

My first novel was published in 2011. It later became an AACTA-nominated film, released in cinemas and available on major streaming platforms. In 2027, I will publish my fifth book. It is a successful career – except it's not really one, it's a hobby. I pay my mortgage, contribute to my superannuation and support my family through earnings from an unrelated job in policy and justice reform.

I consider myself a writer. I consider myself an artist. But over the fifteen years of my career I have come to realise I can only ever treat my artistic practice as a hobby. It is not possible to earn enough from non-genre fiction writing in Australia to treat it as a career.

All of my books have been reviewed and sold well, earning out their advances (which are based on expected sales). But this success is not a proper income.

In Australia, even those who sell 10,000 books (rarely achieved for literary fiction) would only earn approximately \$30,000 from royalties. A literary book takes approximately 3 years to write and publish. That's a possible income of \$10,000 a year. Maybe another \$3000 from teaching workshops, writers festival appearances and similar.

You can see, it is not possible to be a working writer (of non-genre fiction) in Australia.

During my career, there was only one period of approximately 12 months where I worked solely on my writing. This was funded by my own savings, a payment for film rights, a grant from Creative Victoria for a novel and a JUMP mentoring grant from Australia Council for a non-fiction book (and funding for a mentor to assist). All of these things had to come together at once for me to take a significant break from earning a wage in an unrelated field.

It also meant taking time out from my career as a social worker, creating challenges with retaining long-term employment, skill building, parental leave, superannuation, etc.

For the 14 other years, I have written in the hours before my children wake up and on the one (or, for a brief period, two) weekdays that I am not working in a non-artistic field. It is possible to write good books in this manner. I am not yet convinced it is possible to write *really* good ones.

Why the current system doesn't work

Advances for literary novels are about \$7,500. A grant of up to \$50,000 is extremely helpful but hard to get (and a significant amount of it is handed right back to the government as income tax). This is not an adequate income let alone a reliable one, particularly when spread over the number of years it takes to write a book.

For my fourth book, I applied for funding from Australia Council four times and was never successful. The final two applications were marked 'unfunded excellence' as there was not enough funding to support all the high-quality projects. Australia Council noted there was nothing I could do to improve my application, there just wasn't enough money to go around.

Each time I do a grant application I put together project plans and statements showing why this unwritten book will be innovative and unusual and ground-breaking. It doesn't seem to matter that even the author doesn't know what a novel is about until it's

finished – a grant application must declare a novel's brilliance and relevance from the outset. Art is supposed to be a response to everything that has come before but a grant application only wants it to be unlike anything the funding body has ever encountered.

The books get written, between 5.30 and 7am, and eventually published. They don't get edited much because publishing houses can hardly afford it, and they don't get reviewed properly because few places still pay for arts criticism. The arts in Australia is dying a slow death, strangled by short-sighted governments who have kowtowed to multinational companies (and continue to do so as AI steals what is left of our livelihoods) and an instance on seeing the arts as an 'industry' not just something that makes us all feel a little bit more alive, a little bit more connected with each other.

What I would like to see

I support all the recommendations proposed by the Australian Society of Authors, including multi-year fellowships, a basic income pilot and tax reform to make grants and prizes tax-free.

I would like to see more support for mid-career writers that would provide time to write, and less focus on one-off project-based grants that have to demonstrate the creation of something innovative and exceptional. This support would be based on an acknowledgement that if someone has written five books maybe they can be entrusted (and empowered) to write five more without grovelling and pretending they are trying to write against, rather than into, a literary tradition.

This kind of support would allow writers time to write but also to give workshops and library talks and share their skills and experience.

I would also like to see the abolishment of peer support letters, a gatekeeping practice that supports those in a position to network and self-promote more than it does those spending time at their desk, working on their craft.

I would like to see an acknowledgement that art and writing are not just book sales and writers festivals. That it is a craft and practice important for individuals and communities to take part in, in order for each of us to analyse and experience the world.

I would like to see public education at all levels value art and literature for what it is, not what it provides to the economy.