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Guernica, OAC at odds over funding

August 14, 2009 | 6:40 PM | By Suzanne Gardner

The 31-year-old Toronto-based publisher Guernica Editions, a company that has consistently received operating funding through the Ontario Arts Council's block grant program, has been denied OAC funding for 2009-10 – a decision that publisher and editor Antonio D'Alfonso calls a “condemnation” of the kind of books Guernica publishes, mainly translations of Italian, French, and other foreign-language works.

D'Alfonso wrote about the situation on the Guernica blog earlier this week, and is appealing to readers to write letters of complaint to the OAC. According to OAC literature officer John Degen, however, the decision will not be repealed.

Degen met with two of Guernica's editors, Elana Wolff and Julie Roorda, last Monday to discuss the

decision and to look at ways the company could regain funding in future years. “I’m not there to tell them how to do their business,” Degen told *Q&Q Omni*. “I’m there to give them feedback from the assessment so they can understand the logic behind the decision.” D’Alfonso was asked to participate in the meeting as well, but he declined. In conversation with *Q&Q*, D’Alfonso explained that he didn’t attend because he finds the whole situation “very insulting.”

According to Degen, this year’s grant assessment panel expressed the same concerns about Guernica that the 2008, 2007, and 2006 panels did, and last year was Guernica’s “warning year.” Although Degen wouldn’t divulge details about the OAC’s concerns, D’Alfonso forwarded *Q&Q* a letter sent from OAC executive director John Brotman last September explaining that last year’s panel had concerns “with promotion, marketing, governance, and viability.” The letter went on: “The idea of publishing more titles to increase revenue in the absence of viable plans to sell them seemed risky to the advisors.” (In 2008, Guernica published 18 books, a mix of novels, poetry, and essays.) The letter also noted that the covers of Guernica’s books – featuring European-style designs – make them a difficult sell in the Canadian market.

For his part, D’Alfonso says he was not aware that last year was his “warning year.” (He must have had a hint, however, as his company’s funding was cut from \$11,008 to \$8,855 from 2007 to 2008.) And now, he adds, he may have to relocate the company to its original home in Quebec in order to stay afloat. “Ontario is saying that we’re not allowed to stay in this province to produce these books,” D’Alfonso says. “That’s a very, very, very heavy statement that our books are not good enough to be subsidized by the province of Ontario.... They attacked me today, but tomorrow they’re going to attack someone else. This is censorship.”

According to the internal rules of the grant program, Guernica will still be able to apply for funding next year. “They’ve had a place in the program in the past, and I can see reason for a place in the program in the future,” says Degen. “They have to address the concerns.”

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