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OLA and Forest of Reading on Book Challenges and the Child's Right to Read

The Ontario Library Association (OLA) and Forest of Reading are committed to promoting literacy and the love of reading among children through Canadian literature. Through our nine reading programs for readers of all ages, the Forest of Reading provides an opportunity for Canadian youth to access a diverse range of books that explore Canada's vibrant cultural landscape. The Forest of Reading has four main goals:

1. Create a meaningful experience that instills the love of reading and provides opportunities for all young people to become lifelong readers.
2. Give young people a proven head start. Children who read recreationally have more success in all subject areas, and are more socially and civically engaged.
3. Position libraries as spaces for discovery, exploration, inquiry and imagination in their communities and schools.
4. Promote and celebrate Canadian books, authors, illustrators and publishers in both English and French.

Each year, the Forest of Reading carefully selects all titles to ensure that each program is balanced in its themes, representations and perspectives. It is the Forest of Reading's position that all young people deserve to not only see *themselves* reflected in the books they read, but to also be exposed to the worldviews and lived experiences of *others*, particularly those of historically marginalized groups. Reading a diverse selection of books offers an opportunity for young people to broaden their understanding of the world, building empathy and compassion, and preparing them to become proactive members of society.

The Forest of Reading is one of the few reading programs in the country where kids get to pick the award winners. This unique aspect is critical to the success of the program because young people are empowered to share their voice and become active participants. We recognize that not every reader will enjoy every book. Some lists may contain books that some readers may not be ready to read. Some readers may find a book entertaining and joyful, while others may find that same book unrelatable or challenging. Books can elicit a myriad of responses, emotions and thoughts, underscoring the significance of reading in cultivating a critical awareness of one's environment. We are always in awe at which books are selected by students as the winner each year and are reminded that the titles and themes that deeply resonate with young people can evolve overtime. With this in mind, the Forest of Reading continues to ensure that our reading lists are varied, well-rounded and representative of the different realities of Canada's population.

The OLA and Forest of Reading are committed to upholding the fundamental right of children to read and access information. Under the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#), Part 1, Section 2, all individuals in Canada are guaranteed freedom of expression as a fundamental

freedom. Under Article 13 of the United Nations [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), a child is guaranteed the right to freedom of expression, including “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.” The Forest of Reading program offers a safe environment for students to explore diverse topics and themes with their peers, teachers, library staff, and parents. Our [Selection Committees](#) are dedicated to curating book lists that are free from personal biases.

Book challenges and censorship are a growing concern in our democratic society. In attempting to restrict access to literary or artistic images, ideas, and/or information, under the guise of “protecting” some children, censorship inevitably creates an unsafe environment for other children by erasing their history and lived experiences. Canada’s school libraries are especially faced with challenges to books that reflect LGBTQIA2S+ perspectives, or contain characters of diverse gender identities or racial backgrounds. Under the [Ontario Code of Human Rights](#), every person is protected from discrimination because of “race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status or disability.” All young Canadians are guaranteed freedom of expression, the right to access information, and the right to be protected from discrimination under provincial, federal and international law.

These are all factors that are taken into consideration by the [Forest of Reading Selection Committees](#) when choosing books. Our committees are comprised of educators, school library professionals and literacy experts from a range of backgrounds who volunteer their time to create lists of Canada’s best literature for children and young adults. Amongst many other [criteria](#), our committee members consider audience appeal, relevancy, genre and diversity in representation in their selection process. We trust our Selection Committees to make sound judgements in choosing the 100 titles Forest of Reading releases every year.

The OLA and Forest of Reading believe that exploring the issues of today’s world through reading is a vital ingredient in helping our children become active and knowledgeable participants of our society. Our reading programs are designed so that all 10 titles per program are included, ensuring a balanced reading list for young readers, and allowing them the opportunity to see themselves, see others, learn, grow and become lifelong readers. The Forest of Reading has created resources and activities to support running these programs, but recognize that each library professional, educator or family member’s program could look different since it is an optional program and not mandated at the government level. Nevertheless, we encourage all who run the program to utilize the full range of titles, guaranteeing that your readers can fully exercise their right to access books of their choice. In doing so, we expand their perspectives, help them develop their own opinions and values, inform them of the world beyond their window, and inspire them to dream of a brighter future.