

PEN Canada mourns the death of Georges Anglade, founder and president of PEN Haiti

A tribute by John Ralston Saul

PEN Canada joins the international PEN community in mourning the death of Georges Anglade. We especially extend our sympathies to his family, and to his immediate PEN family, members of PEN Haiti and le centre québécois. John Ralston Saul, president of International PEN and a past president of PEN Canada, was a friend.

Georges Anglade was a great bear of a man. If you stood for causes like free speech or the defence of minority cultures, he was a warm, embracing force. If you didn't, he was a formidable opponent equipped with a torrent of rich, terrifying language, a true model of the engaged writer.

He was one of the leading writers produced by the close relationship between Haiti and Canada. He was one of the founders of the University of Quebec in Montreal. But he was also an important player in the evolution of modern Haiti. In many ways, Montreal is one of the two cultural capitals of Haiti, along with Port-au-Prince. And as with the other writers in his situation, Georges's life enriched both Canada and Haiti. He was one of the proofs that Haiti is on the very short list of Canada's closest and richest relationships, often produced by large groups of initially unwilling exiles.

Georges's fiction and non-fiction came out of Haiti, but were marked by Canada. He was particularly known for his *lodyans*, a Haitian literary form of short, explosive, comic stories, oral and written, to be declaimed on important occasions. One of his *lodyans* describes a negotiation between the Pope and Castro over who has to pay what to whom in order to pull off a papal visit to Cuba, as compared to a visit by a Canadian prime minister.

Georges was central to the struggles over the last half-century to bring some sort of normalcy to Haiti. He was imprisoned in 1974, twice exiled, often lived with his life at risk, entered Haitian cabinet with the hope of improving people's lives. He was always moving back and forth between Canada and Haiti: two loves, in many ways a classic Canadian story of exile and commitment.

His last great campaign was aimed at creating a PEN Centre in Haiti. PEN-Quebec – of which he was an engaged board member – was strategic in this difficult work. It is no accident that so many of Haiti's writers live in exile. But if he could create a PEN Centre linking those in exile with those at home, he would have created some sort of safety net for those who might be in danger in the future. A writer alone in an unstable country is frighteningly alone. Writers in an organization through 102 countries have friends who will speak up and defend them.

The Haitian PEN Centre came into existence two years ago. I saw it functioning publicly for the first time at the International PEN Congress in Austria in October. Georges was its president and he was already a force, cutting across borders, with friends throughout Africa and North Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas. I knew that in my role as the new international president, he was not only a friend, but an important force for the freedom of literature.

Then came the earthquake, hours of not knowing, then the news that from beneath the rubble he had managed to call his daughter. But by the time they'd found him, both he and his wife, Mireille Neptune, were dead. It is hard to accept that such a force of nature could be stopped by nature. I will miss his friendship and his support for tough causes. But his legacy, beyond his writing and his memory, is the reality of PEN Haiti and all that he has done for that freedom of speech and thought which allows civilization to function.

Essayist and philosopher John Ralston Saul was elected president of International PEN in October, 2009. He is the former president of PEN Canada. Georges Anglade and his wife, Mireille, died in the collapse of their Port-au-Prince home. They were both 65 years old and had been married 43 years.