

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public

Individual

Dmetri Kakmi



Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

My name is Dmetri Kakmi. I am a Greek/Turkish writer based in Melbourne with five fiction and non-fiction books, and many essays and short stories in anthologies under my belt. For 15 years I worked as a senior editor at Penguin Books. I am what you may call a mid-career author. Despite being shortlisted for literary prizes, being well reviewed and ‘acclaimed’, as they say, I am not part of mainstream Australian publishing. My books are released by small publishers with limited budgets, marketing and distribution; I usually pay for my own marketing, which is prohibitive. My career has hit a wall and it does not look as if I will progress beyond this point.

The problem is two-fold.

First, publishing is in dire straits and therefore very cautious, choosing high profile writers or high concept books over what in the old days we called ‘odd-ball or literary novels that nevertheless contribute vitality to culture and society’. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that younger editors and publishers are ideologically driven, choosing manuscripts based on questionable diversity and inclusivity categories rather than quality, craftsmanship, art and aesthetics.

I will give two examples. My latest novel, *The Woman in the Well*, was rejected by five mainstream Australian publishers. They ‘loved’ the story but could not publish because I am white man writing an indigenous female character. The book was subsequently published by a small genre publisher. It is thankfully loved by readers and it is a finalist for best novel in the Australasian Shadow Awards. Another small publisher contracted and then cancelled a memoir, *Haven*, because ‘we are scared of a backlash from the LGBTQIA online community’. The manuscript is marginally critical of the contemporary transgender activism. The same manuscript was subsequently picked up by a publisher who specialises in Australian gay histories. The publisher called it ‘an important book’ before turning it down for similar reasons.

As you can see, contemporary politics and ideology play a big part in the choices made. Censoriousness across the board is the order of the day. This does not bode well for Australian writers who don’t follow a particular prescribed line. It also impinges on freedom of speech and expression, which is foundational to a healthy society.

The second point I want to make is as follows. I believe you are making a mistake by saying First Nations First. The term should be All Australian Writers First. We are all Australian. Some are not more Australian than others and should not command more respect or support than they already get. Which is substantial. Indigenous writers are not the only ones struggling. White and migrant writers struggle too. Last year I made \$5000 out of my writing. I would be the first person to say that Australian culture has grown richer since Indigenous arts across the board exploded on the scene some forty or so years ago, but I still believe that governmental policy should aim to support all Australian writers equally.