

Who Stepped In And Took A Table At The PEN Awards Dinner

Neil Gaiman Leads Authors Stepping In To Back Charlie Hebdo PEN Award

Fantasy novelist to act as a host at PEN gala along with Alison Bechdel and Art Spiegelman, following boycott by writers including Peter Carey.

Neil Gaiman, Alison Bechdel and Art Spiegelman have stepped forward to host tables at Tuesday's PEN gala in New York honouring the work of Charlie Hebdo, after writers including Peter Carey and Michael Ondaatje withdrew last week in protest.

Carey, Ondaatje and the authors Francine Prose, Teju Cole, Rachel Kushner and Taiye Selasi last week made public their concerns over PEN American Center's decision to present the French satirical magazine with a "Freedom of Expression Courage award". They had been set to host tables at tonight's ceremony – which is also due to honour jailed Azerbaijani journalist Khadija Ismayilova with a Freedom to Write award – but pulled out, later adding their names to a letter now signed by more than 204 writers.

The letter, printed in full on The Intercept , says that by selecting Charlie Hebdo, PEN is "valorising selectively offensive material: material that intensifies the anti-Islamic, anti-Maghreb, anti-Arab sentiments already prevalent in the western world".

Now award-winning fantasy novelist Gaiman, acclaimed

cartoonist Bechdel, Maus creator Spiegelman, Reading Lolita in Tehran author Azar Nafisi and American author and journalist George Packer have been named as new hosts at the event, which PEN confirmed would have heightened security. French-Congolese novelist Alain Mabanckou, meanwhile, will present the award to Jean-Baptiste Thoret, the Charlie Hebdo member of staff who arrived late to work on 7 January, missing the attack that killed 12 people.

Mabanckou told the Guardian he had decided to present the award because "I'm a big reader of Charlie Hebdo, because I know that it's not a racist magazine. I decided to do it in memory of all journalists and cartoonists who die because they have the courage to pursue their work. Finally, I decided to do it because among the members of Charlie Hebdo who were massacred in January 2015 was a friend of mine, the economist and journalist Bernard Maris, who was an extraordinary man."

Gaiman tweeted: "I'll be hosting a table at the PEN event because it's important." He told the Associated Press in an email: "I was honoured to be invited to host a table. The Charlie Hebdo cartoonists are getting an award for courage: They continued putting out their magazine after the offices were firebombed, and the survivors have continued following the murders."

"They died for their beliefs. The award is for courage that transcends our like or dislike of them," Nafisi tweeted this weekend. She also wrote: "PEN award to CH is recognition of the writers' artists' rights to 'disturb the peace,' regardless of the price".

Thoret, the film critic for Charlie Hebdo, told NPR that "if you're standing for the freedom of expression, you can't be at one moment for this freedom of expression, and two or three minutes later, against that. You know, you're honouring a principle. You're not honouring a specific content in a magazine. Even in Charlie Hebdo, we did not often agree."

Other writers including Paul Auster, Siri Hustvedt, Simon Schama, Richard Ford and Sara Paretsky have also offered their support to PEN. The novelist Salman Rushdie, meanwhile, has

been a particularly outspoken supporter of PEN's decision to honour Charlie Hebdo, writing in a letter to the free speech organisation that by withdrawing, the six authors had "made themselves the fellow travellers" of "fanatical Islam, which is highly organised, well funded, and which seeks to terrify us all, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, into a cowed silence".

– The Guardian