**Writers defy criticism to attend Jerusalem festival**

*After encountering pressure not to attend the third International Writers Festival in Jerusalem, London-based novelist Tracy Chevalier, British writer Tom Rob Smith and Algerian author Boualem Sansal make a statement through their appearances. Sansal said “it was important to come to Israel to prove my autonomy from the government.”*

By Rachel Marder/JointMedia News Service

JERUSALEM—The third International Writers Festival in Jerusalem did not pass without controversy.

The weeklong gathering, which closed May 18, drew authors from 12 different countries to meet with their Israeli colleagues, as well as book lovers from across Israel to hear their discussions and attend book signings. Some writers like American-born and London-based novelist Tracy Chevalier, British writer Tom Rob Smith and Algerian author Boualem Sansal encountered pressure not to attend the literary event, said Uri Dromi, director general of festival host Mishkenot Sha’ananim.

“Some of our friends from abroad confronted some, how shall I say, unfriendly criticism,” said Dromi, applauding those writers for visiting Israel, during the opening event May 13.

Chevalier, whose 1999 novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* was recently adapted to the screen, ignored a letter from British Writers in Support of Palestine urging her not to attend the festival. Smith, author of *Child 44* (2008), *The Secret Speech* (2009) and *Agent Six* (2011), also rejected a written plea from the group as well as calls online to culturally boycott Israel.

Sansal, 62, who participated in a May 16 panel with Daniel Ben-Simon, a Moroccan-born Labor MK, said when he accepted the festival’s invitation he became a target of condemnation.

“I talked with my wife and she said I’d have problems,” he told the panel guests. “But to me it was important to come to Israel to prove my autonomy from the government. So my wife said, ‘Great—go for it.’”

Sansal, who until the age of 50 worked in the Algerian government, is a trained engineer and holds a PhD in economics. He has won nearly every major literary prize in France and is considered one of the most important Algerian writers of his time. His books, all written in French, have been banned in Algeria since 2006. Sansal’s fifth novel, *The German Mujahid* (2008), was his first to be translated into English. Sansal received the Peace Prize in Frankfurt last year for his books that protest oppression and encourage respect and understanding between cultures.

During the panel discussion, Sansal, a secularist, warned about the growing tide of Islamism since the revolts of the “Arab Spring.”

“I feel we’re in the 1930s in the last century—then, no one responded properly. Today Islamism is becoming fascism,” he said. “If there’s no democracy, people will look for religion to be their parliament, their government and so forth. There’s a lot of work to be done.”

Israeli author Zeruya Shalev, international bestselling author of *Love Life*, thanked writers like Sansal for attending during the festival’s opening. “In so doing, you have proved your faith in literature,” a field rife with complexity, she said.

Speaking about about what it’s like to be a writer in Israel, Shalev called the country “a writer’s paradise.” She said being a writer in Israel means to struggle for inspiration in an ongoing drama, to be asked in every international interview why you don’t write about politics, and for critics to think every character is a symbol of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Etgar Keret and Gary Shteyngart**

Israeli short story writer Etgar Keret and Russian-American author Gary Shteyngart took the stage in the festival tent May 14 to discuss immigrant literature, the dangers of technology, and their families.

Shteyngart, the award-winning author of *Absurdistan* (2006), *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* (2002) and *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), moved to New York from Leningrad at the age of 7. He told the crowd that immigrant fiction does well in America because those writers serve as a “bridge between the fury smelly people abroad” and American readers.

“In America if you’re born in Russia they expect borsht. They don’t want a hot dog from you,” said the Jewish author, whose books feature immigrant protagonists and plenty of mocking of Russian culture. In his most recent book, the world has become a dystopia and a completely visual society.

“Whenever great empires collapse literacy is the first thing to go,” he said. “Visual culture becomes dominant.”

However, big countries falling apart offer fruitful material for the 39-year-old Shteyngart, who is working on his memoirs. “It’s my favorite subject. Those are much more interesting than countries that are on the rise.”

The U.S., Shteyngart said, which has too few readers (250,000 in Seattle and Brooklyn, he said), too much reliance on technology, and “overblown religiosity and patriotism,” is on the downfall. “You know there’s a problem when the flag gets bigger and bigger and bigger,” he said of a monstrous flag he recently saw in Akron, Ohio.

The decline of interest in reading does not necessarily worry Keret, 44. “Readers are a minority that endures like the Jewish people,” he told Shteyngart.

Pointing to Americans’ level of exhaustion at the end of the workday as a motivation for preferring to watch an HBO series or read tweets rather than pick up a novel, Shteyngart said the bombardment of technology in modern life, with people simultaneously working on their laptops and watching TV, is killing his business. “Can you imagine what goes on in their minds when they do that? There’s at least three levels of insanity right there.”

HBO series are the new novels, Shteyngart said, citing shows like “The Wire” and “The Sopranos.” Keret agreed, adding that “The Wire” is like a Charles Dickens novel. Shteyngart said he is working on an original HBO series, like most other American writers he knows.

“I’ve written 3 books and I’m exhausted,” he said. “You can’t outsource most of it to India.”

Shteyngart, who recalls always hearing his parents tell jokes about Leonid Brezhnev (the general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), got his start writing when as a young child in America he felt isolated and shunned by the children in his Jewish school. “Being a Russian kid was the worst thing you could be,” he said. “So I started writing a Torah of my own.” He called it the Ganorah, and filled it with plenty of salacious episodes. Exodus became Sexodus, for instance. That’s how he made friends, and how he realized that writing could be subversive.

“I’ve been writing the same kind of crap ever since,” he said.

Though his books are translated into many languages, including Russian, Shteyngart said they don’t sell well in Russia. He recalled, to enormous laughter, a memorable review of his first book there: “Balding traitor betrays motherland.”

Reveling in such reviews, Shteyngart aspires for his absurdist humor and satire to poke fun at authority and insecure countries. “What I learned from [my parents’ jokes] is authority is always stupid [and] you can make fun of it but you have to do so very quietly.”