



Reading & Literacy

The “Three Wishes” Dispute

On April 26, 2006, the Toronto District School Board upheld a decision made earlier by Gerry Connelly, its Director of Education, concerning Deborah Ellis’ *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*, one of the 10 non-fiction books selected for the 2006 Silver Birch Awards competition.

In late 2005, early 2006, there had been a few complaints, notably from the Community Relations Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Ontario Region (CJC), who opined that the book was completely unsuitable for students from grades 4 to 6 (the specific grades covered by Silver Birch), despite a generally positive review by Linda Silver, the co-editor of children’s and teens’ book reviews for the Association of Jewish Libraries. Although Silver found fault with some aspects of the book, she stated in the November/December, 2004 issue of the *AJL Newsletter* that it was “recommended with reservations for grades 5 to 12.” Many other reviewers found the book equally suitable and extremely compelling.

After meeting privately with CJC representatives on February 20, the Director banned the book from all K-5 and K-6 schools in the Board; and K-8 schools were only able to use the book with restrictions. Three other school boards in Ontario made similar decisions. Despite

the letter all Directors of Education received from the Canadian Jewish Congress early in February, the vast majority of boards did not remove the book from their schools. The members of the Silver Birch selection panel late in 2005 reviewed the choices they had made for the 2006 awards and did not change their minds either.

When the Toronto District School Board, Canada’s largest, was challenged by the Canadian Jewish Congress Committee, the book was sent to an internal Review Committee as part of the Board’s operational procedures, ‘Handling Concerns About Learning Resources.’ After review, the committee recommended that the book be allowed to stay in all schools, with some safeguards for students in grades 4 and 5. Grade 6 students were to have unfettered access. The Review Committee’s report was overridden by the director outside the terms of the written procedure and under circumstances that neither informed all School Board trustees about what was going on, nor gave them access to the process. The book, which by then was in the resource centres of most TDSB schools, was ordered removed in



mid-March. Only certain trustees were consulted, and at no time prior to the decision by the director did she or the Board’s chair ask the author, publisher, or OLA—sponsor of the Silver Birch program—to meet with her, even though she had met with officials of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

The entire process generated considerable publicity and controversy in the print and broadcasting media and on the Web across Canada, the USA and overseas. Attempts at intervention by the Association of Canadian Publishers, the Book and Periodical Council of Canada, the Canadian



Chris Bolton, TDSB trustee for Ward 10, speaking at the March 28 press conference.

Coalition of School Libraries, the Canadian Library Association, the Canadian Society of Children's Authors Illustrators and Performers, PEN Canada, People for Education, The Writers' Union of Canada and many other groups did not prevail, despite the fact that the Board's own procedures had not been followed.

Three OLA representatives appeared on various national and local radio talk shows and TV newscasts in debate with Canadian Jewish Congress representatives. They included Larry Moore, executive director of OLA, Peggy Thomas, chair of Silver Birch's selection panel, and myself, Bernard Katz.

Next, before a packed room at the Lillian H. Smith Branch of the Toronto Public Library, writers and publishers put on a passionate and remarkable press conference that was covered on national radio and television. Articles, columns and letters to the editor appeared in Toronto and other city and community newspapers across Canada and abroad, primarily championing the book and the just cause of the issues.

Trustees of the Toronto District School Board, who either disagreed with the decision or were very concerned about the discarded procedure, could not get the director's decision reviewed by the full Board. A final attempt during the Board's April 26 meeting was

ruled out of order by the chair, Sheila Ward, and the subsequent challenge to her ruling was defeated 13 to six, with two abstentions. At the same meeting, trustees approved a report from the Board's Program and School Services Committee. Following a four-hour meeting on April 5, the committee had recommended a staff review of "Handling Concerns About Learning Resources." The review process was to include consultation with all trustees, and the results were to be submitted to the Committee "no later than September, 2006."

On September 6, the Program and School Services Committee received a Toronto District School Board staff memorandum outlining the results of the review. But it did not include a detailed text of the procedure showing just what had been deleted and added, as well as a final text of the complete revised procedure. These were called for. A month later, on October 11, the committee received them and forwarded them to the full Board on October 25 for information. The revisions effectively "address the issue of equitable access by trustees to the process by which learning materials are reviewed following a challenge by an individual or group," and ensure an open and transparent process, that "will allow... any interested party that disagrees with the director's decision to appeal directly to the Board [via PSSC], not just the individual/group who submitted the original challenge"

(staff memo to the PSSC, September 6, 2006). The director's role in making the final decision, subject to an appeal to the Board, is also spelled out.

Although this can be seen as a positive outcome to the Three Wishes controversy, it does not provide redress for the injustice perpetrated by those at the Toronto District School Board who violated its own procedures in order to accommodate the demands of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

We are still victims of those events, especially the children who were prevented from reading the book as part of the 2006 Silver Birch Awards.

Bernard Katz is a life-member of OLA and a former OLA Intellectual Freedom Committee member. He wrote a detailed rebuttal to the Canadian Jewish Congress's 4.5 - page letter for OLA.

Editor's Note: Three Wishes placed fourth in the Silver Birch non-fiction voting in spite of the restrictions on the numbers of students who were allowed to read it. The Association thanks everyone who supported the right of the children to read. We applaud the writing and publishing community, who were particularly pained by these events and were shocked by the indifference they received. Particular thanks go to Bernard Katz for his extraordinary scholarship in analyzing the historical and religious arguments being made and for being such an articulate spokesperson for the Association and for the unfairness of how this affair was conducted. Appreciation ultimately goes to the book's remarkable author, Deborah Ellis, whose sensitivity and insight made this struggle worth the pain.