

## WiPC: Fighting for the Freedom of Imprisoned Writers | Sampsonia Way Magazine

### [Sampsonia Way in Brussels](#)

*Marian Botsford Fraser holding a picture of Chinese activist and dissident Hu Jia. Photo: PEN American Center*

The young Afghan student who was sentenced to death; the Chinese webmaster, who has been under residential surveillance; the Mexican writers who have been murdered or disappeared. These are only a few of the cases PEN International's [Writers in Prison Committee](#) (WiPC) is focused on.

WiPC's Chair, Marian Botsford Fraser, talked about these and other cases in her speech at the opening event that WiPC shared with the [International Cities of Refugees Network](#) (ICORN) and [Halma](#), the literary centers' network in Europe, as part of the biannual Passa Porta Literary Festival in Brussels.

In her talk, Botsford Fraser emphasized the Cuban Black Spring in 2003, when journalists, writers, librarians, and academics were incarcerated without fair trials. She referred to the writers affected as "some of the most striking symbols in the PEN casebook of writers," and read a statement from Ricardo González Alfonso, who has been a main case of the WiPC, and an honorary member of several PEN centers, since he went to prison in 2003.

**Brussels, 25 March, 2011**

If I could only tell you two things about the work of the WiPC of PEN International, it would be these: First, what distinguishes the work we've done for fifty years from that of other freedom of expression organizations is that we are in the business of naming names. So, in addition to creating a campaign on the criminalization of religious defamation, by taking the issue to the UN Human Rights Council and challenging directly those countries which punish blasphemy as an insult to the state, we make Parwez Kambakhsh, the young Afghan student, one of our main cases. Kambakhsh was accused by fellow students of downloading and distributing materials discussing the prophet Mohammed's ideas about women. He was charged with blasphemy, and sentenced to death. A number of PEN centres made Kambakhsh an honorary member, and worked directly with their own governments, the diplomats of those countries in Afghanistan, and members of the Afghan PEN Centre, to get Mr. Kambakhsh pardoned and out of the country.

We are developing a strategy on the myriad freedom of expression issues created by digital media, but we do so by building the case of Ye Du, webmaster for the Independent Chinese PEN Centre. Ye Du (who very bravely came to the PEN Congress in Tokyo last September) has been under residential surveillance since March 1, and is accused of "inciting subversion of state power," a charge



regularly used to silence writers in China. □ Ye Du is one of more than one hundred other dissident writers, lawyers, and activists harassed, summoned, and forced to “travel” or put under house arrest in the months since our colleague Liu Xiaobo was honored with the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize.

A second hallmark of PEN's freedom of expression work is that we never stop working on behalf of a writer until he or she is released from prison, or until death and beyond. In a number of our cases (and we might have between 700 and 900 in our casebook at any time) we also seek justice for those who have been disappeared or murdered, like those in Mexico (more than 40 since 2006), and writers like Anna Politkovskaya and Hrant Dink. Over the past ten years, we've been working on behalf of some 30 Eritrean journalists, 15 of whom have died in prison since 2001. One of them, Dawit Isaak—a journalist, playwright, and author—is still alive, we believe, like others detained without trial, or even formal charges. Yet the European Union agreed to transfer €122 million of unconditional aid to Eritrea between 2009 and 2013. Swedish PEN (which collected 20,000 signatures on behalf of Isaak in 2009) has asked the EU to scale back economic aid to Eritrea “until the death camp in Eiraeiro has been closed.”

[“On the Move”](#) is this year's theme for Passa Porta's Literary Festival, and for our three conferences. Being on the move, for many among us here today, is a quixotic combination of freedom and exile. One of the most striking symbols in the PEN casebook of writers for whom freedom means suddenly, unexpectedly being on the move is that of the Black Spring writers of Cuba. Earlier this month, the last of the Black Spring writers, Pedro Argüelles Morán was freed. He was one of the 35 writers, independent journalists, and librarians arrested in March 2003, when 75 people were detained, tried, and sentenced in one-day trials under laws governing the protection of the Cuban state.

Argüelles Morán has been allowed to remain in Cuba under a special parole program, but 18 other writers, journalists, and librarians freed under a deal brokered by the Catholic Church and the Spanish foreign ministry were forced to accept exile in Spain (three have reportedly since relocated: two to the USA and one to Chile). They are no longer serving twenty-year sentences, but they are not truly free. As one of them, journalist, librarian, and poet Ricardo González Alfonso said shortly after his arrival in Spain, “The day that I am able to return to my own country and express myself freely in favor for or against the government in power, in favor for or against an idea that I think is just or unjust, that is the day that I will feel free for the first time.”

We invited Ricardo González Alfonso to come to this conference, but the complications of his status as a writer in exile seeking asylum meant that he was unable to travel at this time. Instead, he has sent us the following statement.

Ricardo González Alfonso's statement is entitled EL MILAGRO DE LA LIBERTAD [The Miracle of Freedom] [Read](#) the English version.

[Read](#) more highlights from *Sampsonia Way's* visit to the Passa Porta festival in Brussels.

No comments yet.