

2025 Supporter Report

Wordfest's milestone 30th year was marked by record attendance, sold-out shows, and creative connections fuelled by overwhelming support from the Calgary community. Wordfest's national and international reputation remains excellent (based on audience and author surveys), with our activities putting Calgary on the map as the first choice of publishers, authors, and agents when it comes to Canadian appearances. By the end of December 2025, Wordfest presented 139 artists in 108 activities for audiences reaching 24,029. As part of our contribution to the country's "Elbows Up" initiative, 90 percent of the artists featured were proudly Canadian.



2025 Highlights

This year saw Wordfest fully realize its programming philosophy of delivering 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 from a literary event.

Among the 139 authors and artists we presented in 2025, 48 call Calgary home. The impressive range of local artists included Said M'Dahoma, "The Pastry Nerd" and book champion, at our annual Canada Reads celebration; Lee Kvern, for whom Wordfest commissioned poker-themed cookies inspired by her latest novel *Catch Me on The Flipside*; romantasy *New York Times* bestseller Danielle L. Jensen; TikTok sensation Josie Balka; Deborah Willis and Kris Demeanor who starred in an epic Variety Show at the Imaginairium; jazz musicians Timothonius and Jane providing improv stylings to the festival's Poetry Cabaret; and performances by Calgary's

fabulous duo Charms (Meg & Denis Dufresne, the current CCMA Fiddler of the Year) at our spirited conversation between The Hebridean Baker and Julie Van Rosendaal. And, of course, our 30th Anniversary Celebration in June featuring local luminaries Ali Bryan, Marcello Di Cintio, Will Ferguson, Cheryl Foggo, Richard Harrison, Joshua Whitehead, and Teresa Wong, with a special performance by musician (and Wordfest alumni) Tom Phillips.



Year-Round Programming

Year-round programming for adults increased to 48 unique shows (up from 35 in 2024), enabling us to stretch engagement opportunities out, experiment with unique venue activations, and build enthusiasm circles of Calgary audiences across a range of genres and interests. And our ambitious curatorial approach has found ways to do both in-depth conversation and multi-media/multi-genre “variety” shows—and have it all feel like “Wordfest.” The breadth of our year-round season ranged from timely conversations about the future of journalism with Mark McKinnon, Gabrielle Drolet, and Brittney McNamara, presented in partnership with the Canadian Association of Journalists, through to immersive lobby activations at Central Library to welcome fantasy phenom R.F. Kuang, through to staging an improvised one-man show (full of props and sound cues) with Max Kerman, the frontman of the award-winning touring band Arkells, inspired by his new book, *Try Hard: Creative Work in Progress*.

One of the most profound, lasting highlights was Writers’ Trust Weston International Award winner Robert Macfarlane, who ended his North American tour for *Is A River Alive?* with us in Calgary. He raved about the experience to his editor: “Wordfest curated-created the most amazing evening/event. A remarkable confluence of people and waters. The team is next level. It was an incredible fillip: Leroy Little Bear drew us all together and basically said it all with clarity & simplicity, then Corb Lund (water activist & legend of a musician) sang us in and out.”



We turned our 30th Anniversary into a year-long tribute to the many artistic voices working across diverse genres that have defined Wordfest’s past, present and future. This included welcoming back notable alumni Guy Gavriel Kay, Miriam Toews, and of course Margaret Atwood, who bookended our 2025 season with a sold-out show at the Jack Singer Concert Hall in December.

This is a note from wildlife conservationist and author Kevin Van Tighem about Wordfest’s deep connection to community and commitment to our artists and audiences:

“I drove home in a happy glow last evening after a wonderful book launch staged by Wordfest and hosted by Rosemary Griebel. The event, at the Memorial Park Library building where I still remember taking out books in my childhood years, had a full house that included family, old friends and new friends. Wordfest’s generosity in hosting the Calgary launch of *Understory: An Ecologist’s Memoir of Loss and Hope* can’t be overestimated; they were loaded right up with preparations for the Imaginairium and yet, when I called, they scrambled to add this launch to their roster and made it a night to remember.”

Calgary and region are blessed to have an organization that brings writers and readers together in such creative and inspiring ways. Never take it for granted—these sorts of cultural gems don’t happen by accident.” — **Kevin Van Tighem**

Please watch this short video of audience testimonials on the Wordfest experience. Film by Pluto Pictures: <https://wordfest.com/2025/video/perfect-night-out/>



Imaginairium Festival

We staged another successful 2025 Imaginairium festival, right-sized to 36 events over six days, primarily featuring one or two authors with professional Calgary-based hosts. The return of so many past Wordfest superstars (along with unique Canadian appearances by E. Jean Carroll and chef Gabrielle Hamilton) to our 30th Anniversary Festival was gratifying.

We succeeded at keeping attendance at capacity and earned revenue high, selling a record number of festival passes since our return to live programming (190 paid passes last year, up significantly from our average of 71 in 2022–2024). Passholder demand and strong single-ticket sales resulted in sold-out shows at Memorial Park Library, Central Library, and Decidedly Jazz Dance Theatre. Glowing post-festival surveys of Audiences, Artists, Educators & Volunteers reinforced the success of the 2025 Imaginairium.



Wordfest attended the Canadian Association of Literary Festivals (CALF) Conference in Ottawa last November, and our programming is the envy of our peers. As is the size and demographic variety of our audiences. And while everyone else is relying on last-minute ticket purchases, we've created a FOMO culture in which audience members buy their tickets early and register for festival shows in advance if they have a pass.

This is a note from Charidy Johnston, the VP of Sales & Marketing at Penguin Random House Canada, who attended the Imaginairium Festival for the first time in 2025:

“I just wanted to say thank you so much for your exceptional hospitality to me (and of course to our authors) last week. I am so glad to have been able to see your work in action and you'll be heartened to know that I've become evangelical about Wordfest. Some things I've been saying (and so want to commend you on directly):

1. Your thorough care and attention to detail is exceptional.
2. Your ability to get a varied audience! It wasn't the same group of stalwart CBC listeners (always an appreciated bunch)—but folks from a variety of communities. Kudos!
3. Your programming—I can't say enough about the completely emotional experience I had during 'The Way We... Talk About Candy'!”

Please watch this short video recap of the 2025 Imaginairium Festival. Film by Pluto Pictures:
<https://wordfest.com/2025/video/imaginairium-highlights/>



30th Anniversary Celebrations

2025 marked Wordfest's 30th Anniversary Year. To celebrate, Wordfest hosted a lively storytelling showcase on June 10 called "The Way We... Calgary'd," which invited seven of the city's finest storytellers to share a tale about the relationship between their art and their hometown, in all its contradictions, complexities, and connections. Creating and staging an anniversary art exhibit and Calgary-focused show at Central Library in June was a major milestone.



Read more about the artists and the artistic vision for the celebration here:

<https://wordfest.com/2025/show/the-way-we-calgaryd/>, and watch our Instagram coverage here: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DKxrdqTB2P4/>

Watch this short animated film that pays tribute to all of the authors, artists, graphic designers, and creatives who've put their stamp on Wordfest over the last 30 years

(<https://wordfest.com/2025/video/30th-anniversary-creative-history/>) alongside this mini-documentary with Founding Director Anne Green and Wordfest's current CEO & Creative Ringleader Shelley Youngblut: <https://wordfest.com/2025/video/30th-anniversary-film/>



Reading in the Wild

In partnership with Calgary Public Library, we successfully launched the 2nd edition of our popular “Reading in the Wild” annual event. For one evening in June we created a free outdoor community event in Memorial Park, with park attendance reaching 1,500 between 5 and 7pm last year. This free event is for everyone—children, teens, seniors, friends, neighbours, colleagues, even well-behaved dogs. Readers of all ages are welcome to bring a blanket and book (or borrow one on site!) to read amongst fellow readers in the wild. Participants can bring their own books, or choose from a specially curated selection from the Library’s collection, organized by age and interests. The 2025 edition also featured live music by Calgary-based string duo Solatido, complimentary Dog-Friendly Village Ice Cream for our four-legged companions, and of course complimentary ice cream for the first 200 humans! We also partnered with local vendors to offer samples of Wild Folk’s tasty zero proof canned cocktails and Tuesday Brewing’s non-alcoholic beer.

Please Watch this Reading in the Wild Instagram Reel:

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DLT48nquSZu/>

Wordfestivus

2025 also saw the return of Wordfestivus at Memorial Park Library, a wildly successful December initiative piloted by Wordfest in 2024 in partnership with local indie booksellers Cookbook Co. Books, Owl's Nest Books, Shelf Life Books, and Slow Burn Books. This unique book market offered a curated selection of Canadian-authored titles to help visitors solve all their holiday gift needs, offering a one-stop shopping experience for buying local and supporting an array of independent booksellers (which can otherwise be challenging given Calgary's sprawling size).

Please Watch this Wordfestivus Instagram Reel: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DC8PNMSJPKY/>



Community Engagement

With as many kinds of books as there are types of readers, we've built a proven programming model for creatively attracting Calgary audiences coming from a broad spectrum of interests, backgrounds and enthusiasm circles—fiction or non-fiction, memoir or mysteries, food culture or pop culture, politics or poetry, major prize winners or breakout stars. We do this by focusing on high-impact curation of the audience experience—what we call our “special sauce”—which means adding bonus or surprise elements or experiences to almost every show to excite, entertain, and delight.



For example, at the 2025 Imaginairium, in partnership with local Cochu Chocolatier, we distributed custom chocolate bars to attendees, each wrapped with a different book cover image from the festival lineup. The chocolates rounded-out the festival's own line of bespoke tote bags and apparel (produced onsite with a heat-press), supplemented by made-in-Canada enamel pins and stickers designed by Wordfest's in-house graphics team and connected to themes from the featured book titles at our live shows. The goal of our merch is to further drive audience engagement through the sharing of tangible keepsakes connected to books.

These bonus elements not only resonated with audiences, but left a lasting impression with the artists, sometimes putting Calgary on the international map. Take for example the Indigenous Marketplace held in conjunction with our presentation of Canadian author and Vogue editor Christian Allaire in April 2025. The lineup of Indigenous creators included Emerson's Cree Design, Erin Rianna Arts, Midnight Sun Elegance, and Rezinbabe—all from Mohkinstsis and surrounding areas within Treaty 7 territory. They were not only introduced to new audiences, but one of their pieces was showcased by Allaire as part of Vogue's Met Gala celebrations. Please visit this Instagram post for an example: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DIQIO8nRICR/>



Other 2025 “Special Sauce” examples included the creation of a “My Little Pony” glow-up station themed around a plot point in Mona Awad’s Giller Prize nominated novel, *We Love You, Bunny*; renting flower walls at select shows as backdrop for author selfies; turning past Wordfest branding creative into unique props for our 30th anniversary photo booth; and hosting a candy bar (why not!) at our festival signature storytelling showcase, *The Way We... Talk About Candy*, headlined by Calgary’s own Andrew Phung.



Almost every show at Wordfest has a carefully and thoughtfully curated special sauce component designed to connect onstage conversation about art and ideas with a memorable, interactive experience or keepsake.

“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 2025 Audience Member**

Marketing Reach & Audience Development Highlights

Wordfest hired Calgary’s most respected live events publicist, Alex Kingcott, and her team at Shareworthy, to get our authors coverage on the CBC, Calgary Herald, CTV, Global, and other local outlets. Author profiles that originate through us often go national via Postmedia. The 2025 Imaginairium festival attracted a strong author lineup of Canadian authors who made

themselves available for press, resulting in more than 80 pieces of traditional media coverage (Estimated potential reach 24,566,096, with an Advertising Value Equivalency of 144,005.60).

Now in its second year, the Bookstagrammer in Residence program continued to build on its initial success by generating online engagement and amplifying awareness of the Imaginairium. We intentionally focused on accounts with strong Calgary community connections—particularly those whose followers may not have been previously familiar with Wordfest—while still ensuring each participant had sufficient reach to make their involvement impactful.

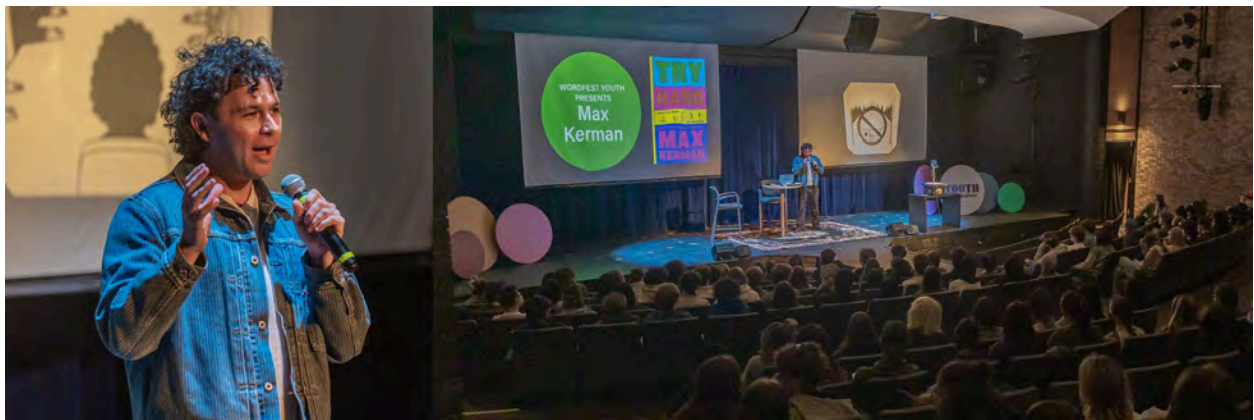


Designed to spark pre-festival interest through early promotion, giveaways, and community outreach, the program also played a key role in on-site coverage during the festival itself. And a number of Bookstagrammers in Residence continued to cover Wordfest’s busy fall season of arts programming. By leveraging established online literary communities—primarily based in the Calgary area—the initiative contributed to increased visibility for Wordfest and supported ticket sales through authentic, peer-driven content.

The result: in 2025, Wordfest’s community-driven approach to online marketing managed to “flip” our engaged audience demographic, while still maintaining consistent growth in every age segment. This means that engagement in every age segmentation grew; however, our most engaged audiences now skew younger rather than older as compared to last year. Essentially, every age group engaged with our organic social content, and we didn’t sacrifice the growth of older followers for younger followers; every group increased, with the most notable jump in engagement (more than doubled) among individuals aged 25–34.

Youth Program Highlights

Backed by community support and the generosity of our donors, Wordfest Youth fuels teen literacy in Grades 5 to 12 to spark the next generation of engaged Calgarians and avid readers. In 2025, we connected 4,706 middle and high school students from 38 school groups in Calgary & area across 12 theatrically staged shows with authors such as Christian Allaire, Tim Caulfield, Johnnie Christmas (Online), Cherie Dimaline, Gabrielle Drolet, Omar El Akkad, Bob Joseph, Max Kerman, Tanya Lloyd Kyi (Online), Brittney McNamara, and David A. Robertson.



At Wordfest Youth shows, our unique programming model enables us to connect the world's most inspiring authors with students in interactive theatrical experiences, giving teens agency through an ask-me-anything format, and gifting either class sets or individual copies of the authors' books to participating students. In 2025, we distributed 2,093 books to Calgary teens through this 100% donor-funded initiative. For many teens, it's the first book they've been able to call their own.



Important note about the impact of the Alberta Teacher’s Association job action in fall 2025: Wordfest had originally planned to stage a total of 12 youth daytime shows during the Imaginairium Festival (Oct. 13–18, 2026) at Central Library and DJD Dance Centre, in response to anticipated high demand that already exceeded venue capacity (e.g. teachers originally requested more than 5,000 student spots for the fall when registrations opened prior to the strike action). During the strike, Wordfest was still able to present two Youth events during the festival week. One intimate show featured David A. Robertson & Cherie Dimaline at Central Library for Grade 5 students from Chief Big Belly Middle School (Tsuut’ina), in addition as well as students from Stoney Nakoda school (approx 80 students total in attendance). All participants received a copy of *You Were Made for this World*, and due to the small size of the show, we were able to create a signing line experience for the students who attended. The second show introduced David A. Robertson to 56 students in Grade 7 from Westmount Charter School.

Monique Gray Smith, another contributor to the *You Were Made for this World* anthology, also had her appearances in the youth program in fall 2025 rescheduled for March 2026, at which point 330 participants received an individual copy of the collection, while an additional 330 students were given the class sets of *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults* that they requested.



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**

Thank you so much! What an incredible opportunity for our students to learn from such an accomplished driven person! I saw students smile/ask questions and take risks to keep their hands up that have become pretty withdrawn in class! I don't know if you realize the depth of the impact this has. I even had one student, who is so incredibly shy that talking one-on-one is hard, make her way to the stage to ask a question. I could go on and on, but just want to encourage you all on the vast impact of the work! **–Teacher, Central Memorial High School (Max Kerman show)**

As always, Wordfest provided students with an exceptional opportunity. My students were still talking this morning about how they wished Omar El Akkad could have spoken longer and how they wished they could have had more time to question him because of how honest his responses were. **–Learning Leader, Central Memorial High School**

[\(You can listen to Omar El Akkad answering a student's question here.\)](#)



Moving Forward into 2026

New Year. New Challenges. New Opportunities. And Wordfest remains committed to delivering MORE:

- More Lively Experiences
- More Literary Lightning Bolts
- More Life-Affirming Ideas
- More Wild Imaginings
- More Real Connections
- More Questions Answered
- More Answers Questioned
- More Human-Powered Delight

With your continued support, we can continue to build an innovative, open-minded, and exciting space for the sharing of big ideas. At this key moment of cultural pride and sovereignty, together we're amplifying Canadian authors and books, while enhancing the national and international profile of our city and our province.

Please reach out to Everett Wilson, Senior Director of Development & Audience Engagement at ewilson@wordfest.com anytime if you have questions about this report or how to meaningfully invest in Wordfest's future with your generosity.