



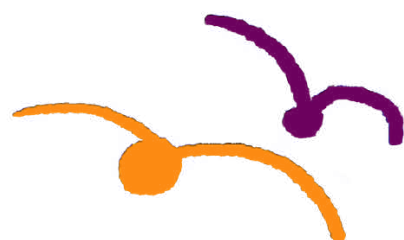
Impact Report 2025–26

**ENGLISH
PEN**

FREEDOM
TO **WRITE**
FREEDOM
TO **READ**

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Words from the Chair of English PEN

Over the last year, it's been inspiring to see our community come together in solidarity; whether by sending messages of hope to imprisoned writers via our letter-writing campaign, PENWrites, joining us on marches and vigils, or simply helping amplify our calls to action within your networks. Despite the odds, the release of writers from prisons across the world in the past year has been a powerful reminder of why this work matters.

Even in difficult times, there is power in moments of joy and celebration. It was wonderful to catch up with so many members and supporters at the English PEN Summer Party, where we announced Leila Aboulela as the winner of the PEN Pinter Prize 2025. I was delighted to attend the PEN Heaney Prize in Dublin to see Tom Paulin collect the award for his latest collection of poetry. Our support for literature in translation goes from strength to strength and we were especially proud to launch a new partnership with the International Booker Prize, specifically to support translators from the Global Majority.

It has been my privilege to serve as Chair of English PEN. As I step down after five years, I am incredibly proud of all that we have achieved together, in the face of increasingly complex times for the human rights and literary landscape. At a time of deepening division in the UK, rising far-right influence and increasing challenges to free expression, the work of English PEN has never felt more urgent. Protecting the cultural and civic spaces in which writers and artists can speak freely remains vital.

I will continue, like so many of you, to support the work of English PEN – defending writers, championing free expression, and creating space for both courageous and joyful celebration of literature.

My deepest thanks go to my fellow Trustees for their dedication, and to the brilliant English PEN team led by Daniel Gorman. And most of all, thank you to the writers, readers, supporters, activists who inspire this work every day.

Ruth Borthwick
Chair of English PEN



Ruth Borthwick
© Ian Macaulay

Outstanding literature and extraordinary courage

Established in 2009 in memory of Nobel Laureate playwright Harold Pinter, the annual PEN Pinter Prize celebrates outstanding literary merit and courage, recognising the powerful intersection between art and human rights.

The 2025 Prize, judged by Chair of English PEN, **Ruth Borthwick**, poet and author **Mona Arshi**, and novelist **Nadifa Mohamed**, was awarded to author **Leila Aboulela**.

Aboulela grew up in Khartoum and has been living in Aberdeen since 1990. She is the author of six novels, including *River Spirit*, *The Translator*, *Minaret* and *Lyrics Alley*, Fiction Winner of the Scottish Book Awards. She was the first winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing, and her collection of short stories *Elsewhere, Home* won the Saltire Fiction Book of the Year Award. Her books have been translated into fifteen languages, and she has written numerous plays for BBC radio.

Leila Aboulela was announced as the winner at the English PEN Members' Summer Party on 9 July 2025. The evening, which revived the tradition of the yearly English PEN summer gathering, was a reminder of the power of community and solidarity, bringing together members, supporters, and book lovers. Following the announcement, actors **Khalid Abdalla** and **Amira Ghazalla** read from Aboulela's work.

In a world seemingly on fire, [...] her writing is a balm, a shelter, and an inspiration.



– The PEN Pinter Prize judges on Leila Aboulela



Writer of Courage

Each year, the PEN Pinter Prize winner selects a Writer of Courage with whom to share their award – an author who is active in the defence of freedom of expression, often at great risk to their own safety and liberty.

Leila Aboulela shared the prize with **Stella Gaitano**, a writer who has faced harassment and attacks for her outspoken criticism of the South Sudanese government. Gaitano has published two short story collections and the novels *Edo's Souls* and *Ireme*. Her first novel, *Edo's Souls*, translated from the Arabic by Sawad Hussain and published by Dedalus Books, was awarded a PEN Translates grant in 2020, becoming the first novel from South Sudan ever to be published in the UK.

Stella is a principled writer and a fearless activist, who has endured hate speech and physical threats. Reading her work has opened my eyes to the injustices and consequences of war in Sudan. She is a wonderful, enriching writer who has already broken new ground in African literature.



– Leila Aboulela

The PEN Pinter Prize is supported by the generosity of Faber and Ruth Allison.

Highlights from our magazine, *PEN Transmissions*

PEN Transmissions is a space where English PEN's work on human rights, linguistic rights, freedom, power, and justice come together with our core mission of celebrating writing and writers.

This year saw the continuation of our focus on Gen Z writers – now an embedded part of our commissioning. The PEN movement, at its core, is about writers coming together; *PEN Transmissions* is a space where new voices and established figures sit side-by-side on a virtual stage. In the autumn, we came together with our sibling centre, PEN Canada, to publish [a series of new commissions](#) by writers recognised through their New Voices Award.

While some of our most-read pieces emerge from major public events or writers with significant profile, there are pieces we commissioned this year whose writers were unable to promote – or even speak about – their work. One such piece was 'Banana Scrambled Pancakes with Whole Milk on the Side on 13 June', an essay by [Sana](#) – a pseudonym – written from Iran during Israeli bombardment.

Clockwise from top-left:
Christine Wu © Indigo Clarke
Media; Em Dial © Mengwen
Cao; Hajera Khaja © Soko
Negash; Deepa Rajagopalan
© Ema Suvajac



Ales Bialiatiski © Viasna Human Rights Centre

While this year's pieces are often – as a result of the global rise of authoritarianism and an increasingly dire landscape for human rights and free expression – sites of testimony, pain, and solemnity, they are also vital sites of hope, resistance, and power. In May, we published 'Postcards', a short piece by [Ales Bialiatiski](#), the Belarusian writer and human rights defender and winner of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize, shared with us from prison, translated by [Valzhyna Mort](#). Ales writes about the letters of solidarity he has received while incarcerated.

In December 2025, after years of unwavering advocacy from our colleagues at PEN Belarus and the wider human rights community, Ales was finally released from prison.

The world has countless problems: war, oppression, violence, cruelty, and hatred. There are entire countries and regions where a human life is worth the price of a bullet from a Kalashnikov. Be it in such a harmless way, with a postcard or a letter, something incites people to send me moral support. [...]

It seems to me that there is an invisible connection between me and those who write to me without expecting a reply. ”

– Ales Bialiatiski, translated by Valzhyna Mort

Reaching new audiences through our events and prizes

22 events

reaching over 2000 people

featuring 80 speakers

with 20 partners

PEN Heaney Prize

Established in 2024, the PEN Heaney Prize recognises a single-author collection of poetry of outstanding literary merit that engages with the impact of cultural or political events on human conditions or relationships.

In December 2025, English PEN, together with Irish PEN/PEN na hÉireann and the Estate of Seamus Heaney, announced **Tom Paulin**'s *Namanlagh* (Faber), Paulin's first collection in over a decade, as the winner of the PEN Heaney Prize 2025 at a ceremony at the National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

The PEN Heaney Prize 2025 was judged by poets **Sasha Dugdale**, **Seán Hewitt**, and **Zaffar Kunial**, with **Chris Heaney** joining them as non-voting Chair and representing the Estate of Seamus Heaney.

The PEN Heaney Prize is supported by Hawthornden Foundation and the Estate of Seamus Heaney.



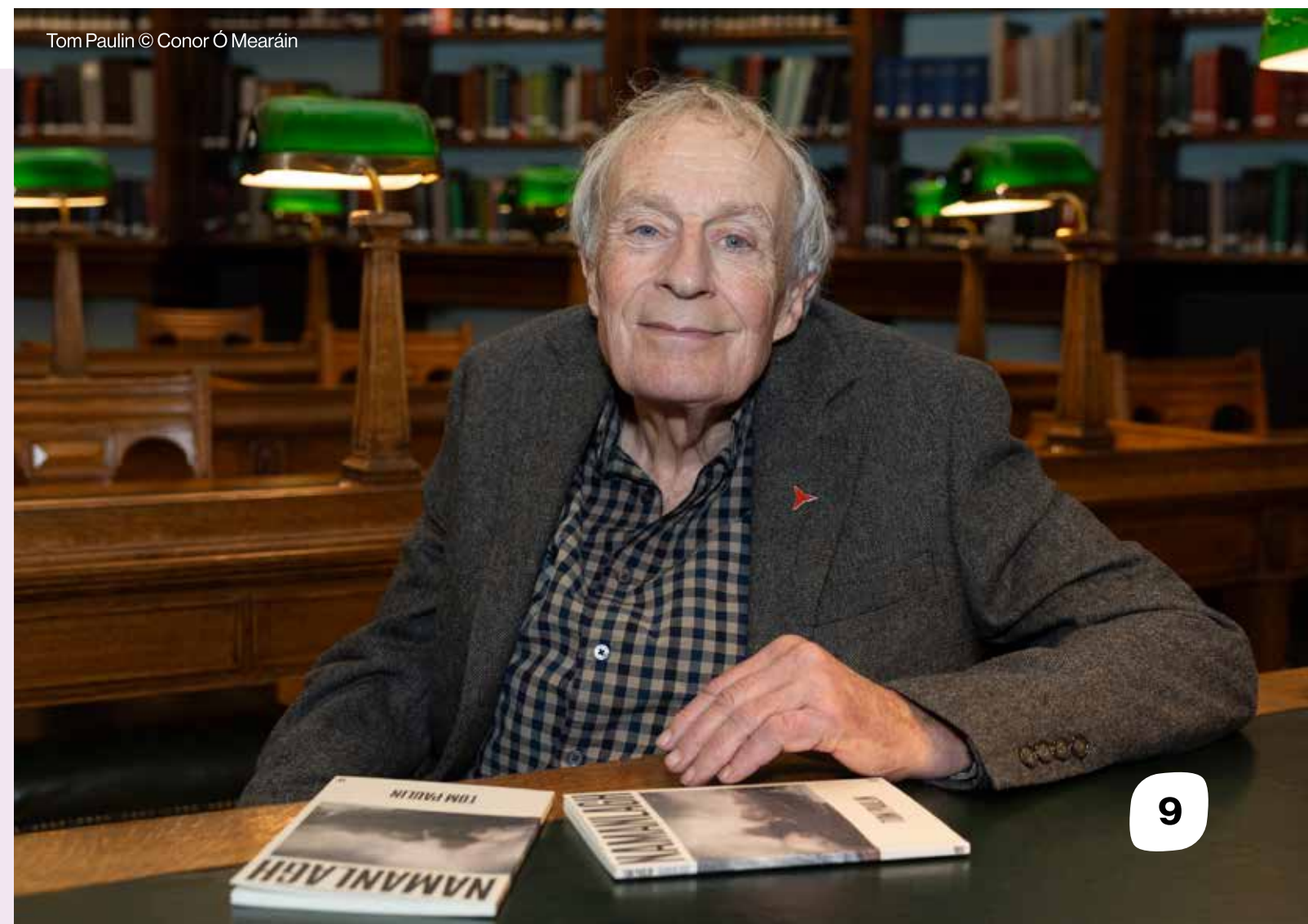
Also shortlisted for the PEN Heaney Prize 2025 were:

- *Mirror Nation* by **Don Mee Choi** (And Other Stories)
- *No One Will Know You Tomorrow* by **Najwan Darwish**, translated by **Kareem James Abu-Zeid** (Yale University Press)
- *Something About Living* by **Lena Khalaf Tuffaha** (the87press)
- *The Banquet* by **Stav Poleg** (Carcanet Poetry)
- *Wellwater* by **Karen Solie** (Picador)

I am hugely grateful to the judges, honoured and delighted to be awarded the PEN Heaney Prize which places social engagement at its core. It also embodies a cross-cultural alliance. The Prize is particularly special to me because of its association with Seamus Heaney. His poems of sublime beauty have brought a depth of concern and an unfalteringly humane perspective to the conflict in Northern Ireland, and added immensely to the imaginative wealth of Ireland and the world beyond. ”

– Tom Paulin

Tom Paulin © Conor Ó Mearáin



PEN Lecture

The 2025 PEN Lecture was delivered by award-winning novelist **Kamila Shamsie** in Newcastle, now established as the home of our annual lecture, in partnership with New Writing North and the Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts.

English PEN's annual PEN Lecture invites a leading writer to reflect on the current state of free expression, and to explore the resonance – or dissonance – of the words of the [PEN Charter](#), the guiding principles of the PEN movement, with our current reality.

Shamsie's lecture, '[Respectable Writers and Useful Scenery](#)' is available to read in *PEN Transmissions*.



L-R: Kamila Shamsie delivering the PEN Lecture © Will Forrester; Kamila Shamsie in conversation with Preti Taneja © Will Forrester

There is nothing more PEN than regarding the PEN Charter itself as a text that is subject to questioning rather than an immovable set of guidelines. It feels essential to re-examine the Charter's claim that art 'should be left untouched by national or political passion', not merely for the sake of argument but to interrogate the role of writers, and of free expression organisations, in 2025.



– Kamila Shamsie

Spotlight on Sudan

Sudan is currently experiencing what [NGOs and IGOs have called](#) “the worst humanitarian crisis in the world”, amid ongoing conflict beset by widely recognised atrocities and war crimes. But the severity of this reality has not been reflected by the limited political engagement of international governments, coverage in mainstream Anglophone media, and representation of Sudanese voices in UK public discourse.

Against this backdrop, and emerging from an event in the English PEN Salon at London Book Fair 2025, English PEN curated two public panel discussions last summer, platforming Sudanese voices and exploring these issues.

A panel of political, media, human rights, and literary voices gathered at the Conduit in July to discuss free expression in the UK in relation to the war in Sudan, and the action that can be taken by media workers, politicians, and the public.

We were joined by Newsday presenter, author, and former BBC Sudan Correspondent **James Copnall**, global health and humanitarian consultant **Dr Eva Khair**, and senior research fellow with the Africa Programme at Chatham House **Ahmed Soliman**, in conversation with writer, broadcaster, and award-winning social advocate **Yassmin Abdel-Magied**.

The following month, we held an evening of readings and discussion with Sudanese authors and translators from across the diaspora, in partnership with City of Sanctuary Sheffield.

Father-daughter translators **Adil Babikir** and **Mayada Ibrahim**, poet **Salma Ali**, writer and poet **Al-Saddiq Al-Raddi** joined **Yassmin Abdel-Magied** to explore the traditions, diversity, and influences of Sudanese literature, discussing the importance of promoting and celebrating Sudanese literary and intellectual culture, and the role of literature in times of conflict.

With thanks to the Conduit and City of Sanctuary Sheffield for providing the space for these important conversations.



L-R: Sudan, Power, and Free Expression © Eleanor Antoniou; An Evening of Sudanese Literature © Zoe Sadler

Connecting with sibling PEN centres at the 91st Congress

Gathering as a global PEN community at the 91st Congress was a vital opportunity to reflect, share strategies, and renew our collective commitment to defending the right to write, to read, and to speak freely. The resolutions adopted address some of the most pressing issues of our time. They are a testament to the power of literature and human rights to confront and transform the world around us.



– Daniel Gorman, Director of English PEN

© Katarzyna Kukiela KBF

In September 2025, PEN International concluded its 91st Congress in Kraków, Poland – hosted in partnership with Polish PEN. The 91st Congress was marked by major decisions and announcements for the PEN movement, including the appointment of **Olga Tokarczuk**, Nobel Prize-winning Polish author, as Vice President of PEN International.

At its Assembly of Delegates, PEN International adopted four urgent resolutions. These have:

- called on writers to defend human rights and free expression amid rampant authoritarianism and global conflict;
- urged writers and governments to address the climate crisis as the human rights issue of our time;
- affirmed the protection of trans and gender-diverse people's right to free expression and inclusion;
- and defended free expression in the United States.

In addition, delegates approved a Manifesto on the Protection of Climate, signed by award-winning writers including **Burhan Sonmez**, **Jennifer Clement**, and **Olga Tokarczuk**, among others. The manifesto underscored the urgency of the climate emergency and its inextricable link to freedom of expression and human rights.

Other key moments included the re-election of **Arne Svingen** as International Secretary, and the election of **Mads Julius Elf** as Board Member. PEN Spain, PEN Languages of Russia, Low German and Frisian PEN, and PEN Syria were officially recognised as the newest PEN Centres.

Campaigning for change

English PEN has continued to campaign for the right to freedom of expression in a variety of ways throughout 2025–26.

In December 2025, English PEN, PEN Georgia, and PEN International welcomed the European Court of Human Rights' judgment in the case of *Tsaava and Others v. Georgia*. The judgment followed our third-party intervention regarding the excessive use of force by police in Georgia during the dispersal of a demonstration in front of the Parliament building in Tbilisi in 2019 and the contention that no effective criminal investigation was carried out. This landmark judgment is significant for its articulation of State obligations concerning the policing of protests and the protection of journalists and set an important precedent regarding the dispersal of demonstrations using rubber bullets.

English PEN has also continued to engage with key coalitions and campaigns here in the UK. These include Art Not Evidence, a group of musicians, lawyers, academics, activists, and NGOs campaigning to limit the admissibility of creative expression as evidence in the criminal courts. We are also a member of the UK anti-SLAPP coalition, advocating for standalone legislation to protect everyone's right to speak out. Strategic litigation against public participation stifles freedom of expression and particularly inhibits investigative journalism, but has also impacted sexual assault survivors, medical service users, and even those who write reviews on public forums.

We were also proud to join the Together Alliance in March 2026, promoting hope, unity, and solidarity across communities, alongside many friends, artists, and partner organisations.



The English PEN team and friends at the Together Alliance march © English PEN

Reflecting on what ‘home’ truly means

We were delighted to host our colleague **Khatuna Tskhadadze** – Georgian literary translator, scholar, and President of PEN Georgia – for a residency in London last summer.

Tskhadadze’s acclaimed translations include *The Complete Cosmicomics*, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, and *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* by Italo Calvino; *The Name of the Rose*, *Foucault’s Pendulum*, and *The Prague Cemetery* by Umberto Eco; *Ragazzi di Vita* by Pier Paolo Pasolini; and *Pereira Declares* by Antonio Tabucchi.

She has also brought into Georgian the works of Luigi Pirandello, Cesare Pavese, Melania Mazzucco, Elena Ferrante, Maggie Nelson, and many other authors. Working from both Italian and English, she has received multiple literary honours, including the SABA Literary Award (2015, 2017), the GALA Award (2011), and the Machabeli Prize for Translation (2023).

During her stay, Tskhadadze took full advantage of her time here – going to concerts, museums, and the theatre, and networking meetings. She also travelled to Edinburgh, where she attended events at the Edinburgh International Book Festival and to Brighton and Hove to meet with colleagues from PEN International.

Khatuna Tskhadadze’s reflections were a powerful reminder of the value of respite and the meaning of home.

Our residency programme is generously supported by Hawthornden Foundation and is delivered in partnership with Goethe-Institut London.

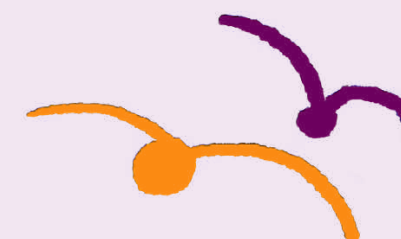
Khatuna Tskhadadze
© Eleanor Antoniou



Since arriving here, I’ve often thought about those who came before – about the lives they left or fled. One thing is certain: all of them, in some way, thought of home –the one you don’t choose, yet is yours alone. I feel at home in this beautiful, peaceful place, with the park’s green framed by the windows and the kindness of those below. I, too, think of home: of the battle we are in, and the uncertainty it brings. I am deeply grateful to the organisations and people who have welcomed me, giving me the chance to see home from afar: at peace, more detached, clearer in mind, and to reflect on what “home” truly means.



– Khatuna Tskhadadze



Championing international writing and its translators

This year, through our translation programme, we supported **32 books** from publishers across the UK with PEN Translates grants, awarded translation grants to **25 languages** and to approximately **40 translators and authors**, and supported **36 translators** to create samples.

In September, **100 translators** joined us for our annual International Translation Day programme, a two-part conversation exploring pressing questions for the craft, business, and ethics of translation.

We have continued to expand the reach of the PEN Translates Bookshelf, our monthly campaign showcasing a selection of our PEN Translates award-winning titles to promote international literature and help diversify reading lists.

Our **collaboration with the Feminist Book Club** brought in new readers, with members from five of their book club groups across the UK reviewing PEN Translates titles selected from our shelves.

For a new social media video series, the English PEN team visited **12 independent bookshops** across London and showcased over **50 PEN Translates books** 'in the wild', distinguishable by the 'English PEN award winner' roundels on their front covers. Across our social media platforms, the three **videos** achieved **over 15k views**.



© Instagram @englishpen_

Our most popular editions of the PEN Translates Bookshelf this year were 'Six books in translation from East Asia' in February 2026, and 'Six new releases in translation' in March 2026. The February edition was our most saved post on Instagram, meaning that close to **300 people** bookmarked the list of book recommendations to come back to later.

Six books in translation from East Asia



Six new releases in translation



Filming at Veranda Bookshop
© Samantha Ho

Thank you to all our members, supporters, and partners who make our work possible.

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Southbank Centre
The Conduit
The Estate of Seamus Heaney
The West Lodge Project
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University of Exeter

If you would like to add your voice to our cause, we'd love to hear from you.

Please get in touch with Charlotte Aston, Head of Development at charlotte@englishpen.org to find out more about how you can help.

With thanks to all the writers and artists who took part in our programme over the last year.

**Khalid Abdalla Yassmin Abdel-Magied Leila Aboulela
Sami Abu Wardeh Ade Adedeji Jordan Aitcheson-
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Daniel Gorman

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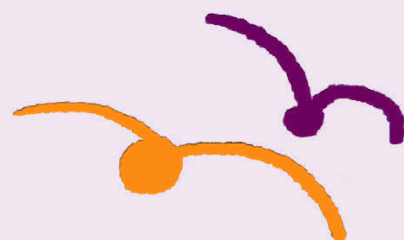
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Clockwise from top-left: The PEN Heaney Prize 2025 © Conor Ó Mearáin; Leila Aboulela © George Torode; The English PEN team filming at London Review Bookshop © Samantha Ho; Margaret Busby, Honorary President of English PEN © George Torode

At English PEN, you know that writing is always dangerous business somewhere. That's why you exist: to champion the pen over the gun and the prison cell. ”

– Naomi Klein

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**ENGLISH
PEN**

FREEDOM
TO **WRITE**
FREEDOM
TO **READ**