
STANDING UP TO ONE'S OWN NEIGHBORS

PEN American Center on the Greatest Struggle Against Censorship

by LARRY SIEMS

“It is a strange doctrine . . . that students must be made all to read the same things, to think the same things and to mold their whole lives in one pattern. This is one more affront to the true spirit of education.”

—“Book Burning Day,” *New York Times* editorial, May 11, 1933

On May 10, 1933, university students gathered in cities and towns across Germany to burn books. Thousands of books. In Berlin alone, some 25,000 volumes that the students had pulled from public and personal libraries were heaped onto the bonfire in Opera Square as speakers chanted indictments against them and their authors. Works were condemned to the flames for depicting decadence and moral decay and undermining discipline and morality. For promoting political irresponsibility and disloyalty and weakening dedication to the State. For betraying the German troops who fought in the First World War and failing to educate the people in the truth about the war. The offending writers included Erich Maria Remarque, Helen Keller, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein.

For PEN, an organization founded 11 years earlier in the belief that creating a dialogue between writers of different origins would diminish the kind of nationalism that gives rise to wars, it was a defining moment. Meeting in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia for its annual international congress of writers two weeks after the Nazi book burnings, delegates from PEN centers throughout Europe and the Americas were forced to confront two grim realities: not only the fact that young Germans had just publicly incinerated many of the greatest works of early twentieth century

literature, but also that the German PEN Center had recently expelled all its Jewish members.

H.G. Wells was President of International PEN at the time, and he presided over a Congress that helped clarify PEN's purpose. Over the fierce objections of the German PEN Center, Wells gave the floor to the exiled playwright Ernst Toller, who spoke passionately about the assault on writers and freedom of expression in Germany. The German PEN Center walked out of the assembly in protest, and would eventually be replaced by a center composed of German writers in exile. By the end of the meeting, PEN understood that promoting a truly open international conversation required confronting specific acts of censorship and defending individual writers who are being persecuted for their work.

Today, PEN is best known for its advocacy on behalf of imprisoned and threatened writers around the world. Last year, PEN acted on behalf of 1009 writers in 91 countries, working to secure their release from prison, forestall harsher treatment, and protect them from arrest or physical attack. It also conducts international campaigns focusing on particular countries and troublesome trends; such campaigns include both an Olympic-year push to win the release of 44 writers and journalists jailed in China and an ongoing effort to rewrite defamation laws that



have been used to silence writers in a number of countries around the world.

As the largest of the 141 centers of International PEN, PEN American Center leads many of these international efforts. We also work to protect freedom of expression in the United States, where, fortunately, our First Amendment provides strong safeguards for writers and journalists and discourages the natural impulse of the government to censor unfavorable material and silence critical voices. But as Ray Bradbury famously observed, “There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches.”

In the United States those people are generally less likely to be federal government officials than members of their own communities. Not that this makes the threats they pose to books and intellectual freedom any easier to confront: it is in fact often far more difficult to stand up to one’s neighbors. So for the past 16 years, PEN has been honoring U.S. citizens and residents who have fought courageously, despite adversity, to defend the First Amendment right to freedom of expression as it applies to the written word, first with the PEN/Newman’s Own First Amendment Award and now with the PEN/Katherine Anne Porter First Amendment Award. The list of recipients is full of men and women who took brave stands against would-be censors in their own communities.

They include Claudia Johnson, a Florida teacher who fought a statewide ban on teaching classic literary

works by Aristophanes, Chaucer, Steinbeck, and others; Cissy Lacks, a Missouri high school creative writing teacher who was fired for refusing to censor her students’ work; Dr. William Holda, a Texas university president who defended a campus production of Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America*; Deloris Wilson, a high school librarian in Louisiana who fought to preserve access to library materials banned for sexual content; Jerilynn Adams Williams, a public librarian who successfully turned back an attempt to remove books from circulation in her county library system; and Joyce Meskis, a bookstore owner who successfully challenged a Colorado law barring stores open to children from selling novels and art books with sexual content.

In the past five years, though, we have also honored ordinary Americans who have fought free expression battles against forces from outside their communities. 2005 PEN/Newman’s Own First Amendment Award winner Joan Airolidi, a librarian and library director in rural Washington State, challenged an effort by the FBI to search patron records to learn who had checked out a biography of Osama Bin Laden. A former FBI employee won the award in 2006; Sibel Edmonds, who had worked as a translator for the agency, was fired for blowing the whistle on shortcomings in the FBI’s translation services. And this year, PEN American Center awarded the first PEN/Katherine Anne Porter First Amendment Award to Laura Berg, a Veterans Administration nurse who was investigated for sedition after writing a letter to her local newspaper criticizing the Bush Administra-

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tion's handling of Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. These cases all point to a new chill in the air since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

As Director of PEN American Center's Freedom to Write and International Programs, I, too, experienced this chill following Hurricane Katrina. A few days after the storm, FEMA announced that it was not going to allow any more news photographs of dead bodies. A couple of hours after the announcement, I received a call from Reuters asking if PEN had a reaction or comment. I answered that we naturally opposed such a ban as a clear violation of First Amendment protections of freedom of the press, and that I didn't see how you report a story whose subject is death without allowing the public to see images of the subject of the story.

The Reuters story carrying my quote was posted on the Internet that afternoon. Within an hour I was getting a steady stream of extremely angry emails questioning my upbringing, suggesting I had "no decency," and, in one case, expressing the wish that my family—or better yet, I myself—had been among those lost in the floodwaters. That these messages came not from government officials but from my fellow citizens somehow made them all the more harrowing.

I recently traveled to Cambodia, a country that has one of the most effective censorship regimes I've ever seen. What makes it so effective is that its mechanisms

are so unclear, so diffuse: it is very hard to find the government's fingerprints on the censorship. Instead, it's always someone much closer to home who tells you that you shouldn't say this, you shouldn't write that. If you're a journalist, it's your editor. If you're a university professor, it's your department chair. In the end, everybody is holding something back. Everybody has a reason for holding something back, and very few of those reasons are traceable to the government.

The day after the Nazi book burnings, during which many publications that were "un-German" had been destroyed, German officials tried to tell a shocked world that it was the students who had planned and carried out the spectacles – that the bonfires were a kind of spontaneous grassroots cultural cleansing. And indeed it was the students who did the work – many, I'm sure, believing that eradicating these particular volumes would strengthen the moral and political core of their communities. Even here in the United States, with our First Amendment heritage, we can recognize these impulses. Here, as everywhere, the first and best thing each one of us can do to preserve that heritage is to make sure we never become those students. ■

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To learn more about PEN's efforts to protect free expression in the United States, see www.pen.org/corefreedoms

To suggest someone as candidate for the PEN/Katherine Anne Porter First Amendment Award, email us at ftw@pen.org

About the Writer

LARRY SIEMS directs the Freedom to Write and International Programs at PEN American Center, where he leads PEN's ongoing efforts to defend writers facing persecution around the world and PEN's Campaign for Core Freedoms, a comprehensive initiative to turn back new threats to freedom of expression in the United States.

*A poet and a nonfiction writer, he has written extensively on immigration and cross-cultural issues; his publications include the acclaimed collection *Between the Lines: Letters between Undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans and their Families and Friends*. He researched and reported on human rights abuses along the U.S.–Mexico border for *Human Rights Watch*, and studied and wrote on immigrant politics in Orange County, California under a fellowship from the Open Society Institute. His poems have appeared in leading literary journals.*

