

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submission: Australian Government Cultural Policy 2022

Thank you for this opportunity.

I write as an experienced children's book illustrator.

The generation of authors and illustrators whose careers started around the 70's and 80's were lucky to be part of a cultural blossoming.

This came out of the questioning and challenging of how things actually *were* in Australian politics and culture back then. An appetite for substantive change was evident from this time, continuing for some decades.

Whitlam PM was genuinely interested in culture and advocated for it. In South Australia the wonderful Premier Don Dunstan did the same.

To my mind, culturally they shared an international outlook. They embodied the ambition to create a more confident Australian identity in a changing international context.

In my experience, (firstly, the way it all rippled down to the SA School of Art), the goal of the Australian book publishing industry, and a little later the Australian educational publishing was to produce storytelling art with increasing sophistication.

At this time, it was thought important to produce our own books for Australian kids (as distinct from UK and US) that they could relate to and identify with. There have been many magnificent books done in Australia that are wonderfully inventive. For youngsters stories are told with humour, wit, empathy and wonder, and often distinctly of our communities, landscape and society.

The art-styles vary quite widely, albeit with many international influences.

It is a fair thing to ask today, 'who is reading these books?' It seems the wrangling of kids away from screens is so very hard. Particularly if home-life is indifferent to reading.

One response to that is the traditional role school and public libraries have played in young family lives. Readers can browse, selecting books that interest *them*, their individual selves.. Or, at school, a librarian might prompt a book to a resistant reader, knowing the reader just has to get some way into it, before becoming immersed in it.

Libraries are very important spaces. Usually they are calm places, maybe a refuge.

In schools, students deserve to have a well-managed library, and access to a broad range of books.

Libraries in Australia are a fundamental part of the publishing economic ecosystem. Australia has approximately twelve thousand libraries. The hope that most of them may purchase a copy of your book is a reasonable hope, but only rarely happens. However, the library purchasing remains important because it feeds Australian created books into the *Lending Rights Scheme*.

Public Lending Right commenced in 1975. *Educational Lending Right* extended the scheme to school libraries in 2001.)

These twin schemes are magnificent.

The way it works is respected and trusted. Despite its calculation method being based on a sample, an eligible author/illustrator has their 'score' (payment) effectively curated by the purchasing choices of hundreds of librarians. I believe this broadens the choice of books going into libraries. Most importantly it increases the chance of unusual books with a smaller readership make a bit of income.

The scheme measures the stock of books held in libraries. The effect of this is your *score* increases slowly as more books enter the system. It decreases as your books are destocked. I understand libraries need to periodically make room for new books, and delete books that are barely used.

The Lending Rights payment feels like an anchor. It grants a modest income in a creative life.

An author/illustrator's payment is scaled in the progressive manner, like tax scales, so individuals who achieve massive commercial & library success – it does happen – can't walk away with the vast bulk of the Scheme's funds.

Broadly put, it is impossible to tell which books will succeed commercially in the children's publishing area. Every book is somewhat original, or somewhat derivative or formulaic. The editorial choices to try and achieve commercial sales can end up flattening the story telling – maybe flattening that unique voice, or twist, or truth, to the story.

All illustrated books take significant time to produce. In my experience several months or much longer. The advances are not large. For example, a project with a larger publisher this year is \$6000. The work to date thus far has taken 6 months and the painting has just commenced. This is not unusual.

But we all need an income.

The Lending Rights Schemes are of fundamental importance Australian authors and illustrators in the childrens' book industry.

On a related, but separate issue, the Australian Educational Publishing Industry enjoyed wonderful growth in the 80's and 90's, particularly in the Children's Publishing area. This growth had the same trajectory as the Trade industry. The growth was primed by academic work in Aust and NZ universities on literacy. Small and large publishers here in Australia developed reading schemes etc that were of their time and place. Importantly they were fresh and freewheeling and designed to reflect curriculum developments as well.

This work successfully achieved massive overseas sales, especially to school regions within the US. The work was so successful that large US educational publishers bought several of the Australian providers, for awhile consolidating the editorial work in the US, but using Australian creators. My understanding is that market is now served largely by home US providers.

My point in recalling this, is that the learning of literacy is a challenging space. Personally, I would love to see updated academic work that explicitly tackles literacy as it is now.

Children are much the same, they enjoy stories. But their manner of being in the world has shifted in line with devices and social media platforms, and with young parents who may not have a fond sentimental memory of being read to.

There is much in our world that reads like gibberish, including corporate speak.

I do have a sentimental view of libraries, and librarians. I do sthink they have no less an important role today than ever. A good librarian can have a distinct, informed, warm & enlightening role with students.

Thank you for reading.

Craig Smith

Author note:

My career as a childrens' book illustrator commenced in the mid 1970's.

I am a beneficiary of Lending Rights.

I have collaborated as illustrator on over four hundred picture books, chapter books and lots of educational readers.