



The State of American Philanthropy

Giving for
Writing
&
Literature

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ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nonprofits, and the philanthropic dollars that support them, are critical to a vibrant literary culture. Their importance is only likely to grow as the publishing industry continues to consolidate, narrowing the number of titles and the types of books published commercially.

Yet, philanthropic giving for writing and literature is minuscule compared to other artistic disciplines. Funders often assume that literature is commercially viable. Furthermore, other artistic disciplines have a denser network of nonprofits, and nonprofit literary organizations are generally smaller and less visible within their communities than other art nonprofits.

Funders that gloss over writing and literature, however, may be missing out. In the words of one foundation leader, “the return on your investment is shockingly high in writing.”

This brief summarizes the state of philanthropic giving for writing and literature based on interviews with funders and nonprofit leaders, a survey of professionals working in this field, Candid data spanning 2014–2018 and long-term reporting on the topic from Inside Philanthropy. This State of American Philanthropy brief on funder support of nonprofit writing and literature organizations details:

Who's Giving

- Giving is dominated by private foundations, although community foundations are major players at the local level.
- Private foundations – Mellon Foundation in particular – are the most influential players in this space.
- Funding for literature does not appear to be increasing significantly over time.

Who's Getting

- Recipients of philanthropic funding are broadly classified as individual writers, nonprofit literary arts organizations, and education organizations.
- Literary nonprofits have few grant opportunities and cannot rely on them on an ongoing basis.
- Philanthropy plays a larger role for education organizations, which are also more likely to receive support from community foundations and corporations.

The Big Issues and Funding Trends

- Emergency funding for writers and nonprofit literary organizations in the COVID-19 era became a priority.
- Donors have also increasingly pursued initiatives that leverage literature to advance social justice and promote civic engagement.
- Funders have historically followed a traditional model of awards for writers and project-specific grants for organizations, but they are slowly adopting new strategies such as collaborative funding and a greater emphasis on infrastructure.

Equity in the Sector

- Funders have tried to ensure their grantmaking is more equitable, recognizing that the literary world has been predominantly white- and male-dominated.
- Funders also consider multiple dimensions of diversity, funding nonprofits that promote women, LGBTQ+ and immigrant writers, as well as writers with disabilities.
- While more conversations about equity have taken place, some nonprofit leaders believe that grantmaking processes have not fundamentally changed, and those processes may exclude organizations serving disadvantaged groups.

Fundraising Now

- Despite a general slowdown in support over the pandemic era, many organizations reported to IP that they were able to survive thanks to emergency funding from government and philanthropy, as well as a pivot to virtual fundraisers and Zoom meetings with donors.
- While national funders such as Lannan and Mellon that have long been committed to writing and literature nonprofits continued their support during the pandemic, some local foundations shifted their giving to other areas.
- Some sense of normalcy and stability has now returned to literary organizations. An encouraging trend is more funding for programs and initiatives related to social justice – some major funders have signaled that they see literature and writing as powerful forces for social change.

The extraordinarily limited array of funding sources for writing and literature nonprofits is, according to nearly every person interviewed for this brief, simultaneously the biggest challenge and opportunity for the field. Two other specific concerns were also frequently mentioned in conversations with funders: the lack of support for nonprofit publishers and rurally focused grantees.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the financial fragility of writers and literary nonprofit organizations and may prompt funders to reevaluate their strategies and practices. One promising trend emerging in direct response to the COVID-19 crisis is closer collaboration among groups of funders and intermediaries. This model may become more common in the future.

Introduction

In 2019, Sarah M. Broom received the National Book Award for Nonfiction for a memoir of her family's life in New Orleans before and after Hurricane Katrina. In a review for the New York Times, critic Dwight Garner writes that "The Yellow House" is "a major book that I suspect will come to be considered among the essential memoirs of this vexing decade."

How does a book like "The Yellow House" come into being? As she worked on a final draft, Broom received a creative nonfiction award from the Whiting Foundation, a grant for ambitious projects. The idea for the memoir emerged after publishing pieces in the Oxford American, a nonprofit literary magazine that Broom says feels like home. Those early pieces, and later, much of the book itself, were written at arts residences across California, Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York and Wyoming. And years earlier, like many aspiring writers, Broom enrolled in a writing workshop at the 92nd Street Y in New York City.

The work of a writer is largely invisible, and outside of a book's acknowledgment pages, the role that nonprofit organizations play in the careers of writers is underappreciated. Awards and fellowships give writers some financial stability and allow them to spend time on challenging projects. Editors at literary magazines and journals help writers find their voice, and literary centers and residencies provide them with a community. "There are very few writers who go on to have prominent careers who have not been nurtured along the way by smaller grants and prizes and by residencies," said Daniel Reid, executive director of the Whiting Foundation.

Nonprofits, and the philanthropic dollars that support them, are critical to a rich literary culture. Their importance is likely to grow as the commercial publishing industry continues to consolidate, narrowing the number of titles and the types of books that are published commercially. In response to an August 2020 survey of Inside Philanthropy readers and others in the nonprofit sector, a fundraiser noted that "the trend is toward homogenization of popular mass-market bestsellers rather than literary work, which is struggling to survive." Nonprofit publishers and other literary organizations counter that trend. "The nonprofit status serves as a buffer against sales so that our editors have the freedom to publish books that meet the mission and that they personally feel passionate about," said Josh Ostergaard, senior development officer at the nonprofit press Graywolf.

Yet, philanthropic giving for writing and literature is minuscule relative to other artistic disciplines. An analysis of Candid data spanning 2014–2018 shows donors gave \$418 million to writing and literature programs in the United States, nearly 15 times less than what they gave to the visual arts (\$6.3 billion) and four times less than giving for music (\$4 billion) during the same time. Giving for the literary arts also lags behind theater (\$2.4 billion) and dance (\$1 billion).

This discrepancy in giving to the arts is related to several factors. Most obviously, literary works, aside from readings and spoken-word events, do not require costly performance or exhibition spaces. Still, funders in the arts often gloss over literature. The same respondent to the IP survey believes that "within the arts, there is very little support for literary organizations because

philanthropy assumes that literary work is supported sufficiently by the marketplace.” In reality, publishing revenues have declined for decades, and exceedingly few writers can make a living solely by writing. Courtney Hodell, director of literary programs at Whiting notes that “most of the writers that we work with have one or two or more jobs that they do in order to buy themselves the privilege of being able to sit at their desk and do their work, the work that really matters to them.”

Other artistic disciplines also have a denser network of nonprofit organizations. “It’s the rare city without a theater and without a museum and without orchestras or choruses,” said Ben Cameron, president of the Jerome Foundation. “Literature is predominantly an individual pursuit, and many cities don’t have that infrastructure landscape in the same way.”

Jen Benka of the Academy of American Poets counted 400–500 incorporated nonprofits in the United States whose central mission is supporting, employing, publishing, presenting or archiving the work of writers. In comparison, there are more than 35,000 museums, 1,200 theaters, and 1,000 nonprofit orchestras across the country.

Nonprofit literary organizations, with the possible exception of literary centers, are also less visible within their communities than other arts organizations that host public events. They also tend to be smaller, and few have annual operating budgets larger than \$1 million. “We don’t blip on the radar of philanthropy,” said Benka.

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

Giving for writing and literature is dominated by private foundations, although community foundations are notable players at the local level. Private foundations are also the most influential players in this space, especially the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Prominent private foundations shape how other funders approach their grantmaking in this area.

From 2014 to 2018, three funders—the Mellon, Lannan and MacArthur foundations—gave more to writing and literature than the seven next-largest donors combined. Both private and community foundations give to writers, nonprofit literary organizations, and educational programs, although community foundations are more likely to support local organizations and to allocate a larger share of their giving to education.

Major individual donors support literature, but that support is generally more modest than what those funders give to the other arts. A notable exception was the \$200 million gift to the Poetry Foundation in 2002 from Ruth Lilly, heir to the Eli Lilly and Company pharmaceutical fortune. Still, multi-million-dollar gifts to literary arts organizations are much less common in the writing and literature world than for the visual or performing arts.

Funding for literature does not appear to be increasing over time. Candid data shows a sizable bump in giving to writing and literature in 2018, but this increase is driven in part by large, one-time gifts. The combined value of gifts larger than \$1 million soared to \$68 million in 2018, whereas it had ranged from \$12–38 million during the

Top 10 Writing & Literature Funders 2014 - 2018¹

Grantmaker	Dollar Value of Grants Awarded
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation	\$20.44M
Lannan Foundation	\$11.38M
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation	\$5.88M
Ford Foundation	\$5.52M
Cleveland Foundation	\$4.13M
Bellwether Foundation	\$3.21M
Lilly Endowment, Inc.	\$3.18M
Davee Foundation	\$3.10M
Zell Family Foundation	\$3.07M
Oregon Community Foundation	\$3.01M

Source: Candid

previous four years. The survey of IP readers and philanthropy professionals shows that roughly the same number of respondents working in the field think that philanthropic interest and funding levels in the field are gaining momentum as those who think it is losing traction. “I feel like the funding horizon has been fairly constant,” said Cameron of the Jerome Foundation.

Nevertheless, some funders are hopeful that interest in writing and literature may grow. One reason for optimism is the appointment of Elizabeth Alexander, an accomplished writer and poet, as president of Mellon in 2018. Alexander was previously director of creativity and free expression at the Ford Foundation. “The biggest thing that has happened to the nonprofit literary arts in terms of philanthropy is Elizabeth Alexander and her role first at the Ford Foundation, and now, of course, at Mellon,” said Benka of the Academy of American

Poets. “She is an esteemed poet and she, in her post, has brought visibility to literature.”

Under Alexander, Mellon has launched major funding initiatives related to literature, such as a three-year, \$4.5 million grant to fund poet laureate positions across the United States. As National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Chair Dana Gioia told [NPR](#) after the announcement, multi-year and multi-million-dollar grants to literature are extremely rare. Mellon also made social justice central to all aspects of its work. Funders of writing and literature, and of the arts more broadly, have paid attention to Mellon’s giving priorities, as it has long been considered a leader in the field.

Who's Getting

The recipients of philanthropic funding for writing and literature can be classified into three broad categories: individual writers, nonprofit literary arts organizations, and education organizations that offer literacy and creative writing programs. Each of these categories can be further divided by programmatic focus – fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry, for example – and distinctions across those areas are discussed in the next section.

The lack of philanthropic support for writing and literature relative to other artistic disciplines is apparent when examining the top 10 grant recipients from 2014 to 2018. The recipients on Candid’s list received around \$63 million. In contrast, the top 10 theater organizations received a total of \$364.95 million.

The largest recipient is the Writers Theater, a theater company based north of Chicago that runs a literary development initiative, but which is primarily a performing arts institution. The annual budgets of the organizations on this list also reflect

the small size of many literary nonprofits. Some of the largest recipients are funding intermediaries such as the Academy of American Poets, which play a key role in selecting and disbursing funds to writers and smaller organizations.

Contrasted with the visual and performing arts, where prominent museums and companies are the largest recipients of philanthropic support, education-focused organizations represent four of the top 10 grant recipients for writing and literature. These organizations include Youth Speaks, a spoken poetry program that operates in several cities, and 826 Valencia, the San Francisco chapter of a network of writing and tutoring centers. Educational organizations, particularly those that operate in multiple cities, generally have operating budgets that dwarf those of other literary nonprofits like writer centers or independent publishers.

Top 10 Writing & Literature Grant Recipients 2014 - 2018²

Recipient	Dollar Value of Grants Received
Writers Theatre	\$18.66M
Youth Speaks	\$16.65M
PEN American Center	\$10.33M
826 Valencia	\$7.66M
Sefaria	\$7.62M
National Writing Project	\$5.91M
Folger Shakespeare Library	\$4.53M
City of Asylum	\$3.92M
Young Chicago Authors	\$3.68M
American Academy of Poets	\$3.63M

Source: Candid

The importance of philanthropic funding varies for different types of grantees. For writers and translators, who often work one or more jobs in addition to writing, philanthropic funding in the form of awards and fellowships can be critically important, particularly during the early stages of a project. Translator Jennifer Croft, for example, notes that a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts “made it possible for me to keep working on Olga Tokarczuk’s *Flights* back when nobody had any interest in publishing it.” Croft’s English-language translation of the Polish novel won the 2018 Man Booker International Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award for translated literature.

Nonprofit literary arts organizations include literary centers, reading series, book festivals, writing-in-prison programs, writers’ residencies, and literary magazines and independent presses. In this incredibly diverse landscape of organizations, the relative importance of philanthropic support again varies. Book festivals, for instance, can obtain corporate sponsorships with relative ease because they stage widely publicized events. The latest edition of the Brooklyn Book Festival was sponsored by Amazon, Disney, Con Edison, JPMorgan Chase and several other corporations.

For the most part, there are few grant opportunities for literary nonprofit organizations. Many of those organizations cannot rely on grants on an ongoing basis. Philanthropic support helps create flexibility in their budgets or allow them to launch new initiatives or expand programs, but are not reliable enough to serve as a significant ongoing revenue source. Instead, these nonprofits depend on support from trustees and board members, income from events, or earned revenue.

Literary magazines, for example, rely heavily on earned income from subscriptions and advertisements, annual fundraising events, or an individual benefactor. Carolyn Kuebler, the editor of the literary magazine *New England Review*, notes that many literary journals such as the *Kenyon Review* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review* are affiliated with colleges and enjoy greater funding stability. “A large percentage of literary magazines that managed to stick around for more than a couple of years tend to hitch themselves to colleges and universities,” Kuebler said. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has negatively impacted higher education institutions, some of which in turn made severe budget cuts to affiliated literary magazines.

Cumulative Funding: Writing & Literature 2014 - 2018 ²				
Year	Dollar Value of Grants	Grantmakers	Grants Awarded	Recipients
2014	\$59.98M	1,494	2,681	705
2015	\$76.04M	1,833	3,804	881
2016	\$72.81M	1,791	4,170	912
2017	\$66.48M	1,662	3,084	1,662
2018	\$142.82M	1,865	3,376	943

Source: Candid

Writers' residencies also have few grant opportunities. DW Gibson, director of the writing program at Art Omi notes that it can be difficult to get funders interested in supporting a residency program. "We are asking them to fund a process, and that takes a great leap of faith," Gibson said. Foundation support constitutes a small portion of the budget for the writers' program at Art Omi, with trustee support and income from fundraising events making up most of the rest.

Some nonprofit literary organizations also receive grants from the NEA or state arts councils, although not all councils consider literature a part of their mission. These grants however, are similar to philanthropic support in that they are rare and that funding priorities change. Furthermore, grantees have noted that government grants require a lot of paperwork, a hurdle for small organizations. Nonprofit organizations, however, see a grant from the NEA or a state arts council as an important sign of recognition that they can leverage for fundraising.

Additionally, foreign governments and foundations may fund organizations that support international writers or literature in translation. Art Omi, for example, typically hosts writers from around the world in partnership with cultural offices such as the Dutch Foundation for Literature and the Institut Ramon Llull, a consortium backed by the Government of Catalonia and the city of Barcelona. In the case of Art Omi, these institutions cover half of the cost of hosting a writer from their country or region. Another prominent example of international funding is the Library of Korean Literature, 25 novels and short story collections published by the Dalkey Archive Press, an independent publisher from Illinois, with support from the Literature Translation Institute of Korea.

The third major category of grantees in this space comprises organizations running literacy and creative writing programs. Most of those programs benefit children, and in particular, at-risk or disadvantaged children, although some of them also focus on adults. Philanthropic funding plays a larger role for those organizations. Arts education is a very well-established field and, as a result, those organizations can apply to a wider range of grants, including those from foundations focused on education. Since the impact of those programs on local communities is more apparent, those organizations are also more likely to receive support from community foundations and corporations, particularly those that have headquarters or major offices in the cities where the organizations operate. Finally, some of those nonprofits may receive significant government contracts. Federal grants and operating agreements, for example, made up 86% of the [2019 annual operating budget](#) for the National Writing Project, a professional development organization for writing teachers.

Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

"Disapproval for philanthropy is growing as foundations demonstrate the same failures of the past in the response to the pandemic. It is increasingly seen as a racist tool of the rich that perpetuates inequality, and that pits mission-oriented organizations against each other in a fight over dollars that they limit. Philanthropy does not believe problems will ever be solved by the organizations they support and demonstrates that lack of confidence by ensuring foundations will last forever."

—Fundraiser, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

Candid breaks down giving for writing and literature into five categories: writing, literature, spoken word, poetry and publishing. From 2014 to 2018, the categories that received the most philanthropic dollars from the top 10 funders in the space are writing and literature, partly due to the broadness of those terms and their use as catch-all for organizations that do not neatly fit into other categories.

Top 5 Funding Priorities: Writing & Literature 2014 - 2018²

Subject	Amount Funded
Writing	\$19.95M
Literature	\$17.00M
Spoken Word	\$11.76M
Poetry	\$6.28M
Publishing	\$3.08M

Source: Candid

The writing category encompasses organizations that support writers as well as education programs focused on creative writing. The largest recipient in this category from 2014 to 2018 was PEN America, which runs a wide range of initiatives, including advocacy efforts, and prison writing and education programs. PEN America also operates as a funding intermediary, providing fellowships and emergency grants to individual writers, but not to other organizations. Mellon and the Ford Foundation were the largest philanthropic donors to PEN America from 2014 to 2018, followed by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, a nonprofit consulting firm that handles many family fortunes, collaborative funds, fiscally sponsored projects and other philanthropic initiatives.

The literature category covers a wide range of grantees. From 2014 to 2018, the largest grant recipients in this category included a writers' residency, a program that distributes Bibles and other religious literature to children, and an ecumenical institute. This last grantee, the Collegeville Institute in Minnesota, hosts summer writing workshops for religious and lay leaders, as well as residency programs for scholars. The largest donor to the institute is the Lilly Endowment, a private foundation based in Indianapolis. The Lilly Endowment is also a major supporter of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library and other cultural institutions in Indiana.

The third category attracting the most funding was spoken word. The largest recipient of philanthropic dollars from 2014–2018 in this category was Youth Speaks, a San Francisco-based organization that runs spoken word poetry programs for at-risk youth in several U.S. cities. During this period, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the largest community foundation in the United States, donated nearly \$7 million to Youth Speaks. Private foundations such as Ford, MacArthur and Mellon contributed approximately \$1 million each, and California-based donors such as the California Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation also made large grants. Other major grantees in this category are StoryCorps, a project that records stories told by people of all backgrounds, and the Storyville Center for the Spoken Word, the organization behind The Moth storytelling series.

Giving for the two other categories, publishing and poetry, reflects long-held beliefs of funders about the commercial viability of different types of literature. Publishing received less than half as much in philanthropic funding as poetry from the top 10 funders in this space, possibly because some

donors believe that publishers can make a sufficient profit through book and magazine sales. The reality is more nuanced, since few titles today generate significant revenue. Some of the publishers that do receive substantial gifts are niche players on a topic of interest to funders. For example, Island Press, a publisher that specializes in books about sustainability, received a gift of \$1 million from the Kresge Foundation.

On the other hand, funders recognize there is not a large market for poetry and that it needs their support. There is a longer history of institutional support for poetry than for other genres of writing. “Poetry has benefited from older institutions like the Academy of American Poets, which was founded in 1934,” said Benka of the Academy of American Poets. “Creative nonfiction hasn’t had an institution with that much longevity.” To this day, the academy remains the largest recipient of philanthropic dollars for poetry, with the Mellon Foundation as its largest supporter.

In 1934, fiction and creative nonfiction may not have needed institutional support. In recent years, however, after declines in book publishing revenue and mass layoffs in newspapers and magazines, where many nonfiction writers work, those genres may be in as much need of support as poetry.

The Big Issues & Beyond

Some of the most important issues for funders of writing and literature today include providing emergency funding for writers and nonprofit organizations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting programs that leverage the power of literature to advance social justice and promote civic engagement.

In 2021, emergency funding for writers and nonprofit literary organizations continued to be a priority for donors in light of COVID-19. Some funders such as the Haven Foundation had previously provided emergency grants to writers, but the pandemic prompted funders to increase their grantmaking and to create much larger initiatives. [Artist Relief](#), funded by Mellon (\$5 million) and more than 20 other foundations, provided grants to artists, including writers. Poets & Writers magazine, PEN America, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts and other organizations also established emergency funds for writers. Foundations also increased emergency funding for nonprofits, which were hit hard by the pandemic. A survey by [Americans for the Arts](#) found that 55% of literary arts organizations believed the pandemic made a severe impact on their finances, with an expected median loss of \$20,000. To fill that gap, Mellon created a \$3.5 million [Literary Arts Emergency Fund](#) for nonprofit organizations that was administered by the Academy of American Poets, the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP) and the National Book Foundation.

Funders have also become increasingly interested in how literature can advance social justice. Benka of the Academy of American Poets sees storytelling as a powerful lever for social change. “When we think about how individuals begin to care about other people, which is really the root of social justice, one of the best ways we learn about others, others’ experiences, others’ lives, is through stories,” she said.

Funders of literature are particularly active in the area of criminal justice. While prison writing programs have a long history—PEN America

started its program in 1971—funding for literature as an instrument to criminal justice has increased in magnitude and scope over the last five years. The [Art for Justice Fund](#) was initiated by the philanthropist Agnes Gund with programmatic support from the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Gund set aside \$100 million for the Art for Justice Fund—a huge amount—and the [first round](#) of Art for Justice grants primarily focused on literary organizations. The focus on literature is perhaps unsurprising, given that Gund credits two nonfiction books—Michelle Alexander’s “The New Jim Crow” and Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy”—with sparking her interest in the issue of mass incarceration.

In the summer of 2020, the Mellon Foundation announced that it will refocus its grantmaking to advance social justice. This shift in priorities has not translated into less funding for literature but in greater support for initiatives that leverage the literary arts for social change. One of its new programs, for example, is Freedom Reads (formerly known as the Million Book Project), which will distribute libraries of 500 curated books to 1,000 medium- and maximum-security prisons.

In light of the growing polarization and divisiveness in the United States, funders have also become interested in how literature can strengthen local communities and promote civic engagement. Mellon gave \$4.5 million to the Academy of Academy Poets to fund fellowships for local poets laureate. The academy had noticed that such positions were increasingly common, but that they often carried no remuneration, even as poets laureate were expected to visit classrooms, run workshops, and write poems for public events. The fellowships were designed to allow the poets laureate to conduct meaningful and impactful civic activities.

Equity, another major issue for donors, is discussed in the “Perspectives on Equity” section of this brief.

Funder Strategies and Trends

Giving for the literary arts has historically followed a traditional model of awards and fellowships for writers and project-specific grants for organizations. Funders are slowly adopting new strategies, however. One of the most noteworthy recent shifts in strategy has been a focus on collaborative funding, largely in response to

Program Spotlight



Freedom Reads

Founded by Reginald Dwayne Betts, Freedom Reads “uses literature as a powerful antidote to the hopelessness of incarceration.” Its programs have shipped over 15,600 books to prisons across the country and nearly 7,000 books to juvenile detention facilities.

Its Freedom Library features 500 carefully curated books and the Freedom Library program aims to seed 1,000 libraries across the country. The Mellon Foundation awarded Freedom Reads a \$5.25 million grant in 2020. Other partners include the Justice Collaboratory, Ford Foundation, Art Justice Fund, JSTOR, Yale Prison Education Initiative, and the National Book Foundation.

COVID-19. At the outset of the pandemic, funders felt the urgency to provide swift relief to artists. Seven small- and medium-sized grantmakers in the arts, including the Academy of American Poets, joined forces to create the [Artist Relief](#) fund. Mellon seeded the fund with \$5 million, and more than 20 other funders collectively contributed another \$5 million.

By pooling dollars and coordinating their efforts, the funders were able to launch the emergency fund in just three weeks. The collaborative nature of the project also extended to nonprofits – the organizing foundations enlisted their help to review the thousands of applications received. Benka of the Academy of American Poets said that the experience may serve as a model for future initiatives. “Pooling of philanthropic resources toward collaborative efforts that are led by organizations that have expertise in their fields on the ground is interesting, and we’re going to need more of that,” she said.

Another emergent strategy is a growing interest in capacity-building for nonprofit organizations. The Whiting Foundation created an award for literary magazines in 2018 that offers up to three years of funding. Prize winners are part of a cohort that shares best practices. The initiative prompts publishers and editors to think about financial sustainability by arranging sessions with development professionals.

The cohort model is also common among writers’ residencies, where participants often have a chance to meet with literary agents and other publishing professionals. One unique feature of the Whiting Literary Magazine Prizes, however, is that the foundation provides an outright grant for the first year, but offers a matching grant for the two

subsequent years. This structure is not meant to be punitive, but designed as a tool for the publications to broaden the donor base. “Fundraising, as important as it is, often falls to the bottom of the list when people are trying to develop writers, push the work along, and get their publications out,” said Hodell of Whiting.

Foundation Spotlight



The Whiting Foundation “provides targeted support for writers, scholars, and stewards of humanity’s shared culture.” Its Whiting Award program was established in 1985 and focuses on supporting emerging writers. Each year the program awards 10 grants to writers in fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama. Whiting also offers literary magazine prizes, creative nonfiction grants, a Public Engagement Fellowship, seed grants for scholars, and grants to support the preservation of endangered heritage around the world.

There has also been more funding for field-building in this space. The most prominent example of this trend is the Poetry Coalition, which the Mellon Foundation funded and the Academy of American Poets administers. The more than 25 organizations that comprise the coalition meet regularly to avoid duplicating services and to identify unique contributions their organizations can make. When COVID-19 hit, the coalition members, many of them small organizations with fewer than five staff members, shared information on how to navigate the crisis, including how to apply for a Paycheck Protection Program loan. The coalition has helped make its participants more resilient and may serve

as a model for other organizations. “I’m hopeful because of efforts like the Poetry Coalition that the younger generation of leaders emerging is just going to have more support than their predecessors,” said Benka.

Ben Cameron of the Jerome Foundation, however, suggests that funders have generally fallen behind their grantees in adapting their strategies. “I think literary organizations are thinking in new ways, but I’m not sure funding is happening in new ways,” Cameron said. He cites the Open Book, a literary space in Minneapolis co-founded by the Loft Literary Center, Milkweed Editions, and Minnesota Center for Book Arts as an example of collaboration that funders can learn from.

Perspectives on Equity

Over the past decade, a growing number of publishers, nonprofit leaders and funders have recognized persistent inequities in the field of literature and called for change. These inequities include the lack of recognition for underrepresented voices, support for organizations working with disadvantaged populations, and diversity in leadership positions at nonprofits and funders.

The high-profile success of some writers who aren’t white men can have the effect of obscuring the deeply ingrained and continuing inequities in the literary world. The nonprofit VIDA: Women in Literary Arts has sought to bring attention to those trends. Starting in 2010, it has tallied the number of women and men whose work was published, or whose books were reviewed, by major literary journals. The counts have revealed that most publications predominantly published the work of male writers. In response, many editors sought to promote the work of more female authors.

The literary world has also often glossed over non-white writers and communities. “You have white-founded organizations that have been predominantly white-led over many decades who weren’t thinking outside of that demographic,” said Benka of the Academy of American Poets. “There has been exclusion over time, and also a wakening-up over time that that’s not acceptable.”

In recent years, funders have adopted processes to ensure their grantmaking is more equitable. The Jerome Foundation, which funds early career writers as well as nonprofit literary organizations, made equity, diversity and inclusion one of its three core values in 2016. As part of the change, the foundation switched from staff-adjudicated to peer panel-adjudicated grantmaking with diverse panels selecting grantees. “The grants are now decided by a far more diverse, equitable and inclusive group of people than had historically been the case,” said foundation President Ben Cameron. The most recent group of literary arts organizations supported by the foundation include the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, Cave Canem, a literary organization serving African American poets, and the Feminist Press.

Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

“No matter what the programmatic issue, the philanthropic sector must commit to funding efforts that are of and by the communities that they are intended to serve. This is the only path to true equity. The sector must absolutely center every effort to combat white supremacy, anti-blackness, and anti-racism. More funding efforts must be made to support people of color and LGBTQ+ people everywhere, but most specifically in the US South.”

—Development and strategic planning consultant,
Oakland, California

DW Gibson, a writer and the director of the writers program at Art Omi, has noted a shift in funder support for underrepresented voices and programs that serve those writers. “For the last couple of years, awareness has grown that whatever financial support there is for writers is often geared to white writers, mainstream writers, writers that already fit some sort of mold of what we’ve been looking for historically,” Gibson said. “There’s a lot of energy going toward correcting that wrong and trying to find organizations that are already embedded into communities that are helping young writers and writers that haven’t traditionally had that support.”

The murder of George Floyd and the subsequent racial justice protests of 2020 accelerated discussions about equity within nonprofit organizations and funders. “There are a number of institutions in the literary arts that have been experiencing very, very public calls by their community to change and make change,” said Benka. She added that the members of the Poetry



“You have white-founded organizations that have been predominantly white-led over many decades who weren’t thinking outside of that demographic. There has been exclusion over time, and also a wakening-up over time that that’s not acceptable.”

—Jen Benka, president and executive director, American Academy of Poets

Coalition, a group of more than 25 poetry organizations, have been discussing how they need to change and how they can hold each other accountable in terms of equity and inclusion.

Gender and race are often central to conversations about equity in writing and literature, but funders also consider other aspects of diversity. “We now ask our applicants who are willing to self-identify in whatever dimensions they find most essential to their own identities—a request that elicits a response from most (but not all) applicants, who often lift up issues of sexual orientation or immigration or physical disability—as well as religion or political identity or geographic heritage and more,” said Cameron of the Jerome Foundation.

Grantmakers have funded nonprofits that promote LGBTQ+ and immigrant writers as well as writers with disabilities. Those organizations often receive grants from both funders that give to literature and those whose mission is to support those groups. One prominent example is Lambda Literary, a nonprofit that has hosted an awards gala to celebrate queer authors for more than 30 years. It also publishes a literary review and runs an LGBTQ+ writers-in-schools program and an annual writer’s retreat. Lambda Literary receives support from LGBTQ+-focused funders such as the Jeanne R. Cordova Living Trust and the David Bohnett Foundation, but it has also received grants from the Literary Arts Emergency Fund and the NEA.

Funders are likely to continue making equity central to their funding strategies. Illustrative of this trend is the announcement by Amazon Literary Partnerships, a major corporate funder, that its 2021 grants would promote underrepresented voices.

Still, some nonprofit leaders believe that while more conversations about equity have been taking place among funders, grantmaking processes have not fundamentally changed. “People have been talking about racial equity and centering justice in philanthropy for years, but we haven’t seen a watershed moment in terms of actual dollars,” wrote one fundraiser in a response to the Inside Philanthropy survey. “Program officers in the large, forward-thinking foundations embrace the change but are fundamentally powerless to do anything but finesse investments under the radar of actual leadership/decision-makers.”

The same respondent noted that many nonprofits that serve disadvantaged groups have relatively small operating budgets that make them ineligible for grants from larger foundations. “To truly advance disparities and support racial equity within organizations that are African-American-focused or led, many of which are small organizations, the barriers to qualify for funding need to be eliminated.”

Accessibility has also become an area of interest for funders. Carolyn Kuebler, the editor of the literary magazine New England Review, said that she has seen grants for increasing the accessibility of print publications by providing an audio component or making the content available digitally or as an ebook so that a reader can easily adjust font size.

All of these efforts have not stopped the core criticism that the field has major problems on many equity fronts. A recent [New York Times article](#) detailed the fact that diversity issues keep coming up among literary organizations, and that “conflicts over race, culture and inclusion have roiled the Romance Writers of America, the National Book Critics Circle, the Society of Children’s Book

Writers and Illustrators and other groups devoted to books and literature... In each instance, these organizations have bumped up against a moment in the country when greater accountability is being demanded, perhaps especially in an industry that is generally both fairly liberal and largely white.”

Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

“People have been talking about racial equity and centering justice in philanthropy for years, but we haven’t seen a watershed moment in terms of actual dollars. Program officers in the large, forward-thinking foundations embrace the change but are fundamentally powerless to do anything but finesse investments under the radar of actual leadership/decision-makers.”

—Fundraiser, Wilmington, North Carolina

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private Foundations

Private foundations are the largest source of funding for most writing and literature nonprofit organizations, while family foundations are often major champions of local nonprofits.

Mellon is by far the largest funder operating in this space. From 2014 to 2018, it made nearly \$20.4 million in grants to writing and literature programs, nearly twice as much as the next largest funder. Mellon typically only makes direct grants to large nonprofits, but it reaches individual writers and smaller organizations by partnering with organizations such as the Academy of American Poets for regranting. Mellon has recently shifted its grantmaking focus to advancing social justice. Its most recent initiatives, including the Million Book Project, reflect that new priority.

The Lannan Foundation, based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is the second-largest funder of the literary arts. Unlike Mellon, Lannan works closely with writers and smaller nonprofits in addition to regranting through intermediaries like PEN America. The foundation supports writers directly through annual awards and fellowships. Since it initiated its literary program in 1987, Lannan has also given grants to more than 150 nonprofits. Lannan also runs its own programs, including a writers' residency in Marfa, Texas, and a series of public events with authors in Santa Fe.

Several major private foundations support the literary arts to a lesser degree. The annual list of MacArthur Fellows, for example, often includes playwrights, poets, essayists and fiction writers. It

has also supported education programs such as the National Writing Project and Youth Speaks as part of its journalism and media portfolio. The Ford Foundation has funded the literary arts through its Creativity and Free Expression program, with a strong focus on fairness and justice.

Some private foundations are strong supporters of writing and literature in specific geographies. These include the McKnight Foundation, which gives to Twin Cities organizations, and the Jerome Foundation, which makes grants to artists and organizations based in Minnesota and New York City. Family foundations also tend to concentrate their giving within a region. The Zell Family Foundation, founded by Sam Zell, the chairman of the private investment firm Equity Group Investments, is a major giver to Michigan- and Chicago-based institutions including Young Chicago Authors, a creative writing program for teens and young adults.

A handful of smaller private foundations are largely focused on the literary arts. The Whiting Foundation has supported emerging writers since 1985. More recently, the foundation sought to identify and fill gaps in funding for the literary arts by surveying writers and other professionals. In response, it established a creative nonfiction grant for ambitious projects such as deeply researched biographies and histories and an annual award for literary magazines. The Jerome Foundation has supported early career artists, including writers, and, more recently, art nonprofits.

Private foundations focused on education such as the Spencer Foundation and the Wallace Foundation have supported literacy and writing education programs, but those grants tend to be a small share of their overall grantmaking portfolio.

Corporate Giving

Corporate funders are significant supporters of arts education, including literacy and creative writing programs for children. The main goal of these funders is to strengthen the communities where their employees live, and therefore, they often limit their support to programs in cities where they are headquartered or have large offices. For example, Disney and Sony Pictures have supported the Los Angeles chapter of the 826 youth writing and publishing centers, whereas Wells Fargo and Yelp have given to the San Francisco chapter.

Amazon and Target have been the most prominent corporate supporters of nonprofit literary organizations. Since 2009, Amazon Literary Partnerships has given [\\$13 million](#) to literary centers, workshops, residencies and independent publishers. Over the past few years, it has funded annual grants for poets and small publications administered by the Academy of American Poets and the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP), respectively. Like other funders in this space, Amazon has increasingly paid attention to equity and diversity. Its grantmaking for 2021 focuses on supporting literary organizations that champion underrepresented voices.

Much of Target's giving in this area benefits the thriving, independent literary scene in Minneapolis, where the corporation is headquartered. Historically, Target has supported local organizations such as the Minnesota Center for Book Art, The Loft Literary Center and the nonprofit presses Graywolf and Milkweed. To a lesser extent, the corporation has also supported literary programs elsewhere, such as the Brooklyn Book Festival. In 2019, however, [Target announced](#) that its grantmaking would prioritize the creation of economic opportunity through "entrepreneurship, workforce development, housing and asset building." Target has since phased out support for literary programs over the past few years.

Other corporations have sponsored literary galas and book prizes. Commercial book publishers like Penguin Random House are major sponsors of events such as the National Book Awards or the PEN America Literary Gala. Several other corporations, including entertainment companies like HBO and Netflix, and digital companies like Facebook and Twitter, have supported such events at varying levels.

Corporate Funder Spotlight



The Amazon Literary Partnership (ALP) has given more than \$13 million to organizations that "champion diverse, marginalized and underrepresented authors and storytellers." ALP offers grants to national and local organizations, as well as, nonprofit writing centers, after-school programs, residencies, literary magazines and more. In 2021, it awarded 80 grants totaling more than \$1 million. Grantees include WriteGirl, an L.A.-based organization working with underserved girls and promoting creativity and self-expression; the Hurston/Wright Foundation which honors and champions Black writers; and the House of Speakeasy, a bookmobile serving marginalized communities in NYC.

Community Foundations

Education is a priority area for community foundations and local donors alike. As a result, literacy and creative writing programs for children often receive substantial grants from community funders. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the largest organization of its kind in the United States, gave \$9.2 million to writing and literature from 2014 to 2018, behind only the Mellon and the Lannan foundations. The foundation also funds nonprofits operating outside of Northern California, but much of that funding supported local education programs. Youth Speaks, a spoken-word poetry program that engages at-risk youth, received \$6.5 million from the Silicon Valley Community Foundation in donor-advised funding. During the same period, Youth Speaks also received significant support from other Bay Area community foundations, including the East Bay Community Foundation, the Jewish Community Federation, and the San Francisco Foundation.

Funder Spotlight



The Jerome Foundation supports early-career artists in New York and Minnesota. It defines early-career artists as those with 2-10 years of generative experience, who are still developing their voices, have yet to be recognized or celebrated by the public at large, and are vocational. Age is not a determining factor. Jerome currently offers grants for film, video and digital artist development, the Jerome Hill Artist Fellowships, and residencies at the Camargo Foundation. For arts organizations, it offers two-year grants to organizations with programs and services benefitting early-career artists working within any arts discipline.

The Cleveland Foundation is another community foundation that provides significant support to writing and literacy programs for children. From 2014 to 2018, it granted \$4.1 million in the space. Some of the major projects the Cleveland Foundation has supported include a literacy tutoring program run by Greater Cleveland Volunteers and the development of a new building for Twelve Literary Arts, a nonprofit that provides youth programs.

Community foundations have also supported literary arts organizations to a lesser extent. For example, Graywolf, the Minneapolis-based independent publisher, lists the Minneapolis Foundation itself, as well as three distinct family funds within the foundation, as annual supporters contributing \$2,500 or more. Community support for the literary arts seems to correlate to the strength of the local literary scene; funders in cities that have well-established nonprofit organizations such as Portland and Minneapolis are more likely to donate to the literary arts.

Major Donors

Multi-million-dollar individual gifts are rarer for literature than they are for the visual or performing arts, where exceptionally large naming gifts have become commonplace. One notable exception over the past 20 years was the \$200 million gift from Ruth Lilly, whose family founded the Eli Lilly and Company, to the Poetry Foundation in 2002. Another exception was a gift from Susan and John Jackson in 2006—Mr. Jackson is the former CEO of the pharmaceutical company Celgene—to endow a poetry prize administered by Poets & Writers, a nonprofit literary organization. Two years later, the Jacksons pledged \$5 million to establish a writing program at Hollins University in Virginia.

Nevertheless, individual donors are often the founders or benefactors of smaller nonprofit literary organizations. “There is a model for literary magazines and book publishers where you have an angel who is your publisher and who doesn’t mind losing money year after year because they really love getting the work out there,” said Daniel Reid, executive director of the Whiting Foundation. Tin House, an esteemed literary magazine from Portland, Oregon, that became widely successful before shutting down in 2018, started with the backing of Win McCormack, the co-founder of Mother Jones and the Liberty Hill Foundation. Similarly, [Linda Breneman](#) and her then-husband Jeremy Jaech, a software entrepreneur, co-founded the Hugo House, a literary center in Seattle, in 1997. The Breneman Jaech Foundation supported the Hugo House through its first years and also funded other literary arts organizations in Washington state, including Hedgebrook, a residency for women writers.

Breneman attributes her interest in funding the literary arts to her lifelong career as a writer. In fact, many high-profile supporters of literature are writers who benefited from the nonprofit literary infrastructure, publishing their work in nonprofit journals and presses and attending residencies, before attaining commercial success. Stephen King established the [Haven Foundation](#) in 2006, which makes grants to writers and other artists in need, particularly those suffering from chronic illness, medical emergencies, or catastrophic events. In 1995, Patricia Highsmith, author of “The Talented Mr. Ripley,” left her entire estate and any future royalties to Yaddo, an artist retreat she had attended nearly 50 years earlier. Cameron of the Jerome Foundation has suggested that American

writers could establish a national endowment for literature by following Highsmith’s example and bequeathing future royalties for one of their books to future generations of writers.

Major Donor Spotlight



Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library spans five countries and gifts more than 1 million books each month. As of August 2021, the nonprofit has given away over 165 million books to children around the world. Parton is quoted on the foundation’s website as saying:

“I know there are children in your community with their own dreams. They dream of becoming a doctor or an inventor or a minister. Who knows, maybe there is a little girl whose dream is to be a writer and singer. The seeds of these dreams are often found in books and the seeds you help plant in your community can grow across the world.”

In recent years, high net-worth individuals have increasingly relied on commercial donor-advised funds such as Fidelity Charitable and Schwab Charitable to support the arts, including literature. These funds allow donors to enjoy immediate tax benefits for a donation the fund can disburse over multiple years. Donor-advised funds have [grown quickly](#), a trend that is expected to continue in the coming years. In the survey of Inside Philanthropy readers and other philanthropy professionals, more than half of the respondents who work in the field of writing and literature indicated that such funds have become more prominent.

It is likely too early to tell what the growing popularity of donor-advised funds will mean for writing and literature. From 2014 to 2018, Fidelity, the largest commercial gift fund, made more than 200 grants totaling \$4.3 million to literary organizations—1% of overall giving in this space—on behalf of donors. Some of the organizations that received funds include 826 National and its local affiliates, and The New Press, an independent publisher that specializes in publishing progressive voices. Many of the organizations that received funds are based in the Greater Chicago area, which could indicate that a single individual or family may have been behind much of the giving disbursed by Fidelity during that period. Commercial gift funds pose a direct challenge to established community foundations, many of which offer similar services, but it is still unclear how they will affect funding trends in this funding area.

Grantee Spotlight

Youth Speaks

Youth Speaks describes its mission as creating spaces “that challenge young people to develop and amplify their voices as creators of social change.” Its programs include Brave New Voices, a network of national arts organizations and an international poetry festival featuring young writers; the Emerging Arts Fellowship, a two-year professional development program in the Bay Area; and the Bigger Picture, a partnership with UCSFs Center for Vulnerable Populations focusing on young people and Type 2 Diabetes.

Over the years Youth Speaks has been awarded \$1 million+ over multiple grants from the Mellon, Hewlett, Irvine and MacArthur foundations, among others.

High-profile celebrities and other public figures have played a major role in the literacy space. In 1995, singer Dolly Parton, inspired by her father, who never learned to read, launched a program to give free books to preschool children. Laura Bush, who co-founded the National Book Festival as first lady, has funded school libraries through her foundation. During the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as schools and public libraries shut down, [numerous celebrities](#) read aloud children’s books on video to raise funds and promote learning at home.

Intermediaries and Associations

There is no funder affinity group that is specific to writing and literature, although many of the private foundations operating in the space are members of Grantmakers in the Arts. Since funders across artistic disciplines often face similar challenges, such convening tables can be a useful resource for philanthropy professionals.

Funders also meet with each other and with current and potential grantees at major book festivals and meetings such as the annual Association of Writers & Writing Programs Conference and Bookfair. AWP has a few prizes that pay out \$1,000 or \$2,000 to writers or publishers. The line between “grant” and “prize” is blurred in this field, but fundraisers should generally not think of AWP as a grantmaker.

Many large funders rely on intermediaries to select grantees and regrant funds to individual writers and nonprofit literary organizations. As previously mentioned, the Academy of American Poets and Community of Literary Magazines and Presses separately administer annual grants that are funded by Amazon Literary Partnerships. The Academy and CLMP, along with the National Book Foundation, also jointly administered the Literary

Arts Emergency Fund, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Another important intermediary is PEN America. It administers an emergency fund for writers, for example, that was largely funded by Lannan Foundation and the Haven Foundation.

The AWP and the CLMP also play a major role in creating opportunities for networking, education and capacity-building for the field. The AWP is a membership organization of nearly 50,000 writers and hundreds of creative writing programs and writer conferences. In addition to hosting its annual conference, attended by more than 10,000 participants, it also advocates on behalf of writers and offers professional development opportunities. The CLMP brings together hundreds of independent presses and literary journals from across the United States. It offers workshops, one-on-one consultations, grant databases and other services to publishers.

A third organization, LitNet, is a coalition of literary organizations that provides resources (but not grants or other financial resources) to its members, but that operates on a smaller scale than AWP and CLMP. Other nonprofit associations focus on more specific areas. They include the Alliance of Artist Communities and Res Artis, two networks of art residencies, the Poetry Coalition, and the Writers in Schools (WITS) Alliance, a group of literary arts education programs.

Regional coalitions have also emerged. LitTAP, supported by the New York State Council on the Arts, is a group of 40 literary arts organizations statewide. In addition to organizing annual convenings and offering mentoring and other resources to members, the organization also provides annual advancement grants of \$2,500 to

\$10,000. More recently, approximately 30 New York City literary organizations including the Author's Guild, Harlem Writers, the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and PEN America formed the [NYC Literary Action Coalition](#) to raise the visibility of the sector. The coalition published an [interview series](#) with New York City mayoral candidates ahead of the city's primary election in June 2021.

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"Within the arts, there is very little support for literary organizations because philanthropy assumes that literary work is supported sufficiently by the marketplace. But it definitely isn't, and the trend is toward homogenization of popular mass market bestsellers rather than literary work, which is struggling to survive."

—Fundraiser, San Francisco, California

Funding intermediaries are uniquely important in the writing and literature funding space because so many grantees are individual writers or small organizations. Making grants to individuals requires a different level of oversight, fiscal responsibility and reporting that many foundations are not equipped to handle. Furthermore, smaller organizations "might not have the budget size that would allow them in the door of a large foundation," said Benka of the Academy of American Poets, which serves as funding intermediary. "Large foundations don't give that many grants, and the grants they give are large, and they don't want to tip organizations over," she adds.

Fundraising Now

The years 2020 and 2021 have been a challenging time for writing and literature nonprofits, as the pandemic disrupted typical fundraising efforts across the country. Despite a general slowdown in support over the past year, many organizations reported to IP that they were able to survive thanks to emergency funding from government and philanthropy, as well as a pivot to virtual fundraisers and Zoom meetings with donors. There remains a scarcity of major funders that prioritize literature.

With rare exceptions, literary nonprofits are unendowed and must raise their operating budgets each year, primarily from institutional and individual gifts. Even presses and literary magazines, which generate more earned revenue through sales and subscriptions than other literary nonprofits, normally rely on philanthropic support for 30% to 70% of their budgets, depending on the strength of sales. A survey of nonprofit literary organizations that applied for emergency funding during the pandemic [reported](#) nearly \$28 million in losses as of September 2020 and projected an additional \$48 million in losses in 2021.

While key national funders such as Lannan and Mellon foundations continued to support literature during the pandemic, some local foundations shifted their giving to other areas. “We have noticed that some funders have gone in the direction of more direct support for COVID-related services, which we completely understand,” said Joel Arquillos, executive director of 826LA, a nonprofit that runs creative writing programs in the Los Angeles area. Individual donations also slowed down and some organizations limited their asks, given the health crisis.

“This time last year, we weren’t really asking anybody because people were in such disarray and pain,” said Fiona McCrae, executive director and publisher of the nonprofit press Graywolf.

Emergency funding from the government did help stabilize nonprofit literary organizations. Many received forgivable loans from the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) provided [grants of \\$50,000](#) to organizations that had previously received an NEA award. Arts organizations also gained more financial flexibility [after Congress allowed the endowment](#) to change project-based grants awarded from 2019 to 2021 to general operating support.

Funders of literature stepped up with emergency grants, as well. The Mellon Foundation set up a [\\$3.5 million fund](#) for struggling literary organizations that was jointly administered by the Academy of American Poets, the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses, and the National Book Foundation. Nearly 300 nonprofit literary arts organizations received grants that ranged from \$5,000 to \$50,000.

“We didn’t have to lay anybody off, we didn’t have to shut anything down, and we were able to pivot pretty quickly digitally, thanks to this influx of emergency funding,” said Jafreen Uddin, executive director of the Asian American Writers’ Workshop.

The pandemic led some literary nonprofits to reframe and shift their programs so that their organizations could remain essential. “It was a really fast pivot to think about, what are our essentialities in a world defined by pandemic?” said Nossel of PEN America. One focus for the group was expanding its existing emergency fund for writers,

made possible by larger-than-usual gifts from the two foundations that support the fund.

Fundraising moved online, too, with virtual events and galas and Zoom chats with major donors. The transition was difficult for nonprofits that rely on events for a large share of their fundraising. PEN America, for example, typically holds 50 small-scale author evenings annually in the homes of authors or supporters. “Our question was, ‘can this possibly translate into the virtual realm with ticket prices in the low to mid three figures?’” said PEN America’s Nossel. “Luckily, it has worked. We have done more than 50 virtual events, and they’re shorter, but they’re also very intimate.”

Switching to online events has also helped literary organizations reach a wider audience. PEN America typically holds an annual gala at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The 2020 Literary Gala, scheduled for May, was postponed twice before it was finally canceled. Instead, PEN America hosted an online event in December, headlined by former President Barack Obama in conversation with presidential biographer Ron Chernow. “We had to learn how to produce a virtual event, and we tried to make lemons into lemonade,” said Nossel. The event had an audience of 17,000 viewers instead of the 900 supporters who would have attended the in-person gala. “That was a huge opportunity for us to reach a much wider audience than we ever could within the four walls of the museum.”

Online events also allowed nonprofits to reach individual donors across the country. Graywolf, based in Minneapolis, held author readings and a series of events open to the general public, in which members of the editorial and marketing teams discussed upcoming books. In addition to providing

an inside look at the workings of a publisher, the events led to new donors. “We had more donations last year from places around the country rather than Minnesota, because of the virtual events,” said Josh Ostergaard, senior development officer at Graywolf.

Some sense of normalcy and stability has now returned to literary organizations. Nossel from PEN America says she has been able to meet with donors in person again and resume the planning for the centenary campaign. “In the last month or two, it felt as though it could come back to something that ambitious.”

Initiative Spotlight



The Freedom
to Write

PEN America launched its PEN Across America Initiative in 2018 in response to “mounting threats to a free press, breakdowns in civil discourse and the marginalization to important voices.” Its Press Freedom Incentive Fund supported initiatives in 20 cities during its pilot year. The fund has an open application process and supports a number of projects including town halls, film screenings, awards for local journalism, and civic dialogues. Grants range from \$1,000 to \$4,000.

Despite the reopening and some positive fundraising developments that emerged from the pandemic, leaders of literary nonprofits remain concerned about fundraising prospects. Their worries include being overlooked by national funders of arts and culture, as well as local funders perceiving their impact as insufficient on the community. Other than Lannan and Mellon, there are few large, national foundations supporting

literature. Some smaller foundations, such as Whiting, exclusively support writing and literature, but they are also few and far between. Local foundations and state arts councils often support literary organizations, but those funders may favor other arts organizations that have bigger budgets and a more visible presence in the community.

Corporations and corporate foundations are not significant sources of support for nonprofit literary organizations. The two exceptions have been Amazon and Target, although the latter is phasing out its support of literary programs as it shifts funding priorities. “Corporations can be hard to engage,” said Arquillos. Uddin of the Asian American Writers’ Workshop agrees. “I know that corporations obviously have a process for determining where certain charitable dollars go, but how the beneficiaries of those funds are determined is a bit opaque,” she said.



826LA offers a number of different programs to students ages 6-18, including tutoring, field trips, workshops, and in-school programming. Its Writers’ Rooms are on-campus spaces to help build and encourage students’ writing and literacy skills.

826LA currently has Writers’ Rooms at Manual Arts Senior High School in South Central Los Angeles and opened its second room in 2019 at Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights. It has plans in the works to open a third Writers’ Room in the L.A. area.

Typically, support from corporations comes in sponsorships for galas and other large events. Sponsors of PEN America’s 2021 Literary Gala include commercial publishers like Penguin Random House and entertainment industry players such as the Walt Disney Company and Creative Artists Agency.

Literary nonprofits we spoke with have seen only a modest increase in donations from donor-advised funds (DAFs). “It’s becoming more common, but I haven’t seen a big shift,” said Nossel of PEN America. She occasionally receives an unsolicited gift through a DAF. “We always want to know, if possible, who the person was and what prompted them to give so we can develop a personal relationship.”

Given the relative scarcity of institutional funding for literary nonprofits, individual donors, who are often passionate readers themselves, have become important contributors. Million-dollar gifts are less common in literature than in the other arts, where donors sometimes make large naming gifts, but high-net-worth individuals may donate \$10,000 or \$20,000 each year. Those donations typically come in via events or end-of-year appeals.

Small-dollar donors typically make up a small percentage of the overall budget, but nonprofits are seeking to grow those donations to diversify their fundraising. All Asian American Writers’ Workshop events are free and open to the public, but the organization solicits donations at the start of each event. The nonprofit also has a “fan club,” a recurring donor program in which donors give as little as \$5 a month.

Literary nonprofit leaders hope that some changes implemented during the pandemic may become

permanent, such as streamlined processes for application and reporting and more opportunities for general operating support. They are also optimistic that a greater focus from funders on social and racial justice will create funding opportunities for existing initiatives such as fellowships for underrepresented authors and prison writing programs.

Arquillos from 826LA has noticed that in recent years, more foundations have moved in the direction of offering general operating support. But others in this space said these opportunities are still rare. “Most funding opportunities are tied to specific programs, and it’s not always the case that it’s worth our staff’s time to try to cram or redefine our book list in a way that fits with a specific program,” said Ostergaard of Graywolf.

Some nonprofit leaders have seen encouraging trends from funders, including a greater focus on establishing partnerships between nonprofits. “I’ve noticed that there’s a lot of interest in collaborative work,” said Uddin. “I think it helps fight against the scarcity model that organizations often find themselves in when it comes to funding, being pitted against each other.” A prominent example of collaboration between literary nonprofits is the [Poetry Coalition](#), a group of 25 poetry organizations funded by the Mellon Foundation and administered by the Academy of American Poets.

Another encouraging trend is increased funding for programs and initiatives related to social justice. Many literary organizations believe that social justice has long been core to their work and that the growing interest from funders around the issue will open the door to more funding opportunities. “We had done a lot of work in the prison and justice writing program, our emerging voices program

focused on writers in communities traditionally locked out of the literary world, our literary awards program that, every year, honors a diverse array of voices,” said Nossel of PEN America. “All of that really came to the foreground amid the racial justice protests and a sense of reckoning in society, including within the literary community.”

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“An important topic to keep raising is inviting foundations to rethink perpetuity and/or significantly increasing their payout rates. It will be interesting to see what happens with the 10% payout campaign.”

—Foundation professional, San Francisco, California

Some major funders have signaled that they see literature and writing as powerful forces for social change. In early 2020, the Mellon Foundation [announced](#) it would prioritize the funding of initiatives, including in literature, that advance social justice. Philanthropist Agnes Gund attributes her interest in social justice to reading books like Michelle Alexander’s “The New Jim Crow” and Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy.” It is unclear whether other funders will follow suit, but in a fundraising landscape with so many competing priorities, literary organizations may need to make a stronger case for their importance.

“Arts organizations were constantly fighting for scraps even before the pandemic,” said Uddin. “Does that scarcity increase after the pandemic, when people are maybe thinking about more advocacy funding or more community organizing funding or more things they view as more of a direct response to societal situations versus the arts?”

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

One challenge comes up repeatedly in conversations with funders and grantees in this space: the philanthropic sector's general lack of interest in funding writing and literature. Nearly every person interviewed for this brief argued that the biggest challenge, and opportunity, in philanthropic giving for writing and literature is the sheer lack of it.

"As a lover of literature, I find it very perplexing why this is a difficult story to tell potential grantmakers," said Hodell at the Whiting Foundation. "It's certainly clear to someone who goes to the ballet or to the opera that this is a costly spectacle. Maybe it's that the work of a writer is largely invisible."

While the work of writers and the literary nonprofit organizations that support them is less visible than the work of their peers in other artistic disciplines, literature is a good investment for funders. "The return to your investment is shockingly high in writing, whether you're investing in individual writers or indie presses," added Daniel Reid, executive director at Whiting.

This high return is partly because writers and literary nonprofits have relatively low costs. Unlike an elaborate production that involves set design and venue expenses, the costs of writing are often limited to labor and the time it takes to write a work or to edit a book or literary magazine. "I love talking about the impact that our organizations are able to have pretty economically," said Benka of the Academy of American Poets. "Our organizations are agile and wide-reaching. We can do a lot with little."

The benefits of literature, on the other hand, are usually unconstrained because it is an easily scalable medium. It is also highly impactful in the way that it touches readers. "Literature, stories, poetry help people understand some of the complicated but very important critical issues that we're facing as people and as a globe," Benka added.

The [rapid consolidation](#) of the book publishing industry has greatly reduced the number of for-profit publishers and narrowed the number and the type of books they release. Nonprofit, independent presses have filled the void, promoting emerging authors and ambitious works that commercial publishers may deem too risky. Literary magazines also play an important role in developing and showcasing new voices.

Unfortunately, there are very few grant opportunities for independent presses and even fewer for literary magazines. "Many independent journals and presses have a significant national and international reach, elevating the importance of equity in publishing and playing an important role in our country's diverse literary legacy, but they may be less visible in their local communities and thus receive less funding locally," said Amy Stolls, literary arts director at the NEA. Greater support for the infrastructure that serves writers, including independent presses and literary magazines, but also literary centers and workshops, is an opportunity for funders seeking to make an impactful investment in literature.

Funders have also pointed to a lack of support for nonprofits that are located or operate in rural areas. Private foundations, corporations, and

individuals supporting the arts are generally based in cities and they almost exclusively fund organizations in urban areas. Jeremy Adams, development director at Art Omi, located in New York state's Hudson Valley, notes that his organization is shut out from numerous grants because many funders do not fund in rural areas. According to Cameron of the Jerome Foundation, the lack of funding for literature in rural areas is an opportunity for donors, particularly those interested in addressing divisiveness in the United States. "In light of what we've seen in politics in virtually every state, the deep divisions politically between urban centers and rural centers is a source of concern for some funders," Cameron said.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the financial fragility of writers and literary nonprofit organizations, and it may prompt funders to reevaluate their strategies and practices. "As we start to emerge into a post-COVID-19 existence, we need to be thinking about how the literary arts can be more resilient, more financially viable, more adaptable, and certainly more equitable," said Stolls of the NEA. "I think many of the fault lines in our systems and practices were there before the pandemic, and some have gotten worse."

One promising trend in the field emerging in direct response to the COVID-19 crisis is closer collaboration among funders and intermediaries. The Arts Relief Fund was supported by pooled dollars from multiple funders and administered by seven cross-disciplinary intermediaries. The experience of funders and intermediaries has been positive, and this model may become more common in this space.

Funding Spotlight: Emergency Relief

ArtistRelief.org

support for artists affected by COVID-19

Artist Relief launched in April 2020 with a \$5 million matching seed gift from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Over 15 months, nearly 4,700 artists received \$5,000 emergency relief grants. In March 2021 Artist Relief relaunched, thanks to a gift from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. It provided grants to artists from March 2021 to June 2021.

Artist Relief's long list of supporters include the Arison, Andy Warhol, Ford, Knight and Emily Tremaine Hall foundations, among others.

Resources for Writing and Literature

Reports & Data Sets:

[2020 Donor-Advised Fund Report.](#) (n.d.) National Philanthropic Trust.

[The COVID-19 Impact Survey for Artists and Creative Workers.](#) (n.d.) Americans for the Arts.

[The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arts & Cultural Sector.](#) (n.d.) Americans for the Arts.

Websites & Individual Pages with Key Information:

[About Artist Relief.](#) (n.d.) Artist Relief.

[About the Fund.](#) (n.d.) Art For Justice Fund.

[Annual Report. 2019 NWP Financials.](#) (n.d.) National Writing Project.

Blair, E. (January 30, 2020). [Academy of American Poets Receives \\$4.5 Million Grant.](#) National Public Radio.

Garner, D. (August 5, 2019). [The Yellow House Is a Major Memoir About a Large Family and Its Beloved Home.](#) New York Times.

Harris, E. (August 30, 2021). [In Literary Organizations, Diversity Disputes Keep Coming.](#) New York Times.

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[Here's How the Target Foundation's Philanthropy is Evolving.](#) (September 5, 2019). Target.

Maughan, S. (October 6, 2020). [Coronavirus Response: Celebrities Reading Kids' Books.](#) Publishers Weekly.

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[NYC Mayoral Candidates Talk to New York Literary Action Coalition.](#) (n.d.) PEN America.

Scutari, M. (September 24, 2020). [As Writers and Poets Struggle, an Emergency Fund Offers Relief to Literary Arts Groups.](#) Inside Philanthropy.

Woodworth, A. (October 27, 2020). [Amazon Literary Partnership accepting grant applications for 2021.](#) Amazon.

Photo Credit

Jen Benka. Photo by Molly Walsh. Academy of American Poets.

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¹Based on available grantmaker data from Candid. Excludes federal funding, funding by higher education institutions and major donor advised funds (DAFs.)

²Based on available grant recipient data from Candid. Excludes government organizations.

Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project, each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.org.