

# National Cultural Policy Submission



## Submission on the New National Cultural Policy

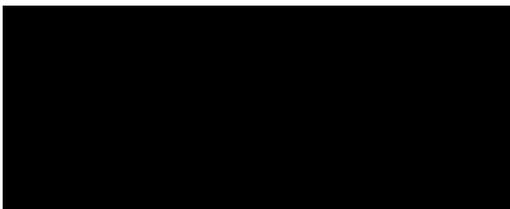
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## About ASAL

The Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) is the peak body for the research, teaching and writing of Australian literature. As the largest organisation of literary studies academics in Australia, ASAL's aims are to encourage the writing and reading of Australian literature and the study of and research into Australian literature and Australian literary culture. ASAL's annual activities include public lectures and other events showcasing Australian writers, an academic journal (*JASAL*) and annual conferences on Australian literature, and a number of prizes for Australian writing and its scholarship, including Australia's longest running literary award, the ALS Gold Medal.

## Submission

Australians are a nation of readers and writers: more Australians read books each week than play sport.<sup>1</sup> The energy, productivity, and flourishing of writing and reading in Australia is demonstrable, but Australian writers and the institutions that sustain them are stretched to breaking point. What stories would Australians tell, and read, in a sector that was sustainably resourced?

As researchers, teachers and writers of Australian literature, we would like to see a cultural policy that reflects the centrality of literary culture in Australian lives and that:

1. Supports all aspects of the infrastructure needed to ensure that Australian readers have access to diverse works of literature (past and present), and a range of ways of engaging with them – from regional libraries to university courses and national institutions;
2. Creates opportunities for First Nations involvement in all aspects of the sector: as writers but also as scholars, teachers, editors and publishers;
3. Includes mechanisms to support cross-sector collaboration between writers, publishers, schools and universities; and
4. Is informed by a whole-of-government approach in which the research and teaching of literature is valued and securely funded.

In this submission we ask that the disjunction between literature's centrality in Australian life and its lack of support in Australian cultural policy and funding is urgently reviewed and rectified. Despite the prevalence of books in Australian homes, and high levels of readership, the importance of literature to Australian culture and society has not been reflected in Australian cultural policy to date. Literature is a cultural sector and industry that reaches into the lives of every Australian: it is the subject of compulsory study at all levels of schooling; it is a source of pleasure, entertainment, community and understanding. Literature is the site on which we, as a settler colonial nation, can understand our histories and where contesting stories can meet.

Literature connects us to the past and informs our thinking about the future. It shapes our children's and young adults' sense of themselves and how they fit into the world at large. A diversity of stories – in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, and social background – is hugely important for the wellbeing of young people in Australia. Literature more broadly is also vital for social inclusion, especially through local libraries, bookclubs and author events. Literature is also a substantial sector of Australia's cultural economy:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/australian-book-readers-24-05-592762e0c3ade-1.pdf>

Australia's book industry contributes approximately \$1.3 billion to the Australian economy each year and employs some 3,700 people.

Australians have long turned to books and storytelling to understand who we are and want to be as a nation, and individually and communally in times of crisis. "We feel if we don't read we shall become rabbits purely and simply," Nat Barton wrote to his mother from Gallipoli in June 1915; requests for Australian books were a stand-out feature in letters sent by Australian prisoners of war. Book sales increased by 7.8% during COVID, but government support for literature did not increase accordingly, as key sources of writers' incomes (such as workshops and public events) declined.

### Supporting First Nations Literary Cultures

Australia is in the midst of a flourishing of First Nations writing which evidences how literature can be a source of strength, pride, and sovereignty. As Melissa Lucashenko writes:

We can exert power not only over the national story or the regional story, but also over the stories we tell each other around the kitchen table. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are as Aboriginal people, and what we are doing here, about who we can be and who we once were.

However, **creative works are not enough on their own to sustain First Nations writing cultures**. The current blossoming of First Nations literary production has not come out of nowhere: it has been built and sustained by writers, editors, publishers, teachers and scholars, most of whom have been working in conditions of great precarity and little recompense. We urgently need to build capacity so that this body of writing can be met with culturally informed and rigorous editing, scholarship and teaching. Accordingly we would like national cultural policy to **recognise and resource the work of First Nations people in the Australian literary sector, not just as creative artists but also as editors, scholars, critics and teachers**.

We recommend:

- programs to build First Nations capacity in the sector, building on the success of the Black&Write program to train First Nations editors and extending this to support First Nations capacity in literary journals and the broader publishing sector;
- facilitating partnerships with the university sector to support the work and careers of First Nations critics and teachers working in the field of Australian literature, for example through research and teaching fellowships for early career researchers transitioning out of their PhD studies, and targeted support for the few mid-career and senior scholars who currently face significant burdens of mentoring and leadership across the sector.

### Strong Institutions

A whole-of-government approach is important to a vibrant and sustainable literary sector. Universities form part of a system of literary infrastructure in Australia that has been unsustainably funded for some years. **Scholarship, criticism, and reviewing of new and old works of Australian literature are vital for writers to make and sustain careers** and this work is currently undertaken in precarious and uncertain circumstances. The journals and magazines that provide the space for critics to review new work – and are often the site of first publication for new works of fiction and poetry, especially by writers from diverse backgrounds – have

not received sufficient funding over the past decade, and the funding that is available is short-term and requires significant administrative overhead for applications and acquittals. So, too, the precarious funding cycles of large-scale infrastructure such as the National Library of Australia's Trove service, or AustLit, the 'definitive information resource and research environment for Australian literary, print, and narrative cultures', destabilise the capacity-building needed at the very foundation of knowledge of Australian literature and literary cultures. **A more reasonable and sustainable model of funding for Australian literary infrastructure is needed to prepare the way for the next generation of scholars, critics, and reviewers.**

As the peak body representing those involved in the study and teaching of Australian literature, we would like to emphasise the vital role that universities play in the Australian literary ecosystem. Australian universities and those who work in them undergird contemporary Australian literature. Academic positions in creative writing are one of the very few jobs available to Australian writers that actively support their work as writers. Australian universities continue to teach generations of Australian writers the craft of writing; they house and support publishers and writers' centres, publish and edit journals of creative writing and criticism, and run public events promoting writers and their work. Academics judge literary prizes, write book reviews and introduce Australian books to thousands of students each year. Universities play a central role in Australian culture by providing opportunities for critics, scholars, and writers to reinterpret the past for the present.

The role of the university in supporting literary production and reception is amplified in regional areas. With a few exceptions, the publishing and reviewing cultures of Australia are concentrated in major centres in the south-east corner of the country. Regional universities play an important role in fostering engagement with Australian literature, and providing opportunities for much broader cultural and institutional networks to be established or consolidated.

The research and teaching of literature sustains the reputations and careers of Australian writers and the Australian publishing industry, including, vitally, the work of First Nations writers. We make this submission in an environment in which the infrastructure that supports the work of the writers and scholars represented by ASAL is significantly under-resourced. Retiring Professors in Australian literature are seldom replaced; brilliant early career researchers are leaving the field because there are so few ongoing positions available. This represents a devastating loss of knowledge and expertise and directly impacts the ability of Australian students to encounter the work of Australian writers at school and university, and for Australian literary culture to be curated and sustained.

**A flourishing national literary culture depends on sustainable funding for the teaching and research of literary studies in Australian universities.** We recommend:

- longer-term funding for literary journals, including through partnerships with universities;
- sustainable funding for key digital infrastructure including Trove and AustLit;
- targeted research support such as the previous (and much over-subscribed) Special Research Initiative;
- fellowships for early career researchers to keep expertise in the sector, and
- creating opportunities for collaboration across the sector (for example, in ensuring that cultural sector institutions are able to be partners on ARC Linkage grants).