

*PEN America forced to cancel
literary awards ceremony amid
fallout over position on Gaza*

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Seth Meyers speaks during the 2022 PEN America Literary Awards in New York. (Arturo Holmes/Getty Images)

New York, April 23 (RHC)-- PEN America has canceled its 2024 literary awards ceremony following months of escalating protests over the organization's response to the war in Gaza, which has been criticized as overly sympathetic to Israel and led nearly half of the prize nominees to withdraw.

The event was set to take place on April 29th at Town Hall in Manhattan. But in a news release on Monday, the group announced that although the prizes would still be conferred, the ceremony would not take place.

“We greatly respect that writers have followed their consciences, whether they chose to remain as nominees in their respective categories or not,” the group’s chief officer for literary programming, Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf, said in the release.

“We regret that this unprecedented situation has taken away the spotlight from the extraordinary work selected by esteemed, insightful and hard-working judges across all categories. As an organization dedicated to freedom of expression and writers, our commitment to recognizing and honoring outstanding authors and the literary community is steadfast.”

In recent months, PEN America has faced intensifying public criticism of its response to the barbaric and genocidal war of aggression being carried out by Israel in Gaza. In a series of open letters, writers have demanded that PEN America support an immediate cease-fire, as its global parent organization, PEN International, and other national chapters have done.

In March, a group of prominent writers, including Naomi Klein, Lorrie Moore, Michelle Alexander and Hisham Matar, announced that they were pulling out of next month’s World Voices Festival, one of PEN America’s signature events. And over the past several weeks, growing numbers of nominees for the literary awards, including Camonghne Felix, Christina Sharpe and Esther Allen, announced that they were withdrawing their books from consideration.

In a letter that PEN America leadership received last week, 30 of the 87 nominated writers and translators (including nine of the 10 nominees for one prize) criticized the group’s “disgraceful inaction” on the situation in Gaza, accusing it of “clinging to a disingenuous facade of neutrality while parroting” what the letter characterized as Israeli government propaganda. The letter also called for the resignation of the group’s longtime chief executive, Suzanne Nossel, and its president, the novelist Jennifer Finney Boylan, along with that of the group’s executive committee.

“PEN America states that ‘the core’ of its mission is to ‘support the right to disagree,’” the nominees stated. “But among writers of conscience, there is no disagreement. There is fact and fiction. The fact is that Israel is leading a genocide of the Palestinian people.”

That letter drew a brief but forceful response last week in which the organization described the war in Gaza as “horrific” but challenged what it said was the letter’s “alarming language and characterizations.”

“The perspective that ‘there is no disagreement’ and that there are among us final arbiters of ‘fact and fiction’ reads to us as a demand to foreclose dialogue in the name of intellectual conformity, and one at odds with the PEN Charter and what we stand for as an organization,” the organization said in a statement.

The awards ceremony is not as high profile as PEN’s star-studded annual gala at the American Museum of Natural History, set for May 16th. But the cancellation of the awards event also raises questions about whether the organization will go ahead with the World Voices Festival, set to take place in New York from May 8th to the 11th, with additional events in Los Angeles the following week.

Last month, some panelists, including participants on a panel about challenges to free expression for Palestinians, announced they were pulling out. Since then, additional writers have withdrawn, some of them quietly.

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