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# *National Book Award Finalist May Be Ineligible for the Prize*

The writer Abdelrahman ElGendy was blocked from visiting the United States to attend this year's National Book Awards ceremony. Though his memoir is a finalist for the nonfiction award, it appears not to qualify.



Abdelrahman ElGendy Fadel Dawod




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In a personal essay published in The New Yorker last week, the author Abdelrahman ElGendy wrote about the dismaying process he endured trying to obtain a visa to enter the United States ahead of this year's National Book Awards ceremony.

ElGendy is a nonfiction finalist for his memoir, “Huna,” about his years as a political prisoner in his native Egypt. He showed a representative in the U.S. consular office extensive documentation demonstrating that he is a European resident with a lease on an apartment — “evidence that I would leave the U.S. once my brief visit was over,” he wrote.

Nevertheless, his application was denied. ElGendy will not attend the ceremony, which will be held on Wednesday in downtown Manhattan.

“This visitor-visa application was my last stab at a homecoming — if only for a few days,” he wrote.

While ElGendy’s essay chronicled the painful challenges facing many people navigating current U.S. immigration policies, it also raised serious questions about whether he is eligible for the award — although its administrators maintain that he is.

ElGendy, 30, left the United States in April 2025, according to his essay. But the National Book Awards rules require authors in four of the five categories, including nonfiction, to be an American citizen, a permanent resident or “maintain their primary, long-term home in the United States, U.S. territories or Tribal lands” at the start of each awards cycle. This year’s cycle began on Dec. 1, 2025.

“He’s not eligible,” said Andrew B. Lustigman, head of the advertising, marketing and promotions practice at the New York City law firm Olshan. “Once a contest has begun and you’ve accepted your first entry, the rules are set in stone.”

In the essay, ElGendy described leaving the United States after living for three years in Pittsburgh, where he was pursuing a master’s degree in creative writing. At the time, he feared he would be arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents over his vocal opposition to the war in Gaza and criticisms of America’s relationship with Egypt. He also feared he would be deported back to Egypt and imprisoned.

“I knew then that I had to uproot my life again,” ElGendy wrote. “I left the U.S. in late April and resettled in Europe, entering what I hoped would be a temporary exile within my exile.”

Instead, he never returned.

Despite the criteria explained on its website, the National Book Foundation, which administers the National Book Awards, does not “have any concerns regarding the eligibility of his title,” Ale Romero, a spokeswoman for the foundation, told The New York Times in an email. ElGendy’s publisher, Hogarth, “confirmed that ElGendy considers the United States to be his long-term home,” she added.

Romero added that confirming eligibility “is a confidential process that is handled entirely by the staff of the National Book Foundation in discussions with publishers.”

An email statement from Hogarth said that the publisher had followed the foundation’s “appeals process,” and that the foundation “accepted our appeal and deemed ElGendy eligible under its current eligibility criteria.”

The National Book Foundation website does not include any details about an appeals process, how it works or how outcomes are determined.

Romero clarified that while the organization used to have a formal petition process to determine eligibility, “We no longer have a petition process.”

Claire von Schilling, a spokeswoman for Penguin Random House, Hogarth’s parent company, referred additional questions about the appeals process back to the National Book Foundation.

ElGendy did not respond to requests for comment. His publicist cited his busy travel schedule.

Shortly after ElGendy’s essay was published by The New Yorker, the other finalists and semifinalists for the National Book Award for nonfiction posted a joint statement to social media opposing “the arbitrary and often deadly immigration policy of the Trump administration, which rejected ElGendy’s visa application precisely because of his writing’s ability to challenge its power.”

When asked by The Times to comment on questions over ElGendy’s eligibility, Colin Asher, one of the nonfiction finalists, wrote in an email that, after speaking with the other finalists, “our feeling is that we made a statement already and stand by it.”

Publishers pay a $135 fee per title to submit books for consideration for the National Book Awards, which are among the most prestigious American literary honors. The winner in each category is awarded a $10,000 cash prize, and each finalist receives $1,000.

“People pay to submit — they have skin in the game,” said Eli D. Greenberg, a lawyer who specializes in nonprofit law and is a partner at the New York City firm Schwartz Sladkus Reich Greenberg Atlas. “People make the decisions based on what the rules are; now they are changing the rules midstream?”

Lustigman suggested that aggrieved parties could have a claim for breach of contract or for violating consumer protection laws.

If nothing else, “There is a big shame factor involved,” Greenberg said.

The current eligibility rules for the National Book Awards were established in February 2024, following adjustments made by the Pulitzer Prize board in September 2023 to include permanent U.S. residents and authors whose “longtime primary home” was in the United States.

“I think it’s important to consider what a situation like ElGendy’s illuminates,” said Ingrid Rojas Contreras, whose 2022 memoir, “The Man Who Could Move Clouds,” was a Pulitzer and National Book Award finalist, and who helped lead an open letter campaign to change eligibility requirements for the Pulitzers. “What if he had been forced to leave

the country for his own safety earlier — say at or before the time of submitting the book for award consideration?"

ElGendy celebrated the years of advocacy that led to the changes in the eligibility rules for both prizes.

"The fantasy that had sustained me under my mother's prison duvet for years was suddenly within reach," he wrote in The New Yorker.

"There is a particular cruelty to being forced to outrun the fruits of one's labor, to watch one's work bloom from afar," he added. "My book has made it into rooms that I never will. I don't know what to do with that, and so I write."