



Australia's National Cultural Policy

Public consultation, May 2026

Stakeholder submission: *Australian Book Review*

About Australian Book Review

Australian Book Review (ABR), established in 1961, is the nation's oldest book review publication. Every year it publishes around 500 reviews, commentaries, essays, poems, short stories, and interviews, and administers three major literary prizes, across eleven print issues and its digital interfaces. For a decade, through *ABR Arts*, it has reviewed film, television, music, theatre, opera, dance, festivals, and art exhibitions. *ABR*, based in Melbourne and with 3.8 FTE staff, is supported by a strong subscription base, private philanthropy and partnerships, advertising, and public arts funding.

ABR welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Australia's National Cultural Policy and congratulates the Australian Government for foregrounding cultural life for Australians through *Revive*.

Overview

ABR sees evidence, every day, of how cultural reviews help establish, support and sustain writers' and artists' careers, and drive arts participation across diverse communities, including First Nations communities.

However, cultural criticism in Australia is in a state of crisis, with outlets and column inches diminishing and payment rates declining annually. In 2000, reviewers at major Australian reviewing mastheads were paid \$1 per word for reviews of around 1,500 words. Today, those same reviewers are paid 70 cents per word for reviews that are typically half that length, at around 750 words, representing a substantial contraction in both pay and available space.

By recognising the participatory and economic benefits of cultural reviewing and strengthening the cultural reviewing sector, the next National Cultural Policy can support the work of *ABR* and like organisations and further advance the existing five pillars by encouraging informed and engaged discourse about the arts in Australia.

Cultural, Economic and Social Benefits of Cultural Reviews (Pillar 3, Pillar 5 and Pillar 4):

High quality reviewing – expert, fact checked, professionally published – of books and arts productions provide crucial ecosystem benefits by:

- publicising creative works and driving book purchases or live arts attendance;

- enriching public participation in the arts;

- enhancing public literacy by contextualising and connecting works;

- stimulating engagement and public dialogue by prompting conversation, letters to the editor, social media discourse, critical responses and commentary;

- supporting arts practitioners by driving closer engagement with their work;

- promoting a diversity of views and opinions in the public sphere, including vital First Nations perspectives and voices;

- building networks across the arts sector between writers, artists, publishers, awards, publicists, and arts organisations; and

- providing a sense of community, social cohesion and human connection, especially for those living in remote and regional Australia.

Literary journals such as *ABR* also play a pivotal role in establishing the careers of writers and critics, offering them their first bylines and helping them to develop their public profiles. Many of the writers given their first start in *ABR* receive publishing deals, agent representation, festival invitations, media opportunities and other professional opportunities through their appearances in *ABR*'s pages, emphasising the pivotal role that literary magazines play as career incubators for Australian writers.

Sector contraction (Pillar 1, Pillar 3 and Pillar 4):

Shifts in the cultural sector and media landscape have radically contracted the number of outlets publishing reviews of new Australian works, with many major newspapers and other print outlets cutting their available review space due to cost pressures. This contraction has increased the pressure on outlets like *ABR* to cover an ever-increasing volume of culture and books – and field a greater share of publicity queries and approaches from authors – at a time where there are few similar avenues elsewhere. At the same time, social media and content algorithms are directing audiences away from Australian books, films, and performances. The proliferation of online cultural commentary not subject to quality controls has further generated an overwhelming volume of undifferentiated and uncurated content, diluting and reducing the discoverability of published reviews and diverting audiences from Australian works.

There is an urgent need to strengthen the cultural review sector and enhance the discoverability of Australian reviews and voices, especially First Nations perspectives.

High-quality, informed cultural commentary on Australian works is a key mechanism by which Australian literary and artistic works gain visibility, reach audiences, and endure in the cultural imagination.

Debate and social cohesion (Pillar 2):

Organisations like *Australian Book Review* play a critical role in fostering healthy, robust and respectful intellectual exchange within the arts, supported by editorial standards, filters, and mechanisms for redress through letters to the editor. Without a strong reviewing sector and a culture of intellectual exchange, relatively unmediated platforms such as social media can readily become the primary means by which sensitive cultural ideas are discussed, contributing to a divided and riven arts sector, especially in the present moment of reduced social cohesion.

The rapid expansion of AI-generated content is likely to further erode access to reliable and mediated sources of information and forums for discussion. At a time of increasing disinformation, social fragmentation, and growing cultural and intellectual silos, the National Cultural Policy should recognise the vital role that publishers play both as mediators and facilitators of the exchange of ideas.

There is a clear need for targeted cross-jurisdictional investment at federal, state and local levels to strengthen Australia's critical culture and the organisations that support and promote robust and respectful debate. Publications and projects that generate informed, expert commentary and foster the exchange of ideas should be recognised as key contributors to social cohesion and strengthened through sustained government investment and support.

Public support for writers and magazines (Pillar 3 and Pillar 4)

Magazines like *ABR* are increasingly reliant on private giving and partnerships to sustain payments to writers. *ABR* awards three major literary prizes with international impact annually – the Peter Porter Poetry Prize, the *ABR* Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize, and the Calibre Essay Prize – all of which are underwritten by generous individual donors to the magazine. *ABR* also relies on philanthropic donations to support and increase its payments to writers. Yet this private support cannot sustain the whole work of a magazine, including its staff, printing, administrative, technical, and distribution costs. Each year, *ABR* pays a greater sum to its writers than it receives in private giving. Donors want to support Australian writing and cultural infrastructure, but they cannot do it alone; their generosity must be supplemented by fulsome and reliable public support, and the impact of every philanthropic dollar in the arts must be maximised through relevant taxation reforms.

ABR recognises the urgency of increasing pay rates to writers, which have stagnated and even gone backwards. It has long advocated for and driven increased payments to writers in Australia's literary sector and is committed to sustaining this through public and private support. AI represents a major threat to writers' incomes, as businesses look to AI to undertake the work they once paid writers for. AI also represents a significant

threat to magazine income, which is reliant on the maintenance of robust intellectual property protections that AI is threatening and royalties and copyright payments to both writers and magazines. Australian cultural institutions such as *ABR* are wholly committed to human-created content and protecting the intellectual property of writers. This investment in human creativity and dialogue should be publicly recognised and supported.

There is a strong need for ongoing baseline funding for cultural institutions in the literary sector, but this must be supplemented by tax reforms and investments which will enable literary publications like *ABR* to maximise the value of philanthropic giving, alleviate cost pressures, increase payments to writers, and encourage community participation in the arts. Key initiatives such as a GST exemption on books, tax-free status for literary awards to maximise the benefit to writers and encourage greater philanthropic giving, and the establishment of a national cultural voucher system to encourage younger Australians to read and engage with Australian culture will be crucial to help sustain the Australian literary ecosystem into the future.

Policy Asks

Australian Book Review asks that the next National Cultural Policy includes:

1. **A significant uplift in Writing Australia's funding** to support ongoing base funding for major Australian literary journals and magazines in recognition of their pivotal role in establishing and sustaining Australian writers' careers (**Pillar 3**);
2. **Targeted investment in cultural reviewing outlets** in recognition of their place as key cultural infrastructure, to foster social cohesion and healthy critical discourse in the arts, revitalise coverage of Australian culture, enhance the discoverability of Australian titles, and support Australian creators (**Pillar 4, Pillar 2, Pillar 3**);
3. **A GST exemption on books and magazines** to offset escalating printing and distribution costs for publishers, and to make books and magazines more affordable and accessible to as many Australians as possible at a time of increased cost-of-living pressures (**Pillar 4, Pillar 5**);
4. **A tax exemption for literary awards** to maximise the value of philanthropic giving and stimulate increased cultural philanthropy in the arts, and to increase writers' incomes (**Pillar 3**);
5. **A national reading strategy** to encourage all Australians to engage with books, reading, and literary cultures, including First Nations voices and stories (**Pillar 1, Pillar 5**);
6. **A national culture voucher scheme** focussing on Australian titles and content to encourage younger Australians to participate in the cultural activities of their choice, including reading books and magazines, theatre, film and other cultural activities (**Pillar 1, Pillar 3, Pillar 5**).

Australian Book Review is grateful for this valuable opportunity to offer input into Australia's next National Cultural Policy.