

Submission to Australia's National Cultural Policy, 2026 by Sophie Cunningham

Thank you for this opportunity to advocate for writers, for books and for literature, and for valuing the input of working writers and artists in developing cultural policy.

I'm a former Chair, now Deputy Chair of the Australian Society of Authors and a non- executive director of the Copyright Agency. I support ALL of the recommendations in the ASA's separate submission, most particularly:

1. the calls for direct investment in authors via multi-year fellowships supporting mid-career authors by providing time to write
2. a top up to the Lending Rights budget
3. a basic income pilot, involving 300 authors
4. solutions to the unprecedented theft of Australian authors' work by multinational tech companies operating within Australia
5. adequate resourcing to Writers Australia to allow that important new body to deliver meaningful change

A few more personal statements to give context for my support of the ASA generally, and these recommendations specifically.

I worked as a publisher and editor earlier in my career but these days I am a Melbourne-based writer who has written 10 books with an 11th on the way. I write non-fiction, fiction and books for young children. I'm also a teacher of creative writing and mentor to many writers.

Since the early 2000s I've been a freelancer, with the occasional longer contract (Lonely Planet, *Meanjin*). I've been directly impacted by the buyout of publishers several times over my career, starting with McPhee Gribble at the end of 1989, Lonely Planet (2010) and more recently Text Publishing (Text hold most of my back list).

In terms of support over my career I've had four fellowships of around \$20,000 this century (one from the Australia Council, one from the Copyright Agency, one from the University of Melbourne and one from Eucalypt Australia). I have also had several other modest fellowships which supported travel, writing retreats and research but didn't provide an income. I've won a couple of awards for my essays but none for my books which has had real implications for my

capacity to maintain my writing life and says something about the precocity of making an income in this industry. Every book feels a bit like buying a TattsLotto ticket, and most of us only get to buy that ticket every few years.

This is, of course, one of the main difficulties of the industry: books take years to write and some days it feels like bad timing is all it takes to upend everything. Just to give a personal example, my book *City of Trees* came out in 2019. I was asked to a number of writers' festivals to talk about the work, but then COVID came along and . . . well. It happened to hundreds of us and while book sales in general ended up doing okay, the chances to spruik our work were severely constrained. At the same time I had to keep paying rent on a studio that I couldn't access and I wasn't eligible for JobKeeper, because the ways I earned my income, and the amount of that income, was so erratic. Alongside this story of Good Years and Bad Years is the story of rising costs. To run a small business (ie, be a writer) you need to buy multiple subscriptions, you need Zoom and other software, you need to build a website, you need computers and phones, if you need an office the rent goes up, you're expected to have public liability insurance if you do public speaking etc. These things add up, but one thing that doesn't go up is earnings. For the most part, and for most writers, our income is going down. These days my stable but modest income is sustained by an increasing load of teaching and a single, paying, board position. I work six days a week, often evenings as well as weekends, as do most of my colleagues. The only reason I have any superannuation is because of my years working in publishing when I was younger. I have to say, that now I'm in my sixties, and trying to make plans for an even greater drop in income I'm becoming increasingly nervous. This nervousness hasn't been helped by the fact that my (three) parents have required High Level care in Aged Care institutions. The costs are staggering, and I have been grateful that they DID have superannuation to enable them to access this care.

I would say that the recent changes to PLR have made a material difference to my life and I'm grateful for that. I am also getting superannuation payments more often from more organisations when I do different jobs. And of course I was very pleased by all the commitments made by the Revive National Cultural Policy in 2023. That said, when I attempted to fill in the Creative Workplaces survey a few months ago I was stymied by the number of questions that I couldn't answer because the options did not allow for the nuance of my situation (which I assume is in no way unique). I have cobbled a livelihood over the last forty years in the industry through a fairly chaotic mixture of working within publishing houses, writing and publishing

work for (hopefully) a commercial audience, doing voluntary work, sitting on boards and having the occasional contracted job. To give just one example of a question that I couldn't adequately answer in the constraints of the survey, I have NEVER received overtime either as a freelancer or when I worked for publishing houses (or a university). Sick leave and carers leave hasn't been on the table since around 2004 when I left Allen & Unwin. As for safety at work, while I have never really expected it (that could be my age speaking), I think it's fair to say that the current political and cultural environment has been the LEAST safe that I have felt in my working life. I'm not alone in feeling this. It has been an extremely demanding time for every writer I know, but most particularly First Nations writers, Palestinian writers, Lebanese writers and Jewish writers. Many of my colleagues – whatever their political opinion – have been subject to harassment by email or worse. There is no workplace stability to be found when festivals and speaking/teaching contracts are cancelled, books are pulped, and political views can risk punishment. Of course writers are jumpy. We are watching the abhorrent erasure of the Palestinian people, anti-semitism – always present – is getting significantly worse, and newspapers like *The Australian* regularly embark on bullying campaigns of members of the literary community. Writers tend, by their nature, to have strong opinions and to be articulate and forthright about those opinions. For that they are being punished, as are the arts workers and arts organisations that support them. It is this, more than financial frustrations, that have led me to feel on the verge of burn out, and slightly heartbroken by, a writing community and literary industry in crisis.

Yours Sincerely

Sophie Cunningham

