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**MORE THAN A LITERARY FESTIVAL**

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ANNUAL  
**REPORT**  
**2023**

# President's Statement



Marina Salandy-Brown - Founder & President

It was the “comeback” year. After 3 hermetic years of digital connections with audiences, the collective sound of relief emanating from readers and writers at the NGC Bocas Lit Fest in downtown Port of Spain during the 3-day festival in April 2023 echoed across the Caribbean archipelago.

Rebuilding an event that is about people when they have become used to solitariness is quite a challenge. Yet, Team Bocas approached the task with confidence in its ability to make a strong in-person comeback. Festival audiences in 2023 fell below 2019's but the sessions were packed, and the big gain was the year-long increase of regional and international audiences for the continuous programming Bocas Lit Fest now offers.

In 2023, we had to sharpen our focus on young people and also increase our collaborations in order to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. This work gained momentum and extended to helping youths prepare for the workplace. Processing the painful loss of several venerated writers who shaped our literary and intellectual worlds reminded us that our own legacy is linked to that of others, and we redoubled our efforts to extend both local and international financial and literary partnerships.

After 13 enduring years, our NGO does not shy away from hurdles. The resilience, creativity and entrepreneurship that are now integral to Bocas are bolstered by improved standards of governance and management and a firm belief in the future. How we get there? is always on the agenda. In 2023, Team Bocas conducted its second 5-year strategic planning session. It set itself “the greatest imaginable challenge”, which is that every reader in the world will one day have a favourite Caribbean writer.

It's a bold challenge that will concentrate our minds and energies. We entered 2024 with the vitality to start working towards that, knowing it requires building on past achievements, the continuing success of our writers, exploring new possibilities, and not being risk averse. In 2023, we relaunched The Writers Centre, our rented headquarters at 14 Alcazar Street. It now houses a branch of Full Bloom Coffee and the region's best shop for Caribbean books, Paper Based.

As we venture farther, our financial probity will be key to retaining sponsors and attracting new ones. I thank the current Board of Directors for its careful oversight and the creative team led by Jean Claude Cournand, CEO, and Nicholas Laughlin, Festival and Programme Director, for the high level of performance achieved in 2023. To all our most valued partners and sponsors, led by the National Gas Company, on behalf of all those who understand the power and magic of words and ideas, huge thanks.

# Vision

The Bocas Lit Fest exists to develop and promote Caribbean writers and to grow Caribbean readers to realise the full potential of our literature in cultural, social and economic terms.

# Mission

To be the Caribbean's premier literary arts organisation, dedicated to the development of all our people, the broadening of our culture and the expansion of the literary industry.

# Board of Directors

Marina Salandy-Brown - President & Founder

Lucy Hannah - Vice President - Producer of global literary initiatives

Thackwray "Dax" Driver - Secretary - CEO of The Energy Chamber

Courtenay Williams - Treasurer - Attorney-at-Law

Stacy Ann Golding - Principal, S N Golding Financial Services Limited

Jacqueline Quamina - Consultant in Corporate Law, Governance and Banking

Leslie Clarke, Managing Director, Murphy Clarke Financial Limited

# The Year in Review

## The Festival

2023 marked the return to a full in-person festival and audiences could not have been happier. The three-day NGC Bocas Lit Fest provided opportunities for 220 festival participants including over 100 writers and speakers for the main festival, 33 of whom came from abroad. In addition, 35 readers and performers signed up for the open mic event. The NGC Children's Bocas Lit Fest included 36 participants who were actors, musicians, and masqueraders.

Collectively, total in-person audiences reached 4,300 for the 2023 festival, Children's Caravan and First Citizens National Poetry Slam semi-final and final events. Overall audience numbers were lower than in 2019 (the last in personal festival) in part due to it being a three-day versus five-day programme and the Bocas Lit Fest's (BLF) concerted strategy to expand year-round activities and events. On an event-by-event basis however, the 2023 festival attracted large in-person audiences comparable to pre-COVID numbers, with several events at full capacity.

Online live streaming and post-event archived content were available during the festival and in subsequent days and weeks post the festival attracting:

**YouTube views: 2,669**  
**Facebook views: 6,585**  
**Total online views: 9,254**

## Snapshots!

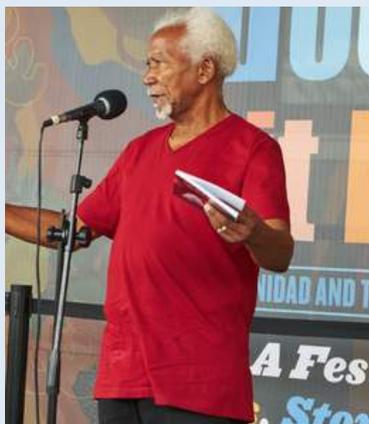
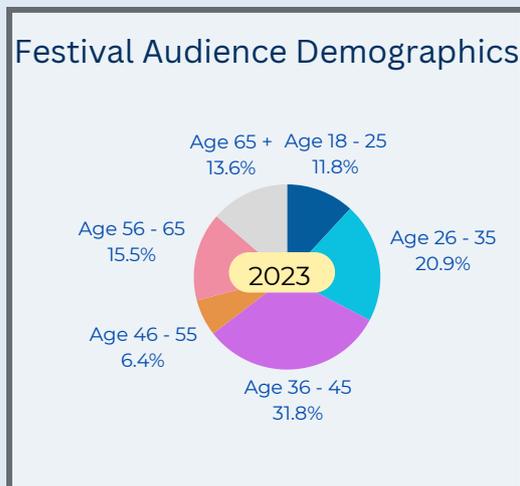


Photo Credit: Marlon James

64.5% of the 2023 festival audience was below the age of 45 which shows a reduction in the average age relative to past years.



## Relaunch of The Writers Centre

The BLF headquarters, The Writers Centre at 14 Alcazar Street, St. Clair, Port of Spain, was publicly relaunched in August 2023 with the opening of Paper Based Bookshop and a branch of the Full Bloom Coffee, leveraging on how perfectly conversations, books and coffee go together. The Writers Centre is now a hub for literary activity, and on average we host two events per month, year-round. Regular fixtures include book launches, the Writer to Writer interview series, one-off events to mark important occasions, and the monthly Family Reading Circle for young children. The 2023 events included a tribute to the late Michael Anthony and Writer to Writer conversations between authors Kevin Jared Hosein and Breanne Mc Ivor, and Ira Mathur and Celeste Mohammed.

From the first to the most recent annual festival, Paper Based Bookshop has been there, and throughout the years has been a most avid supporter and provider of Caribbean books to the festival and to book lovers. In 2023, with the retirement of owner and founder Joan Dayal, the bookshop got a new home at The Writers Centre.

## Strategic Planning Session

Recognising that the BLF exists in a world that is changing rapidly in terms of how we work and engage others, the team spent two intensive days in a strategic planning session led by Karen Johnstone. The aim was to critically assess the work that we do and the areas in which we can achieve the greatest impact, in the present and in the future. Focus was placed on clearly redefining the purpose of the NGO and formulating strategies to ensure our sustainability.

Accordingly, our future programming will intensify focus on youth and writer development and assisting Caribbean writers in taking their rightful place on the world stage. Much of the work of the BLF will also be aligned to relevant sustainable development goals of the United Nations, to ensure that the BLF is doing its part towards promoting peace and prosperity for people and the planet.



BLF Team Members during planning session

## Strategic Planning Session

As key outputs of the strategic planning session, the Bocas team agreed on the following:

### Why do we exist?

Because Caribbean words, stories and ideas belong in the global conversation

### Our inspirational dream:

To have new Caribbean voices take centre stage and change the world

### Our greatest imaginable challenge

For every reader to have a favourite Caribbean writer

### Our Key Focus Areas

To realize our dream and achieve our greatest imaginable challenge, we will concentrate our energies on two areas:

- *Finding and developing new literary voices*
- *uncovering new audiences for our words, stories and ideas*

We will use these two areas to guide our direction and priorities, to influence our ideas, and to align our everyday actions.

## Achievements of Caribbean Writers

Promoting Caribbean authors and books to international audiences, including fostering opportunities and partnerships for Caribbean-based authors and literary organisations, is a key part of our mission.

The Bocas Lit Fest is an active founding member of the Global Association of Literary Festivals, headquartered in Dubai, and members of our team have participated in networking and professional events including, most recently, the delegates programme at the Norwegian Festival of Literature in May 2023. The British Council continues to be a key partner, funding and partnering with us on a series of projects in 2024, including the second stage of a long-term literary exchange between Trinidad and Tobago and Northern Ireland.

Through the instigation and with the support of the Bocas Lit Fest, our prizewinners and other writers participated in 2023 in events such as the Ake Arts and Book Festival in Nigeria, the Miami International Book Fair, the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in Indonesia, and the BVI Lit Fest in Tortola, British Virgin Islands.

2023 OCM Bocas Prize overall winner Ayanna Lloyd Banwo was also named 2023 winner of the Eccles Centre & Hay Festival Writer's Award, and the Author's Club Best First Novel Award.

2022 OCM Bocas Prize poetry winner Jason Allen-Paisant was named the winner of the 2023 Forward Prize for Best Book of Poems and of the 2023 T.S. Eliot Prize, two of the most significant international awards for poetry.



Ayanna Lloyd Banwo.



Jason Allen-Paisant - Photo credit: MSN.com



# News & Highlights

2023 was a progressive year for the BLF and for the literary community as we made significant changes to The Writers Centre, witnessed the many achievements of Caribbean writers and launched new initiatives to support future generations of literary talent. Sadly, our community also had to say goodbye to some of our beloved writers.



Joan Dayal's love for Caribbean literature

## New chapter for Paper Based bookstore

When it came to selling books, Joan Dayal thought outside the box. Paper Based, her bookstore - named by the late architect Roger Tarsus - evolved much like a good novel, with unexpected plot twists.

The Paper Based story began in 1987, when the newly renovated Hotel Normandie in St Ann's added shops, and Fred Chia Lee, the hotel's owner, offered space to Dayal.

She said, "Why not?" and opened a shop that catered to hotel guests with tourism, local newspapers, postcards, greeting cards, wrapping paper and stacks like planet chips and chocolate bars.

Gradually, a bookstore took shape, as her love for books - especially Caribbean literature - grew. Paper Based became the champion of Caribbean literature and an oasis for book lovers.

But this year, on August 16, Dayal and the staff of Paper Based wrapped up business in the Normandie.

Dayal has moved her store to the Writers Centre on Alcazar Street, St Clair, where the literary NGO, the Bocas Lit Fest is based.

Dayal has mixed feelings about the end of this era. "For over 36 years, Paper Based has been my life and my passion. It's like giving up my child," she said. However, a London-based publisher with a Caribbean division, had an agent here who helped Dayal represent Longman in Trinidad.

Dayal said on their podcast.

"I wasn't familiar with literature. My parents moved here from China, and we didn't have books at home. But I became interested in books - especially books from Trinidad.

"Then I noticed there were people who published their little books. (The late Jerry Bennett's) Paris Pub-Followers of Trinidad book was always popular.

ning books like the Booker Prize and Nobel Prize for literature."

Dayal remembered one occasion in the early days when she was having a sale on its books.

"I used to get a whole lot of them. The Trinidad Express did books, and I carried them, along with (the late UWI professor) Dr Gordon Rohlehr's books on calypso and Trinidad society."

More UWI lecturers sought out Dayal to stock their books. The bookshop kept shape.

"I felt I had to do something to promote the books. So I had little readings outside of the shop."

Since then, dozens of Trinidadian writers have given readings and launched their books there. Among them, artist Jackie Hinkson brought his series from Tobago to read one of his books, and writer Lawrence Scott came calling.

Credit: Newsday

## Paper Based Bookshop gets a new home

MATTHEW CHIN  
Reporter

On August 25, the Writer's Centre on Alcazar Street welcomed their newest resident, Paper Based Bookshop, who made the move to St Clair from the Hotel Normandie, in St Ann's. It was there for 36 years. The bookstore has dispersed local literature since its establishment in 1987.

Sharing the space is NGO, Bocas Lit Fest, and one of Port-of-Spain's finest coffee houses, Full Bloom Coffee Roasters.

Paper Based has partnered closely with the Bocas Lit Fest and the Writer's Centre since inception with their move to 14 Alcazar Street, considered by some within Trinidad's literary circle as nothing short of a homecoming.

The bookshop offers readers and newcomers the luxury of choosing from an array of books focused on the Caribbean experience which they can read and discuss while sipping cups of coffee.

Considered to be one of the earliest bodies specialising in Caribbean literature, the bookshop has solidified itself as a giant on the nation's literary scene, furthering its propagation at home and within the Caribbean region.

According to their founder, Joan Dayal, the reason for the move was due to a change in ownership of the bookshop, having been bought by the Festival Events of T&T (FETT).

Dayal said when Paper Based began it had started off very slowly, gradually selling local books, and carrying not only Caribbean literature but also merchandise, cards, CDs, artwork, and anything to do with the Caribbean culture.

New shop manager of Paper Based, Bianca Peake, worked closely with its founder, stating that Dayal had created something great.

Peake said: "Dayal's pride and joy has been Caribbean authors and literature, and that's something really important because we need to see ourselves. Our hope is that the Writer's Centre becomes a (literary) hub so that writers can come in and have conversations. We hope that this is a meeting place for people to talk, and maybe it'll birth ideas, birth a new book, birth something."

Founder and president of the Board of the Bocas Lit Fest, Marina Salandy-Brown, said the NGO has done a lot of good work with the Ministry of Education in trying to introduce new contemporary writing onto the reading lists of local syllabi.

"Within the NGC Bocas literary festival, we've been publishing children's books and other activities, going on now for 13 years. We are very happy that



Manager of Paper Based Bookshop, Bianca Peake, speaks in an interview with Guardian Media. PICTURE VASHTI SINGH

Paper Based has moved in because that is just part of the ecosystem that Bocas has been trying to do. To get people together who love books and literature and care for it," she said.

Also present was local writer, Mary Cuffie, an author of three children's books based on his main character, Lola the Ladybug.

The author added, "If someone has never experienced Carnival, when they come here they'll actually see something about it. They may not have experienced Carnival, but they can read about it at Paper Based."

Marketing and media manager for the Bocas Lit Fest, Alette Liz Williams, said the nexus of Paper Based with the Writer's Centre is a dream of Salandy-Brown's, and the legacy of Joan Dayal.

"Paper Based has been an avid supporter of the Bocas Lit Fest. They take the risk of bringing extra books when our writers come here; we love them for that because they understand the habits of our readers, our writers, and authors. We are Caribbean based with an international focus," Williams said.

Williams also wants the public to remember that the raison d'être of the Bocas Lit Fest is impact, not profit.

"We are passionate about literature in all of its forms, which is why, when we had our festival this year, we had over 800 events with 100 participants - it was fashion, food, film, and much more. The fact that Paper Based is here (The Writer's Centre) gives a punctuation, I would say. And signals that we make space for your writing to be here and be accessible," Williams added.

### BOOK SUGGESTIONS FROM ALETTE LIZ WILLIAMS AND BIANCA PEAKE

1. *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernadine Evaristo, Winner of the Book Prize 2019.
2. *No Pain Like This Body* by Harold Sonny Ladoo

Credit: Trinidad Guardian Newspaper

28 we
Sunday, June 11, 2023

## Desirée Seebaran

### Among the rising stars of writer & poets for 2023

**DEA MATHEW**

Desirée Seebaran is a rising star among TRT's writers and poets, one to watch in 2023. The poet won the Queen Mary Wasafiri New Writers Prize (poetry) in 2020 and, while working and raising a young family, published the highly prestigious Johnson & Sonnet's Caribbean Writer's Prize (2022) administered by Arvon and the NGC, Bocas Lit Fest.

For her art, she began writing stories when she was a child, says she's "compelled by words, books, reading and writing them," and remembers "devouring" her father's impressive collection of Reader's Digest and reading Yu Kip and Kingbird (Harper Lee) and Missy & Aley (C.L. James) at the time. Finally, Seebaran "fell in love with poetry" at the University of The West Indies, thanks to some "brilliant professors."

Of the impulse to write, Seebaran says, "These post-colonial places are the backdrop of everything I write. I can't leave TRT or Guyana, my mother's historical and even if I did. Not even Naginee could. But I'd be lying if I said I was disappointed here. I've had much support from The Bocas Lit Fest, but it's hard to afford to be a writer unless you're being supported by someone else's wealth. That's

try for writers everywhere. With the compulsion to write has never left me, and I can't imagine it ever will."

Queen Mary's WE magazine reproduces two of Seebaran's poems with permissions from the writer and publications where they first appeared.

**PICNIC**

Now we sit and we later, posing pictures  
the empty side of your skin black & ugly.

Like a man, you were to sleep a full,  
the center  
making cold metal into art,  
black & ugly.

Your face is a weak eye shattered,  
blackish, olive, and olive-black  
black & ugly.

The chains hang to your lips like ropes,  
a knot of words that sing.  
"Black & ugly."

These words are ugly,  
and ugly that all the skin, black & ugly.

They burn like cotton wicks  
in one corner by empty fire, black & ugly.

Allege the words for your chest, wet,  
singing down  
another woman's pain. Full black & ugly!

Some times may have held you,  
inexorably.

"Oh-oh, sweet dog, you'll just get more  
black & ugly."

How these words feel you to mind, that  
matters are  
their books, spreading black & ugly  
Alec's!

**The Book Shelf**

Desirée Seebaran

When your spine, facing back to flower  
to sunrise from it, candles, black & ugly.

And sign a nothing gently under long  
in one corner, spread into black & ugly  
poems.

Point your lips, Desirée, one of that final  
poem.

Like the lip of your skin, black & ugly.  
You smile, speak, answer. Then catch a  
glimmer.

Of yourself in some mirrored surface—  
black & ugly—

This poem was the poetry  
winner of the 2020 Queen Mary  
Wasafiri New Writers' Prize.

**BONE**

I've never touched a dead body,  
but one night, I read it for  
the first time,  
arriving at the face  
that had looked and only once  
when had I ever seen her wear a  
dress  
with no structure!

When I woke up, the one that I used to  
wear tears in my dream was always

looking it into an oval frame,  
like the window I've.

And my great aunt may have  
beenly rejected to how long  
for that circle that I did not  
I could be writing, it was  
acquainted with its  
years before I was born,  
with her softest arm and leg  
and calm conversations with a man  
who I loved.

I don't think I should, but  
but one photo, her wide mouth  
that would make a cry, like  
the photo slipped into the pile,  
but I felt my left eye become a  
heavy as salt. I make an exception.  
None.

The dust hangs a bed in me,  
finger clenching deep  
and I'll write.

Seeing me into cottoning legs,  
I never stopped asking me to sit  
because my silence is not traditional.  
You can't speak when I was  
heavy as salt.

**Interviewing the Caribbean—  
Spring 2019 issue.**

Desirée Seebaran is an alumna  
of the Creative Foundation  
Biennial Workshop for  
Writers (2010) and the  
inaugural Moku Magazine  
Poetry Masterclass  
(2018). Seebaran's work  
was shortlisted for the  
2014 Small Axe Literary  
competition and Frontiers  
Poetry's Award for New  
Poets Contest 2017. The  
poet's work has been  
published in several  
journals, including *Caribbean  
Poetry Review*, *Makka  
Magazine* and *Interviewing the  
Caribbean*.

Credit: Trinidad Guardian Newspaper

## Remebering Lost Literary Icons

A number of significant Caribbean writers and intellectual figures with connections to the Bocas Lit Fest died in 2023 — including past festival participants and winners of our awards.

These include Trinidadian fiction writer and poet Jennifer Rahim, winner of the 2018 OCM Bocas Prize; critic and scholar Prof. Gordon Rohlehr, winner of the Bocas Henry Swanzy Award; T&T literary icon Michael Anthony, a past festival author; and T&T historians Prof. Brinsley Samaroo and Gerard Besson, known for their different approaches but shared passion for making history accessible to a wide audience.

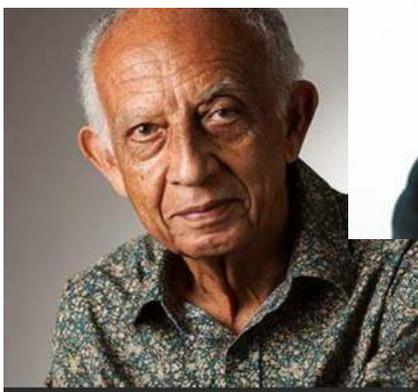
The literary world mourned the loss of Jamaican writer Edward Baugh, who passed away leaving behind a rich legacy that will inspire writers and scholars for generations to come. Baugh was a past recipient of the Bocas Henry Swanzy Award and also served as a chief judge for the OCM Bocas Prize.

Beloved Guyana-born writer, journalist, and well-known columnist BC Pires succumbed to cancer in 2023. BC, as he was known, was an avid supporter and friend of the Bocas Lit Fest.

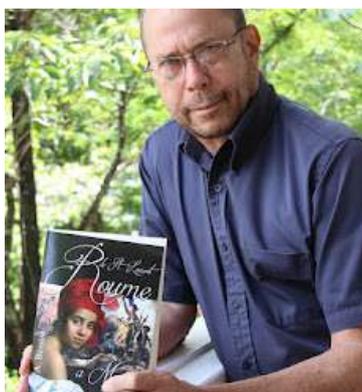
He will be remembered for his witty and perceptive musings in his incredibly popular columns Thank God It's Friday (TGIF) and Trini/Bago to D Bone.



Jennifer Rahim



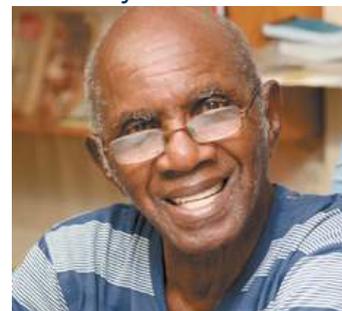
Edward Baugh



Gerard Besson



Brinsley Samaroo



Michael Anthony



BC Pires

## Writer to Writer

With the return of in-person events, the space opened its doors to OCM Prize winners Ira Mathur and Celeste Mohammed, for an intimate event “Writer to Writer”.

Participants of this and other Writer to Writer events, thoroughly enjoyed and welcomed the opportunity to engage with the writers in such an up close and personal fashion, made all the more attractive in our cosy hub for book lovers and literary events.



## Writer Development

In 2023, the Bocas Caribbean Literature Showcase and the Bocas Breakthrough Fellowships, funded by a UNESCO Creative Caribbean grant, got underway, and will culminate at the 2024 NGC Bocas Lit Fest, to help raise the festival's regional and international profile and increase its impact.

**The Bocas Breakthrough Fellowships** are the latest in the Bocas Lit Fest's long-term series of programmes aimed at seeking out, developing, and promoting new literary talent in the Caribbean. The fellowships offer support to five early-career Caribbean writers in completing a book manuscript, and developing their professional skills and networks in the regional and international literary world.

Applications for the fellowships opened in October 2023, and the five successful writers were selected in December 2023 and announced in January 2024. The fellows are Heather Barker of Barbados, Stephanie Koathes and Rhea Manley of Jamaica, and June Aming and Amílcar Peter Sanatan of Trinidad and Tobago.



**The Bocas Caribbean Literature Showcase** is a new delegates programme that will bring six international literary professionals to the 2024 festival, to encounter Caribbean authors, network with the Bocas team, and plan future collaborations.

# Youth Programmes

The BLF continued its initiatives to develop a love of reading, writing and Caribbean literature among the nation's youth and children, with a rich offering of youth projects.

Additionally, strategic collaborations with the Ministry of Education, COSTAATT and generous support from our sponsors, resulted in tremendous impact in 2023.

## WE LIT

WE LIT sponsored by the J.B. Fernandes Memorial Trust provides support and instruction for literature students in high school. In January 2023, pupils of the WE LIT programme launched their chapbook *On the Day I Was Born* featuring a collection of stories emerging from online master classes hosted by spoken word poet Derron Sandy. Noteworthy is that students who achieved 1st and 2nd places in CSEC literature examinations were a part of the 2023 WE LIT cohort.

**WE LIT! Project... gearing up for its second year**

THE WE LIT! Project, sponsored by the J.B. Fernandes Memorial Trust, is gearing up for an eagerly anticipated second year. Administered by the Bocas Lit Fest, this annual programme is gaining momentum as it champions the transformative influence of English language and literature.

Targeted at pupils in Forms 1 to 6, WE LIT! introduces underserved youth to the captivating world of literature through a blend of immersive in-person experiences and engaging online components. The project strives to elevate the academic performance of the pupils in English language and literature, by fostering the development of literary skills, empowering students to become more confident. The programme extends beyond academics, with elements that contribute to participants' overall well-being. With workshops and activities designed to spark enthusiasm for language and literature education, enrollees will be encouraged to explore the realms of reading and writing.

This year's edition, which was launched on Bocas Lit Fest's social media on 21 July, has already received numerous signups and proof of keen interest. In 2022, WE LIT! recorded a cohort of over 2,500 secondary school pupils across Trinidad and Tobago participating in online workshops, a national school tour and free CSEC lessons classes in English language and literature. Among them, 14 teens aged 13 to 17 became published authors through the WE LIT! Student Chapbook, titled *On the Day I Was Born*.

At the heart of the WE LIT! Project is the Creative Writing Camp, led by prize-winning novelist, poet, and journalist Lisa Allen-Agostini. Valued at \$600, camp participation will be offered to interested pupils free of charge. The project also comprises a School Tour, driven by past First Citizens National Poetry Slam Champion Derron Sandy, blending spoken word and drama, and CSEC English A and B lessons. Adding to the excitement is the WE LIT! Travelling Journal, which beckons pupils to explore various genres, through online workshops, with stories crafted from their own experiences and imagination. Standout submissions will be celebrated through publication, reminiscent of the successful 2022 student chapbook.

Visit <http://www.bocaslitfest.com/we-lit-2023/> or follow @bocaslitfest on

**Prize-winning novelist**

Credit: The Trinidad Guardian Newspaper

## Youth Fest

The third annual NGC Bocas Youth Fest, took place over 20 and 21 October, and offered a fully in-person, expanded programme of simultaneous events targeting an audience up to age 25.

It was held in conjunction with the University of the West Indies, in partnership with the Department of Creative and Festival Arts. The festival included free workshops, a career fair, a youth debate and moko jumbies!!



Photo credit: Christopher Collens

## Scotiabank Write Away!

A digital package of five videos and a student workbook were produced and, in 2023, Scotiabank Write Away! focused on preparing participants for the world of work by developing critical skills in reading and writing non-fiction for aspirant entrepreneurs, entertainers, social media content producers, media professionals, technical writers, and more.



From left COSTAATT president Dr Keith Nurse, Bocas Lit Fest Chief Executive Officer, Jean-Claude Cournand, Education Minister Dr Nyan Gadsby-Dolly and Stephan Lalonde of ScotiaBank, at handover ceremony to the MOE. **Credit: Trinidad Guardian Newspaper**

The project included 10 virtual workshops conducted by The Ken Gordon School of Communication, Creative and Digital Media, COSTAATT. The Project also included outreach to 70 schools of which 33 registered and only 11 participated. A total of 9 virtual workshops were offered in a variety of business writing disciplines for which 478 students registered and 284 participated. The videos were also placed on the MOE's YouTube Channel and attained 550 views.

The programme offered internships to participants and a total of 5 students benefited from short-term internships at Lonsdale Saatchi and Saatchi and CL Communications to use the skills they acquired from Write Away! 2023.

# First Citizens National Poetry Slam

The 2023 First Citizens Poetry Slam Final returned this year to its traditional place as the closing event of the festival. It was held at the Central Bank Auditorium and well ahead of the event, tickets for its 408-seat capacity sold out, indicating the need for a larger venue in 2024. The final and two semi-finals were televised by TTT.

At the audition stage, conducted in a hybrid virtual/in-person format, 72 poets participated, from whom 30 (50% more than in 2022) were selected for the semi-finals, held in March at the Little Carib Theatre.

At the finals, 15 competitors vied for the championship title, which came with a cash award of TT\$50,000, won by Kyle Hernandez. The second and third-place winners received \$20,000 and \$10,000, respectively.

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FEATURES



## Kyle Hernandez wins FCB poetry slam

Kyle Hernandez is the 2023 winner of the First Citizens National Poetry Slam, the popular spoken word championship. He triumphed over 14 finalists to take the prize of \$50,000, sponsored by First Citizens.

Performing before a sold-out audience at the Central Bank Auditorium, Fort of Spain, on April 30, Hernandez wooed the judges with his piece titled 'The Classics'.

Slam lovers were treated to a high-energy production of the popular spoken word championship, as the audience stage was transformed into a village circle for the signature closing event of the 2023 NGC. Bocas Lit Fest, a media release said. Fifteen poets performed before an audience which included visiting literary icons such as Jamaican dub poetry legend Linton Kwesi Johnson and Trinidadian born, UK-based Anthony Joseph, poetry category winner of the 2021 OCAC Bocas Prize.

The challenging task of adjudicating the performances was led by head judge Ihaba Eliaa Barakat, who said, "The Slam season paved the way for the exciting finale that saw the youths giving the veteran poets serious competition. Additionally, with seven judges, we were able to enjoy the surprise reads of the night."

Judges included poet Akele John, former journalist Akele Joseph, David Roberts, deputy permanent secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister, NCC director Lawrence Arjones, Nubolan-Botell poet Jafary Kamaria Kinsabana, and Elizabeth "Lily" Mouton, author of King of Sosa.

Hernandez's victorious performance was a stunning display of

alms, emotion, and lyrical dexterity, the release said.

He tackled the problem of negative self-talk, calling for a more positive outlook. During his performance, he even addressed the audience in a sing-along, proving his message was resonating with everyone in the auditorium.

When he was declared winner Hernandez's joy was palpable. "Becoming the national Slam champion of TT feels like faith, it feels like fate," he said.

Damon Sandy, the 2022 winner, took second place with Barakat and Alexandra Stewart, the three-time defending champion, came in third with Warming Skot. They received \$20,000 and \$10,000 cash prizes respectively.

Deputy CEO, business generation, at First Citizens James Jaleel highlighted the importance of the slam as a platform for local poets to showcase their inimitable talent. "We at First Citizens are proud to continue to be a partner with Bocas Lit Fest in the development and advancement of our literary talent," he said.

"The First Citizens National Poetry Slam continues to be a unique event that follows the contemporary and tradition of storytelling, relevant and unique to society and the current generation. With such talented performers, it is a quality, vibrant, well-thought resource that can be exported and broadcast to audiences around the world."

Bocas Lit Fest CEO Juan-Claude Courmand commended the high standards of the championship, saying, "The Grand Slam Final was a fitting way to bring the festival to a close."

"The poets were diverse, re-

ASON Jaleel on deputy CEO, business generation, at First Citizens, left, with Kyle Hernandez, winner of the 2023 First Citizens National Poetry Slam.

feeding and some were even surprising." Courmand said slam supporters can soon look forward to broadcasts of the winners and final.

**The 15 finalists and title winners are:**  
1st - Kyle Hernandez - 'The Classics'  
2nd - Damon Sandy - 'Bare'  
3rd - Alexandra Stewart - 'Warming Skot'  
Akele Joseph - 'Abel Karam' - A Clay Alike Joseph - 'History'  
Damon Thomas - 'Shoemaker'  
Dimitrios Pappas - 'The Black Medical Movement'  
Jorge Fots - 'They Took Michael Legie - Slam Education'  
Michael Henry - 'Let me prove go'  
Nubolan Botell - 'Bad Day'  
Nubolan Botell - 'Ligatures'  
Sadiq Sanyal - 'I am not a person'  
Shakir Gray - 'Aunt #2'  
Sadiq La Fleur - 'They say I am old for my age now'

**More info:**  
For more info about the First Citizens National Poetry Slam visit [www.bocaslitfest.com](http://www.bocaslitfest.com) or follow @bocaslitfest on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter.

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FEATURES

## 15 poets to face off at Slam finals

FOURTEEN poets will challenge defending champion Alexandra Stewart at the First Citizens National Poetry Slam Finals on April 30.

The announcement, on the First Citizens National Poetry Slam social media on March 28, listed poets 16-34, and included past winners and several first-time slam contestants.

The poets performed before a full and interactive audience on March 28 and 29 at the Little Carib Theatre.

Several pieces explored trending and gripping topics such as migrant discrimination, domestic violence against men, and a recent controversy surrounding a prominent social media influencer.

"There are more than 100 poets in the finals who morphed words into physical expressions, manipulating the mic and at times stooping and falling to the floor to enhance their presentations. The dynamic delivery captured heart and local applause from Slam lovers."

The Wild Card poets kicked off each show, joining the poets, just to help of winning over the crowd and being voted to qualify as boule seed finalists. Alexandra Douglas and Ihabat Collins edged out their counterparts Sadiq Hinkson and Chayenne Calise to join the 30 contestants.

Anticipating the semifinals reads were head judge Ihaba Eliaa Barakat, David Roberts, James Damon-Prescott and Lawrence Arjones.

Commenting on both rounds of the championship, Barakat said, "It is exciting to hear the interesting topics shared by the poets and to see the incorporation of acting into their performances. The finals will be something to look out for."

Jean-Claude Courmand, CEO of the Bocas Lit Fest, said, "The energy of a first spoken word show came alive in the Little Carib, which is a new space for the Slam. It is great to have a mix of new and seasoned talents."

This year, the Grand Slam Finals return to the Central Bank Auditorium after a decade. Courmand commented, "This is a full circle return for one of the key birth-places of the Slam." He explained that one of the most significant achievements of the Slam occurred in 11th year is that it is a sustainable product that is now televised and accessible."

For 2023, the Slam adopted a straightforward theme, which follows the theme 'What's your story?' from this year's NGC. Bocas Lit Fest, which is set to take place from April 28-30. The Grand Slam is the signature closing event of the annual literary festival.

Competing poets are characterized as

master storytellers, journeying to the Village Circle - the Slam stage - to meet the defending champion, Alexandra Stewart, represented as <https://www.bocaslitfest.com/poetry-slam/>

Tickets are available online at <https://www.bocaslitfest.com/poetry-slam/>

**Finalists:**  
Abdul Majeed Abdul Karim  
Akele Walker  
Damon Thomas  
Damon Sandy  
Dimitrios Pappas  
Jorge Fots  
Michael Legie  
Michael Henry  
Nubolan Botell  
Rashid Riggie  
Rashid Riggie  
Sadiq Sanyal  
Shakir Gray  
Soleil La Fleur  
Defending champion: Alexandra Stewart

**Standby poets:**  
Maria Donald  
Chaquille Charles  
Jahnet Collins



Abdul Majeed Abdul Karim  
Akele Walker  
Damon Thomas  
Damon Sandy  
Dimitrios Pappas  
Jorge Fots  
Michael Legie  
Michael Henry  
Nubolan Botell  
Rashid Riggie  
Rashid Riggie  
Sadiq Sanyal  
Shakir Gray  
Soleil La Fleur  
Defending champion: Alexandra Stewart

# Children's Programme

The children's programme offered a variety of activities for children aged up to 12. BLF aims to remain sustainable for years to come and to ensure that future generations of advocates for Caribbean literature are nurtured in the present.

## Storytelling Caravan

In 2023, the Caravan spanned 10 locations and reached a total of 213 children who would have contributed to the next edition of the Storytelling colouring book.

## Family Reading Circle



The BLF welcomed young readers back to the Writers for its Family Reading Circle. Volunteers from COSTAATT and Let's Read assisted in hosting the 44 children who participated in the two sessions held in 2023.

## Storytime on YouTube



The BLF's YouTube channel, Storytime now features 44 animated stories, with Ziggy Marley being among our collaborators!

**FEATURES**

**Bocas Storytelling Caravan rolls on**

The NGC Children's Bocas Lit Fest Storytelling Caravan has returned after a three-year break caused by the covid-19 pandemic.

In beloved Dragonilla mascot and professional storytellers entertain and inspire children at ten locations throughout TT.

During sessions, professional storytellers tell their own tales, then encourage the children to craft a new story based on a suggested title, unearthing and guiding their creativity and inspiring them to value self-expression through the written word in a story-writing workshop.

The Storytelling Caravan started its month-long journey of fun and creativity on April 1 and concludes on April 29 at the annual festival.

Children with mascot Dragonilla at the Legation Caravan.

Fun and excitement in Rio Claro.

Children's storytelling in Myran.

## Storytime at President's House

The President of the Republic, the Honourable Christine Kangaloo enthusiastically facilitated three sessions and 357 guests to President's House for Storytime.

**18 news**

**President Kangaloo urges pupils to protect the environment**

good job with reading the children had related, but we see that she generally likes children and their reading," she said.

"This is the President's initiative and we collaborated with them. I think the engagement is important because it helps to have the children be engaged in some way through the use of reading, regardless of age, or levels of power, that are more meaningful."

When Kangaloo asked the pupils what they learnt from the story, the creative determination was the need for children to consider their own and their family's environmental footprint.

She is appreciative of the children's authors, April Gentry, who selected the President's programme by reading an excerpt from her own children's book, *My Little Green World*.

"The author who we saw, who we look like, when we come here, we may continue to protect our planet. The earth is our home and we need to protect it," Kangaloo said.

Kangaloo thanked the team for their commitment to the storytime initiative and called on the children to continue to read and to be inspired during a discussion for reading.

"This was my first time and one of the most special moments. We came together to show what reading can do for us. This was an all very exciting, fun for them being engaged, but I continue to read, from today I can bring them reading. I encourage the fact that some of you volunteered to read, because reading gives you confidence in what you are presenting what you think. I hope you all continue to read and use the time and confidence that is in this you read," Kangaloo said.

President Christine Kangaloo speaks to pupils who joined for a read and discuss programme in read room.

Kangaloo chose the book prior to the event, with pupils being already read if already.

The story time was held at the President's House on Friday, November 3, 2023.

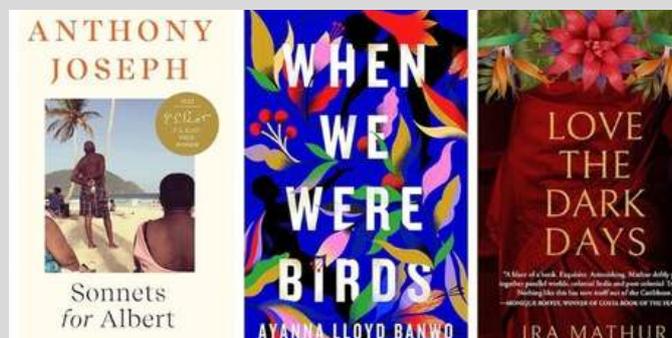


# Prizes

## OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature

The 13th instalment of the OCM Bocas Prize was won by UK-based T&T writer Ayanna Lloyd Banwo, selected by a jury chaired by internationally renowned author Bernardine Evaristo. This was the second time (after 2019) that all three genre category winners of the prize were T&T authors, and notably two of the winners (fiction winner Lloyd Banwo and non-fiction winner Ira Mathur) were debut authors who have been longtime festival participants benefitting from numerous BLF writer development programmes.

This is clear evidence of the impact of the BLF's strategic developmental work with new and early-career T&T and Caribbean authors. A total of US\$16,000 in prize money was awarded in 2023, sponsored by One Caribbean Media.



2023 award winning books of the OCM Bocas Prize



2023 winning authors from left Anthony Joseph, Ayanna LLOYD Banwo and Ira Mathur. Photo credit: The Trinidad Guardian

## Bocas Henry Swanzy Award

The 2023 Bocas Henry Swanzy Award for Distinguished Service to Caribbean Letters was also presented at the festival, to T&T-born scholar, editor, and literary mentor Sandra Pouchet Paquet, Professor Emerita at the University of Miami.

A number of the awardee's former colleagues and students attended the festival to witness the presentation, and the award was widely acknowledged for its valuable and timely recognition of an influential figure in Caribbean scholarship and literature.



Sandra Pouchet Paquet

## GCCA+ Bocas Ways of Sunlight Youth Writing Competition

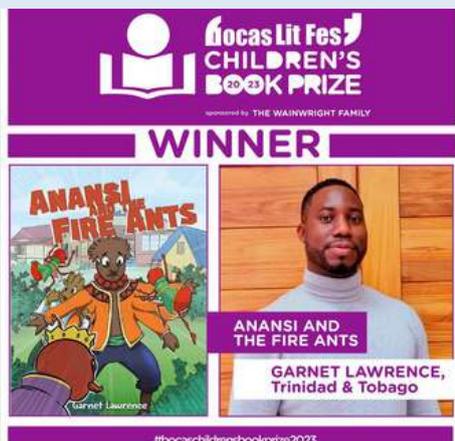
In commemoration of the 100th birthday of T&T's iconic Sam Selvon (1923 - 1994), the Bocas Lit Fest in collaboration with the EU-funded Global Climate Change Alliance staged the GCCA+ Bocas Ways of Sunlight Youth Writing Competition. The prize targeted youths aged 12 to 18 and sought to raise awareness of the Global Climate Change Alliance+ goals while encouraging entrants to write and submit short creative essays exploring themes drawn from Selvon's popular short story collection *Ways of Sunlight*, including social and cultural change, migration, relations across boundaries of ethnicity, class, and personal and collective identity.

First place was taken by Samara Dolabaille, 2nd place by Jada-Marie Giles and 3rd place by Rebekkah Murray. They received trophies along with cash awards of TT\$6,000, \$3,000, and \$1,000 respectively.



Credit: Newsday

## Children's Book Prize



The 2023 Bocas Children's Book Prize winner was Garnet Lawrence and the winning title was *Anansi and the Fire Ants*. Lawrence, a T&T playwright, poet, and screenwriter is based in Barbados. He received US\$1,000 in prize money courtesy the Wainwright Family, sponsors of the prize.

## NGC Youth Writer Award



The annual NGC Bocas Youth Writer Award, now in its third year, was run as a part of the Youth Fest programming and in parallel with the Youth Festival.

Twice Spoken Word champion Alexandra Stewart, showed her mastery also as a writer, copping the 2023 award.

# Year-round Programme

## Bring your Own Book and Bottle (BYOBB)

The Bocas Lit Fest hosted three BYOBB sessions for the ever-growing community of fun-loving readers and limers. A total of 50 authors and readers participated.

## Bocas Book Bulletin

The impressive and growing success of Caribbean writers provided a tremendous amount of rich content for the monthly round up of news and information published in Sunday Express.

A special edition  
**BYOBB**  
Saturday 30 September • 6 pm  
The Writers Centre, 14 Alcazar Street, St. Clair  
#bocas2023 #bocasbyobb  
Celebrating **Michael Anthony**  
featuring readings by  
Lisa Allen-Agostini  
June Aming  
Lance Dowrich  
Hadassah K. Williams  
Bring your own book and bottle! Free and open to all  
NGC Bocas Lit Fes  
paper based

suite as sugar  
and other stories  
Camille Hernández-Ramdarwar  
Bocas Book Bulletin  
New Releases and Awards  
NGC Bocas Lit Fes  
ABENI'S SONG  
P. DJELI CLARK

IF I SURVIVE YOU  
JONATHAN ESCOFFERY  
ELECTRIFYING, ENTHRALLING DEBUT ABOUT IDENTITY AND BELONGING  
WORLD JOURNAL BOOK REVIEW BY TALEY

## Workshops and Training

A total of 30 aspiring writers registered for workshops offered by the BLF in 2023. Participants took advantage of opportunities to learn from some of the best and brightest literary talents in Trinidad and Tobago, who provided insights about many of the key considerations for successfully writing, editing, illustrating and publishing books.

Our workshops are offered at prices considerably lower than market value in an effort to make them accessible to the wider public, while enabling us to cover administrative and other direct costs.

**WORKSHOP**  
Images Meet Words:  
How to Put Together  
a Visual Book  
with **Melanie Archer**  
Thursday 16 November  
6 - 7:30pm (TT time)  
\$150.00TTD / All levels  
Via ZOOM  
Limited spots available!  
Open to international  
participants

**WORKSHOP**  
WRITERS FIRST SEMINAR  
BETWEEN  
THE COVERS:  
Editing Matters,  
with **Shivaun Hearne**  
Thursday 6 July  
6 - 7:30pm  
\$150.00TTD / All levels  
Via ZOOM  
Limited spots available!  
Open to international  
participants

**WORKSHOP**  
A Novel  
is A World  
with **Kevin Jared Hosein**  
Saturday 29 July  
10am - noon TT time  
\$300.00TTD / All levels  
Via ZOOM  
Limited spots available!  
Open to international  
participants

# Metrics

4.3k

2023 NGC BOCAS LIT  
FEST ATTENDEES

\$1.08 M

VALUE OF  
MEDIA  
COVERAGE OF  
BLF EVENTS

220

FESTIVAL  
COLLABORATORS

17%

OF  
FESTIVAL ATTENDEES  
WERE REGIONAL &  
INTERNATIONAL

50%

INCREASE IN SLAM  
AUDITIONS OVER 2022

10,714

FESTIVAL EVENTS  
VIEWS ONLINE

210%↑

IN INSTAGRAM ACCOUNTS  
ACCESSING BLF CONTENT

227,400

TWITTER  
IMPRESSIONS

132,290

EMAILS SENT  
PROMOTING BLF  
ACTIVITIES

90%

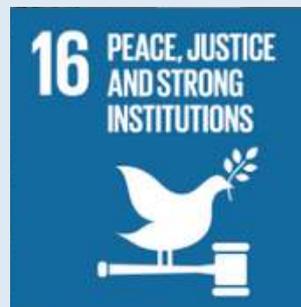
OF STUDENTS HAD AN  
INCREASED APPRECIATION FOR  
LITERATURE POST YOUTH FEST

# Impact

Key to the sustainability of the NGO and the wider literary community is the alignment of programming and other initiatives of the Bocas Lit Fest in achieving maximum benefit and impact.

Towards this goal, many organisations, including the BLF and some of our key sponsors seek to adopt the blueprint adopted by the United Nations Member States in 2015, in aligning their work to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

The BLF has identified 4 goals which it is best suited to prioritise and give focus to as follows:



Our WE LIT and WriteAway! initiatives have had huge impact with respect to SDG 4. Participants have developed a more profound appreciation for literature, which resulted in greater success in CSEC and CAPE examinations.

Many children and youths have found their voice through a variety of platforms like the storytelling caravan, spoken word, master classes, writing prizes and chapbooks to share their ideas, opinions, thoughts and aspirations, while becoming positive role models and influencers for their peers.

Youths participating in BLF projects are exposed to career fairs, internships, mentorships and skills development, which positively impact SDG 8 and how they re-imagine writing as a decent and potentially lucrative means of supporting themselves.

The annual festival, year-round programming, discussions and author engagements address socio-economic issues, equality and human rights, which are key aspects of SDG 16.

Last but not least, the BLF continues to align itself with ALTA, Read Aloud, NALIS, the Ministry of Education, foundations, the UN, and other agencies in forging strategic collaborations, accessing project funding and ensuring that our work has impact that will drive generational sustainability for the BLF, enabling it to evolve to changing agendas and circumstances.

# Our Team



**Jean-Claude Cournand**  
CEO



**Nicholas Laughlin**  
Festival & Programme Director



**Marielle Forbes**  
Youth & Hospitality Manager



**Alette Williams**  
Marketing & Media Manager



**Shivanee Ramlochan**  
Festival & Programme Manager



**Melvina Hazard**  
Children's Programme Manager



**Neala Bhagwansingh**  
Social Media Manager



**Stefan Rampersad**  
Digital Administrator



**Maria Tappin**  
Prize & Festival Administrator



**Chinyere Herbert**  
Youth Programmes Coordinator



**Maria Bleasdel**  
Marketing & Media Assistant



**Dwayne Dubarry**  
Office & Financial Assistant



**Jayden Phillip**  
Youth Programmes Intern

The BLF seeks to provide a working environment where team members can learn, flourish and progress. Inevitably, this creates new opportunities for the team, often resulting in staff losses; however, the BLF sees this as a mark of its success and is proud to be a conduit through which team members can pursue their passions and achieve their professional goals.

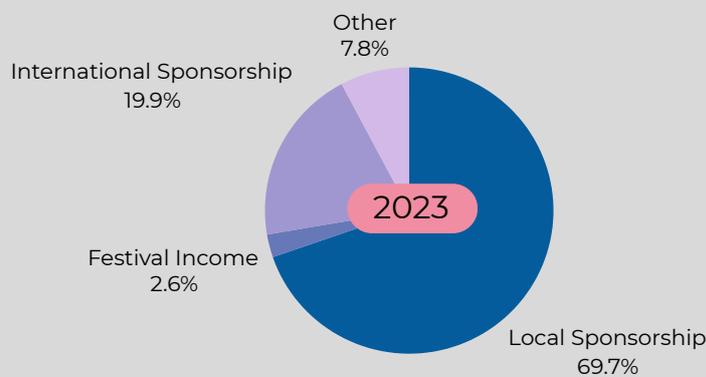
# Financial Summary

Bocas Lit Fest's work continues to be possible through the invaluable support of sponsors. In 2023, festival title sponsor, NGC, increased funding to aid development of BLF'S human capital and its sustainability and growth. Additionally, the sponsor base widened to include new international funders.

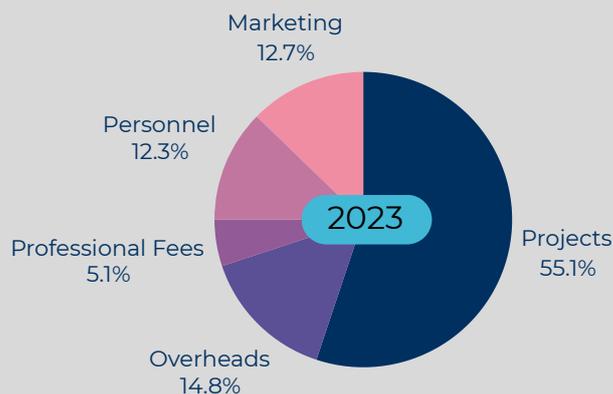
While 20% of income is derived from international sponsorship and 69.7% from local sources, additional income is generated through workshops, rentals, ticket sales and advertising placements which help fund year-round projects. Notably, BLF generated \$200,600 in direct cash to authors through its prizes.

Projects: the main festival; year-round programming; youth and children's programmes were the main areas of expenditure. In 2023, Bocas Lit Fest increased marketing to foster a return to in-person programming but overheads were kept in balance despite the increased number of projects.

## INCOME



## EXPENDITURE



# 2023 Sponsors & Partners

## Title Sponsor



## Main Sponsors



## Sponsors



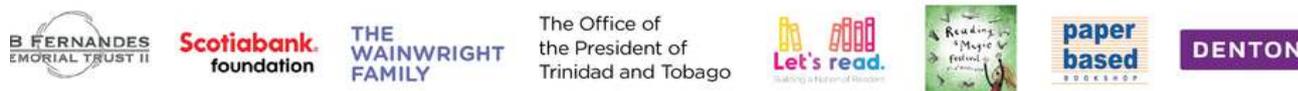
## Caribbean Literature Showcase and Breakthrough Fellowships Sponsors



## Festival Programme Partners



## Non-Festival Partners and Sponsors



## Sponsors in kind



## Media partners



# Outlook

# 2024

Looking ahead and now fully settled in a post-pandemic landscape, BLF will refocus on diversifying its funding base while building robust, year-round programming at the Writers Centre. Via Paper Based bookshop, BLF seeks to be self-sustaining and to deliver more value to writers and readers.

New partnerships with COSTATT, the British Library in London and Casa de America in Madrid will support programming and create opportunities for literary advancement without scaling expenses.

The environment is changing but BLF will continue to maintain leadership in the literary arts in the Caribbean, with its visionary programming, well honed creative team, and sustainable financial management.

## Connect with us

The Writers Centre

14 Alcazar Street, St Clair, POS, Trinidad and Tobago



[www.bocaslitfest.com](http://www.bocaslitfest.com)



[info@bocaslitfest.com](mailto:info@bocaslitfest.com)



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