



Challenges to the book Irreversible Damage by Abigail Shrier – a CFLA-FCAB Intellectual Freedom Brief

The Canadian Federation of Library Associations – Fédération canadienne des associations de bibliothèques (CFLA-FCAB) supports the decision of Canadian libraries to uphold Intellectual Freedom, in acknowledgement of libraries' core responsibility to support, defend, and promote the universal principles of intellectual freedom, while safeguarding and fostering free expression.¹

The decision to retain Abigail Shrier's *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* in the face of requests to remove it demonstrates the commitment to a diversity of thought in the development of library collections.

CFLA-FCAB supports and promotes the universal principles of intellectual freedom as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights² which include the interlocking freedoms to hold opinions and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

CFLA-FCAB "affirms that all persons in Canada have a fundamental right, subject only to the Constitution and the law, to have access to the full range of knowledge, imagination, ideas, and opinion, and to express their thoughts publicly. Only the courts may abridge free expression rights in Canada." Further, library "employees, volunteers and employers as well as library governing entities have a core responsibility to uphold the principles of intellectual freedom in the performance of their respective library roles."

The articles of the CFLA-FCAB Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries are explicit declarations of fundamental principles that govern the service of all publicly funded Canadian libraries, nonetheless, questions do arise regarding application of these principles to specific library practices. CFLA-FCAB acknowledges the significant public and professional discourse regarding the challenge inherent in the right for free speech and the desire to foster inclusive environments, particularly for marginalized communities.

- CFLA-FCAB affirms controversial expression is supported in the library. Equally so, challenge to controversial expression is supported. CFLA-FCAB does not, however, endorse the exercise of *prior restraint* (that is a decision to deny an expression of ideas by choosing not to make certain materials or speech available) as a means of avoiding controversy in the library.
- CFLA-FCAB encourages libraries to work within the Canadian law and human rights codes.



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- CFLA-FCAB recognizes Canadian public libraries are subject to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which identifies freedom of expression as one of the four fundamental freedoms in Canada, subject only to reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.
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- CFLA-FCAB recognizes there is a wide range of measures available to libraries to minimize and correct violations of the law, expecting libraries to exercise due diligence and avoid being willfully blind to illegal behaviour while ensuring their fundamental commitment to intellectual freedom.
- CFLA-FCAB is mutually committed to intellectual freedom and to zero tolerance for discrimination, believing the two principles are mutually reinforcing. We believe that it is only through access to a wide range of ideas and opinions that diversity and inclusion are truly supported.

CFLA-FCAB acknowledges that the issues faced supporting intellectual freedom are challenging and that the process will entail serious, sometimes difficult, conversations with partners, users, staff and stakeholders of all kind that can negatively impact relationships.

We acknowledge that it will take time, patience and hard work to heal divisions this decision may cause in communities served by the libraries. The choice to make the book accessible to any Canadian wanting to know more about its contents and the controversy surrounding them will, we hope, encourage necessary conversations about its assertions. Libraries are dedicated to serving all our communities and welcome dialogue about our commitment to intellectual freedom.

¹CFLA-FCAB Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries

<http://cfla-fcab.ca/en/guidelines-and-position-papers/statement-on-intellectual-freedom-and-libraries/>

²UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-humanrights/>

³Halifax Public Libraries, *Response: Community Petition for Book Removal* (27 May 2021)
<https://www.halifaxpubliclibraries.ca/news/response-community-petition-for-book-removal/>