

Geoff Howe

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**

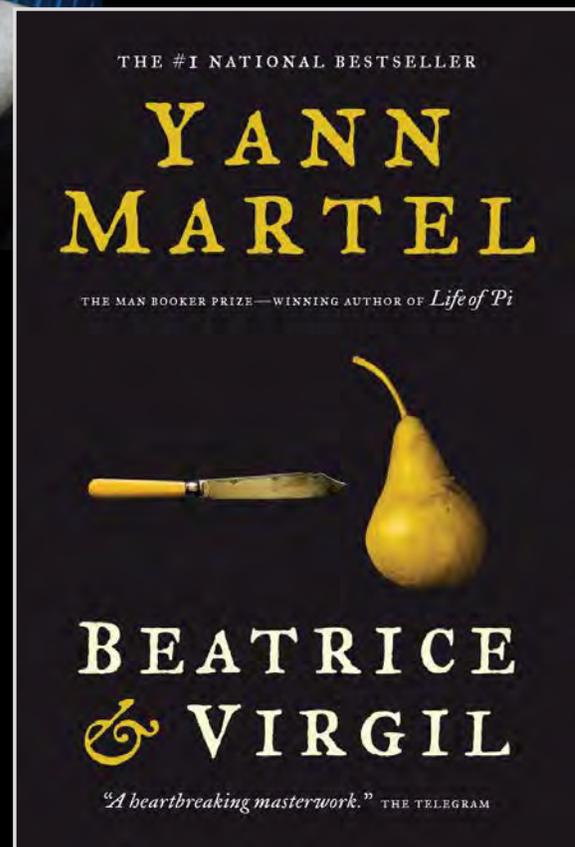


**BOOK CLUB**

**SEPTEMBER  
2015  
DISCUSSION  
GUIDE**

***Beatrice & Virgil*  
by Yann Martel**

Recommended by  
guest reader  
**Charles Foran**



## ***Beatrice & Virgil*: The unexpected and the unthinkable**

A novel in which two of the most important characters are stuffed animals, which you will care about deeply. An allegory about the Holocaust. A play similar to Samuel Beckett's masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*. A novel about novel writing.

These are all parts of this month's Amnesty Book Club selection, *Beatrice & Virgil* by award-winning author Yann Martel. At times funny, moving and horrific, the novel deals with the ways in which the Holocaust is represented and how art can help us remember what should never be forgotten.

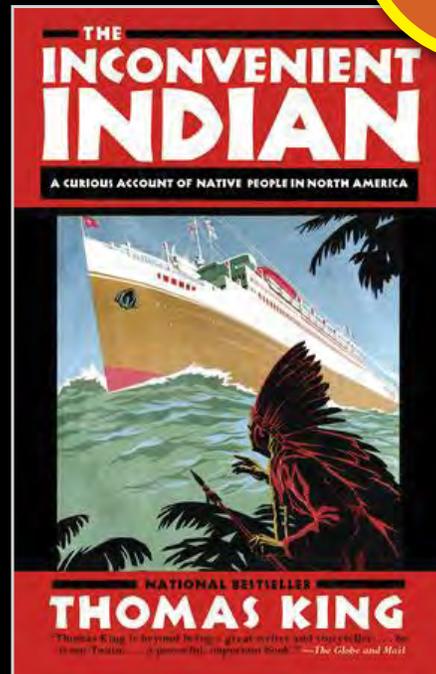
This month's book club action focuses not on the horrors of the past but on torture, which continues to be practiced in many parts of the world. In the Background section, you will meet four people who intimately know the harm that torture inflicts on both the body and the mind. We hope you will take action to stop torture on page 10.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. If you have any questions, suggestions or comments, we'd love to hear from you. Just send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

– The Book Club Team

2015  
READERS'  
CHOICE

THIS JUST IN!



Amnesty International Book Club readers chose *The Inconvenient Indian* by Thomas King as this year's Readers' Choice book. Look for it in November.

## **About Amnesty International**

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than three million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit [www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca) or write to us at:  
**Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.**

## About this month's author Yann Martel

Yann Martel is a novelist and short-story writer whose best known work is *The Life of Pi*. Martel was born in Salamanca, Spain, the son of French-Canadian parents. He spent his early years in various parts of Western Canada and the United States, Central America, and Europe, thanks to his father's diplomatic career.

Martel's first book, a short-story collection entitled *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* was published in 1993, with the title story winning the 1991 Journey Prize. His first novel, *Self* (1996), is a fictional autobiography.

With the phenomenal success of his third book, *Life of Pi*, published in 2001, Martel became an internationally recognized author. The novel won the 2002 prestigious Man Booker Prize and was nominated for both the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book and the Governor General's Award for Fiction, among other awards and recognitions. *The Life of Pi* has been published as an illustrated edition, adapted as a play and a film, and translated into many languages.

In 2007, Martel began the project "What is Stephen Harper Reading?", a one-sided correspondence with the Prime Minister in which he sent Harper a work of literature every two weeks along with a letter. The first 55 letters were collected into a book in 2009, *What is Stephen Harper Reading? Yann Martel's Recommended Reading for a Prime Minister (and Book Lovers of All Stripes)*.

Martel has taught in the Department of Comparative Literature at the Free University of Berlin and was the Writer in Residence at the Saskatoon Public Library in 2003-04. He lives in Saskatoon, with his wife, writer Alice Kuipers and their son.



Geoff Howe

## About this month's guest reader Charles Foran

Charlie Foran was born and raised in Toronto. He holds degrees from the University of Toronto and the University College, Dublin, and has taught in China, Hong Kong, and Canada. He has published 11 books, including five novels.

His fiction, non-fiction, and journalism have won the Governor General's Literary Award, the Weston Prize, the Taylor Prize, the Canadian Jewish Book Award, two QSPELL prizes, and several National Magazine Awards. You can learn more about his books on his web site [www.charlesforan.com](http://www.charlesforan.com), as well as read recent essays, features and reviews.

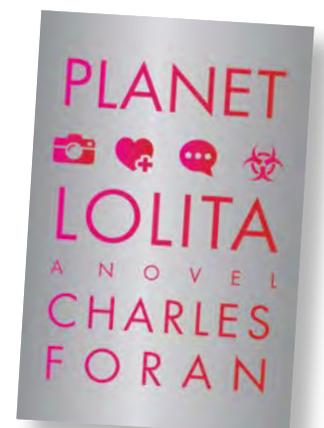
Charlie has also made radio documentaries for the CBC program *Ideas* and co-wrote the Gemini-winning TV documentary *Mordecai Richler: The Last of the Wild Jews*. A past president of PEN Canada, he is a senior fellow at Massey College and an adjunct professor in the Department of English at the University of Toronto. In 2014 he was named to the Order of Canada.

Charlie Foran is also CEO and Executive Director of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship (ICC), an organization committed to helping engage new Canadians in active citizenship and engendering conversations about inclusion.

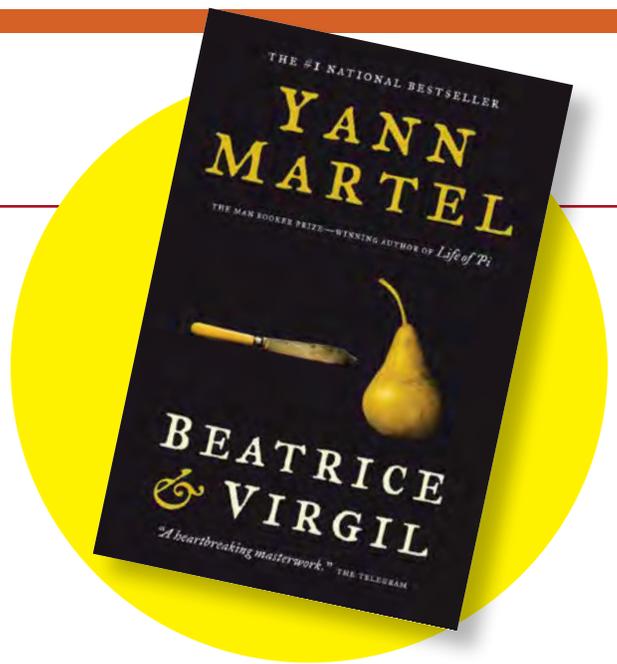
His most recent novel is *Planet Lolita*. He lives in Toronto with his family.



Neil Sauer



## Charles Foran on *Beatrice & Virgil*



*“Yann Martel’s third novel is about how not to forget. Its subject – if novels have subjects – is the Holocaust. Better, it explores the value of continually re-imagining, rather than simply revisiting, the defining horror of the 20th century.*

*The book asserts not so much that the memory of the six million dead must be kept alive into the 21st century but that we need to keep on morally re-conceptualizing what happened just one or two blinks of historic time ago – that is the systematic, state-sponsored attempt to obliterate a race. To single them out by one supposed shared characteristic. To hunt and corral and ready them for slaughter. To exterminate them, without mercy or purpose, and then either burn the bodies or just toss them into pits.*

*To treat Jewish people, in effect, like animals.*

*Upon its publication in 2010, a few critics charged Beatrice & Virgil with trivializing the Holocaust by seemingly reducing it to the plight of a donkey (Beatrice) and a monkey (Virgil) awaiting their fate in some vague war time in some vague place.*

*But these animals aren’t intended to stand in for any people, Jewish or otherwise. They are themselves, and are touchingly rendered as vibrant, empathetic creatures – a donkey and a monkey many of us would be pleased to meet at a dinner party or in a forest and find a moment to quietly discuss the sensual aesthetics of pears, among other topics.*

*Neither are Beatrice and Virgil and their vague war and vague place meant to be Nazi Germany or Nazi-occupied Poland in, say, September 1942. About this, Martel couldn’t be clearer: his characters are living in dangerous times in a province called ‘Lower Back’ in a country called ‘The Shirt.’ Any clue as to where that time and place might be?*

*I think I know. It is in Beatrice & Virgil, and the novel is an allegory, a smart, earnest, ambitious allegory about the human propensity for slaughtering things. How we are*

*naturally violent, but also often lean towards sustained, psychotically violent outbursts. How we are both adept at using our own psychological constructs to justify the demented behavior and perhaps to just enjoy the cruelty. And how, unless we insist on recasting the Holocaust in ways that keep it a fresh, urgent, stinging assault upon any notions of our alleged moral evolution as a species, we are certain to push ‘play’ on that dreaded tape loop – forget history/repeat history, forget history/repeat history.*

*It’s true that bookshelves groan under realistic depictions of the 1939-45 ‘Horribles,’ as Beatrice and Virgil call their own waking nightmare. We’ve had seven decades of documentation, memoir, memorial and story-telling about what occurred in Europe during World War Two. And yet now, as decades eight, nine and ten loom before us, those courageous people who survived the Holocaust to tell their terrible tales, and those determined to document and memorialize the events, will cease to be. There is no guarantee their determination and courage will be passed along. It will for a while, naturally – what was done to the Jewish race was unrivaled in scale and intent – but, well, a lot can happen, and does; and a lot can get forgotten, and does.*

*You think it unlikely? Google ‘genocide’ and run down the short-list of documented ‘Horribles’ from only the last thousand years. You remember Rwanda, of course – that was almost yesterday – but may need to be reminded about Armenia. And all those wholesale slaughters and exterminations back into the Middle Ages, never mind the mists of the Dark Ages. Who remembers any of them?*

Never mind either the ceaseless parallel Asian histories of atrocities and extinctions down through the ages.

Yann Martel thinks an allegory about a pending fictional extermination of certain animals, bound up in a meta-fictional encounter between ‘real’ people wrestling with the actual Holocaust, is a worthy approach to not forgetting. No, *Beatrice & Virgil* isn’t a parable extolling vegetarianism. Yes, it may have a thought or two about extinction in general, even more broadly defined than human-on-human. How about human-on-planet violence?

But mostly the book is about how, if you want to be counted truly human, you must continually re-ask a few simple, sorrowful questions about our killing habits, and

their implications, and how it actually feels to be hunted, and corralled, and extinguished. The questions are the ones you’ll find in ‘Games for Gustav,’ the brief, almost unbearable final section of the novel. Here is ‘Game Number Seven,’ taken from down in one of those pits. “Your daughter is clearly dead. If you step on her head, you can reach higher, where the air is better. Do you step on your daughter’s head?”

By the way, these ‘games’ should keep you awake at least one night after finishing the novel. They should set your soul trembling. That, too, is the cost of being counted truly human, being obliged to think freshly about the horrible stuff we are capable of, and that we do.”

—Charles Foran

## Discussion questions from Charles Foran

1. Yann Martel likes to use animals in his novels. In *Life of Pi*, he does not anthropomorphize them. In *Beatrice & Virgil*, he does. Why do you think he made different decisions for different books?
2. Henry, the main character of *Beatrice & Virgil*, is a writer. We read a story about a writer finding a story about a man writing a play he can’t finish. Why do you think Martel encased the allegory of the donkey and monkey in such scaffolding?
3. Would *Beatrice & Virgil* be as effective as a pure animal allegory? Would it have been as effective as an actual play?
4. The taxidermist is a figure of pure malevolence. Or is he? When you learn he has been an actual Nazi, does it help better explain the allegory? Does his play about Beatrice and Virgil make him less evil?
5. ‘Games for Gustav’ is a startling end to the novel. Is it effective?
6. *Beatrice & Virgil* is technically inventive. Yann Martel’s work is known for this kind of innovation. Does the ‘form’ of the novel aid the ‘content’?
7. Major novels welcome multiple interpretations. For all the evidence that *Beatrice & Virgil* is thinking about the Holocaust, can it be read an entirely different way?
8. In the intro, it is claimed that this novel is about “how not to forget.” Do you agree and, if so, does it work?

# BACKGROUND

## Invisible scars

Henry, the protagonist of *Beatrice & Virgil*, tells us early in the novel it is a story about representations of the Holocaust. While allusions to the Holocaust are found throughout the story, much of it is more than an allegory.

*Beatrice & Virgil* describes acts of violence and explores what it means to be a perpetrator and survivor of such violence. It examines the cost to those who wreak violence, and to those who survive.

Two of the characters in this story are animals restored by a taxidermist - the donkey Beatrice and the monkey Virgil. They tell us that once you have been struck by violence you acquire companions that never leave you. They speak metaphorically, not only about their own experience, but about society as a whole.

*Beatrice & Virgil* is also about torture and asks if it is possible to ever recover from such an experience. “How can there be anything beautiful after what we’ve lived through?”

The taxidermist in the book goes to great lengths to describe the work that is required to recreate broken specimens, challenging us to believe that that which has been destroyed can be repaired. But he admits that there are limits.

“Mind you, the animal might come to the taxidermist already damaged, whether when it was killed by a hunter or by another animal in a zoo or in a collision with a vehicle. Blood, dirt and other spoilage can be dealt with, and damaged skin or feathers can, within reason, be repaired, but there are limits to what we can do. The evidence can be so ruined as to prevent a proper interpretation of the event...” (pg 41)

We learn about the invisible scars which are hidden under Virgil’s most eye-catching attribute - his soft, thick

lustrous and beautiful fur. “On the skin was a stitch, a suture, that circled the base of the tail. It looked purple, medical, horrible.” The tail, longer than the rest of him, his pride and joy, had been cut off. Great care had been taken to sew the tail back on.

Much as the taxidermist has tried to repair the damage, we know that Virgil has been broken by experience, as he cries, “Oh Beatrice, how are we going to talk about what happened to us one day when it’s over?”

Virgil is not the only one who has been tortured and broken. We are given a graphic description of the “institutional torturing of a donkey” (Beatrice). It’s hard to read, and the description echoes the experiences which the survivors of torture have told to Amnesty International.

“I remember the first slap, just as I was being brought in. Already then something was lost forever, a basic trust. If there’s an exquisite collection of Meissen porcelain and a man takes a cup and deliberately drops it to the floor, shattering it, why wouldn’t he then proceed to break everything else? What difference does it make, cup or tureen, once the man has made clear his disregard for porcelain? With that first blow, something akin to porcelain shattered in me.” p. 175

There is nothing allegorical in this book about the description of torture and its effects. Torture survivors have told Amnesty International how their lives have been permanently changed by their experience. “It was a slap that crushed my dignity and took away my humanity.”

Torture survivors carry invisible scars which are forever marked on their minds and hidden on their bodies.

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PHOTO EXHIBITION

### *In/visible Scars: torture survivors in Canada*

Photos by Florin Zamfirescu

This fall, Amnesty International will promote a photo display of eight torture survivors who have found a way to talk about what happened to them and who have struggled to find something beautiful in the world after their experiences. Here are some of their stories.

#### Nora Melara-Lopez and Osiris Lopez-Chevez



José Eduardo Lopez was a freelance journalist and human rights activist in Honduras. He was detained and tortured in August 1981. In 1982, he fled to the United States after receiving repeated death threats. After his application to Canada for refugee status was denied, he was forced to return to Honduras. The death threats continued. On Christmas Eve 1984, he was abducted by armed men. He was never seen again – he “disappeared.”

In 1985, his wife Nora Melara-Lopez and her young family fled Honduras and moved to Canada after receiving refugee status from the Canadian government. Within a few weeks of her arrival in Canada, Nora became involved with the work of Amnesty International, increasing awareness about human rights abuses and impunity in Honduras.

For years the family had no information about what happened to José.

Nora Melara-Lopez has said that not knowing what happened to José was the hardest part. “We never had a grave. We never had a body. I had three children and we were waiting for their father to come home.”

In 1993, a report confirmed that José Eduardo had been abducted by the security forces of the Honduran



government, tortured, executed and buried in a clandestine cemetery.

With the help of others, the family has found a way to talk about what happened to them and has created something beautiful out of their experience.

In 1996, an Amnesty International group in Ghent, Belgium with support from the Honest Artistic Movement and the local, regional and federal government, erected a human rights monument to honour José Eduardo Lopez and “the disappeared” around the world.

In Canada, the family has kept José Eduardo's memory alive by providing the José Eduardo Lopez Memorial Scholarship, an educational scholarship for disadvantaged members of the Latin American community.

Osiris Lopez-Chevez says that her father “...strongly believed that education was the way out of poverty. If people are educated, they can't be exploited. We are trying to make sure our Latino youth get a chance.”

## Abdullah Almalki



Abdullah Almalki is a Canadian engineer, who was imprisoned in May 2002 when he traveled to Syria to visit his grandmother. He was arrested after Canadian officials sent false information to the Syrian authorities alleging that he was a terrorist threat. Abdullah was imprisoned for 22 months and brutally tortured. In March 2004, he was released on bail, and in July 2004 he was acquitted of all charges and returned to Canada. To this day no one has been held to account for his detention and torture in Syria.

Abdullah has relentlessly pursued justice and accountability for himself, Ahmad El Maati and

Muayyed Nureddin - two other Canadians who were also tortured in Syria. He speaks frequently about torture and has been an advocate against it.

Abdullah's name was cleared by the Iacobucci Inquiry, which found that he was not an Islamic extremist, terrorist, or terrorist threat. All were false labels used by Canadian agencies. The inquiry also found that Canadian officials were complicit in his torture in Syria and that his interrogation was based on information and questions that Canadian officials sent to the Syrian interrogators.

In 2009, the House of Commons passed a motion calling on the government to provide compensation and a formal apology to Abdullah, Ahmad El Maati and Muayyed Nureddin. They asked the government to do everything necessary to correct the misinformation about them that may exist in records administered by national security agencies in Canada or abroad. The Canadian government has not responded.

Abdullah continues to fight for an official apology and accountability. He wants Canada to do everything in its power to ensure that no one is ever tortured again

## Marina Nemat



On January 15, 1982, when she was 16, Marina Nemat was arrested. She spent more than two years in Evin prison in Iran, where she was tortured and came very close to execution. Her “crime” was complaining that math and history lessons in her school had been replaced by Koran instruction and political propaganda.

She was released from prison in 1984 and returned home to her family. She never spoke about her two years in prison. She married, had a child, and in 1990 left Iran with her family and moved to Canada. After arriving in Canada, Marina was pre-occupied with the life of

a new immigrant. Another child was born and she and her husband were busy establishing their home and careers in a new country.

After 20 years, when nightmares and flashbacks continued to haunt her and interrupt her sleep, she began to look to her past and write about it. Her writing began as a therapeutic diary and became a mission to tell the story of Iran’s past, in the hopes of helping the future.

Marina was not prepared to pretend that her two years of abuse in Evin prison never happened. She knew that she had to find a way to talk about what happened to her. Her memoir, *Prisoner of Tehran* was published in 2007.

Marina Nemat has been a vocal advocate of human rights. She has received multiple awards for her work in support of human rights and speaks regularly at high schools, universities and conferences around the world.

She speaks passionately about human rights and putting an end to torture. “In Evin, I broke under torture. I signed every piece of paper they told me to sign, because I just wanted to go home and sleep in my own bed. I was only 16 years old. They told me that I had to marry my interrogator or my parents would be arrested. I complied. They told me I had to convert to Islam. I did.

Then they changed my name from Marina to Fatemeh. I had lost my family, my religion, my freedom, my dignity, and even my name. How much can you take away from a person before she crumbles into dust? It took me about 20 years to be able to look back at my past and write about it. I live to testify. Without it, my life loses all meaning.”

# TAKE ACTION

Torture seeks to annihilate one's personality and denies a person the inherent dignity of a human being. The United Nations has condemned torture as one of the vilest acts perpetrated by human beings. Torture is a crime under international law.

In the aftermath of the atrocities of the Second World War, the governments of the world adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This enshrined the basic right of all of us, everywhere, to live free from torture, free from cruelty.

This right – at the heart of our shared humanity – was later enshrined in a legally binding international agreement, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which explicitly and absolutely prohibits torture and other ill-treatment.

Thirty years ago this year, this progress was further built upon by the UN Convention Against Torture. The Convention was ground-breaking. It offered a set of concrete steps to make the global ban on torture a reality, by establishing a set of measures, enshrined in law and specifically designed to:

- prevent torture
- punish perpetrators
- ensure justice and redress to victims.

These measures were intended not only to end torture and other ill-treatment nationally, but also to ensure that no one is deported across borders to be tortured, and that there is no safe haven for perpetrators.

Canada has signed the Convention Against Torture. Its next step to fully ban torture is to sign an international agreement – the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture – which allows for regular national and international level inspections of our detention centres. Inspections force open the doors to prisons, and help identify and remedy the conditions that encourage and allow torture and ill-treatment to take place.

In 2006, the Conservative Party of Canada – the Official Opposition at the time – declared its support for the 2002 Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OP CAT) as “an important human rights treaty that strives to establish independent monitoring of detention facilities”. They expressed concern that the government of the day had not signed or ratified OP CAT. Part of what made OP CAT an important human rights mechanism is that it would also help protect Canadians detained abroad from torture.

Almost 10 years later, and despite repeated promises to “consider ratifying” OP CAT, nothing has happened. Meanwhile 73 countries, including many of Canada's closest allies, have signed on to the treaty. With the use of torture so prevalent around the world, Canada should be pushing other countries to become parties to the Optional Protocol as part of a wider effort to eradicate torture around the world. But how can that happen if Canada itself has not signed the Protocol?

## ACT NOW

During this election campaign, call on party leaders Stephen Harper, Thomas Mulcair, Justin Trudeau and Gilles Duceppe to support signing and ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture without further delay.

Green Party leader Elizabeth May already supports the Optional Protocol.

Link to Action: [http://e-activist.com/ea-action/action?ea\\_client.id=1770&ea.campaign.id=31053](http://e-activist.com/ea-action/action?ea_client.id=1770&ea.campaign.id=31053)

## WRITE YOUR OWN LETTER:

In your own words, call on the political party leaders to support a process in which relevant ministries will sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture without further delay.

### Write to:

Right Hon. Stephen Harper  
House of Commons, Ottawa ON K1A 0A6  
Harper.S@parl.gc.ca

Mr. Thomas Mulcair  
House of Commons, Ottawa ON K1A 0A6  
Mulcair.T@parl.gc.ca

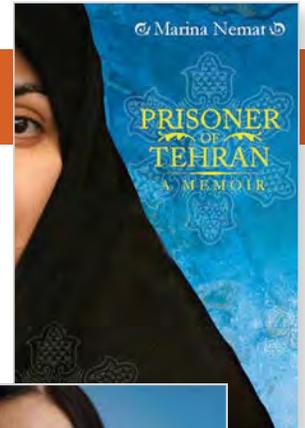
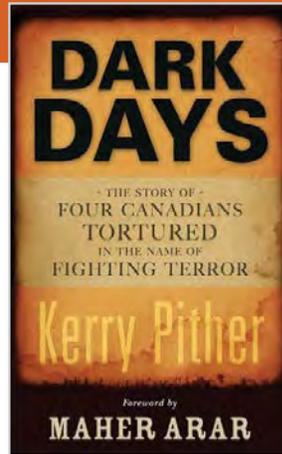
Mr. Justin Trudeau  
House of Commons, Ottawa ON K1A 0A6  
Trudeau.J@parl.gc.ca

M. Gilles Duceppe  
3750, boul. Crémazie, bureau 502  
Montréal (Québec) H2A 1B6  
info@bloc.org

Please note that within Canada, mail may be sent postage-free to any Member of Parliament.

## RESOURCES

- *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror* by Kerry Pither  
<http://kerrypither.com/about/>
- <http://www.abdullahalmalki.com/home>
- <http://www.marinanemat.com/>  
Marina Nemat: *Prisoner of Tehran* 2007  
Marina Nemat: *After Tehran: A Life Reclaimed* 2011
- *Amnesty International Photo Exhibition: In/visible Scars: torture survivors in Canada*. This exhibition features eight torture survivors who live in Canada. It is available for display. Contact: [materials@amnesty.ca](mailto:materials@amnesty.ca)



## COMING UP IN OCTOBER 2015

### *Secret Daughter* by Shilpi Somaya Gowda

Recommended by guest reader **Heather O'Neill**

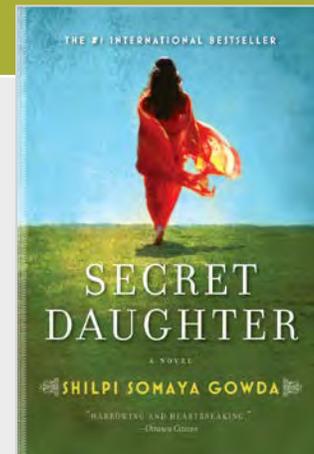
In rural India, a baby, Asha, is born to Kavita and her husband. Due to their extreme poverty and the fact that the child is a girl, her husband forces Kavita to give the baby up - a decision that will haunt them both for the rest of their lives.

Halfway around the world, Somer, an American doctor, decides to adopt a child after discovering that she will never have one of her own. When her husband Krishnan shows her a photo of baby Asha sent to him from a Mumbai orphanage, she falls instantly in love. But little does she know the obstacles she will face.

Weaving together the stories of Kavita, Somer and Asha, *Secret Daughter*, the debut novel by Shilpi Somaya Gowda, explores the emotional terrain of motherhood, loss and belonging. As the story moves between the two families, one struggling to eke out an existence in Mumbai, the other grappling with the challenge of raising a brown skinned child from another culture, Gowda addresses issues of culture, identity and familial loyalty.

**The discussion guide will be sent out in early October**

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).



Shilpi Somaya Gowda