

ADDRESS TO INTERNATIONAL PEN CONGRESS  
Tromsø, Norway, May, 2004

*Over the summer I've been re-reading some of the histories of PEN. What stands out is how often PEN members understood a particular historical moment and acted—whether it was after the Burning of the Books in Germany in 1933 or after the fatwa issued in Iran threatening Salman Rushdie's life or when writers and others were under siege in Sarajevo. PEN is an organization founded on ideals that are realized in the actions of its members.*

*As we've seen just at this Congress, those actions can also be a literary forum as is being planned for Central Asian women writers, an exile network linking writers from many different countries and cultures, a campaign for writers in prison in countries like Cuba and Vietnam and China, or discussion and declaration of the rights of minority languages. PEN has gained its worldwide reputation because of its members' literary work and also because its members have taken its ideals and set them in motion.*

*As International Secretary of PEN, I would want to think with you, with the board, with the committees and with the President to consider the activities we are engaged in and the particular issues of our times that we should be addressing and the means by which the International Secretariat can help. There would no doubt be many answers as we had that discussion and there would be no wrong answer, but I would suggest we should at least put on that list the so-called "clash of cultures" and think how PEN can be part of turning that clash into an exchange and a dialogue through our literary forums, through visits with writers and exploration of potential new centers of PEN. At its best PEN is a place where cultures don't clash, but communicate.*

*In my reading I came across many observations, one from the French poet Pierre Emmanuel, who served as International PEN President of from 1969-1971. "My PEN experience tells me that PEN is not a comfortable meeting-place and that it is better that your comfort should be disturbed by important questions than by petty ones." He called the continued existence of PEN "a miracle of precariousness."*

*In my 20 years working in PEN, I've witnessed that miracle over and over. I attribute it to the idealism at the heart of the organization with its charter and to the fellowship of the writers involved. As we restructure, fundraise, debate issues, and express our differences, I hope that fellowship will underpin our work. It is the fabric out of which our actions are shaped and the reason PEN was founded.*

*As to the precariousness, I would set this into three categories: first, financial, second, structural and third, of the spirit. Since PEN's founding, it appears to have faced financial difficulties and yet has always come through. It is time, however, to stabilize our finances if we can.*

*The next challenge is structural. Over the years, PEN has grown into 138 centers in 98 countries, with over 15,000 members. It has added a governing board, a foundation,*

*and a board of trustees, and yet our Secretariat has remained almost the same size as it was 20 years ago—two and a half people, not including the Writers in Prison Committee staff. PEN's strength of course is its members and its centers, which operate autonomously, though linked to the international. The difficulty at the moment is that all the spokes of this giant wheel are connected to a very tiny hub that is under a great strain.*

*A more fully staffed professional office would offer needed support to the activities of the standing committees and to the centers and would allow us to operate more dynamically as the global nongovernmental organization that we are. I would anticipate working with the treasurer, the new board of trustees and the staff to help in fundraising for this and other purposes. PEN's wish list of projects is long and includes working with PEN centers in developing regions of the globe,*

*increasing the aid for writers through the PEN Emergency Fund, translating our work into the three languages of PEN and expanding our communications, including a more dynamic website where International PEN can link to the sites of individual centers and perhaps eventually help host a site for smaller centers. I would expect to call on you for help, not just with finances, but with ideas and with action.*

*As we move forward, it is important that our finances be clear and transparent. It is important that our structure be inclusive. But most important is that our spirit be one of friendship, even when we disagree.*

*Many of you know me through work as Chair of the Writers in Prison Committee. I am a novelist and a journalist, but I also serve or have served on the boards of a number of organizations, including international nongovernmental organizations like Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, and the International Crisis Group, other writers' organizations and on the boards of two major U.S. universities. In this work I've received an education on the governance and fundraising of organizations. While all have considerably larger budgets and much larger staffs than International PEN, few have the geographic reach. I would hope to use the experience and the knowledge and contacts I've gained to assist PEN.*

*Before I conclude, I want to thank the two International Secretaries I have worked with: Alexander Blokh and Terry Carlom, who have each served PEN with dedication.*

*I'll conclude with an observation by another International PEN president, American playwright Arthur Miller: "None of us comes here as a representative of his country. None of us is obliged to speak here as an apologist for his culture or his political system." Instead he noted, PEN is "a neutral ground, a kind of sanctuary," where members can focus on "the stubborn, underlying sameness of the human spirit whatever the variety of forms in which it is expressed."*

*--Joanne Leedom-Ackerman*