

Penguin
Random House
Australia

Submission on Australia's Next National Cultural Policy

Penguin Random House Australia Pty Ltd (**Penguin Random House Australia**) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy.

Our contribution to national culture

We are Australia's largest trade book publisher and distributor. Our purpose is to share stories that inspire, inform and entertain, creating a lifelong love of reading for everyone in Australia. We believe that our cultural and artistic expression gives shape to who we are as Australians, individually and as a nation.

We invest in Australian authors, illustrators, publishers, editors, designers, marketers, publicists, licensing teams, sales teams, production teams and distribution networks. Our role extends beyond our own lists through sales and distribution relationships with other Australian publishers. We have recently invested in a purpose-built, state-of-the-art warehouse to support the delivery of over 50 million books annually, a clear signal of our belief in, and our commitment to, the Australian book industry and its infrastructure.

We are also committed to advancing diverse voices. In the past three years, between 24% and 27% of our local publishing program has been authored by writers who are First Nations people, people of colour, LGBTQIA+ people, neurodiverse people or people with disability.

Our role and experience in Australia's book industry give us a practical perspective on both the opportunity and fragility of our industry. We are acutely aware that every book depends on a chain of creative risk, editorial labour, printing, warehousing, bookshop curation, library and education channels, media attention, copyright protection and, ultimately, reader discovery and engagement. It is with these insights that we offer our submission to Australia's next National Cultural Policy.

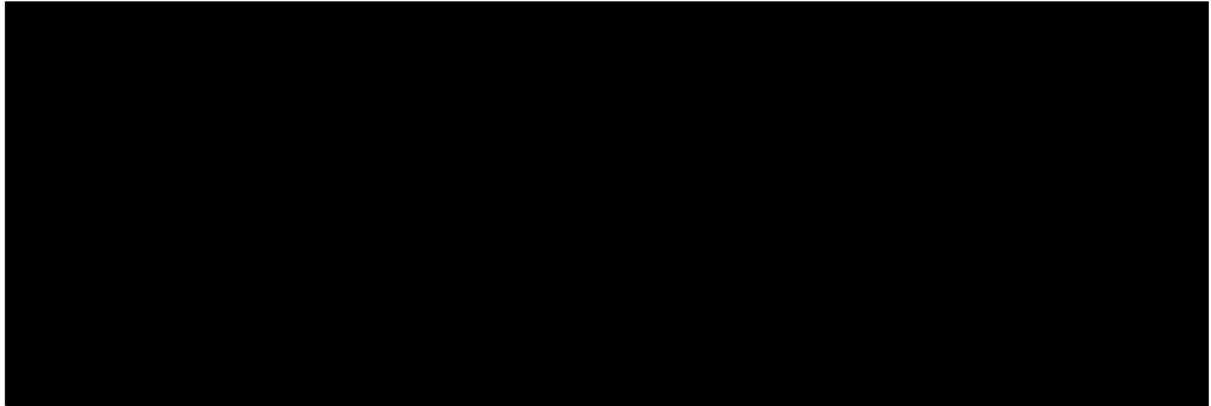
Cultural revival

We applaud the success of *Revive* in restoring culture to national attention. Through establishing Writing Australia as a dedicated national body for strengthening the literature sector, *Revive* has encouraged renewed ambition for Australian stories, including support for publishing, writers' festivals, translation and First Nations storytelling and literature (ie, the Australian Publishing and Promotion Fund, Writers' Festival Author Travel Fund, Translation Fund and Elevate: First Nations Storytelling and Literature Fund).

We believe that increasing this investment will continue to lift the skills and commercial prospects of Australian talent. We have seen the positive impact that these types of initiatives have had on authors through our fellowship program, *Writelt*, which includes mentoring and

grants to nurture and develop unpublished voices, with a focus on First Nations writers, culturally and linguistically diverse writers, writers from socio-economically marginalised backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ writers and writers with disability. For example, Melanie Seward, a proud Bigambul and Wakka Wakka woman, was a recipient of our fellowship program in 2021 and has since published two novels and recently collaborated on a new book.

Our publishing program also showcases the potential impact that investment in Australian authors can have on our culture:



To build on the success of *Revive*, we agree with the policy recommendations in Book Create's submission for a National Plan for Books and Reading, involving:

- respecting First Nations storytelling and cultural authority;
- backing Australian books and publishers;
- supporting authors' careers;
- strengthening infrastructure; and
- building a reading nation.

We also agree with the Australian Publishers Association's submission.

In our submission, we focus on a clear policy opportunity that Australia Read and Writing Australia's research on reading has revealed: reader engagement.

Closing the reader engagement gap

In addition to issues regarding literacy rates and access to books, Australia Read and Writing Australia's research identified that many Australians want to read more but need practical support to close the gap between intention and action, including overcoming difficulties with choosing books that match tastes/interests, and opportunities to reflect and share experiences.

We believe this policy opportunity should be a priority in the next National Cultural Policy, particularly under Pillar 5 (Engaging the Audience). Without discoverability and engagement, a book merely exists silently, and a creator's hard work does not have cultural impact on our community.

From *Revive* to *Gather*

We believe that the next National Cultural Policy should build on the momentum of *Revive* and move towards *Gather*: a policy to connect Australian stories, creators, readers and communities into a stronger national reading culture. Through this, we can ensure that Australian books are not only written, but found, recommended, read, discussed and shared among our local communities and beyond.

While we are strong supporters of Australian libraries and writers' festivals, we also believe there are significant opportunities to boost readership through Australian bookshops, particularly dedicated bricks-and-mortar bookshops (where, according to Australia Reads and Writing Australia's research, between 23% and 38% of readers purchase books from).

Although we have embraced online retail and digital discovery to improve access to books for more Australians, bricks-and-mortar bookshops offer essential access to books and opportunities for discoverability and engagement. Importantly, bookshop staff play a significant role as a guide to help readers overcome one of the earliest barriers in the reading journey: finding a book that feels relevant, accessible and worth starting. Along with local libraries, Australian bookshops are places of browsing, conversation, recommendation, author discovery and community events.

"There are so many reasons I love my bookshop. I enjoy the atmosphere created by the general public lingering and turning over pages, and reflecting. I love seeing the evidence of so much creativity in the world and being tantalized by what to read next."

– Stephanie Alexander

"A trip to the bookshop is the ultimate exercise in empathy. Within it you will find endless opportunities to see and understand the world from someone else's perspective."

– Jamila Rizvi

Australia Read and Writing Australia's research also found that recommendations from family, friends, bookstore staff or librarians are used by between 25% and 37% of readers. This supports what we see in practice: curated displays, staff-picks and conversations with bookstore staff clearly help move readers from intention to action.

***Gather* – connecting creators and readers**

We believe that Australia's next National Cultural Policy should include a dedicated program delivered through Writing Australia in partnership with libraries, bookshops, publishers, schools, festivals, local government and community organisations to foster the connection between creators and readers. For bookshops, this should include campaigns and funding initiatives towards:

- Australian bookshelf displays and staff-picks;
- author and illustrator events, including launches, school-holiday programs, reading nights, book clubs and community conversations;
- staff time for reader recommendations and community engagement, supported by professional development in Australian literature;
- regional and outer-suburban access through pop-up bookshops, festival book tents and

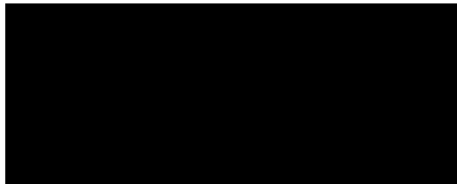
- bookshop-library collaborations in communities without a local bookshop;
- digital discoverability to improve online catalogues, newsletters, local delivery, event streaming and recommendation tools; and
- book vouchers to encourage people to go into a bookstore and choose a book.

Through our involvement in similar initiatives, we have seen the significant impact that supporting bookshops can have on reader engagement. For example:

- we support the Australian Booksellers Association's annual Love Your Bookshop Day event, where bookshops host a range of activities to share the joy of reading;
- we partner with the Australian branch of the Global Book Crawl, where Australian independent bookshops invite readers to a curated walk from bookshop to bookshop, to rediscover familiar places and to experience books as something shared; and
- we run the Penguin Children's Bookseller Grant, a \$200,000 grant to fund initiatives aimed at encouraging children's interest in reading, whether through events, activations, installations or workshops. In the most recent round, we were pleased to award grants to 41 recipients. Samples of the impact the awards have had on bookshops are **enclosed**.

These initiatives turn books into community experiences. We believe they strengthen reading habits, give local authors visibility, and connect families and children with diverse Australian stories.

The feedback we have received on these initiatives from bookshops and readers has been overwhelmingly positive. The next National Cultural Policy presents an exciting opportunity to scale these proven community initiatives and make reader engagement a shared national cultural priority.



Julie Burland

CEO, Penguin Random House Australia

