

VANCOUVER
WRITERS
FEST

2023

WRITERSFEST.BC.CA



Annual Report



The Vancouver Writers Fest envisions 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. Our flagship Festival is one of the largest and most prestigious in North America; every October, we bring acclaimed, established, and emerging writers from across Canada and the world to Granville Island, where they connect with tens of thousands of enthusiastic readers.

The Vancouver Writers Fest carries out our work on unceded xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tseil-Waututh) territory.



Left to Right:
 Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Mona Awad, Ashley Audrain, Dionne Irving, Celeste Ng, Joel A. Sutherland, Nabem Ruthnum, Rebecca Solnit, Chris Turner, John Vaillant, audience members at the 2023 Festival

Our Year in Review

At our Festival's closing night event, American writer and activist Rebecca Solnit said, "Hope is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency." These felt like the perfect words to summarize the mission behind our programming for the year. Coming out of a pandemic, and grappling with climate catastrophe, socioeconomic woes, and international conflicts on a horrific scale, the Vancouver Writers Fest strove to bring book-lovers together; connecting them to authors and conversations that provided hope for a more empathetic, inspired, and just society. In collaboration with Guest Curator Elamin Abdelmehmoud, we sought to meet the moment, curating events that addressed topics such as deepening inequality and growing political division, alongside celebrating how joy can bring us together.

Audiences returned with enthusiasm to our year-round programming and flagship October Festival, helping us to break pre-pandemic ticket sales, and boost our much-needed revenue stream. Support from a loyal and enthusiastic volunteer base, a wealth of community partners, and donors, sponsors,

and other generous funders, ensured we were able to produce a well-run, exciting series of events, hosting important voices from across Canada and around the world.

We connected writers with students year-round in their classrooms and on our stages, and further inspired students through our Youth Writing Contest and My Roots writing workshop. Each year, we see the direct result of these school-aged connections, when many of these grown students return to the Festival as patrons, volunteers, board members, and sometimes even authors.

This was also a year to build upon our learning from our Accessibility Roundtable, made up of members with lived expertise from the Blind, Deaf, and Disability communities, who gathered monthly and shared information and perspectives on our work. Their invaluable work resulted in a more accessible Festival on multiple levels. The results are detailed later in this report.

It is through essential dialogue, new ideas, and exceptional books that we aim to connect



community in these troubled times. We are dedicated to showcasing the best in literary publishing, storytelling, and writing; and introducing readers to their next favourite author. We are proud to share our successes from the past year in this annual report.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leslie Hurtig".

Leslie Hurtig
Artistic Director

Our Year-Round Numbers

29,266

Individual Tickets

173

Authors

104

Events

18,200+

Subscribers

A Message from Our Board

The Vision of the Vancouver International Writers Festival Society is a world in which the transformative power of books and ideas is the foundation of an empathetic, inspired, and just society. In these challenging times in the world, that Vision is more important than ever. Through the flagship week-long Festival and the many Special Events over the course of the year, the VWF has continued to work towards that Vision, and our Mission of connecting people to exceptional books, ideas, and dialogue.

The programming that our Artistic Director Leslie Hurtig and her team puts together over the year continues to be inspiring and provides opportunities for everyone to learn, to find comfort, to be challenged, to escape, or to be entertained—or any of the myriad reasons we seek books, ideas, and dialogue. It is an honour and pleasure to serve and support that work, and we are grateful for the dedication and hard work from the team.

Over the past year the Board bid farewell to some long-serving members and welcomed six new board members. The VWF also bid farewell to our Executive Director, Kaile Shilling, who left to explore new chapters, and we thank her for her service over the past three years. We are excited to welcome our Interim Executive Director Susan Jackson.

Although there have been some changes on the Board, there has been no change in our commitment to working together toward the goal of a more equitable and just environment for our authors, audiences, volunteers, staff, and communities.

Of course, we could not do any of our work without the continued support of our volunteers, members, and festival-goers, and our government, individual, and corporate sponsors. Your contributions are what makes all of this possible and we truly thank each and every one of you!



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen M. Gilmore".

Karen Gilmore
Board Chair

Our 2023 Board of Directors

Karen Gilmore
Chair

Alison Broddle
Vice-Chair

Benita Loughlin
Treasurer

Pat Cumming
Secretary

Michelle Blackwell
Jaiden Dembo
Kyla Epstein

Julia Iannacone

Alexia Jones
Steve Tornes
Sonia Wong

Our 2023 Finances

Total 2023 Income

\$1,737,915

Public Sector Revenue **\$718,136**

Ticket & Earned Revenue **\$629,637**

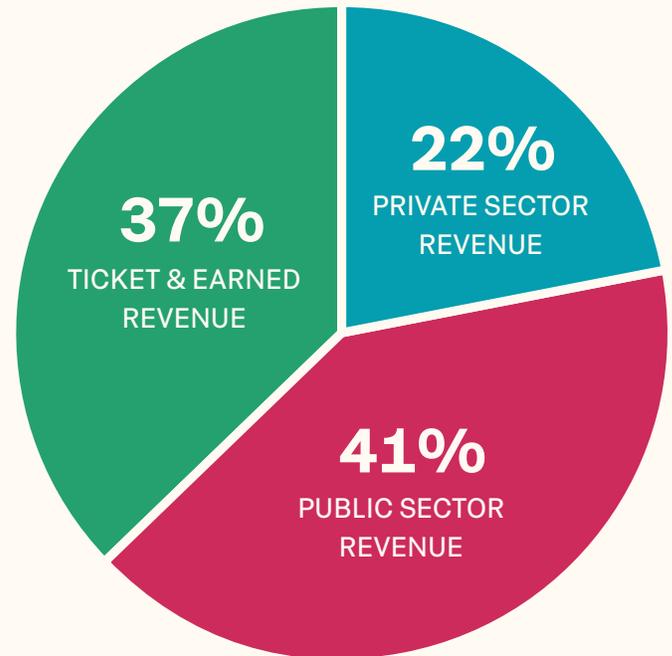
Private Sector Revenue **\$390,141**

Total 2023 Expenses

\$1,680,862

Our success is built on a strong foundation of partnerships and supporters who help make our flagship Festival and year-round programming possible.

We are thrilled to report that the 2023 Festival marked a successful return to our pre-Covid ticket sales and venue capacities, with over **20,800 tickets sold**, **nearly 35% of events sold out**, and **80% of total venue capacity filled**.



Our Economic Impact – Selected Highlights

86% of attendees spent money on Granville Island during the Festival

Nearly **\$250,000** in book sales at events

393 hotel nights booked for Festival authors, moderators, and publishers

The Festival

Every October, Granville Island comes alive with the energy of engaged readers, visiting and local authors, and exemplary new books across every genre at our flagship Festival. Taking place over one celebratory week, the 2023 Festival offered 85 events in a variety of stimulating presentation formats.

Our efforts and the enthusiasm of our audience resulted in a successful return to our pre-COVID Festival scope, for the first time since the pandemic began. 145 authors joined us at the 2023 Festival, which welcomed Elamin Abdelmehmoud as Guest Curator and Benjamin Millman as our new Musical Director, alongside returning Spoken Word Curator Jillian Christmas. We were proud to host literary luminaries such as Esi Edugyan, Michelle Good, Anne Berest, Kevin Chong, Patrick deWitt, Lauren Groff, Celeste Ng, Naomi Klein, Suzette Mayr, Paul Harding, and Darrel J. McLeod.



Jarrett Martineau and Naomi Klein at the Festival.



From our Guest Curator, Elamin Abdelmehmoud

I don't know about you, but my last year has largely been defined by tentativeness and uncertainty. Perhaps the same is true for you. I am deeply honoured to be this year's Guest Curator at the Vancouver Writers Fest, and I'm selfishly using this moment to explore some of these themes.

In that spirit, I'm excited to meet you and also meet the moment. I have curated a slate of 5 events that reflect some of the most urgent conversations right now—conversations many of us are having privately, brought to Festival stages so we can live in these questions together.

Festival Snapshot

85 Festival Events
in 2023

145 Authors &
Participants

20,800+
Individual Tickets

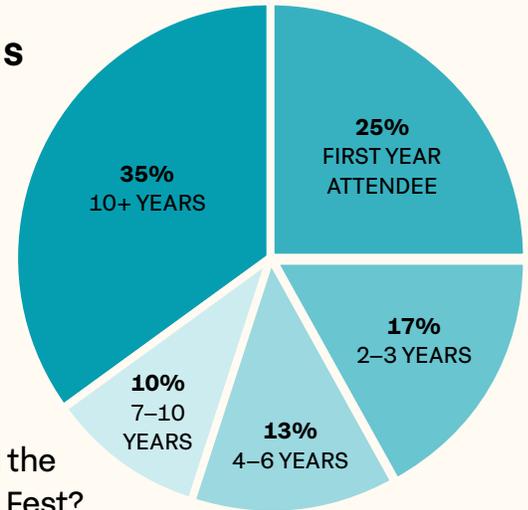
11,590+
K-12 Students Inspired



NEW & RETURNING FANS

*How
many
years*

have you attended the
Vancouver Writers Fest?

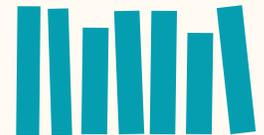


said that attending a Festival
event caused them to
think differently
about an issue or topic

Over **50%** of patrons attended more
than two events

95% of patrons are “extremely” or
“very” likely to recommend future VWF
events to their friends and family

Over 60%



of attendees bought and/or read books
by featured authors prior to the Festival

Our Year-Round Programming

In addition to our flagship Festival in October, we program year-round **Special Events**, connecting Vancouver audiences with the highly anticipated latest works by world-class writers. From intimate discussions in cozy theatres to sold-out cathedrals full of lifelong fans, these year-round events take place on stages across the city, and host some of the most celebrated Canadian and international writers of our times.



Left to Right: Margaret Atwood, Ian Williams, Zadie Smith, Kent Monkman

**10 Special Events
in 2023**

Margaret Atwood*

Louise Penny*

R. F. Kuang*

**Colson
Whitehead**

Zadie Smith

Andrey Kurkov

Eleanor Catton

Brent Butt

**Rick Mercer
& Jann Arden**

**Kent Monkman
& Gisèle Gordon**

*Part of our widely-promoted
spring Bestsellers series

Our Year-Round Programming (Continued)



John Vaillant speaks with Laura Lynch at Incite.



Michelle Good and Carleigh Baker.



2023 My Roots writing workshop for adults.

Incite

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, in-person or online. These events jumpstart the literary season each year by highlighting emerging and established authors alike, featuring anticipated new releases in fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Our 2023 lineup included Cherie Dimaline, Vincent Lam, Jessica Johns, Jen Sookfong Lee, and John Vaillant, among many others.

Digital Festival

Virtual programming remains highly sought after among our audiences. In 2023, we were thrilled to offer the second annual Digital Festival, featuring a curated selection of 25 professionally filmed events from our flagship October Festival. Audiences from across the province and beyond tune in for these events, which are available for viewing over the winter holidays through a pay-what-you-can pass. Featured authors included Paul Harding, Michelle Good, Rebecca Solnit, Christina Sharpe, Kai Thomas, Anne Berest, and Kevin Chong.

My Roots

My Roots is our popular one-day writing workshop for immigrants to Canada, offered for free to writers with origins from across the globe. Adult participants worked with local writer Eddy Boudel Tan, a Writers' Trust of Canada rising star, to deepen and enrich their writing through guided exercises and techniques.

For the first time, we also held a second My Roots workshop designed for youth aged 16–19. Young immigrants and children of immigrants worked with acclaimed author Tanya Boteju to explore themes of place, home, and belonging in their writing.

Inspiring 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.

Nearly one third of our 2023 **Festival Programming** consisted of events for youth, which invited classrooms to Granville Island and were also livestreamed for free across the province and beyond. Our Youth Brochure was mailed to schools and teachers in BC, providing curriculum connections and reading levels. 11,500+ students participated in-person and online in youth events at our 2023 Festival, with an estimated 1,615 students supported through Festival ticket and bus subsidies.

Our popular **Writers in the Classroom** series brought writers into BC classrooms to engage directly with students on a variety of topics connected to their teachers' curriculum needs. In 2023, WITC brought 33 authors to nearly 1,000 students, covering topics from marine biodiversity, to debate skills, to Indigenous inventions and more. Featured authors included Kim Spencer, Kuljinder Kaur Brar, Danny Ramadan, Kirsten Pendreigh, Henry Tsang, Richard Scrimger, and Valerie Jerome.

We were blown away by the quantity and quality of the submissions to our annual **Youth Writing Contest**, which offers one contest for middle grade students and one for high school students. The contest, presented with support from Emily Carr University of Art + Design, seeks to foster a love of writing and storytelling by providing a cash prize and public recognition for emerging writers.



Top: Crystal Smith and Kirsten Pendreigh at the Festival.

Bottom: Danny Ramadan at a Writers in the Classroom event.

Accessibility

The Vancouver Writers Fest is committed to the ongoing work of making our events low-barrier, accessible experiences for diverse community members of all ages. Over the past two years, we worked with an **Accessibility Round Table** to audit the accessibility of our programming, and discuss additional practices that could be implemented to support our audiences.

We offer free and/or discounted tickets for students and youth under 25, to encourage a lifelong belief in the power of books and storytelling.

Supporting the *Next Generation* Of Readers, Writers, & Thinkers

- 1,615 students supported by **ticket and bus subsidies**
- **50% discount** on tickets for youth under 25
- Recipients of **free Festival tickets** included SFU English, UBC Creative Writing, and Langara English departments

“ *I was so pleased with your support with my hearing challenges. Nothing like walking up to a reserved seat in the front row with my name on it!* ”

—2023 Attendee

Some of the accessibility supports we offered in 2023 include:

- Increased **ASL interpretation** at events, selected in consultation with the d/Deaf community.
- New in 2023: ASL interpreters at the Festival Opening Reception, and student volunteers from the Sign Language Interpretation program at Douglas College to support with off-stage ASL interpretation.
- **Auto-generated captions** at select events, and **human-edited captions** for all our Digital Festival events.
- Increased **accessibility training for volunteers**, including two sighted guide sessions and one accessibility awareness session.
- New in 2023: a designated **low sensory space** on Granville Island for guests who need to decompress or relax.
- New **audio guides** and updated **visual stories** for each venue, and an **annotated map** with accessibility information.
- **Simple text versions** of our Festival Program Guide that can be read by a screen reader.
- **Reserved seats** for audience members with mobility issues or other seating needs.
- **Discounted tickets** for youth under 25, and sliding scale tickets available on request.
- **Free livestream access** for school-aged youth events, and \$10 tickets to attend in-person.
- **Free tickets** provided to select community organizations, colleges, and universities.

3,500+

people supported by
ticket subsidies

Championing Authors & Publishers

Our Reach

11,700+ Instagram Followers
9,480+ Twitter/X Followers
9,000+ Facebook Followers
18,200+ Email Subscribers
23,000 Program Guides Distributed
60+ Media Hits for the 2023 Festival
1.5 Million Impressions on Online Ads

Books & Ideas

We share anticipated releases, literary news, and important conversations with a wider audience through our weekly newsletter and monthly podcast. The **Books & Ideas newsletter** provides a one-stop digest for VWF's upcoming events, as well as broader community news and events. It has become a trusted resource for educators, librarians, and book lovers across British Columbia, with an email open rate of 51%—well over the industry standard.

The **Books & Ideas Audio podcast** is a diverse, powerful selection of some of the Vancouver Writers Fest's most compelling conversations, released once a month on all major podcast platforms. We reached a 143% increase in listeners in 2023, across 46 countries.

Championing the extraordinary work of authors and publishers is at the very heart of what we do. Every book and author we feature is part of an extensive marketing campaign, and publishers have grown to depend on VWF as a reliable partner and platform for elevating the profiles of their authors. Festival participants are spotlighted in our digital **Summer Reading List**, and our eye-catching **Program Guide** that is distributed to bookstores, coffee shops, arts organizations, and other venues across Metro Vancouver.



Pop-Up Festival Bookstore



The Festival Bookstore was open from October 16–22 in a pop-up space on Granville Island, managed by our official bookseller Book Warehouse (a division of Black Bond Books). Vigorously promoted in the Program Guide, online, and in the introductory notes of every event, the Festival Bookstore carries the featured new releases, along with a selection of backlisted titles. All year round, we sell featured books at our Special Events and Incite, with sales managed by local, independent bookstores.

Our 2023 Book Sales

Over 7,000 books sold
& Nearly **\$250,000** in book sales

Who We Are



Our Year-Round Staff in 2023

Leslie Hurtig

Artistic Director

Kaile Shilling*

Executive Director

Chelsee Damen

Operations Manager

Leena Desai

Senior Education and
Development Coordinator

Matt Ros*

Operations Coordinator

April Thompson

Senior Development Manager

Joyce Wan

Marketing & Digital Production
Coordinator

Sarah Wang

Programming Coordinator

*Kaile Shilling and Matt Ros left in 2023, and at the start of 2024, we welcomed **Celeste Cadieux-Rey** as our Senior Operations Coordinator, and **Susan Jackson** as our Interim Executive Director.



The Vancouver Writers Fest is proud to be a certified Living Wage Employer.

Our Volunteers

The Vancouver Writers Fest is powered by the time, energy, and expertise of our extraordinary volunteers. In 2023, our volunteer team expanded by 21%, welcoming **184 new volunteers** to work alongside returning friends and colleagues.

Vancouver Writers Fest volunteers are high school students, retirees, and everything in between. They represent a diverse range of skills and backgrounds. Together, they contributed an astonishing total of **4,461 hours** in 2023.



328

volunteers
in 2023

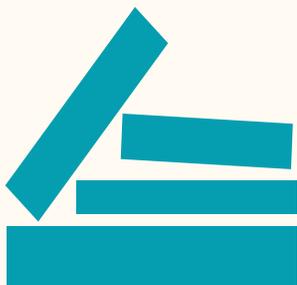


92%

of volunteers surveyed
indicated plans to return

Our Festival family grows each year in the months leading up to the October Festival. We are thrilled to regularly welcome back seasonal team members like Marketing Consultant **Zoe Grams** and Festival Marketing and PR Director **Ariel Hudnall** from ZG Stories, Production Manager **Eduardo Ottoni** and his team at EventLAB, Festival Hospitality Manager **James Tyler Irvine**, Catering Manager **Elizabeth Glancy**, and many more valued collaborators. We'd like to give a special thank you to **Dale Flexman** and **Alison Hart** — valuable fundraising volunteers who have done huge lifts on our annual Whisky & Words fundraiser over the years.

Our Community



We're proud to be part of a rich, interconnected cultural community. Treasured partnerships with fellow arts organizations such as VIFF, Indian Summer Festival, Talking Stick Festival, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Public Library, The Vancouver Latin American Cultural Society, and Carousel Theatre enhance our promotional reach and our accessibility work, while helping to support other not-for-profit organizations.

New partnerships in 2023 with The Chinatown Storytelling Centre, UBC Black Caucus, UBC Centre for Climate Justice, and Hogan's Alley Society provided valuable new perspectives and connections.



The Vancouver Writers Fest is a proud member of the Canadian Association of Literary Festivals.



Book Club for Inmates

This year brought us a meaningful new partnership with Book Clubs for Inmates, a charity that organizes volunteer-led book clubs within federal penitentiaries across Canada. We worked with them to facilitate three visits to minimum and medium security institutions with authors Eddy Boudel Tan and Daniel Kalla, who led thoughtful discussions about their work with inmate book clubs.

Vancouver's Poet Laureate

We're proud to continue our partnership 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.

Fiona Tinwei Lam continues her term as the 2022–2024 Poet Laureate, and we're delighted that her projects in 2023 have included the Poetry Video Contest based on last year's award-winning City Poems, Poetry in Parks free community workshops, and a poetry booth at the DTES Heart of the City Festival.

Our Partners

Title Sponsor



Collector's Edition Sponsor



Media Partners



Bestseller Sponsor



Limited Edition Sponsor



Community Partner



Government Support



Festival Supporter



We'd like to thank all of the artisans and vendors of Granville Island who donate food, goods, and services to us during Festival Week and throughout the year.

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

Please contact us to learn more
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Sponsorship Opportunities

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Education Programming Inquiries

Leena Desai
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