

Letter to members

Dear esteemed colleagues,

Recent news coverage of the Jewish Public Library's decision to relocate books by celebrated children's author Elise Gravel, prompted by her social media commentary on Israel and Palestine, has sparked discussion both within our profession and in the public sphere. As the Board of Directors of the ABQLA, it is incumbent upon us to join this conversation about intellectual freedom and the role of libraries. Our goal is to clarify some of the confusion surrounding this controversy and to provide guidance that is rooted in both principle and practice.

First and foremost, we reaffirm our commitment to intellectual freedom. We condemn censorship as it runs counter to the fundamental principles of our profession. At the same time, we must approach this issue with sensitivity, acknowledging the complex dynamics at play within our local communities, both political and otherwise. We support our librarians on the ground who make difficult, thoughtful, and nuanced decisions every day.

In negotiating this delicate balance, it is imperative that we, as professionals, remain both critical and compassionate. We understand the importance of information literacy, and facts, perhaps more than others. While we should acknowledge that we often lack all the facts necessary for rendering judgement, we must nonetheless remain critical of each other and of media representations.

Notably, many media reports stated that Elise Gravel's books were "removed" or even "yanked" from the shelves. We do not expect people outside the profession to be familiar with terminology, but the books were moved to closed stacks. While we concede this created a barrier to discovery, they remained accessible to patrons of the library.

We believe that the common use of the term "public library" has also caused confusion. Unlike municipal public libraries which are funded by the local government, the Jewish Public Library is funded by the community for the community. Their decisions must take into account the needs and values of the community they serve. However, as many have expressed over the past several weeks, including members of the Jewish community, censorship runs counter to the core values of all libraries. The ABQLA is relieved that no other library took the same action and applauds the JPL for returning Elise Gravel's books to their regular circulating collection.

It is worth noting that our local situation is not unique, as we are witnessing an increase in book challenges and bans across the country and throughout North America. Now more than ever, this discussion is important both within our profession and at large. As we kick off Freedom to Read week, a time when Canadians are encouraged to reflect on the importance of intellectual freedom, let us use this opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with our communities and each other.

In closing, we invite you to continue this conversation with us, with empathy, understanding, and a firm commitment to the values that unite us as librarians.

Here are some resources that can help:

CFLA Intellectual Freedom Toolkit

<https://cfla-fcab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2022-12-Intellectual-Freedom-Toolkit.docx.pdf>

Freedom to Read Week, February 18-24

<https://www.freedomtoread.ca/>

ALA - Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries

<https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/selectionpolicytoolkit>

Upcoming event:

Shelf Control: A Dialogue on Harm Reduction, Diversity, and Freedom to Read
Presented by The Partnership and hosted by The Education Institute / OLA.

<https://accessola.my.site.com/OLA/s/lt-event?id=a1U5x00000lf2my>

Warm regards,

Kristen Goodall & Nicholas Lobraico
on behalf of the Board of Directors

The logo for the Association des bibliothécaires du Québec (ABQLA) features the letters 'ABQLA' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letter 'Q' is stylized with a white circular cutout in the center.

L'Association des bibliothécaires du Québec
Quebec Library Association

Relevant links:

Article with the JPL's statement as well as Gravel's response

<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/under-fire-jewish-public-library-puts-gravel-books-back-on-public-shelves>