

Varuna the National Writers' House

Annual Report 2022



VARUNA
The National Writers' House

BLUE
MOUNTAINS
WRITERS'
FESTIVAL



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Message from the Chair



I am very privileged to act as the new Chair of the Eleanor Dark Foundation. The past year has been thrilling, working alongside the Board and Varuna staff to support the delivery of a dynamic program of residencies, workshops and events for Australia's writing community.

Providing opportunities for writers who view the world through a different lens helps to create a diversity of writing that enriches all our lives, preserving these important stories for future generations. The emergence of these stories and publications makes Varuna particularly proud of its work this year.

Recognition of the work we have been doing has seen Varuna's residency program running at capacity for the entire year, and initiatives from lockdown such as the online masterclasses continue to be fully subscribed. Our new accessible studio has proved invaluable over the last 12 months, enabling us to hold our first in-person Writers' Space Fellowship program. We welcomed 27 writers with disability to in-person residencies and a further 20 writers with disability participated in our specialist online programs.

Our First Nations writers' programs have been a personal highlight, with over 30 First Nations writers attending a residency at Varuna in 2022. We also progressed to the Innovate stage of our Reconciliation Action Plan, a significant milestone.

With the world reopened, we have started to re-engage with other writers' associations around the world. We welcomed writers from Scotland, Ireland and New Zealand, and in turn, writers from Australia, chosen by Varuna, visited these three countries.

The Blue Mountains Writers' Festival made a triumphant comeback, bigger and better than ever. Over 7,600 sessions were sold across over 55 events, triple the attendance from our previous festival. An amazing spectrum of authors helped to attract and engage new audiences for the festival, with more than half the attendees being first-time visitors. Thank you to all the funders, sponsors and venue partners, especially The Carrington Hotel, for making this event so successful.

The Blue Mountains Writers' Festival made a triumphant comeback, bigger and better than ever. Over 7,600 sessions were sold across over 55 events, triple the attendance from our previous festival.

We continued to receive the multi-year funding from the Australia Council and Create NSW for which we are incredibly appreciative. We were also delighted to receive a significant bequest during the year from the estate of Dr Ann Moyal AM, FAHA, which will provide nine weeks of fellowships for non-fiction writers for at

least the next ten years. Finally, our successful application to WestInvest for funding means we will receive more than \$815,000 for our new multipurpose building.

Finally, I'd like to extend a special thanks to all the staff and volunteers involved with Varuna and the Blue Mountains Writers' Festival. Your contribution is truly appreciated.

David Hammon, Chair

A note of optimism

While the importance of the written word remains constant from one decade to the next, it's no secret that the world around us is changing, as is Varuna. One of the lessons from the pandemic is that Varuna is much more than a house where writers come to write. Instead, and as this report so clearly demonstrates, Varuna is an organisation that provides an unparalleled depth and scope of professional development for writers, with both in-person and online programs taking place around Australia and internationally.

Bringing six writers together in a house sounds simple enough. Yet the work these writers are doing – creating new Australian literature – is necessary and urgent for

This new work, by Australia's most skilled practitioners in this artform, enables us to understand each other and ourselves. These are the books and the poetry that help us define who we are and who we could become, and inspire us to share our stories with others.

our society. This new work, by Australia's most skilled practitioners in this artform, enables us to understand each other and ourselves. These are the books and the poetry that help us define who we are and who we could become, and inspire us to share our stories with others.

The importance of celebrating storytelling was a key focus of our 2022 Blue Mountains Writers Festival. We took a risk, more than doubling the number of events and audience capacity.

Despite the lingering threat of Covid, over 80 writers and two thousand audience members came from all around the country to participate in 55 events. A sense of common purpose prevailed, with everyone delighting in spending three days immersed in words and ideas.

There's something about walking up Varuna's driveway that cultivates a sense of optimism. Maybe it's the way the trees overhang on either side to create a secret tunnel, or how the mist catches the upper branches of the tall magnolias. More likely however, it's the feeling that whatever day or week of the year it is, there's always something special afoot.



We leave 2022 filled with enthusiasm and a resolve to continue to innovate in the ways we serve Australian writers. We hope this impact report inspires you, our supporters, to continue this journey with us. We could not do this work without you.

**Veechi Stuart, Executive Director
Amy Sambrooke, Creative Director**

From the Visitors' Book 2022

Dear Varuna, please come to Ireland! I loved my stay here with fellow writers and gratitude for all the kindness from Team Varuna – the house staff and directors. Varuna is an inspiration and helps me map my journey in poetry and ecology!

Catherine

I had such high expectations, yet had no idea what I wanted or needed and this beautiful week exceeded all expectations! You're wonderful Varuna. Keep being magical. Andi

*Great food
Great walks
Great staff
Great company
Got heaps done
Keep it up, legends!
In gratitude and solidarity*

Declan Furber Gillick,
Central Arrernte

What an incredible place to spend my first ever residency! I was surrounded by such supportive people. I have no excuse not to embrace the ego and write like mad! Thanks so much Stephen, Bec, Dina, Hugh and Ben! And thanks Varuna for having me. James O'Hanlon 2022



Dear Varuna, I was last here in 1994. This week was not marked by time, but words on the page and on the tongue. I will return.

Barrina South

Hello and goodbye!

Absolutely LOVED my time at Varuna, so productive!! Wrote over 20k of my current WIP, but more than that, it rekindled my love of writing. It made me trust in my process again and gave me clarity and motivation. Just tell me when I can return! Paula Roe

Dear Varuna, The last two weeks have been an inconceivable gift – held by gardens, writers and the good people who do what they do to make this extraordinary place possible... I will carry my memories across the border with a heart full of gratitude. Thank you. Renée Pettitt-Schipp

Last Day in Katoomba
(a first draft)

Part of me
belongs now
to this valley
its granite mouth
exhaling swampy breath,
rain kissing the cracks
in its face
pummelling
the colorbond.

Eucalypts
creeping

onto the carpet,
muddy
boot stowaways
fog taunting the streetlamps,
dancing with the eaves.
To the march fly plotting
its escape
from the library, I whisper,
stay.

Sarah Stevens

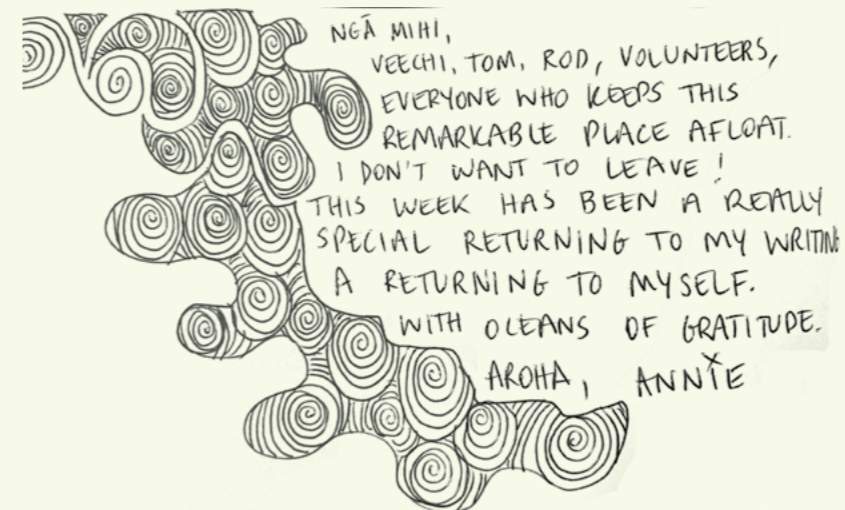
Thank you dear Varuna, so much – for the active safeguarding of our peace and quiet, and nurturing our craft. I am so grateful for having had such a productive, rejuvenating and creative fortnight. And looking forward to returning in August. All best...

Liz Evans

To the wonderful Varuna community – thank you for the incredible space you have created for us writers. When we are here we get to be 'just' writers – giving it everything and the time and the quiet it needs (plus the nourishing dinners and conversation!) I hope to be back.

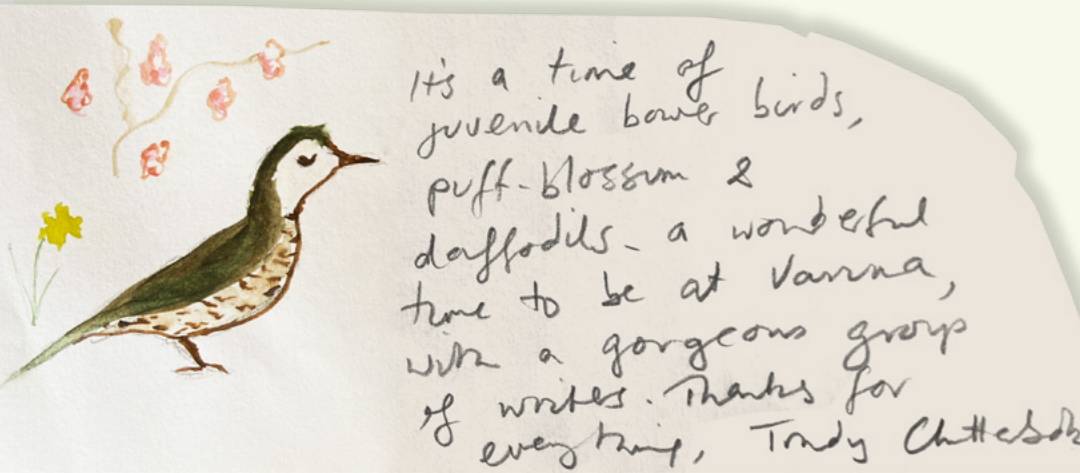
Katherine Brabon

Fair Varuna! Thank you, thank you, thank you! I'm leaving with a renewed energy for my work and a deeper understanding of where to take my novel from here. My heartfelt thanks to the Dark family, the Koppe family, the ASA and all the team at Varuna for making my fellowship possible, and all my fellow writers for making it wonderful. Tim McGuire



On behalf of the First Nations Fellowship winners in 2022, I write here to say that we really enjoyed the Varuna Writers' House experience, and we thank the entire team that helped to make us feel safe, comfortable, well fed and inspired to write (and read) more. Long live the First Nations Fellowship. We'll be back.

- Dr Jenny Fraser, Yugambeh
- Kerry Moran, Anaiwan
- Kalem Murray, Bardi
- Luke Patterson, Gamilaroi
- Neika Lehman, Trawloolway
- Brooke Scobie, Bundjalung
- Maria van Neerven, Yugambeh



Enabling new Australian work

230
writers in residence

285
residency weeks

Top 3
benefits

CREATING NEW WORKS

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

RECOGNITION

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

PUBLICATION

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

82 writers participated in a 10-week online masterclass

1092
fellowship applications assessed

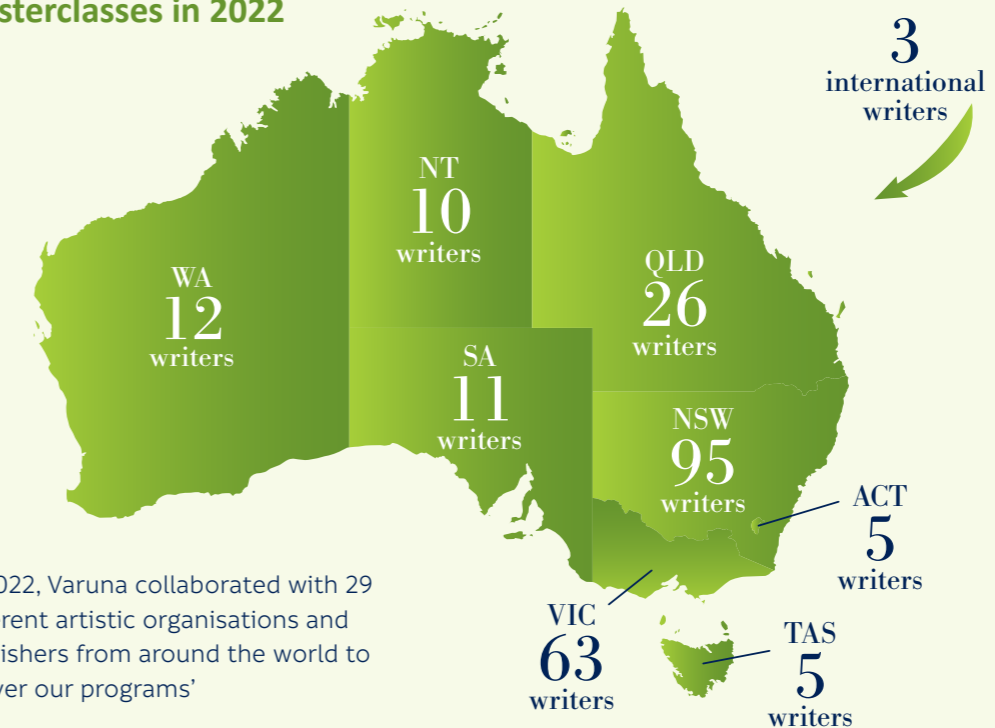
\$195,000
paid directly in artist fees

256 one-on-one writer consultations

Where our writers and partners come from

In 2022, Varuna attracted writers from all around the country to attend both in-person residencies and online masterclasses. As we come out of the harshest restrictions of the pandemic, writers are enthusiastically returning to Varuna from right around Australia.

Writers participating in residencies or masterclasses in 2022



In 2022, Varuna collaborated with 29 different artistic organisations and publishers from around the world to deliver our programs'

Our program partners



International

- Cove Park (Scotland)
- Edinburgh International Book Festival (Scotland)
- Tyrone Guthrie Centre (Ireland)
- Poetry Ireland (Ireland)
- Irish Writers' Centre (Ireland)
- Michael King Writers' Centre (NZ)
- Verb Wellington (NZ)
- Write on, Door County (USA)
- Shanghai Writers Association (China)

Case study: Luke Patterson



Luke Patterson is a poet, musician and Gamilaroi man whose poetry has appeared in *Cordite*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *Rabbit*, *Running Dog* and *The Suburban Review*. His first involvement with Varuna was a 10-week online poetry masterclass with Felicity Plunkett in early 2022.

Since then, Luke has had the opportunity to participate in various programs and residencies that he sees as instrumental in the development of his writing and his career as a poet. These experiences have included a residency with The Next Chapter program in collaboration with The Wheeler Centre, an in-person week-long masterclass intensive with Tony Birch, a First Nations Fellowship residency, and a Varuna Residential Fellowship.

“During the First Nations Residency, I received valuable feedback from Indigenous peers that helped me refine my manuscript in a culturally grounded way that would have otherwise taken months to acquire. I am currently in the middle of a Varuna Residential Fellowship, and I have already received invaluable advice on the more practical and grittier aspects of writing such as acquiring an agent, submitting to publishers, and promoting my work.”

These programs have opened doors to several professional outcomes for Luke. The poem “Dark Arts (a Psychodrama)” which Luke wrote and workshopped during Plunkett’s masterclass was shortlisted for the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Prize, and the poem “Old Man Banksia” which was written during Birch’s residency was published as part of the NSW Botanical Garden’s Herbarium Tales Project and later became a short film funded by AIATSIS.

Additionally, Luke established a friendship with fellow participant Sarah Stevens who invited Luke to join the editorial committee for *Sunder* – an online poetry journal for d/Deaf, disabled, and chronically ill creators.

“Finally, I want to highlight Varuna’s commitment to engaging with local Indigenous knowledge holders. During my visits at Varuna, I have observed staff demonstrate a deep love and respect for these community members, and this sentiment has been reciprocated by the knowledge holders themselves. This relationship between Varuna and local Indigenous communities is of utmost importance to me, as it represents a cultural exchange that goes beyond writing and provides a safe space for meaningful connection.”

Case study: Felicity Plunkett



Felicity describes her first experience with Varuna in 2000 – the opportunity to be part of a poetry mentorship with Dorothy Porter – as one of the most formative and rich experiences in her career as a writer. As for many writers, Felicity found that the opportunities offered from Varuna would create a long-lasting impact.

Felicity was one of the first presenters of Varuna’s 10-week online masterclass series. After a decade as Poetry Editor with University of Queensland Press and a period of demanding face-to-face teaching in schools and universities, Felicity wanted to work more closely with writers, responding to their particular interests and needs.

Felicity’s masterclass became a series filled with exceptional poets, many of whom for reasons of location (Shanghai, rural Australia etc) and disability would otherwise be unable to access such intimate, supportive spaces. Their superb resulting work has won prizes and achieved publication. Simone King wrote, workshopped and developed her first prose poem, which then won the prestigious Blake Poetry Prize. Aiden Hueng (Qiushi Xiang), a self-taught LGBTQI poet living in Shanghai who began learning English at 12, recently published a slew of poems in UK and US anthologies. Luke Patterson’s poem was shortlisted for the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Prize.

“For me, to craft courses independently from my several decades of experience as an academic, poet and critic has been expansive and exhilarating. In the most practical sense, the security of income from this pandemic-proof work has made life easier. As a result, I’ve never written more. I love my relationship with the creative, supportive Varuna community, so crucial to Australian literary culture.”

Case study: George Haddad



George Haddad is an award-winning writer and artist from Western Sydney whose work explores masculinities and the limitations of language in communicating truths. His novel *Losing Face* was published by UQP in 2022.

In 2021 and 2022, George developed and facilitated two online writing courses for Varuna that he describes as being highlights of his teaching and writing career. These subsidised courses welcomed two groups of eight LGBTQIA+ writers to work with George for a period of ten weeks to develop new work.

George was also a presenter at the 2022 Blue Mountains Writers’ Festival, in a sold out session with Rick Morton. His debut novel, *Losing Face*, also sold out over the course of the weekend, and was the highest selling single title of the whole Festival.

“I genuinely had more signings and audience interactions compared to the Sydney Writers’ Festival earlier in the year. There was a sincere interest in my work and what I had to say. The variety and diversity of not only the writers and speakers, but the nature of the events themselves was astounding. The way that the events unfolded and the coordination of the weekend was impeccable, seamless, and designed so that the writers and presenters were at its heart. The backdrop, the energy, the management, and most importantly the Varuna folk, make for a unique and nourishing festival that celebrates and rewards writers.”

Nurturing First Nations writing

65

First Nations writers submitted fellowship applications

30

First Nations writers attended an in-person residency at Varuna

16

First Nations writers received professional fee income from Varuna

7

First Nations writers attended a ten-week online masterclass

4

First Nations writers attended an in-person masterclass intensive

11

First Nations writers presented at the Blue Mountains Writers' Festival

Facts and figures don't properly represent the gradual but significant change that has been happening at Varuna over the last five years. Growing our First Nations programs has been an iterative process of listening, asking questions, experimenting with programs, asking more questions, and letting meaningful programs evolve.

In 2022, we not only ran the fifth year of our First Nations fellowship, welcoming six First Nations writers to a week's residency at Varuna, but we also ran two week-long residencies specifically for First Nations alumni. Welcoming back First Nations writers who had been awarded fellowships in previous years meant reconnecting and finding new ways to support developing work.

Ellen van Neerven ran our first ten-week online masterclass for six First Nations writers, a program that was so successful it ended up running twice. Tony Birch facilitated a week-long in-person *Writing on Country* masterclass intensive.

2022 culminated in our Blue Mountains Writers' Festival, where 23% of festival events featured First Nations writers, including author sessions, kids' events, Darug language workshops, and a spellbinding event with Nardi Simpson telling stories and singing in a cable car suspended over the Jamieson Valley.

Our Reconciliation Action Plan, and Caring for Gundungurra and Darug Country

In 2022, Varuna completed the first stage of our Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan, and formed our First Nations Working Action Group. Led by Board member and Indigenous man Peter Minter, and then by Board member and Bundjalung woman Charmaine Ledden-Lewis, the Working Action Group met throughout the year to explore our vision for reconciliation and to deepen relationships with community. We are now ready to move on to the Innovate stage for this plan.

In collaboration with Gundungurra man David King, Varuna has developed a large, centrally-located bush tucker garden, as well as establishing a bush regeneration volunteer group on-site.

Creating audiences and opportunities for writers



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7,628
sessions attended
(compared to 2,593 in 2019)

52%
were first-time visitors to
the Festival



43
author sessions

10
livestream events and
1 live broadcast

7
writing workshops and
2 language workshops

2
sessions in the cable-car
at Scenic World

82
speakers



Audience satisfaction

97%
would recommend the
Festival to a friend (compared
to 93% in 2019, and 82% in
a recent Melbourne Writers'
Festival survey)

88%
agreed or strongly agreed
that their Festival Pass was
good value for money

89%
agreed or strongly agreed
that the Festival was broad
and inclusive

"I loved everything!!! The diversity of authors across cultures and queer community, privileging First Nations voices in both authors and facilitators. Well organised, warm atmosphere, community." – Audience survey

"The children's events were fun and really personal. The children got to spend time chatting with the authors." – Audience survey

Advocating for diverse voices

Writers
with
disability

143

writers with disability
submitted fellowship
applications

27

writers with disability
attended an in-person
residency at Varuna

11

writers with disability
attended a ten-week online
masterclass

9

writers with disability
received professional fee
income from Varuna

Culturally
diverse
writers

162

culturally diverse writers
submitted fellowship
applications

65

culturally diverse writers
attended an in-person
residency at Varuna

15

culturally diverse writers
received professional fee
income from Varuna

12

culturally diverse writers
attended a ten-week online
masterclass

Our Disability Inclusion Action Group

Varuna's Disability Inclusion Action Group continued to meet throughout 2022. Comprising three writers with disability and a Board member, this expert panel advises Varuna staff on the delivery of our Disability Inclusion Action Plan, and on ways to make our residencies and events as accessible and inclusive as possible.



“The opportunity to network was invaluable, as well as the more intimate, unique and reassuring discussions about writing and living with a disability.” – Micheline Lee

Summarised Financial Statements

The Eleanor Dark Foundation Limited
T/A Varuna The National Writers' House
Statement of Profit or Loss and Other Comprehensive Income
For the Financial Year Ended 31 December 2022

	2022 \$	2021 \$
Revenue		
Revenue from contracts with customers	948,462	690,012
Other income	37,118	69,014
Total revenue	985,580	759,026
Expenses		
Administration	(70,057)	(80,797)
Depreciation	(13,498)	(12,678)
Employee benefits	(370,996)	(371,501)
Facility expenses	(73,215)	(88,899)
Program and fellowship expenses	(390,097)	(222,546)
Total expenses	(917,863)	(776,421)
Surplus/(deficit) for the year	67,717	(17,395)
Income tax expense	-	-
Surplus/(deficit) after income tax	67,717	(17,395)
Other comprehensive income	-	-
Total comprehensive income/(loss)	67,717	(17,395)

Summarised Financial Statements (continued)

The Eleanor Dark Foundation Limited
T/A Varuna The National Writers' House
Statement of Financial Position
As at 31 December 2022

	2022 \$	2021 \$
Assets		
Current		
Cash and cash equivalents	572,960	641,019
Trade and other receivables	13,016	5,053
Other assets	14,928	13,049
Current assets	600,904	659,121
Non-current		
Property, plant and equipment	1,942,689	1,942,743
Non-current assets	1,942,689	1,942,743
Total assets	2,543,593	2,601,864
Liabilities		
Current		
Trade and other payables	31,652	36,182
Provisions	23,936	57,655
Other liabilities	206,293	308,347
Current liabilities	261,881	402,184
Non-current		
Provisions	22,597	8,282
Non-current liabilities	22,597	8,282
Total liabilities	284,478	410,466
Net assets	2,259,115	2,191,398
Equity		
Reserves	1,433,728	1,433,728
Retained earnings	825,387	757,670
Total equity	2,259,115	2,191,398

Summarised Financial Statements (continued)

The Eleanor Dark Foundation Limited
T/A Varuna The National Writers' House
Statement of Changes in Equity
For the Financial Year Ended 31 December 2022

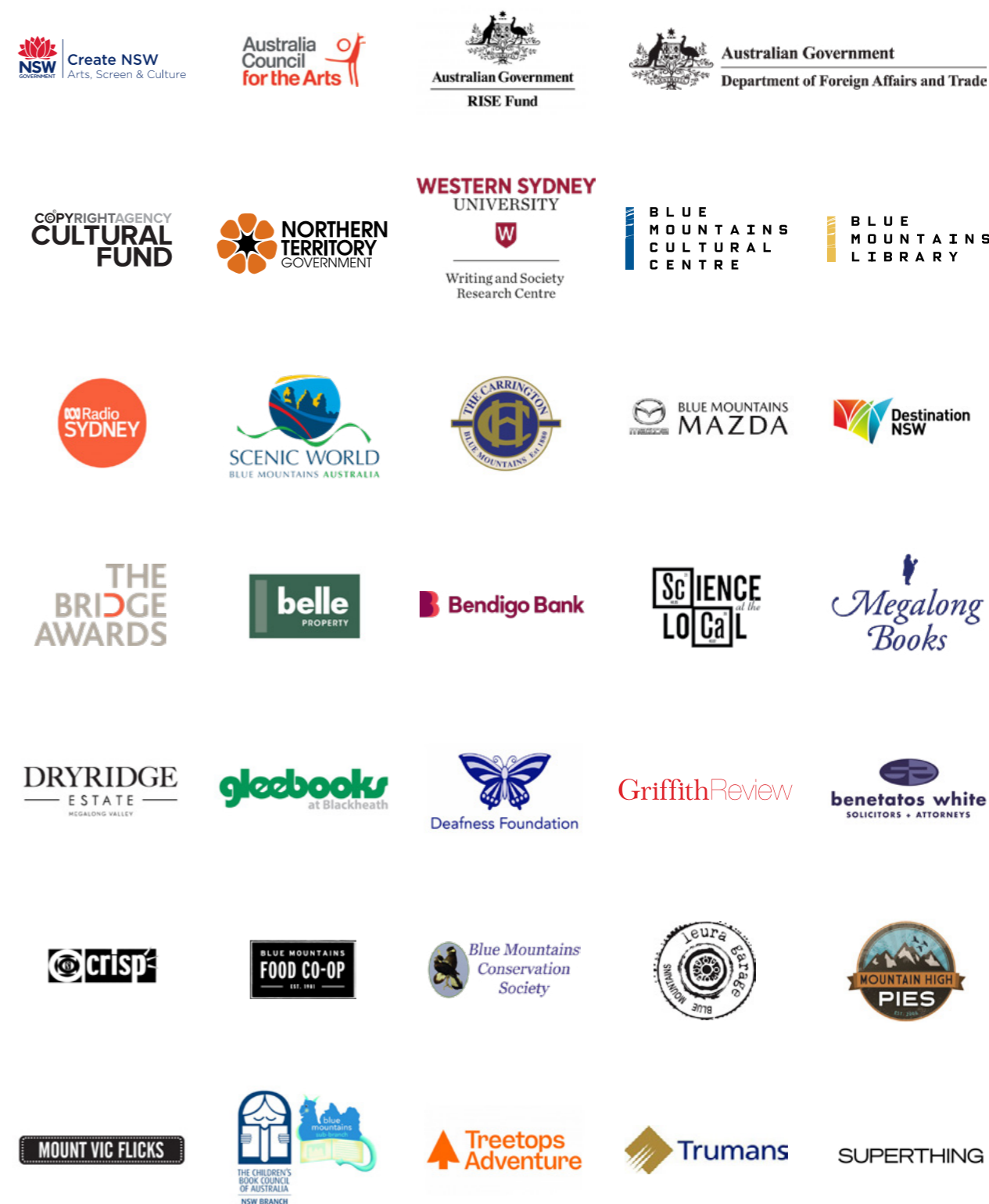
	Accumulated Funds \$	Asset Revaluation Reserve \$	Building and Maintenance Reserve \$	Total Equity \$
Balance at 1 January 2021	775,065	1,388,728	45,000	2,208,793
Deficit for the year	(17,395)	-	-	(17,395)
Other comprehensive income	-	-	-	-
Total comprehensive loss	(17,395)	-	-	(17,395)
Balance at 31 December 2021	757,670	1,388,728	45,000	2,191,398
Balance at 1 January 2022	757,670	1,388,728	45,000	2,191,398
Surplus for the year	67,717	-	-	67,717
Other comprehensive income	-	-	-	-
Total comprehensive income	67,717	-	-	67,717
Balance at 31 December 2022	825,387	1,388,728	45,000	2,259,115

The Eleanor Dark Foundation Limited
T/A Varuna The National Writers' House
Statement of Cash Flows
For the Financial Year Ended 31 December 2022

	2022 \$	2021 \$
Cash flows from operating activities		
Receipts from appropriations/grants	430,288	570,212
Receipts from customers	448,305	241,423
Receipts from government stimulus	-	72,761
Receipts from donors, fundraising and bequests	35,075	7,240
Receipts from sponsors	49,949	2,080
Payments to suppliers and employees	(1,020,118)	(810,405)
Interest received	1,886	1,527
Net cash (used in)/provided by operating activities	(54,615)	84,838
Cash flows from investing activities		
Payments for property, plant and equipment	(13,444)	(17,845)
Net cash used in investing activities	(13,444)	(17,845)
Cash flows from financing activities		
Net cash provided by financing activities	-	-
Net change in cash and cash equivalents	(68,059)	66,993
Cash and cash equivalents at beginning of financial year	641,019	574,026
Cash and cash equivalents at end of financial year	572,960	641,019

Our Sponsors and Funders

Thank you to Create NSW and the Australia Council for the Arts who provide the core funding so essential to the ongoing support of Australian writers. Thank you also to the Australian Government RISE Fund, Copyright Agency Cultural Fund, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Northern Territory Government, and Western Sydney University, and to our many generous sponsors and donors.





Writing Country Masterclass participants Melanie Seward, Sharlene Allsopp and Luke Patterson

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