

Why is your library important to you?

Canadian writers and supporters gather at annual fundraiser to defend the public property against potential funding cuts

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Politics play no part in the annual Book Lovers Ball, even this year, when proposed library funding cuts in the city's budget have inflamed passions, debate and ridicule across the GTA.

So says Heather Rumball, president of the Toronto Public Library Foundation, which organizes the glitzy, literary-themed fundraising event, now in its 7th year. It takes place

Thursday night at the Fairmont Royal York Hotel.

"Libraries are at the very top of our minds because of Mayor Ford's proposed funding cuts, but the foundation is completely neutral," Rumball told the *Star*.

"Our purpose is to raise money to

enhance library services above and beyond basic levels. And those basic services are for people who need the library the most."

Even so, there's a palpable sense of defiance surrounding this year's Book Lovers Ball. At \$600 a ticket, it's a complete sell-out, and the foundation's more than confident of reaching its \$500,000 target, Rumball said.

"That includes money from sponsors, the \$500-per-head adopt-a-branch initiative, and a rather healthy silent auction."

LIBRARY continued on E6



From left, authors Robert Hough, Brian Francis, Christopher Heard, Kevin Sylvester, Kim Izzo, Lawrence Hill and Vincent Lam.

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LIBRARY from E1

Since its establishment in 1997, the TPLF raises between \$3 million and \$6 million a year “from a very broad range of fundraising efforts,” said Rumball.

The Book Lovers Ball, with its literature-inspired fashion and music show, featuring the work of Canada’s top designers, hors d’oeuvres prepared by celebrity chef/writer David Rocco, and 60 prominent Canadian writers as special dinner guests may be one of the year’s most worthy social events, but this year its purpose is fiercely focused.

We asked some of the writers on the Ball’s guest list why their libraries are important to them. . .

Kevin Sylvester (CBC radio personality, illustrator and author of children’s books):

I was not a good reader when I was younger. I went on to study Victorian literature at the University of Toronto and my Neil Flambé (mystery) books are 300-plus pages each.

So, what happened? *Spiderman*, *The Hardy Boys* and *Beatrix Potter*

— books recommended by a librarian who, unlike an automated Internet search engine, saw a particular boy who needed a particular type of book. She matched book to boy and voila! I’ve never looked back.

We didn’t have a lot of money, so getting books for free seemed like a pretty good deal — still does. The environment was equally important. The library is a quiet place to encounter a book, a special place to meet the characters.

Lawrence Hill (novelist, *The Book of Negroes*):

In the 1960s, The Don Mills Public Library and its travelling bookmobile offered my first encounters with rooms full of books and readers. It seemed almost too good to be true that it had every single Henry Huggins book, and that they would let me borrow various copies all at once, and for free. The countless editions of encyclopedia were somewhat more daunting. . . Since my first thrilling encounters with libraries in the 1960s, they have been my faithful friends, offering up books, newspapers, magazines, ar-

chival holdings, CDs and electronic databases for pleasure and research as well as a sacred space to read and write in the company of other quiet seekers.

Kim Izzo (author, *The Fabulous Girl’s Guide to Decorum*):

I love taking my computer to my local branch, which has loads of natural light, to write. The “working” silence of the other library users helps motivate me to focus on my own work and yet feel part of the community. And you can’t beat the magic of the book stacks — such a storied place in fiction and film. I love touring the shelves; you never know what wonderful book you’ll discover or even rediscover. It’s like a treasure hunt.

Brian Francis (novelist, *Natural Order*):

I’m at my local branch every other week, signing out large print Danielle Steel books. They might think I’m lonely. Or that my eyesight is poor. Chances are, though, they’ve figured out that the books aren’t for me; they’re for Isabel, a senior woman I visit on Sunday mornings. Isabel didn’t read much when I first

met her, but five years later, she has read every single large print Danielle Steel book the library carries. I always sense the accomplishment Isabel feels every time she finishes a book and she must see my satisfaction when I ask her how the book was and she smiles and replies, “Wonderful.”

Christopher Heard (biographer, *Kiefer Sutherland: Living Dangerously*):

I was one of those kids who actually cut class to go read in the library. A library is a place where you always feel you belong and a place you always come out of a little better than when you went in. For the kid who is curious and hungry for knowledge and inspiration and guidance, the library is the beacon to which they gravitate.

Robert Hough (novelist, *Dr. Brinkley’s Tower*):

If there’s a book I feel I might like, I go online and place a hold. Soon after, a robot calls to say that the book is waiting at my nearest branch. As that branch is a five-minute walk, it’s as if it’d been delivered it to my door, the difference between the Toronto Library and

Amazon being that one is free and one is most definitely not.

Vincent Lam (novelist and biographer, *Tommy Douglas*):

My kids love the library. They love looking through all the books, seeing all the possibilities, and choosing which ones to enjoy next. They know that some books take them on journeys of fictional adventure, and that others allow them to explore their world.

My kids also know that those books go back to the library. They learn that as citizens of the City of Toronto, they have a right to explore ideas and books freely, that the public library is an institution that makes this possible, and that those ideas and books are shared: they are a public resource. To me, this is a fundamental, core element of an open, democratic society of ideas.

We must share the knowledge, wisdom, and ideas that are in books. We must make them available to all. . . Public libraries are an integral part of a vibrant, healthy city, and that’s the kind of place where I want my kids to live.