



What our audience said...

Thank you to the RAWA team for allowing me to experience such a lovely festival. I had a wonderful time... I am in awe of the talent we have in NZ and it has inspired me to keep writing.

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RAWA ...it just gets better and better! What a line up of speakers. It was amazing how the quality was maintained from start to finish and not a single less than impressive contributor. Some were breathtaking like Michael Bennett on Saturday and Shehan Karunatilaka and Tina Makereti on Sunday. Friends who attended different events to me were equally blown over.

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I loved the mix of locals
Joe Bennett's workshop was an inspiring experience! Joe is such a gifted teacher and we all enjoyed his wit and generosity, his breadth and depth and humanity. With all warmest wishes and congratulations for a wonderful literary festival!

RAWA

Final Festival Report 2026



The RAWA festival is a small, friendly and varied literary event that celebrates all things bookish. It aims to enhance literary values, skills and experiences within a rural region previously underserved for this art form. It attracts a high calibre of established authors from across Aotearoa, underpinning a rich festival programme of multiple genres and delivery formats. A distinguishing feature of RAWA has been its support of writers, including young writers, providing skills-based learning and experimental opportunities. It seeks funding from like-minded agencies and groups to further these aims. Again in 2026, RAWA fellowships provided full access to the RAWA experience, and also a RAWA Flash Fiction Prize that both celebrates and supports New Zealand writing. In 2026, this included an additional prize for young writers. RAWA is committed to continuing and developing this support, engaging readers and writers from diverse backgrounds and experience. Our vision for the future is a thriving, multi-generational literary culture in Te Pātaka o Rākaihautū Banks Peninsula, raising the mana, skills and expertise, social connections, and economic well-being for our regional literary hub.

The 2026 festival was joyful and stimulating on so many levels. Friday night's open mic curtain-raiser thrilled a lively audience. From Kenny Brown's moving mihi whakatau to Kate de Goldi's rallying call to arms in the final session, presenters spoke in awe-inspiring ways of truth and beauty, the splendour of our mountains, and the power of literature to change lives. Enthusiastic festival goers filled Akaroa's streets, motels and even the harbour. But perhaps more importantly, our imaginative cups were filled to overflowing. Many thanks to everyone who came, listened and helped. In the words of one participant, 'RAWA is here to stay'.

RAWA

READERS AND WRITERS AKAROA

6-8 March 2026
Programme

Friday 6 March

Matariki Center, Akaroa School

10am - 5pm Storytelling for Film - A Bootcamp
with Michael Bennett

Akaroa Area School

10am - 3pm Inspiring Young Readers and Writers
with Gavin Bishop and Ross Calman

The Madeira Hotel, Akaroa

8pm Open Mic Poetry Night - All Welcome
hosted by Ray Shipley

Saturday 7th March

Gaiety Hall

8.30-9am - Registration

9-10.30am Mihi whakatau and Welcome
Festival Opening - Story-telling by Word, Image and Song
Ariana Tikao, Michael Bennett, Ross Calman and Nic Low

10.30-11am morning tea

12-1pm Lunch break

Gaiety Hall	Matariki Centre 3	Parallel Workshops
1-2.45pm Poetry makes nothing happen - should it? Ariana Tikao, Isla Huia, Ray Shipley and Nic Low, chaired by Joanna Preston	1-1.45pm Stories of the Peninsula Ant Bentley, John Curry and Marie Connolly in conversation with Morrin Rout	1-2.45pm The Memoir with Joe Bennett
	2-2.45pm Meeting the Ancestor on the Road: personal, cultural and historical essays Tina Makereti with Jane Stafford	1-2.45pm Short Fiction to Die For with Vanda Symon
		1-2.45pm The Craft of Fiction with Damien Wilkins

2.45-3.15pm afternoon tea

Gaiety Hall	Matariki Centre 3
3.15-4pm The South Island novels of Laurence Fearnley Laurence Fearnley in conversation with Jane Stafford	3.15-4pm Driving New Zealand's Organic Movement - the life of Bob Crowder Matt Morris in conversation with Robyn Peers

Gaiety Hall

4.15-5pm This Writing Life
[Joe Bennett](#)

5.15-6pm RAWA's CRIME BOOK CLUBS

Matariki 1	Matariki 2	Matariki 3
Michael Bennett , <i>Carved in Blood</i> facilitated by Steph Walker	Vanda Symon , <i>Prey</i> facilitated by Fae Jay	Liam McIlvanney , <i>The Good Father</i> facilitated by Marie Connolly

7pm - Festival dinner at The Gaiety Hall

Dinner Speaker: [Steve Braunias](#)

Our programme

For a relatively small and intimate festival, RAWA's programme is ambitious, including a diverse mix of genre, both fiction and non-fiction. In 2026, the festival introduced the highly successful Open Mic Poetry on Friday evening, RAWA's new school programme, and on Saturday our first RAWA Crime Book Clubs.

Sunday 8 March

Gaiety Hall

8.30-9.30 Shehan Karunatilaka and Jane Stafford
Winning the Booker Prize

9.30-10.30am Keynote
Awe: the miraculous and mysterious in writing - Tina Makereti

11-12pm Lives of Crime
Vanda Symon and Liam McIlvanney in conversation with Kate de Goldi

12-1pm Lunch break

Gaiety Hall	Matariki Centre 3	Parallel workshops
1-1.45pm Mountain Writing: The Pleasure of Researching and Editing an Anthology Laurence Fearnley, chaired by Morrin Rout	1-1.45pm New Novels, New Conversations Coleen Clare, Wendy Parkins and Heather McQuillan in conversation with Robyn Peers	1-2.45pm Sonnets will not Bite You Joanna Preston
		1-2.45pm Generating Sharp Fictional Prose Josiah Morgan
2-2.45pm Te Araroa from South to North Naomi Arnold in conversation with Liana Ashenden	2-2.45pm Southern Tales Owen Marshall and Dan Smith in conversation with Jane Stafford	1-2.45pm The Story is Wiser Than Us Tina Makereti

2.45-3.15pm afternoon tea

Gaiety Hall	Matariki Centre 3
3.15-4pm Mountain Ranging Andy Buchanan and Nic Low in conversation with Morrin Rout	3.15-4pm Submitting work for publication Isla Huia and Josiah Morgan

Gaiety Hall

4.15-4.45pm RAWA 2026 Awards, introduced by Melanie Dixon and presented by Owen Marshall

4.45-5.15pm Closing Address:
Readers and Writers in Aotearoa - Are we in good heart?
Kate de Goldi

Our spectacular speakers, ambassadors and chairs...

RAWA 2026 brought a spectacular line up of speakers to Akaroa, thrilling the audience and creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere.





What our participants said...

As usual, the RAWA leapt over the high bar in terms of festival performance and delivery. This RAWA delivered another inspiring festival for writers and readers, and in such a charming location. The line-up was great, the readers were enthusiastic, and the food and beverage was superb. RAWA's appeal extends beyond writing and reading to Akaroa and environs. Not only were we drawn to the festival, but my husband and I toured the shops and emptied our wallets! All credit to RAWA's dedicated organising team for giving readers and writers an indelibly memorable experience. More please!

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I loved the mix of locals and guests from afar - we have great talent here too and other festivals don't always recognise that. Great to have some younger presenters- mostly poets- and to have the kids attending- showing that NZ literature is in good hands.

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You attracted an amazing range of writers - please keep going!

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RAWA runs like a well-oiled machine - well done!

Our survey results

Thirty-five percent of our participants responded to the RAWA survey. Overall feedback is extremely positive - people loved RAWA 2026, rated venues and programme highly, and overall they want us to keep the current shape and timing with only modest tweaks.

Who responded and what they came for

- The majority registered for a 2-day pass.
- Most heard of the festival via email.
- Respondents are roughly split between "Reader" and "Both", with a smaller number identifying primarily as "Writer".

Programme content and strands

- The dominant message - the majority is happy with the format we have, with fiction, poetry and literary nonfiction working well.
- When extra nonfiction is mentioned, people suggested interest in history, politics, biographies, science, art and sport.
- Many praise having two strands and the choice between fiction and nonfiction, although some were challenged by having to choose, preferring a single combined stream, with workshops in parallel. At the same time, several attendees enjoyed stretching themselves by going to sessions outside their usual interests, which they only did because of the need to choose.

Venues and timings

- Gaiety Hall is very well liked for atmosphere, acoustics and it's good outdoor space. The Matariki Centre is considered positively, although initially hard to find. The Coronation Library was found "charming" and "special", though a number did not get there.
- Strong preference for Autumn (March/April).

What people liked most

- The "vibe": warm, friendly, intimate, collegial, with writers mingling freely with readers.
- High calibre and variety of speakers, strong interviewing, excellent workshops, crime writing focus, and mountain theme.
- Inclusion of young writers, children, local writers, and Māori authors/Te Reo content.
- Our organisation, with special mention of volunteers, food, morning teas and dinner.
- Being exceptionally welcomed and supported.

Suggestions for future RAWA festivals

- More crime writers; memoir sessions; young adult content and fiction masterclass; more workshops; some science writing; sport writing; more audience participation and readings beyond the single open mic.
- Real coffee during breaks; better way-finding to Matariki;
- And a number of helpful suggestions about food and festival organisation that we'll be sure to consider for 2028!

Overall...

Overall enjoyment is overwhelmingly "Loved it"

Kate de Goldi, Te Awhi Rito New Zealand Reading Ambassador

"The utopia would be that our message reaches parents and they read to their children... Parents reading to their children for the share pleasure of reading is a critical first step.

This would then be built on by schools having a committed reading culture...Developing strong schools cultures of reading and reading aloud."

(Akaroa Mail, March 2026)

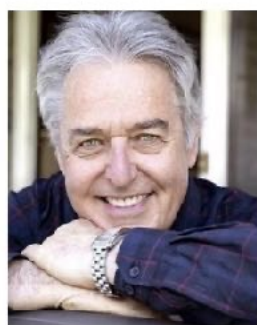


Kate de Goldi's closing address at the festival was a call to arms for everyone to help strengthen reading cultures for our young people in Aotearoa.

Our New School Programme



RAWA is deeply committed to nurturing the next generation of readers and writers, and the new school project brought highly acclaimed writers Gavin Bishop and Ross Calman to work with young aspiring writers from Banks Peninsula. Melanie Dixon, Director of the Hagley Writers Institute and renowned writer of young persons' fiction, prepared the students prior to the festival and the Orion Powerhouse Gallery contributed funding to enable the new initiative to influence lives in joyful and meaningful ways.



Feedback from our fellows...

"I just wanted to say thank you to you and the other organisers for a wonderful festival... I had a wonderful time, and made new friends that I otherwise wouldn't have met if not for being brought to RAWA. As a single mum, it would have been nigh impossible for me to make it down otherwise, so thank you again for the opportunity. I hope to come along again some time in the future, as RAWA is a really welcoming and special festival with a vibe all of its own!"

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"I returned home with wonderful encounters with fellow writers, many new ideas, and vivid memories of the late summer sun on Akaroa harbour."

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"My heart is full and my head is too!"



Our RAWA Fellowship Schemes

In 2024, the Gough Family Foundation supported ten RAWA inaugural young writer fellowships, and we were delighted that they did so again in 2026. The fellowships enabled another ten young people from Write-On to enjoy the full RAWA experience, including their accommodation in Akaroa and a place at the festival dinner. The young writers brought a wonderful vibrancy to the festival, seen here with the Director of Write-On, Heather McQuillan.



Funding the adult scheme proved more challenging in 2026 and so we have been particularly humbled by the individual donations we received through our newly established 'Friends of RAWA' scheme. The Friends generosity enabled us to offer five adult fellowships to writers who would have otherwise been unable to attend.

Our RAWA Flash Fiction Awards

Bayleys Akaroa sponsored the inaugural Flash Fiction Prize in 2024 and again in 2026, making it one of the most generous prizes of flash fiction in Aotearoa. This year Bayleys extended their sponsorship to include a young writers prize category.

Elizabeth Steel won the Open prize for the Flash Fiction Award in 2026 with: *Centrally Located But Not Worth The Tourist*. And Zoe Deans took second prize with her entry: *What I Saw From The Train*.

In the Young Writer RAWA Flash Fiction category, first prize went to Sabrina Li for her entry: *Red String Theory: To The Moon And The Stars*, and Naomi Roberts took second prize for: *Life Is A Journey, Yes, But My Car Is Out Of Fuel*. Congratulations to our winners whose work will also appear in *The Quick Brown Dog*, a journal of the Hagley Writers' Institute.

We are grateful to the judge of the RAWA prizes, Melanie Dixon from the Hagley Writers' Institute and to RAWA's patron, Owen Marshall, for awarding the prizes.

Our Sponsors...without the generosity of our sponsors there would be no RAWA... A big THANK YOU!

This year we had support for a number of special projects, for example, our Young Writers Fellowship scheme was funded again by the Gough Family Foundation. It is the second time the foundation has enabled ten young writers to attend the festival - a clear commitment to supporting the next generation of writers in Aotearoa. Thanks also to the *Friends of RAWA*, a group of individuals who made donations that enabled us to offer five fellowships to adult writers, and also supported Michael Bennett's workshop focused on the image and the word.



Bayleys in Akaroa supported our Flash Fiction Prize again this year, and added a second a young writer category. This provided the opportunity for all young writers attending the festival to enter their first major writing competition.



Chris Mangels
YOUR AKAROA SPECIALIST

The Orion Powerhouse Gallery has been a strong supporter of RAWA since the beginning, and in 2026 the gallery generously supported RAWA's inaugural School Programme which brought award-winning authors Gavin Bishop, Ross Calman and Melanie Dixon to Akaroa to work with students from across Banks Peninsula.



The Akaroa Waterfront Motel sponsored accommodation for a number of our speakers, the The Akaroa and the Bays Lions generously contributed to the cost of hiring RAWA venues.



Another great supporter of RAWA has been Booksellers and Bookhub, who provided the many book token prizes across the RAWA weekend.



Christchurch city Council have also been a strong supporter of the festival demonstrating its deep commitment to sponsoring local events.

A new partnership in 2026 saw KŌAWA Studios at the University of Canterbury sponsor the RAWA festival, particularly supporting RAWA's interest in the theme, the Image and the Word.



AKAROA
KING SALMON

Despite the strong local support we had for the festival in 2026, the newness of the RAWA Charitable Trust meant that we were ineligible to apply for many funding schemes. We are deeply grateful to Akaroa King Salmon who saved our bacon (henceforth, 'saved our salmon') with the financial support needed to get us over the line.

In addition to our sponsors, RAWA could not have succeeded without all the efforts of our volunteers who worked tirelessly before, during and after the festival - and also the community groups that contributed their time and resources. A BIG thank you!

RAWA TRUSTEES AND VOLUNTEERS



Marie Connolly is a writer of fiction and non-fiction living in Akaroa. Her academic published work focuses on child welfare and child protection systems and she has also published a series of children's stories. Her first crime novel, *Dark Sky*, was published by Quentin Wilson Publishing in 2024. In 2025 her new book, *The Orion Powerhouse Gallery Akaroa: A Half Century of Art*, was published by the Orion Art Gallery. Marie's published work can be found here: marieconnolly.co.uk. She chairs the RAWA board of Trustees.

Liana Ashenden is a writer and artist living in the ancient volcanoes of Te Pātaka-o-Rākauhau/Banks Peninsula. With a PhD in English Literature and a BSc in Physiology, her writing blends the esoteric and domestic. You can find her work at Rei Gallery, in journals such as *Flash Frontier*, *Flash Frog*, and *At The Bay*, and on Instagram @swampmoa. She is a Trustee on the RAWA board.



Clare Corban-Banks is a professional classical musician with a latent interest in words. Completing a Diploma in Editing she worked as a freelance editor and has dabbled in writing and self-publishing. She is currently publishing a children's book and writing an historical novel. Clare is the Secretary and a Trustee on the RAWA board.

Brigid Rennell is a writer living in Barrys Bay. She is a regular contributor to The Akaroa Mail and when not writing can usually be found reading with a cup of tea. She has a BA in English Literature and History and has had careers in Performing Arts, Education, Hospitality and Events Management. She loves words and their ability to impact people's lives. Brigid is a RAWA Trustee.



Lynda Wallace has enjoyed a long career in heritage and museum management. As a resident of Akaroa she is an enthusiastic contributor to many community organisations and events. She was an inaugural winner in the RAWA Flash Fiction Prize in 2024. Lynda is a RAWA Trustee.



Julie Whitmore is a self employed professional accounts person with a background in retail and commercial banking, and operations and finance management. She lives in Akaroa on a lifestyle property and gardening is her passion. Julie is RAWA's Treasurer.



Nicole Locke is a writer from the UK with a Master's degree in Playwriting and Screenwriting. She is currently working on a new comedy horror play, inspired by her time in New Zealand, which she aims to have produced this year. Nicole is RAWA's social media expert and heads our communications.

Rebekah Proffit is a high school teacher in Ashburton and mum of three young children. She has a BA in English Literature and Religious Studies, and has been teaching for almost 10 years. Alongside teaching, she also runs her own [Virtual Assistant Business](#). Rebekah is RAWA's website developer.



Memories... thanks to everyone for making RAWA such a success



RAWA's KEY MILESTONES:

2023

- First RAWA festival

2024

- Creates non-fiction strand
- Begins writer Fellowship Schemes
- First RAWA Flash Fiction prize
- Establishes RAWA Charitable Trust

2026

- Introduces Open Mic Poetry
- Adds Young Writer category to RAWA Flash Fiction prize
- Creates School Project
- Establishes Friends of RAWA