

Personal Submission to the National Cultural Policy (Revive)

Submitted by: [REDACTED]

Role: Picture Book Author, Psychologist, Teacher

Introduction

I am [REDACTED] – Australian picture book author, psychologist and teacher. I write picture books to enhance wellbeing, connection and a sense of belonging using casual diversity. I have published three picture books within the last two years, with Penguin, Hachette and Little Steps. I have a fourth book coming out with Barefoot in the US, UK and Canada in September (and Australia in October) this year. I am also a person of Lebanese heritage - a significantly under-represented group in children's literature.

Pillar 2 – A Place for Every Story

Under-representation in children's literature

While Australia claims to celebrate diversity, people whose heritage hails from the Global South remain significantly under-represented in children's literature. While diverse characters are becoming more prevalent, they often appear as peripheral characters rather than central protagonists.

To genuinely realise the vision of Pillar 2 for children's literature in Australia, urgent targeted investment is required.

Recommendation: Adopt and fund an Australian model similar to We Need Diverse Books (WNDB)

To address these systemic barriers, Australia should establish and fund a national organisation modelled on the US-based non-profit **We Need Diverse Books (WNDB)**. WNDB began as a Twitter hashtag in 2014, created by author Aisha Saeed in response to an all-white author line-up at a major book convention. It has since grown into a national non-profit that enacts change across the entire publishing process. Key, replicable initiatives include:

1. **Financial Grants for Unpublished Creators from marginalised backgrounds**
2. **Leadership Pathways (Financial Internships)**
3. **Mentorship and Skill Development:** WNDB offers mentorships, fellowships and intensive workshops to help marginalised and under-represented creators navigate publishing. One local example is by the foundation Think+DO Tank who delivered in partnership with Scribble Books and supported by Creative Australia the MIRROR Mentorship Program. This program pairs emerging multilingual artists from historically marginalised communities with established mentors. Selected

participants receive a \$4000 stipend and support valued at over \$4000 , including industry workshops and networking opportunities. The inaugural cohort produced work that led to agent representation and forthcoming publications. However, programs of this scale remain rare across Australia. We need more of this. An Australian WNDB-style organisation would allow us to scale such initiatives nationally, providing structured pathways for under-represented picture book creators to move from emerging to published.

4. **Classroom and Community Access:** WNDB donates thousands of free diverse books to low-income schools and libraries. An Australian equivalent would ensure that the stories being published reach the young readers who need them.

Recommendation: Create a balanced representation of diversity for people in positions of leadership and decision-making

While programs like WNDB are essential, they must be complemented by direct action on leadership. People of colour remain dramatically under-represented in decision-making positions across Australian publishing. Authors of colour writing for children represent a very small number of writers published in Australia and industry professionals in publishing remain largely Anglo Celtic and European. This lack of lived experience as a person of colour in Australia at the top results in an industry that only recently—and reluctantly—recognised that diverse readers, read and purchase books. I call for specific targets and dedicated funding for leadership pathways for people of colour in children's publishing and arts governance.

A case study in perspective

I offer one small but telling example. Last year, at the Children's Book Council of Australia's 80th birthday celebration, the Governor of NSW Margaret Beazley attended as patron of the CBCA. She gave a speech promoting literacy, concluding with the observation that it was good to see more diverse writers writing now.

This reflects precisely the problem. Diverse writers and people colour have been writing stories in this country for a long time. Our existence and creativity did not begin when the industry became 'woke' to the need for readers to see themselves represented in books, or when they realised the commercial reality that diverse readers purchase books. While the Governor's statement may be well-intentioned, as a person at the top, she has no lived experience of the ground her words describe. Her short-sightedness is not a personal failing but structural proof that we need people from under-represented, and historically marginalised backgrounds at all creative and decision-making levels, including on this board and all funding bodies. Boards, and leadership positions in the arts should reflect the diverse nature of the population they serve.

Developmentally appropriate material

Diversity in children's literature is not only about who is represented on the page, but also about how stories shape the minds that receive them. The publishing industry must take into consideration developmentally appropriate material for children and young people by actively reviewing and understanding childhood and adolescent development. A book that is marketed as a picture book for four-year-olds may exclude age groups which could explore concepts more deeply. Furthermore, a book written for a four-year-old must be written and illustrated with the cognitive, emotional and social understanding of a four-year-old in mind. For example, a picture book on 'Mindfulness' for 0-3 year-olds is not ethically about the child's best interest, but rather a marketing decision. All 0-3 year olds are already present and mindful in their behaviour. This is not about limiting content or avoiding difficult subjects. Rather, it is about recognising that children process information differently depending on their developmental stage. Some teachers and librarians are aware of this, and can often appropriately match picture books, for example, to their readers well, however, when publishers make age-category choices based on marketing decisions; then parents targeted to buy the books will mean that many young people who could benefit from picture books could miss out on them because they are beyond the age that the book is marketed to. Furthermore, older children both upper primary school-aged and high school-aged, can emotionally and intellectually benefit from more active connection to picture books. I call on the National Cultural Policy to fund professional development for industry professionals such as publishers, editors and authors on the psychological development of children, so that picture books are acquired, edited and marketed with nuance and awareness that informed and developmentally appropriate.

Recognising picture books as a serious literary artform

Picture books are too often treated as a simple (and a not real or serious) literary artform by the industry. However, this is a profound misunderstanding. Picture books are a sophisticated literary and artistic medium capable of shaping social attitudes, child and adult minds, and general culture. A single picture book can explore concepts of fairness, grief, belonging or courage in nuanced and complex ways. They possess a resonance that no other form can match due to their dual impact of storytelling – one in images (which often taps into the subconscious, eliciting emotional responses) and one in words (appealing to our intellect). Picture books linger. They are read aloud, memorised, argued over, wept over and returned to for years. They create spaces not only for how children learn to read, but how adult readers, who share them with children, or who enjoy them for themselves, will make meaning from concepts that can be deeply explored.

The industry does not treat picture books with the seriousness they deserve. This must change.

First, picture books should be considered for literary awards within the same thematic categories as adult literature. There is no reason a picture book cannot be judged alongside a novel for an award focused on emerging artists, diverse writers, environmental themes, or contribution to social cohesion. The current practice of segregating children's literature into its own categories—while necessary for age-appropriate judging—should not preclude picture books from broader, theme-based awards. I call on all major Australian literary

prizes to open thematic categories to picture books, judged on content and merit, not format.

Second, prize money for children's authors must be equivalent to that of adult authors to raise the importance of their contribution to our society's cultural development. The production of a picture book, can take several years to complete, yet prize disparities persist. This sends a clear message: children's literature matters less. Many an author of adult literature who has tried their hand at a picture book will comment on the fact that the work that was most difficult to produce by far, was the picture book they wrote. The National Cultural Policy should ensure prize funding is equitable, requiring that any award receiving government support offers equal prize money across all categories, including children's and picture book categories.

Third, the promotion of picture books by booksellers and bookshops must be given as much emphasis and respect as adult novels. Too often, picture books are relegated to a shelving at the back of the store, often away from foot traffic, while adult front-of-store displays receive prime real estate. Booksellers report that when picture books are promoted prominently, they sell. The audience exists. The respect must follow. I call on the National Cultural Policy to work with industry bodies, including the Australian Booksellers Association, to develop guidelines for equitable in-store and online promotion of children's literature, recognising picture books as cultural artefacts worthy of the same attention as any other form of literature.

Structural reform of children's book awards

The paucity of diverse representation in Australia's major children's literary awards is not merely a symptom of an under-resourced diverse publishing sector. When a study in 2020 showed that over 20 years of CBCA award-shortlisted picture books, non-white people made up just 12% of main characters, it becomes clear that the awards themselves are part of the problem. For too long, the industry has relied on a single body, the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA), whose Book of the Year Awards exert an extraordinary influence on the sales of children's books, on the careers of creatives, and on what reaches school libraries and classrooms. As one author described it, the CBCA stickers are "like the Oscars for kids' books". Another noted that being recognised by the CBCA gives a book "a second life ... back in the bookshop, into more school libraries, more readers". This influence is not inherently problematic, but it must be matched by accountability. More significantly however, the stickers on books as a result of the awards are seen by parents and educators as reputable endorsements of literary quality and cultural importance.

I propose two complementary pathways for reform.

Pathway One: Dedicated arts funding for children's literary awards

Awards that target children's books in Australia should be funded directly through arts funding bodies, with transparent criteria that prioritise diversity, developmental appropriateness and literary merit. This would reduce over-reliance on a single organisation and create a more pluralistic awards ecosystem where different categories—emerging artist, diverse writer, environmental theme, contribution to social cohesion—can be judged

on their own terms, including for picture books. I call on the National Cultural Policy to establish a dedicated grants program for children's literary awards, administered through Creative Australia or equivalent state bodies, with multi-year funding to ensure stability and independence.

Pathway Two: Review and reform of the Children's Book Council of Australia

If the existing CBCA Awards are to retain their primacy, the organisation must undergo significant structural reform. Currently, the CBCA Book of the Year Awards are judged by volunteers who receive no remuneration. This model is both inequitable and unsustainable. It excludes qualified judges who cannot afford to donate their labour, and risks recruiting people unfairly. Furthermore, the National Board of the CBCA as well as state branches, have little to no representation of people from diverse cultural backgrounds – reflective of Australian society. I call on the National Cultural Policy to require, as a condition of any public funding or endorsement, that:

- **Selection criteria explicitly require** consultation with First Nations industry professionals and People of Colour from the industry in the development of judging criteria, ensuring that standards of 'literary quality' are not covertly preserving a narrow, Eurocentric canon
- **The hiring process is transparent and ethical**, moving beyond the current system where applications are filtered through State and Territory Branches and final selection occurs with minimal public accountability
- **Affirmative action be taken** to include people from under-represented, diverse and First Nations people as voting members to more reflect Australian society more truthfully.
- **Judges are paid** a professional stipend commensurate with the demands of reading hundreds of books annually and producing written assessments

Board diversity and ethical accountability

The CBCA's own policy states that "consideration will be given to forming an inclusive and diverse judging panel". Consideration is not accountability. There are no targets, no public reporting on the composition of judging panels or the National Board, and no mechanism for measuring progress.

I call for the National Cultural Policy to adopt a framework modelled on the **Canada Business Corporations Act diversity disclosure requirements**, which mandate that corporations report annually on the representation of four designated groups—women, Indigenous Peoples, racialized people, and people with disabilities—on their boards and in senior management. Organisations that have no diversity targets must explain why. The Canadian experience shows that transparency, not compulsion, shifts behaviour over time.

Specifically, I recommend that:

- The CBCA National Board and all judging panels must publicly disclose the number and percentage of members from First Nations backgrounds and People of Colour
- The CBCA must adopt representation targets for both the Board and judging panels, with clear timeframes for achievement

- Where targets are not met, the CBCA must provide a public explanation and outline remedial actions

This is not about quotas. It is about recognising that the people who decide which stories receive the coveted sticker—and which do not—must reflect the diversity of the nation whose children will read those books. Broad and ethical accountability requires diverse representation at every level of decision-making, from the Board to the judging panels to the consultants who shape the criteria.

Festivals and public platforms for diverse children's literature

While there are existing efforts to platform diverse writers in Australia, significant gaps remain for children's and young adult literature. Writing NSW's **Boundless Festival** is a biennial festival focused on Indigenous and culturally diverse writers, featuring performances, readings, panel discussions and workshops. However, Boundless is primarily oriented toward adult literature. Writing NSW also runs a **Kids and YA Festival**, now in its twelfth year, which attracts over 30 children's and YA authors and includes pitching sessions with publishers. Notably, this festival is not specifically focused on cultural diversity—it is a general children's literature event. The frequency is also limited, held every second or third year rather than annually.

What is missing is affirmative action to recruit authentic diverse representation of panellists, speakers, organisers and publishing industry professionals, specifically for children's and YA literature. This would ensure that events such as the Kids and YA Festival, would offer space where diverse stories are reflective of the broader readership of Australia's landscape. Perhaps in conjunction with this a festival that echoes the original vision of Boundless, but for children's literature could also be conceived. Benjamin Law described the Boundless festival as 'showcasing Australian writing in all of its diversity' for a nation where half of us have parents born overseas and one in five speak a language other than English at home. We need this same commitment applied specifically to children's literature, and delivered with regularity and dedicated funding.

Pillar 1 – First Nations First, Pillar 3 – Centrality of the Artist & Pillar 4 – Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Commitment to anti-racism and anti-discrimination

The National Cultural Policy must take an anti-racist and anti-discrimination approach. It should respect and recruit leaders from those in the sector who are already working from a strong decolonial, anti-racist and anti-discrimination framework.

All arts, cultural and educational institutions should adopt the UN Core Stance of Values: *"The UN asserts that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, without distinction of any kind, including race or ethnic origin. It maintains that no state, institution, group, or individual should make any discrimination in human rights and fundamental freedoms."*

Artists are the moral compass of the sector (Pillar 3)

The National Cultural Policy must support artists to continue to be ethical and values-driven leaders of the sector and broader community. Artists must be able to speak freely, sign letters and participate in boycott actions without harming their reputation and livelihoods.

Arts and cultural institutions must respect cultural diversity, and support, champion and care for the diverse conversations that artists bring to their programs, particularly those who have been targeted in the media for speaking out against injustices. Artists must not be instrumentalised by institutions, lobbyists, the media and politicians.

Freedom of speech and artistic expression (Pillars 3 & 4)

Strong cultural infrastructure must be based on artistic freedom of speech. This is already enshrined in the Creative Australia Act (11.e "to uphold and promote freedom of expression in the arts") and needs to be upheld in the National Cultural Policy.

In order to create strong cultural infrastructure, art must be able to facilitate critical discourse, address political issues and critique power and class structures. There must be an end to the culture of intimidation that prevents artists from expressing and creating art freely. The National Cultural Policy must address the prevalence of censorship, targeting and cancellation of artists who speak out against injustices

Freedom from political interference in the arts (Pillars 3 & 4)

In order to create strong cultural infrastructure, the arts must remain independent and free from political interference. The National Cultural Policy must ensure independent and 'arms length' funding processes across federal, state and local government. This includes ensuring that politicians at all levels not influence or give advice that results in the provision or removal of funding support of a particular project or artist. This is already enshrined in the Creative Australia Act (article 14.2) and needs to be upheld in the National Cultural Policy.

A key action for the National Cultural Policy must be to implement an inquiry into political interference in the arts, including through donations and board membership and lobbying. Donors must not influence arts organisations and institutions. Board members with connections to political parties or lobbyists must be removed, for example, the pulping of Jazz Money's picture book *Bila, A River Cycle*, by the University of Queensland Press (UQP) due to pressure from lobby groups criticising the illustrator - completely unrelated to the book. The National Cultural Policy should safeguard against this.

Closing

As an Australian picture book author of Lebanese heritage, I write to create a more inclusive and connected world. I write for the readers who have been told, implicitly and explicitly, that their stories are not part of Australia's literature. I ask the National Cultural Policy to

move beyond rhetoric and into structural, funded, accountable action. The stories are here. The artists are here. We need the policy to catch up.

Thank you for your consideration.