Humanities Tennessee







ANNUAL REPORT | 2026

July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026

LETTER FROM BOARD CHAIR JAMES MCKISSIC

The past year has reminded us just how essential the humanities are. At a time when the humanities have faced uncertainty and new challenges, Humanities Tennessee has continued to create spaces for Tennesseans to read, learn, question, connect, and better understand one another.

I am especially grateful for the brilliance, persistence, and resilience of the Humanities Tennessee staff. They have met each challenge with creativity, determination, and an unwavering commitment to our mission and to the Tennesseans we serve.

An African proverb says, ***"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."***

Humanities Tennessee reaches far because we work together. Our staff, board, partners, supporters, and communities have sustained not only our mission, but one another.

As we look ahead, I am confident that the same spirit of collaboration and shared purpose will continue to carry Humanities Tennessee forward.



JAMES MCKISSIC
BOARD MEMBER SINCE 2018

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"It's not just about books. **It's about celebrating voices, nurturing dialogue, and making the humanities feel accessible to everyone.** *That's why I keep coming back—and why I'll always champion the power of public humanities to bring us closer to each other and to the stories that shape who we are."*

- Lisa Cannone

MISSION

To foster community and civility in Tennessee through public programs that examine and reflect upon ideas, stories, history, arts, and culture.

ABOUT

Founded in 1973, Humanities Tennessee serves as the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Our goal is to develop ways to connect, learn, and grow as a community.

VALUES

Shared Knowledge
Empowerment
Civility
Community
Equity

STAFF

Maria Browning	Editor, *Chapter16.org*
Caroline Carrico	Shared Futures Lab Correspondent
Melissa Davis	Director, Shared Futures Lab
René Dillard	Director of Development
Serenity Gerbman	Director, Tennessee Center for the Book
Tim Henderson	Executive Director
Paul McCoy	Deputy Director, Shared Futures Lab
Patrick Shaffner	Deputy Director, Tennessee Center for the Book
Alexis Stevens	Director of Operations

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PROGRAMS

TENNESSEE CENTER FOR THE BOOK

Tennessee Book Award

Honors excellence in Fiction, Non-Fiction, and Poetry by Tennessee residents. Since 2024, Humanities Tennessee has convened diverse panels of judges to select annual winners, celebrating the state's finest literary voices.

Southern Festival of Books

Now in its 38th year, Nashville's signature literary event welcomes hundreds of authors and thousands of visitors each October. The free festival features performance stages, food vendors, publishers, local organizations, booksellers, and more.

Chapter 16

Serves as Tennessee's virtual Center for the Book, offering reviews, literary news and author interviews. The website highlights homegrown talent and visiting writers, and regularly publishes original poems and essays by Tennessee authors.

Student Reader Day

Connects young readers with published writers through interactive programming designed to foster access to literature and build critical thinking skills. Each event helps build home libraries.

TN Writers|TN Stories

A monthly partnership among Humanities Tennessee, the Tennessee State Museum, and Vanderbilt University Press for free author talks and conversations hosted at the Museum.

SHARED FUTURES LAB

Then. Now. Next?

A multiformat project exploring the roles of crafters and growers in the creation, evolution, and future of U.S. democracy.

Humanities in Action Podcast

Features interviews and storytelling that explores how individuals and organizations use history, culture, and civic engagement to strengthen communities.

TN Association of Museums (TAM) Scholarships

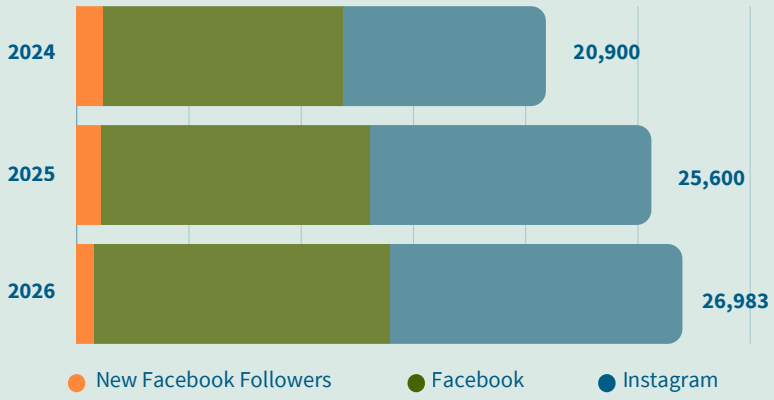
A partnership between Humanities Tennessee and the Tennessee Association of Museums to support attendence to the TAM Annual Conference.

REACH

Southern Festival of Books

191	100	25,000+	28	94
Guest Authors	Panel Sessions	Attendees	Performances	Vendors

SoFest Social Media



HT Podcast *Curating Tennessee*

A special podcast series exploring local history, community archives, and artifacts as part of the "By the People: Conversations Beyond 250" initiative.

Most Popular Episodes

Adam Alfrey Knox County Public Library
Wayne Dowdy Memphis Public Libraries History Department
Tonya Staggs Historic Castalian Springs in Sumner County

Plays & Downloads	Audience
1,005	544

112,679 *Tennesseans directly served through our programs in FY2026*

Don't Miss These: Top 3 from *Chapter16.org*

Poems for the Timesick
In All These Ghosts, former Kentucky poet laureate Silas House reckons with his home state's past and present
Article by Emily Choate

'The Healing Game of Art'
Book Excerpt: Everyday Apocalypse
By David Dark

Looking Closely at the Weeds
Margaret Renkl and Billy Renkl discuss their latest collaboration, a nature book for children
Interview by Margaret Kingsbury

Book Distribution: Student Reader Day



11,207 *books to student readers from 2024-2026*

> "*Two separate Smithsonian exhibits,* **Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program** *and* **Crossroads: Change in Rural America**, *have visited McNairy County through the encouragement and support of Humanities Tennessee.* **Rural Tennesseans would never have access to high quality museum exhibits of this type without the expertise of professionals at a well-connected state humanities council."**
>
> - Dr. Shawn Pitts




BOOKS CHANGE LIVES







SOUTHERN FESTIVAL OF BOOKS





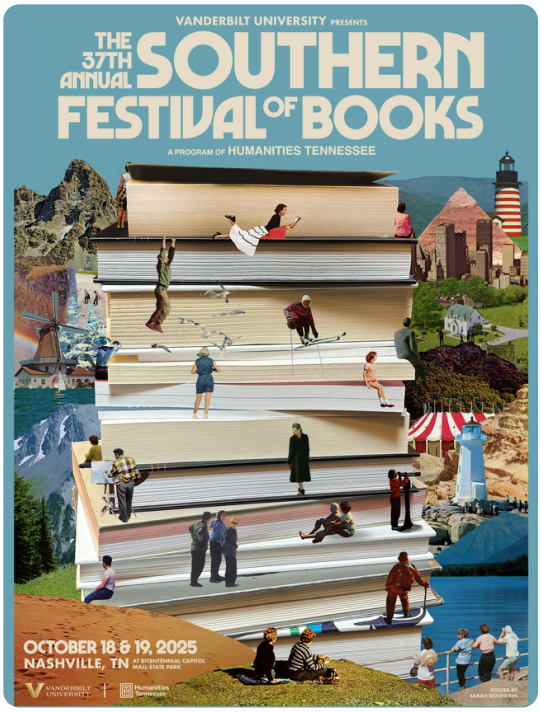


SPOTLIGHT

37TH ANNUAL SOUTHERN FESTIVAL OF BOOKS



TENNESSEE CENTER
FOR THE BOOK



TENNESSEE CENTER FOR THE BOOK is a portfolio of literary programs, including the **Southern Festival of Books** (which celebrated its 37th year in FY26), ***Chapter16.org***, **Student Reader Day** (SRD), **TN Writers | TN Stories**, and the **Tennessee Book Award** (TBA) for Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry.

Student Reader Day events bring together writers with young readers for access to literature and critical thinking opportunities. Each student receives a free signed copy of the author's book. **In FY26, we distributed 1,787 signed books to students through this program.** Since 2022, SRD has been a featured component of the Southern Festival of Books. Last October, 650 students kicked off the festival with National Ambassador for Young People's Literature Jason Reynolds and Jeanne Birdsall, winner of the 2005 National Book Award for Young People's Literature.

> *"...a small bus of my students and colleagues attended, and each person had so many positive things to note about Saturday.* **For many, it was their first time to attend literary-based sessions, their first time to get books signed, and their first time to be around so many literary folks.**"
>
> - Rutherford County Librarian



TN Writers | TN Stories

TN Writers | TN Stories is a partnership between HT, the TN State Museum, and Vanderbilt University Press to host free monthly author events in the TN State Museum. In its fourth year, the series has found a steady audience for its Saturday Morning events. Last year, seven sessions attracted nearly 300 people. Sessions are primarily focused on local and state history, and are based around books by Nashville authors.

Beyond the titles to the left this season of also featured:
The Apostle of Tennessee: The Indefatigable Life and Ministry of Father Aloysius Orengo by Joe Pagetta
The Education of a Senator: From JFK to Trump by Lamar Alexander





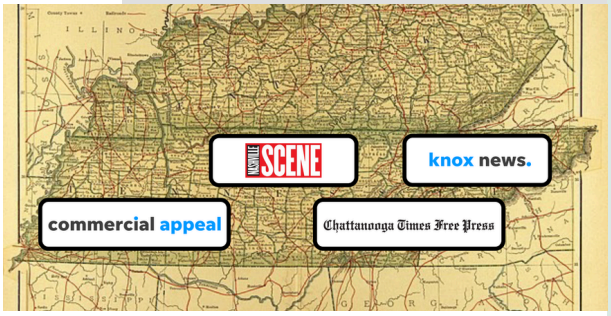
Pictured L-R: Student Reader Day School entry way; Many, many books; Author Jason Reynolds interviewed at the Southern Festival of Books Student Reader Day by Rutherford County District Librarian Kaitlyn Benavides; Author Andrew Maraniss visits Stewartsboro Elementary for Student Reader Day; poet Didi Jackson with her Tennessee Book Award in Poetry for *My Infinity*





CHAPTER 16

When newspaper book sections began disappearing across Tennessee, HT launched Chapter 16 in 2009 to ensure that literary voices and events wouldn't go uncovered. We cover novels set here, histories involving Tennessee events or locations, and celebrate authors who were born, educated, or now live here. When out-of-state writers come to read or sign books, we're there too. We also publish original poems and essays by prominent Tennessee authors, occasionally giving readers a first glimpse of upcoming work. A rotating cadre of 15-20 freelance writers make this work possible.

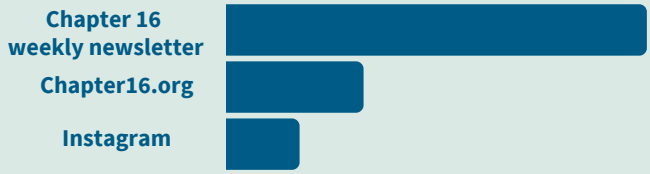


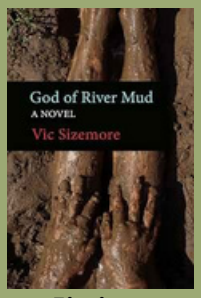
Chapter 16 Reach

Chapter 16 maintains partnerships with newspapers statewide, with in-print and online content featured in the *Nashville Scene*, *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), *Chattanooga Time Free Press*, and the *Knoxville News Sentinel*. Together, these publications get our content in front of 500,000 Tennesseans.

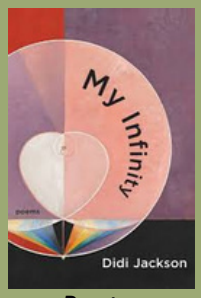
125
pieces published in Chapter 16 in FY26, including 8 book excerpts

How do you access Chapter 16 content?

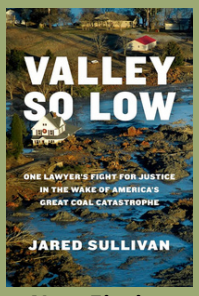




Fiction



Poetry



Non-Fiction

2025 Tennessee Book Award Winners

If you didn't know--Tennessee picks its best books each year, and since 2024 we've put together a panel of esteemed authors to choose. In the past we have been honored to have nationally recognized finalist judges including Richard Blanco, Geraldine Brooks, Timothy Egan, and Rebecca Makkai. TBA was founded to recognize outstanding works by Tennessee authors, to help support and promote writers in the state, and to provide engagement opportunities for readers, writers, and libraries.

"As an author, I've found Chapter 16 to be crucial. When a novel of mine is published, it may be the only review I can reasonably expect to get. So many traditional review outlets, including newspapers, have disappeared. **With Chapter 16, I not only can expect a thoughtful, well-crafted review on the website, but that review then runs in the print edition of my hometown paper.**"

- David Wesley Williams

"As a reviewer, I've had the distinct pleasure of interviewing and reviewing books by Black and queer authors. **Those conversations have been enlightening and gave me the opportunity to amplify authors who might have otherwise been overlooked by other mainstream media.** *I'm proud to have contributed to a dense body of diverse conversations about books and literacy."*

- Tonya Abari



SHARED FUTURES LAB



HT convened crafters & growers for a speculative design workshop in Chattanooga, March 2026.

The SHARED FUTURES LAB experiments with how stories, history, arts, and culture can shape a more empathetic and connected future for Tennessee. Underpinning this work is a core conviction: we cannot imagine where we are going without an honest, deep engagement with where we have been. **The past is not a closed chapter, it is the living foundation upon which all futures are built.**

Marking our nation's 250th, the Lab's **Then. Now. Next?** project explored the roles of crafters and growers in the creation, evolution and future of US democracy. Over the winter we gathered crafters, growers, scholars, and futurists for two events:

- **Crafters, Growers, and Revolutionary Ideals**, panel discussion, Knoxville
- **Designing the Future of Crafting & Growing**, speculative design workshop, Chattanooga

Covering a span of three centuries, the project explored the connection between our nation's past and how we imagine its future.

Tennessee History Day

Tennessee History Day is a year-long contest for grades 6-12, conducted by the TN Historical Society. Students research historical topics related to an annual theme and present their work as papers, exhibits, performances, documentaries, or websites. Top entries advance from school to regionals to state, with winners heading to Nationals each June. HT staff help to judge this award.



2026 Best Project in TN History winners:

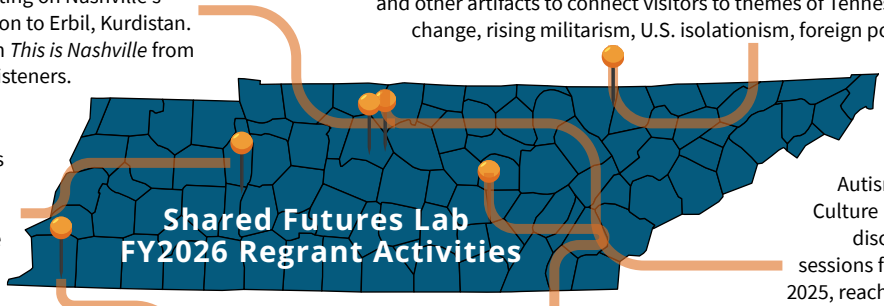
Junior Division: Rameen Alborz (*Voices On The Mountain: The Highlander Folk School's Story of Freedom and Change*, Clayton).

Senior Division: Julia Anderson, Catherine Fields, Noah Grant, Sky Huskey, and Sofia Turpin-Bolanos (*Listen to Mama: The Ratification of the 19th Amendment*).

Nashville Public Radio's *The Country in Our Hearts*—a four-part podcast and accompanying web and radio stories—offered innovative cross-cultural reporting on Nashville's Kurdish community and their connection to Erbil, Kurdistan. The resource-intensive project aired on *This is Nashville* from June 30–July 3, 2025, and drew 2,698 listeners.

The National Alliance of Pan African Seminarians (NAPAS) project preserves one of the few remaining black-owned farms in TN. The permanent exhibit features outdoor panels and a heritage trail and is housed on the 200-acre Moore Family Century Farm.

Nonprofit community radio station WYXR launched *Echoes of Memphis: The Stereo Sessions*, a five-episode audio series that transformed three years of archival recordings into new narratives spotlighting overlooked Memphis albums. Using fresh narration, interviews, and expert commentary, the series premiered on the WYXR website.



4,727

Tennesseans served by these projects

The USS TN BB-44 & WWII Remembrance Museum debuted *The U.S.S. Tennessee Between the Wars, a Date with Destiny*. The exhibit integrates ship history, period photos, newsreels and other artifacts to connect visitors to themes of Tennessee state pride, technological change, rising militarism, U.S. isolationism, foreign policy, and military segregation.

AutismTN's Exploring Autistic Life & Culture Project presented seven panel discussions, including four hybrid sessions from September 4–October 27, 2025, reaching 315 attendees. The panels amplified Autistic voices as they sharepd narratives about their loves and culture.

The Camp Forest Foundation completed the Byway Signs Project, installing four interpretive signs in Tullahoma's History Park and a fifth at the Regional Airport. These signs strengthen community interpretation of local WWII history, support America 250 activities, and contribute to ongoing efforts to honor veterans and preserve the legacy of those who served during WWII.

TENNESSEE ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS SCHOLARSHIPS

In partnership with the Tennessee Association of Museums (TAM), Humanities Tennessee provides scholarships to the annual TAM conference for small, volunteer-run organizations across the state. Our scholarships cover the conference registration, a travel stipend, and an annual institutional membership fee, and are available to volunteers without museum-related backgrounds working for nonprofit museums with no paid, professional staff.

Since 2003, 342 individuals from 125 organizations across the state have attended the TAM conference with this scholarship.



2026 Award Recepients

Jackie Bradshaw	Robertson County History Museum
Lauren Egbert	Gibson County TN Historical Society
Brenda Gill	History Associates of Wilson County
Lee Henwood	Historic Archives of Rosemark & Environs
Thomas Neill	Mid-South Military Museum
Janie Phillips	Granville Museum
Doretta Ward	Black History Museum of Warren County









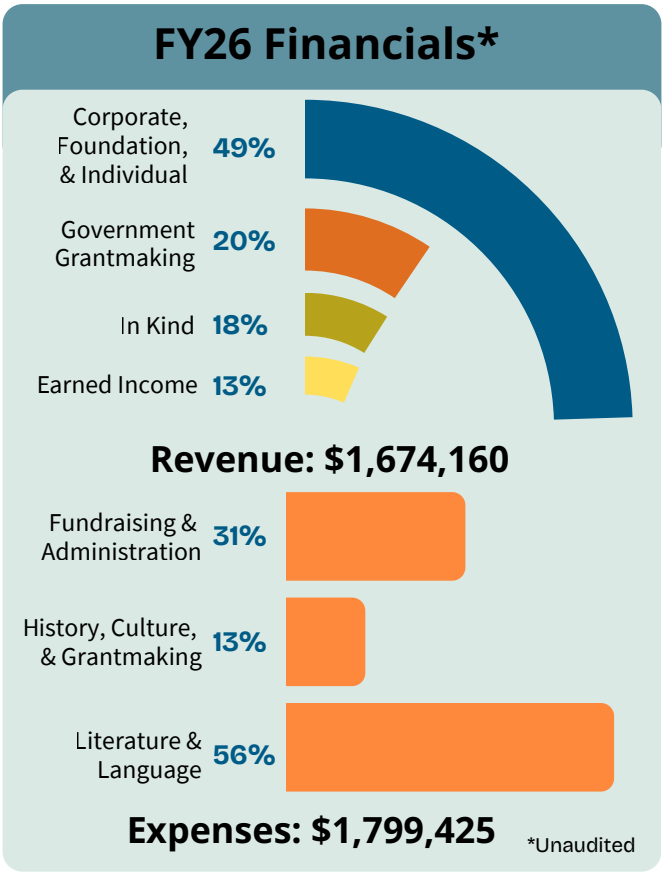


Pictured L-R Clockwise: TAM 2026, Discovery Center of America, Union City; Unveiling of Camp Forest Foundations Byway Signs Project; Moore Farm Farmhouse mockup; *The U.S.S. Tennessee Between the Wars, a Date with Destiny*; Byway Signs Project installation at Tullahoma Regional Airport Center: Then. Now. Next? panel: Crafters, Growers & Revolutionary Ideals at the East Tennessee Historical Society and Museum; Heritage Trail marker at Moore Family Century Farm.

LEADERSHIP AND FINANCIALS

For more than half a century, Humanities Tennessee has looked for ways to "put the humanities to work" for communities all over the state. And through every chapter of our history, our core commitment has remained constant: bringing Tennesseans together around stories, history, literature, and culture to foster mutual understanding and more vibrant civic life.

When this core work appeared threatened by unexpected federal funding cuts, you—our community of sponsors, participants, and partners—stepped up to make a clear and declarative statement that the humanities are essential to the life and spirit of our state. It was a true demonstration that local passion and shared purpose can help bridge our differences and keep our essential cultural spaces alive and thriving.



We saw that vital financial support come, literally, from every corner of our state. From individual donors responding to public appeals, to foundational partners and literary champions, your generosity sustained our core grants, affiliate programs, and statewide educational initiatives when we needed it most.

A major highlight of this community-driven resilience was a historical landmark for our flagship public program. For the first time in nearly forty years, we welcomed a new co-presenting partner to the Southern Festival of Books. Vanderbilt University joined us, marking a transformative chapter that elevated our festival while ensuring this beloved gathering remains free and accessible to all Tennesseans.

Now we look forward to building on this foundation of mission-centered community trust and to increasing our capacity to reach more Tennesseans with programming opportunities that are relevant, impactful, and focused on our shared futures. Thank you for standing with Humanities Tennessee and ensuring our collective stories continue to be told.



TIM HENDERSON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PARTNERS

Humanities Tennessee relies on generous national, regional, and local supporters who believe in our work. For the past 50 years, Humanities Tennessee – the staff and board, volunteers, donors, and community partners – all of us together – have worked to foster community and civility.
We could not do this work without you.

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

METRO ARTS
NASHVILLE OFFICE OF ARTS + CULTURE

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

THE FRIST FOUNDATION

INGRAM CONTENT GROUP

SANDRA SCHATTEN FOUNDATION

TENNESSEE ARTS COMMISSION
Cultivate. Create. Participate.

TENNESSEE STATE MUSEUM
EXPERIENCE TENNESSEE

DOLLAR GENERAL LITERACY FOUNDATION
GIVE. DREAM. HOPE.

Memorial Foundation

NES

Federation of State Humanities Councils

NASHVILLE PREDATORS FOUNDATION

PARNASSUS BOOKS NASHVILLE

TENNESSEE STATE LIBRARY & ARCHIVES
Tennessee Secretary of State

"*When I worked with the Heritage Alliance, we received a grant from Humanities Tennessee to help us preserve and frame artwork by Rhea Wells. He was a Jonesborough author, illustrator, theatre maker, and artist. His artwork had never been displayed before.* **With the grant, we were able to frame his work and have a proper exhibition at the McKinney Center.** *Community members who remembered Rhea Wells shared stories, and his family learned new information about him.* **It was a true celebration of an artist who cared deeply about his community but had been lost to time. It would not have been possible without Humanities Tennessee."**

- Anne G'Fellers-Mason

FRIENDS OF HT

FRIENDS OF THE BOOK

Friends who gave $1,000 or more to Humanities Tennessee programming.

Mr. Stephen Abelman and Ms. Robin Holab-Abelman
The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Dr. Lynn Alexander
Melinda and Jeffrey Balser Charitable Gift Fund
Harlan Coben
The Danner Foundation
Enchiridion Foundation
For All the Kids Fund for Arts Community & Education of The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee
Ms. Melanie and Mr. Randy Ford
Ms. Beth Fortune
Ms. Serenity Gerbman
Mary Kennedy Hendershot and Tom Hendershot
Mr. Timothy and Lauran Henderson
Mr. Stephen and Ms. Denise Henley
Mrs. Kay Johnson
Dr. Susan Kupisch
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Ms. Victoria Ross
Ms. Cynthia Smith
Whitworth Stokes and Nancy Rankin
John and Michelle Talbott
Joyce and Stephen Wood
Eileen and John Zanath

FOLIO SOCIETY

Friends who gave $1,000 or more to Authors in the Round, benefiting the Southern Festival of Books.

Drs. Vandana and Rick Abramson
Mrs. Jean and Mr. Dennis Bottorff
Ms. Cathy Stewart Brown and Mr. Martin Brown
Fred and Beth Cate
Desmond and Curtis Child
Sarah Christian
Elizabeth Dennis
Mrs. Laurie and Dr. Steven Eskind
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Christi and Jay Turner
Bill Wilson
Toby S. Wilt Family Foundation





Each year, our signature fundraiser—Authors in the Round—keeps the Southern Festival of Books free for all. Over 16 years, it has raised over $1.7 million, offering guests the unique chance to dine alongside nationally known authors. The 2026 event was co-chaired by mother-daughter duo Alice Randall and Caroline Randall Williams, both award-winning Vanderbilt professors.







I love the energy the Southern Festival of Books brings to Nashville every year, uniting book lovers and creators of all ages in a celebration of literature, learning, creativity, and community. Over the years, I've been inspired by so many keynotes, panels, and casual conversations. I've heard my favorite authors speak about their work and left motivated to work on my own. I always bump into old friends and make new ones. There's truly something for everyone, and all are welcome. It wouldn't be fall in Nashville without the Festival.

- Jessica Young











THANK YOU

Humanities Tennessee

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