

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY



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<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com>

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation, July 2022

I make this submission as editor of the *Sydney Review of Books*, Australia's leading critical journal. I work with the nation's best writers and critics to publish longform reviews of Australian and international literature in its many contexts. This role positions me to speak with experience and authority on the Australian literary sector, which is currently weathering the impact of decades of underfunding and policy neglect.

Writers, publishers and literary organisations deliver vital economic and non-economic benefits to the cultural sector and to Australian life. Australians read; literature is neither an elite nor a marginal segment of Australian culture. Writers contribute to most other creative artforms, whether as playwrights and screenwriters, or in communicating and critiquing the work of visual artists and other performers. First Nations stories and storytellers are at the heart of our literary culture. **To thrive, the sector requires not just increased funding, but greater visibility within the policy-making arena.**

About the *Sydney Review of Books*

Established in 2013, the Sydney Review of Books (SRB) is Australia's leading critical journal. Dedicated to longform literary criticism and the essay, the SRB is a publication that expands Australian literary culture by publishing original new critical and literary work. We support diverse practices and people as we shape and enrich the discussion of Australian literature in both national and international contexts. From our base at the Writing and Society Research Centre (WSRC) at Western Sydney University (WSU), Australia's leading centre for Literary Studies and Writing, our contribution to the Australian literary scene is at once intellectual, economic and cultural.

Chronic underfunding

Our writers and literary organisations deliver brilliant work – but they do so under penurious conditions, stretched thin. If the Centrality of the Artist is a pillar of the National Cultural Policy, it follows that artists must be fairly paid. A thriving literary sector is one that fosters big-name novelists with international reputations alongside poets, experimental writers, non-commercial writers, translators, multilingual writers, essayists, critics and so on. Major publishers are, necessarily, guided by market considerations when they commission new work. They can't take risks on new writers or commit to works which are unlikely to break even. A National Cultural Policy that makes A Place for Every Story will foster a literary culture that supports all kinds of writers, and sustains the diverse, risky, innovative, exciting work that moves a culture along, and brings parity with international cultural producers and collaborators.

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Not all writers will seek out forms of government funding – but Australia Council investment in the careers of Australian writers over the past several decades has delivered tremendous dividends. Few prominent or influential Australian writers have not received some form of government support in the course of their careers. At the *Sydney Review of Books* I work with emerging and established writers from across the country. Few, if any, of our contributors derive their income from a single source. Most writers I speak with describe their ability to earn income as something of a lottery, always unpredictable. This precarity has obvious and immediate effects on the ability of writers to develop new work. Professional writers have less time to devote to their practice. The consequences of creative and intellectual risk-taking are heightened by precarity. Many writers will abandon their craft. We all lose out if they do.

Chronic underfunding has also afflicted small to medium literary organisations. As fewer literary organisations share a smaller quantum of funding, the diversity of the literary ecology – the fragile network of writers, readers, publishers, journals and literary organisations that together make up a sector – has been diminished. In my tenure as editor of the *Sydney Review of Books* I have seen pay for writers drop and volunteer labour in literary organisations become normalised. Writers are expected to work for peanuts – and editors and other artswriters for nothing at all.

Little magazines and journals are the drivers of innovation in the literary sector, and they are a vital point of encounter between readers and writers. Increasingly it is journals and magazines like the *Sydney Review of Books* that facilitate the first encounters between Australian writers and international audiences. Small to medium literary organisations cannot be the Strong Institutions that the National Cultural Policy seeks to foster without adequate funding.

The fact that the work of building a national literature is being done in spite of low levels of funding is not to be celebrated. Writers and artswriters deserve to be paid for their labour. Staff burnout, poor governance and organisational collapse are common – and when organisations do collapse, years of funding investment collapses too. We all know that organisations running on a shoestring would present better work were they sustainably funded, and reach wider audiences both in Australia and internationally.

A policy blindspot

Public consultation on arts policy typically platform practitioners in the performing and visual arts. The recent National Cultural Policy development literature roundtable was a welcome exception. The misalignment of administrative settings with literary work is a consequence of the failure to include writers and publishers in high level discussions of arts policy.

I have been a successful applicant for funding to the Australia Council and numerous state and local funding agencies, as well as private funding bodies. The model for arts funding is tailored to the performing arts and to the visual arts. Applicants are asked to address selection criteria that have little to do with the daily business of writing, publishing and editing. When we acquit our grants, we are asked to think of our work as theatremakers do, to approximate our impact in



terms of performances, venues and audiences – not publications and readers. When acquitting grants, award-winning essays by authors with international reputations are treated in much the same way as program notes for a theatrical production. The varied activities that make up the literary sector – writing, editing, publishing, whether online, in hard copy serial form, or in book form – simply do not register. Furthermore, our incomes are not generated by ticket sales to events, and our audiences are widely dispersed. Most literary organisations generate relatively little income through subscriptions, ticket sales, donations or events – but we are an extremely effective means of distributing income to writers and developing new work.

We need the impact of our work to be measured and recognised by administrators of arts funding. This shift in administrative settings will make it far easier to assess both the contribution of literature to the cultural life of the nation, and the return on government investment.

3) Recommendations

I urge the prioritisation of literature in the formation of a new National Cultural Policy and make the following recommendations.

- Restoration of total literature funding at the Australia Council to at least 2013-2014 levels, that being \$9 million per annum.
- Implementation of an Australian Literature Strategy to reinvigorate small and medium literary organisations across the country.
- Establishment of a federal funding stream for literature, independent of the Australia Council, along the lines of the contemporary music initiative funded via APRA.
- Review of funding criteria and reporting mechanisms for Australia Council grants to align with the way writers work and literary organisations function.

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