



Iowa City was named a UNESCO City of Literature in 2008, becoming the first City of Literature in the United States and the third in the world to receive this designation.

The Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature is an independent nonprofit organization that works to build and support diverse communities of writers and readers through the power of story. The organization is supported by the cities of Iowa City, Coralville, and North Liberty; Johnson County; the University of Iowa; and Think Iowa City.

MISSION: To build and support diverse communities of writers and audiences through the transformative power of story.

VISION: We foster collaborations with the goal of enriching local literary programs and expanding our global engagement.

VALUES: Collaboration - The City of Literature engages in complementary and cooperative work; **Community** - The City of Literature fosters inclusive engagement to create connection locally and globally; **Creativity** - The City of Literature seeks, engages, and supports innovation.



123 S. Linn St.
Iowa City, IA 52240
319.887.6100

info@iowacityofliterature.org
iowacityofliterature.org

2025-2026 Annual Report

Connecting Readers and Writers through the Power of Story

The Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature brings people together through writing, supporting authors, readers, and the many ways stories connect us. Our festivals, programs, partnerships, and community events create opportunities for people to share ideas, discover new voices, and connect.

In Fiscal Year 2026, our work reached people of all ages throughout the Iowa City area and beyond. Children shared their own writing on stage for the first time, acclaimed authors engaged audiences at the Iowa City Book Festival, and local writers saw their work featured in public spaces throughout the community. International partnerships connected Iowa readers and writers with literary communities around the world. Every program was free and open to the public, providing accessible opportunities for all.

The Iowa City Book Festival continues to be the largest of our programs. The 17th annual festival, held in October 2025, offered 35 events, a week of author readings, panel discussions, book fairs,



University of Iowa professor and poet Donika Kelly talks with attendees after her reading at the 2025 Iowa City Book Festival.

literary walks, and exhibitions that welcomed thousands of readers and writers to downtown Iowa City. Together with our many community partners, the festival celebrated Iowa City's world-renowned literary culture, while introducing audiences to new voices and ideas.

Encouraging young writers and readers remains a priority. The 2026 **One Book Two Book Children's Literature Festival** welcomed hundreds of children and families for a day of books, creativity, and hands-on activities in downtown Iowa City. Through **Poetry in Public**, dozens of students from across Johnson County shared original poems and were celebrated at a public reading during the Iowa City Book Festival. Joining us for the reading was 2025 **Iowa Student Poet Ambassador** Daniel Umemezie, who has since been named the 2026 National Youth Poet Laureate.

Student writers also took part in the **Glory of the Senses: Paul Engle High School Essay Contest** which awards college scholarships to Iowa high school students. Together, these programs give young people opportunities to develop, share and celebrate their creativity while ensuring their voices have a place in our literary future.

This spring, the **MusicIC Festival** explored the theme The Black Angel, bringing together music, literature, and history in a multidisciplinary celebration inspired by one of Iowa City's most iconic landmarks. The festival reflects our ongoing commitment to presenting innovative programming that connects literature with other art forms.



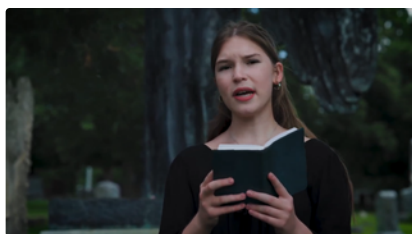
Slamovision winner Henry Morray

Our commitment to international collaboration remains steadfast. Iowa City works alongside fellow UNESCO Cities of Literature to share ideas, develop collaborative programming, and strengthen connections across borders.

In 2025–26, we participated in international exchanges, welcomed writers and cultural leaders from abroad, and continued our involvement in global initiatives such as the **Slamovision Global Poetry Slam**.

The Notts X Iowa MusicIC Collaboration

offered another opportunity to connect. The project brought together two young artists, a musician from Nottingham and a writer from Iowa City, to create a multimedia work inspired by this year's MusicIC festival. The resulting piece, "The Black Angel's Lament" by Nottingham musician Max Worth and Iowa City writer Josie Nabhan-Warren (who is also serving at this year's Iowa Student Poet Ambassador), combines poetry and classical music to explore the folklore surrounding the statue. The collaboration gave two emerging artists the opportunity to create across borders and share their work with an international audience, demonstrating the power of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network to support young artists.



Josie Nabhan-Warren

We recognize established writers as well, presenting our **Paul Engle Prize** to poet and translator Cole Swensen in fall 2025.

Throughout the year, we also continued to make literature visible in everyday life. From poetry installations to author talks, workshops, and livestreamed events, we work to ensure stories reached people wherever they are. Whether someone encounters a poem while commuting, attends a reading downtown, or joins a discussion online from another country, each experience reinforced the idea that literature belongs to everyone.

FY26 at a Glance

60+ free programs and events including author readings, workshops, panel discussions, concerts, and community celebrations

100+ authors, artists, and presenters shared their work and expertise
Nearly 5,000 attendees and participants engaged across our programs and events

25+ Iowa schools participated in student writing opportunities

30+ community partner organizations collaborated to bring literary programming to our region

80 volunteers donated their time to support our events and programs

10 countries represented through international literary exchanges and programming

Community Impact



In FY26, the City of Literature organization made a significant impact on the Iowa City community. This included:

–**Participated in the steering group that led to the formation of the Iowa City Arts Alliance.** Our director served on this committee whose work over the course of the year resulted in the crafting of a feasibility study and the eventual creation of the new organization.

–**Collaborated with dozens of local arts, culture, and community organizations.** This included:

- Iowa City Book Festival (FilmScene, Iowa City Public Library, University of Iowa Center for Advancement, University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Greater Iowa City, Inc., University of Iowa Libraries, Porch Light Literary Center, Dream City, Prairie Lights Books, Little Village, and the Hubbell Environmental Law Initiative)
- One Book Two Book (Iowa City, Coralville, and North Liberty libraries, Sidekick Books, FilmScene, Iowa City Poetry)
- MusicIC (University of Iowa School of Music, City Channel 4, Iowa City Downtown District's Free Week)
- Slamovision (PS1, Mic Check Poetry Festival, Iowa City Poetry)
- Paul Engle Prize (City of Coralville, Coralville Public Library, Iowa Youth Writing Project)

–**Offered more than 60 free programs and events across our festivals, collaborations, and one-time opportunities.** These included author readings, workshops, panel discussions, concerts, and community celebrations.

–**Provided opportunities for writers of all ages to work on and share their writing.** These included:

- Poetry in Public: 145 poets of all ages submitted work
- Slamovision: 13 slam poets from across Iowa competed for the chance to represent Iowa City in this international competition. Henry Morray, our local winner, was named the overall Slamovision champion for 2025
- Glory of the Senses essay contest: West High student Reed Hagan won the top prize of a year of free tuition to the University of Iowa in the 2025 contest.
- One Book Two Book: 95 students in grades 1-8 from 25 area schools submitted work to this annual festival.

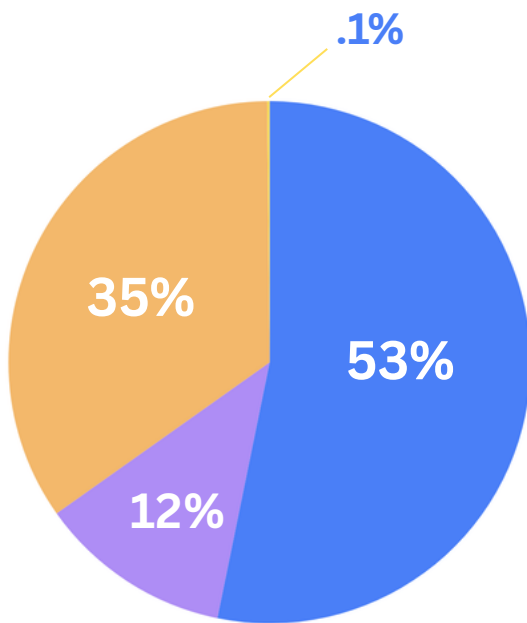
In **FY27**, the City of Literature organization will continue these programs while looking for ways to expand our reach and provide even more opportunities for residents to participate in and experience the arts. This involves raising funds that will enable us to keep our events free, and programming a diverse range of voices speaking on a wide range of topics as we look to grow our audiences across the community.

We are also preparing to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Iowa City's UNESCO designation in fall 2028.



INCOME

\$267,817



● Public Support

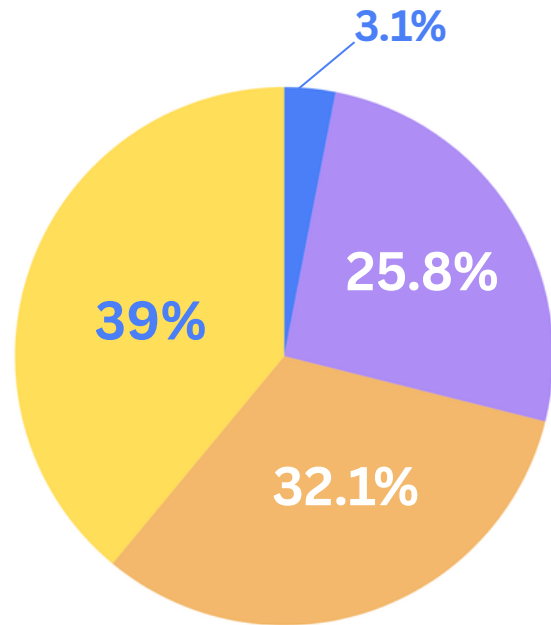
● Individual Contributions

● Program Income

● Misc. Income

EXPENSES

\$249,727



● Promotion

● Program Expenses

● General Administration

● Program Administration



Tianna Newell, contributor to The Black Superwoman & Mental Health, speaks at a Book Festival panel.

None of this work would be possible without the support of our donors, sponsors, volunteers, educators, community partners, and civic leaders. Their commitment allows us to expand access to literary arts and create meaningful opportunities for readers and writers of all ages.

As we look ahead, we remain dedicated to fostering creativity, championing free expression, supporting emerging writers, and strengthening Iowa City's place in the global literary landscape. Together, we continue to demonstrate that stories have the power to connect us, inspire us, and help build a more thoughtful and engaged community.

Thank you for helping us write the next chapter.



IOWA



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