

9 November
2005

Brave writers lauded

The execution of a celebrated Nigerian writer 10 years ago this week is cause to reflect on many other writers' courage, says HEATHER CAMPBELL HAPETA.

Around the world, November 15 is dedicated to freedom of speech and in support of persecuted writers: usually people imprisoned or killed for writing about things others disapprove of.

In New Zealand, it is called Courage Day, in honour of New Zealanders James and Sarah Courage, whose writings were suppressed.

James Courage's book, *A Way of Love*, about a homosexual relationship, was banned in New Zealand for some years. His grandmother, Sarah Courage, wrote *Lights and Shadows of Colonial Life*, in which disguised descriptions of her neighbours were so unflattering that many copies were destroyed.

Courage seems an appropriate name, because of the bravery required by authors who face opposition in its many forms.

Other books banned, censored or suppressed in New Zealand include Ettie Rout's *Safe Marriage* and the children's reader, *Washday at the Pa*, with photos by Ans Westra, which was withdrawn from schools in the early 1960s.

The *Butcher Shop*, by Jean Devanny, born in Nelson in 1894, was banned because of its supposed obscenity, "detriment to New Zealand's immigration policy", and "most vivid description of the symptoms of delirium tremens".

Even one of New Zealand's 20 Living Icons, Hone Tuwhare, had some of his first works banned by the Maori Affairs Department, apparently because of his early communist affiliations. New Zealander William Taylor, author of novels for children and young adults, had his work banned by the American Library Association.

Apart from Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare appears to have been expurgated more often than any other English-language author, and even today, cut editions of his work are read in some schools.

This year, as part of Courage Day, the New Zealand Society of Authors (PEN NZ) is remembering Nigerian television producer and writer of satirical novels, children's tales and plays, Ken Saro-Wiwa.

In 1994, he was imprisoned by Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha. He had strongly defended the rights of the Ogoni people and criticised the Government's oil policy. Despite



Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-95): "I may be dead but my ideas will not die."

International protests, Saro-Wiwa was hanged after a show trial with eight other activists in Port Harcourt, on November 10, 1995.

To remember his death, Courage Day is being commemorated in many parts of the world tomorrow, rather than the usual November 15.

All over the world, writers continue to be persecuted. The organisation Reporters without Borders says Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk has been charged with insulting the Turkish Republic by statements published in a Swiss newspaper on February 6 this year.

In Afghanistan, journalists were abducted, arrested and threatened in pre-election violence, and New York Times researcher Zhao Yan has been in custody in China for more than a year. Recently, in Katmandu, Nepal, almost 90 journalists were arrested, and on September 22, award-winning war journalist Robert Fisk was banned from entering the United States.

Even internet service provider Yahoo has come under fire after it was revealed that its subsidiary in Hong Kong provided information to the Chinese authorities. This was used to jail a journalist who had emailed the editor of a New York-based website the contents of a Propaganda Department memo sent to his newspaper.

At the end of September, a Liberal Australian MP called for "an outrageous book", *The Bad Book*, by Andy Griffiths, to be withdrawn from school libraries.

New Zealand is not exempt from censorship. In 2003, New Zealand Herald cartoonist Malcolm Evans was dismissed over his portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On January 1 this year, Reporters Without Borders reported that 107 journalists and 70 cyber-dissidents were in prison around the world and, for the second year, Iraq was the most dangerous country for journalists: 10 reporters and 12 media assistants were killed there during the year.

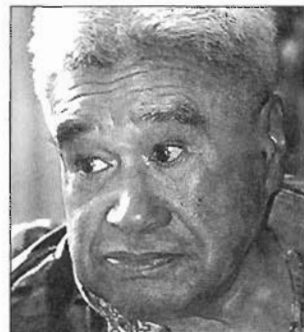
Around the world, at least 53 journalists were killed in 2004 while doing their job or for expressing their opinions. Fifteen media assistants were also killed.

Reporters without Borders' Index of Press Freedom shows that press freedom is most threatened in Asia. North Korea is at the bottom of the list at 167th, followed by Burma (165th), China (162nd) and Vietnam (161st). In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is 159th, Iran 158th, Syria 155th and Iraq 148th.

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Ettie Rout: books banned. Photo courtesy of Alexander Turnbull Library.



Hone Tuwhare: communist affiliations.

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The greatest press freedom is found in northern Europe. Of the top 20 countries, only three — New Zealand (ninth), Trinidad and Tobago (11th) and Canada (18th) — are outside Europe. The US is 22nd at home and 108th in Iraq. Australia is 41st. Britain is 28th equal with El Salvador and Hungary.

■ To celebrate Courage Day, a get-together will be held at the Madras Cafe Bookshop tomorrow from 5.30pm. Readings will highlight Ken Saro-Wiwa's life and other freedom-of-expression issues.

Heather Campbell Hapeta writes on behalf of the New Zealand Society of Authors' Canterbury branch.

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Alexander Solzhenitsyn