

The Eleanor Dark Foundation

Annual Report 2023



VARUNA
The National Writers' House

BLUE
MOUNTAINS
WRITERS'
FESTIVAL



The Eleanor Dark Foundation

Annual Report 2023

Message from the Chair



Many readers of this report will be aware that Varuna, and of course The Eleanor Dark Foundation, was conceived out of a significant act of generosity from its founders, Mick and Jill Dark. As Chair, I'm honoured to be involved with this organisation and to witness how this thread of giving continues from one year to the next.

This year, an extraordinary bequest of \$350,000 from Dr Ann Moyal enabled Varuna to initiate a new annual fellowship program for non-fiction writers. In addition, a donation from the Fowler Trust enabled Varuna to offer four additional fellowships and provide financial assistance to a further 15 writers participating in residential

programs. The Foundation is so grateful to these donors, and to the many other generous supporters of the work we do.

Increasingly, Varuna the National Writers' House is not just a place where writers come to find time and space to write but rather, acts as a centre for professional development for writers across the globe. In 2023, we were delighted to welcome four international writers to be in residence for the month of October. Hailing from Ireland, Scotland, China and New Zealand, these four writers not only spent time at Varuna but also participated in our annual Blue Mountains Writers Festival.

These international exchanges were reciprocated, with Australian writers visiting overseas counterparts throughout the year; online international residencies complemented these programs, partnering with the Irish Writers Centre and the Shanghai Writers Association to create significant professional opportunities for Australian writers.

Over 50 per cent of writers who receive a fellowship at Varuna go on to be published, and while Varuna can't take all the credit for the work that goes into writing a manuscript and getting published, we are very proud of the contribution we're able to make in supporting these writers on that journey.

Over 50 per cent of writers who receive a fellowship at Varuna go on to be published, and while Varuna can't take all the credit for the work that goes into writing a manuscript and getting published, we are very proud of the contribution we're able to make in supporting these writers on that journey.

The achievements of the organisation detailed in this report would not be possible without our dedicated staff. I'd like to extend my thanks to Executive Director Veechi Stuart, outgoing Creative Director Amy Sambrooke and Residency Producer Jaala Hallett for their significant contributions in 2023, and also extend a warm welcome to our new Creative Director Maeve Marsden and Programs Administrator Wei Clerkin.

Thank you to all the volunteers who contribute to everything from the Blue Mountains Writers' Festival to Bushcare, from the Board of Directors to curating Varuna's library; your time and skills are greatly appreciated.

I'd also like to express my gratitude to Create NSW and Creative Australia for their ongoing multi-year funding, and for contributing to the wonderful richness of Australia's literary landscape.

David Hammon, Chair

From the Executive Team

Every week at Varuna the National Writers' House is different. As new writers arrive and others are farewelled, different conversations and connections emerge. Sometimes the house crackles with life; other times, it radiates that quiet intensity so distinctive to Varuna. Constant however is the commitment of the writers to their writing.

While 2023 was a remarkable year in the different fellowships and partnerships offered by Varuna, the core of what we did remained the same. Put simply, we offered many of Australia's best writers the time and space to write (220 writers, to be precise).

The recent books published by Varuna's alumni serve as a reminder of why we do what we do: The urgency of Graham Akhurst's *Borderland*, quiet beauty of Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional*, or truth-telling of Sharlene Allsop's *The Great Undoing*; the climate change writing of Kate Mildenhall, Rachael Mead and Elanna Herbert; the social commentary from Karen Viggers' *Sidelines*, Shirley Le's *Funny Ethnic* or Michelle de Kretser's *Scary Monsters*. Not to mention many dozens more.

While 2023 was a remarkable year in the different fellowships and partnerships offered by Varuna, the core of what we did remained the same. Put simply, we offered many of Australia's best writers the time and space to write (220 writers, to be precise). Varuna is a place where writers get to be 'just' writers, somewhere where writers can be acknowledged for what they do and the contribution they make.

Our Blue Mountains community is still recovering from the effects of bushfires, floods and the pandemic; just this week, recent rains and landslides reminded us again of the increasing impact of climate change. These economic and social challenges are one of the reasons we're proud to have created the Blue Mountains Writers' Festival, an event that has grown from being a small local gathering to becoming a landmark on the nation's literary circuit. In 2023, the Festival was the biggest yet, with four simultaneous stages running across the weekend and over

55 events. We were proud to bring our community together in this way.

2023 was a year where we not only nurtured new work, but we celebrated the books and stories that matter. We look forward to doing this again in 2024.

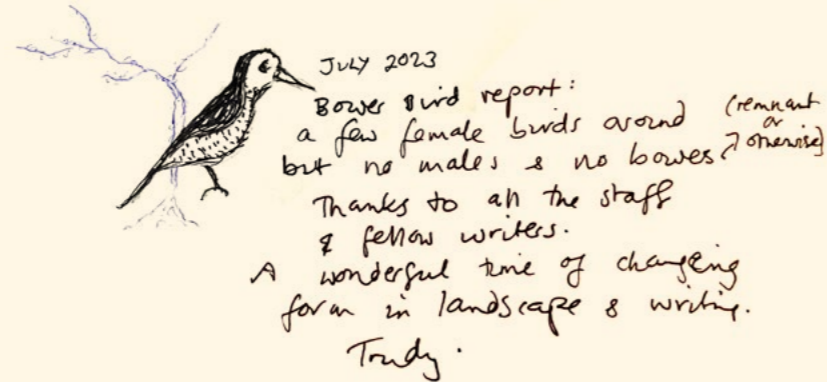


Veechi Stuart, Executive Director
Maeve Marsden, Creative Director

From the Visitors' Book 2023

Thank you Varuna. Truly a remarkable experience to spend a week with five other writers working all day and sharing lots of stories at night. It has been fantastic.

Görkem Acaroğlu



Thank you for a magical week of immersion in reading, writing and inspirational friendship.

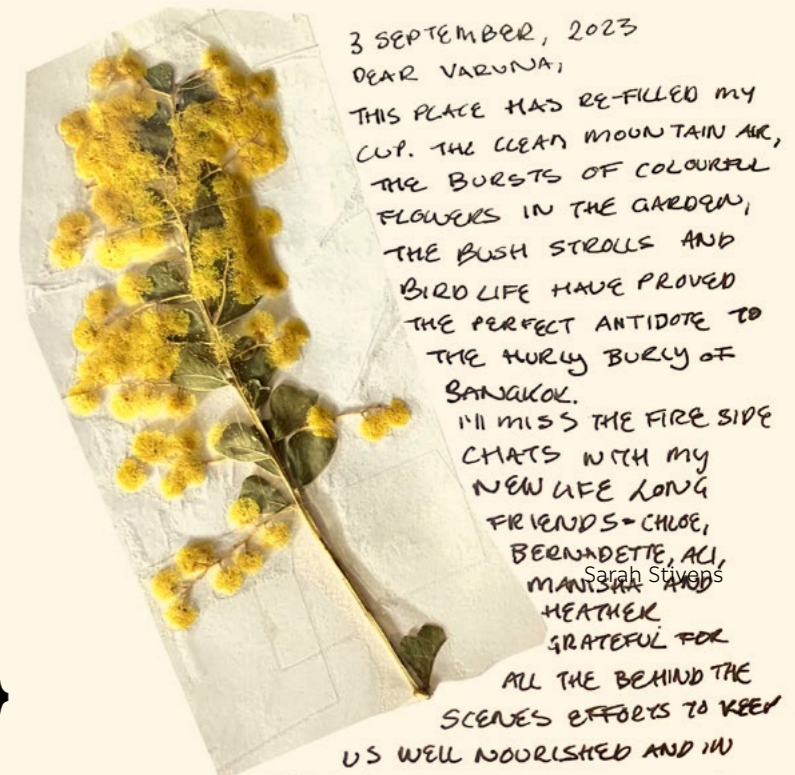
Janet Chan

Thank you Varuna for a wonderful Affirm Press Mentorship week! It has confirmed what I've always suspected, that (crime) writers are the best people!

Zoe Downing

I feel so blessed! Thank you Varuna for giving me this chance to develop the memoir that has been inside me for so long. This house has a magical vibe and there are fairies behind every shrub & tree. Forever grateful.

Thang Dac Luong



Varuna, mon amour, you have nourished me, body and soul. You have moved me, inspired me, transformed me, replenished me. You shall always have a special place in my heart. Until we meet again.

Paris Rosemont

Two weeks of contemplation, consideration & conversation. I'm so grateful to Varuna and the Eleanor Dark family for the time away to write. I don't believe in magic, but I do believe in Varuna.

Eleanor Limprecht

This week has been incredible and has impacted the progression of my writing tremendously! I've met amazing, brilliant people and will miss this space dearly.

Munira Tabassum Ahmed

Varuna . . . mist spreading through the trees, bees tapping against the window, quiet moments with new friends, with room to let my stories grow. Thanks for giving this young writer a place to dream!

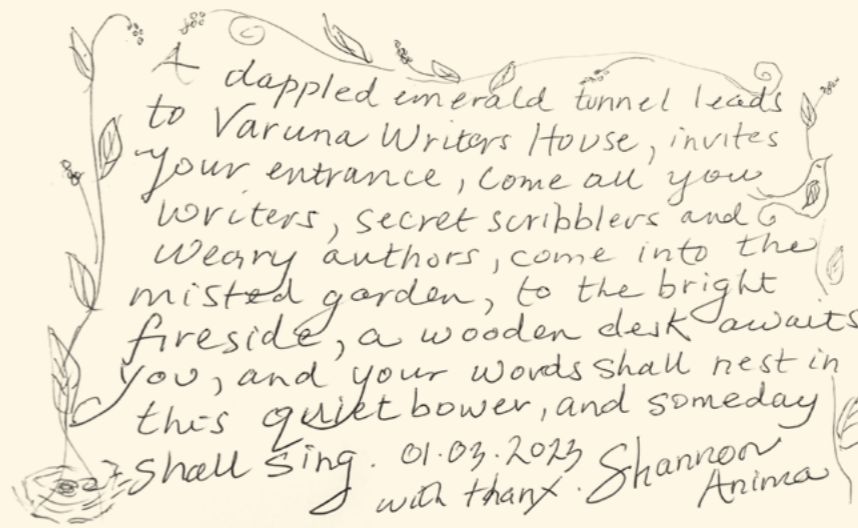
Kieran McKay

For the house itself and the country it rests in, for holding me as I write, like all the writers here now and before, trying to shape this world into words. Thank you Varuna.

Dani Powell

It is sixteen years since I was resident in the House and it is as beautiful as ever - and its wonderful traditions as strong as ever. The companionable silence of the writers' house is inspirational, and the evening dinner-party a joy. Thank you Varuna.

Tom Griffiths



Thank you for this wonderful creative time, and the extraordinary company of fellow writers. I leave with a full heart and a clear sense of where to go next with my book.

Nicole Hasham

Beautiful words arrive among the safety of trust and truth. Many thanks.

Ali Cobby Eckermann



Varuna Growing Thank you! Maria Spenser 2023

Enabling new Australian work

222

writers in residence

277

residency weeks

Top
3
benefits

CREATING NEW WORKS

Varuna's residencies provide time and space to write, seeding over 200 new projects per year.

RECOGNITION

"I am a writer." Varuna fellowships represent a significant career milestone.

PUBLICATION

Approx. 30 per cent of residency projects culminate in publication.

64 writers participated in an online masterclass

1,395
fellowship applications
assessed

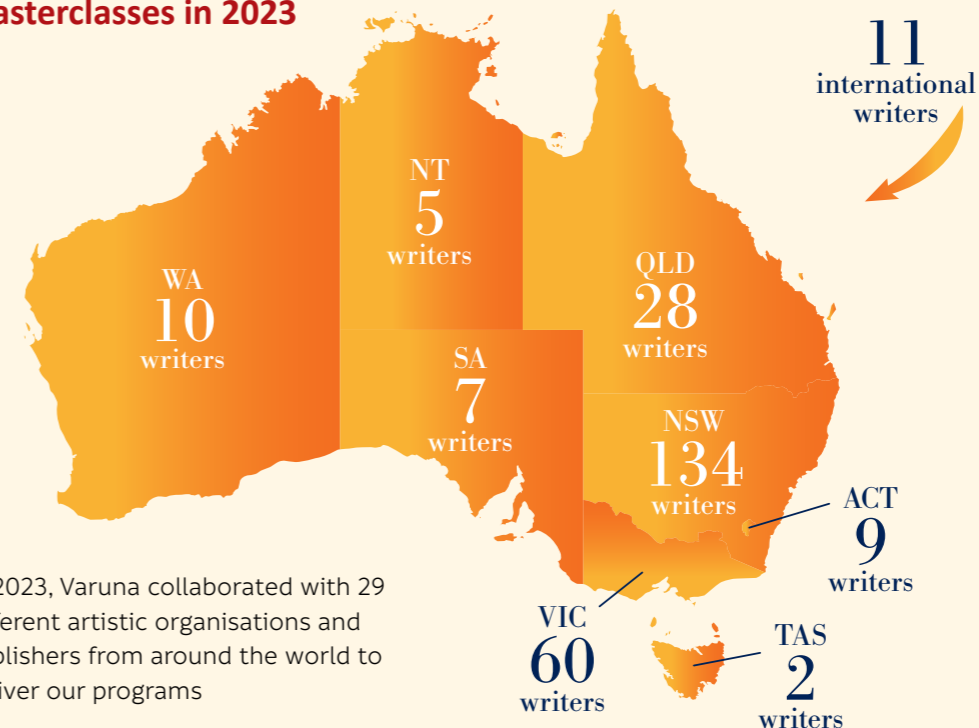
\$195,000
paid directly in
artist fees

148 one-on-one writer consultations

Where our writers and partners come from

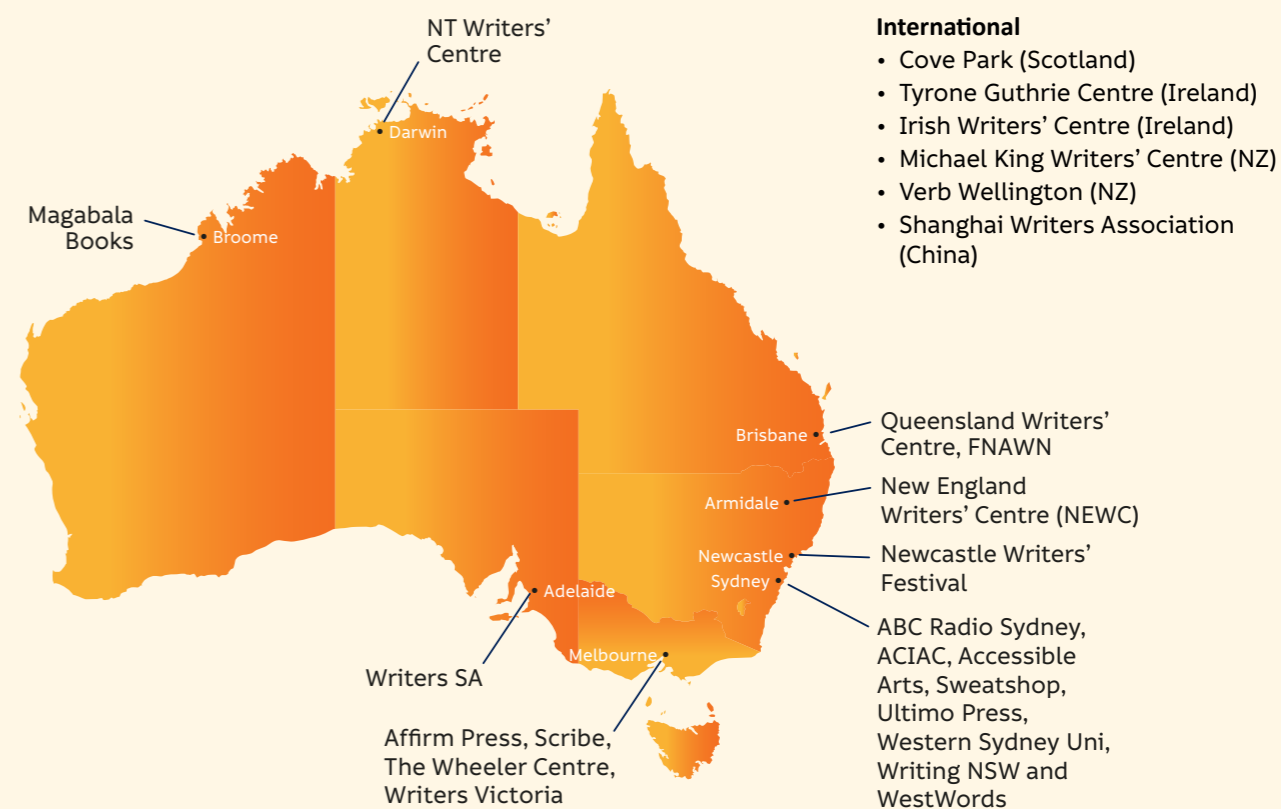
In 2023, Varuna attracted writers from all around the country to attend both in-person residencies and online masterclasses. As we come out of the harshest restrictions of the pandemic, writers are enthusiastically returning to Varuna from right around Australia.

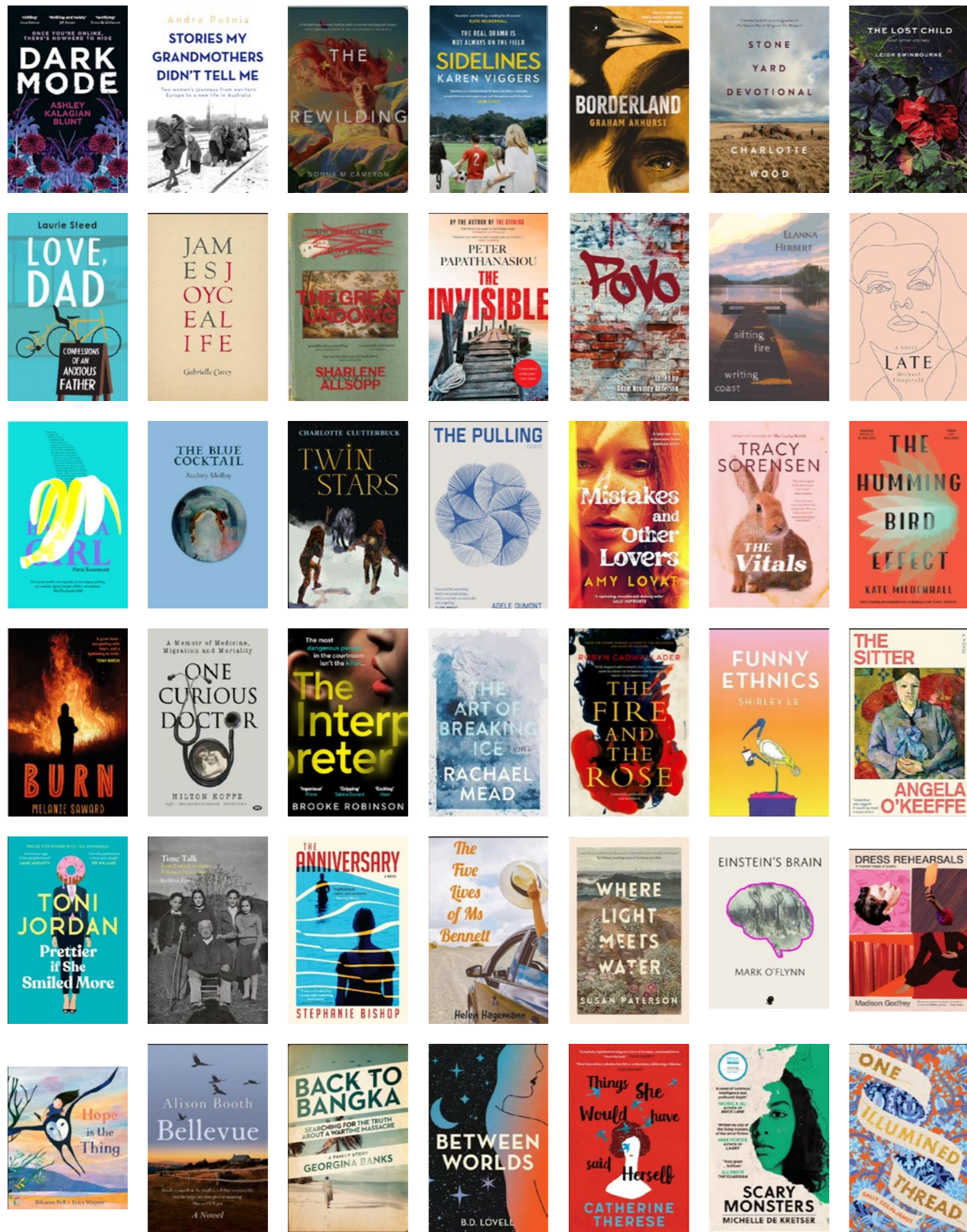
Writers participating in residencies or masterclasses in 2023



In 2023, Varuna collaborated with 29 different artistic organisations and publishers from around the world to deliver our programs

Our program partners





Some of the publications from Varuna's alumni during 2023

Case study: Sharlene Allsopp



Sharlene Allsopp is an author, university tutor and Bundjalung woman whose debut novel *The Great Undoing* was published in early 2024 with Ultimo Press.

Sharlene first came to Varuna as a fellow with The Wheeler Centre's Next Chapter program in 2021, and then in 2022 participated in a residential masterclass at Varuna with Tony Birch. That visit became the basis for a non-fiction essay published in Griffith Review 80. Since then, Sharlene has returned to Varuna three times for alumni residencies, using Varuna for the time and space to write, and for the opportunity to connect with other writers.

“Every time those train doors open and I step out onto Gundungurra Country, I feel welcomed and home. Varuna has gifted me the privilege of focus, freedom, and genuine friendship with other writers. I am always so productive. The day I received the offer to publish my debut novel there were three other First Nations’ writers/artists in attendance. I flew downstairs and had the joy of sharing that moment with them, which was so fitting as so much of the novel was written there.”

Case study: Mary Anne Butler



Mary Anne Butler is a playwright whose work has won the Victorian Prize for Literature, Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Drama, an AWGIE and two NT Chief Minister’s Book of the Year Awards. She first came to Varuna in 1999 on a Varuna / Australia Council theatre development grant, and has had the great pleasure of coming back many times: as a Fellowship recipient, as a member of the Varuna Residential Fellowship selection committee, and as an alumni.

Mary Anne still has the hard copy letter sent from Varuna in December 1998, inviting her to the Varuna/Australia Council theatre initiative, “I felt such a buzz,” she says. “It was the first time that I felt like a real writer, my work recognised by

the National Writers’ House. I was on a high for weeks”.

“This linking of writers is one of the many wonderful things about the Varuna space,” Mary Anne says. “At Varuna, I have made friends and met writing colleagues who have stayed with me for life, offering me a network of like-minded peers who remind me that I’m not alone in this journey. That is such a vital part of Varuna, for me.”

Decades later, Mary Anne is back at Varuna as part of the team. She is one of the consultants who – through an active listening and questioning process – holds conversations with attending writers to help them clarify and progress with their work. Additionally, she’s engaged to facilitate workshop readings, writer in-conversations and – in 2025 – will be running a workshop on The Art of Dialogue.

Mary Anne loves this sense of having a ‘full-circle’ relationship with Varuna over the course of her writing life, “...like the skills I began to learn from my first time here in 1999, are the very skills I hope to bring back to Varuna: active listening, active questioning. A handing over of the baton, as it were...”

“The fact that Varuna consistently employs freelance writers for roles such as mentoring, workshop facilitation and course delivery, rather than taking that work ‘in-house’, is indicative of their commitment to sustaining writers financially, simultaneously offering a myriad of writers opportunities to extend their teaching experience.”

Nurturing First Nations writing

65

First Nations writers submitted fellowship applications

19

First Nations writers attended an in-person residency at Varuna

15

First Nations writers received professional fee income from Varuna

8

First Nations writers attended a ten-week online masterclass

8

First Nations writers with publication outcomes from fellowships and residencies

14

First Nations writers presented at the Blue Mountains Writers' Festival

In 2023, we were delighted to see so many awards and publications from First Nations writers who participated in our recent fellowship and masterclass programs. These included:

- ➔ **Alison Barton's** *Not Telling* full-length poetry collection was published in December 2023; Alison was also awarded the inaugural First Nations Cambridge University Writer-in-Residence Fellowship.
- ➔ **Eugenia Flynn** had two essays published: *An Indigenous Grand Narrative Voice: Alexis Wright's Carpentaria as Indigenous Epistemology*, as well as *Australia in Three Books* in Meanjin.
- ➔ **Kathryn Gledhill-Tucker** was a finalist in the 2023 David Unaipon Award.
- ➔ **Maya Hodge** was co-editor of *Collective Movements: First Nations Collectives and Creative Practices from across Victoria* and was also published in *Best of Australian Poems 2022*.
- ➔ **Lulu Houdini's** poem *Mangrove Girls* was published by Red Room Poetry.
- ➔ **Kim Morrison** was shortlisted for the Daisy Utemorrah Award 2023.
- ➔ **Ellen O'Brien's** essay *Opaque Gems* was published in Meanjin.
- ➔ **Luke Patterson** published the dedication editorial in *Cordite Poetry Review* as well as his poem *A Grass Tree By Another Name* in *Nangamay Mana Djurali*.
- ➔ **Melanie Saward's** YA novel *Burn* was published, as well as short stories *Home* (Meanjin), *Grace* (New Australian Fiction) and *Galah* (First Nations Stories Then and Now).



First Nations writers in residence Ellen van Neerven, Ali Childs, Maria van Neerven and Tahnee Carter.

Creating audiences and opportunities for writers

BLUE
MOUNTAINS
WRITERS'
FESTIVAL



8,044
sessions attended

52%
were first-time visitors to the Festival



40
author sessions

5
livestream events and 1 live broadcast

11
writing workshops and 1 language workshop

3
sessions in the cable-car at Scenic World

82
speakers

Audience satisfaction

98%
would recommend the Festival to a friend (compared to 93% in 2019)

96%
agreed or strongly agreed that their Festival Pass was good value for money

80%
felt it was one of the best writers' festivals they had ever attended

"I loved lots of things – the location and the easy walk to and from the different venues; the Indigenous content and the mix of creative writing, poetry and political writing." – Audience survey

"The vibe was exciting, and I met so many wonderful people and had many stimulating and thought-provoking discussions because of the topics covered." – Audience survey

Advocating for diverse voices

Writers
with
disability

188

writers with disability
submitted fellowship
applications

27

writers with disability
attended an in-person
residency at Varuna

13

writers with disability
attended an online
masterclass

8

writers with disability
received professional fee
income from Varuna

Culturally
diverse
writers

267

culturally diverse writers
submitted fellowship
applications

56

culturally diverse writers
attended an in-person
residency at Varuna

23

culturally diverse writers
received professional fee
income from Varuna

20

culturally diverse writers
attended an online
masterclass

Our Disability Inclusion Action Group

Varuna's Disability Inclusion Action Group continued to meet throughout 2023. This expert panel advises Varuna staff on the delivery of our Disability Inclusion Action Plan, and on ways to make our residencies and events as accessible and inclusive as possible.



"I'm so grateful for this opportunity to learn and grow. For writers who aren't affiliated with a university writing program, the Varuna opportunities are our advanced education."

Recipient of 2023 Writers' Space Fellowship,

Summarised Financial Statements

The Eleanor Dark Foundation Limited
T/A Varuna The National Writers' House
Statement of Profit or Loss and Other Comprehensive Income
For the Financial Year Ended 31 December 2023

	2023 \$	2022 \$
Revenue		
Revenue from contracts with customers	908,341	948,462
Other income	71,742	37,118
Total revenue	980,083	985,580
Expenses		
Administration and other operating costs	(91,517)	(70,057)
Depreciation	(14,109)	(13,498)
Employee benefits	(400,185)	(370,996)
Facility expenses	(92,245)	(73,215)
Program and fellowship expenses	(375,740)	(390,097)
Total expenses	(973,796)	(917,863)
Surplus for the year	6,287	67,717
Income tax expense	-	-
Surplus after income tax	6,287	67,717
Other comprehensive income	-	-
Total comprehensive income	6,287	67,717

Summarised Financial Statements (continued)

The Eleanor Dark Foundation Limited
T/A Varuna The National Writers' House
Statement of Financial Position
As at 31 December 2023

	2023 \$	2022 \$
Assets		
Current		
Cash and cash equivalents	845,615	572,960
Trade and other receivables	29,167	13,016
Other assets	18,598	14,928
Current assets	893,380	600,904
Non-current		
Property, plant and equipment	1,938,647	1,942,689
Non-current assets	1,938,647	1,942,689
Total assets	2,832,027	2,543,593
Liabilities		
Current		
Trade and other payables	20,460	31,652
Provisions	15,871	23,936
Other liabilities	517,901	206,293
Current liabilities	554,232	261,881
Non-current		
Provisions	12,393	22,597
Non-current liabilities	12,393	22,597
Total liabilities	566,625	284,478
Net assets	2,265,402	2,259,115
Equity		
Reserves	1,433,728	1,433,728
Accumulated funds	831,674	825,387
Total equity	2,265,402	2,259,115

Summarised Financial Statements (continued)

The Eleanor Dark Foundation Limited
T/A Varuna The National Writers' House
Statement of Changes in Equity
For the Financial Year Ended 31 December 2023

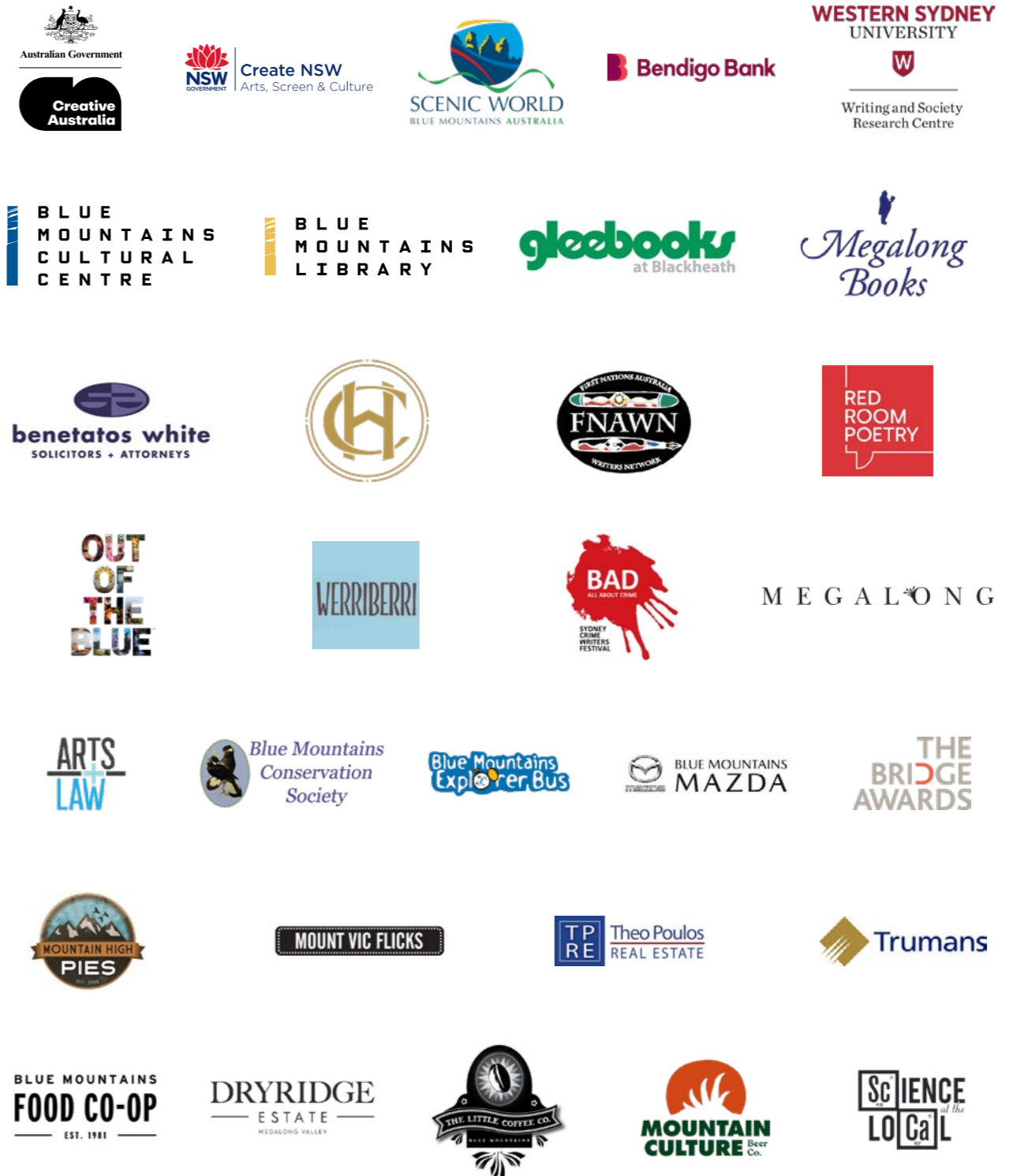
	Accumulated Funds \$	Asset Revaluation Reserve \$	Building and Maintenance Reserve \$	Total Equity \$
Balance at 1 January 2022	757,670	1,388,728	45,000	2,191,398
Surplus for the year	67,717	-	-	67,717
Other comprehensive income	-	-	-	-
Total comprehensive income	67,717	-	-	67,717
Balance at 31 December 2022	825,387	1,388,728	45,000	2,259,115
Balance at 1 January 2023	825,387	1,388,728	45,000	2,259,115
Surplus for the year	6,287	-	-	6,287
Other comprehensive income	-	-	-	-
Total comprehensive income	6,287	-	-	6,287
Balance at 31 December 2023	831,674	1,388,728	45,000	2,265,402

**The Eleanor Dark Foundation Limited
T/A Varuna The National Writers' House
Statement of Cash Flows
For the Financial Year Ended 31 December 2023**

	2023 \$	2022 \$
Cash flows from operating activities		
Receipts from appropriations/grants	423,498	430,288
Receipts from customers and others	805,916	448,305
Receipts from donors, fundraising and bequests	57,667	35,075
Receipts from sponsors	61,670	49,949
Payments to suppliers and employees	(1,078,606)	(1,020,118)
Interest received	12,577	1,886
Net cash provided by/(used in) operating activities	282,722	(54,615)
Cash flows from investing activities		
Payments for property, plant and equipment	(10,067)	(13,444)
Net cash used in investing activities	(10,067)	(13,444)
Cash flows from financing activities	-	-
Net cash provided by financing activities	-	-
Net change in cash and cash equivalents	272,655	(68,059)
Cash and cash equivalents at beginning of financial year	572,960	641,019
Cash and cash equivalents at end of financial year	845,615	572,960

Our Donors, Sponsors and Funders

Thank you to Create NSW and Creative Australia who provide the core funding so essential to the ongoing support of Australian writers. Thank you also to the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Northern Territory Government, the Bridge Awards Foundation, and to our many generous sponsors and donors, including the Fowler Family Trust, the Koppe family, Pip Williams, and Sophie Torney.





*Board Directors and Festival volunteers
Sanki Tennakoon and Bianca Nogrady*

VARUNA
The National Writers' House

Eleanor Dark Foundation
t/a Varuna the National Writers' House
141 Cascade Street Katoomba NSW 2780
t: 02 4782 5674 w: www.varuna.com.au

