

National Cultural Policy Submission

Name: Sophie Cunningham AM Deputy Chair of the Australian Society of Authors

Submitted: As an artist; as an individual

My history: Australian literature has been my life. I began working in publishing at the independent publishing house McPhee Gribble in the 1980s. I stayed on with that publishing house after it was acquired by Penguin Books and became publisher of the McPhee Gribble imprint within Penguin in the early nineties. I was then a Trade Publisher at Allen & Unwin for almost ten years. I edited the literary journal *Meanjin* for three years, was Chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, and a co-founder of The Stella Prize. Until last month I was an Adjunct Professor at RMIT's Non/fiction Lab. I teach the Writing A Novel course (Melbourne) at the Faber Academy. I am currently the deputy chair of the Australian Society of Authors and on the board of the University of Queensland Press. I've written nine books and edited one: two for children, five nonfiction and three novels. In 2019 I was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for my various contributions to literature. This range of experience has given me a broad overview of the Australian literary sector. 3

I'd like to make the following observation. The success (in terms of books sales) of writers such as Tim Winton, Helen Garner, Peter Carey, Richard Flanagan, Christos Tsiolkas, Melissa Lucashenko or Charlotte Wood did not happen overnight. These 'successes' took decades of work: of long hours, the winning of the occasional award, and, at times, the receiving of a grant or fellowship. These successes also took the sustained support of publishers, editors, bookshops, the support of their peers and literary agents. Change can't be driven by individual successes alone.

The economics of the writing life: It goes without saying that a freelance writer does not get overtime, superannuation or sick pay. I'd also note that I, like most writers, am often asked to work for no money at all, or offered a small honorarium. If the cause is important to me I accept working on these terms. I am motivated to do my work for a range of reasons, not just economic. I find fundraising for important causes enormously rewarding, and enjoy communicating with audiences on subjects I care about and that inspire me creatively, similarly rewarding.

I am considered a successful writer. My income has averaged \$39,000 a year over the last five years. I earn this by working multiple jobs. I must stress here, that despite earning \$28,000 less than the average Australian each year, I am earning substantially more than most writers. According to the ASA's Survey 2021, 81% of respondents earn less than \$15,000 per annum and advances are low: 58% of respondents received no advances

whatsoever, and only 13% of respondents reported receiving an advance over \$10,000. According to a 2015 Macquarie University study, Australian writers' creative incomes have dropped by nearly 50% in the past two decades.

Recommendations: Literature needs a coherent national, long term plan as opposed to the the current approach in which policies and modes of funding change with every new arts minister or government. We need to try and imagine what 'Literature' will look like in ten years and ensure that it is supported by long-term arts policy rather than being seen as the poor cousin of the performing arts.

We didn't have a cultural policy under the previous Coalition government, and even in the last national cultural policy (under the Gillard government) literature didn't rate much of a mention. Despite enjoying high participation rates, literature is the most poorly funded of all the major art forms through the Australia Council and is the only major art form without a national plan nor does the Australia Council steward a national plan for literature. In the last decade, investment in literature through the Australia Council has declined by 40 percent.

As a member of the board of the Australian Society of Authors (ASA) I support *all* the recommendations included in the ASA's submission. Ones that I would particularly draw your attention to include the introduction of a National Funding Framework and I would ask that, as an absolute minimum, investment in literature through the Australia Council should be restored to the level of 2013-14, or \$9 million. I would also like tax reform to be considered, at least to a particular income threshold. There should not be a tax on literary prizes or PLR/ELR payments — and payments for digital lending rights (DLR) should be introduced and also tax free.

Conclusion: A wide range of measures and surveys indicate that various sources of support available to writers: financial cultural and emotional, are being eroded. Yet almost three-quarters of the adult (and young adult) population read for pleasure. Reading is one of the most common ways in which Australians engage with arts and culture. Writers' festivals are flourishing and attendances growing. Children's books are the basis on which a lifelong love of reading can develop — and the memory of books read when young drives many editors, writers and publishers to enter the industry. Writers are the primary producers of content that inspires other parts of the creative economy: art forms including film, television, theatre, visual arts, music and opera.

I love my country, and I love my work. I am buoyed by the knowledge that many Australians get much pleasure and feel supported by stories, by literature. Writing is how

we share and grow our understanding of the world around us, the challenges, both historical and contemporary. Australia's identity was formed by writing and the literary world is — finally — beginning to engage with the rich diversity of that identity, and, specifically, the depth of knowledge and experience that has existed on and in this land for millennia. 'Australia' is not a static concept: it is dynamic. The truths our stories encompass grow ever more complex and exciting. We need literature more than ever and it would be willfully naive and careless to imagine that such literature can leap forth fully formed. It grows out of community and place. It responds to good governance.

