



MORE

by **wordfest**

2025-2027 Strategic Plan

About Wordfest

Artistic Mission & Mandate

To not just survive but thrive in the current artistic climate of uncertainty and inevitable change, Wordfest strives to be four key things as an organization: resonant, relevant, responsive, and responsible.

Wordfest™ beams out from Calgary, Alberta in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, Treaty 7 territory. We are an entrepreneurial arts non-profit founded in 1996 as one of Canada's leading literary festivals. Our goal? To help audiences of all ages think bigger, dig deeper, and build meaningful relationships with the world's most compelling authors (prioritizing Canadian talent). Whether you love fiction or non-fiction, memoir or mysteries, food culture or pop culture, politics or poetry, major prize winners or breakout stars, a Wordfest show is the exclamation between the book being written and the book being read.

Our small team's mission has evolved to include producing lively, accessible shows year-round, in addition to the fall Imaginairium (Canada's Liveliest Literary Festival). Our unique (and free) Wordfest Youth program focuses on Grades 5 to 12 to fuel teen literacy, providing interactive experiences and class sets of books to thousands of students every year. We also produce Imagine On Air Audio to make our programming even more accessible.

Moving forward, Wordfest will continue to excel as the key catalyst for literary engagement in Calgary and Alberta, while helping to increase the national and international profile of Canadian authors and books.

"Your shows are charged with imagination and verve. The themes of the interviews and showcases, the back-stage choices of whom to pair with whom, make each event unique and make a writer's words buzz with energy and warmth in front of an audience. The respect and love for writers and readers is palpable." –Governor-General award-winning poet Lorna Crozier

History

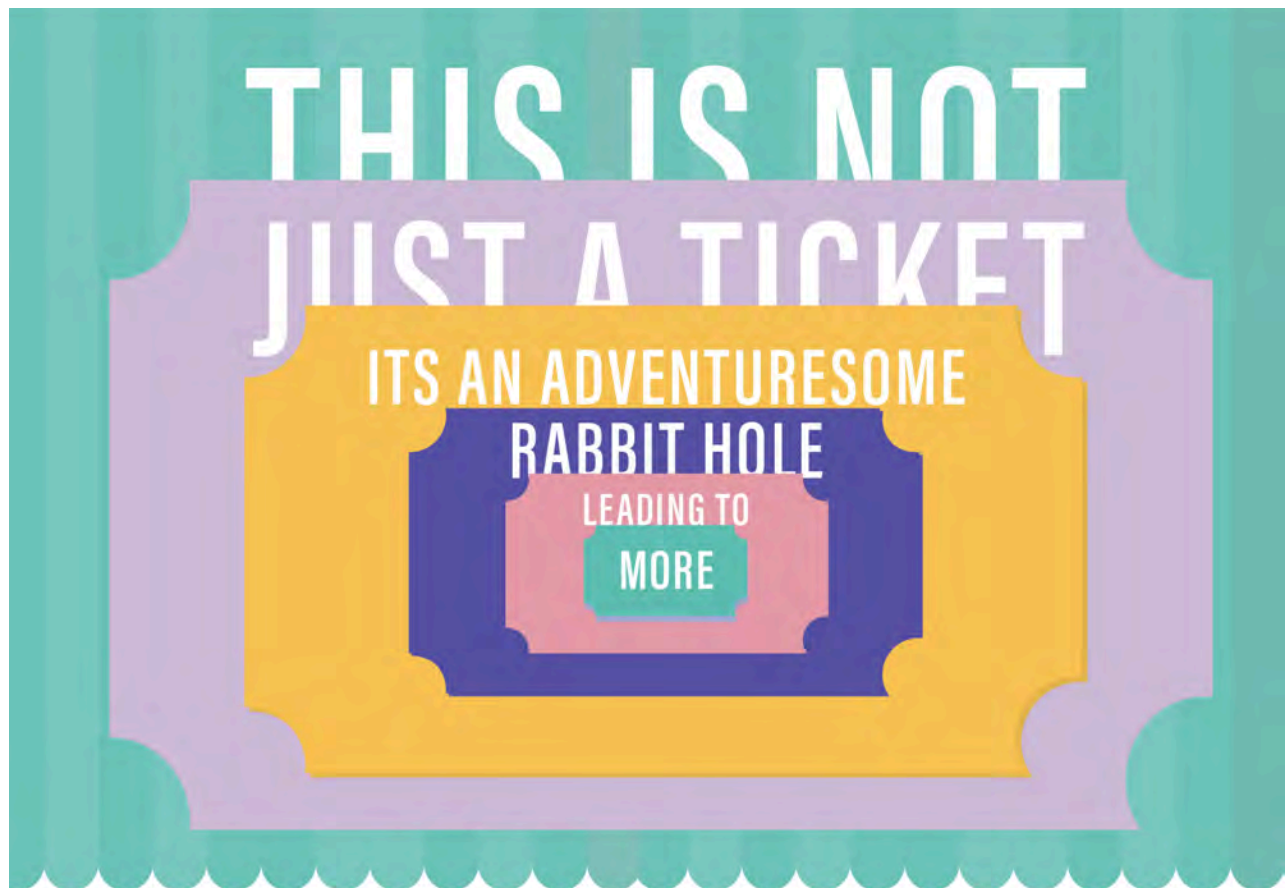
Wordfest was established in 1996 by committed community partners including The Banff Centre, Calgary Public Library, Mount Royal University, and The Writers' Guild of Alberta, and incorporated in 1997 as a not-for-profit organization and annual festival. Since its inception, Wordfest has striven to increase and enhance awareness of the most compelling Canadian authors, as well as international authors, through accessible events designed to engage diverse audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

In 2017, a key strategic partnership was formed with Calgary Public Library to transform the second floor of Memorial Park Library (the oldest library in Alberta) into a vibrant arts and culture space. Now with its own 140-seat theatre, including the only licensed bar in a library in North America, Wordfest was able to program year-round, increasing the diversity and range of the authors it could showcase (and the related audiences it could attract). Through its stellar reputation among authors, publishers, and agents, Wordfest helps put Central Library's Patricia M. Whelan Theatre, MRU's Taylor Centre, Decidedly Jazz Dance Centre, The Grand, and Arts Commons on the literary map.

Beginning in 2019, to increase equity and impact, Wordfest's Youth program was refocused on increasing teen literacy and highly theatrical engagement experiences were offered free of charge to students in Grades 5 to 12.

Responding immediately to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, Wordfest pivoted to produce original online programming that reached global audiences exceeding 80,000 and produced 150+ shows over the two-year period that garnered national acclaim.

From 2022 to 2024, Wordfest successfully returned to live in-person, year-round programming, continually improving and enhancing its ability to spark meaningful author-audience connections. With the introduction and integration of Wordfest's "MORE" branding campaign in 2025, the experienced team and focused board are well-situated to continue this Calgary success story, beaming out "wordy goodness" near and far from the foothills of the Canadian Rockies.



Our Context

Wordfest is your ticket to MORE. (Even our thought bubbles have thought bubbles.)

Wordfest is able to think differently about the literary arts because we are rooted in a city at the confluence of the Bow and the Elbow, reckoning with the past with our eyes on the future, rocked and rejuvenated by busts and booms. We reflect Calgary's Blue Sky brand: "a city of blue-sky thinking and innovation, a place of unexpected possibilities and a place of confluence —where peoples, lands, cultures and ideas converge." Calgary has the youngest and most highly educated populace of any major Canadian city, with a large number of American and international permanent residents. We are also increasingly diverse, with more than one third of residents identifying as racialized. We attract knowledge workers, not only in oil and gas, but also in tech, renewables, gaming, and film and television. We remain a city of entrepreneurs, free thinkers, and risk takers. We are capable of more than even we think we are.

This echoes Wordfest's overall programming philosophy of being *more*. More than one kind of author, one kind of reader, one kind of book. More than panels, more than readings. More than a festival. More engaging, entertaining, welcoming. *More than you expect*.



We have created a year-round organization that was built to stay ahead of the curve, nimble and unafraid of taking well-considered risks. Unlike Toronto or Vancouver (or New York and London), Calgary has to try harder, do better—yes, *think bigger*—to attract the authors we want to showcase. That’s a challenge we embrace.

Wordfest fully understands its key role in the local, provincial, and national literary arts presentation ecosystem. The economic benefits are substantial, whether paying sector-leading fees to artists and arts workers, filling local venues, hotels and restaurants, and spotlighting community partners. Our programming partnerships enable the Calgary Public Library and other arts organizations to make their funding go further. And our events generate yearly book sales of \$170,000, contributing to the resiliency of independent booksellers and the Canadian publishing industry.

We right-size each opportunity to ensure the best experience and full attendance for authors and audiences. We present in our 140-seat theatre at Memorial Park Library, as well as in larger venues of 240 to 1,700 seats, leaving book launches and smaller shows for local bookstores and writing series. This enables Wordfest to serve the larger community by creating deeper sessions on craft or an aspect of the publishing industry that would be of general interest.

Wordfest consults with publishers, agents, other authors, and community members to help identify the best year-round mix of literary talent. This enables us to repeatedly program future award nominees, as well as debut novelists before they become superstars.

“Your festival is so beautifully run. Your crew and staff do their utmost to make both writers and the festival attendees feel welcome. And you score 11 on a 10-point scale when it comes to creativity. There is no other festival quite like it!” –Nita Prose, author of the international best-selling series *The Maid*

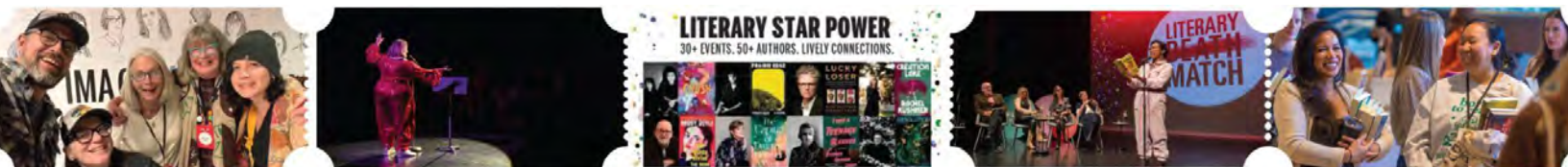
Core Activities

In this age of sound bites, we design our shows to spark deep engagement.

Wordfest presents the world's best authors and books to inclusive audiences in a variety of professionally produced formats, with an emphasis on supporting and sustaining audience engagement with the arts in Alberta. To enhance our experiences, we commission and showcase artists from other disciplines outside the literary arts, such as music, theatre, film, video, and graphic and fine art. By creatively programming across all genres, enthusiasms, and platforms and then marketing our arts experiences extensively, we have been able to attract, sustain, and grow audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

“Wordfest has jettisoned readings in favour of much more exciting and wide-ranging conversations with writers punctuated with tightrope-worthy events that will keep me coming back for many years to come!” –Charlotte Gill, author of *Almost Brown*

Our programming is designed to create the best opportunities for authors and audiences to meaningfully connect. Our professionally produced experiences range from “talk-show style” conversations to original, theatrical event concepts (including creative staging, projections, video, original music) and Spirited Conversations or lunch and dinner salons, paired with local food and beverage partners.



Imaginairium Festival

Every October, we showcase 45+ authors in 35+ original live arts experiences (e.g. What a Pair! conversations, Big Ideas showcases, our unique The Way We... storytelling showcase, How to's, The O'Neill Reads Talk Show, Literary Death Match, Deep Dish Culture) over five days.

Approximately 85% of the artists presented are Canadian, showcasing major stars, groundbreakers, vital voices, and emerging talents. Mainstage acts are held at Memorial Park, DJD Dance Centre, and the Bella Concert Hall, with youth events at Central Library and DJD Dance Centre.

"My event was called a variety show, so it had music by Kris Demeanor, smart discussion lead by Deborah Willis (*Girlfriend on Mars*), a reading (me), a visual and sound presentation by Sig Burwash for their awesome graphic novel, *Vera Bushwack*, a photo presentation by Leah Hennel (*Alone Together*), and a dramatic reading by playwright Clem Martini (*Cantata & The Extinction Therapist*). I think I can say this since I'm a writer, the night was positively electric, and way more interesting and engaging than five literary readings. The crowd loved it."

—Carleigh Baker, author of *Last Woman*





Year-Round Programming

Wordfest's year-round season offers live arts experiences ranging from 75-minute "talk-show style" conversations with short readings and audience Q&A to 90-minute original, theatrical event concepts (including creative staging, projections, video, original music, and local food and beverage partners). Through strategic partnerships with larger venues (including MRU's Taylor Centre & Werklund Centre and investments in target marketing, we're also attracting new audiences who are drawn to romance, graphic novels, poetry, our Way We Storytelling events, and cross-genre experiences.

"Wordfest is so friendly, open, wide-ranging, interesting, and entertaining. It is so incredible to have an experience that brings us all together. This sense of community, belonging, learning, sharing, growing, laughing, crying and all in all having a great time is soul-renewing." –Wordfest Audience Member





Youth Program

Wordfest’s Youth Program focuses on fueling teen literacy in Grades 5 to 12 to spark the next generation of engaged Calgarians and avid readers. Teen literacy is a growing challenge, according to our educator surveys and outreach, as well as current education research.

Our accessible programming model (offered at no cost to students and schools) enables us to connect the world’s most inspiring authors—such as Sarah Polley, David A. Robertson, Yann Martel, Cadence Weapon, Cherie Dimaline, Tegan & Sara, Omar El Akkad, and Matty Matheson—with thousands of students in interactive theatrical experiences designed to inspire a love of reading. Donors provide much-needed class sets to Calgary schools, along with free busing to our venues. Teens come alive when they are exposed to life-affirming ideas, and leave informed and empowered. They ask questions, get autographs, sign up for library cards, and can’t wait to dig into books that animate and illuminate their engagement with the world. Learn more about Wordfest Youth [here](#).

“As a high-needs school, we often face barriers to accessing enriching educational opportunities. The subsidized programming was crucial for us, ensuring that financial barriers didn’t prevent our students from participating. The excitement of attending live author sessions, where hundreds of students gathered, created a sense of community. Many of our students felt seen and heard, inspired to express their own voices during the Q&A. Thanks to Wordfest, we saw firsthand how literature can spark curiosity, empathy, and a lifelong love of reading.” –Calgary Educator





Imagine On Air

Wordfest produces a curated selection of professionally packaged audio and video programming, which further expands our reach locally, nationally, and internationally. We think of these online offerings as yet another way to connect the world's best audiences to the world's best authors, enabling our audience to focus on the big ideas, life-changing insights, and moments of magic that define Wordfest events. [Click here to listen](#) to our latest audio releases, custom-crafted by Wordfest.

"I love the variety and being introduced to new authors. And the honesty, integrity, and willingness of all participants to share their stories, experiences, failures and successes for everyone. The take-away learnings are amazing."

—Wordfest Audience Member

