



2020 Annual Report

Captivating explorations of
books and ideas

Learn more at
writersfest.bc.ca

Our Direction

2020
In Review

*Celebrating
Books & Ideas*

In this unprecedented year, the Vancouver Writers Fest was able to forge ahead, presenting a full complement of literary events, fulfilling our mission to connect people to exceptional books, ideas and dialogue through year-round programming that ignites a passion for words and the world around us. We added a lot of new words to our daily vocabulary in 2020: pivot, Zoom, social-distancing, and indeed, the catalyst of them all, COVID-19, but we also found the silver linings in what was an otherwise challenging year for arts organizations.

In a year of Festival themes encompassing hope and human connection, we were unable to gather in person, but we were witness to online conversations that bridged the digital divide. Thanks in part to our deeply thoughtful Guest Curator, Ivan Coyote, we presented events that showcased voices from across Canada and around the world, and provided perspectives that expanded our notion of empathy and equality.

Thanks to our generous public and private funders and sponsors, we were able to forge ahead with digital offerings such as our **My Roots** writing workshop for new immigrants to Canada; our Youth Education Programming, including **Writers in the**

Classroom, which brought a dozen authors into the classrooms of thousands of British Columbia school children; our digital **Book Club**, connecting internationally renowned authors with fans across Canada; and of course, our annual Festival, including flagship offerings such as **The Poetry Bash**, **The Literary Cabaret** and **The Afternoon Tea**.

In a year that was so difficult for so many, with illness, racial injustice, political turmoil and loneliness plaguing our lives and the lives of our neighbours, friends and loved-ones, the Vancouver Writers Fest was able to provide accessible programming that shed some light, provided companionship and entertainment, and offered some respite from the otherwise dreary days of 2020.

As we move into this new year, we do so with dedicated financial funds that will help us navigate the bumps and curves in the road ahead. We do so knowing that our goal is to gather once again in celebration of exceptional literature and unique voices, in person and on screens, and to deepen the impact, engagement and quality of those conversations. Thank you for your role in helping us to achieve these goals.



© Yasmeen Strang

Leslie Hurtig
Leslie Hurtig
Artistic Director



By the Numbers

28,300
Attendees

20%
First-Time Attendees

14,000
Newsletter Subscribers

12,000
Youth Participants

73
Events in 2020

115
Authors in 2020

A message from the *Board of Directors*



Alexia Jones
Chair

While online events cannot recreate the thought-provoking exchange of author and audience, or the cultural exchange and creativity that a gathering of people in one physical space can bring, I believe we were able to create something special this year. As I watched or listened to the interaction of authors and audiences on line or in a podcast this year, I was impressed by the sense of community. This sense of community was a gift during this challenging and uncertain year.

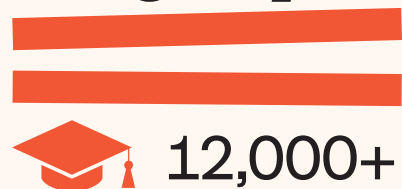
The Board is extraordinarily proud of the team who have turned themselves inside out, learned new skills and a completely new way of working to deliver events, in challenging circumstances, which have been engaging, stimulating, entertaining and technically excellent. We have reached parts of the world and Canada that we have never reached before, and brought an accessibility to our events that we never want to lose.

On behalf of the Board I want to thank our incredibly generous funders, sponsors, and donors in 2020. It was because of you that the Vancouver Writers Fest was able to offer all the events during Festival week for free this year. Now the hard work begins to develop a financially stable model for a hybrid festival of live and online events for the future.

Stay safe and thank you for continuing to support us in the myriad of ways that you do.

Why We Thrive

Big Impact



K-12 Students

Inspired by authors & poets

92%

of our attendees think
differently about an issue
after a Writers Fest event

52%

earn \$80,000+

11% under 40

44% 41–64

45% over 65



42% of 2020 attendees
opted to pay \$10+ for free events

100% of attendees would recommend
the Festival to friends and family

8,800+ Twitter followers

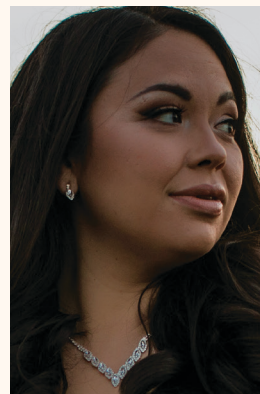
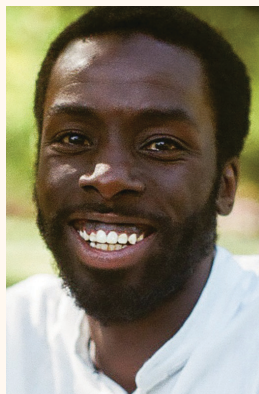
7,600+ Facebook followers

3,500+ Instagram followers

What We Do

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we view and experience art, literature and community, and it has reminded us of the deep value and essential effect creative programming has on our society. It also challenged thousands of arts organizations like never before. At the Vancouver Writers Fest, we wanted to ensure we continued to enact our vision of connecting readers to books and ideas, even when traditional, in-person event opportunities needed to be postponed.

We did so by launching new digital formats of events and conversations while continuing to prioritize bold, accessible programming. By adapting early to virtual alternatives, we were able to expand our reach, community and impact in new ways, while continuing to offer Incite events, youth programming, Book Club, podcast and Festival Week offerings.



Left to Right: 2020 Scotiabank Giller Prize winner Souvankham Thammavongsa, Desmond Cole, Dr. Jen Gunter and Helen Knott, some of the authors featured throughout 2020's Incite season.

Incite

In 2020, our free reading series, Incite, offered conversations with authors every two weeks from January to June, pivoting to shorter, 45-minute "Mini-Incite" events for the virtual stage. Celebrated writers and new talents discussed their latest works, answered questions about their creative process and spoke to overarching themes that inspired each event. Guests included **Chantal Gibson, Hasan Namir, Stéphane Larue, Desmond Cole, Dr. Jen Gunter, Tara Henley, Maria Reva** and 2020 Scotiabank Giller Prize winner **Souvankham Thammavongsa**.

Incite is presented in partnership with the Vancouver Public Library and with support from the Vancouver Downtown Business Improvement Association.

We're proud to continue providing this highly accessible programming for members of our community.

In 2021, Incite will also be streamed by Telus OPTIK, giving over 1 million subscribers on-demand access to Incite events thanks to this new partnership.

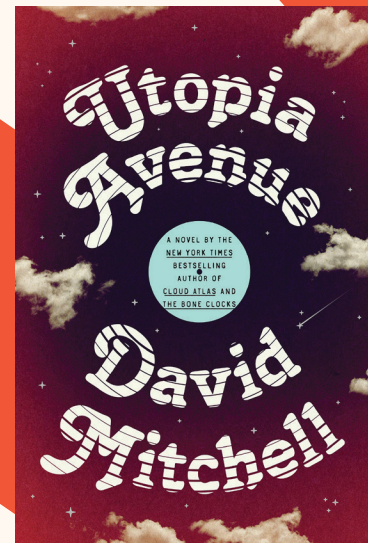
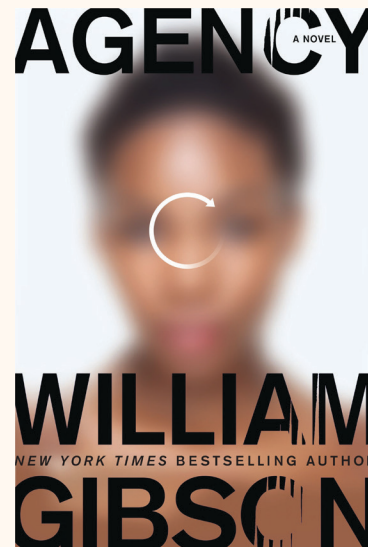
Special Events

During our Special Events, we host some of the most celebrated names in the international literary community.

In normal years, these sold-out events take place on Vancouver's premiere stages, igniting a frenzy of conversation and book buying. In early 2020, **William Gibson** presented *Agency* to a packed Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, just days before the first cases of COVID-19 were recorded in BC.

While Special Events are normally one of the Festival's most important revenue sources, in 2020 these offerings were postponed to comply with health regulations. Instead, we pivoted Special Events online, hosting a live discussion with **David Mitchell**, attended by 215 fans through an exclusive book + ticket model, in partnership with the Toronto International Festival of Authors.

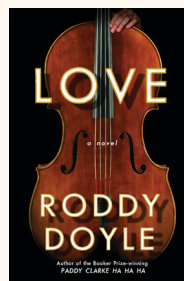
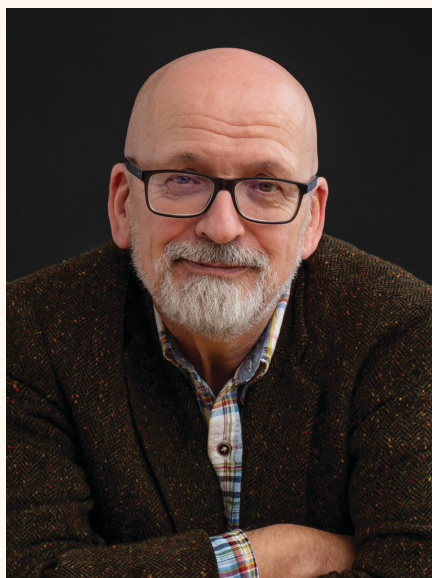
William Gibson & David Mitchell



Seasonal Book Clubs

Roddy Doyle & Yaa Gyasi

In the summer of 2020, the Festival launched its new seasonal Book Club program, featuring world-renowned, bestselling authors **Roddy Doyle** (*Love*) and **Yaa Gyasi** (*Transcendent Kingdom*). These special events, which included a copy of the author's book and a chance to receive a signed bookplate, provided readers across Canada the opportunity to hear from some of the literary world's most exemplary talents in intimate Q&As and conversations. The Vancouver Writers Fest's seasonal Book Club events take place four times a year.



Back Soon: Whisky & Words and Books & Brunch

Due to the realities of COVID-19, the Vancouver Writers Fest made the difficult decision to postpone both **Whisky & Words** and **Books & Brunch**. While the majority of our programming was able to shift to a digital environment, due to provincial health and safety regulations, we were unable to provide a safe alternative to in-person dining. These programs will return once it is safe for large groups to safely gather again.

- **Whisky & Words** is the Vancouver Writers Fest's primary fundraising event and has been a vital source of revenue to support our Youth Education Program, connecting over 7,000 BC kids to celebrated writers, empowering them to see the impact of books and words on enhancing our community. During weekend-long events, patrons can attend Masterclasses, enjoy world-class whisky and favourite local food pairings.
- **Books & Brunch** combines author conversation with a delicious brunch at Dockside Restaurant in the boutique Granville Island Hotel. Authors Shelley Wood (*The Quintland Sisters*), Terry Fallis (*The Albatross*) and Karma Brown (*Recipe for a Perfect Wife*) were previously featured at these sold out spring and summer events.

Youth Programming

Our Youth Education Program (YEP) continued to connect students with celebrated writers from across the globe in more than 25 events designed specifically for young people, teachers, schools and student groups. In typical years, we reach more than 7,000 students across British Columbia. In 2020, with expanded accessibility through online programming, including for our Writers in the Classroom program, we were able to raise student attendance to **over 12,000**. Youth Education Programs include:

- **Festival Week Events:** Each year, students across British Columbia attend our events—in the classroom and at the Festival. Our programs are curated with the BC curriculum in mind, for K-12 student groups. For the 2020 Festival, we initiated a partnership with TELUS Optik, bringing our Festival's youth events to a free, on-demand platform with over 1 million subscribers in BC and Alberta.
- **Writers in the Classroom:** 20 authors joined local schools on their preferred digital platform to read and discuss their writing process in intimate class discussions for both traditional and non-traditional learning environments. Costs for this program are fully covered by the Vancouver Writers Fest.
- **Youth Writing Contest:** Encouraging reading and writing in Canada requires supporting burgeoning future authors. The Vancouver Writers Fest continued to host its annual writing contest, during which youth could submit their works of fiction and/or poetry. A judge reviews the entries each year, awarding a cash prize.

Thank you to the Vancouver Writers Fest for the virtual 'Writers in the Classroom' event with Indigenous author Michelle Good. Having an experienced author from a marginalized voice was very empowering for our students. They were able to ask Michelle Good questions on the process of writing a book that details struggles that are both personal and societal. Good's reading and presence allowed my students to engage in the process of literary analysis from the back end; how does authorship work, what are intentions and imperatives set, the experience of being intentional with their message.

**Kiran Shoker, Teacher, Stratford Hall,
Vancouver**

Over 100 students participated in the 'Writers in the Classroom' event with author Steven Heighon, who read from his children's book *The Stray and the Strangers*, which was inspired by his experiences as a volunteer during the Syrian refugee crisis on the Greek Island of Lesbos in 2015. Our classes have been studying immigration and learning about refugees, and this event was an incredible opportunity for our students to hear about the perilous journeys and immense challenges faced by refugees. Thank you for providing us with such a wonderful opportunity to hear Steven give life to his words.

**Nellie Susan Wong, Tyee Elementary,
Vancouver**

Year-Round Events

Youth Writing Contest

Writers in the Classroom



Left to Right: Nasra Adem, Lindsay Wong, Wesley King, Caroline Adderson

To receive further information about our Education Outreach programming, email education@writersfest.bc.ca.

The Writers in the Classroom program run by the Vancouver Writers Fest is an exceptional gem. Aleksandra Ross's presentation to my Grade Ten class was enriching, informative, fascinating, and perfectly geared towards beginning writers starting their own world-building journeys. Bringing a real, living and breathing author into my classroom provided a boost of energy, not only inspiring my class in their own writing, but also demystifying the process of how one actually goes about trying to get published.

**Jordan Peters, Mark R. Isfeld Secondary,
Courtenay, BC**

What We Do

My Roots

In 2020, the Vancouver Writers Fest continued to build on the success of our My Roots Workshop—an expanded vision of what education outreach can be.

The writing workshop, now in its third year, encourages immigrants to develop and share their stories of place and was facilitated by award-winning writer and teacher Doretta Lau. Through a mix of writing exercises and easy lessons on how to write well, the workshop encouraged writers at all levels to think imaginatively about those places and landscapes called ‘home’.

Select writings were published on the Vancouver Writers Fest’s website and shared with our Books & Ideas Newsletter subscribers.

Adult Education

“This was an excellent introduction into writing! I liked the format of timed writing exercises. It helped to let go of the inner ‘editor’ and to focus on the act of writing itself. Doretta’s instruction was kind, calm, and present. I hope it runs again in the future!”

2020 My Roots Workshop Attendee

Throughout the year, we expanded the accessibility of our programs by publishing our **Books & Ideas Newsletter** weekly instead of monthly, and launching our **Books & Ideas Audio** series. The newsletter and podcast directly serve our mandate to connect an ever wider audience with the power of the written word and the conversations they provoke.

Books & Ideas Newsletter

Started in 2019, Books & Ideas has been a one-stop monthly digest for the Festival's upcoming events, community news, and an inspirational source for educators, librarians and book lovers across British Columbia. In 2020, with the sudden onset of COVID-19 and the cancellation of author tours, literary events and more, the VWF decided to publish our newsletter weekly. This format provided more space for publishers, authors and other arts organizations to reach an established, engaged audience of over 14,000 individuals. The newsletter has several ongoing columns, including Community News, Audio Book Journeys and Youth Book Corner (geared at educators). This weekly format will continue in 2021.

Books & Ideas Audio

The Vancouver Writers Fest's *Books & Ideas Audio* series features exclusive interviews and some of the Festival's most celebrated conversations from our extensive archive.

Available on every major podcasting platform, *Books & Ideas* released eleven episodes in 2020, including three during Festival Week, amassing over 6,000 plays overall. Our top two episodes, Beverley McLachlin and Ayad Akhtar, both received over 880 individual plays within 72 hours of going live.

Books & Ideas



Fall Programming

2020 was an important year for our flagship Festival. With over 28,000 attendees from around the globe, new pay-what-you-can ticketing, and the highest quality digital events, our 2020 Festival reaffirmed our steadfast commitment to essential conversations and the power of ideas.

Featuring more than 40 virtual events over seven days, and nine stand-alone events as an extended Fall Season, the 2020 Festival was a light when we needed it most. **Hope** became the operative word, filtering through each online discussion as chat windows bustled and webcams illuminated faces from across the globe.

In response to the unique challenges of an unprecedented year, we made programming decisions based largely on improved accessibility, opting for pay-what-you-can pricing on all Festival week events, live captioning for adult programming and platform agnostic streaming for all Youth events. Learn more about how we enhanced access to the Festival on page 11.

20% of our 2020 audience had never attended a Festival event previously. Ticket buyers responded positively to the ideas and conversations on their screens, opting to donate \$10 on average for pay-what-you-can tickets. 100% of survey respondents said they would recommend the Festival to their friends and family.

In addition to the vision of Artistic Director, **Leslie Hurtig**, and Senior Artistic Associate, **Clea Young**, the Festival was honoured to welcome its 2020 Guest Curator, celebrated storyteller **Ivan Coyote**, alongside returning Spoken Word Curator **Jillian Christmas** and our new Musical Director **Sally Zori**.

Featured writers included Ayad Akhtar, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Emma Donoghue, Francesca Ekwuyasi, John Freeman, Thomas Homer-Dixon, Oliver Jeffers, Thomas King, Kevin Kwan, Margaret MacMillan, Megha Majumdar, Walter Mosley, Jenny Offill, Tegan and Sarah Quin, Ian Rankin, David A. Robertson, Marilynne Robinson, Emily St. John Mandel, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Brandon Taylor, Kawai Strong Washburn, and Ian Williams—to name but a few.



Tegan and Sara Quinn sit in conversation with Baharak Yousefi for a livestreamed Festival event, *High School*.

A message from our Guest Curator, Ivan Coyote



From the 2020 Festival Guide

The first time I was invited to be a part of the Vancouver Writers Fest was back in 2002. I was 33 years old, my second slim volume of short stories had just been released, and I was starstruck and mostly tongue-tied the whole week. I met Lorna Crozier and Patrick Lane that year, both so charming and gracious to a newcomer like me. I shared a quiet cup of tea before an event with Nancy Richler, and stayed up way too late one night listening to Susan Musgrave tell stories in the hospitality suite. I saw Pierre Berton standing in a coffee line up. I got last minute tickets to hear Michael Ondaatje speak, and shared a shy elevator ride with Thomas King.

Ten published books and 18 years later, I am reflecting on all that this festival has brought into my life. The many friendships I have found and forged there, the multiple magical moments to always remember, the love of words and books and writers the festival has planted and watered and grown in me. That feeling when making it all the way from the Arts Club Theatre to Performance Works takes nearly two hours because of all the writers and readers and word lovers I needed to stop and talk to on the way.

I've shared many phone calls and conversations with Leslie Hurtig and Clea Young over the last months, working together to try to bring some of that pre-pandemic festival feeling to our programming this fall. As I write this, we are about to begin our sixth month of physical distancing and facemasks and new infection numbers, and fear. I remain faithful in the potential of books and words and sharing stories as the very best tools we have to bring us together, even across ethernet cables and closed borders and computer screens, and witness and celebrate our shared humanity, and our common struggles to build a better After All Of This.

I have done my best to curate events that stand back and let writers speak to their own stories, their own inspirations, their own challenges, and their own approach to their craft. My dream is that this October we can all gather again, from many different physical places, and listen and speak and laugh and cry together, despite all that might seek to divide us. I know that this year we all need stories, more than ever.

Spoken Word Curator Jillian Christmas



As an enthusiastic organizer and advocate in the Canadian arts community, whose work has increased anti-oppression initiatives, **Jillian Christmas** has curated the Vancouver Writers Fest's spoken word events since 2017.

Literary Cabaret Musical Director Sally Zori



A transgender Iraqi raised in the United Arab Emirates and different parts of Canada, **Sally Zori** is an acclaimed session musician, percussionist, and content creator, and our new Musical Director, alongside their band, The Allegories.

Committed to Accessibility

Accessibility in 2020

In 2020, the Festival transitioned our events to safe and accessible platforms, restructured our ticketing systems, and pivoted to a **pay-what-you-can model** for all events except Book Club events. Additionally, we:

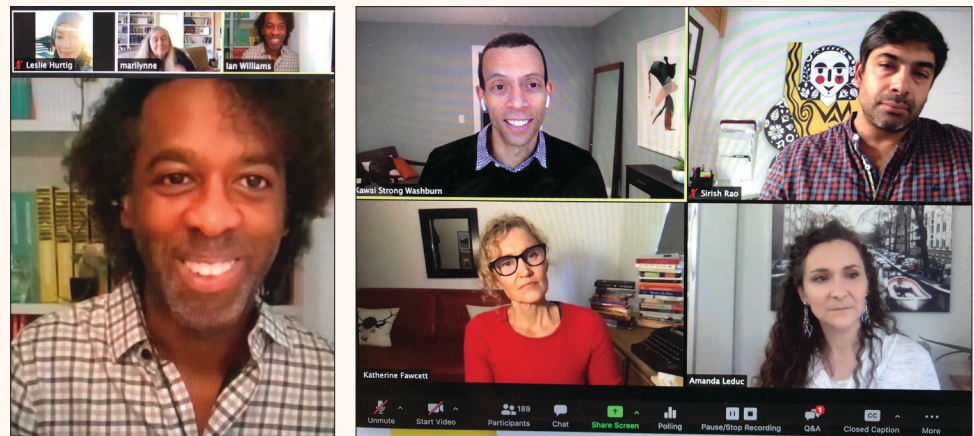
- introduced our first ever Festival Pass; an **all-access ticket** available to members for all Festival Week events for \$100 CAD + GST. With the use of their pass, patrons were able to dramatically simplify their booking process, and also retained access to events with **on-demand recordings** for 30 days.
- provided live captioning for all of our adult programming, while youth events employed auto-captioning through YouTube.
- improved the accessibility of our youth programming in three profound ways:
 - Offering youth events **free of charge**;
 - Providing **live streams over YouTube**;
 - Initiating a partnership with TELUS Optik, providing its million subscribers across British Columbia and Alberta **on-demand access** to our youth events through their cable service.

“The best literary festival I have attended in a long time. Really pleased at the variety, diversity and scope of your festival offerings. Thank you for a superb experience.”

2020 Festival Attendee

“As a senior, I probably wouldn’t have been able to go this event. Attending virtually really made it a possibility for me!”

2020 Festival Attendee



Left to Right: 2019 Scotiabank Giller Prize winner Ian Williams; Kawai Strong Washburn, Sirish Rao, Katherine Fawcett, and Amanda Leduc in *Fairytales & Legends*.

Board of Directors

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Kyla Epstein

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Holman Wang

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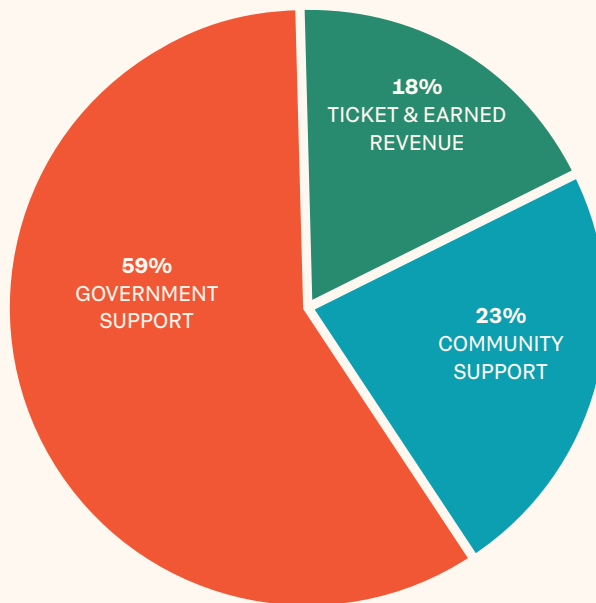


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Financials

Persevering Through Difficult Times

Revenue - \$1,053,828



Government Support \$625,491

Grants	\$464,576
CEWS	\$160,915

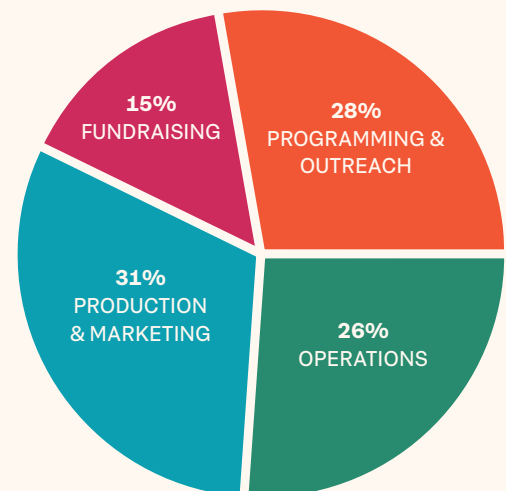
Ticket & Earned Revenue \$184,947

Community Support \$243,390

Sponsors & Foundations.....	\$69,500
Individual Giving.....	\$141,486
Fundraising Events	\$32,404

- 55% drop in ticket, earned and fundraising revenue
- 2020 surplus will help re-launch in-person Festival
- Online audience on par with 2019 in-person audiences

Expenses - \$947,060



Our Team

Leslie Hurtig, Artistic Director

Andrew Forshner, Development Director

Zoe Grams, Marketing & Publicity Director

Ariel Hudnall, Marketing & Publicity Manager

Chelsee Damen, Operations Manager

Sarah Wang, Programming Coordinator

Lauren Dembicky-Polivka,

Marketing & Development Coordinator

Leena Desai, Outreach Coordinator

Eduardo Ottoni, Production Manager

Kathryn Fowler, Volunteer Manager

*Announcing new Executive Director in
spring 2021.*

Please contact us to learn more

Main Office: 604.681.6330

Sponsorship Opportunities

Lauren Dembicky-Polivka

Marketing & Development Coordinator

ldembicky@writersfest.bc.ca

604.262.1190

Community Partnerships

Leena Desai

Outreach Coordinator

ldesai@writersfest.bc.ca

778.658.0451

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We hope you will be
inspired to join our
celebration of books,
storytelling, ideas—
and the possibilities
they infuse.