

VANCOUVER
WRITERS
FEST



2021 Annual Report

WRITERSFEST.BC.CA



The Vancouver Writers Fest imagines a world in which the transformative power of books and ideas creates the foundation of an empathetic, inspired, and just society.

We connect people to exceptional books, ideas, and dialogue through year-round programming that ignites a passion for words and the world around us.

In 2021, this vision was furthered by a commitment to expanded accessibility with in-person, virtual, and experimental hybrid offerings, and we're proud the result was a more diverse audience and increased participation—especially in light of the many challenges this year presented.



*Left to Right:
Jael Richardson,
Shashi Bhat,
Jen Sookfong Lee,
Kaile Shilling
(Executive Director),
Lauren Groff,
Sally Zori and the
Allegories,
a cappella at the
Opening Reception,
Brandon Wint*

Our Direction

“The Vancouver Writers Fest is one of my very favourite in the world! Welcoming readers, fabulous authors, incredibly thoughtful, efficient and kind organizers, and located in the perfect spot on Granville Island. As a writer, I always leap at invitations to join the Vancouver Writers Fest in the celebration of books!”

Lawrence Hill, 2021 Guest Curator

Subject to Change; This was the theme of our 2021 Festival Week, and for the year of 2021 itself: a year of adaptation, rapid response, and in finding new meanings and deeper understandings in familiar subjects.

This year, we were bold and ambitious. We embraced the challenge of constant change and rolled with the unexpected, pulling off one of the only in-person literary festivals in the country. We did this through an innovative approach that included fully in-person (with limited capacities), hybrid events (with a live moderator, in-theatre audience, and on-screen author), fully digital events, and our first-time-ever “Nest Cinema” where we could watch digital events collectively, in a cinema-like setting.

This embracing of all possible outcomes enabled us to be adaptive, to explore different ways to reach audiences both loyal and new, and to be a model for festivals moving forward.

Organizationally, we were ourselves the subject of significant change, as we welcomed a new Executive Director, and added two new staff positions that increased our commitment to digital production and organizational rigor. We also shifted two existing positions, promoting staff from within, thus fostering their ongoing leadership and professional development. We’ve strengthened our internal financial practices, creating more transparency and accountability, including the creation of a reserves account to ensure we’re able to weather the ups and downs and inevitable changes to come. And, thanks to successful adaptation, we dramatically expanded the reach of our youth programming, seeing an increase of nearly 60% in young people attending our Festival Week events.

Throughout this incredible year, we’ve been overwhelmed by the support of our audiences and authors who returned

eagerly to our venues; by our members and volunteers who provided support through contributions of funds, time, and encouragement; and by our donors, sponsors, and other funders whose generosity ensured that we were able to innovate, host important voices, and use this unpredictable year as an opportunity for positive change, greater inclusion and, of course, the presentation of exceptional literary artists.

Our work of creating community through sharing books, ideas, and dialogue means we’re dedicated to showcasing the best in publishing and storytelling; fostering a love of reading, increasing literacy, and connecting readers with emerging and acclaimed authors from around the world.

We’re proud to share the successes—and challenges—of this past year with you in this report.


Kaile Shilling
Executive Director


Leslie Hurtig
Artistic Director

By the Numbers

24,955
Individual Tickets

523
Digital Passes

19,276
Youth Participants

49%
Ticket Revenue from
Pay-What-You-Can Events

55
Events in 2021

18,000+
Newsletter Subscribers

A Message from Our Board

Over the past few years, the Board of Directors has made a number of changes to advance our commitment to a more equitable and just environment for our authors, audiences, volunteers, staff, and communities. We developed and published a statement on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, refocused our board committee structure to integrate this focus on equity and justice in practice, developed a framework for all policy reviews to ensure we're guided by an equity lens, and implemented organization-wide learning sessions. Given the events that have transpired over the last twenty two months that include but are not limited to: a global pandemic, the horrific uncovering of mass graves of hundreds of Indigenous children, multiple episodes of violence towards Indigenous peoples and people of colour—including a sharp increase in anti-Asian racism—and the devastating impacts of climate change on our province, our country and the world, we know this commitment is part of an ongoing, necessary, and urgent journey for the organization.

It is our mission and vision to provide a powerful forum for the public to exchange views with writers and creators on a wide range of issues: social, ethical, and political as well as literary and cultural. We hope that our programming this year will lead you, our audiences, on a journey of discovery through fact, fiction, poetry, personal stories, and world affairs.

The Board of Directors recognizes that accessibility is an important underpinning of equity and justice in our community and this objective remains a priority for VWF.

This past year we continued to adapt to the changing environment and offered a hybrid festival where people had the option to gather remotely or in person to engage with authors. Most importantly, our events allowed us to connect with one another during a time of upheaval, hear different voices, and continue the exchange of ideas. Our amazing staff team will build on the accessibility this year's hybrid festival afforded, and which allows us to reimagine exciting events and programming for the future.

The Board acknowledges the hard work of the entire VWF team, ably co-lead by Leslie Hurtig and Kaile Shilling. The VWF team continually finds a way to improve the way we operate as an organization, meet challenges during this time of uncertainty, and inspire the Board. It is because of their efforts that we can continue to offer programming and events consisting of writers and thinkers from around the world.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the support of our volunteers, members, festival-goers, and government, personal, and corporate sponsors. We are grateful not only for your financial contributions and volunteerism that makes it possible to put on world-class events, but also for your words of encouragement and feedback during the year. The Board looks forward to meeting and thanking many of you in-person at our events in the coming year.

On behalf of the Board and with continued gratitude,

 **Alexia Jones,**
Board Chair



Alexia Jones
Chair



Kyla Epstein
Vice-Chair



Robert McLean
Treasurer



Holman Wang
Secretary



Hurriya Burney



Natascha Kiernan



Tracy Rogers



Nisha Sikka

Why We Thrive



57% of survey respondents were under 55, up 56% since 2019

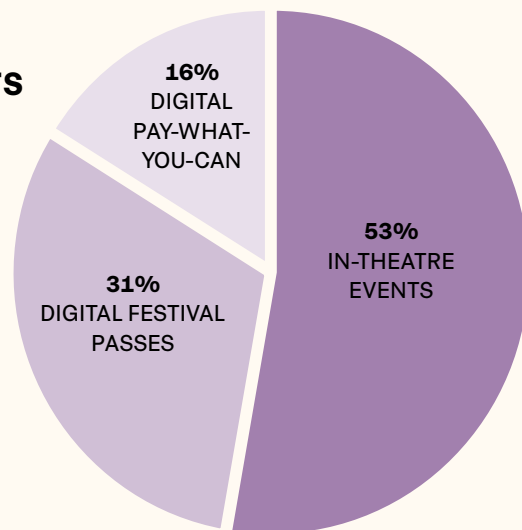
Over 70% of attendees surveyed bought books by authors featured at the Festival



REVENUE *from* FESTIVAL EVENTS

Flexible Formats

provide diverse revenue streams and greater accessibility



Big Impact



19,000+

K-12 Students

Inspired by authors & poets

66%

of patrons attended *more than two events*, up 50% from 2020

39%

earn \$80,000+

25% male
68% female
3% nonbinary



49% of 2021 attendees opted to pay **\$10+** for PWYC events

29% of attendees reside outside of Metro Vancouver

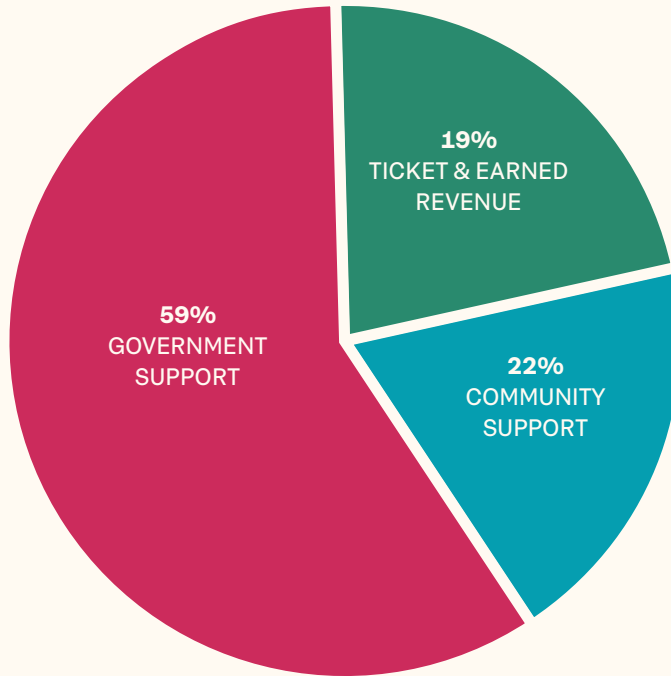
9,300+ Twitter followers

8,100+ Facebook followers

10,700+ Instagram followers

Our Impact

Revenue - \$1,208,610



Government Support \$718,271

Grants	\$647,810
CEWS	\$70,461

Ticket & Earned Revenue \$231,687

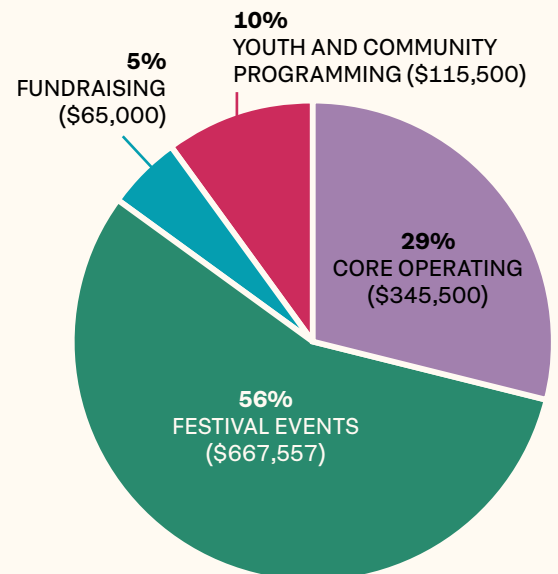
Community Support \$258,652

Sponsors & Foundations.....	\$118,016
Individual Giving	\$109,746
Fundraising Events	\$30,890

Our funding streams remained diverse and robust in difficult times. Pandemic support from the government offset decreased earned revenue, and generous patrons who donated on Pay-What-You-Can events ensured our programming remained financially accessible to more people than ever.

This past year we increased our discount for students and seniors, and moved our Box Office entirely online, leading to more efficient ticketing all around.

Expenses - \$1,193,557



Increasing Accessibility

Accessibility in 2021

Through surveys and within our internal data, we were shown—over and over again—that having virtual options for our events removed or reduced geographic, mobility, and financial barriers. These improved options also diversified our audience significantly for the first time in several years, with a **230%** increase in male-identifying survey respondents (now at 25%), a 56% increase in patrons under 55, and nearly 29% of ticket buyers reporting that they reside outside of Metro Vancouver.

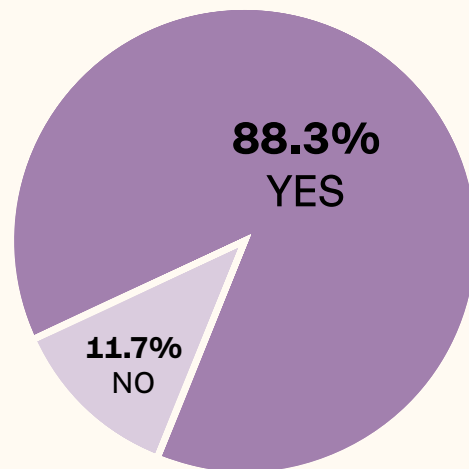
For 2022, we'll continue to offer high quality digital programming, and also maintain Pay-What-You-Can pricing for all digital events, for which 49% of patrons elected to pay \$10 or more in 2021.

Moving forward, we intend to deepen our commitment to accessibility in all forms, and will be engaging members of the community to help us in this process.

inclusive personally
deaf hearing important
needed event attended
interpretation service
great asl good
applicable thank you
require glad means notice accessible
experience improvement

"I was delighted to see ASL available and used by some participants. Thank you for being inclusive. I recognize this comes at a cost."
2021 Festival Attendee

Would you like to see more digital events from us in the future?



Our Work

While our flagship October Festival is an event anticipated and beloved by readers, authors and thousands of school-aged youth, the Vancouver Writers Fest is much more. Our year-round programming highlights great reads for book lovers in a wide mix of genres and invites audiences to contextualize and explore complex current issues through diverse voices and events. We leverage the power of stories and storytelling to build empathy and connection, to spark curiosity, and sometimes simply to delight in the sheer joy of reading.

We learned a lot in 2021, especially in regard to bringing flexibility to our event formats, supporting a broader community of youth, and cultivating deeper connections with our community through diverse programming. On the following pages, we'll speak more to these, as well as our plans to continue improving our work in 2022 and beyond. For more information about our individual event programs, refer to pages 8–9.



Left to Right: Esi Edugyan, Chantal Gibson, Billeh Nickerson, Joshua Bennett, Lauren Groff, John Freeman, Casey Plett

Our Programming

“We were bold and brave this year. We were one of the few to hold events in a hybrid format, with in-person authors joining digital authors on stage, and we did it safely. And now, we’re the model for how to do it well.”

Leslie Hurtig, VWF Artistic Director



Zoe Whittall, Rachel Yoder, Mona Awad and Artistic Director Leslie Hurtig share the stage for The Spectacular Complexity of Womanhood (©Dillon Byrne, 2021)

Festival Week

Each October, Granville Island comes alive with the energy of enthusiastic readers, visiting and local authors, and the hottest books of the season. In 2021, we welcomed award-winning author **Lawrence Hill** as our Guest Curator. We’re thrilled we were able to support a safe in-person experience with the help of over 200 volunteers and support team members. This year’s authors included **Lauren Groff, Anthony Doerr, Tomson Highway, Omar El Akkad, Miriam Toews, Cherie Jones**, and many more.

Spoken Word Curator Jillian Christmas and **Musical Director Sally Zori** returned this year for our Word! and Literary Cabaret events. Both were held in-person, and were instant must-attends: tickets sold out within days of release.

I’ll just come out and say VWF has absolutely become my favorite festival for so many reasons. I love how it thinks about and reaches so many different kinds of readers. You’re all so welcoming and such incredible hosts. And you’re so thoughtful about how you put together panels and think about books and authors thematically. Not only is it fun and inspiring creatively, but it helps me connect and feel like I’m part of a community of readers and writers that I value.

Mona Awad, 2021 Festival Author

Our 2021 Programming (continued)

Incite, presented in partnership with the Vancouver Public Library, provides bi-weekly conversations with authors from January through May that are free and open to all. This past year, we're proud to share that TELUS came on as a presenting partner, significantly expanding the reach of the digital broadcast. These events jumpstart the literary season each year by mixing the entertaining and provocative, highlighting anticipated new releases in poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. In 2021, we featured local favorites and internationally recognized authors, including **Michelle Goode**, **Billy-Ray Belcourt**, **Silvia Moreno-García**, and **Michael Moss**.

Now in its second year, our seasonal **Book Club** featured high-profile authors in intimate virtual conversations. This quarterly event series provided readers across Canada a copy of the author's book, and often was the exclusive Canadian launch for the biggest names of the season, including **Ethan Hawke** (*A Bright Ray of Darkness*), **Viet Thanh Nguyen** (*The Committed*), **Rivka Galchen** (*Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch*), and **Colson Whitehead** (*Harlem Shuffle*).

My Roots writing workshop continued this year, although in virtual form. With a record number of applicants, and once again facilitated by award-winning writer and teacher **Doretta Lau**, this workshop encouraged immigrant writers at all levels to think imaginatively about the places and landscapes that create 'home'. Writings were shared in our Books & Ideas Newsletter, which has over 18,000 subscribers.

Our **Special Events**, while remaining virtual in 2021, continued to draw major interest from readers—and authors—locally and abroad. **Dr. Jen Gunter** (*The Menopause Manifesto*), **Jody Wilson-Raybould** (*Indian in the Cabinet*), and the contributors of ***The Care We Dream Of*** all shared their perspectives on reclaiming movements in healthcare and politics.



Patrons await the start of *The Afternoon Tea at Performance Works*. (©Dillon Byrne, 2021)

From our Guest Curator, Lawrence Hill



I have always loved attending and supporting the Vancouver Writers Fest, which is one of the most dynamic, friendly, and diverse of its kind in the world. I was honoured to be asked to serve as the 2021 Guest Curator, as it gave me the opportunity to help writers and readers forge new and unexpected connections. I look forward to welcoming writers whose distinct voices will enrich our conversations in Canada and enhance our mutual understanding, appreciation, and respect. I have chosen to focus my curation on Black and Indigenous writers, because Canadians still have many miles to walk before they can say that Indigenous and Black people are treated with the same respect and accorded the same opportunities as other Canadians.

Supporting Youth

VWF is committed to increasing youth access to free, high-quality educational programming which expands perspectives and creates space for critical thinking in our venues, online, and in the classroom.

One third of our 2021 **Festival Programming** was events for youth. Our special Youth Brochure, produced annually, was sent to BC teachers, providing curriculum connections and reading levels for class visits to Granville Island or when streaming online. In 2021, we had approximately 530 classes stream our youth events at the Festival, serving over 19,000 K–12 students overall: a 58% increase from the year before!

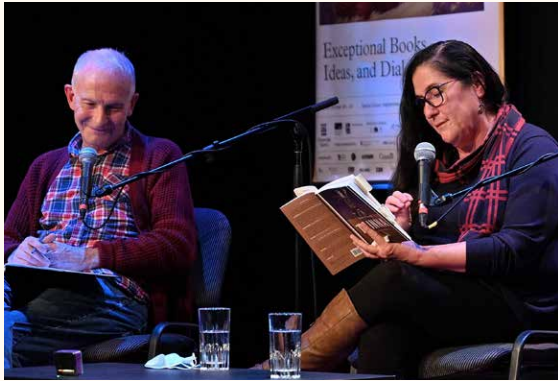
Festival Week student programming will return in person alongside live-streaming from 2022 onward. This means even more classrooms across the province—and across the country—will be able to access our youth events!

Our **Writers in the Classroom** series brought writers to BC classrooms virtually in 2021. A hallmark of this series is its intimate structure, where students can engage directly with authors on topics connected to their teacher's current curriculum needs. Over its spring and fall seasons, WITC brought 31 authors to 65 classrooms, covering topics from Indigenous environmental stewardship to post-apocalyptic genre-bending science fiction. Featured 2021 authors included **David A. Robertson**, **Ashley Spires**, **Jael Richardson**, **Wab Kinew**, and **Les Stroud**.

Our annual **Youth Writing Contest** continued to grow, with more submissions than ever before. The contest seeks to foster a love of writing and storytelling by providing a cash prize and public recognition for emerging writers in high school. Its increased success has allowed us to expand the contest even further: in 2022, we'll be offering a second writing contest for middle grade writers!

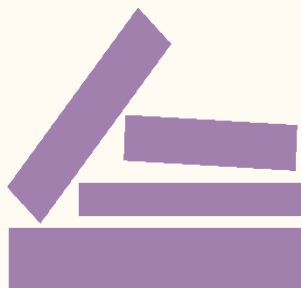


Left to Right: Tanya Boteju, Robin Stevenson, Cherie Dimaline, David A. Robertson; Ashley Spires presents Burt the Beetle to a class for Writers in the Classroom.



*Left to Right:
Bill Richardson,
Norma Dunning,
Cherie Jones,
Lawrence Hill,
Kamal Al-Solaylee,
Laura Lynch,
Arno Kopecky,
J.B. MacKinnon,
Ian Williams,
Danny Ramadan,
Miriam Toews,
Marsha Lederman,
Hiromi Goto,
Gord Hill*

Celebrating & Connecting



Books & Ideas

We regularly expand and revisit the way we communicate our programs through Books & Ideas, a weekly newsletter, and the Books & Ideas Audio series, a monthly podcast produced in-house. The newsletter and podcast directly serve our mandate to connect an ever wider audience with the power of stories and the conversations they provoke.

Newsletter

Started in 2019, **Books & Ideas** has been a one-stop digest for the Festival's upcoming events, and community news, and is a trusted resource for educators, librarians, and book lovers across British Columbia. In 2021, we produced this newsletter weekly, growing our subscriber base from 14,000 to over 18,000 individuals.

Podcast

The Vancouver Writers Fest's **Books & Ideas Audio** series released ten episodes in 2021, including three during Festival Week, amassing over 4,000 plays overall. Available on every major podcasting platform, our most popular episodes were Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in Conversation with Dionne Brand (with 608 individual plays), and a replay of our Seasonal Book Club event with Ethan Hawke (473 plays).

Whisky & Words

Whisky & Words remained online for 2021, but we were thrilled to be able to offer a limited-capacity series of Master Classes, with tasting kits delivered to participants. This fundraising event is a vital source of revenue, supporting our expanding, free Youth Education offerings. We're excited to be bringing this event back in 2022, with local food pairings, world-class whisky, and Master Class offerings.

Vancouver's Poet Laureate

We were proud to be a partner once again with the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Public Library in supporting **Vancouver's Poet Laureate program**. The "people's poet," this unique literary project connects with the city's diverse communities and is funded through a generous endowment from Dr. Yosef Wosk, OBC.

We're delighted that **Fiona Tinwei Lam** was named Vancouver's Poet Laureate for this term, and we look forward to engaging with her!

Our Partners

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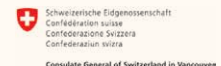
Kidsbooks



Media Sponsor



Government Support



Community Partner



Festival Supporter



We'd like to extend a special thank you to the publishers who helped support their authors' appearances at the 2021 Vancouver Writers Fest.





Live ASL interpretation at Caribbean Masterpieces in 2021.

Our Team

Leslie Hurtig, Artistic Director

Kaile Shilling, Executive Director

Zoe Grams, Marketing & Publicity Director

Chelsee Damen, Operations Manager

Lauren Dembicky-Polivka, Development Manager

Ariel Hudnall, Marketing & Publicity Manager

Leena Desai, Senior Education & Development
Coordinator

Matt Ros, Operations & Admin Coordinator

Joyce Wan, Marketing & Digital Production
Coordinator

Sarah Wang, Programming Coordinator

Please contact us to learn more
Main Office: 604.681.6330

Sponsorship Opportunities

Lauren Dembicky-Polivka

Development Manager

ldembicky@writersfest.bc.ca

604.262.1190

Education Programming Inquiries

Leena Desai

Senior Education & Development 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.