

National Cultural Policy Submission

Erica Wagner

Submitted: As an individual

- 1. What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you?
Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:**

First Nations

In my capacity as a children's book publisher for large companies, I have seen the benefit of establishing trusting relationships with First Nations creators and how powerful and important work can be made if publishers can take the time to nurture talent. Books like Mumu Mike Williams' *Kulinmaya* would not have been published by a commercial publisher without an exploratory trip to art centres in the APY lands.

Creative development is a concept close to my heart. Busy commercial publishers and editors are overworked and underpaid and don't have time or energy for the careful relationship building and nurturing of ideas. And yet this is how exceptional work can arise. For example, the Octopus Story Camp project I co-facilitated with Johanna Bell in Darwin in 2019 was a 6- month curated program to support local writers and artists to co-create new stories set in the NT. This program was spectacularly successful with several books, an innovative story map, exhibitions and long-term projects emerging. The total cost of the Octopus project was \$50,000. Projects like the Octopus model could be used to develop opportunities for First Nations people to form relationships, to see how publishing works, to foster careers. We need First Nations editors, designers, publicists, marketers, Rights sellers, as well as creators. *The Relationship is the Project*, by Jade Lillie and Kate Larsen, Cara Kirkwood and Jax Jacki Brown provides brilliant guidance for working with communities. Stable, regular funding would enable long-term creative development projects like Octopus to continue.

A Place for Every Story

PLR and ELR are two of the best government policies ever created. They recognise that libraries are a vital resource. Libraries are where literacy is fostered. With a vital library sector, authors and artists are supported in creating work that is not necessarily obvious and commercial. Education, libraries, academia are all linked. If we want a smart, literate, informed society, we need to recognise that the library houses all the tools we need ... We need to create opportunities for children and teenagers to discuss books and ideas, not just in Book Week. It would be great to see politicians discussing books they love, for example, as well as showing up at the footy.

The Centrality of the Artist

The arts are vital to a civilised society. Books and stories don't happen by themselves. They are not just 'content', they are the product of a writer's imagination, blood sweat and tears, and often years of labour. Being a writer is as vital as being a plumber. It is a job. Being an artist is not a hobby it is a calling. Artists are needed more than ever in a world of fragmented, polarised, distracted conversations.

I support the idea of a wage for writers.

<https://overland.org.au/2022/03/a-liveable-income-guarantee-should-support-artists-and-artists-should-support-a-ubi/>

Currently writers have to work usually in underpaid jobs to support their creative work, so it would be fantastic if the Minister could act on the recommendation in the Creativity in Crisis Report of 700 fellowships:

https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Creativity_in_Crisis-Rebooting_Australias_Arts_Entertainment_Sector_FINAL_-_26_July.pdf

Strong Institutions

Kate Eltham has said that 'The economic structure of the book industry treats authors as small businesses not workers'. So there is not even the protection offered to the performing arts where artists are protected by awards and industrial agreements.

Is it possible to consider tax structures that support the creation of literature. Kate Eltham again: 'Why not have a Creative Industry Growth Centre which would unlock big \$\$s in university research for arts and humanities disciplines in almost all categories of research funding.'

As a small press – Twelve Panels Press – we have literally made our labour intensive graphic novels from the smell of an oily rag. None of us are wealthy. The effort is enormous. We are distributing ourselves as there is absolutely no margin if we are distributed (can't be done for less than 65%). And yet our latest book, Safdar Ahmed's *Still Alive*, has just won its 4th literary award. People recognise it as a landmark literary work. Can we publish more books? Probably not given our lack of resources, but if there was more targeted support for a micropress like ours, we just might be able to.

Reaching the Audience

For children's books, teachers are the best placed to introduce books with complex themes. A trained teacher librarian is vital in every school. But there is not a universal appreciation for this role. I'd love to see teachers teach more Australian children's books. There are so many brilliant ones out there! But teachers have no time to read, everyone is racing, and burnt out after years of COVID teaching online ... Courses too have been cut over decades now. We are in the appalling situation where it is impossible to train to be a teacher librarian in Victoria. At the same time, governments speak of declining literacy standards and the social consequences of not being able to read. The answer is simple. Re-establish reputable courses for teacher librarians. Give teachers breathing space. Support free reading in the classroom. Skilled teachers can use books and stories to start deep and important conversations with their students. We need to respect our teachers, and not bury them in paperwork, admin and pointless testing. The Arts Minister and Education Minister should read Gabbie Stroud's book *Teacher* if they haven't already done so.

Every school should have an artist or writer in residence to work with the students and support teachers.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

The following are thoughts from the judging group for the PM Literary Awards this year, of which I was a part. Our group included James Roy, Demet Divaroren, Paula Kelly, Tony Eaton and Erica Wagner.

Please find a record of our contributions to the input into your work around the development of new policy regarding the importance of reading and the correlations to the Economy - specifically through the lens of Children's and YA Literature and Literacy.

1/ We believe that the funding of a Publishers' Book Bounty type program should be reinstated in the respect of the production of certain books that publishers in the current. the economic climate can not necessarily fund production but should be published.

See link for the previous iteration that was established in 1969, but shelved in the late 90's
http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num_act/bba1969831969178/bba1969831969178.pdf
f Erica can speak further to this.

2/ We support the provision of more Creative Residencies that affirm and contribute to the creative and productive outputs of Australian book creators. Writers and Illustrators alike attest to this dedicated time, support and "space" making a significant positive impact on the quality and timeliness of outputs of their creative works. Demet Divaroren can speak further to this.

3/ Literary Prizes and grants being tagged as TAX-free. Most literary creators in this country earn incomes below the minimum wage and taxable thresholds from their writing. In order to continue writing, and continue to promote this creative endeavor as a viable career (hence contributing to the creative economy) writers and illustrators, should not have to pay 1/3 of their prize money back in income tax. This current practice reduces the productive creative time available to that author or illustrator, and their outputs by 1/3 effectively as creators have to work more beyond their creative projects, in order to earn that increase in household income. It is a Catch 22!! James Roy can speak to this.

Perhaps this could quite simply be changed to an "honorarium" status so that all prizes were seen as having genuine non-taxable status. The prizes rarely reflect the effort or cost involved for the author/illustrator and the dedicated time put towards the creative process and endeavour.

4/ We support the focus on Early literacy with the backing of research that testifies the increased ROI for governments based on the work of Nobel Peace Prize-winning economist James Heckman, (See P 52 "Lifting our Game Report") for the Heckmann equation), and that of Professor Joseph Sparling attached PDF outlining his work at the University of Melbourne's Graduate school of Education. Further Professor Collette Taylor posthumously honored for her work in this area, contributed and reviewed the attached document informing unequivocally the impact of early childhood development and language priority and the direct correlation to health, wellbeing, social and educational as well as economic outcomes for individuals and families alike.

<https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/aboutUs/Documents/lifting-our-game-report.pdf>

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/professionals/profdev/Professor%20Joseph%20Sparling%20-%20The%20Abecedarian%20Approach.pdf>

<https://www.cdacouncil.org/en/newsletter/dr-joseph-sparling-looks-back-on-a-life-devoted-to-enriching-early-care-and-education/>

earlychildhood.qld.gov.au

Well-stocked Libraries and high-quality Library programming advocate for and support early literacy development, as well as parents as first literacy educators. Programs based on evidence-based frameworks like Professor Sparling's Abecedarian Approach, need funding at the federal level to sustain a universal approach across Australia. There is a local library in almost every community - a network of 1700+ public libraries plus outreach mobile services that serve many remote and regional areas.

Paula Kelly can speak further to these areas, as can representatives from the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA).

5/ The funding nationally of the curation of online sessions sourced from a range of books in the form of Bibliotherapy sessions. Current podcast series have reached audiences of 20,000 in recent times (across 2021) promoting the health benefits of read-aloud engagement with literature and poetic non-fiction works. Provided by the State Library of Victoria, Dr. Susan McLaine's Bibliotherapy Podcast Series has been acclaimed by listeners and academics alike. In 2021 The Guardian ran an article 'At once intolerable and addictive': five wellbeing courses and

apps, road-tested', which included this bibliotherapy podcast series - received feedback stating it was the most appreciated online health experience of all those examined.

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/oct/18/at-once-intolerable-and-addictive-five-wellbeing-courses-and-apps-road-tested>

6) The funding of school libraries, collections, and qualified staff.

This is far from a well-understood area. In Victoria, they are starting to build schools with no library!! (Read no collection or specialty staff to share and promote the love of reading!!)

For context a linked article from the UK on topic. Again ALIA will be able to provide further Australian context/ content.

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/08/cressida-cowell-renews-call-for-100m-investment-in-primary-school-libraries?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other&fbclid=IwAR24MBPnwq5tgHTATkHpXPPHsLPLK5O9qCLprjUiN-4S-EWd6qNDDnJKB7Q