

PEN CANADA

for FREEDOM *of* EXPRESSION

PEN hosts forum on censorship at Dubai literary festival

TORONTO: February 27, 2009 — Canadian writers Margaret Atwood and Nelofer Pazira will join by video link a panel of international writers at the inaugural Emirates Airlines International Festival of Literature (EAIFL) in Dubai, to discuss “Cultural diversity and censorship.” The forum will be chaired by Eugene Schoulgin, International Secretary of International PEN, and will consider the ways in which cultural assumptions inform decisions about the acceptable limits of freedom of expression.

Earlier this month, Atwood, a vice-president of International PEN, cancelled her appearance at the festival after she was told that its organizers had banned a book and disinvited the author. When neither claim turned out to be strictly true – the book has not been officially banned, nor was its author invited to the festival – Atwood reconsidered her withdrawal and agreed to attend the festival “virtually,” via a video link from Toronto, as part of International PEN’s commitment to discussing the problem of censorship wherever it may occur.

Commenting on her decision to take part in the forum on censorship, Atwood (who in 1984-85 was the first president of PEN Canada) said, “This is a very important event at a very important festival. It will allow us to discuss the freedoms and responsibilities of human speech – the challenges and the limitations, and the consequences of these. Having recently devoted five days to the pursuit of the meaning of the word “ban,” I am greatly looking forward to being present.”

Nelofer Pazira, the current president of PEN Canada, said she hoped the discussion would remind visitors to the festival “of the centrality of the right to free expression in cultural and political misunderstandings and conflicts that have shaped the modern Middle East. I hope our discussion will help to reaffirm the need for tolerance and dialogue between cultures.”

The panel will also include Rachel Billington (Vice President English PEN), Mohammed al-Murr (Vice-Chairman of the Dubai Cultural Council), the Saudi novelist Rajaa al-Sanea, the Ukrainian author Andrea Kurkov, and Ibrahim Nasrallah, a Palestinian-Jordanian author shortlisted for the Arab Booker Prize. The event will start at 9 a.m. February 28, at Al Khayma Ballroom 3, the Interncontinental Hotel in Dubai Festival City.

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