

Writing Toward a Better World: 2021 PEN America Literary Award finalists with local ties



Ninety-nine years ago, Thomas Hardy sent a message to a dinner gathering of writers in London: “The exchange of International Thought is the only possible salvation of the world.” The collection of poets, essayists and editors, and novelists contributed their literary skills to the group’s acronym: P.E.N. Club, which celebrated the opening of organizations in the United States and across Europe. Nearly a century later, 100 PEN centers around the world today ladder up to PEN International, an association bridging literature and human rights while advocating for the principles of a free press and freedom of expression.

Since the inaugural PEN Translation Prize in 1963 celebrated Archibald Colquhoun for his translation of *The Viceroys* from Federico de Roberto’s Italian original, PEN America has expanded and evolved its annual awards to recognize new works of poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction. In an email announcing the 2021 shortlist, program director Jane Merchant called the 55 titles “the highest examples of literary excellence, during a time when writing is urgently needed to support empathy and a better world.”

Several of the finalists were influenced by time in Rhode Island and the South Coast of Massachusetts:

Lizzie Davis

Ornamental by Juan Cárdenas

Translated from Spanish into English

Published by Coffee House Press

Finalist for the PEN Translation Prize, recognizing “book-length prose translations from any language into English.”

In her “Writers on Writing” course in the Literary Arts department at Brown University, Lizzie Davis encountered unfamiliar works from independent publishers that pushed boundaries in terms of form and content. The syllabus included Rikki Ducornet’s *Netsuke*, the first novel she read from Coffee House Press.

“I thought, if I ever work in publishing, I want it to be for a press that publishes books like these,” Davis said. “So much of what I’m doing now seems to be the direct result of my time spent in Providence and the generosity and support of the people I encountered there.”

Now editor of Coffee House Press, based in Minneapolis, Davis credits a Brown workshop led by Forrest Gander for enabling her as an undergraduate to translate a single work of literature over the course of one semester. From a stack of books, she selected a collection of prose poems by Spanish writer Pilar Fraile Amador. The following year, when Amador visited Providence for a bilingual reading series, Gander invited Davis to participate.

“That book exerted some kind of gravitational pull on me,” said Davis. “I was hooked.”

After translating most of Amador’s poetry, co-translating Valeria Luiselli’s American Book Award-winning *Tell Me How It Ends*, and bringing a selection of poems, letters and various excerpts from Spanish and Italian into English, Davis met novelist Juan Cárdenas at the Medellín Book and Culture Festival. She arrived in Colombia after a hurricane cancelled a connecting flight and left her stranded for 24 hours in San Salvador, El Salvador. Since Davis was staying at the same Medellín hotel as Cárdenas, the organizers of the book fair encouraged her to get to know him and rely on him as a local guide.

“I didn’t know then that he was a writer and translator, but he mentioned that Coffee House published all his friends,” said Davis. “I found one of his books at the fair, started reading it, and immediately knew that I wanted us to publish it, and that I wanted to throw my hat into the ring as a possible translator.”

Peniel E. Joseph

The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

Published by Basic Books

Finalist for the PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography, recognizing “excellence in the art of biography.”

Now a professor of public affairs at The University of Texas at Austin and founding director of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs Center for the Study of Race and Democracy, Dr. Peniel E. Joseph lived in Rhode Island between 1999 and 2005.

Besides a one-year fellowship with the Wilson Center in Washington, DC, during this period, Joseph served as an assistant professor at the University of Rhode Island and spent two summers on fellowships at Brown to research and write his first book, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (Henry Holt, 2007).

The history department and Africana Studies program at URI were “filled with world class scholars, who encouraged me as a young scholar,” said Joseph. He wrote at cafes near Brown and learned about the history of Black student activism on both campuses. He said these experiences galvanized his studies of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and his interest in the relationship between race and democracy.

“In short, I owe such an enormous intellectual and personal debt to the many friends and colleagues and students and administrators and community folk who supported me during my years in Rhode Island,” said Joseph. “I loved every minute of my time there.”

Emily Levesque

The Last Stargazers: The Enduring Story of Astronomy's Vanishing Explorers

Published by Sourcebooks

Finalist for the PEN/E.O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award, recognizing “writing that exemplifies literary excellence on the subject of the physical or biological sciences and communicates complex scientific concepts to a lay audience.”

As a professor of astronomy at the University of Washington in Seattle, Dr. Emily Levesque researches and explains how massive stars evolve and die. Born and raised in Taunton, her earliest memories of stargazing took place in the backyard of her childhood home. In *The Last Stargazers*, she writes of first meeting an astronomer during an astronomy night hosted nearby at Wheaton College.

“My writing and astronomy career were both heavily shaped by the arts and science opportunities that my parents and teachers were able to make possible in the area,” Levesque said.

She participated in local, regional and state science fairs while growing up. At Taunton High School, Levesque joined the math team and participated in band and theater.

“As a university professor, now I’m starting to get a small understanding of how immensely hard some of our teachers in the Taunton school system worked and fought to make these opportunities available,” she said.

Levesque considered Kenneth Perry, her eighth grade science at Martin Middle School in East Taunton, a “big driving force.” She also studied music under Ann Danis, now a professor of music and director of orchestral activities at URI, and played violin in Rhode Island youth orchestras.

“Science and the arts have always been very closely connected for me,” she said. “I think learning how to enjoy hard work, how to find and tell a good story and how to pass your enthusiasm on to an

audience are all crucial components of both.”

Emma Ramadan

A Country for Dying by Abdellah Taïa

Translated from French into English

Published by Seven Stories Press

Finalist for the PEN Translation Prize, recognizing “book-length prose translations from any language into English.”

After Emma Ramadan earned her B.A. in comparative literature and literary translation at Brown, she pursued a master’s degree in Paris, a Fulbright in Morocco and a stint in New York City before returning to Providence in 2016 to co-found Riffraff bookstore and bar with her husband Tom Roberge. (Read *Motif’s* December 2019 feature on Riffraff and Q&A with Ramadan and Roberge.)

Ramadan credited Cole Swensen and Forrest Gander at Brown who “made it feel like the community of writers in Providence was something very special and that people like that were being drawn here.”

As well as bringing Moroccan writer and filmmaker Abdellah Taïa’s novel *A Country for Dying* to readers of English, Ramadan has translated more than a dozen novels and poetry collections from French.

Her translations of *Zabor, or the Psalms* by Algerian journalist Kamel Daoud will publish in March with Other Press and *In Concrete* by French novelist Anne F. Garréta will publish in April with Deep Vellum.

Asako Serizawa

Inheritors

Published by Doubleday

Finalist for the PEN Open Book Award, recognizing “book-length writings by authors of color.”

While pursuing graduate studies in American and English literature at Brown in the late 1990s, Asako Serizawa hadn’t considered the possibility of writing fiction. Interested in modernist and postcolonial literature, she considered classes taught by Neil Lazarus and Mary Ann Doana to be “foundational” to her creative work.

“Brown was absolutely crucial,” Serizawa said. “It gave me a critical frame, a way to think about not just my material, the context and content, but my aesthetic choices, as well.”

Living in an attic apartment along Benefit Street in Providence, Serizawa often braved the wintertime risks of the “craggy back steps” for coffee and popovers downstairs at the now shuttered Cable Car cinema and cafe.

“It would’ve been the perfect place to revise manuscripts,” she said, “if I’d been working on my book then.”

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore

The Freezer Door

Published by Semiotext(e)

Finalist for the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award, recognizing “a book-length work of any genre for its originality, merit and impact.”

Although spending much of her time at Brown in 1991 involved with campus activism, protesting against the university over issues of class and race in admissions, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore discovered the avant-garde form of “language poetry” in workshops with Lee Ann Brown and C.D. Wright.

“What language poetry taught me was to condense all of my experiences into just a few spare words on a page,” said Sycamore. “Through that, I really learned how to edit.”

Sycamore withdrew from Brown and moved to San Francisco, but returned to Brown in 1994 for what would have been her senior year before withdrawing one semester later. During this time, she explored the city’s gay bars, club culture, and arts venues and events. At ‘Stravaganza, AS220’s annual queer entertainment showcase, she read her first short story based on making a living in San Francisco as a sex worker.

“One thing I learned over the years is to write toward feeling,” said Sycamore. “I think that what I was actually learning at Brown was more about clinical detachment in writing.”

She has now edited five nonfiction collections, three novels and two memoirs, including *The Freezer Door*.

“As a queer kid growing up in a world that I knew wanted me to die or disappear and growing up in a family that magnified that violence rather than protecting or nourishing me, leaving Brown and moving to San Francisco was the best choice I ever made,” said Sycamore. “It allowed me to find other kids like me and to find other queers and outsiders who were intent on building our own world, building our own value system, building our own ways of living with, and lusting for, and taking care of one another.”

C Pam Zhang

How Much of These Hills Is Gold

(Riverhead Books, 2020)

Finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Novel, recognizing “a debut novel of exceptional merit by an American author who has not previously published a full-length book of fiction.”

Earning her bachelor’s degree in English from Brown, C Pam Zhang specialized in Creative Nonfiction. Her senior thesis received the David Rome Prize for the best lyric essay by a Brown undergraduate, and an excerpt of the lyric poem, written in eight parts, was featured in *Prospect*, an annual Brown anthology.

“Half of what I know about writing fiction derives from nonfiction forms I encountered and tried for the

first time in classes with Catherine Imbriglio and Carol DeBoer-Langworthy,” said Zhang.

“I was fueled by far too many 5am potatoes and buttered muffins at Louis on Brook Street.”

The longlist for the 2021 PEN Literary Awards also included a few other authors with local connections:

- **Rachel Tzvia Back**, longlisted for the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation for her Hebrew-to-English translation of *Now at the Threshold: The Late Poems of Tuvia Ruebner*, led Brown’s joint study-abroad program for Israeli and Palestinian studies in Jerusalem.
- **Jotham Burrello**, longlisted for the the PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Novel for *Spindle City*, was born in Fall River and weaves the city’s history throughout his novel.
- **Asako Serizawa’s** *Inheritors* was longlisted for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Short Story Collection as well as being shortlisted for the PEN Open Book Award.
- **David Wallace-Wells**, longlisted for the PEN/John Kenneth Galbraith Award for Nonfiction for *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, earned a BA from Brown.