Upstart Crow, Inc.

Media Coverage & Organizational Overview

About Upstart Crow

Upstart Crow, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in Northern Virginia, dedicated to promoting books, literacy, and cultural appreciation through podcasts, public forums, and educational initiatives. Founded by Jennifer L. Disano (President & CEO), with co-hosts Ken Budd and William Miller, the organization produces the literary podcast *Upstart Crow* in affiliation with Watershed Lit Radio and the broader literary community at George Mason University. The podcast features in-depth conversations with authors, historians, and cultural figures. It explores the craft of writing, the ideas behind books, and the role of literature in community life. Episodes are available at upstartcrow.org and on major podcast platforms.

In the News: Connection Newspapers

Burke / Fairfax / Fairfax Station / Clifton / Lorton / Springfield Edition — November 5–18, 2026

Upstart Crow and Fairfax County Public Library Open Free Virtual Author Series Upstart Crow, Inc. and Fairfax County Public Library present free virtual author conversations. The programs are online, open to the public, and sponsored by the library. Registration is available through the Fairfax County Public Library calendar. A link to join is sent to registrants. Each program runs from 6:30 to 7:45 p.m. The series has featured: • Valerie Tripp, author of the “American Girl” stories of Felicity, Josefina, Kit, Molly, and Maryellen, with Jennifer Disano • Jane Kamensky, president and CEO of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, on “Declare: A Civic Gospel,” with Ken Budd • Lois Romano on her New York Times bestseller “An Inconvenient Widow: The Torment, Trial, and Triumph of Mary Todd Lincoln,” with William Miller • Shubha Sunder on her novel *Optional Practical Training* (Graywolf Press), with William Miller. Sunder is a recipient of the 2025 Whiting Award and the 2025 New American Voices Award. All conversations are also released as episodes of the Upstart Crow podcast, affiliated with Watershed Lit Radio at George Mason University. “People keep saying the book is dead. Come to Fairfax County,” said Jennifer Disano, president and CEO of Upstart Crow. “We have book clubs; writing communities; Watershed Lit at George Mason; Fall for the Book, a major literary festival now in its 28th year; and the New American Voices Award, founded with George Mason’s Institute for Immigration Research to recognize books by immigrant and first-generation writers. Learn more at upstartcrow.org.”

In the News: George Mason University English Department

“An interview with Upstart Crow” — December 8, 2025

The English Department at George Mason University interviewed the hosts of *Upstart Crow*—William Miller, Ken Budd, and Jennifer Disano. The podcast is affiliated with Watershed Lit Radio. Disano, former executive director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute and a member of the Fall for the Book board, originated the idea and recruited Budd (a Mason alumnus and freelance writer) and Miller (a longtime journalist and former Mason English professor who helped start Fall for the Book). The interviews center on books and their writers, exploring how authors practice their craft and the challenges they face. Below are selected excerpts from the conversation.

On the relationship with Watershed Lit and the Cheuse Center

Jennifer Disano: "*Upstart Crow* was born out of an appreciation that we share for both writers and readers. Watershed Lit is the perfect platform for our podcast collaboration, as we are all connected at Mason through our professional and volunteer roles and share the desire to champion literacy, history, culture, community, and the literary arts." **On the distinction from the Fall for the Book podcast**

Ken Budd: "The focus there is on writers who participate in the festival or who want to participate. Though we have had a couple of guests who also appeared on the Fall for the Book podcast, the *Upstart Crow* podcast is not limited to writers who are connected to the festival. We like to explore freely… The world of books is so varied. We like making *Upstart Crow* as open and broadly focused as books are." **On serving the Mason community and beyond**

William Miller: "We do see *Upstart Crow* as a conduit of sorts—letting the world know about the books coming out by Mason people as well as letting the world beyond Mason know about the larger global goings-on in publishing… Ideally, people will glean an idea or get a creative spark from listening to *Upstart Crow* and will benefit from it but also will go get the book the episode was about and read it." **On memorable moments from guests**

Jennifer Disano recalled curator Paula Johnson's emphasis on careful listening. Ken Budd spoke of the courage and vulnerability in memoirist Scott Strode's work. William Miller noted that the conversations continually expand his sense of how knowledge, history, and perspective are constructed. The full interview is available at english.gmu.edu.

Origin Story

The name “Upstart Crow” comes from a 1592 pamphlet by the dramatist Robert Greene, who called Shakespeare “an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers.” The phrase has a rich literary history involving debates about authorship, ambition, and the borrowing of ideas—threads that continue in fiction, plays, and even a modern BBC series. The three founders chose the name because of that backstory and because they see themselves, in some ways, as upstart crows. The initial idea belonged to Jennifer Disano. She recruited Ken Budd, a Mason alumnus, freelance writer, and author of the memoir *The Voluntourist*, and William Miller, a former journalist and longtime English professor at Mason who directed the creative writing program and helped start Fall for the Book. Their goal is to offer interviews and presentations centered on books and their writers—conversations that probe the craft of writing, the challenges authors face, and the ideas that shape their work. The aim is to inform and inspire listeners to explore books more fully.

Leadership

Jennifer L. Disano — President & CEO

Jennifer L. Disano is a nonprofit executive and advocate for literacy and cultural programming. She is the co-founder and President & CEO of Upstart Crow, Inc., and originated and co-hosts the *Upstart Crow* podcast. From 2013 to 2025 she served as Executive Director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at George Mason University, where she expanded educational programs and volunteer engagement. She has chaired the Fall for the Book Festival, co-created the New American Voices Literary Award, and served as Vice Chair of the Fairfax Library Foundation. She continues to serve on the Fall for the Book board. She holds a Master’s degree in Psychology from Penn State University and a Bachelor’s degree in Geography from California State University, East Bay. Her work has been recognized with the Arts Fairfax Education Award, the Town and Gown Legacy Award, and the Volunteer Fairfax Adult Services Award.

Ken Budd — Secretary

Ken Budd is a writer whose work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Smithsonian*, and many other publications. His *Washington Post Magazine* story was selected for *The Best American Travel Writing*. He spent 15 years as an editor at *AARP The Magazine* and is the author of the memoir *The Voluntourist*. He chairs the Fall for the Book festival and has appeared on numerous national television and radio programs.

William Miller — Vice President & Treasurer

William Miller chairs the advisory board of the Alan Cheuse International Writers Center, serves as Vice Chair of the Fall for the Book festival, and is an advisor to the Watershed Lit center at George Mason University. He directed Mason’s creative writing program for more than two dozen years and taught in the English Department for more than thirty years. He previously worked as a newspaper journalist and has published fiction and nonfiction.

Partnerships & Community Programs

Fairfax County Public Library

Upstart Crow partners with Fairfax County Public Library on free virtual author series and on the annual Local Author Festival. Recent series have included conversations with Lois Romano, Shubha Sunder, Valerie Tripp, and Jane Kamensky. In 2025, Jennifer Disano recorded a special episode at the Fairfax Regional Library's Local Author Festival, featuring interviews with 16 local authors. These collaborations expand access to literary conversations and support community reading and writing.

StoryWorx at the Workhouse Arts Center

Upstart Crow collaborates with the Workhouse Arts Center in Lorton through the StoryWorx Book Festival. The partnership includes live podcast programming as part of the festival's celebration of authors, poetry, workshops, and community storytelling.

Fall for the Book

Upstart Crow's leadership is closely connected with Fall for the Book, Northern Virginia's longest-running literary festival and a key part of the Watershed Lit ecosystem at George Mason University. Jennifer Disano serves on the festival board, Ken Budd chairs it, and William Miller helped found it and serves as Vice Chair. The organizations offer complementary programming that strengthens the regional literary community.

Bards Alley Bookshop

Upstart Crow collaborates with Bards Alley, the independent bookstore in Vienna, Virginia. The partnership supports local author visibility, community reading initiatives, and connections between the podcast's conversations and independent bookselling in Northern Virginia.

Watershed Lit & George Mason University

The podcast is affiliated with Watershed Lit Radio and maintains connections with the Alan Cheuse International Writers Center, Fall for the Book, Stillhouse Press, and the wider literary community at George Mason University. These relationships link academic, festival, and independent literary work across Northern Virginia.
