



# Covid Visions

**Pivoting Amidst Pandemic Waves**

Saskatchewan Festival of Words

+ Wallace Stegner House

by  
**STEVEN ROSS SMITH**



Saskatchewan  
Arts Alliance

## Pivoting Amidst Pandemic Waves

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For most artists, there exist two pivotal stages in a creative spectrum—making and presenting. Two Saskatchewan organizations, one at each end of the arc, provide essential opportunities.

In Eastend, Saskatchewan, a place that might be considered isolated—150 km from the nearest city—stands the historic Wallace Stegner House. Artists from near and far have made the trek to the province’s southwest to spend creative time in the charming, historic, refurbished house where Wallace Stegner, respected environmentalist and Pulitzer Prize winning author, once lived.

Stegner’s family moved there in 1914, spending winters in the town and summers forty miles away on a homestead. The family left Eastend in 1920, when Wallace was eleven and he lived most of the rest of his life in the United States.

Stegner House has been preserved as a retreat, available to artists for periods of one month, and run by the Eastend Arts Council. Over the last 30 years the Wallace Stegner House has received more than 250 residents.

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About 300 kilometres east, in the many-storied Moose Jaw lives an organization that serves the presentation end—the annual Saskatchewan Festival of Words. Since 1996 hundreds of invited writers have come to present their work, live, in reading, discussion, interview, and activity formats.

Festival of Words has presented known and lesser-known writers including Saskatchewan’s Guy Vanderhaeghe, Louise Bernice Halfe, and Sharon Butala, from-away authors Angie Abdou

and Farzana Doctor, and luminaries such as Margaret Atwood and Lawrence Hill. 2021 had been planned as a twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, but the team, because of Covid, decided to wait for 2022 to bring out the balloons and confetti.

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Emily Bamforth, volunteer Chair of the Wallace Stegner House Administrative Committee of the Eastend Arts Council, suggests that Stegner House offers “a sanctuary—a retreat where artists can get away from their own busy lives and focus on their work.”

Artists in assorted genres have come: “Fiction and non-fiction writers, poets, painters, fabric artists, documentary filmmakers,



Wallace Stegner House stands on Treaty 4 territory and the homeland of the Metis Nation.

playwrights, musicians, photographers, dancers, historians, academics in the arts, ecologists and social scientists,” says Bamforth. “It’s a place where people come to discover that ‘the middle of nowhere’ is actually the middle of somewhere quite remarkable.”

While there, artists might walk the trails of one of the world’s most endangered ecosystems: native grasslands. And there are those dinosaur fossils. It can be so compelling, as Bamforth notes, that: “In several cases, artists who came as Stegner House residents loved the area so much they came to live in Eastend.”

Guest artists manage their own time and schedules but are invited to do some form of exhibition—an art show, a reading. “This provides the community with exposure to people and art forms they may not otherwise have experienced,” says Bamforth.

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Sarah Simison, working with the Festival of Words for over a decade, has been the Executive Director since 2015.

In days before Covid, hundreds of people would gather to hear the presenters, creating an effervescent air in Moose Jaw, excitement generated by the confluence of literary-minded folk. Readers revelled in the opportunity to get close to a favourite or newly discovered author, and authors enjoyed meeting their fans. Words lifted off the page, conversation bloomed, new friends were made, and books were purchased and signed at the on-site bookstore.

Simison reflects on the 2020 impact of Covid: “At first, we were sort of like, oh, let’s, let’s wait a couple of weeks and see how this plays out. Maybe we’ll be fine. And then we quickly realized that wasn’t the reality we were facing.”



Inside the Wallace Stegner House in Eastend, SK.



Inside the Wallace Stegner House in Eastend, SK.



A rethink became necessary as lead time shrunk and lockdowns rolled out. Conversations with colleagues at other festivals were valuable. “Very quickly, the key phrase became pivot,” recalls Simison.

Once organizations adapted, it became evident that digital media would be the new stage for presentation. Simison and her team contacted invited writers. “Ninety per cent of our lineup was on board for a digital festival. So, we pivoted and hosted it [online] and it was great. We got a lot of compliments from our attendees and from our funders and our authors. We had attendees from the UK, France, the Philippines, India, and the United States. It was so exciting to see these people logging in and chatting and talking about CanLit.”

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As we artists and arts consumers emerged from winter in 2021, hope for spring and summer gatherings lifted our spirits. Thoughts of mingling ‘live’ energized us. Yet there was, what I think of, as Covid lag.

Simison concurs. “We started 2021 very optimistically—thoughts of in-person events, but we had to scale that back into more virtual events. We did end up hosting three in-person events with people on stage, and we also live-streamed all our events into the May Wilson Theatre in Moose Jaw. But our live audience sizes were small. I think everybody was not quite ready to be going to live events yet. We still had good numbers on our virtual programming, but the numbers weren't as big as the previous year. We think part of that reason was it was a beautiful summer and people were sick of being stuck in front of their computers.”

Simison thought that with fewer live events she would just be sitting in front of her computer, not as in the past, running around from event to event, venue to venue, troubleshooting things all over town. And to a point that was true.

“Online, with virtual chat rooms and video chat you could see each other and talk about what you liked

and disliked. That was exciting.” But Simison was surprised to find that she “underestimated how exhausting an online festival was going to be...we still had to troubleshoot during sessions—somebody’s inexperience with a screen, somebody who’s computer died. But we had a good team, and it went smoothly. We also upped



Nisha Patel hosts the SKFOW Poetry Slam.

our authors fees a little ...we paid them a bit more with a technology fee.” Presenters could then purchase needed equipment—chargers, microphones, lights, or cameras.

Along with presentation challenges, came others. The festival’s booksellers are McNally Robinson of Saskatoon and the local Post Horizon Book Store. But how would they sell books to a mostly virtual audience? “We did a combination of online sales with McNally and in-person sales at our local store. But book sales were hit hard. People buy a lot more books when they're there in person.”

And Simison notes other financial impacts. “Not just our local economy takes a hit; our festival takes a hit. Some of our funders and sponsors are local businesses and if people are not coming to town to spend money in their stores or hotels then those sponsorship dollars dry up. So, we've been lucky to be able to take advantage of some of the Covid relief programs of Canada Council for the Arts and Canadian Heritage.

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In Eastend, they have now gone two years without their major annual fundraiser, the Wallace Stegner House Event, which is usually held in March. They also charge monthly residents \$500 per month to stay in the house, which helps to cover the cost of the house’s operation. Artists often apply to have this fee covered by grants from their local art agencies.

Bamforth elaborates: “Since the pandemic began, we have now had to cancel nine monthly residencies due travel



SKFWO Staff around Executive Director Sarah Simison.



Jael Richardson and Danny Ramadan read at SKFWO.

restrictions, second/third/fourth waves, etcetera—so we lose money there, too. We launched a major GoFundMe fundraiser to help us through the pandemic.

It was successful and helped create a new donor base and provided recognition for the Stegner House.” And she notes, “We figured out how to do events and host meetings online quite well, after a bit of practice. We also started using social media much more to reach a broader audience.”

Of the future, Bamforth says, “We are still dealing with issues related to travel restrictions and health directives. In the next year or so, we would like to work towards once again having residents for every month of the year, without the looming threat that any could be cancelled with little notice. We also look forward to hosting our annual fundraiser again, and to in-person events for our community.”

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David Carpenter, a Saskatoon writer who has been graced with, and benefitted from, attendance at each—Festival of Words and Stegner House—refers to the Festival of Words as “a galvanic celebration of books.” And of Stegner House he says: “It’s a good place for writers to work and read in solitude, and the town and its surrounding hills are perfect for friendly conversations and long hikes...Every time we go there, I end up looking wistfully at real estate for sale.”

*Wistful* we may be, for days gone by, while *pivot*, *rethink*, *innovate*, *imagine*, and *hope* are words more often heard in the new realities. Such words are not unfamiliar to artists and have been injected into the practices of organizations like Eastend Arts Council and Saskatchewan Festival of Words, and all those working together in the realm of creative making and presentation.



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