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Poets & Writers ANNUAL REPORT

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Elliot Figman

**During his four decades at the helm, Elliot Figman oversaw the creation of *Poets & Writers Magazine*, the launch of pw.org, the expansion of the Readings & Workshops program, and the introduction of several awards.**

#### **A NEW CHAPTER**

In January, Poets & Writers executive director Elliot Figman stepped down after forty-three years, handing the reins over to Melissa Ford Gradel. The board of directors selected Melissa, who previously served as Poets & Writers managing director for more than a decade, to build upon her predecessor's extraordinary service.

Elliot came to Poets & Writers in 1977 as a volunteer. After holding several paid positions at the organization, he was named executive director in 1981. During his four decades at the helm, he oversaw the creation of *Poets & Writers Magazine*, the launch of pw.org, the expansion of the Readings & Workshops program, and the introduction of several awards, including the Jackson Poetry Prize, now one of the most prestigious honors offered to an American poet. Elliot was a cofounder of the Literary Network (LitNet), which advocates for the field of nonprofit literary organizations. He will continue to serve as a member of the Poets & Writers Board of Directors.

In announcing this leadership transition, Amy Berkower, president of the board of directors, commented: "We are thrilled to continue our long partnership with Melissa as we write the next chapter for Poets & Writers. Melissa's contributions to Poets & Writers and her commitment to our mission made this a natural choice—and one that will provide continuity in a time of unprecedented change. The Board thanks Elliot for his long and successful tenure and welcomes Melissa to her new role."



**Dear Reader,**

**The year covered in this report will undoubtedly be remembered as one of the most disruptive and challenging in recent memory. At Poets & Writers, it was a year of challenge and change, too, but that change cannot be separated from the context: the ongoing devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic; a long-overdue reckoning with the nation's history of brutal, violent racism; shocking attacks on democracy; an uncertain economy; and an intensifying climate crisis that brought unprecedented fires, floods, and storms.**

For Poets & Writers, it was also a year of transition. Elliot Figman, the organization's executive director for nearly forty years, retired at the end of 2020 and Melissa Ford Gradel succeeded him in January 2021. (Read more about Elliot's exceptional service to Poets & Writers on the facing page.)

Of paramount importance this year is our commitment to becoming an antiracist organization, which has led to reflection, learning, and action. In addition, in the early months of the pandemic—before federal aid was available to those most severely impacted by the economic downturn—we created the Poets & Writers COVID-19 Relief Fund, providing emergency grants to 150 writers in thirty-six states. Our Readings & Workshops program provided mini-grants for virtual literary events and helped hundreds of writers connect with audiences online. In the pages of *Poets & Writers Magazine* we covered the pandemic's impact on the literary world and highlighted writers' reflections on racial inequity in the publishing industry. We are especially grateful to Poets & Writers' exceptional staff for their dedication and creativity. Despite very challenging circumstances, together we continued to provide the resources and services that writers count on and found new ways to respond to writers' changing needs.

Throughout this most difficult year, it is reported that people are reading more than they have in years. They have turned to stories, poems, and essays for solace, perspective, escape, insight, and to imaginatively engage with the most complex and challenging issues of our time. Which is why supporting writers remains essential work that we are proud to do.

Onward!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Melissa Ford Gradel".

**Melissa Ford Gradel**  
Executive Director

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Amy Berkower".

**Amy Berkower**  
President of the Board of Directors

## **In summer 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, Poets & Writers made a public commitment to becoming an antiracist organization.**

In a statement of solidarity with the Black community, we stated our intention to devote time and resources to discerning how we have been complicit in supporting unjust practices, how we can contribute to dismantling systemic racism, and how we can more effectively support Black writers as well as other writers of color.

Putting this commitment into action was a priority throughout the year. Initial steps included an increase to the starting salary for full-time entry-level positions—an adjustment made in recognition that low pay typical of entry-level positions in the nonprofit arts sector is an obstacle to increased diversity in the sector. We made Juneteenth a paid holiday for all employees. In order to gain a clear picture of the diversity of our past editorial coverage and establish a benchmark for measuring future progress, the editorial team began an internal analysis of the identity of writers hired to write for *Poets & Writers Magazine* and *pw.org*, and the subjects covered in those articles.

Our board of directors also began a process of change. We hired an outside expert to conduct an organizational assessment, lead training for the board, and facilitate community conversations on antiracism that engaged the full board and staff. Out of this work, we developed an Antiracism Action Plan outlining specific objectives to be met in 2021–22. Throughout the year, a joint committee of board and staff members will meet quarterly to monitor progress toward those objectives as well as to determine next steps.

We recognize the urgency of this work and are committed to ongoing improvements in governance, organizational culture, and programming in order to more fully embody our values.

**In the early months of the pandemic—as its devastating economic impact on writers was becoming clear—the board of directors allocated \$50,000 from the organization’s reserves to create the Poets & Writers COVID-19 Relief Fund.**

**WE EXTEND GRATEFUL THANKS TO THE GENEROUS SUPPORTERS OF THE POETS & WRITERS COVID-19 RELIEF FUND:**

Maureen Mahon Egen

Malcolm Gladwell

Hachette Book Group

Hello Sunshine

Zibby Owens

Michael Pietsch

Stacy Schiff and  
Marc de la Bruyère

Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Amor Towles

We raised an additional \$100,000 in special contributions, allowing us to distribute \$1,000 emergency grants to 150 writers in thirty-three states.

While this support was modest in relation to the need, the response from the writing community confirmed its importance. “This is fantastic news and a much-needed boost to morale at a time when everything seems to be going wrong,” an author from

Topanga, California, wrote.

“I lost my job three weeks ago, and this grant is a lifeline thrown at a perfect moment.” A writer from

Pahoa, Hawai’i, commented: “*Aloha! Mahalo* for supporting an Asian American writer in a time of rampant yellow peril; it means the world to me and my family.” A writer from Queens, New York, wrote to say: “In these moments of challenges and uncertainty, your support is a cause of needed relief.

A gentle light in the middle of great loneliness and anguish that affects the world right now and so intensely the city of New York.”

**“I lost my job three weeks ago, and this grant is a lifeline thrown at a perfect moment.”**

**WRITER FROM TOPANGA, CALIFORNIA,  
WHO RECEIVED A POETS & WRITERS  
COVID-19 RELIEF FUND GRANT**

SPECIAL REPORT: COVID-19 AND THE BUSINESS OF BOOKS

**Poets & Writers**

**Natasha Trethewey**  
A Poetics of Resistance

**Literary Agents**  
Literary Agents to Watch: How Will They Get What They Best Agents for Books, An Interview

What We Found in Writing: "Creativity in Quarantine"

First Fiction 2020  
Honoring the Authors of Five Contemporary Stories

Writing Prompts, Reviews & Critique

Some Indie Bookstores, Literary Festivals Go Virtual

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Page One: Where New and Noteworthy Books Begin

**SIGN UP**



**Weekly Update**

Our free weekly e-newsletter provides links to the newest online content from *Poets & Writers Magazine*, plus highlights from our blogs, writing contest deadlines, job listings, and more.

**sign up**

**DAILY NEWS**

**The National Book Critics Circle Rebuilds, Colson Whitehead Announces Next Novel, and More**

Jul 16, 2020

The movement to free poet Varavara Rao; Ann and Jeff VanderMeer on the evolution of modern...

**Lisa Lucas to Depart National Book Foundation, Transformations at the Top Levels in Publishing,...**

Jul 15, 2020

Antiracism training with Robin DiAngelo; Literary Hub highlights the best books still forthcoming...

**WRITING PROMPTS**

**Creativity in Quarantine**

*Creative Nonfiction*

In "What We Found in Writing: Authors on Creativity in Quarantine" in the July/August issue of ...

**Garden Making**

*Fiction*

"Like other artistic endeavors, garden making can be a response to loss. Creating a garden can be..."

**Rituals**

*Poetry*

"Rituals—or the tasks we perform repeatedly, not for what they accomplish but for what they mean..."

**A POPSUGAR BEST BOOK OF JUNE 2020**

**BLOCK SEVENTEEN**

KIMIKO GUTHRIE



**TOOLS FOR WRITERS**

LITERARY MAGAZINES	1300+	SMALL PRESSES	530+	LITERARY PLACES	440+	LITERARY AGENTS	170+
GRANTS & AWARDS	390+	MFA PROGRAMS	260+	WRITERS RETREATS	110+	REVIEW OUTLETS	50+

Tweets by @poetswritersinc 



**LITERARY EVENTS CALENDAR**

**READINGS & WORKSHOPS**



**Our website, pw.org, offers an abundance of carefully curated resources to keep writers informed, inspired, and connected, plus select content from *Poets & Writers Magazine* and online exclusives.**

Our heavily utilized databases of grants and awards, small presses, literary magazines, MFA programs, and more allow writers to research professional advancement opportunities and markets for their work. In March, we launched Poets & Writers Groups, a new peer-to-peer networking tool designed to help writers connect, communicate, and collaborate with fellow writers. Supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Poets & Writers Groups grows out of a decades-long commitment to helping writers build community. Since its launch, over 900 writers have signed up and formed more than ninety writing groups.

#### PW.ORG BY THE NUMBERS

**150,000+** Unique monthly visitors to pw.org

**5%** Increase in traffic over the prior year

**12,000+** Author profiles in the Poets & Writers Directory

**390+** Writing contests carefully vetted by our staff for our Grants & Awards database

**1,300+** Journal listings in our Literary Magazines database

**530+** Independent publisher listings in our Small Presses database

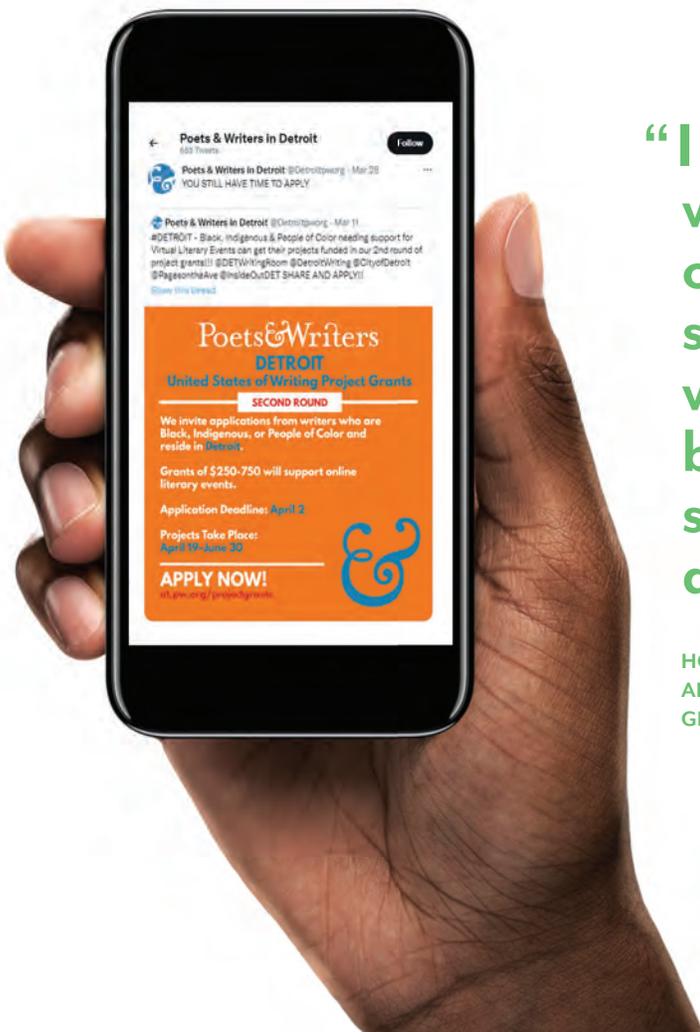
**260+** Graduate writing program listings in our MFA Programs database

## United States of Writing expands our core programming to better serve writers around the country, especially those from historically marginalized groups.

Launched in 2019 as a pilot project in Detroit, Houston, and New Orleans, United States of Writing adapted to find new ways to engage and support writers through online forums, blogs, and social media. In the fall of 2020, we created a new grant opportunity for writers from the three pilot cities who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). Grants of up to \$750 enabled thirty-six BIPOC writers to create, curate, and produce original online literary events. To engage their communities, the writers addressed a range of themes, with compelling titles like “Home Is Where a House Was,” “Resistances & Reclamation: A Workshop & Reading Series in Celebration of Caribbean/American Voices,” and “Loneliness: A Collaboration.”



Literary outreach coordinators Lupe Mendez, Justin Rogers, and Kelly Harris worked to connect writers with resources and strengthen literary communities in Houston, Detroit, and New Orleans.



“I was elated to know that I was going to be able to not only organize a virtual reading series and pay poets for their work, but I was also going to be able to afford captioning services to make the reading as accessible as possible.”

HOUSTON-BASED WRITER AND EDUCATOR REYES RAMIREZ, AFTER LEARNING HE HAD RECEIVED A SPECIAL PROJECT GRANT FOR BIPOC WRITERS



**Each year since 1970, the Readings & Workshops program has provided mini-grants to writers participating in literary events—ensuring that writers are paid for their work while also providing important validation and encouragement, connecting these writers with audiences, and fostering literary activity in big cities and small towns across the country.**



When the pandemic brought in-person gatherings to a halt, we altered our program guidelines to provide funding for live virtual events. During an otherwise isolating time, these events brought literary programming to a combined audience of more than 88,000. We also hosted a series of online meetings and town halls that offered writers opportunities to connect to share challenges, successes, and tips; to promote their events and programs; and to build community.

The Readings & Workshops program supports literary events throughout New York State and California, and in Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, New Orleans, Seattle, Tucson, and Washington, D.C. This program is made possible thanks to generous support from the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the California Arts Council, the Cowles Charitable Trust, the Frances Abbey Endowment, and Friends of Poets & Writers.

#### READINGS & WORKSHOPS BY THE NUMBERS

- 1,500+** Virtual literary events supported (an average of more than four every day)
- 88,000+** Audience members from around the United States attended these virtual events
- 194,000+** Dollars granted to writers participating in these virtual events
- 760** Writers received these mini-grants
- 71,000+** Dollars from presenting organizations matched our support, for a total of \$265,000 paid directly to writers

For writers at all stages of their careers, *Poets & Writers Magazine* is the primary source of information about writing and publishing.

The six issues published this year offered content and context about the craft and business of writing and reflected the extraordinary times we are living through. We reported on the impact of the pandemic on writers and examined the intersections of race and writing. We showcased the excellence and diversity of contemporary literature with interviews and profiles of authors including Rumaan Alam, Ayad Akhtar, Danielle Evans, Melissa Febos, Nate Marshall, Imbolo Mbue, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Diane Seuss, and Natasha Trethewey. We covered news and trends important to writers and offered special sections on Literary Agents, MFA Programs, Independent Publishing, Inspiration, Writers Retreats, and Writing Contests. While newsstand sales were significantly down due to the pandemic, circulation grew to over 60,000 paid subscribers; each issue reaches a readership of over 100,000.

“When I was an undergrad at Berkeley, I’d go down to Cody’s Books on Telegraph Avenue, and I discovered *Poets & Writers Magazine*. It was like finding a treasure map!”

CHARLES YU, AUTHOR OF *INTERIOR CHINATOWN*,  
WINNER OF THE 2020 NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR FICTION





“When I want to feel electrified in my writing, I turn to Poets & Writers.”

POET AND ESSAYIST AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL,  
SPEAKING AT POETS & WRITERS' 2021 VIRTUAL GALA



Our first-ever virtual gala brought together dozens of literary champions and luminaries, including, from top: 1. (clockwise) Oprah Winfrey, Cheryl Strayed, and Isabel Wilkerson; 2. Don Weisberg; 3. (left) Stacey Abrams, (right) Aimee Nezhukumatathil; and 4. Marlon James.



## On March 25, as the pandemic lockdown dragged on, more than 2,500 people from around the country and the world tuned in online for our first-ever virtual gala.

The star-studded event featured special guest Oprah Winfrey, recipient of Poets & Writers' Leadership Award, in conversation with authors Cheryl Strayed and Isabel Wilkerson. U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo opened the event with a poem, and the Cornelius Eady Trio, featuring poet Cornelius Eady, contributed musical performances. The host for the evening was Stacey Abrams, noted champion of voter rights and author of several books, including the thriller *While Justice Sleeps*.

The event gave the Poets & Writers community an opportunity to celebrate together in the midst of the extended lockdown. Don Weisberg, CEO of Macmillan Publishers, served as this year's gala chair, marshaling extraordinary support from the literary and publishing communities totaling over \$930,000. We are deeply grateful to Don for his leadership and to every donor who contributed to make this gala an enormous success. Proceeds from the annual event allow us to provide life-changing opportunities to writers nationwide.

Dozens of authors made appearances to attest to the profound impact of Poets & Writers. Novelist Marlon James described an article from *Poets & Writers Magazine* by the author Terry McMillan, which he read decades ago: "It was an article about basically everything about publishing that your publisher won't tell you. It blew my mind. It remains the single most encouraging conversation I've ever had with a writer, and it changed my life. And Poets & Writers continues to do that." Fiction writer and journalist Adam Haslett commented, "For there to be a real democracy of letters writers need access to the institutions of letters, not based on their connections or savvy but simply because they are writers. Poets & Writers is this access."

## 2021 Gala Sponsors

### PREMIER UNDERWRITER

Penguin Random House

### LEAD UNDERWRITERS

Macmillan Publishers

Michelle and David Baldacci

James Patterson

### UNDERWRITERS

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Dan Brown

Maureen and David Egen

Hachette Book Group

HarperCollins Publishers

Ann and Richard Sarnoff  
Family Foundation

### CHAMPIONS

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OverDrive

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ReaderLink

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Janet and Michael Pietsch

Nora Roberts

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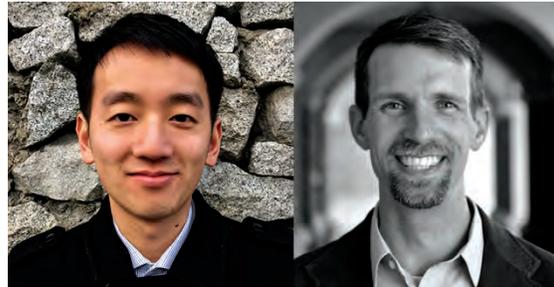
Writers House, LLC

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*We are grateful to every donor who contributed to our 2021 gala. Due to space limitations, we list here only donations of \$10,000 and above.*

## Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award

Each year the Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award provides two winners from a select state with a unique professional opportunity. Typically, the winners spend a week in New York City meeting with literary professionals, but because of the pandemic the format was different this year. In October, we welcomed two writers from Oklahoma—fiction writer Simon Han and poet Brent Newsom—to a series of video chats with over a dozen agents, editors, and authors selected from their personal wish lists. The goal of these conversations is to provide the winners insight into the publishing industry and establish contacts that will help them shape and navigate their careers in the years ahead. This prize is made possible thanks to the generous support of Maureen Egen, a member of Poets & Writers' Board of Directors.



Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award winners  
Simon Han and Brent Newsom

## Jackson Poetry Prize

In May, Carl Phillips was selected as the fifteenth recipient of the Jackson Poetry Prize. The prize is awarded annually by Poets & Writers to an American poet of exceptional talent, and aims to provide what all poets need: time and encouragement to write. Thanks to a generous endowment from the John and Susan Jackson family, the monetary award has grown over time, reaching \$75,000 this year. In their citation, judges Jericho Brown, Carolyn Forché, and Juan Felipe Herrera noted: “Carl Phillips is one of the most influential poets of our time because he builds—line by unrelenting line—poems that sustain our contemplation, disrupt our complacencies, and leave us changed.” In June, Poets & Writers hosted an online celebration to honor Carl Phillips together with 2020 Jackson Poetry Prize recipient Ed Roberson. Poets Jericho Brown, Nikky Finney, Juan Felipe Herrera, Carolyn Forché, Anne Waldman, and Robert Wrigley—all of whom served as recent prize judges—also made appearances.



Carl Phillips was selected as the fifteenth recipient of the Jackson Poetry Prize

**“Encouragement and confirmation are always wonderful...but there’s something especially meaningful when those come at the later end of a writing life: it means what I do has not only mattered to others, but still matters. And that makes all the difference when it comes to setting off all over again in search of the next poem.”**

CARL PHILLIPS, ON WINNING  
THE 2021 JACKSON POETRY PRIZE



UNRESTRICTED ACTIVITY

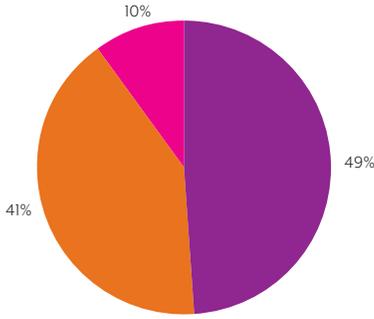
FY 2021

UNRESTRICTED OPERATING REVENUE

Earned Program Revenue .....	598,365
Earned Non-program Revenue .....	1,444,787
<b>Total Earned Revenue .....</b>	<b>\$2,043,152</b>
Investment Revenue .....	12,738
Contributed Revenue .....	2,390,692
Paycheck Protection Program Forgiveness .....	408,545
In-Kind Services .....	68,218
<b>Total Unrestricted Operating Revenue .....</b>	<b>\$4,923,345</b>

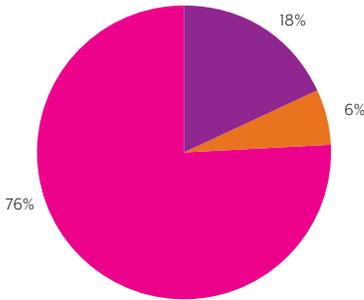
OPERATING EXPENSES

Program .....	3,487,733
Fundraising .....	291,260
General & Administrative .....	846,854
<b>Total Operating Expenses .....</b>	<b>\$4,625,847</b>
Net Unrestricted Activity - Operating .....	297,498
Net Unrestricted Activity - Non-operating .....	0
<b>Total Net Unrestricted Activity .....</b>	<b>\$297,498</b>
Net Donor Restricted .....	(530,090)
Net Unrestricted Activity .....	0
<b>Net Total Activity .....</b>	<b>(\$232,592)</b>



REVENUE BY SOURCE

- CONTRIBUTED
- EARNED
- OTHER



EXPENSE BY FUNCTION

- ADMIN
- FUNDRAISING
- PROGRAM

Our FY21 Audited Financial Statement and 990 are available on our website at [pw.org/AnnualReport](http://pw.org/AnnualReport)

## DONORS

*We are grateful to every donor who helps support our programs and publications for creative writers. Due to space limitations, we list below only donations of \$1,000 and above.*

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Amy Berkower and Daniel Weiss  
Maureen Mahon Egen  
The E.H.A. Foundation  
New York State Council on the Arts  
Penguin Random House  
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### **\$50,000 TO \$99,999**

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### **\$25,000 TO \$49,999**

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Audible, Inc.  
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DreamWorks  
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Wilys Schneider Kals  
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LIONSGATE  
LSC Communications  
Marsh USA  
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Family Foundation  
Scholastic Inc.  
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Abbey K. Starr Charitable Trust  
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Westchester Publishing Services  
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Poets & Writers acknowledges with sincere gratitude the vital contributions made by the individuals who stepped off the board of directors this year: Andrew Cohen, Jane Friedman, Susan Isaacs, Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, Tracy K. Smith, Galen Williams, and Victoria Wilson.

We mourn the passing of Ellen Joseph, a generous supporter who served on the board for more than forty years.

## POETS & WRITERS STAFF

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Ricardo Hernandez  
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and Web Development*

# Poets&Writers