

We, the Writers? A Global Literary Congress Meets in New York.

Authors from 30 countries held an “emergency” meeting at the United Nations to address the multiple crises of the moment — and whether stories can help.



By Jennifer Schuessler

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has evoked a back-to-the-future Cold War frisson, in culture as much as politics.

So, as 80 writers from around the world filed into the stately Trusteeship Council Chamber at the United Nations on Friday, some may have flashed back to the heyday of high-stakes cultural diplomacy — or at least the climax of the 2005 Nicole Kidman thriller “The Interpreter.”

The occasion was an Emergency World Voices Congress of Writers, convened by the writers organization PEN America. But after the pounding of the opening gavel, the group’s chief executive, Suzanne Nossel, laid to rest any notion that the grand setting meant that a solution to the “cascading crises” of the moment was at hand.

The U.N. Security Council, which meets just across the hall, she noted, counts among its permanent, veto-wielding members “the world’s most egregious aggressor” (Russia) and “the world’s worst jailer of writers” (China).

“If these are the guardians of our freedom and security,” Nossel said, “we’re in trouble.”

The congress, which coincided with PEN’s annual World Voices Festival, was inspired by a similar emergency gathering held in New York in May 1939, where some 500 writers, including Thomas Mann, Pearl Buck and Dorothy Thompson, came together to address Europe’s slide toward war. But the role of the writer — and the nature of the emergency — has changed a lot since then.

Over three hours, there were impassioned statements on Ukraine, the killing of the Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, social media polarization, climate change, the deluge of disinformation and the global decline of democracy, along with pleas to remember, as one Sri Lankan novelist wryly put it, “the insignificant little countries” of the world.



The Cameroonian American novelist Patrice Nganang at the gathering. Beowulf Sheehan

There was lots of fumbling with the microphones, and jokes about klutzy writers fumbling with microphones. But if there was an overall theme, it was faith in the old-fashioned power of stories.

“A poem will not stop a bullet, a novel cannot defuse a bomb,” Salman Rushdie said. But writers can still “sing the truth, and name the lies.”

“We must work,” he declared, “to overturn the false narratives of tyrants, populists and fools by telling better stories than they do — stories within which people might actually want to live”

The rhetoric hit a cruising altitude of about 30,000 feet quickly, and mostly stayed there. But there were also impassioned on-the-ground appeals for solidarity with Ukraine right now from a delegation of Ukrainian writers.

Andrey Kurkov, a novelist and the president of PEN Ukraine, assailed Vladimir Putin’s assault on Ukraine’s territory, culture and history, which he described as an assault on the whole world.

“He is destroying not only Ukraine,” Kurkov said. “He is trying to destroy life on Earth, menacing everyone with nuclear weapons.”

There were plenty of laments that, as the American novelist Siri Hustvedt put it, “literature lives at the margins of culture, especially in the United States.” But some stuck up for the less exalted forms of storytelling.

Luiza Fazio, a Brazilian screenwriter, said that it was pop culture that shaped the imaginations of most people, especially young people — for better and worse. (Are superhero movies, she asked, “normalizing war” and “glamorizing violence?”)

Shehan Karunatilaka, a Sri Lankan novelist, noted that it wasn’t a “well-researched novel” but social media hashtags like #GoHomeGota that have helped fuel recent protests against Sri Lanka’s strongman president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

“Let’s not be too snobbish when talking about the written word,” he said. “Sometimes a well-choreographed TikTok can bring down a tyrant.”

The French-Algerian novelist Walid Hajar Rachedi recalled his shock upon learning that one of the gunmen in the 2015 terrorist attack on the Bataclan nightclub in Paris grew up in the same suburb that he had. As a writer, Rachedi said, “I believe in the power of stories.” But he asked if a novel like his own well-received debut, “What Would I Do in Paradise?” could really counteract whatever story turned that young man into a killer.

“We are here in New York, and it is very fancy,” Rachedi said. “But does it make a difference outside the world of literature?”

The French Moroccan writer Leila Slimani noted the estimated 700 million people in the world who, like her mother and grandmother, had never learned to read or write. “Maybe the first thing we have to fight for is this fundamental right,” she said.

As for the United States, there were references to the Republican-led efforts to ban books and restrict teaching on race. But some speakers warned against the subtler forces that coerce and constrain the imagination.

The Chinese-born novelist Yiyun Li recalled how, as an 18-year-old in the Chinese military, she had excelled at writing propaganda, a job she took because it was better than cleaning toilets or feeding the pigs.



Yiyun Li, a Chinese-born novelist, center, recalled her experiences writing propaganda for the Chinese army. Beowulf Sheehan

Recently, she overheard her American-born son and a friend talking about how they couldn't win a school poetry contest unless their poems included certain "key words," like "injustice" and "police brutality." Can't a poet also "write about flowers," one asked?

Our role, she said, "is to make sure they know they don't have to write the keywords, as I did when I was in China."

Mark Lilla, a professor of humanities at Columbia University (and a sharp critic of American-style identity politics), called on writers to cultivate imaginative openness to "the minds of all others, not just the cultural other."

"We need to make it harder to speak so confidently about what's wrong, about what's wrong with the people we think are behind what's wrong, and we need to develop some humility and self-doubt," he said.

While there was no direct debate (let alone Khrushchevian shoe-pounding), there was some pointed disagreement. In his remarks, the Cameroonian American novelist Patrice Nganang noted that more than 50 nations in Africa had so far declined to impose sanctions on Russia and support Ukraine. But African writers, he said, should feel no shame over their countries' lack of enthusiasm for a "unipolar world."

"African people very quickly realize that it is the very same countries that chained the African continent and Black people for so long that are clamoring for freedom at the borders of Ukraine," he said.

Kurkov, speaking last, offered a riposte. It is natural, he said, to feel one's own "tooth pain" most acutely. But "I myself feel tooth pain for Sri Lanka, for Africa, for Palestine."

"Always remember there is no competition of tragedies," he said. "If we can help, we should help."

At the end, there was an informal (and unanimous) vote on one tentative proposal: that PEN initiate an oral history project about the present moment, akin to those undertaken in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration.

If the congress itself felt like a very rough first installment, so be it.

"These are writers," Nossel said after the group posed for a portrait. "You can't script them."