

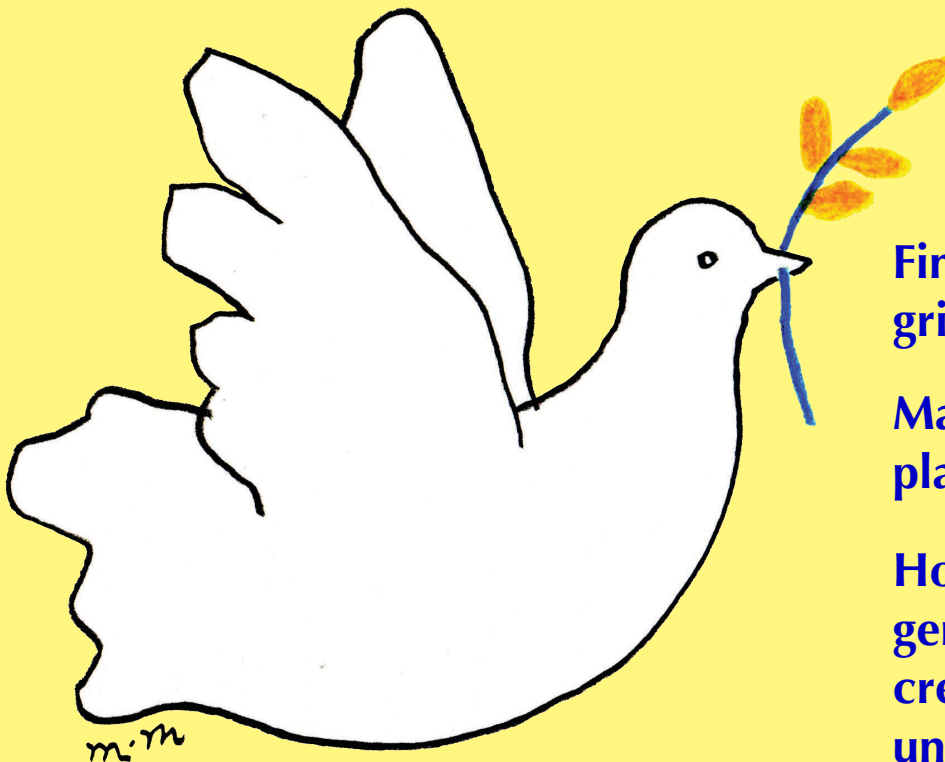


SYDNEY

PEN magazine

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Ukrainian literature's history is a mouthpiece for a denied community



Finding a place for grief, memory, hope

Maria Ressa's big plan to defend facts

How a rebellious genre gained credibility from an unlikely source

Going to bat for Assange

Freedom of expression and cultural rights remain under threat



Every year, about this time, PEN Centres world-wide do a reckoning of democracy, social justice, freedom of speech and cultural rights around the globe. And each year, we hope there has been an improvement on the previous year.

However, it does not take great insight to judge that the current reckoning is not good, given the terrifying assault on Ukraine by Russia as an indicator.

Authoritarian forces seek to extend their power, and democratic progress is increasingly curtailed in Africa, the Middle East, Central Europe, Central America and Asia.

Censorship and intimidation of dissenting voices are weapons employed universally in both authoritarian and democratic countries, book banning being one alarming development in the United States.

As PEN America's 'Freedom to Write Index' documents, writers and public intellectuals have been unjustly locked up for their exercise of free expression; dozens are currently serving sentences of 10 years or more for their words. In countries notorious for poor prison conditions, the mistreatment of political prisoners through solitary confinement or torture has been compounded by the grave threats to their health posed by COVID-19 and its spread inside jails.

But governments' attempts to muzzle dissent have failed to extinguish individual writers' voices. In the face of repression, literary communities have come together in defence of writers under threat. PEN's established committees, such as PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee, offer hope to all who seek to push back against the forces of repression.

During 2021, according to data collected for the Freedom to Write Index, at least 277 writers, academics, and public intellectuals in 36 countries were unjustly held in detention or imprisoned in connection with their writing, their work, or related advocacy. This number is slightly higher than the 273 individuals counted in the 2020 Freedom to Write Index, and significantly higher than the total in 2019 (238).

By far the most significant increase was seen in Myanmar, as a result of the crackdown that followed the military coup there on February 1 last year, which has included the deliberate targeting of writers and the broader creative community. The numbers of those detained in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Belarus dropped from 2020, although many of those released from prison in Saudi Arabia continue to face draconian, unjust conditions on their release, including constraints on their freedom of movement and expression. In Belarus, the sharp uptick in detentions — many of them short-term — that accompanied the protests after the stolen election of August 2020 dropped off, though 2021 increasingly saw targeted arrests of writers and others who continued to speak out, and longer-term detentions.

China and Saudi Arabia remained the first and second-worst gaolers of writers, with 85 and 29 writers detained, respectively. Myanmar escalated to the third-worst jailer of writers and public intellectuals, with 20 individuals newly detained in 2021 and 26 total behind bars; Myanmar was jointly ranked ninth last year with 8 detentions. These three countries alone accounted for half of all cases, just over 50 percent of the total.

In Iran, a significant increase was also documented: at least 21 writers were in prison or detention during the year, remaining the fourth-worst gaoler of writers around the world as documented in 2020. While some writers counted in Iran in the 2020 Index have been released, at least eight writers were newly jailed during 2021. Rounding out the top five with 18 writers held in detention — compared to 25 last year — is Turkey, where a decline was documented due to the welcome release of writers; some had been detained for more than four years.

The most prevalent professions of those incarcerated in 2021 were literary writers (111), scholars (59), poets (68), singer/songwriters (27), publishers (12), editors (9), translators (8), and dramatists (4). Notably, the number of poets jailed during 2021 increased compared to the 57 jailed during 2020, likely reflecting the bold stance many poets have taken on sensitive political and social themes.

Sandra Symons
Joint President

- Gathering support

Combing pain and melancholia with love

Kurdish writer and political leader Selahattin Demirtaş' short stories are lyrical and compassionate. He continues to write, publish and even run for President from his prison cell. His work and life was celebrated at an event in Blacktown in collaboration with the Kurdish community.

Imagine you're on a crowded bus and you get a phone call from your mum; you want to take the call but you know that if you speak to her you'll face the ire of everyone around you. That's what happened to President of PEN International, novelist Burhan Sönmez in Turkey when he wanted to speak in his mother tongue, Kurmanji, to his mother.

"At the age of six, you learn that your language is dangerous," Burhan said. Banning their language is one of the many ways the Turkish government persecutes the Kurdish people. He told this story on Zoom from London at an event celebrating the Kurdish writer Selahattin Demirtaş who has been in prison in Turkey since 2016.

Demirtaş is a remarkable writer, politician and human rights lawyer. He wrote his award winning collection of short stories *Dawn* from inside prison. It became an instant bestseller. Burhan described Selahattin's writing as combining "pain or melancholia with love". Light and witty, his narratives always manage to bring together opposites, like beauty and ugliness. He also writes and records popular songs and is a talented visual artist.

He was the joint founder of The Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), a left-wing party that gives equal footing to women in leadership positions and has fielded gay and transgender candidates. Demirtaş even ran for president of Turkey from his prison cell in 2018 and has been called a "Kurdish Obama".

Burhan said Selahattin's imprisonment was an example of the arbitrary detention of opponents by the Turkish state that has occurred in the last seven years. Yet this crackdown on free expression is having the opposite effect. Burhan said that "99 per cent of journalists, when they come out of prison, they speak louder".

He also pointed out that it's not just politicians and journalists who are imprisoned but anyone who is active against the state in any way. Some 30,000 ordinary citizens have had cases filed against them just for something they have written or shared on social media. "If you write something on your Twitter



Kurdish writer Selahattin Demirtaş.
Image courtesy English PEN

or Facebook account, you know that you are taking a risk," he said. "Yet millions of people continue to write courageously and freely."

And he had a message for people in Australia at the event held recently by PEN Sydney and the Federation of Democratic Kurdish Society, Australia at its state-of-the-art centre in Kings Park, near Blacktown.

He urged us to use our social media to speak out about oppression in Turkey. According to Burhan, Turkey's President Erdogan hates but also fears the power of social media.

Karin Karlekar, who leads PEN America's Free Expression at Risk program, sent a message calling for the release of Selahattin Demirtaş. And young Kurdish-Australian leader Ruken Kaya performed a poem she co-wrote called *Lost Tongues* that began with a Kurdish lullaby: "You're a figtree of the mountains, you are the beauty of the mountains".

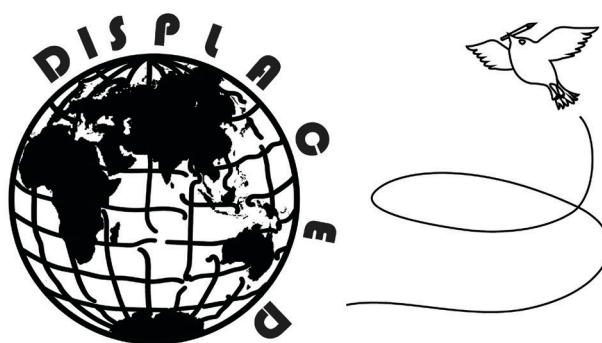
Claudia Taranto



Finding a place for

Displaced from your home,
from your country, from your
land, what place is there for grief,
for memory and for hope?

On unceded Gadigal land to
mark PEN International's Day of
the Imprisoned Writer, six young
Sydney writers explored our
connection to place and what
happens when we lose it. Hosted by poet, journalist and academic
Saba Vasefi at the Museum of Contemporary Art, we celebrated writing
beyond boundaries, including the work of young writers currently
imprisoned in Turkey, Uganda and East Turkestan.





Poets Bilal Hafda, Ethan Bell, Sara Saleh, Hani Abdile, Vivian Pham, Jazz Money and presenter Saba Vasefi

grief, memory, hope

They lit little fires everywhere, we waited for rain, and 16 years later Bilal Hafda

I am still burning, in Cronulla
 a beach can only quench the thirst of those allowed to swim
 and there have been enough droughts slaked on my grandfather's nape.
 He carried all his blazing into Bankstown
 his neck and hair
 red as a broken rose, ask me
 which moments lit the fires?

In Chester hill, my cousin, a fire
 in his backseat, his trunk a beacon
 red and black and blue on a canvas of the suburb.
 Another fire climbed the pipes and lit the rafters, his little brother

and I played in the dry backyard while he cracked
 his elbow being dragged out of his second home.
 Paul Keating lit another, park 2 minutes from the old house
 we played there too, after, to lighten
 the fields of this infernal burdening.
 Leaves falling down in atoms, over echoes
 on the giant's teeth, we'd jump over the boulders like
 we fell
 from grace, and I'd sneak
 into the park to find my lost pebble, a stone really
 is the Earth, no matter how hard you throw it
 you can't play catch with someone's history, birth
 is a bookmark on foreign land, not the finish, I was born
 in Auburn, a reddish brown, Autumn still clinging to
 winter's wrists
 slashed open into a world Keating "committed

ourselves to succeeding
in the test which so far we have always failed."

We are still failing, but the fires are smaller
Cronulla Chester Hill Bankstown

our words fuel breaks and sightlines, to the future
I tell Redfern to stop showing up in my father's dreams,
in the marks on his hands. Tracing his steps, looking for
home,
kicked out like last week's drums. In Lebanon

they ask if you want gas or coal, burning is an endless
question which pinned street corners will hook their
thumbs and drop into new conversations, us Arabs
make every dialogue into a wedding,
so let's celebrate hurting together. Dance
to the rhythm of whether these words will come
unbidden when the sky opens out into uranium,
sundered by sea - everything in nature is green
until it isn't, until it's combustible, and isn't it lust
to want
what kings can't have?
You don't own the soul
or this place
or this dialogue

on this stage, and every other, we've been through
fusillade, cannonade, barrage
my hands are flint my voice is stone, I am dropped
into every cavernous room I walk into.
In a big enough space even murder can sound like an
intervention. Reverberating out and up my family tree,
cedar
and iron, locked in bars, and whatever tradition
you think owns me, reading
whatever leaves float in through wired tongues
I have 8 dreams, clasped onto my shoulders like wings
a Spider - I wish
I were as light as a feather-formed treaty,
as impermanent. Weather worn, downpoured
I wish sparks had fallen into this poem, just as light,
I would have followed the fire, Keating meant
every single stone, always "practical
building blocks of change", and what is fire
if not matter making a difference?
I'm back in Bankstown, and this block is still burning
here we are, ear against the crown,
asking for a voice
all I hear is the kindling. Being a leader is about
whoever has the better heart
whoever is more ready to be fuel

I have a kernel in my chest
fire only warms, and pops
for those close enough to taste what's feeding it, and we
have been
too close, at every checkpoint
beacon, watchtower, and bonfire unravelling
the scroll of our history singed, by different hands
we are passed over
like wet ash, busy enough with migration
that we didn't notice the rain.



Bilal runs creative writing workshops all across NSW. He works with schools and community groups full-time, at the Story Factory, facilitating and designing workshops to assist young writers to find their voice, and publish their work. He's also a spoken-word artist. He's performed at TEDx in Sydney and has featured at a number of slams. He currently hosts and runs the Bankstown Poetry Slam.

Poem #11

Ethan Bell

I would betray the world before the world betrays me,
I'd rather
untie the knot calmy
The knot we call society
Then grasp for it with raw chafing hands I would clear
my
throat, able to speak.
My own existence
Wiping the tears falling from my Father's face, so he
can wipe
the tears from his.
My blood will be free
Never blowing with the wind like a seed taken by its

breeze,
 Never letting the current of history flow over me
 And my peoples story
 There is a hole in my abdomen dark as void, dripping
 constellations of stars, leaving my stomach to rumble
 As the thunder does
 It's my culture, I hunger for culture, it is for her I that I
 thirst, driving my toe into country
 Like rain hitting dirt
 I search for my shadow on silver screens, videos of
 brothers fighting brothers
 hustling is their only queen, tagging up lines with TFC
 An indoctrinated identity
 Picking through piles of steel and concrete, midden
 shells stinking of rust, a poem from my Grandfather's
 Country
 A cultural object connected to us.

Wallaballoa land.
 Where Mulleun circle a crimson red sky, while the Sun
 it sets overhead,
 here we stand proud Ngunnawal Men
 fishing on our riverbed,
 And the Murray Cod's scales, there as dark as an
 emerald stone
 And like Ngunnawal men, they cut down the river track
 Returning to a place they call home
 connecting to their blood and bone.

Country is a Life Sentence

Sara M Saleh

The storm clouds settled, an unwelcome visitor, into
 the unwitting summer sky.

'Wala ad-Daleen. Ameen. Sadaq Allah al azeem.'

Suheila exhaled the last line of al-Fatiha, the opening
 verse of the Quran and the customary prayers for the
 deceased, as she wiped down her face with the palms
 of her hands. They didn't tremble with desperate amens
 and sadness like they used to.

She draped the white chiffon scarf over her shoulder
 and took a last look of resignation at the tombstone.

Kamal Farahat

born - July 5, 1950

died - Unknown

'Unknown' poked at her, stunned her each time she
 was caught in its blast. Cemeteries are not always an
 honest place. The grave was empty, fake with nobody -
 no body - in it. It felt impossible to grieve 'Unknown',
 no matter how many wreaths of jasmines they left and
 al-Fatihahs they whispered out over it.

The ritual was both comfort and despair missing the
 body. In Islam, washing and placing it in a shroud was
 part of the ceremony to cleanse the soul and help it
 transition to The Hereafter. Their father was denied this,
 denied dignity even in death.

It was the first time Suheila had visited the grave alone.
 She shivered, thinking of the tenuous threads that dared
 tether her to a dangerous hope: only a few days before,
 President Michel Sleiman in his inauguration oath (of
 2008) pledged to "work hard to release the prisoners
 and detainees and reveal the fate of the missing
 persons."

She and her family had been hanging from these
 dangling strings since Suheila was eight years old.
 She was 33, the same age her father was when he
 disappeared during the Lebanese Civil War.

'Ya Laylat el Eid' blared out through the radio, Oum
 Kathoum's baritone wrapping itself around the
 balconies of Nasrah, signaling to the neighbourhood
 that it was officially the last night of the holy month of
 Ramadan.

"I can't believe it's the last day," Kamal called out to
 his wife Amal and the tiny head bobbing on the lounge
 room floor. Amal and Suheila were cocooned in ratty
 red cushions, scraps of paper, colouring pencils, and
 wooden pencil shavings.

Kamal had just returned from taking the meal Amal had
 prepared for the neighborhood guards, it consisted of



*Ethan is a proud
 Ngunnawal and
 Gamilaraay
 man, based in
 Campbelltown. He
 is a poet, producer
 and educator for
 MCA's National Centre
 for Creative Learning
 (NCCL). Ethan's poetry has
 been published by RedRoom
 Poetry, Sydney Living Museum, and
 Magabala Books. His poetry is reflective of his life,
 he is a proud community man who hopes that by
 sharing some of his thoughts and feelings through
 his work he can share what it is like for a black
 man living in Australia.*

two dates, broth, flatbread, hummus, beans, orange slices, and carob juice. The Nasrah residents took turns preparing meals for the male volunteers who started sentry at 7pm, some of whom as Muslims would be breaking their fast, and others who were fasting in solidarity, the kind of camaraderie that blotted out the hardships of the war.

Nasrah was a once lively neighborhood in the belly of Beirut, and part of the Green Line – tangled streets and alleyways that vertically divided majority Christian East Beirut from mainly Muslim West Beirut. Overnight, Nasrah and its indigenous mix of both populations, turned into a strategic frontline, an unwilling witness, a bystander to the grotesque. Like sutures and skin, the residents of Nasrah had only each other amidst the long, convoluted war that had pitted political and religious factions against each other, exacerbating sectarian divisions and creating deep wounds that would never properly heal.

They tried to create their own version of ‘normalcy’ despite the fighting, the regular power cuts, the indefinitely paused jobs, and interrupted schools. There was no way to commute safely through the pockets of fighting, and the landscape littered with checkpoints that spared no one. After a bomb exploded on the east side of the line – shattering windows, debris hurtling towards homes, the residents set up the sentry and managed the neighborhood for themselves. They didn’t want a tomb for a neighborhood in the middle of the city.

Kamal was getting ready for the evening prayer. He stepped into the bathroom crammed in the back of the apartment to perform his Ablution, a process of purifying oneself. Suddenly, they heard commotion down the street and the guards yelling something indiscernible. The door to their tiny flat swung open like a loose tooth, revealing four men in plain black shirts, military khaki pants, and laceup boots, AK47s casually clinging to their chests like brown paper grocery bags.

‘Police!’ One of them yelled, the faint light of the corridor sputtering across his bald head.

“We are looking for Kamal, the history teacher?” He towered over Amal, close enough for her to see the tiny droplets of sweat gather like ellipses along his forehead.

“W-w-why? Amal stuttered; her eyes glistened like chipped glass.

“We just want to question him,” he spat.

Kamal rushed out, dripping in ablution. Without saying a word, he already knew. He couldn’t resist the men and put his family in danger and risking the neighborhood quiet. Amal knew this, too. The leader barked at him to go, ‘Yalla!’, and the men led him out at gunpoint.

Amal found herself screaming: “You can’t take him – he has a medical condition!”

The words skidded off the door they had already slammed shut in her face.

Years of stories and silhouettes, it was clear Kamal was not coming back. In the decades since his disappearance, Amal had turned their home into a shrine, photographs and things belonging to Kamal kept intact. Amal and Suheila remained like a shadow disconnected from its source, his disappearance consuming their every conversation and action.

Then, in October 1990, reprieve came. The war had ended. People emerged from their bunkers. The residents cheering in the streets for weeks. Christmas trees rising up in the rubble, Muslims helping Christian neighbours, a symbol of the celebration and hope and peace people thought was coming. People planning to turn war bunkers into restaurants and party halls, ready to reclaim their beloved Beirut in its full vibrance and chaos and contradiction. Amal and Suheila waited, hopeful that this turn of events would transpire to bring Kamal home.

On her 15th birthday, Suheila found herself standing in a long line that trailed around the block. She and Amal were waiting along with hundreds of other families who had an array of grievances – brothers missing, husbands disappeared, food shortages – in line at the ICRC and its national body Red Crescent, where they would be able to lodge an application to find out the fate of Kamal.

There they learned that there were so many others like them, that during the 15-year war, more than 17,000 people were kidnapped and forcibly disappeared in Lebanon: from their homes, from the street, or taken from checkpoints. Those abducted were often exchanged for other prisoners, or for money or for revenge, or were disappeared to deepen sectarian divisions and creating fear within communities. They were buried in mass graves and would never be identified or exhumed.

The Red Crescent worker in the white shirt and tan vest whose name tag read Sandra, said, ‘The chance is low, but we will do all that we can.’

Year after year they checked in with Sandra, then with her replacement, and the person who replaced the replacement. They dwindled between denial and despair, hope and trying to heal. The limbo, the long road their only inheritance as they still searched and waited for answers.

In the years following, many families migrated to places like Australia and Canada, to get away from the ghosts and the pain of the war behind. Suheila

and Amal stayed and found their purpose. After an exchange with Bosnian women fighting for their missing dead, Amal and Suheila launched a national campaign to pressure the government to establish an entity like a truth committee. And finally, on November 2018, Parliament passed a law on the missing and disappeared, promising to form a national commission with a mandate to investigate individual cases of disappearances, locate and exhume mass graves, and enable a tracing process which potentially could bring some measure of closure to the thousands of families who have been locked in a state of frozen grief for far too many years.

Mere weeks after the law, Suheila found herself back at the cemetery, reciting al-Fatiha for her now deceased mother. Amal used to say to her only daughter, she was never going to stop searching for her husband Kamal, 'Either he will find me first...or I'll find him.'



Sara is a human rights activist and the daughter of migrants from Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon. A poet and writer, her pieces have been published in English and Arabic in various national and international outlets and anthologies. She is co-editor of the 2019 anthology

Arab, Australian, Other: Stories on Race and Identity. Sara is the first poet to win both the Australian Book Review's 2021 Peter Porter Poetry Prize and the Overland Judith Wright Poetry Prize 2020. She is currently developing her first novel as a recipient of the inaugural Affirm Press Mentorship for Sweatshop Western Sydney.

Melting joy

Hani Abdile

My mind was lost at sea; spotting land.
I fill with joy.
Then I see dry cages and turn to resistance.
This can't be Christmas.
Before burning sun chokes me,
Resilience kicks me in the belly roaring,

"Sail on!"

I felt I was chained in my being

Like a mentally enslaved bird
that flew from a jungle of danger
with an unsettled brain
feathers replaced with sticky
notes glued, to the skin
Scattered wings
Infinite fear

However the island blessed this bird
With wandering giant red crabs
The casual air of breath
Overlapping histories
Even the wind brought
The echo of their dry sound

And fortnightly contractors—
Sympathise with our flooded past
and some education for those who have nothing left

Then

As IHMS becomes irresponsible
And SERCO serves chicken with rice
hope fades away.

To a prison in an island in a continent
Which welcomed many birds with constant sobbing
voices

And little kids who went to sleep on the lullaby of
parents

Arguing about what life had presented—
Migration officers failing human rights

THEN we were finally Free
some doors opened wide.

And joy melted in our face
Like a marshmallow kissed by a flame.

But words of the past still hunt the foundation of my
cells

The door opened wide.

Maybe the definition of hope is a blend of beauty and
horror.

Suffocated with empathy

My soul is soundless
Over seeing my rainbow's thoughts
Which are wrapped with Merital anxiety

My feet are fading
Over crashing

The beautiful jacaranda
Which surprises me with a mirage future
venting about a fantasy life
In which merit is the key
I miss the streets of the past filled with
the breeze of the jasmine trees
Still feels refreshed in my nose

Learning new ways
Trying to compose
A new track of this new life
My cells are boiling And
My night is young So do this path of mine
Papers penetrate my being
Policy polices my purpose
Suffocating with empathy
This Marathon is precarious.



Hani is a writer and spoken word poet. She was forced to leave her home of Somalia and came to Australia seeking protection in 2014. During her 11 months in immigration detention, she found healing in writing poetry and developed a love for it.

Her first book of 43 poems, 'I will rise' explores how the power of our collective voices can shape the world to be a better place, for the next generation. Hani is an honorary member of PEN International. She is currently studying for a degree in journalism and has received numerous awards for her community work and creative art.

1900

Vivian Pham

1.

A peasant stumbles
through snow
with frosted eyelashes.

In a blink, it is spring.
Blossoming,
peaches are cut into two
blushing cheeks.

It does not snow in my home;
my peasants have never seen the snow.
The seasons do not change. If we have poems,
I have not read them. People inscribe
paddies into limestone mountains.
I am told of this talent. I marvel, but still
I would wonder if my ancestors have any culture
to speak of, unrelated to our geography.
If they did, my parents were unaware of it.

2.

Elsewhere you can forget the world is ancient,
but here, in this village, amnesia is a sin.
It must be, when everywhere is a grave.
The village is full of aborted love. Have you ever seen
love that never saw light? It clings
to the underside of rocks
like moss,
green with jealousy, and overgrown,
shining like jade, slithering serpentine.
How can I make you see?
Over there, look, but
don't let the burst of foliage fool you.
That is no ordinary banana grove.
Withered witchdoctors believe banana trees
to be the reincarnated bodies
of women who died
while pregnant.
It is believed that for
every banana blossom,
another dead baby is born.

3.

Some historic places have no monuments.
They have old men who put up with all life's languor
for a brassy afternoon of checkers
and condensed-milk coffee. They have
propaganda speakers in the middle of the street
now used on weekdays for karaoke.

4.

In Confession,
the eighteenth-century concubine Xuân Hương
writes of fragments.
Her moon is only a sliver. Her clouds have been

pierced.

Even when scarce, love belongs to the collective
“just the littlest bit”

5.

I read biographical details about Nguyen An Ninh:
anti-colonial scholar in
French colonial Vietnam,
we know him from his speeches and his newspapers,
from his translations of foreign theory,
from the poem found folded on his chest
when his heart finally stopped.
On his tongue, words were not only words
but promises;
language a dream in action.
“He did not mind anything,
working as the editor-in-chief,
reporter, type-setter and
even paper seller on resplendent
Saigon streets”. I want to believe in writing as he does.

I try to bring him to life but only
feel myself wonder in the shadow
of the ruined sculpture.
There are the tremendous
hands; large, artistically shaped, veined with turquoise.
There is the torso, or what is left of it, the ivory-dusted
shoulders.
There is the neck, the head, the face,
the blind limestone gaze. Does he belong
in the museum of Roman heads,
or is that my western education?
“He graduated from
the Sorbonne with a degree
in Law age 20.” For some reason, this
Wikipedia fact
ameliorates me.

Still, let's examine his figure *alfresco*,
cherry-picked from a dwindling bunch of dreams.
Let the light stain the ivory *incarnadine*.
For our literary purposes, let him live again.

In the yellow gloom of the *ylang ylang*s,
Ninh sat alone. Radiant, remote and
consumed in thought, a disposition bearing some
relation
to the self-immolating monks, of which
our country has produced a noteworthy number.
All over he was the colour of clay
baked for three days and three nights,

the same as any farmer's son.

But the threads and mannerisms
that manoeuvred him have other origins
– perhaps Parisian.

He went nowhere
without the shelter of a white parasol.
He moved slow and viscous like
honey in that tailored tropical suit,
always buttoned up to the neck.

Windows once encasing glass
now only covered
with a one frayed banana leaf.
It is through this window that I see
the young revolutionary.
Where did he come from?
He wears the rural sunshine and humidity
like someone who grew up in the countryside.
It is as though the atmosphere had
coughed him into being. Young girls watch the
stranger closely on their way back
from the village well, leaving puddles
in the dirt as they crane their necks.

In front of the house,
a crowd of vines rest on a bamboo frame,
from which dangle the bursting bodies
of blood-ripe bitter melon. Sieved through
entrails of flowered vegetables,
the sunlight falls gently onto Ninh.
Nature kneels before him;
even sunlight abandons its harsher forms
to suit the mild look in his eyes.

“Ngo Van recalls that
Nguyen An Ninh ‘raised his eyes [over the prison walls]
toward the tamarind trees and began to sing.”

It does not matter that the song was a French ballad.

What does matter?

An Ninh.
The revolutionary's name means peace.

6.

Where is the village I thought I knew?
Who are the peasants
whose features
my face steals from?
Exiled
by some twist of fate,

some random act of violence,
 some unfathomed silence,
 I made my body is a temple to you.
 There is no god greater to
 Vietnamese children
 than their parents. Everything I have sacrificed
 comes back to me now.
 The books you never read to me,
 I found them on my own.
 It is
 no one's fault.
 But it is
 our victory.



*Vivian is a
 writer from
 a long and
 frequently
 interrupted
 line of writers;
 her greatest
 influences
 include poet and
 civil rights activist
 James Baldwin, humourist*

*P.G. Wodehouse, and legendary
 filmmaker Stephen Chow. She was twice the
 Australian delegate to the International Congress
 of Youth Voice. In addition to writing fiction, she
 studies philosophy at university and wants to
 become a folklorist.*

Giyira

Jazz Money

What is it to talk about literary freedoms, on a continent such as this?

Where song and story are born within the land, comes swelling out the mouths of the people. For we are Country as Country is us and we speak in a language of wholeness.

In speaking our languages we open universes. Words and song and story that explain the the way the world is whole.

There was a time when we used to speak of lost languages on this continent.

Disrupted, yes, disturbed, yes, even taken, perhaps, but

never lost.

Nothing can be lost which belongs to Country. Country is the first teacher, and so our languages are held all around us.

And when our bodies are gone, our ancestors remain, walk and guide and sing all this.

This continent is full of hauntings of all unsaid. Of histories we do not speak. Of languages that are quiet without shape in the mouth of those who inherit the song. That is what makes Country incomplete. Our world depends on ceremony and care, of a dialogue where Country listens back. What we speak, Country hears.

Giyira is the Wiradjuri word for future. Giyira is also the Wiradjuri word for womb.

As someone who was raised in English, with all its awkwardness, its messiness, its cruel reach, it can be hard to imagine a world so full of harmony and grace, so embedded with science and with empathy, that the word for future and womb would be the same.

And isn't that the cruelty of all this?

That to have language disturbed is to lose the way we understand the world.

Bilabang is the Wiradjuri word for a pool of water. Bilabang is also our word for the galaxy, the Milky Way.

I am incredibly privileged as a Wiradjuri person to have access to my language. Dr Uncle Stan Grant Snr has kept safe the canoe of our tongue so that those of us who were not raised within its warmth can return to travelling along the rivers of our language.

Each stream leading to something greater.

The language remains, it is only our ability to access it that changes.

To be born into this colony is to enter a conflicted state. A place where the law, the language, the spirits, the science, and all of Country is usurped by a tongue that brings a code of theft, of cruelty, of extraction and harm, where the true words were made forbidden. How can foreign laws enter a place by breaking every code on either side. Whichever way you cut the words, this is an illegal occupation. And yet one that wields power to harm Country and imprison those with responsibility to the land and the true laws.

To speak of literary freedoms on this continent is to speak of Country. Every Uncle, cousin, niece locked in a prison cell is a poet, a story teller, a singer, a dancer, who is taken from us. Every Black child who is in a prison cell is the victim of a violence against the universe.

And I say all this to you in English.

That's the gag.

In Bilingual Blues by Gustavo Perez Firmat the poet writes
 “The fact that I
 am writing to you
 in English
 already falsifies what I
 wanted to tell you.
 My subject:
 how to explain to you that I
 don’t belong to English
 though I belong nowhere else.”

Those of us who do not have fluency in our languages know this. Those of us displaced from our homelands and forced into English know this. Those of us who have dialogue with Country yet do not speak its language know this.

We are imprisoned within English. That is not a metaphor. We are imprisoned by the colony. That is not a metaphor.

Our bodies, our stories, our universes are the evidence - that which is missing, and all that which remains.

Bilabang is a single pool of water, Bilabang is the galaxy.



Jazz is an award-winning poet of Wiradjuri heritage, a freshwater woman currently based on beautiful sovereign Gadigal land. Her practice is centred around the written word while producing works that encompass installation, digital, film and print. In 2020 Jazz was awarded the David Unaipon Award from the State Library of Queensland and a First Nations Emerging Career Award from the Australian Council for the Arts. Jazz’s debut collection ‘how to make a basket’ is out now with University of Queensland Press. Her website is www.jazz.money.

This special event was supported by the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund, which has also been a long-term supporter of PEN's Free Voices program.

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Awards to celebrate literary translation skills

The Australian Association for Literary Translation now invites entries for its 2022 Translation Awards, which acknowledge the wealth of literary translation skills present in the Australian community.

Prizes are awarded for a translation of a selected prose text and for a translation of a selected poem, with the focus on a different language each time the prize is offered. For the first time, the poetry award is in the name of acclaimed Australian poet, Judith Rodriguez.

This year, the focus language is Arabic. The prose text for translation is by Ghassan Kanafani. The poetry text is by Soukaina Habiballah. Closing date is May 27, 2022.

Poetry prize offers ‘hope’ to Australian poets

Australian Catholic University is also putting the call out to poets from around the nation to share a glimmer of hope in a world shaken by a global pandemic, worsening natural disasters and the threat of global conflict.

The 2022 ACU Prize for Poetry is now open for all Australian residents to submit their finest works on the theme of ‘Hope’, inspired by a line from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s famous play about Robin Hood: “Hope smiles from the threshold of the year to come, whispering ‘it will be happier’...” Entries for the \$20,000 prize close on July 4, 2022.

The winners of the \$10,000 first prize, second prize of \$5000, \$3000 third prize, and two \$1,000 Highly Commended prizes will be announced at the ACU Prize for Poetry Awards night on September 6 in Sydney.

Fr Anthony Casamento, ACU Vice-President, said the 2022 prize would give Australian poets and aspiring writers and artists an outlet for creating a sense of optimism during what many consider an unimaginable time.

Ukrainian literature's history is a mouthpiece for a denied community

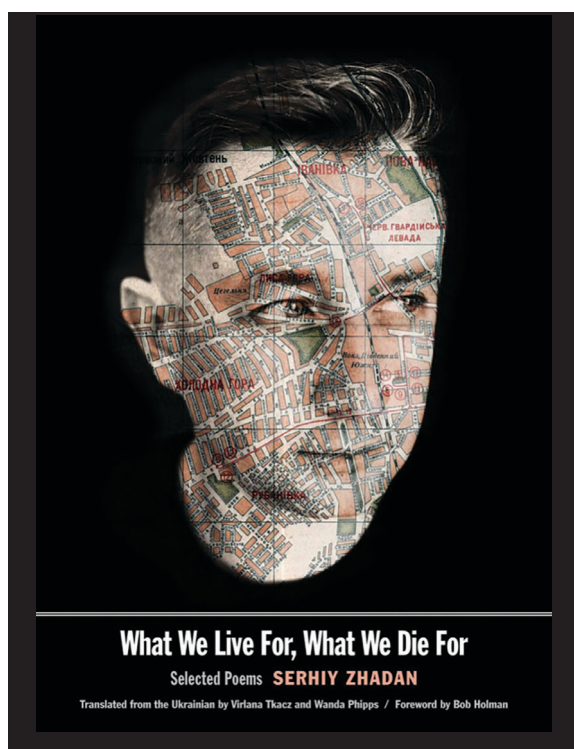
In early March, the Polish Academy of Sciences nominated Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan for the Nobel Prize in literature. For Ukrainians and readers of Ukrainian literature, this may have been a piece of good news in awful times, writes **Dr Alessandro Achilli**.

A prolific prose and poetry writer as well as a very popular musician, Serhiy Zhadan hails from eastern Ukraine. After his debut in the mid-1990s, Zhadan has become the most influential voice of contemporary Ukrainian culture, with an impressive array of readers and fans both in Ukraine and abroad. His latest novel, *The Orphanage*, originally published in 2017, has recently come out in English with Yale University Press.

The story of a dull teacher from war-ravaged eastern Ukraine who has been charged with the task of rescuing his nephew and, hence, finding meaning in life again, *The Orphanage* is both a highly readable novel and a reminder that there has been war in Ukraine for eight years now. But Zhadan is also the author of several poetry collections. Two anthologies of his poems have been recently published in English, one with Yale UP and the other with Lost Horse Press, an Idaho-based publisher with a remarkable Ukrainian poetry series.

Among Lost Horse's newest titles in Ukrainian poetry is also *Apricots of Donbas* by Lyuba Yakimchuk. Yakimchuk, also a native of eastern Ukraine, had to flee Luhansk in 2014 after it was occupied by Russian proxies. Her poetry is one of the strongest literary testimonies of the fact that war is nothing new for Ukrainians.

Ukrainian literature certainly experienced a boom after 2014, but the roots of the new, post-Soviet Ukrainian literary culture are to be found in the 1990s. Soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, Yuri Andrukhovych published *Recreations* and *The Moscoviad*, two influential novels that can significantly help understand modern Ukrainian identity and self-representation, both available in English translation. In *Recreations*, a novel centred around the participants of a colourful art festival in western Ukraine, the joyful celebration of Ukrainian culture and its liberation from the yoke of Soviet censorship and Soviet aesthetics goes hand in hand with an ironic, postmodern self-deconstruction of Ukrainianness at the very moment of its liberation. In *The Moscoviad*, the Ukrainian-Russian encounter is depicted through the adventures of a young Ukrainian writer studying in Moscow and his attempt to understand and survive the horrors of the Soviet and Russian capital.



Another leading name of Ukrainian literature of the 1990s is Oksana Zabuzhko, a key figure of the feminist movement that significantly shaped Ukrainian cultural conversations after independence. Although selections of her poetry, essays and short stories are also available in English, Zabuzhko's breakthrough remains her 1996 novel *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*. More than 25 years after its original publication, this stream-of-consciousness text on such topics as emigration, sexuality and female writing in a complex, multilayered (post) colonial context provides today's readers with insight into the extent to which independent Ukraine has managed to modernise itself and to deal with the social and cultural challenges inherited from decades of subjugation to the Soviet mindset.

While Zabuzhko's novel is set in sophisticated Cambridge, Massachusetts, everyday life in 1990s Kyiv

is at the heart of *Death and the Penguin*, one of the most popular books by Andrei Kurkov. Kurkov, born in Soviet Russia, grew up in Kyiv and has become the most influential Russian-language author of today's Ukraine. A living demonstration of the fact that an unequivocally Ukrainian identity is also possible through the Russian language, Kurkov is currently president of the Ukrainian PEN.

But none of these names has the evocative power of Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), the national poet par excellence and a symbol of the Ukrainian nation cherished by Ukrainians all over the world. Shevchenko shaped modern Ukrainian as a literary language able to function in different styles to deal with a variety of themes. His biography can be said to be symbolic of Ukraine's own fate. Born a serf in a village in central Ukraine, Shevchenko was later taken to St Petersburg, where his artistic talent allowed him to become a free

Once the police found about the Brotherhood in 1847, Shevchenko was arrested and sent into exile for 10 years to remote parts of the Russian Empire. He returned to Petersburg in the late 1850s, where he died in 1861.

Yet, although abundant and multifaceted, Shevchenko's poetry has its cornerstone in its representation of and preoccupation with Ukraine. Torn

between a mythically glorious past, a tragic present of colonial subordination and an uncertain future, Ukraine is one of the two fundamentals of Shevchenko's poetic world, the other being the titanic poetic subject's self and his emotions.

One of the most powerful examples of Shevchenko's writing is his 1844 revolutionary long poem *The Dream* with its Dante-inspired subtitle, *A Comedy*, in which the lyrical subject dreams of flying over the earth. His ability to fly gives him the chance to better see the reality of the Russian state, including Ukrainian soldiers who have forgotten their mother tongue and are now part of the repressive system of the empire. But the best part of the poem is the vivid representation of the Tsar and the Tsarina in all their grotesqueness and squalor.

The literary history of Ukraine is long, stretching back to the Middle Ages. What any reader of modern Ukrainian literature – from Shevchenko and his 19th-century successors to the present day – cannot fail to notice or appreciate is the emotional intensity that has accompanied and shaped its role as the mouthpiece for an often denied or repressed national community.

Alessandro Achilli is a lecturer in Ukrainian Studies at Monash University. This piece also appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.

Belarusian journalist Yury Hantsarevich detained for 10 days, charged with extremism

Belarus authorities should drop all charges against journalist Yury Hantsarevich and let the press report freely on the war in Ukraine, the Committee to Protect Journalists said recently.

On May 5, the pro-government Telegram channel Obratnaya Storona published a video in which Hantsarevich, a correspondent for the independent news website Intex-Press, is seen confessing to sending materials to extremist media outlets; CPJ was unable to immediately determine the circumstances under which that video was recorded.

News reports published later that day said authorities in the western city of Baranavichy had charged Hantsarevich with facilitating extremist activities and ordered him to be held for 10 days in a separate administrative case. If convicted on the extremism charge, he faces up to six years in prison, according to the criminal code of Belarus.

"The seemingly coerced confession of journalist Yury Hantsarevich once again shows that Belarusian authorities will do whatever it takes to demean and harass members of the press," said Gulnoza Said, CPJ's Europe and Central Asia program coordinator, in New York. "Authorities must release Hantsarevich immediately, drop all charges against him, and stop using extremism legislation to stifle independent reporting on the war in Ukraine."

In the video, Hantsarevich says he sent a screenshot from a weather website showing a Russian military convoy to the independent Belarusian news website Tut.by via Telegram on February 24, and took a photo of what he thought were Russian aircraft at the Baranavichy military airfield with a camera borrowed from Intex-Press and sent it to Radio Svaboda on March 1.

Both Tut.by and Radio Svaboda, the Belarus service of the U.S. Congress-funded broadcaster RFE/RL, are designated as "extremist" in Belarus, as CPJ has documented.

Hantsarevich mainly covered sports for Intex-Press, but also reported on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions imposed on Russia.

- Literary non-fiction

How a rebellious genre gained credibility from an unlikely source

Many people may think or assume that creative non-fiction is just part of the literary ecosystem; it's always been around, like fiction or poetry. In many ways, of course, they are right: the kind of writing that is now considered to be under the creative non-fiction umbrella has a long and rich history, says **Lee Gutkind**.

Many writers look to Michel de Montaigne as the father of the modern essay, but, to my mind, the more authentic roots of creative non-fiction are in the eighteenth century: Daniel Defoe's historical narratives, Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, Thomas Paine's pamphlets, and Samuel Johnson's essays built a foundation for later writers such as Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau.

That is to say, even if the line between fact and fiction was perhaps a little fuzzy in the early days, it's not hard to find rich non-fiction narratives that predate the use of the word "non-fiction" and were around long before the first recorded use of the phrase "creative non-fiction".

But in a lot of important ways, creative non-fiction is still very new, at least as a form of literature with its own identity. Unfortunately, it took a long time — longer than it should have — for the genre to be acknowledged in that ecosystem. And, of course, you'll still encounter people who are unfamiliar with the term or want to make that dumb joke, "Creative non-fiction: isn't that an oxymoron?"

Be that as it may, there's no real doubt at this point that creative non-fiction is a serious genre. Non-fiction narratives are everywhere. Newspapers have welcomed personal essays not only on their op-ed pages but in many different sections. Memoir, labelled a "craze" in the 1990s, is a mainstay of the publishing industry. Twenty or so years ago, almost no one was publishing essay collections, and even the word "essay" was the kiss of death if you wanted a trade publisher to consider your work, but now essay collections are routinely on best-seller lists. And, increasingly, even non-narrative creative non-fiction like lyric essays and hybrid forms have gained legitimacy and commercial viability.

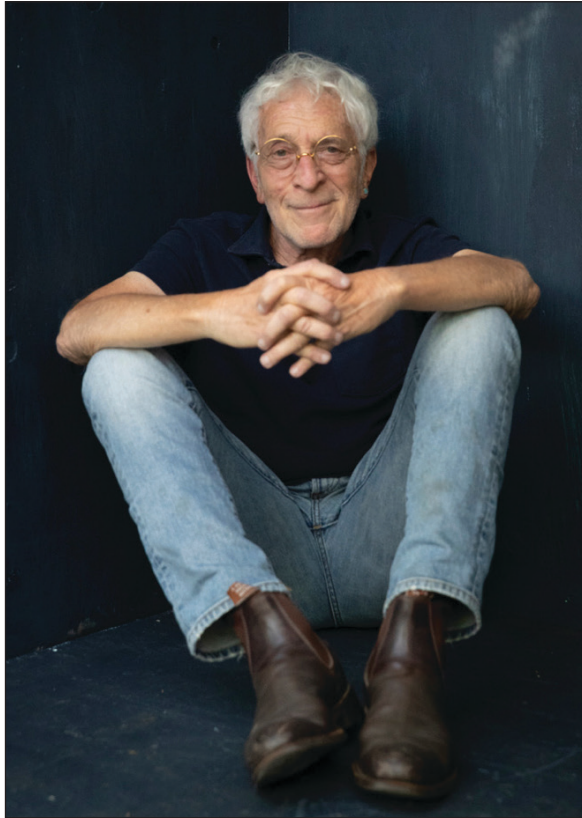
It's not hard to find rich nonfiction narratives that predate the use of the word "nonfiction".

So, you might ask, what happened? How did we get to this era of acceptance and legitimacy? The genre's success, a gradual process over almost a half-century, emerged in many important ways from an unlikely and dominant source. I am not at all sure I would be writing this today, if not for the academy, and specifically departments of English.

I've written a great deal about the power struggles that went on in the early 1970s, when I was teaching at the University of Pittsburgh and to a lesser degree at other universities and trying to expand the curriculum to include what was then called, mostly because of Tom Wolfe, "new journalism."

I find that many students today aren't very familiar with the New Journalists — Wolfe, Gay Talese, Gail Sheehy, Jimmy Breslin, Barbara Goldsmith, and Jane Kramer, among others. The New Journalists were doing some very exciting stuff, seemingly groundbreaking. They were writing in scenes, recreating dialogue, manipulating timelines, and including themselves — their voices and ideas — in the stories they were writing.

Other writers, recognized for their literary achievements, were also taking chances, pushing boundaries. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, his "non-fiction novel", stunned and obsessed the literary world when it was published first in *The New Yorker* in 1965 and then, the following year, as a book. In 1969, another novelist, Norman Mailer, was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction and the



Lee Gutkind

National Book Award for Arts and Letters for *The Armies of the Night*, about the Washington, DC, peace demonstrations.

Mailer was awarded a second Pulitzer in 1980 for his intense, thousand-plus-page deep-dive into murder, obsession, and punishment, *The Executioner's Song*, which became a centerpiece of a national conversation about the death penalty.

I couldn't see why this kind of work didn't belong in the classroom. Why wasn't there a category for writing that wasn't poetry or fiction or essay or journalism but that could bring the various literary and journalistic techniques used in all of those forms together into one unique work of art and craft? Why didn't this amalgam of literary and journalistic richness belong . . . somewhere?

I think the resistance to creative non-fiction as being part of creative writing went even deeper and had something to do with how we define literature. And I mean not just contemporary works like *In Cold Blood* but the work that came before it, too — the non-fiction written by H. L. Mencken and Mark Twain, James Baldwin and Jack London, not to forget the father of English journalism, Daniel Defoe. I have a few theories.

First, the lack of a unifying name was definitely a complicating factor. "New journalism" wasn't great because (the argument went, in English departments, at least) journalism was a trade, not a literary

pursuit. There were other names — "the literature of fact," "literary non-fiction," "belles lettres". But using the word "literary" to describe contemporary writing, meaning that a person would have to say "I write literary non-fiction" . . . well, that felt sort of presumptuous, didn't it? "Creative" sort of had the same problem; who was to say what that meant, and it also sort of implied that other kinds of writing weren't creative, and that didn't feel good, especially to the scholars. And to the journalists, "creative" sounded like it meant you were making stuff up. As for "belles lettres," well... it just sounded pretentious.

Even more than that, I think there was something about the writing itself — and the writers — that felt threatening. Not just because of the rule breaking. So much of this new non-fiction was about real people and events and was often quite revelatory. We were really a no-holds-barred crew. Wherever there was a story we were there, boots on the ground, bringing it to life — and often revealing the darkest side of things, of war, of poverty, of inherent societal racism.

And it wasn't just Mailer and Capote and Baldwin who were writing this stuff, but real people capturing their own lives and struggles in dramatic detail. The "new" whatever you wanted to call it was truly an awakening. Suddenly the doors were open to other options far more interesting than the inverted pyramid or the five-paragraph essay, and considering these new possibilities for what to write about and, more important, how to write their stories was liberating, challenging, and downright enjoyable.

So much of this new nonfiction was about real people and events and was often quite revelatory.

I should also point out that as the dialogue and debate about non-fiction began to grow, in the 1980s and early 1990s, I was travelling widely. I got invitations from not just universities, but also book clubs and local conferences and met not only with students but also with many of these "real" people who wanted to write. Some were professionals — doctors, teachers, scientists — but there were also firefighters, ambulance drivers, and what we then called homemakers, all with stories to write. They, too, saw the appeal of this non-fiction form that let you tell stories and incorporate your experiences along with other information and ideas and personal opinions.

These folks cared much less than the academics did about what it was called. But — after the dust had settled to a certain extent in academia; after the English department at Pitt had agreed, first, to a course called "The New Non-fiction" and then, nearly two decades later, to a whole master's program concentrating on creative non-fiction writing (the first in the country, I believe), which later became an MFA program; and after the NEA, in 1989 or so, also adopted the term "creative non-fiction," a tipping



Norman Mailer with Joyce Carol Oates. Below: Truman Capote

point for sure — well, it mattered tremendously to those folks that it had a name, this kind of writing they wanted to do.

It brought a validation to their work, to know that there was a place or a category where their work belonged. The writing itself wasn't necessarily anything new but now people were paying attention to it, and they had something to call it.

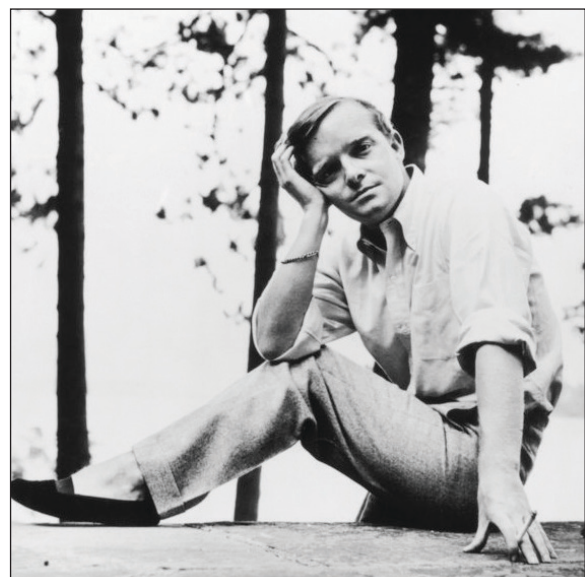
And, in fact, work from many of those writers I met during those years on the road was published in the first few issues of *Creative Non-fiction*. In the early issues of the journal, we attracted all kinds of writers who were, perhaps, tired of being locked in or limited. We published journalists and essayists and poets, all of them exploring and reaching.

It may well be that English departments resisted change for various reasons at the beginning, but they also opened the doors and provided a place — a destination — for creative non-fictionists to come together, dialogue and share our work, and earn a certain legitimacy that had been denied to us at the very beginning.

I had no idea at the time I started teaching that creative non-fiction would become such a mainstay, not just in the academy, but as a force and influence in literature and in publishing. I don't think this fight could have taken place anywhere else but in the academy, where intellectual discourse and opportunities for new ideas can so richly flourish and be recognized.

Today, we are not just a part of the literary ecosystem, we are its most active and impactful contributors — leaders and change makers and motivators where we once did not belong.

Lee Gutkind, the founder and editor of Literary Non-Fiction magazine, is the author and editor of more than 30 books, including You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Non-fiction.



- True stories

What is creative non-fiction and where did it come from?

It's one of the most important and fast-growing movements in contemporary writing, but what exactly is creative non-fiction? The blanket term covers the work of many writers, including some who would be astonished to be listed under that label, reports **Jane Sullivan**.

The simplest definition is true stories well told. Delve a little further and it's writing that uses literary craft and techniques (narration, characters, dialogue, scenes) to tell stories about real people and events in a way that brings them to life. When she was prose editor of *Westerly* magazine, Rachel Robertson went further: it's usually told in the first person and the narrator's voice is a key part of the work. "The best works ... use their apparent topic to explore a deeper issue and are both timely and timeless," she said.

Susan Orlean's work is an example of creative non-fiction.

Of course, this kind of writing has been around since St Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, but we can see it develop in the past decade or two through the boom in memoirs, travel and nature writing, personal essay collections and immersive journalism. Well-known examples include Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood*, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* and Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*. There are also anthologies and magazines devoted to the form and courses on offer for would-be writers.

Lee Kofman, herself a teacher and writer of creative non-fiction with her books *The Dangerous Bride* and *Imperfect*, has compiled a brief online history of Australian writers in the genre, from the pioneers (Clive James, Robyn Davidson, Thomas Keneally), to the veterans (Helen Garner, Raimond Gaita, Robert Drewe), through to the newcomers (Anna Funder, Kate Holden, Alice Pung, Chloe Hooper). Already there are new names to add to that list.

The epicentre of the form is the US, and one of its great teaching pioneers, Lee Gutkind, has written in *Creative Non-fiction* magazine about its birth and history. University English departments enabled the form to grow, he says. It had its roots in the New Journalism of the 1990s and books such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, but nothing like it was being taught when he began teaching. Why not, Gutkind wondered.

So, almost by stealth, he began to teach it, mostly because nobody else wanted to. It helped that he was "a bit of an interloper" in academia. He recalls a heated debate among colleagues about the classics that ended when the department chair said "after all, gentlemen, we are interested in literature here – not writing".

Creative non-fiction techniques are at work in Julia Baird's *Phosphorescence*. Professor Gutkind thinks the academy resisted because something about the writing was threatening, "often revealing the darkest side of things, of war, of poverty, of inherent societal racism". But gradually universities became more accepting, not least because the form attracted an entirely new breed of students.

"Fifty years ago," Gutkind concludes, "we were hardly a blip on the radar ... Today we are not just a part of the literary ecosystem, we are its most active and impactful contributors – leaders and change-makers and motivators where we once did not belong."

Where will the writers go next? Already things are getting a bit wilder, as experimental work marries prose with poetry, visual effects and multimedia; or more political and passionate, in memoir that tackles social injustice. The techniques are also at work in some crowd-pleasing Australian bestsellers such as *Phosphorescence* or Richard Fidler's personal biographies of Istanbul and Prague.

I'm not sure who came up with it, but one of the nicest definitions of the genre is "an entire dresser labelled nonsocks". Which means you can go anywhere, do anything. As long as your story is true and you tell it well.

Jane Sullivan's feature was also published in the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.

- The power of poetry

Celebrating cultural linguistic expression

Writer **Melissa Bruce** had not heard of World Poetry Day until recently and says now that it seems there's a day for everything. Some days are important reminders, like the International Day of the Imprisoned Writer that highlights cases of writers imprisoned or facing prosecution for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression. Others, she says, like Australia Day, are fraught.

UNESCO'S World Poetry Day simply celebrates "one of humanity's most treasured forms of cultural and linguistic expression and identity. Practiced throughout history – in every culture and on every continent – poetry speaks to our common humanity and our shared values, transforming the simplest of poems into a powerful catalyst for dialogue and peace."

It is an uncomplicated day, except that the definition has always been debated. Even *Encyclopedia Britannica* wrestles with "the difficulty or impossibility of defining poetry". It begins with "...literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound, and rhythm..." and ends with "Poetry is the way it is because it looks that way, and it looks that way because it sounds that way and vice versa."

The esteemed late poet Jon Stallworthy said in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, "A poem is a composition written for performance by the human voice... the most satisfying reading of a poem involves a simultaneous engagement of eye and ear..."

Countless forms of poetry have been fashionable throughout history, including the sonnet, haiku, limerick, ballad, nursery rhyme, epic and rap lyric, though the apparent purpose remains the same – to explore the human condition and invoke emotion through words.

Perhaps it is oxymoronic to define poetry, stifling with nomenclature something that has been described as the language of the soul. Perhaps we should define it more poetically? American poet Carl Sandburg, winner of three Pulitzer Prizes, called poetry "an echo, asking a shadow to dance". American writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde said, "Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before." According to Salman Rushdie, "A

poet's work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it from going to sleep."

Our world may well be "unwoke", a climate-changing natural disaster zone with a world-stopping plague and the threat of nuclear, biological and actual arms war, yet violins are being played in bomb shelters in Ukraine. The arts, like the spirit, survive in the darkest times, offering gifts of beauty, truth and solace.

Yet in Australia, we mourn massive funding cuts to arts organisations. Our current budget delivers a \$190m drop in funding to the sector and tertiary students are financially penalised for choosing Humanities subjects. It highlights a culture that misunderstands the importance of the arts in maintaining a free and healthy nation. Meanwhile, an Australian Prime Minister plays a (Hawaiian) ukulele on national television, recalling (some of) the politically poetic lyrics of Dragon's song, *April Sun in Cuba*. Brings to mind the lyrics of Midnight Oil's *Beds are Burning*. How can we sleep, indeed?

In the film *Dead Poets Society*, an inspirational teacher proclaims, "No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world". Dylan Thomas wrote "A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him..."

Activist-artist Ai Weiwei's memoir, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, tells an epic tale of China through the story of his life and the legacy of his father, Ai Qing, China's most celebrated poet. It serves as a timely reminder of the urgent need to protect freedom of expression. "Without freedom of speech, there is no modern world, just a barbaric one." The book takes its title from poetry that Qing wrote while visiting ruins on the Silk Road: "Of a thousand years of joys and sorrows / Not a trace can be found." With the powerful act of public remembering, often reciting his father's poems, Weiwei ensures much more than a trace of a concerning history remains.



Jordi Albisto

President John F. Kennedy said, “When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of this existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.” In a soul-bankrupted world we need languages of the soul.

After the Trump-induced threat to democracy with the storming of Capital Hill, a divinely inspired antithetical act ensued. The incumbent president, for the inauguration ceremony, invited Amanda Gorman, a young African American woman, to deliver a poem bookended with these lines:

When day comes, we ask ourselves:
 Where can we find light
 In this never-ending shade?
 ...
 When day comes, we step out of the shade,
 Aflame and unafraid.
 The new dawn blooms as we free it.
 For there is always light,
 If only we’re brave enough to see it,
 If only we’re brave enough to be it.

If poetry is the language of the soul, essential in a world gone mad, and if stories are our lifeline, perhaps the verse novel matters a great deal at this time. Recently published, *The Verse Novel* offers insight into this unique blend of poetry and storytelling. Produced by author and academic Dr Linda Weste, it features a collection of 35 interviews with verse novelists from our region.

Again, the problem of definition.

According to Dr Weste, “Some ambivalence is evident about the nomenclature, ‘verse novel’. As she says, “the verse novel has never been bound to a specific poetic form” and “the term ‘form’ not only poses definitional challenges – it has discernible limitations for communicating the complexity in the verse novel.”

The collection provides a chance to convey this complexity and to improve verse novel reception. Perhaps it was no coincidence that in 2008, when highly respected verse novelist Dorothy Porter died, the form became locally unfashionable. Now it is alive again in general readership and academic settings. Verse novels discussed in the interviews in the book were published by 29 separate publishing houses. And perhaps for the information-overloaded, text-message/twitter/snapchat sound-biting generations, the form is perfectly appropriate for the times.

In the preface to *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, literary critic M. H. Abrams wrote, “...a vital literary culture is always on the move,” both in the appearance of new words and in the altering response to existing texts. Verse novelist Paul Hetherington says, “Various contemporary writers, such as Anne Carson, are already subverting the conventional idea of what a verse novel might look like, and I’m sure that there is much more subversion and reimagining of the form to come.”

Another trail-blazing verse novelist, Jordi Albiston, who died in March, was also interviewed for this collection, reflecting on the creation of her “verse biography” *The Hanging of Jean Lee*. “I was hoping to create a poetry both full and sparse. I wanted there to be room for other minds, other imaginations to move around... It is not the preordained function of the documentary poet to simply recycle history in broken lines: rather, as Emily Dickinson wrote, to “tell all the truth but tell it slant.” Sometimes telling “all the truth” requires leaving some of it out.

Asked about her thoughts on the verse biography as a form, she said, “I am surprised this form is sometimes considered a contemporary genre. In fact, given the Homeric epics, documentary poetry is probably the first kind of verse ever composed. Having said that, the verse biography is a slippery animal, one that (thankfully) defies a sure pinning down...it can poke around below the radar of accepted notions of reality; it may breathe fire without fear.”

In our democratically threatened and soul-bankrupted times, maybe we need the freedom of poetic expression more than ever. On this year’s World Poetry Day, Director-General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, said, “Arranged in words, coloured with images, struck with the right meter, the power of poetry has no match. As an intimate form of expression that opens doors to others, poetry enriches the dialogue that catalyses all human progress, and is more necessary than ever in turbulent times.”

In these dire times, may we stay awake to the power of poetry, world-shaper, sleep-waker, life-raft to the soul, a place to find light in this “never-ending shade... aflame and unafraid”.

Melissa Bruce holds an MA in Writing (UTS), a Diploma in Directing (NIDA) and a BEd (Victoria College). She has worked as a writer, teacher, stage manager, performance consultant and theatre director. Melissa has produced original stage, radio and educational plays and published short stories, poetry and articles.

- Restoring collective truth

An existential moment: Maria Ressa's plan to defend facts against lies

Journalists are under attack around the world. Last year, the number of journalists who were jailed for their work hit a record high of 293, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. At the same time, the financial lifeblood of journalism — advertising — has shifted away from the press toward Big Tech companies whose algorithms promote content that enrages and entertains rather than informs.

Julia Angwin reports.

Authoritarian regimes increasingly use this shifting information environment to their advantage by spreading lies and disinformation about their opponents while suppressing independent journalism.

But Maria Ressa has a plan for how journalists can restore a collective truth and societies can hold the tech platforms accountable for promoting falsehoods. Ressa is a journalist who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year along with journalist Dmitry Muratov “for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace.”

Ressa was born in Manila and moved to the United States when she was nine years old. After graduating from Princeton University, she returned to the Philippines and eventually began working as a correspondent for CNN, where she rose to bureau chief in Manila and Jakarta, specializing in terrorism coverage. She is the author of two books on terrorism: *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda's Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia* (Free Press, 2003) and *From Bin Laden to Facebook: 10 Days of Abduction, 10 Years of Terrorism* (Imperial College Press, 2013).

In 2012, she co-founded *Rappler*, an online news site that has exposed the violence of President Rodrigo Duterte's war on the drug trade and his use of fake news to harass political opponents and manipulate the public. As a result, she became a government target, facing dozens of charges and arrest warrants. Her book *How to Stand Up to a Dictator* comes out later this year.

In our conversation, she describes how she wants to hold the tech platforms accountable while increasing investment in journalism. Our discussion, edited for brevity, is below.

ANGWIN: You have dedicated your life to fighting for freedom of the press and for truth, but it has come at a cost. You and *Rappler* have been repeatedly targeted by the authoritarian administration led by President Duterte. For our readers who are unaware, can you provide a brief overview of the false allegations against you and the latest updates in these cases?

RESSA: It started in 2016 when we exposed the real toll of President Duterte's brutal drug war and the disinformation network that silenced anyone who asked questions. About a year later, President Duterte asserted in the State of the Nation address that I was a criminal, and about a week later we got our first subpoena, in 2018. There were 14 investigations by 2019, and I received 10 arrest warrants, an experience I would never wish on anyone.

They threw everything at me. There is one that alleges I'm a foreign agent, forget the fact that I've been a journalist for more than 36 years and that my track record is clean. There is also tax evasion, I have five of those, and cyber libel. But the real damage was what Duterte had already accomplished on social media, which was to tear down all journalists' credibility so that there was no trust in the media.

In January 2018, the government tried to shut us down by revoking our license to operate. We fought back legally and publicly, but nevertheless within four months we dropped exactly 49 percent



Nobel Peace Prize Laureates Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov at the Grand Hotel Balcony greeting the annual Nobel Torchlight parade. Photograph by Jo Straube

of our advertising revenue, so it became a do or die situation. We had to come up with an alternative business model to support ourselves.

ANGWIN: Can you talk a bit about the sustainable business model you developed?

RESSA: When we came under attack, we were actually tracking the narrative and spread [of disinformation]. We realized that what we were doing to defend ourselves is actually what every company is going to need in the social media world. It's like getting a map of the city, so we built a product that advertisers could use to track attacks and meta narratives using natural language processing. With this we were able to grow 2,000 percent, and this set us up to survive the pandemic. In the last two years, we've actually grown rather than letting go of our journalists.

I don't think good journalism is going to survive without good tech, tech that isn't about profit but instead about creating a public sphere where people can have public discussions and an exchange of

ideas, things that are necessary for a democracy. The lesson I'd take out of this is that they can throw the kitchen sink at you, but it is all about how you handle it, and how you use it to make yourself stronger.

ANGWIN: I want to talk about your book, *How to Stand Up to a Dictator*. It feels really relevant right now when the whole world is attempting to stand up to Russian president Vladimir Putin. What lessons do you have that might be applicable to our current context?

RESSA: Last year, when I handed in my first draft, my prologue was about the annexation of Crimea. I think that's when the splintered reality started and you could see two different realities because of disinformation. The core of the book is about identifying and protecting our common values. For example, is it important to be honest? Yes, it is, and if we agree on that, we must agree that there have to be facts. If we can find the facts, we can find the truth and we can rebuild trust. That's the crucial part of how to stand up to a dictator, and it begins with each of us.

With the election coming up, we are trying to defend the facts with a hashtag #FactsFirst Philippines. If we can assure the facts, then we can begin to build the foundations of democracy again.

ANGWIN: What do you think it would take for companies to adjust their algorithms to prioritize truth and facts?

RESSA: I have three ideas for this. Facebook, for example, is the world's largest delivery platform of news, and yet this platform doesn't distinguish between fact and fiction. In fact, they actually give preferential treatment to the distribution of lies because that will keep you scrolling longer.

We need to hold them accountable for the amplification, make data uses more transparent, and take away the insidious manipulation. That's where regulation needs to start. The EU has the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, which just last week went through. However, it's taken two years to get here, and it's not going to be out in time to help us with our elections.

Second, U.S. lawmakers need to reform or revoke Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. The diddling around this has allowed people like me to lose our freedom. It has allowed people in Myanmar to die. Someone's freedom of speech or ability to make more money has literally not just taken away others' but has also led to death and destruction.

"In 2016, it only took six months for President Duterte to destroy our trust in existing institutions. And I'm not out of the woods. I still have to ask myself, 'Am I going to jail or not?'"

In the long term we need to look for an entirely new system for the internet. We need the checks and balances we have to extend to the digital world. There is only one world, and to pretend like the virtual world is something different is just a way for companies to continue making bucketloads of money at our expense. We are all victims of this insidious manipulation, and it must stop. Democracy is impossible if we do not have a shared set of facts.

ANGWIN: You have called for intervention to help journalism survive amid collapsing advertising business models. You are co-chairing a fund, the International Fund for Public Interest Media, which is trying to raise money for journalists from overseas development assistance funds. Can you tell us more about this effort?

RESSA: If you want to see the worst of what can happen with disinformation and media manipulation, look to countries in the Global South. In 2016, it only took six months for President Duterte to destroy our trust in existing institutions. And I'm not out of the woods. I still have to ask myself, "Am I going to jail or not?" I don't know.

The goal of the International Fund for Public Interest Media is to help the Global South, where the worst damage by these American companies has been done. Helping independent media survive becomes critical in the Global South, where we don't have the philanthropy you have here. Currently, only 0.3 percent of development funds go to the media. If we can raise funding to one percent, then you will give journalists a fighting chance.

Is it an uphill battle? Yes, but as more people begin to understand the impact of technology on our information ecosystems and on journalists, it is getting easier.

ANGWIN: Finally, in your Nobel prize acceptance speech you said, "[W]e can continue down the path we're on and descend further into fascism, or we can each choose to fight for a better world." How far down the path to fascism do you think we are? And do we have a hope of pulling back?

RESSA: It's an existential moment; people in Ukraine are seeing one reality, and people in Russia are presented with another. How is that possible? It was enabled by our information ecosystem. In the Philippines it is an existential moment. For example, if Ferdinand Marcos Jr. becomes president, will we celebrate the anniversary of the People Power Revolution? Probably not, but we don't know.

If facts lose in every country around the world — and that is what's at stake — we will lose truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without these, any shared human endeavour is impossible, and that includes democracy. I'm calling this an "Avengers Assemble" moment to try to get Filipinos to defend the facts.

I think we're right on the edge globally of dropping into the abyss. We can still do this, but the time to fix it is getting smaller and smaller. The time to act is now.

Julia Angwin is editor-in-chief and founder of The Markup, which originally published this article. It is republished under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives license.

- Memoir revisited

The Making of a Publisher: *The Washington Post's* Katharine Graham

It is 25 years since Katharine Graham, having recently completed an extraordinary tenure as publisher of *The Washington Post*, wrote a memoir called *Personal History*. The following year, the book won a Pulitzer Prize. In revisiting the furore caused by Mrs Graham's memoir, we publish a report by **Gloria Cooper** that appeared in the May/June 1997 issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

In the interest of full disclosure, it must be noted at the outset that in the course of her number-one best-selling memoir, Katharine Graham makes a passing reference to “the fucking *Columbia Journalism Review*.” The inspiration for that sentiment, expressed by the great lady publisher of *The Washington Post* in her annual letter to executive editor Ben Bradlee at the end of the momentous year of 1974, is not entirely clear, but it seems to have had something to do with a vague anticipation of unwelcome articles in the aftermath of the stunning climax to the paper's coverage of the Watergate affair.

Other publications, in particular *The New Republic* and *The Washington Monthly*, get slammed more specifically for their “demonstrably wrong” and “outrageous” pieces on her handling of the long and painful pressmen's strike in the mid-1970s. A similar fate befalls the renowned Ben Bagdikian, a national editor for the *Post* who, since leaving the paper, Graham explains to her readers, has “made a cottage industry of criticizing us.” Never mind that Bagdikian had been a prime mover in helping the paper catch up to *The New York Times* on the Pentagon Papers story — an achievement that finally managed, as Graham quotes Bradlee as saying elsewhere in the book, “to get the world to refer to the *Post* and *The New York Times* in the same breath.” Having had the bad judgment to write the offending *Washington Monthly* piece, Bagdikian, KG observes in a memo to BB, is now an “ignorant biased fool.”

Clearly, Graham (who died in 2001 aged 84) does not suffer critics gladly. And fortunately — at least as far as her book is concerned — she doesn't have to. The reviews have been universally favorable, the book-tour profiles flattering, the talk-show interviews fawning. No wonder. Everyone's a sucker for transformation stories, and the makeover of an



Katharine Graham. Photograph by Juergen Frank/Corbis via Getty Images

insecure, dowdy, poor little rich girl into The Most Powerful Woman in America, framed within the parallel tale of how a puny third-rate daily changed into a fearsome giant, is not to be resisted — certainly not by news junkies like you and me.

What becomes this legend most — and what appeals most to reviewers — is Graham's confession of inadequacy, the deeply rooted belief that she could not quite measure up, planted by Agnes Meyer, her egocentric, hard-drinking, depressive, demoralizing mother, and cultivated by Philip Graham, her egocentric, hard-drinking, depressive, demoralizing husband, to whom Katharine's father, the fabulously successful entrepreneur Eugene Meyer, handed the paper on a silver platter a few years after their marriage. True, the family portraits were by



In the *Washington Post* office, Katherine Graham with Watergate reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward and managing editor Howard Simons and executive editor Ben Bradlee. Photography by Mark Godfrey

Steichen and the birthday music was by Serkin and the childhood camping trips were accompanied by seventeen pack horses and a staff of five. But there was also what she still remembers bitterly as the “first lavish compliment” her mother ever paid her, bestowed when the grown-up Katharine was planning a coming-out party for her own daughter Lally: “Darling, you are very good with lists.”

And true, there were breakfasts with Felix Frankfurter and parties with the Alsops and Restons, trips to the ranch with Lady Bird and Lyndon and picnics with Jackie and Jack; there was even laughter and love between Kay and Phil — Phil, who “was the fizz in our lives.” But there were also his demeaning jokes at her expense, the conspiratorial put-downs by Agnes and Phil, his inhibiting stares when she ventured an opinion, and that cruelly amusing gift, the head of a pig, a sign from a French butcher-shop: his reminder to the mother of his four young children that she should watch her weight. Afraid of being boring, eager to please, Katharine soon became, by her own account, a “second-class citizen,” a “doormat wife,” “the drudge” who “liked to be dominated” by the “brilliant, charismatic, fascinating” Phil — in short, the most unlikely person in the world to succeed him as publisher of the increasingly influential *Washington Post*.

If low self-esteem combined with high achievement — a paradoxical condition not unheard of in the twentieth-century American female — is an accurate headline here, it is also misleadingly incomplete. Even before her husband’s suicide in 1963, Katharine had begun to show her stronger stuff. When he announced his intention to divorce her and marry an Australian *Newsweek* reporter (not the first of his affairs) and to buy out Katharine’s 49 percent of the

company’s stock — the majority had been given by Eugene to his son-in-law because “no man should be in the position of working for his wife” — Katharine vowed to fight him for control. “I was not going to lose my husband and the paper,” she writes. “My intention to dig in was total.”

The contest was settled, of course, by Philip Graham’s death. Still, had he lived to fight for the paper they both cared about so much, the smart money would have been on Kay. That she moved in fast — instinctively rejecting advice that she assume the title of president but leave the role of chairman to someone else — was not really so astonishing. After all, she was the daughter not only of Agnes, but also of Eugene.

From the moment of her inauspicious introduction to the paper in 1933 — home for the summer from Madeira and puzzled by a chance remark, she was breezily told by her mother, “Oh darling, didn’t anyone tell you? Dad has bought the *Post*” — it was the centerpiece of her life. It became at once an intense and unwavering bond between father and daughter, the subject of what she describes as a “constant conversation over the years about newspapers in general and the *Post* in particular.”

In 1937, she was all of twenty years old. She was learning to be a journalist. At a summer job on the *Mount Vernon Argus* in suburban New York, she wrote a bylined story on women doctors (“Quite professional,” judged Eugene). At Vassar, she worked on the *Miscellany News*; later, as a student at the University of Chicago, she helped a stringer for *The Daily News* cover a strike at Republic Steel. A fan of “Terry and the Pirates,” she proudly persuaded Eugene to pick it up for the *Post*.

After college, there was a job at Scripps Howard's *San Francisco News*, where her assignments included the Warehousemen's Union (and where she got involved quite unprofessionally, she realizes now, with the union's very attractive negotiator).

In 1939, it was back to the *Post*, to write light editorials and handle letters to the editor. During the early days of her marriage, while Phil was in the army and planning a career in law, she kept her hand in, writing stories and helping Eugene with the off-the-record stag dinners that brought the paper's editors and reporters together with administration bigwigs and visiting dignitaries.

On a special assignment from her father, she compared a number of papers for ideas and newsplay, adding to his list on her own initiative *PM* and *The New York Times*. In 1947, shortly after Eugene appointed her husband publisher, she began an eight-year run as the writer of a weekly column on magazines. A stint in the paper's circulation department taught her how to handle "enraged subscribers." She was closely involved with developments on the business side. She accompanied her husband everywhere, and when the acquisitions were being made — the broadcast stations, *Newsweek*, the *Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service* — she was in on them. Here is her account of a "supreme moment in the history of *The Washington Post Company*" — the day in 1954 that the family achieved its long-sought goal of acquiring the rival *Washington Times-Herald* from Robert McCormick's *Chicago Tribune Company*:

We were in Phil's office waiting for news...We all took turns talking to keep the line occupied. At last the board approved the deal, the check was delivered, and Colonel McCormick signed the agreement of sale...We were terribly moved, and excited beyond all imagining. We now had the morning field in Washington to ourselves...Daily circulation jumped immediately. That afternoon and evening, however, before we hit the streets with our combined papers, were a real challenge. We were running a more-than-double press run of a larger paper. Combining news and editorial was difficult, since we had two very opposite cultures to meld. We started that night by running two equal sized names on the masthead. The perception Phil and I shared was right...This was the best short route to the future. At last we could believe that the Post was here to stay.

In truth, Katharine Graham knew more about running the paper — both sides of the paper — than Eugene and Phil put together when they first took the job. And, all the "quaking in my boots" notwithstanding, when crucial decisions needed to be made — to hire or to fire, to buy or to sell, to publish or not — she made them. Whether Phil would have decided those critical matters in quite the same way, whether journalism and politics would have come to intersect at quite the same place and time, are obviously unanswerable questions, though the record suggests that the answer is no.

Politically, Katharine and Phil had already diverged in 1952, when Phil, with his usual unbridled passion, threw the entire weight of the paper behind Eisenhower, while Katharine was "swept away with excitement by Stevenson." Professionally, they played by different rules. Time and again, in recounting Phil's actions as publisher — working feverishly to persuade Kennedy to pick Johnson as his running mate; convening a private meeting at which Phil and Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter managed to persuade civil-rights activist Joe Rauh to postpone the drive for school desegregation in favor of the more immediately attainable goal of voting rights; arranging a dinner for Senator John F. Kennedy to "sell himself" to *New York Times* publisher Orville Dryfoos and Washington bureau chief Scotty Reston; recommending presidential appointments to JFK; burying a story about a summer riot in Washington in exchange for a private promise of integrated community swimming pools from Truman's top advisers — Katharine feels obliged to point out that while such close relationships between newspapers and government were usual, even common, in those days, they are unquestionably out of bounds now.

Philosophically, Phil viewed the paper as a means to a political end; Katharine was guided by Eugene's conviction that "the American people could be relied upon to do the right thing when they know the facts." They differed, too, in basic loyalties. Alone in their room after a late-night drinking session with Johnson, during which the senator from Texas had expressed in no uncertain terms his contempt for journalists — "You can buy any one of them with a bottle of whiskey," the future president had said — Katharine rebuked her husband for letting him get away with it.

Indeed, when all is said and done — after the talks with Adlai and the walks with McNamara and the dances at Truman Capote's grand masked ball; after the tragedy and comedy, the gossip and glamour, the humiliations and heroics — what lingers longest is the echo of that straight appraisal of herself half a century ago: "I wanted to be a journalist and my father had a newspaper." One closes the book marvelling anew at the forces that shape our history, and that made this woman one of them.

Gloria Cooper was the Columbia Journalism Review's deputy executive editor. For three decades, she wrote the magazine's "Darts & Laurels" column. Published courtesy of CJR on the occasion of its 60th anniversary.

Their voices must be heard

The stories of Maung Yu Py and Ahmed Douma are the stories of all those who are detained, harassed and persecuted for exposing injustices and defending freedom of expression through poetry. The PEN community stands in solidarity with Maung Yu Py and Ahmed Douma and all poets who are silenced in Myanmar and across the world. As **Ma Thida**, Chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee says, their voices must be heard.

Every year on 21 March, PEN observes World Poetry Day, celebrating one of the most cherished forms of cultural and linguistic expression and identity across regions, and honouring those poets worldwide who face threats, intimidation and violence for speaking up and holding governments to account.

Adopted by UNESCO during its 30th General Conference in Paris in 1999, with the aim of supporting linguistic diversity and endangered languages through poetic expression, the creation of World Poetry Day was envisioned by PEN International at its 1997 Congress in Edinburgh, as proposed by PEN Turkey and seconded by Melbourne PEN.

PEN Centres around the world have long campaigned on behalf of poets at risk and for the protection and promotion of minority languages. In 2011 PEN's Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee developed the Girona Manifesto on Linguistic Rights, a 10 point document designed to be translated and disseminated widely as a tool to defend linguistic diversity around the world.

This year, PEN features the case of poet Maung Yu Py, detained by the Burmese authorities for exercising his right to freedom of expression through poetry, and Ahmed Douma, who participated in the Egyptian Uprising that overthrew the Mubarak regime in 2011 and since has been persecuted by Egyptian authorities.

Maung Yu Py was arrested on 9 March 2021 while attending an anti-coup protest in his hometown of Myeik, southern Myanmar. On 8 June 2021, he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment under Sections 145 & 505(a) of Myanmar's Penal Code, which effectively criminalises public criticism of the coup or military junta and is frequently used by the regime to punish those who publicly oppose the dictatorship.

Considered to be one of Myanmar's most well-known poets, Maung Yu Py published his first collection of poetry, *The Bird that was Killed when the Sky Capsized* (2000), at the age of 20, and has since published several poetry collections, including *There is a New Map for that Little Island Town Too* (2007) and

With the Big Television Turned On (2009). His poetry has also been featured by Poetry International and was included in *Bones Will Crow: Fifteen Contemporary Burmese Poets* (2011), an anthology edited by Ko Ko Thett and James Byrne.

In 2015, Maung Yu Py participated in the University of Iowa's prestigious International Writing Program as a visiting fellow. Two of Maung Yu Py's poems can also be found in *Picking off new shoots will not stop the spring* (2022), the first Burmese literary work to be published since the military's violent coup d'état and featured by PEN International.

One year ago today, Myanmar's nascent democracy was brutally repressed by the country's military, which illegitimately seized power and imposed its rule through shocking levels of violence and cruelty against the very people it had a responsibility to protect.

In the 12 months since the coup took place, the military junta has mounted a ruthless campaign of terror against Myanmar's civil society, targeting anyone who peacefully expresses their opposition to dictatorship. This has had a devastating impact on free expression across the country, silencing independent media and using internet blackouts and other forms of censorship to limit citizens' ability to access independent information.

Poets and writers, whose words have come to symbolise the people's struggle against dictatorship, have been subjected to some of the most egregious levels of violence carried out by junta forces. PEN acknowledges those who are no longer with us, including poets K Za Win, Myint Myint Zin and Khet Thi, whose lives have been mercilessly taken from them by the military junta. Numerous others remain in various forms of unjust detention, many of whom have been subjected to torture and other forms of ill treatment.

Despite the ongoing repression, the people of Myanmar have continued in their defiance against tyranny. In *Picking off new shoots will not stop the spring*, Burmese writers and poets provide first-hand

accounts of their experiences during the coup and in the decades of hope and struggle that preceded it. Representing what the book's editors, Ko Ko Thett and Brian Haman, refer to as 'witness poems and essays', this collection features writings from some of Myanmar's most important writers and poets.

Included in this powerful collection is an excerpt from Dr Myint Zaw's *The noble*, which hauntingly captures the devastating horror and trauma caused by the bloodshed unleashed on unarmed civilians by the military junta:

The black-hearted pass real bullets into the hands of those who are armed with rubber bullets. The devil kneels, takes his aim carefully and shoots. Packed in the bullet that speeds out of the gun muzzle is grief. Grief for someone's children, someone's parents, someone's siblings. One thing we can say for sure—the bullet whizzes into an unarmed crowd. The place where the bullet ends its journey is where the grief begins.

The forbidden poetry of Ahmed Douma

Ahmed Doma is a young Egyptian poet and a prominent activist who participated in the Egyptian Uprising that overthrew the Mubarak regime in 2011. Egyptian authorities arrested Doma on several occasions under different administrations and governments. Doma spent prolonged periods in arbitrary detention due to the practice of his right to freedom of expression.

Over his prolonged years in prison, Doma kept writing about his experiences, dreams, and aspirations in his poetry. He published his poetry collection *Soutak Talee (Your voice is Heard)* in 2012 via Dewan publishing house. In his collection, he shared his revolutionary poetry and his experiences with several youth and reformist movements in Egypt, including Kefaya and 6 of April Youth Movement. Doma documented the dates and locations during his imprisonment at the end of this poem, in which he told his story of imprisonment and oppression.

Also, his poetry collection *Curly* was printed and published during the 2021 Cairo International Book Fair via EL Maraya publishing house. However, security officials attended to the publishing house section during the fair and asked them to take Doma's poetry collection down.

PEN International believes that poet Ahmed Douma has been targeted because of his political activism and opposition to the authorities and that banning his poems violates his right to freedom of expression, and calls on the Egyptian government to end the ban on his writings and release him immediately.

Ahmed Doma has been arbitrarily detained since December 2013, when security forces arrested him over appearing at Abdeen Court in Cairo during a protest against the notorious protest law. He faced several charges that Egyptian human rights organisations considered trumped-up and came as a punishment for his critical views of the government. He was later convicted and sentenced to three years imprisonment followed by three years of parole.



Above: Maung Yu Py. Below: Ahmed Douma

In 2015, Doma faced several charges, including "ill-legal assembly" and "assaulting security forces" over his participation in protests known as "Alshoura council events" in 2011. He was handed a 25 years sentence and 17 million fines (with others) following a grossly unfair trial where the judge showed a personal bias against him. The judge additionally sentenced him to a further three years for "insulting the judiciary" during the trial.

Doma's lawyers appealed the sentence, and his case was sent to another court for a re-trial. However, he was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment and 6 million Egyptian pounds following an unfair trial. In 2020, the Court of Cassation rejected his appeal and upheld the sentence against him.

His health condition has been significantly deteriorating due to the poor detention conditions, including keeping him in solitary confinement for over eight years which had a devastating impact on his mental health. Doma also suffers from severe joints, nerve and blood issues.

The new anthology, Picking off new shoots will not stop the spring, amplifies voices of Burmese people in their struggle against dictatorship. The e-book of this title is available free-of-charge on the Ethos Books webstore to share their stories as widely as possible. It was released on 29 January 2022 by Ethos Books (Singapore), Gaudy Boy (US) and Balesstier Press (UK).

Precarious quest for freedom

A young, educated woman, who grew up in a solid, middle class family in Afghanistan, has twice felt the oppressive power of the Taliban, and has twice fled the place of her birth. This is her story.

My name is Sahar Khuja and I am 30. I grew up in a privileged family in Kabul, Afghanistan. My father owned a business in New York but returned home to be with his parents. In 1993, we were living the good life in Kabul. I was three years old and I remember I had a silver glitter clutch bag full of pens and old cosmetics that I had collected from my grandmother. Then the Taliban took over our country and we had to flee to Pakistan. As we were leaving, my mother threw away my silver clutch because it looked too luxurious and so it was too risky to carry.

We started our life from scratch in Pakistan as 'refugees', a title I never wanted to own. Although only a child, I was very mature. I was against all hatred, prejudice, discrimination and frivolity. For me, the word refugee is more about vulnerability and seeking sympathy. I finished primary school in Pakistan and then we returned to Afghanistan in 2001, after the fall of the Taliban regime.

Back to Kabul

When I started high school in Kabul, poverty was widespread, but slowly opportunities for Afghans to improve their lives through education and employment began to blossom. A lot of effort was put into changing people's attitudes to things like gender equality and education. Women started participating in different spheres of society. A few years later, many restaurants and coffee shops opened, owned by young people.

After graduating from high school, I began studying at a private university. In 2011, I started my career with an international media development organisation and then moved to Salam Watandar, a media organisation with more than 100 radio stations, reaching over 22 million people across the country. I began as the assistant for radio network coordination and eventually became the acting president of the organisation. I also founded a union for women, Salam Women's Union, with the aim of advocating for the rights of female journalists.

Collapse of the Afghan Government

On August 15, 2021, I was in the office when we heard gun shots and then the news that the government had collapsed and the Taliban had entered Kabul. All my colleagues began rushing out of the office. On the streets I saw masses of people, queuing outside banks

and travel agents, running home and later mobbing the airport. I saw the Taliban everywhere, wearing their distinctive robes. They were all taking selfies.

I sensed the culture of patriarchy in the current regime in a very strong way from day one. As a woman, anything I said became irrelevant. The Taliban began visiting media organisations like ours, trying to gain our trust. They also told us we needed to change our radio programs, to make them more religious, which we felt compelled to do. Many provincial media outlets were shut down.

As The Taliban continued their regular visits to our office and every other media organisation, I decided it was time to resign. I left the organisation I had worked with for more than 11 years. I packed my luggage and left Kabul on a quiet morning. I had stayed in Kabul for 47 days trying to understand the situation. On that day as I left Afghanistan for Pakistan for the second time, I was not just missing my silver clutch but I was also missing my identity.

After two months waiting in Pakistan, I reached Canada. Finally I breathed a sigh of relief, but it didn't last long, as I kept remembering my colleagues. I know many who are stuck in Afghanistan, they have qualified for resettlement programs but have not been given a chance to leave. It is heartbreaking.

Many people ask me whether I am happy being in Canada. I appreciate the Canadian government's support for Afghans. But to respond to the question, one thing should be made clear that I had no choice about leaving. There is a huge difference between obligation, being forced out for your own safety and opportunity.

However, Afghans who have fled to different parts of the world are now keen to know what opportunities await them in their new homes. I am so delighted to see that outside Afghanistan our writers, journalists, artists, women's rights advocates and others are being celebrated. I hope this continues, as some of these careers are unfortunately not relevant to the current Afghan government and we don't want these talents to be lost in the shuffle of time.



The global expansion of authoritarian rule

Global freedom faces a dire threat. Around the world, the enemies of liberal democracy — a form of self-government in which human rights are recognized and every individual is entitled to equal treatment under law — are accelerating their attacks. By **Sarah Repucci** and **Amy Slipowitz** for Freedom House.

Authoritarian regimes have become more effective at co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions meant to support basic liberties, and at providing aid to others who wish to do the same. In countries with long-established democracies, internal forces have exploited the shortcomings in their systems, distorting national politics to promote hatred, violence, and unbridled power.

The present threat to democracy is the product of 16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom. A total of 60 countries suffered declines over the past year, while only 25 improved. As of today, some 38 percent of the global population live in Not Free countries, the highest proportion since 1997. Only about 20 percent now live in Free countries.

During this period of democratic decline, checks on abuse of power and human rights violations have eroded.

In the decades after World War II, the United Nations and other international institutions promoted the notion of fundamental rights, and democracies offered support — however unevenly — in their domestic and foreign policies as they strove to create an open international system built on shared resistance to totalitarianism.

For much of the 21st century, however, democracy's opponents have laboured persistently to dismantle this international order and the restraints it imposed on their ambitions. The fruits of their exertions are now apparent. The leaders of China, Russia, and other dictatorships have succeeded in shifting global incentives, jeopardizing the consensus that democracy is the only viable path to prosperity and security, while encouraging more authoritarian approaches to governance.

At the same time, democracies are being harmed from within by illiberal forces, including unscrupulous politicians willing to corrupt and shatter the very institutions that brought them to power. This was arguably most visible last year in the United States, where rioters stormed the Capitol on January 6 as part of an organized attempt to overturn the results of the presidential election. But freely elected leaders from Brazil to India have also taken or threatened a variety of anti-democratic actions, and the resulting breakdown in shared values among

democracies has led to a weakening of these values on the international stage.

Defining democracy

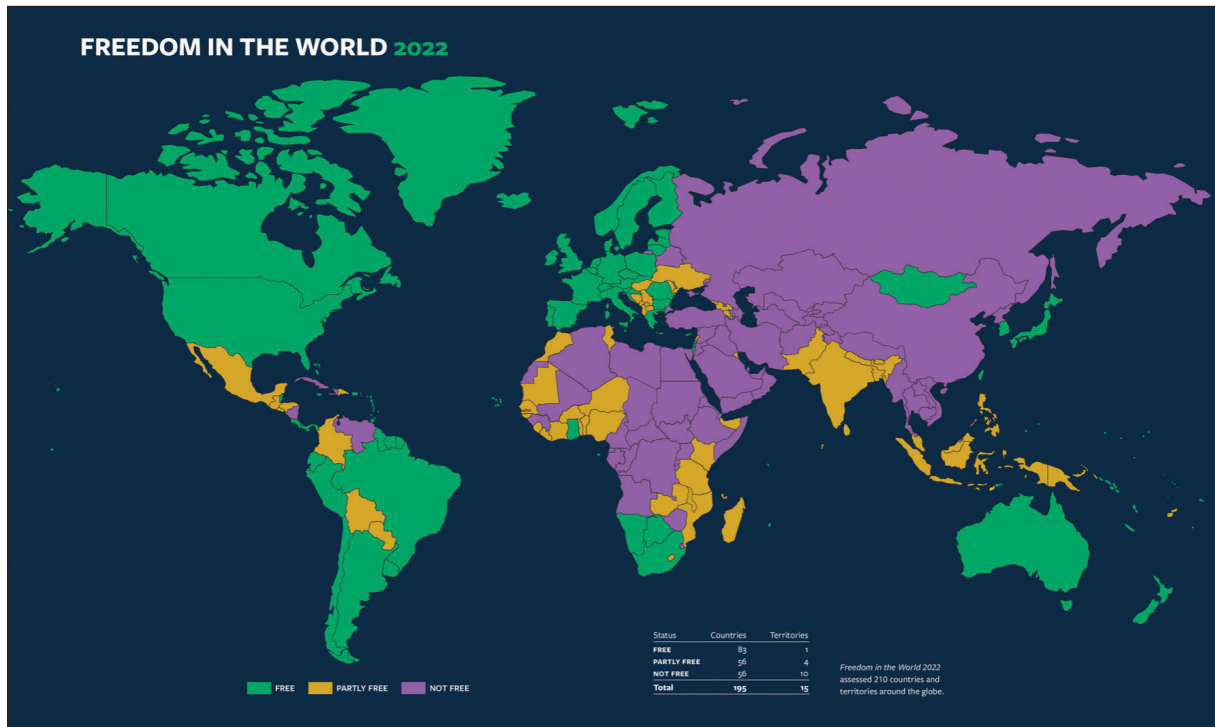
Fundamental to the restoration of democracy is a correct understanding of what it is. The word democracy has been applied, rightly or wrongly, to states of all types, from the 'Democratic People's Republic' of North Korea to the freest polities in Scandinavia. A December 2021 joint op-ed by the Russian and Chinese ambassadors to the United States called both of their dictatorships "democratic." Misappropriation of the word is a testament to democracy's widespread appeal. Yet this unfortunate practice has generated confusion, allowing opponents to simultaneously claim democratic credentials and argue that actual democracies are ineffective or hypocritical.

Moreover, it has contributed to a misperception that all democracy requires is the regular performance of elections. Democracy means more than just majority rule, however. In its ideal form, it is a governing system based on the will and consent of the governed, institutions that are accountable to all citizens, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

The share of the world's population living in Free environments has fallen as authoritarian practices proliferate. Autocrats have created a more favourable international environment for themselves over the past decade and a half, empowered by their own political and economic might as well as waning pressure from democracies. The alternative order is not based on a unifying ideology or personal affinity among leaders. It is not designed to serve the best interests of populations, or to enable people to improve their own lives.

Instead it is grounded in autocrats' shared interest in minimizing checks on their abuses and maintaining their grip on power. A world governed by this order would in reality be one of disorder, replete with armed conflict, lawless violence, corruption, and economic volatility. Such global instability and insecurity would have a significant cost in human lives.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) plays a leading role in promoting autocratic norms. Citing its self-



World Freedom map. Purple represents Not Free; Yellow Partly Free; Green Free

...serving interpretation of state sovereignty, the party strives to carve out space for incumbent governments to act as they choose without oversight or consequences. It offers an alternative to democracies as a source of international support and investment, helping would-be autocrats to entrench themselves in office, adopt aspects of the CCP governance model, and enrich their regimes while ignoring principles like transparency and fair competition.

The rot within democracies

As authoritarians continue to extend their reach, often facing little more than rhetorical denunciations from governments that declare their support for human rights, there is increasing evidence of home grown illiberal streaks within democracies. Undemocratic leaders and their supporters in democratic environments have worked to reshape or manipulate political systems, in part by playing on voters' fears of change in their way of life and by highlighting the very real failures of their predecessors.

They have promoted the idea that, once in power, their responsibility is only to their own demographic or partisan base, disregarding other interests and segments of society and warping the institutions in their care so as to prolong their rule. Along the way, the democratic principles of pluralism, equality, and accountability — as well as basic stewardship and public service — have been lost, endangering the rights and well-being of all residents.

In a curious contrast to authoritarian regimes' attempts to impose a façade of electoral credibility, leaders who fear losing power in a democratic system have taken to sowing distrust in elections. The assault on the US

Capitol was the culmination of a months-long campaign by outgoing president Donald Trump to cast Joe Biden's victory as illegitimate and fraudulent.

Trump and his supporters have continued to push the message that fraud tipped the balance toward Biden in the 2020 election, despite multiple recounts and consistent court rulings against all claims of widespread fraud. Far from a good-faith effort to uncover abuse, the stolen-election lie is undermining public confidence in the US electoral system ahead of the 2022 midterm and 2024 general elections, which are expected to be close contests for control of the legislative and executive branches. The trend is especially dangerous in the US context, where state legislatures, particularly those dominated by Republican leaders, have considerable leeway to declare that irregularities took place in the voting process.

The United States has fallen below its traditional peers on key democratic indicators, including executive elections, freedom from improper political influence, and equal treatment of minority groups.

Cause for hope

Even in a year dominated by disturbing setbacks to democracy, people around the world demonstrated its continued appeal and capacity for renewal.

Ecuador's democracy was trampled for a decade by former president Rafael Correa, who stepped aside for handpicked successor Lenín Moreno in 2017 on the assumption that he would retain control through the ruling party. But Moreno struck out on his own and reformed parts of the system, supporting a new judicial appointment process that helped weed out partisan

judges, reducing state control over the media, and pardoning human rights activists so that they could continue their work.

Ecuador has consequently seen a steady expansion of freedom over the past five years, moving from Partly Free to Free this year after credible general elections resulted in a peaceful transfer of power to an opposition presidential candidate. These improvements have persisted despite Correa's continued efforts to exert influence from outside government.

In Chile, already one of the better-performing democracies in the Americas, the political system responded to massive protests in 2019 by authorizing the election of an inclusive constitutional convention that will now work to replace the 1980 constitution — originally inherited from the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet — and address deep socioeconomic disparities. In Montenegro, an opposition coalition came to power in late 2020, ending three decades of rule by the Democratic Party of Socialists. The new government imposed fewer obstacles to political competition and gave the public broadcaster more independence, and its narrow parliamentary majority allowed the legislature to provide greater oversight of the executive branch.

People in Côte d'Ivoire have proven their desire to steer their nation toward full democracy since the end of an armed conflict in 2011. While the country experienced a vast expansion of freedom over the past 10 years, its democratic momentum faltered in 2020, as President Alassane Ouattara circumvented constitutional term limits and secured a third term in voting that was marred by candidate disqualifications, an opposition boycott, and widespread political violence. But parliamentary elections in March 2021 featured significant improvements, with several opposition candidates freely registering and participating. The elections were less affected by violence, and Ivorians had more freedom to express themselves and participate in public assemblies.

In Myanmar, despite the military's well-earned reputation for brutal violence, the February 2021 coup immediately sparked widespread resistance across the country. By the end of the year, protests were continuing even in the face of live ammunition and systematic reprisals, and a civil disobedience movement — including a general strike — had brought the economy and public services almost to a standstill, with participation by health workers, civil servants, educators, bank workers, and many more. The resistance to the military regime has denied it legitimacy and crippled its ability to function as a government, reflecting both the people's commitment to democracy and the power it gives them to shape events.

Pushback against CCP influence is gaining traction. During 2021, democratic governments and private actors devoted greater attention to the moral, human rights, and national security implications of integration with a regime in China that has become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad over the past decade. Lithuania was the first country to announce a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, setting the stage for other countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia to take a stand against

CCP abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

The migration and refugee crisis that has so preoccupied many democracies is an outgrowth of the authoritarian expansion of the past 16 years. But in another sense it is an emphatic endorsement of democracy as the preferred system of government, as millions of people flee repressive regimes or antidemocratic militants and seek to live in free societies.

The rate of migration out of Hong Kong spiked following the Beijing-backed authorities' crackdown on prodemocracy protests. Tens of thousands of people have fled Nicaragua since 2018 demonstrations were brutally suppressed, as have millions of Venezuelans suffering under the regime of Nicolás Maduro. Rather than attempting to deter migrants and refugees with daunting border infrastructure and harsh asylum systems, governments in democratic destination countries should recognize their shared interest in the struggle for freedom.

Building a more democratic world

The displacement of global democratic norms by authoritarian powers and other antidemocratic actors can still be reversed. But success will require a bold, sustained response that establishes support for democracy and countering authoritarianism at the heart of each democracy's foreign policy, national security strategy, and domestic reform agenda. It must also entail the participation of both governments and an engaged and active citizenry.

Effective democracy support should not be subordinated to a free country's short-term economic, military, or geopolitical interests, all of which would actually be best served by a long-term rollback of authoritarian practices. Nor can democracy be imposed by forces outside a given country. International assistance and solidarity are crucial to countering the tactical advantages and many forms of collaboration enjoyed by autocrats. Developing a set of coordinated international policies grounded in democratic principles, while strengthening their own domestic governance systems, will ultimately make all participating countries safer, more prosperous, and more just. Democratic nations share interests in fair trade and security, and since they are more likely to adhere to agreements and norms, they make more reliable partners in both fields.

Despite the clear arguments in favour of democracy, the past 16 years have shown in stark terms that neither the prevalence of democratic ideas around the world nor the certainty of global progress toward democratic governance can be taken for granted. Autocrats remain determined to keep and expand their power, and they will continue to make gains so long as democracy's proponents let them. It is time for everyone who understands the stakes to rebuild and improve upon the international norms that democracies long championed, and push the reprehensible practices of authoritarians back to the margins of human experience where they belong.

This is an abridged version of the report.

Continuing the fight to free Julian Assange



Julian Assange

Sydney PEN, together with PEN Centres in Melbourne and Perth, the MEAA and Amnesty International, continues to lobby for support on behalf of Julian Assange, currently occupying Sydney PEN's Empty Chair. PEN Australia's centres are among the 150 PEN International centres around the world dedicated to freedom of expression. In particular, we advocate for those who are imprisoned or otherwise endangered, as a result of their work as writers or publishers.

PEN Australia, in conjunction with PEN International, is calling for the US Government to cease all processes to extradite Julian Assange to face charges of espionage in the US. The following is an excerpt from the letter a Sydney PEN delegation delivered to the office of the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Marise Payne.

"PEN Australia, in conjunction with PEN International, are calling for justice for Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, on this third anniversary of his detention in Belmarsh Prison. We are appealing to you as a representative of the Australian people to assert the rights of an Australian citizen by taking up his case with your counterparts in the United Kingdom government. It is the responsibility of Australian government representatives to advocate for Australian citizens.

The decision to extradite him to the United States for trial currently sits with UK Home Secretary Priti Patel. This was after the UK Supreme Court in March refused to consider Mr Assange's appeal against the High Court decision, which overturned the District Court ruling barring his extradition to the US on mental health grounds. We urge you to use the considerable diplomatic influence you undoubtedly have to strongly request of Secretary Patel that the request for his extradition to the US be rejected immediately and that he be brought home to Australia.

In the US, Mr Assange would face trial on 17 counts under the Espionage Act and one count under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, which combined could see him imprisoned for up to 175 years. He is highly likely to be detained there in conditions of isolation or solitary

confinement, despite the US government's assurances, which would severely exacerbate his risk of suicide.

Further, Mr Assange would be unable to adequately defend himself in the US courts, as the Espionage Act lacks a public interest defence. His prosecution would set a dangerous precedent that could be applied to any media outlet that published stories based on leaked information, or indeed any journalist, publisher or source anywhere in the world.

Julian Assange has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, by German politician Martin Sonneborn (MEP). This nomination reflects not only the esteem in which Assange is held but also the fact that his extradition to the US is seen as a blow to media

freedom, with far reaching implications for investigative journalism worldwide.

Aside from these significant concerns, the health and welfare, perhaps the life of an Australian citizen is at stake. The harmful and detrimental conditions under which Julian Assange is currently detained in Belmarsh prison have been described as torture by the UN special rapporteur Nils Melzer.

Currently in Australia, 28 of the 226 Senators and Members of Parliament support actions to bring Julian Assange home, including the Deputy Prime Minister, The Hon Barnaby Joyce. A petition, tabled in Parliament, is still growing strongly with over 692,600 signatures. It is now the fourth largest petition to ever be tabled. "

■ Correspondence

A letter from Kylie Moore-Gilbert



Dear PEN Sydney

I wanted to write to you to say a huge thank you for the incredible advocacy and support your members showed me during my incarceration in Iran.

The embassy has passed on the postcards PEN members wrote to me, and I have seen pictures of the vigil you held at Sydney Town Hall. I am totally blown away by your incredible efforts to both support me and raise awareness about my plight. Honestly, I cannot thank you enough.

It takes a special kind of person to stand up for the rights of a total stranger, and I am full of admiration for your organisation and the values you represent.

I want you to know that in spite of the views of the government, this (your advocacy) is what I wanted, and I believe you played a part in helping to secure my release.

Thank you and please keep up your excellent work.

Best wishes,

Kylie Moore-Gilbert

- Staying focused

Can ‘distraction-free’ devices change the way we write?

The digital age enabled productivity but invited procrastination. Now writers are rebelling against their word processors, writes **Julian Lucas**.

For a long time, I believed that my only hope of becoming a professional writer was to find the perfect tool. A few months into my career as a book critic, I’d already run up against the limits of my productivity, and, like many others before me, I pinned the blame on Microsoft Word. Each time I opened a draft, I seemed to lose my bearings, scrolling from top to bottom and alighting on far-flung sentences at random. I found and replaced, wrote and rewrote; the program made fiddling easy and finishing next to impossible.

I’d fallen into the trap that the philosopher Jacques Derrida identified in an interview from the mid-nineties. “With the computer, everything is rapid and so easy,” he complained. “An interminable revision, an infinite analysis is already on the horizon.” Derrida hadn’t even contended with the sirens of online life, which were driving writer friends to buy disconnected laptops or to quarantine their smartphones in storage bins with timed locks. Zadie Smith touted Freedom, a subscription service that cut off the user’s devices — a chastity belt for procrastinators.

I tried “distraction-free” writing apps that encouraged mindfulness, disabled the backspace key, or, in a few extreme cases, threatened to delete everything if I took my hands off the keyboard (Write or Die). Later, I tried coding my own writing tools, a hobby as rewarding as it was ineffective. The experiments gradually meshed into a literary Rube Goldberg machine, a teetering assemblage of Scriveners and SimpleTexts that left me perpetually uncertain of which thought I’d written down where. Longhand was a luxury I couldn’t afford: Wendell Berry boasted in Harper’s that he didn’t need a computer, because he had a wife, but I was a mere urban freelancer, whose boyfriend had a job. So I continued the search for word processing’s Excalibur, a perfect union of consciousness and composition.

Then, in the late twenty-teens, focussed writing tools started cropping up everywhere. Distraction-free text editors stormed the productivity section of the Apple Store. The Times recommended a Tom Hanks-sponsored typewriter simulation for National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). A Detroit company Kickstarted a “smart” typewriter that cost more than five hundred dollars. The movement seemed to crest in the first months of the pandemic, as writers newly intimate with the routines of spouses and roommates — or with their own

restlessness — sought peace with newfound desperation. I was suddenly deluged with ads for “the world’s thinnest tablet,” which promised not only to replace pen and paper but to help you “Get Your Brain Back.” The company’s Lovecraftian promotional ad, which has racked up nearly three million views, begins with a hissing demon-child clinging to her iPad and proceeds through an animated hellscape complete with attention-sucking brain tubes and notifications circling like sharks. The narrator quavers an ominous warning: “We have to modify technology, or else it will modify us.”

The tools of writing have seldom been designed with writers in mind. Most early cuneiform inscriptions were works of accounting, not poetry; a few millennia later, typewriters sprang to success largely as aids to clerical work. Even so, new inventions have always influenced literary production, as Friedrich Nietzsche, who struggled with a semi-spherical typewriter, once lyrically observed: “The writing ball is a thing like me: made of / iron / yet easily twisted on journeys.” Few advances have twisted us more than word processing.

Matthew Kirschenbaum’s “Track Changes” (2016), a study of the technology’s advent, notes that the first mass-market writing software promised to emancipate writers from the inconveniences of revision: cutting and pasting with scissors, retyping drafts to fix typos, and losing entire manuscripts in the mail. “Writing on glass” swept America between the late nineteen-seventies, when personal computers first became widely available, and the mid-eighties, when writing with them became the norm. Kirschenbaum uses Stephen King’s fiction to dramatize the transition. Where King’s novel “The Shining” (1977) linked killing sprees to typewriter drudgery, his story “Word Processor of the Gods” (1983) featured an author made omnipotent by software, which he uses to delete his bingo-addicted wife.

The magic faded with the universal adoption of word processing, especially after the “word wars” of the early nineties, when Microsoft Word, having shoved aside WordStar and WordPerfect to attain a ninety-per-cent share of the market, was, as Kirschenbaum writes, “fully naturalized as the No. 2 pencil of the digital age.” Google Docs has since challenged its dominance, but the consolidation of writing technology has only continued. These days, we don’t just write, revise, and lay out our work in one program; if so inclined, we can

go all the way from gathering research to monitoring reception without leaving our browsers. (Medium, a writing app that is also a publishing platform and a social-media network, represents the logical extreme of this vertical integration.) Some thrive on the streaming of a previously sequential process; for others, it's like being forced to write with an Instant Pot. Could the new wave of Zen editors and e-ink tablets, tempering tech solutionism with analog nostalgia, reverse this trajectory—and give writers a dedicated device of our own?

My first experiment with focussed writing was iA Writer, a minimalist word processor designed by the Swiss-Japanese firm Information Architects. I bought it in 2014, when I was starting research for a college thesis in literature, supervised by a charismatic graduate student with perfect handwriting who warned me that I spent too much time revising my work. He encouraged me to start writing each day without looking at what I'd written the day before — advice I followed about as effectively as Lot's wife. If I was ever going to stop rewriting opening paragraphs, it would take more than a commandment.

The main feature of iA Writer is not having many features. The program is, essentially, a white rectangle, where the user can do little else but type in a custom monospaced font. There are no headers, footers, drawing tools, or chatty paper-clip assistants. The bare-bones interface uses special characters in a simple formatting language called Markdown to bold, italicize, or otherwise transform text — a way of encouraging writers to keep their hands on the keyboard and their minds on their work.

The app's key innovation is "focus mode," an option that vertically centers the sentence or paragraph being written and grays out everything else. The feature sounded silly when I described it to friends — like horse blinders for writers. Soon after installing it, though, I became an evangelist. My anxieties about how much had yet to be written, cut, revised, or restructured evaporated with everything else that wasn't the sentence onscreen. The program's mobile version, which synched files over the cloud, allowed me to write anywhere — bathrooms, crowded subway cars — with meditative ease, as though I were carrying a small study in my pocket. The impact was as much emotional as functional. With its otherworldly blankness, iA Writer created the illusion of leaving life's mess for an ideal realm of words.

"Plato says that philosophy starts with wondering," Oliver Reichenstein, the Swiss developer who created iA Writer, told me during a recent Zoom. "And I was wondering, Why is Microsoft Word as it is? And why does it feel so bad?" Reichenstein first had the idea for a focussed word processor in the early nineties, while teaching high-school composition to earn extra money as a graduate student in Basel. He noticed that his students were distracted by the fonts, macros, and superfluous menus in Word; at the same time, he was struggling with the suffocatingly dense layout of his philosophy texts. He began to study typography, then quit Switzerland for Tokyo. In 2005, he founded

Information Architects, where he advised media companies on their Web sites — his clients included Wikipedia and Condé Nast — before releasing iA Writer, in 2010.

"I just wanted to have a writing app that did one thing right, and that's writing," Reichenstein told me. "I didn't care if anyone was interested or not in buying it—I just felt it was needed." He drew inspiration from mechanical typewriters, especially for the app's focus mode and signature font. While most books are typeset using proportionate typography, allotting each character space in accordance with its width, monospaced fonts give each character, whether a lowly period or an initial capital, an equal span. "When you write in a monospaced font, you get a feeling of moving forward," Reichenstein said. "Even if you don't click away like crazy, you feel that your text is growing." His biggest priority, though, was eliminating the agony of choice, the paralysis of "Preferences." In an early promotional video, a space invader attacks Microsoft Word, strafing icons and toolbars until only a white rectangle with a blinking blue caret remains.

The app was surprisingly successful, landing a coveted spot as an "Editor's Pick" at the Apple Store. Though some users demanded more features, Reichenstein confidently ignored them; in the world of distraction-free writing, the customer is most certainly not always right. Today, iA Writer has more than half a million active users, mostly designers, programmers, and journalists. It has also spawned numerous copycats and competitors, from blatant ripoffs like iWriter to more fully featured Markdown editors like Ulysses and Bear. The ultimate compliment was Microsoft's rollout, in 2011, of a "focus mode" for Word, which Reichenstein dismisses as "hilarious"; its only improvement, he said, is to "put away all the toolbars." The feature vanishes with a touch of the Escape key.

Other rivals attempt not only to eliminate distraction but to reëchant digital writing, dispelling the workaday atmosphere of the digital cubicle. OmmWriter, a "mindful" writing app with lo-fi music and gauzy background visuals, attempts to lull the writer into a creative flow — an experience akin to being trapped inside an inspirational quote. A more rugged alternative is the Tom Hanks-sponsored Hanx Writer, a skeuomorphic indulgence that displays the smartphone keyboard as a vintage typewriter, complete with carriage-return bells. Neither offers much more than a change in atmosphere, but sometimes vibes are enough: here are apps that nobody would use to prepare a memo or an invoice.

But focus mode on an everything device is a meditation room in a casino. What good is it to separate writing from editing, formatting, and cluttered interfaces if you can't separate it from the Internet? Even a disconnected computer offers plenty of opportunities for distraction: old photographs, downloaded music, or, most treacherous of all, one's own research. And so, just as savvy entrepreneurs have resuscitated the "dumb" phone as a premium single-tasking communication device, it was perhaps inevitable that someone would

revive the stand-alone word processor.

Released in 2016, the Freewrite Smart Typewriter is a hefty little lunchbox of a machine with a noisy mechanical keyboard and an e-ink display the size of an index card. The user can type and backspace but not much else, and, with the default settings, only ten lines of text are visible at a time. (Even Vladimir Nabokov, who studied butterfly genitalia under a microscope, was less zoomed-in; the famous index cards he used to write *“Lolita”* had fourteen lines each.) Documents automatically synch to the cloud for later editing; you can try to revise, but—without a mouse, a touch screen, arrow keys, or the ability to select—the only option is to backspace and rewrite, which quickly grows annoying. The writer is conditioned to simply keep going, typos and non sequiturs be damned, and to experience these constraints as a form of liberation: *“Set Your Story Free,”* the display commands when asleep. Portraits of Shakespeare, Agatha Christie, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and Isaac Asimov take inspirational turns looming over the injunction.

The Freewrite’s creators, Adam Leeb and Patrick Paul, aren’t writers themselves, but they quickly caught on to the appeal of focussed apps for professionals trying and failing to get their words out. Everyone seemed to want to unplug, but without sacrificing the convenience of digital text. After meeting at a Detroit incubator in 2013, the two imagined a machine that would keep writers’ minds off the Internet while maintaining a discreet back channel to the cloud. *“People didn’t even need to see what it looked like,”* Leeb told me from the company’s office, in Michigan. *“They were just, like, ‘Wait, I think I need that.’ ”* He and Paul created the Freewrite as a *“conceptual piece”* for a hardware competition, but when news of the device went viral they decided to establish Astrohaus and manufacture it. Their Kickstarter campaign earned two hundred thousand dollars in the first twenty hours.

Now, thousands of units later, Astrohaus has added a miniaturized Freewrite Traveler and a *“Hemingwrite”* special edition for the writer who quipped that *“the first draft of anything is shit.”* Leeb tailored the machine to the M.F.A. workshop dictum that you have to get it all down before you can fix it all up. *“Anything that was not critical to helping people write more, we just left out,”* he said. *“You draft top to bottom and then edit later.”* He considered omitting the backspace key but decided that would be a step too far. Another consideration was comfort, particularly the reduced eyestrain of e-ink and the tactile feedback of a mechanical keyboard. The final touch was a dash of fancy; Leeb calls the device’s appearance *“retrofuturist”*—it looks a little like a console torn from the cockpit of a steampunk biplane.

The stylized appearance has often been mocked. Mashable described the Freewrite as *“pretentious hipster nonsense,”* and even enthusiastic reviewers have admitted that they would be embarrassed to use the device in public. The hefty six-hundred-dollar price tag has only reinforced its dilettantish aura. *“Oh, you’re gonna buy something that you can replicate by just turning off your Wi-Fi?”* Leeb said, paraphrasing the

naysayers. *“You need to buy this expensive gadget to control yourself?”* But he’s found that consumers are increasingly willing to shell out for single-purpose tools. *“If you want to be in control of your life, then you have to be in control of the things that you’re interacting with on a daily basis,”* he explained.

The most venerable form of literary friction may be the scratch of pen on paper. Computers have largely failed to replace the original focussed word processor, which is not only cheap and abundant but uniquely conducive to the forms of spatial thinking—arrows, scribbles, doodles, and diagrams—that writing often demands. Physical mark-making also quickens the memory, which is one reason that handwritten notes are so much easier to recall than their typed equivalents. Yet paper can also fail us in the heat of composition, when the time comes to search notes and splice sentences. The two indispensable systems square off. For years, I’ve switched between them in what can feel like a war of attrition: scribbling until my hand cramps, typing until dazed by the screen, and wasting time with scanners to translate between mediums.

Then, in the early days of the pandemic, I began seeing targeted ads for the reMarkable, an e-ink tablet that resembles an A5-size Kindle. The product, created by the thirty-seven-year-old Norwegian developer Magnus Wanberg, was a subtly transformative update of a very old technology. Wanberg, who studied engineering at M.I.T., describes himself as a lifelong *“paper person.”* Before founding reMarkable, in 2013, he worked at Boston Consulting Group, where he noticed that his colleagues, though surrounded by expensive technology, nearly all took handwritten notes. Wanberg shared their preference, but also found paper messy and difficult to organize. He wondered if there might be a way to digitize the medium without ruining it. *“Paper is a five-hundred-year-old invention,”* he told me. *“Why haven’t we fundamentally improved upon that?”*

For many years, he knew, e-ink displays were too slow to effectively mimic pen and paper. Waiting half a second for an e-reader to turn the page may not bother anyone, but a pen-stroke lag is enough to break the illusion of writing and disrupt hand-eye coordination. So in 2015, when Wanberg debuted a prototype tablet with a *“latency”* of only fifty-five milliseconds, it was a major step toward eliminating the *“slow-ink problem.”* Now, with more than a hundred million dollars in annual revenue, reMarkable has evolved into the most successful enterprise in the world of distraction-free writing.

The reMarkable is *“digital paper,”* a sheet of imitation loose-leaf that approximates the precision, friction, and immediacy of the real thing. Its slightly rough, resin-coated display can detect more than four thousand gradations of pressure, applied using a special stylus equipped with a replaceable nylon felt tip. The company’s promotional *“Get Your Brain Back”* video, a masterpiece of camouflaged advertising, left many commenters asking why an anti-tech manifesto was trying to sell them a tablet. But Wanberg sees no

contradiction in fighting gadgets with gadgets. “Can you sit down for three hours and just think about one thing deeply?” he asked me. “Because I can’t. And this device helps me.”

A growing cohort of writers agree. The reMarkable evidently has particular appeal for academics — in a survey recently conducted by the company, more than a quarter of users identified as “researchers,” employing it to grade papers, prepare lecture notes, and annotate the scanned book excerpts and journal articles that constitute the lifeblood of academe. (Tressie McMillan Cottom, a MacArthur-winning author and sociologist, is scholarship’s most visible reMarkable influencer. “What writer doesn’t want less?” she asks. The reMarkable “turns off the voices inside the house.”) But to succeed the device will have to fend off a growing number of e-ink competitors, such as Supernote, Papyr, and Onyx, which sells not only tablets but a full-sized e-ink computer monitor. And, with a paper-textured screen cover and an Apple Pencil, even iPad users can mimic the reMarkable experience. Then, there’s the question of its almost four-hundred-dollar price tag. Wanberg dismisses that concern. “The appeal of focussed tools in a very unfocussed world is massive,” he said. “What’s the price of thinking better?”

The targeted ads for reMarkable caught me at a vulnerable moment. During lockdown, several publishers stopped mailing physical review copies of forthcoming books—and so, like many other critics, I found myself staring endlessly at PDFs. The eyestrain was terrible; worse, I missed scribbling in the margins, a form of intimate backtalk that no comment bubble could replace. I held out for a few months before my boyfriend and my mother, pitying my long nights with Adobe Acrobat, jointly bought me a second-generation reMarkable.

After I received my tablet, it quickly became my preferred way of reading anything that wasn’t in print—and occasionally of drafting articles, which it transcribed with the accuracy of a tipsy stenographer. Ironically, it also helped me address bad habits created by other distraction-free experiments. After years of iA Writer’s myopically zoomed-in sentence highlighting, I’d become a faster and more careful writer, but at the expense, I worried, of my intuitive grasp of a text’s overall shape. The tablet gave me a fuller view of what I’d already written, without forcing me back on analog inconvenience.

Many focus seekers remain skeptical of expensive devices that purport to fix problems created by other expensive devices. When I surveyed writers on Twitter, I was surprised to learn that many were using a stand-alone word processor from the early two-thousands called the AlphaSmart. Originally marketed to schools as a cheap alternative to laptops, they are little more than durable keyboards with built-in LCDs, which, unlike computers, kids couldn’t play games on or easily destroy. The final version, AlphaSmart Neo 2, displays six lines of text at a time, and boasts seven hundred hours of battery life. Although AlphaSmart was discontinued in 2013, the devices, which sell for about sixty dollars on eBay, enjoy

a flourishing afterlife among a small but growing cult of “AlphaSmarties,” including journalists, screenwriters, scholars, romance novelists, and NaNoWriMos. Diehards outfit them with backlights, wild paint jobs, and expensive mechanical keyboards; an aspiring horror novelist who likes to write in the dark told me that he wears a headlamp while operating his model. The zealous online community around the device treats it not only as a tool but as a toy or collectible—typewriter mania meets millennial nostalgia for nineties homeroom homeliness. Tracy Clayton, the host of the Netflix podcast “Strong Black Legends,” sent me a picture of her model mid-script at a bar in Brooklyn, next to a glass of rosé. “I just asked my ig friends if they think I’m hipster trash for using it in public,” she wrote to me. “Twenty per cent said yes.”

It’s tempting, even for enthusiasts, to dismiss the renaissance of dedicated word-processing hardware as just another superficial vintage fetish. Alongside the AlphaSmarties are subcultures devoted to the Pomera, a folding Japanese pocket writer, and to the USB Typewriter, a conversion kit that uses gold-plated sensors to digitally capture typewriter keystrokes. (The product’s Web site describes it as “a groundbreaking advancement in the field of obsolescence.”) The more tech-savvy rig up focussed writing devices from old e-readers, computer keyboards, and discarded phones, then showcase their inventions online.

These extremes of life-hacking whimsy are also illustrations of the ways in which many writers feel alienated from their tools. When Frank O’Hara typed his “Lunch Poems” on a floor-sample Lettera 25 in Olivetti’s showroom on Fifth Avenue, it was a cute stunt. Now writing on apps and devices owned and actively managed by corporations is the default, leaving us ever more vulnerable to subscriptions, algorithms, proprietary formats, and arbitrary updates.

A minor literary doctrine holds that great writing should be platform-independent. Let amateurs mess around with gadgets and gizmos; Wole Soyinka wrote “The Man Died” in a Nigerian prison with Nescafé for ink and a chicken bone for a stylus. Yet the ability to write with anything and the drive to experiment with everything likewise reflect the fact that the means, no less than the matter of writing, should adapt to our selves and to our circumstances.

The quest to match writer and machine may be as necessary, in its way, as literature’s unending effort to reconcile experience and expression—or so I tell myself as I sign for the latest delivery. My AlphaSmart, hurriedly unboxed, comes to life with a flash last seen by a high-school student in the mid-two-thousands, and I feel, not for the first time, that it might just be the final Word.

Julian Lucas is a staff writer for The New Yorker. Image by Referral Candy used under Creative Commons.



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