

## **PEN CANADA URGES RECONSIDERATION OF DECISION BY TORONTO DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD REGARDING *THREE WISHES: PALESTINIAN AND ISRAELI CHILDREN SPEAK***

*Toronto, March 16, 2006* – PEN Canada is deeply dismayed by the Toronto District School Board's decision to restrict access for younger children to Deborah Ellis's award-winning book, *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*.

According to *The Toronto Star*, the Board, in reaction to a protest by the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), has decided to remove the book from school libraries serving children below grade seven. "This action sets a dangerous precedent," said PEN Canada president Constance Rooke, "which might well encourage future protests against a wide-variety of books whose subject matter is objectionable to one group or another. We urge the Board to bring the matter before the next meeting of trustees, or a committee thereof, and formally request an invitation for PEN Canada to speak on behalf of the book."

The CJC has objected to the book on the grounds that it is not appropriate for younger readers. In a strongly-worded letter to the OLA, Dr. Frank Bialystok, Chair of the Community Relations Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress Ontario Region, states that the book "serves only to demonize both sides" of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, exposing students to "issues that are complex, neither fully explicated nor properly contextualized." The OLA reviewed the CJC's objections and stood by the book as being appropriate for younger readers.

Indeed, Deborah Ellis has provided age-appropriate commentary that is both balanced and nuanced in her introduction and in prefaces to each child's story. While in a number of instances children express extreme views—for example a Palestinian girl talks about wishing to see her suicide-bomber sister in paradise, and an Israeli boy describes Palestinians as "sneaky, full of tricks" and wishes they would all just leave and live somewhere else—it is very clear that these are among the range of voices sounding within the sad context of a bitter and intractable dispute. Other children express a desire to be able to get to know the other side and criticize both the suicide bombings and the excesses of the Israeli Defence Force.

Deborah Ellis is the award-winning author of such books as *The Breadwinner* and *Parvana's Journey*. In *Three Wishes* she gives the testimony of Palestinian and Israeli children who talk frankly about their lives in a war-torn land. The book has been praised in many reviews and was nominated by the Ontario Library Association (OLA) for its prestigious Silver Birch Award, in which children from grades 4, 5 and 6 read and vote on their favorite literary works.

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As Deborah Ellis writes, "The war in the Middle East has been going on for so long, and in so many forms, that it often seems as if it will continue forever. But war, like almost everything else humans do, is a choice. Creating weapons is a choice. Allowing a child to go hungry or to drink poisoned water is a choice. Sitting on the sidelines and doing nothing to stop something that's wrong is a choice. The children in this book talk about how the choices other people have made affect their lives. The history of the area and its people is a weight that has been placed, none too gently, on their shoulders."

In a March 3, 2006, letter to the Toronto District School Board, PEN Canada stated, "Often the very best literary work pokes light into dark places, and freedom of expression, inquiry and opinion is a cornerstone of our democratic society. Another cornerstone, of course, is an education system which promotes open discussion, learning, and debate.... [W]e urge you to consider what kind of message you would be sending to children if you withhold this work. You would be admitting that the school system is unable to deal with difficult topics, that educators would prefer that students turn their eyes away rather than read the words of children from war-torn cultures. You would be taking away an important tool for helping students and teachers discuss, explore and hopefully come to some sort of understanding about issues like violence, oppression, poverty and deadly national disputes. These are not issues solely reserved for Palestine and Israel, of course—they knock on doors here in Canada too, as you well know."

The OLA is to be congratulated for nominating a challenging book like *Three Wishes* for the Silver Birch, and for standing by it under attack. The Limestone School Board in Kingston, which recently reviewed the book, also stood by it and in fact further recommended it for teaching purposes. The Toronto District School Board should reconsider this decision. 'Hiding books' is an idea that died a deserved death long ago and ought not to be resurrected by, of all institutions, a school board.

**About PEN Canada:**

PEN Canada is a centre of International PEN that campaigns on behalf of writers around the world persecuted for the expression of their thoughts. In Canada, it supports the right to free expression as enshrined in Section 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

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