

The Australian Children's Laureate Foundation (ACLF) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy.

The ACLF believes children's literature and reading promotion should be recognised as essential cultural infrastructure under the National Cultural Policy. This includes investment not only in creative production, but also in access, participation and lifelong engagement with reading. Through the Australian Children's Laureate program and associated national initiatives, the ACLF already works to connect children with books, authors, illustrators and reading experiences across Australia, demonstrating the significant cultural impact of sustained reading advocacy and engagement programs.

If Australia is serious about cultural participation, inclusion and audience development, then children's access to books and stories must be recognised as central to our cultural future.

Reading is often a child's first sustained engagement with culture. Through books, children encounter ideas, language, art, history, imagination and perspectives beyond their own experiences. Reading fosters empathy, creativity and connection. It helps children understand themselves, others and the world around them. Current Australian Children's Laureate Andy Griffiths has said, "I've always loved reading. You can go anywhere in a book. Everything is possible and anything can happen." This sense of possibility sits at the heart of cultural participation.

However, access to books, reading opportunities and literary experiences is increasingly unequal across Australia. Many children, particularly those in regional and remote communities and areas experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, have limited access to contemporary, diverse and high-quality literature. Increasingly, they do not have access to Australian literature. School libraries, public libraries and community reading programs play a critical role in addressing this inequity, yet many remain under-resourced. In recommending Australian books, they also play a critical role in promoting the Australian children's book industry.

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The ACLF particularly encourages the Australian Government to:

- strengthen investment in school and public libraries as cultural and community hubs including not only investment in infrastructure (books and libraries) but also in trained teacher librarians to direct children to the right book;
- support Australian children's authors, illustrators and publishers to ensure Australian stories remain visible and accessible to young readers;

- support opportunities for children and young people to engage directly with Australian authors and illustrators, hearing firsthand about their creative processes, inspirations and ideas, and building meaningful connections between creators and readers;
- increase access to diverse literature, including First Nations stories and books reflecting multicultural and multilingual Australia;
- support national reading promotion initiatives that position reading as both a cultural and wellbeing practice;
- improve access to books and literary experiences for children in regional, remote and disadvantaged communities;
- recognise reading for pleasure as a key contributor to cultural participation, creativity and social connection.

Former Australian Children's Laureate Sally Rippin has highlighted the importance of ensuring children who struggle with reading feel supported and included, stating: "I would really love for kids who struggle with reading not to feel shamed, or lesser." A culturally ambitious nation ensures all children can participate in the cultural life of reading, regardless of background, ability or postcode.

As Kunggandji/Birri-gubba man and Australia's inaugural Children's Laureate Boori Monty Pryor noted, "To have a creative economy we need curious children and to have curious children we need children who are not only able to read, but children who WANT to read. To build a culture of reading, we need a nation of story-tellers...we need to bring everyone into the circle."

Children's literature is not a secondary part of Australia's cultural landscape. It is where cultural participation begins.

The ACLF encourages the Australian Government to recognise and support national organisations and initiatives that already play a significant role in fostering children's reading, creativity and literary engagement across Australia. A nation that values stories and reading in childhood invests not only in literacy, but in imagination, empathy, creativity and belonging for generations to come.