SAMPLER

PEN Journeys

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PEN Journeys

Memoir of Literature on the Line

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International PEN celebrated its Centenary in 2021—a celebration extended through 2022 because of the global pandemic which closed down gatherings and travel. I've been active in PEN for many decades in various positions—PEN member, president of a PEN Center, Chair of International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee, PEN international secretary, and International PEN vice president. With memories stirring and file drawers of documents and correspondence bulging, I am a bit of a walking archive and was asked by International PEN to write down my memories.

This manuscript is dedicated to PEN colleagues around the world who work on behalf of fellow writers to celebrate literature and ideas and to defend freedom of expression and who raise their voices when others are silenced.

Introduction
Raising the Curtain:
The Arc of History Bending Toward Justice?

"In a world where independent voices are increasingly stifled, PEN is not a luxury. It is a necessity."

—Novelist and poet Margaret Atwood, PEN member

"…freedom of speech is no mere abstraction. Writers and journalists, who insist upon this freedom, and see in it the world's best weapon against tyranny and corruption, know also that it is a freedom which must constantly be defended, or it will be lost."

—Novelist Salman Rushdie, PEN member

International PEN was started modestly 100 years ago in 1921 by English writer Catharine Amy Dawson Scott, who, along with fellow writer John Galsworthy and others, conceived that if writers from different countries could meet and be welcomed by each other when traveling, a community of fellowship could develop. The time was after World War I. The ability of writers from different countries, languages and cultures to get to know each other had value and might even help reduce tensions and misperceptions, they reasoned, at least among writers of Europe.

The idea spread quickly of PEN [Poets, Essayists & Novelists—later expanding to Poets, Playwrights, Essayists, Editors and Novelists and now including a wide array of Nonfiction writers and Journalists.] Clubs developed in France and throughout Europe, and the following year in America, and then in Asia, Africa, Australia and South America. John Galsworthy, the popular British novelist, became the first president. A decade later when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature, he donated the prize money to International PEN. Not everyone had grand ambitions for the PEN Club, but writers recognized that ideas fueled wars but also were tools for peace. Galsworthy spoke about the possibilities of a "League of Nations for Men and Women of Letters."

In 1923 members of PEN began to gather at least once a year. Members from eleven PEN Clubs attended the first meeting. During the 1920s writers regardless of nationality, culture, language or political opinion came together. As the political temperature rose in Europe, PEN insisted it was an apolitical organization though its role in the politics of

nations was soon to be tested and ultimately landed not on a partisan or ideological platform but on a platform of ideals and principles.

At a tumultuous gathering at PEN's 4th Congress in Berlin in 1926, tensions rose among the assembled writers. Debate flared over the political versus non-political nature of PEN. Young German writers, including Bertolt Brecht, told Galsworthy that the German PEN Club didn't represent the true face of German literature and argued that PEN could not ignore politics. Ernst Toller, a Jewish-German playwright, insisted PEN must take a stand.

After the Congress Galsworthy returned to London and holed up in the drawing room of PEN's founder Catharine Scott where he worked on a formal statement to "serve as a touchstone of PEN action." This statement included what became the first three articles of the PEN Charter. At the 1927 PEN Congress in Brussels, the document was approved and remains part of PEN's Charter today, including the idea that "Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals." The third article of the Charter notes that PEN members "should at all times use what influence they have in favor of good understanding and mutual respect between nations and people and dispel all hatreds and champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world."

As the voices of National Socialism rose in Germany, PEN's determination to remain apolitical was challenged, though the determination to defend freedom of expression united most members. At the 1932 Congress in Budapest the Assembly of Delegates sent an appeal to all governments concerning religious and political prisoners, and Galsworthy issued a five-point statement, a document that would evolve into the fourth article of PEN's Charter after World War II.

When Galsworthy died in January 1933, H.G. Wells took over as International PEN president. It was a time in which the Nazi Party in Germany was burning in bonfires thousands of books they deemed "impure" and hostile to their ideology. At PEN's 1933 Congress in Dubrovnik, Wells and the PEN Assembly launched a campaign against the burning of books by the Nazis and voted to reaffirm the Galsworthy resolution. German PEN, which had failed to protest the book burnings, attended the Congress and tried to keep Ernst Toller, a Jew, from speaking. Some members supported German PEN, but the overwhelming majority reaffirmed the principles they had just voted on the previous day.

The German delegation walked out of the Congress and out of PEN and didn't return until after World War II. Their membership was

rescinded. "If German PEN has been reconstructed in accordance with nationalistic ideas, it must be expelled," the PEN statement read. During World War II PEN continued to defend the freedom of expression for writers, particularly Jewish writers. (Today German PEN is one of PEN's most active centers, especially on issues of freedom of expression and assistance to exiled writers.)

PEN was one of the first nongovernmental organizations and the first human rights organization in the 20th century. Then as now, writers were often early victims of authoritarian regimes since writers were articulating an alternative vision and reporting facts. PEN's Charter, which developed over two decades, was one of the documents referred to when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted at the United Nations after World War II.[1]

In 1949 PEN was granted consultative status at the United Nations as "representative of the writers of the world." PEN continues today as the only literary organization with formal consultative status with UNESCO.

In 1961 PEN formed a Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) to work systematically on individual cases of writers threatened around the world. PEN's work preceded Amnesty, and the founders of Amnesty came to PEN to learn how it did its work.

Today there are more than 150 PEN Centers around the world in more than 100 countries. (The number of centers noted in these *PEN Journeys* varies depending on the date of the narrative.) Over the years I've used different metaphors to describe International PEN—a giant wheel with 150+ spokes that reach out into the corners of the globe. A vast orchestra with string, woodwind, brass, and percussion sections scattered across the map, led by local conductors then coordinated by the Secretariat in London.

PEN's core is an idea, codified in its Charter, acted upon by writers around the world who are organized into PEN centers. These writers and centers gather intensity when they work together.

Writers in a country or region or language are empowered to work as a center of PEN when the whole body of centers—the Assembly of Delegates—votes and confirms a center's membership at PEN's annual congress. Countries can have as many as five centers if the nation is large like Russia, China, and the United States, or if there are multiple languages originating within its borders such as Spain, which has Catalan,

[1] The full text of the PEN Charter may be found in Appendix I on page 258.

Galician and Spanish, or like Switzerland which has four centers: Suisse Romand, Swiss German, Swiss Italian/Reto-Romansh, and Esperanto.

During the months between congresses, PEN centers act both individually and collectively. The work of the centers includes celebrating and presenting literary programs in the many cultures and languages, mobilizing on issues of freedom of expression, acting to preserve and celebrate languages and translation, in particular minority languages, discussing and debating issues of peace, addressing the situation of women writers, and assisting and protecting writers who find themselves in exile.

The development of a PEN center has often been a precursor to the opening up of a country to more democratic practices and freedoms, as was the case in Russia in the late 1980s and in other countries of the former Soviet Union. In Myanmar in 2013 a former prisoner of conscience on whose case PEN had worked was instrumental in forming a PEN center there and was its first president. She went on to be elected to International PEN's governing board several years later and has recently been elected to chair International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee. In many countries a PEN center is a refuge for writers.

Unfortunately, the movement towards more democratic forms of government and freedom of expression has been in retreat the last few years in a number of these same regions, including in Russia, Turkey, and Myanmar.

For more than 35 years I have been engaged with PEN, as a member, as the president of one of PEN's largest centers, PEN Center U.S.A. West during the year of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, and Tiananmen Square, as chair of International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee (1993–199*7)*, as international secretary (2004–2007), and continuing as an international vice president since 1996. I've also served on the board and as vice president of PEN America (2008–2015). I lived for six years in London, where International PEN is headquartered.

When I was asked if I would write an account of PEN's history as I'd seen it in the run-up to PEN's Centenary, I began by writing a blog twice a month, taking on small slices of the history in each post. This serial narrative recounts both PEN's history as well as the history of the period and a slice of my personal history during those years. The narratives are framed by the times, featuring writers and include the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, the protests and crackdown in Tiananmen Square, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. PEN members and future PEN members were central in all these events—also in the collapse of the Soviet Union

and the formation of PEN Centers there; in the opening up of Eastern Europe with its PEN centers; in the release of PEN "main case" Václav Havel and his ascendency to the Presidency of Czechoslovakia; in the mobilization of Turkish PEN members in opposition to recurring authoritarian governments; in PEN's mission to Cuba; in PEN's protests over killings and impunity in Mexico; in protests and gatherings in Hong Kong on behalf of imprisoned Chinese writers; in the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Peace to PEN member and Independent Chinese PEN Center founder and president Liu Xiaobo.

PEN and its members have played a pivotal role in defending freedom of expression around the world this last century and in challenging systems that trap citizens. In at least two instances, PEN members have taken on the presidencies of the new democracies that emerged. The PEN Charter, which sets out the organization's principles and ideals, has united the worldwide organization and guided its members who have often been at the forefront or in the wings of these important historical moments. Celebrated and outspoken writers and PEN members include Václav Havel, Nadine Gordimer, Margaret Atwood, Orhan Pamuk, Yaşar Kemal, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Kuigi wa Wamwere, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Arthur Miller, Anna Politkovskaya, Salman Rushdie, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Carlos Fuentes, Liu Xiaobo. The list is long. I have had the privilege of interacting with many of these writers in PEN and also with hundreds of perhaps lesser known, but courageous writers who have stood watch and engaged.

The view of *PEN Journeys* is global though the work is often local. As well as chronicling international events and personal history, *PEN Journeys* recounts the shaping and re-imagining of this sprawling nongovernmental organization, one of the largest in terms of geographic reach. PEN has had to evolve and re-shape itself to serve its current 157 autonomous centers. With an estimated 30–40,000 members around the globe in more than 100 countries, there are many stories others might tell. This narrative is a close-up view of a period of time and of the writers who continue to work together in the belief that the world for all its differences and complexities can aspire to and perhaps even achieve "the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world," as the PEN Charter states.

Because I tended not to throw away documents over the decades, I have an extensive paper, as well as digital, archive which I've used to refresh memories and document facts. As I dug through files, I came across a speech I'd given which represents for me the aspirations of PEN,

the programming it can do and the disappointments it sometimes faces.

At a 2005 conference in Diyarbakir, Turkey, the ancient city in the contentious southeast region, International PEN, Kurdish PEN and Turkish PEN hosted members from around the world. The gathering was the first time Kurdish and Turkish PEN members shared a stage and translated for each other. I had just taken on the position of international secretary of PEN and joined others at a time of hope that the reduction of violence and tension in Turkey would open a pathway to a more unified society, a direction that unfortunately has reversed.

The talk also references the historic struggle in my own country, the United States, a struggle which is ongoing. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," Martin Luther King was often quoted, echoing a sermon by American abolitionist and Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker. This is the arc PEN has leaned towards in its first century and is counting on in its second.

From the Diyarbakir Conference in March 2005:

> When I was younger, I held slabs of ice together with my bare feet as Eliza leapt to freedom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
>
> I went underground for a time and lived in a room with a thousand light bulbs, along with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.
>
> These novels and others sparked my imagination and created for me a bridge to another world and culture. Growing up in the American South in the 1950s, I lived in my earliest years in a society where races were separated by law. Even after those laws were overturned, custom held, at least for a time, though change eventually did come.
>
> Literature leapt the barriers, however. While society had set up walls, literature built bridges and opened gates. The books beckoned: "Come, sit a while, listen to this story…can you believe…?" And off the imagination went, identifying with the characters, whatever their race, religion, family, or language.
>
> When I was older, I read Yaşar Kemal for the first time. I had visited Turkey once, had read history and newspapers and political commentary, but nothing prepared me for the Turkey I got to know by taking the journey into the cotton fields of the Chukurova plain, along with Long Ali, Old Halil, Memidik

and the others, worrying about Long Ali's indefatigable mother, about Memidik's struggle against the brutal Muhtar Sefer, and longing with the villagers for the return of Tashbash, the saint.

It has been said that the novel is the most democratic of literary forms because everyone has a voice. I'm not sure where poetry stands in this analysis, but the poet, the dramatist, the artistic writer of every sort must yield in the creative process to the imagination, which, at its best, transcends and at the same time reflects individual experience.

In Diyarbakir/Amed we have come together to celebrate cultural diversity and to explore the translation of literature from one language to another, especially to and from smaller languages. … As one communicates and shares and translates, understanding may result, peace may become more likely and the future more secure.

We are here today as a result of the work of PEN's Kurdish and Turkish centers, along with the municipality of Diyarbakir/Amed. … It is said Diyarbakir/Amed is a melting pot because of all the peoples who have come through in its long history. I come from a country also known as a melting pot. Being a melting pot has its challenges, but I would argue that the diversity is its major strength. In the time ahead I hope we scale walls, open gates and build bridges of imagination together.

—Joanne Leedom-Ackerman,
International Secretary, International PEN, March 2005

PEN Journey 1: Engagement

February 13, 1989: I was president of PEN Center U.S.A. West and on an airplane when I read that Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses* was being burned in Birmingham. The next day a fatwa was issued on Rushdie. We all asked what a fatwa was, as we, along with PEN centers around the world, mobilized to protest that a head of state was ordering the murder of a writer wherever he was in the world.

November 10, 1995: As chair of International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee, I was standing vigil with others outside the Nigerian Embassy in Washington, D.C., when word spread that novelist and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa had been hanged that morning in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

October 7, 2006: My phone rang at 7:30 on Saturday morning. I was international secretary of International PEN, and the International Writers in Prison program director was calling to tell me that journalist and PEN member Anna Politkovskaya had just been shot and killed in Moscow. We all knew Anna—I'd last had coffee with her at an airport in Macedonia. We worked with her on the situation of writers in Russia and Chechnya and had enormous respect for her knowledge and courage.

January 19, 2007: We were about to begin an International PEN board meeting in Vienna when a call came from Istanbul. Hrant Dink had just been shot and killed outside his newspaper office in Istanbul. Dink was an editor of an Armenian paper and a writer whom members of PEN knew well and worked with on freedom of expression issues in Turkey.

Most writers long active in PEN's freedom-to-write work can tell you where they were when the news broke on each of these cases, also on cases since like the death of Chinese writer and Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo and Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. They can tell you because the lives of these writers and many others have been critical in the struggle for freedom of expression around the world.

In sharing memories of PEN, I begin with the writers and with the many friends around the globe who work on behalf of writers who don't have the freedom to write without threat, imprisonment or death. As colleagues, we are bound together by the belief that truthful writing matters, be it journalism, fiction, poetry, drama, essays because stories and witnessing and creative imagination connect, inspire and shape us.

Free expression is fundamental to a free society and is worth defending and expanding.

My own thirty plus years working with PEN began at a dinner meeting in Los Angeles in the early 1980s. I was a young writer, new mother, former journalist who'd recently moved across the country from New York City where I taught writing at university and had friends and colleagues. I landed in the land of sun and Hollywood, and though I had a new college teaching job, I knew few people and even fewer writers. Like many who first seek out PEN, I came for the community.

My second meeting was at someone's home where a presentation was made about writers in different parts of the world who were in prison because of their writing. I was introduced to PEN's Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC). At that meeting, we wrote postcards urging the Chinese government to release Wei Jingsheng, a writer who was imprisoned for "counterrevolutionary" activities, particularly for his essay "The Fifth Modernization" which he'd posted on the Democracy Wall in Beijing in 1978. His manifesto argued that as China was modernizing with four principles of modernization, it needed to include a fifth modernization–Democracy.

As I learned about Wei Jingsheng and the other writers on whose behalf PEN worked, I became more active in the PEN center on the West Coast of America called PEN Los Angeles Center at the time. PEN had two centers in the U.S., one in New York City called American PEN, and our PEN center in Los Angeles. I was elected president of PEN Los Angeles Center in 1988. By then I had published two books. I'd attended my first International PEN Congress in New York City in 1986, where members of PEN Los Angeles had been registered with the foreign delegates. I was active at the New York Congress in the Women's revolution and the statement that came from that Congress. (Further details in Journey 3.) Shortly after my election as president of the Los Angeles Center, I attended my second International PEN Congress in Seoul, South Korea, right before the Olympic Games there.

I arrived in Seoul late summer 1988 with our center's support for resolutions including one calling for the release of Wei Jingsheng and other writers in China, another resolution addressing writers in prison in South Korea, including our honorary member, publisher Lee Tae-Bok, and a resolution to change the name of PEN Los Angeles Center to PEN Center U.S.A. West. The name change had been passed by our center's previous board but needed approval of the international Assembly of

Delegates. It reflected our wider membership in the western part of the United States.

As president of PEN Los Angeles Center, I arrived as a young writer with a small delegation from Southern California, which included the former book editor of the *Los Angeles Times* who had been the previous president of the Los Angeles Center, and with an English professor from UCLA. American PEN, based in New York, the largest of PEN's more than 60 worldwide centers at the time, was headed by Susan Sontag, who was president. American PEN didn't want us to change our name and opposed the resolution on the floor of the Congress. While our two centers agreed on all the other substantive issues of the Congress, including the problematic situation for writers in South Korea, and though we shared meals, the American PEN delegation, and Susan Sontag in particular, tried to get us to withdraw our name change. The lobbying included a midnight call to me from Susan. The name change would be confusing, she said, and would take from the national scope of American PEN's work. In that midnight call I listened to the arguments, then shared our thinking. I observed that our membership came from many states west of the Mississippi; that in a country the size of the United States, PEN allowed more than one center. In fact countries could have as many as five PEN centers. For writers 3,000 miles from New York, there was value in having more than one center of gravity. In the morning I presented American PEN's arguments to my delegation, and we decided to go ahead and let our resolution go to the floor of the Assembly.

After the discussion, the representative from East Berlin stood up and noted: It would seem the East and West of America get along worse than the East and West of Germany. PEN Los Angeles Center's resolution for a name change won by a wide margin, and we left the Congress as PEN Center U.S.A. West, one of International PEN's largest centers, at one point the fourth largest. I no longer live in Los Angeles but note that in 2018 members of PEN U.S.A. West voted to merge with PEN America in New York so there is now only one center of PEN in the U.S.

Most memorable and significant from the Seoul Congress was our delegation's visit with the family of Lee Tae-Bok, our honorary member and a "main case" for PEN. Main cases are writers, editors or publishers who are imprisoned, threatened, attacked or killed for their writing or publishing, whose information has been verified by the researchers in PEN's Secretariat in London, and whose activities are nonviolent.

I reported in our center's newsletter: "The house of Lee Tae-Bok's parents is neat and spare, bedrooms with tatami mats on the floor, a living

room with a sofa, a chair, a fish tank. There is no excess in the house, one senses out of choice. But there is an absence, not out of choice, for Lee Tae-Bok has been away in prison seven years. His mother worries that she will not see her oldest son out of prison before she dies." The family said that Lee Tae-Bok was in poor health and held in a cell four by five square meters, allowed out in the fresh air for only twenty minutes a day and wasn't allowed to write except one letter a month to his family. His mother lamented the "hypocrisy" of the Korean government which had sentenced her son to life in prison because they said he published communist propaganda and yet they were greeting writers and "honored guests" at PEN's Congress from Communist countries as well as inviting Eastern Bloc athletes to Korea for the Olympic Games.

In addition to our visit with the family, PEN Congress delegates petitioned the South Korean government on behalf of those in prison, and a delegation from International PEN visited two of the writers in prison.

A few weeks after the Congress, notification reached us that Lee Tae-Bok had been released, though not everyone PEN spoke up for was let out. I still remember where I was—I was in New York—when I heard the news. I remember the elation. Many people worked on Lee Tae-Bok's behalf so we couldn't and didn't take the credit, but we could feel some part of our actions, some push at the prison door helped spring it open. Release is not always the outcome of PEN's work, but often it is. It is one of the goals. Over all my years in PEN, the release of a writer from prison still evokes a burst of hope and a measure of faith.

PEN Journey 2: The Fatwa

It was Presidents' weekend in the U.S.—between Lincoln and Washington's birthday, coinciding with Valentine's Day, 1989. I was president of PEN Center U.S.A. West and had just hired the Center's first executive director ten days before. I'd been working hard with PEN and was also finishing a new novel, teaching and shepherding my 8 and 10-year-old sons. For the first time in a year and a half my husband and I were going away for a long weekend without our children. He had also been working nonstop and had managed to clear his schedule.

On the plane to Colorado where we planned to ski, I read that Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* had been burned in Birmingham, England. The next day Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against Rushdie. What was a fatwa? The Supreme Leader of Iran was calling for the murder of Rushdie wherever he was in the world, and he was offering a $6 million reward. As information about the fatwa developed, it also included a call for the death of whoever published *The Satanic Verses*.

I began making phone calls. This was a time before omnipresent cell phones so I had to find phones and numbers where people could reach me. Usually our vacation dynamic was that my husband was on the phone.

That first day I skied and wrote press releases on the ski lift and stopped at lodges on the mountain to use the pay phones to communicate with our new executive director. I'd ski another run then call the office again to answer questions from the press. What exactly was a fatwa, we were still asking? What did this mean for a writer? By the end of the day, I told my husband I had to return to L.A.

"Can't this wait?" he asked.

"No, it can't," I said.

Though a fatwa was a new concept, I understood, as did PEN members around the world, that a threshold had been crossed when a head of state issued a death warrant on a writer wherever he was in the world, and I was president of the PEN Center. Our two sons came out to be with my husband, and I returned to LA. Our board went into action as did PEN centers around the globe to protest the fatwa. We organized a public event at the *Los Angeles Times* with writers and experts, an event which included readings from Rushdie's book. Some were frightened by the threat, but most in PEN gathered. We contacted U.S.

government officials and began coordinating with global PEN centers, including American PEN in New York to confirm the support of writers for Rushdie and to protest Khomeini's action.

Whatever the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* and its "insult" to Muslims, PEN was clear that the right of the writer to write without fear of death was primary.

The mobilization included discussions with bookstores to encourage them to keep the book on the shelves for many were quietly removing it. The fuller scope of our PEN's actions at the time is described in the column below in the PEN Center U.S.A. West's newsletter and in a story in the *Los Angeles Times.*

Area Writers Gather to Read, Back Rushdie

By TERRY PRISTIN, *Times Staff Writer*

About 150 people assembled in Los Angeles on Wednesday night to hear local writers read and discuss the works of Salman Rushdie and to show their support for him in the face of the threats against his life.

"We are gathered to show our solidarity and our commitment to the fundamental freedom of writers to write and to publish without the threat of death and for readers to choose the books they would buy without similar threats of violence," said Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, a novelist who is president of PEN Center U.S.A. West, sponsor of the event.

Leedom-Ackerman said she is also concerned that the uproar sparked by reaction to "The Satanic Verses" could lead to "an igniting of prejudice within our communities."

Among the readers and speakers were feminist writer Betty Friedan, now teaching at USC, futurist Alvin Toffler and novelists Lawrence Thornton, T. Coraghessan Boyle and Roberta Smoodin, who read the passage from "The Satanic Verses" that Muslims singled out as blasphemous.

The gathering, held at The Times, was open only to PEN members and the press.

"As a writer whose ideas are associated with the rights of women and the unfinished 'revolution,' I myself have experienced bomb threats," Friedan said. " . . . One reason Rushdie's work has offended [Muslims] is that he is critical of [their] treatment of women."

Explaining why Muslims find "The Satanic Verses" objectionable, Carl W. Ernst, a professor of religious studies at Pomona College, said, "The book does have a mischievous spirit."

Rushdie, a native of Bombay, India, who emigrated to England at the age of 14, "has lost the ties with his community," according to Ernst. To Muslims, he said, the novel suggests "the triumph of colonialism over their own culture."

PEN Center U.S.A. West, which has 450 members, is affiliated with the center in New York that also sponsored readings Wednesday.