

# PEN CANADA

25 YEARS for FREEDOM of EXPRESSION

## **PEN Canada on Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and the Toronto Public School Board**

January 19, 2009—PEN Canada notes with concern that the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has been asked by a parent to justify the inclusion, on a curriculum for senior students, of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's celebrated 1985 novel which, among other literary honours, won the Governor Generals' Award for fiction and also became an acclaimed film and an internationally lauded opera.

Toronto parent, Robert Edwards, made a formal complaint to the principal of Lawrence Park Collegiate; his complaint is being reviewed by a committee of the TDSB, which will make a recommendation to the Director of Education.

Edwards has said that he believes religion should be discussed in the schools, but if one faith is going to be "cast in a critical light, then the board ought to open it up" to others. "I'm not looking to ban books," he has said. "I'm just looking for justification as to why this is an appropriate book ... if the board can declare to me that in their view it fits within their policy, I'd like them to explain how."

PEN Canada is hopeful that the committee of the TDSB charged with reviewing this request will be guided by the principles of freedom of expression. *The Handmaid's Tale* imagines a futuristic dystopia, in which fundamental human rights including freedom of expression, and the rights of women in fundamentalist societies, are denied. It is studied in many classrooms, and considered a classic in the tradition of Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*, and Huxley's *Brave New World*.

But as Atwood herself has noted, "The thing to remember is that there is nothing new about the society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* except the time and place. All of the things I have written about have—as noted in the "Historical Notes" at the end—been done before, more than once."

PEN Canada believes it is the duty of public institutions in a democracy, such as school boards, to defend vigorously the right to freedom of expression. Anything short of this is an extremely dangerous precedent for any public institution, and especially for one of the largest school boards in the country.

PEN Canada is celebrating 25 years as a centre of International PEN, the writers' organization with 145 centres in more than 100 countries. PEN Canada is committed to defending freedom of opinion, as guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). We campaign on behalf of writers around the world persecuted for the expression of their opinions. In Canada we speak out in defense of the right of freedom of expression as enshrined in Section 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

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