

# WRITE

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UNION OF  
CANADA

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THE FESTIVALS ISSUE

Getting the most out of  
your festival experience

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How the heck do I get  
an invite, anyway?

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(Almost) everything  
I know about writing  
came from romance  
novels

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# Get on the List

Applying to literary festivals

BY KRISTYN DUNNION

**I'M A CANADIAN WRITER** who has never had a bestseller and has rarely been invited to participate in literary festivals — not since I was young and green and had no idea what I was talking about!

I suspect I represent the silent majority who is secretly stewing, wondering, “How can I get invited to one of these things?”

In hopes of sparing you effort, dear writer, I've spent the past few weeks scrutinizing festival websites, emailing festival directors, and grilling colleagues about their various festival experiences.

The good news: The Canadian festival list on TWUC's website is fairly exhaustive, and a great place to begin.

The bad news: You'll likely have to do your own research. Factor in your availability, how far you're willing to travel, and take into account your literary form and thematic or cultural concerns. It takes time to visit each website for pitch requirements, but it's time well spent.

## Do you need a publicist?

Publishing a popular book with the support of a publicist might help secure invitations to literary events, but it's no guarantee. We small-press diehards know smaller publishing houses produce vibrant, courageous work, but turnover in their publicity “departments” (often a sole publicist or student intern) means there's little hope for our festival fantasy of tripping around the country, swilling boxed wine, and signing books. Even the big publishers have limited time and resources. For these and other reasons, some authors hire a publicist out of pocket. Perhaps this is you. If so, put that person to work!

While some festivals, like WordFest Calgary, will only accept author applications coming directly from publicists, the refreshing truth I unearthed is that many Canadian festivals have completely transparent

application processes that *do not* require a publicist or publisher. No gatekeepers!

In other words, there's nothing stopping you or me from applying *this very minute*. Do I hear applause... or do I hear moaning? If the latter, I urge you to reframe the situation. We chose this writing life, so let's be as cheerful and empowered as possible! (Note: I'm still under the influence of Stephen Marche's *On Writing and Failure*.)

**One must be prepared to do more than show up, mumble a passage from one's recent oeuvre, and raid the green room refreshment table.**

Each festival serves a niche role in its local community. Each engages attendees with a combination of author readings, panel talks, specialty workshops, and more. Networking and skill-building feature as much as author presentations: the audience is equally composed of readers and aspiring writers. In order to present as a strong candidate, one must be prepared to do more than show up, mumble a passage from one's recent oeuvre, and raid the green room refreshment table. Pitch a viable option, possibly more than one thing.

## Focus, focus, focus

To begin, set aside time for quiet reflection. Brew the tea. Light the candle. Pray to your gods. Think. Who are you, as a writer? How are you situated, as a person on this planet? Which communities are you immersed

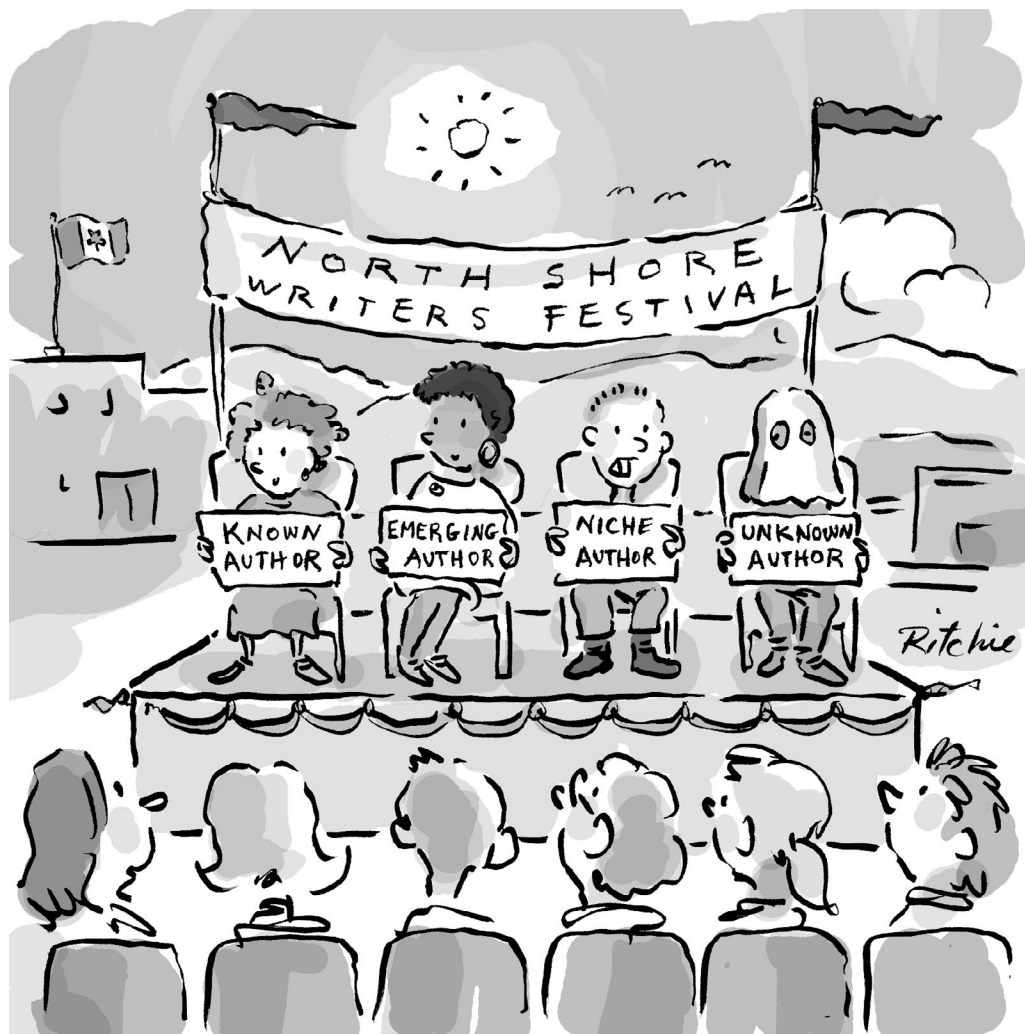
and invested in? What can you offer the wider world of readers, of current and future writers?

And once you've made your pitch, don't take it personally if you don't get an invite. As Karen Stewart, chair of the Alice Munro Festival of the Short Story explains, "Once a list of authors is identified, a committee reviews [it] through the lens of various factors such as a diversity of voices — authors from different backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and experiences — to provide a rich and inclusive experience."

Stewart adds, "We look to include a mix of known authors to draw crowds and emerging or niche writers to offer fresh perspectives. We look for authors that can engage an audience through different types of programming — author readings, masterclasses, stage presentations, and/or panel discussions, for example. Our budget is limited in the areas of travel and accommodations, so these are other considerations we need to balance each year."

A dynamic author statement, great photo, glowing endorsements of your recent publications, and mention of any awards will go a long way to garnering attention. Pay heed to festival themes, and be sure to add enticements to your application. Could you facilitate an intriguing workshop or host a spirited panel? Do you speak multiple languages? Have you got unusual real-world skills or a unique point of view? Cultural, racial, gender, or other identifiers that inform your writing might add weight to your application. Most of the organizers I spoke with — the ones that weren't too busy running actual literary festivals to reply — said similar things to Karen Stewart about narrowing down applications and making final decisions based on achieving a good representation of diverse participants.

Nonfiction writers will want to investigate Lit Fest Edmonton, which hosts 50+ authors, all remunerated; the festival takes place in October. Poets will find opportunities across the board, but especially at



COMIC BY SCOT RITCHIE

Edmonton’s poetry festival in April. NorthWords in the Northwest Territories primarily supports Indigenous writers and invites very few authors who aren’t local (an estimated 6 for 2025), but they have a transparent process, and you can apply directly. Ontario-based writers get excited about gritLIT in Hamilton, Ontario, which, despite being 20 years old, has the lively vibe of a first (or second!) date. And Brampton’s Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD) is entirely devoted to celebrating underrepresented authors and storytellers. Due to its immense popularity, the FOLD has expanded to include a reading challenge, author visit series, monthly webinars, and a separate festival for children. These are vibrant, necessary, and creative literary hubs!

So, apply if it makes good sense, and, again, don’t take it personally if you don’t hear back. There are many times more applications than available spots, and festival organizers are juggling many factors, including travel costs. Increase your chances of success and make their

lives easier by applying early — at least six months in advance of each festival.

With or without an invitation, the thing to do is participate, contribute. If you can afford to, buy tickets, passes, or memberships. Otherwise, volunteer. Many festivals host open-mic events — not just for civilians, they’re great opportunities for sharing works-in-progress with a live audience. Let’s ditch the scarcity mindset (damn capitalism!) that pits author against author. Let’s show up for each other. Writing this article has awakened me to a realization: I’ve been a bit of a curmudgeon. Rather than wondering why I’m *not* invited, I’m brainstorming how to get involved.

.....  
**Kristyn Dunnion**, author of *Stoop City* (Biblioasis) and *Tarry This Night* (Arsenal Pulp Press), is a self-anointed Can Lit Doula. She helps birth your stuck manuscript to its astounding next draft with compassion and skill. [www.kristyndunnion.com](http://www.kristyndunnion.com).

# Genre Festivals

The joy of finding like-minded peers

BY JASON KRAWCZYK

**A FESTIVAL OR CONVENTION** is a genuine safe space for me. My pupils dilate, my heart rate steadies, and I can complete full sentences without jumbling my words into a slurry of vocal dysfluencies. It’s a collection of things I enjoy or am willing to be introduced to in an environment curated and attended by like-minded individuals and specialists. With the addition of programming, the festival becomes a multifaceted event that can somehow entertain, educate, and foster relationships.

Plus, I get to see weird spooky stuff and talk to the people making it.

I’m a writer by trade, and most of my focus has been on screenwriting and manuscripts, but I’ve done my fair share of ghostwriting, treatments, and punch-ups. I’m also a director when I’m lucky enough to get the opportunity (movies take a heinously long time to produce, and the materials packaged just in development is a whole other article). Being in this field allows plenty of opportunities to attend or be invited to niche festivals.



I’ve been to a good amount of panels with writers, directors, producers, publishers, and authors. They’re usually informative, but more importantly, they humanize the people behind the art you are passionate about. If I’m on the panel, I do my best to be as transparent as possible while also imbuing a sense of hope. It’s a rather difficult tightrope, especially when you’re holding a microphone, but the actual craft of writing and filmmaking isn’t very glamorous behind the scenes.

## “Just do it” and other bad advice

At every festival I’ve ever attended, when questions are opened up to the audience, one brave soul always asks something like, “Hello, I am really inspired by your career trajectory, and I would like to know if there’s any advice you’d have for someone with similar aspirations.”

Then, without fail, every single time, like death and taxes, the answer is an absolute at every Q&A session. Whether they're seasoned professionals or promising novices, every artist responds with something to the effect of "You just got to do it!" Directors from Quentin Tarantino to a short-film director at a small-town festival will regale you with the following: "You have cameras in your pocket, there's only one person that can make your movie, and only you can make it! Go! Get out of here and start shooting!" Authors promoting the seventh instalment of their sci-fi fantasy epic and indie authors who just released a short-story collection will both preach inspiration such as, "Writing is free, just go! Write! Write! Write! I want to hear what you have to say. Only you can unleash your inner potential and spatter your soul on the blank page! Get out there and write!"

The people bestowing that advice aren't necessarily wrong, but they can't be exactly sure about what has contributed to their success. Talent is real and something tangible you hone, but success is circumstantial. Right place, right time, had a friend of a friend, their craft fit the cultural zeitgeist at the time, hit big on social media, etc. There are a lot of variables that play into exposure, and a lot of them are out of the artists' hands.

**If you want less BS, go to a genre festival**

This is where genre festivals thrive. Since there's a specific aesthetic, attendees usually have built-in knowledge, and their expectations are less ambiguous. The horror community is as voracious as it is welcoming, so getting an artist to go into explicit detail about their workflow is pretty easy. I've gotten Bruce Campbell's take on method acting *and* the entirety of Stephen Lang's workout routine in one night. Fun interactions, for sure, but what if you're looking for something a little more tangible in terms of advice?

Well, you're in luck because you are surrounded by like-minded individuals who are just as eager to breathe life into their work. Those people are the most inspiring people you can come across. Writing is synonymous with loneliness. The image of untamed hair and sunken eyes

**I've gotten Bruce Campbell's take on method acting *and* the entirety of Stephen Lang's workout routine in one night.**

looming over a typewriter is a mainstay for the craft. And it is true to a degree, but I've met several writers that I swap works-in-progress with at these conventions.

That's the real, priceless reason for attending genre festivals and conventions: peers.

A professional editor, agent, or publisher will not read your work in progress, let alone give you feedback. Do you know who will? Artists in similar spaces. Self-editing is taxing and humiliating, but it requires just as much focus as creating prose. Having outside perspectives, especially from individuals in similar straits, will sharpen your abilities and help guide you on a path forward.

There's nothing of mine produced today that hasn't gone through the peers' gauntlet. And they're peers I've met at conventions and festivals. Every single one of them. I just attended a writer's workshop organized by the writers I met at FanExpo; I am doing a reading next weekend because of the people I've met at Nightmare in the Falls; and my next movie, *Sunset Superman*, has been honed to where it is because of the feedback I've received from friends I've met at DEDfest, Beyond Fest, and SXSW's Midnight Madness. From shorts to features, from a short story to novels. They've been there for me at every stage of my career, and I hope I've been there for them.

Festivals and conventions are wonderful. They're a space where creators and fans alike can relish in their passions. Genre festivals are particularly enlightening because you can see how wide the spectrum of storytelling can get. But they can provide something beyond merchandise and autographs. They can foster relationships, whether it be brief encounters or lasting partnerships.

So, much like hell, conventions are not just the events that take place. They're other people. And, as with any creative endeavour, it is not a road to be travelled alone.

.....  
**Jason Krawczyk** is a writer and film director. His first book, *An Earth That Knows Magic* (Black Hare Press), was published in 2022. He's followed up with *It Looks Like Dad* (Little Ghosts Books, 2023) and the forthcoming *Reality Squall* (Nosetouch Press, 2024). In 2015, Jason wrote and directed the Henry Rollins horror-comedy *He Never Died*, which premiered at SXSW and is streaming on Netflix. The sequel, *She Never Died*, was released in 2020 on Tubi, and *Sunset Superman*, starring Michael Jai White, premieres in 2024. Jason and his husband, Chris Krawczyk, own Little Ghost Books, an inclusive café and bookstore with horror books from sterling classics, LGBTQ authors, and burgeoning indie publishers.

# Take It Outside

Authors in the park

BY ELEANOR P. SAM



**THE CONVENTIONAL PLACES** for a book launch or author reading include libraries, book stores, or book clubs. But Shakespeare's plays are hosted in Toronto's High Park, so why not offer authors a similar platform?

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is, after all, not only home to many creative writers and storytellers but to some of the finest parks in the province. Hence, the Authors in the Park initiative was born. When I shared the idea with other writers, the response was tepid at best, but I saw its potential. Connecting with book clubs via Instagram and posters in neighbourhood storefront windows increased interest.

So, enveloped by nature, on Saturday, June 1, six Ontario-based authors read from their work in Home Smith Park, which is historically significant as a traditional Indigenous trade route. Attendees gathered by banks of the Humber River, as did groups of mallards, led by green-headed, yellow-billed males. The air was replete with melodic birdsong as yellow-brown Baltimore orioles and northern red cardinals observed the activities from nearby maple trees.

At the outset, the intent was to have six authors walking along designated paths, reading, pausing, and addressing audience questions. Writers were unsure, however, of their ability to attract followers and decided that a collective gathering and reading was a safer bet. Accordingly, the approach morphed, and all readings were held in one location with questions taken after each one. We had a range of writers working in genres including women's and contemporary fiction, suspense, memoir, and poetry. For the most part, the authors did not know each other, yet the flow of their narratives was complementary. Attendees sat along park benches or in folding chairs, immersed in the readings and enjoying humour, excitement, wonder, pain, mystery, and reflection.

P.H. Oliver read from her debut novel, *The Gynesaur*, a humorous tale about four women from different walks of life and their bond of friendship that defied extinction.

Next, I introduced listeners to my novel *Manor on the Viridian Sea*, about a Canadian millennial's fantasy of life on a Caribbean island that turns into a series of trap doors.

Jass Aujla's piece from her riveting page-turner about identical twin sisters, *Anjali and Riah in Next of Twin*, kept the audience on the edge of their seats.

Kris Purdy's excerpt from her novel, *Paradise Pending*, gave a glance into partners Dani and Jo's mind-bending medical drama that unfolded on a vacation in Spain.

Laura Pratt shared a cringe worthy passage of a blow-out scene that became a public spectacle from her memoir *Heartbroken*.

Lastly, Maureen Hynes took the audience on a series of journeys through her poetry collection *Take the Compass*.

The event's verdant surroundings came with challenges. The rush of the Humber cascading in the background competed with the readings, making it difficult to grasp the nuances in some pieces. Park rules prohibited the use of microphones, although one author persisted and brought a portable public address system, like those used by tour guides. This proved helpful and should be considered when readings in open spaces are undertaken.

The event culminated with authors selling and signing their books. A giveaway table filled with gently used works by other writers was provided. Excess copies of these books were donated to local initiatives, such as little free libraries. Participating authors left the park as colleagues and agreed to create a virtual writer's group and ongoing events.

The stories told, whether in narrative or poetic forms, were many and as diverse as the authors themselves. There was not a "danger of telling a single story," as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns.

Parks with their fresh air, natural beauty, and walking paths are healthy calming places. Our city has a treasure trove of them. It is our hope that other authors will embrace this approach and read from their stories in unconventional spaces like parks while partaking of nature's abundant offerings.

.....  
**Eleanor P. Sam** is a Toronto-based novelist, born on a sugar plantation in Guyana, South America, with West and Central African ancestry. Her two novels are *The Wisdom of Rain* (2nd edition, Isalea Publishing, 2022) and *Manor on the Viridian Sea* (Isalea Publishing, 2023). Keenly interested in her cultural and historical heritage, her stories reflect and express this legacy. Eleanor received her bachelor's degree from York University and her master's degree from University of Toronto.



**Writers' Trust of Canada is accepting applications for the DC Reid Poets' Grant, which delivers grants of \$5,000 to working Canadian poets of modest means.**



**Apply for the DC Reid Poets' Grant by September 9, 2024**

DC Reid has established a permanent home for the DC Reid Poets' Grant at Writers' Trust of Canada by investing \$1.5 million to support and encourage Canadian poets.

Inspired by his own career, this newly created endowment fund will annually deliver \$5,000 grants to eight poets selected by an anonymous jury.

A long-time member of The Writers' Union of Canada, Reid has published 18 books and has won more than twenty awards for his work. His poems and stories have been published in magazines around the world and his articles on fly fishing have been published in magazines, newspapers, and on websites across North America.

**Read the complete guidelines at [writerstrust.com/poets](https://writerstrust.com/poets)**

To be eligible, an applicant must be:

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- ▼ of modest means, having earned less than \$30,000 from all income sources in the previous tax year.
- ▼ a Canadian citizen or permanent resident, living in Canada.
- ▼ actively working on a literary project of poetry.

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