

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public and anonymous



Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

I am an editor who has worked at several Australian literary journals and contributed to the working group that developed the NSW Literature Strategy. However, I write this submission as a practising critic as well as an editor who supports the work of a large proportion of the nation's critics at the Sydney Review of Books (SRB).

While it has been heartening to see the creation of Writing Australia and increased support for journals, Revive's overarching emphasis on 'storytelling' as the predominant mode of cultural production has tended to occlude genres like criticism for which narrative is *not* the primary focus. I would like to see more support for, or at least recognition of, the contribution that critics make to our nation's cultural ecology – not just in literature, but across the arts.

A lively and robust critical culture not only democratises the arts through raising awareness of new work, explanation and analysis of more difficult work, and redistributing attention away from the commercial mainstream; it also acts as a spur to creative activity. Knowing that an alert and intelligent audience exists means that artists will be more willing to take risks, innovate, and challenge prevailing assumptions. In short, while critics are not often recognised as creators (as they should be), they are essential to the country's creative vitality.

The pillars most pertinent to my comments here are Pillars 4 (Strong Cultural Infrastructure) and 5 (Engaging the Audience). Apart from the commissioning opportunities offered by journals like the SRB, Kill Your Darlings, Overland and others, very little infrastructure exists to support practising critics. Australian publishers seldom publish books of critical essays. Criticism also tends to be sidelined in the programming of the country's major literary festivals, when they could be one of the major venues where criticism is conducted in public. Critics know how to engage audiences; in fact, they exemplify what an engaged audience may look or sound like. If it is important to understand 'engagement' from a qualitative as much as a quantitative point of view, then the elevation of critical writing must be an integral part of the cultural strategy.

I would like to put forward the following proposals:

- 1) Invest in criticism as an artform by supporting key practitioners and organisations;
- 2) Create opportunities for collaboration between the publishing industry and those involved with the study of literature in schools and universities;
- 3) Fund a public lecture series alongside the Prime Minister's Literary Awards that would present critical readings of one or several of the category recipients (a model that could be replicated at the state level).

These are some of the measures the new cultural policy could take to acknowledge and honour the work critics do for a sector whose value is a matter of both public enjoyment and edification.