

Writers in Prison exhibition

A powerful exhibition inspired by imprisoned writers and banned publications has gone on display at Edinburgh's popular Writers' Museum in Lady Stair's Close.

"Writers in Prison : A Scottish PEN exhibition on campaigning for free expression" marks the 50th anniversary of International PEN's WRITERS in PRISON (WIP) Committee which has campaigned to free thousands of imprisoned writers on every continent, from unknown journalists to world famous names such as Salman Rushdie, Vaclav Havel, and Anna Politkovskaya.

The highlight of this thought-provoking and moving display is the Empty Chair, which has lately been touring Scottish literary festivals, including the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the Edinburgh Radical Book Fair.

This specially crafted chair highlights the plight of writers internationally who are imprisoned, suffer horrendous torture, or are in hiding, simply for engaging in freedom of expression.

World famous Edinburgh writer and Scottish PEN member Alexander McCall Smith was photographed with the Empty Chair earlier this year. (see link at the top of this release for image)

He said: "PEN's support for writers in prison has been a lifeline for many. The Empty Chair symbolises that most powerfully, and I am delighted to have been able to support it."

Councillor Deidre Brock, Culture and Leisure Convenor for the City of Edinburgh Council, said: "The Writers' Museum has been proud to host Scottish PEN since 2005 and we are delighted to be displaying this fascinating and poignant Writers in Prison

exhibition. Here in Scotland, we perhaps take freedom of expression somewhat for granted; this hard-hitting display brings home how different things are in other parts of the world, where writers and journalists have been incarcerated, tortured or even murdered simply for expressing their views.”

As well as the Empty Chair, the exhibition also displays examples of some of the ingenious methods imprisoned writers have employed to smuggle their words to the outside world, such as toilet paper, cigarette papers and even bars of soap.

Jean Rafferty, Scottish PEN’s WIP Committee Convenor, said: “This exhibition focuses on the campaigning of the WIP Committee who work to combat repression and to support individual writers. It is not a dry and dusty look at the principle of free expression, but shows the people who fight and suffer for the right to speak their minds.”

The exhibition at the Writers’ Museum is particularly timely since the Chinese writer, Liu Xiaobo, has recently been awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. Liu Xiaobo, President of Independent Chinese PEN, is one of Scottish PEN’s adopted cases and members have been campaigning on his behalf since he was imprisoned on Christmas Day 2009. His ‘crime’ was ‘incitement to subversion’ for his role in publishing Charter 08, a document calling for political reform and human rights. He wrote 224 Chinese characters – seven sentences – and was given eleven years in prison as a result.

During his seventeen years in an Albanian prison camp, Fatos Lubonya, wrote on cigarette papers; Irina Ratushinskaya spent over three years in a Soviet prison and labour camp yet continued to produce her poems embedded in bars of soap, and Ken Saro-Wiwa wrote on toilet paper while imprisoned.

Writers in Prison will be on display at the Writers Museum until April 2011. Admission is free. The Writers’ Museum and Makars’ Court are located in the heart of Edinburgh’s Old

Town, off the Royal Mile in Lady Stair's Close. The Museum celebrates the lives of three great Scottish writers – Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson. Visitors can see portraits, rare books and personal objects including Burns' writing desk, the printing press on which Scott's Waverley Novels were first produced, and Scott's own dining table and rocking horse. The Museum houses Robert Louis Stevenson's riding boots and the ring given to him by a Samoan chief, engraved with the name 'Tusitala', meaning 'teller of tales'. There is also a plaster cast of Robert Burns' skull, one of only three ever made.