

National Cultural Policy Submission

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I am a full-time, professional author of 24 books for children and young adults. My first book was published in 1998. Since then, my works have been published internationally and translated into many languages. I have won and been shortlisted for numerous awards including the NSW Premier's History Award, CBCA Book of the Year Award and the WA Premier's Book Award, amongst others. My work is studied in schools and universities both in Australia and abroad. I have been nominated twice for the Swedish Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for a lifetime contribution to Children's Literature. I have worked as a writer-in-residence at scores of schools and institutions and presented at writers' festivals across Australia and abroad. I have taken Australian stories to the world. Currently, I serve as a director on the board of the Australian Society of Authors and the Copyright Agency. I am the daughter of an artist and the mother of a writer, a graphic designer and a musician. My life is deeply invested in Australian art and story.

I support the ASA's submission and their thoroughly thought-out requests for improving the lives of Australian authors. Literature underpins the vitality of the wider arts sector. Without Australian stories to inspire, adapt, and discuss Australian culture languishes. A national plan for literature is long overdue.

Australian writers are becoming increasingly impoverished. Many talented authors do not meet their potential due to financial constraints. Writing stories and making art is a joy but it is also a job. It takes years of dedication and hard work to master the craft and to produce a body of work. Funding to writers has regressed and economic conditions have worsened. Tax policies favour hobbyists that are exempt from tax on literary prizes, unlike dedicated professional writers. There is a myriad of ways that government could empower Australian writers to excel from more sympathetic taxation policies for people working in creative industries, enhanced protection of copyright, an expansion of Public & Education Lending Rights to include Digital Lending Rights, the restoration of Australia Council funding and an increase in funding to literature, as well as a reinvigoration of the study of Australian texts in schools and tertiary institutions.

Every year I visit schools throughout Australia to teach creative writing and to talk about my work. I have witnessed a steady decline in the use of Australian books as set texts over the past 20 years. This impacts on the entire industry and on Australia's cultural integrity. The recent (2022) Civica list of most borrowed public library titles illustrates this trend. Of the top 10 most borrowed children's fiction books, only three were by Australian authors. Of the top 10 YA novels only one was by an Australian author.

Without quotas of Australian content in Australian schools, tertiary institutions and public libraries, Australian books become increasingly marginalised under competition from global publishing. Lack of focus on Australian titles reinforces cultural cringe. Quotas of Australian content in Australian schools, libraries and tertiary institutions should be a key pillar of arts policy.

A major factor in the decline of the teaching of Australian texts is the absence of focussed attention on Australian content in education degrees. Teachers emerge from their training with little exposure to contemporary Australian literature. All education degrees should include a unit in teaching Australian texts to empower teachers to share these stories with their students.

Teachers are time poor. Every Australian school needs a dedicated specialist or teacher-librarian who can help curate content with an Australian focus in the school library and the classroom and support and encourage teachers in the teaching of Australian stories from the early years through to senior secondary. Every public library should have dedicated displays of Australian content and ensure that classic Australian texts are available in both print and digital formats. Every Australian university should offer courses in Australian Literature and have a Chair of Australian Literature.

The National Centre for Australian Children's Literature, The Literature Centre in Fremantle and the Copyright Agency's Reading Australia all operate on tiny budgets to encourage the teaching of Australian content. The CBCA works tirelessly to promote Australian stories. It should not be left to volunteers and underfunded organisations to champion the cause of Australian literature. The teaching of Australian content must be supported by federal and state funding.

In response to the five pillars:

First Nations First. Promoting Indigenous art should not be compensation for the theft of country, nor should it be considered a social justice policy that somehow mitigates the impetus to pursue a treaty. First Nations art is not a cultural artefact – it is dynamic Australian art that deserves to be funded, recognised and celebrated. In a nation that underfunds and undermines artists in so many ways, there is something disingenuous about this pillar of Australian arts policy.

A place for every story. Until parents from disadvantaged backgrounds can see evidence that the arts can provide an economically viable career pathway for their children, Australia will continue to struggle to elevate diverse voices. To sustain a career in the arts in Australia requires a blend of stubborn fortitude and good luck. In the first decade of my career, two Australia Council grants and a modest inheritance after the death of my mother put me in a financial position where I could afford to pay down my mortgage and dedicate time to my writing. It allowed me the space to produce six novels within a decade. I acknowledge my privilege and am grateful for the support and encouragement I received. But if my mother hadn't died in 2001, when I was an emerging writer, I doubt I would have been able to create the many works that have established my career.

We cannot insist that we want diversity if only those who have families that can support them as they build a career can afford to make a life in the arts. If an artists' career is contingent on the death of their parents or necessitates decades of poverty and sacrifice, diverse voices will continue to be silenced.

Australia loses much talent and diversity to poverty. Artists and writers find it impossible to obtain credit and secure mortgages. With no security of tenure, irregular, unpredictable and lumpy incomes and no superannuation, many young artists leave the arts industry after a decade or more of studying and investment in their careers. When the young artist realises they might never be able to afford a home or a family, they seek alternative employment and their creative output shrivels. The nation loses the investment that they have made in the artists' education and a generation of disillusioned creators fail to fulfill their potential.

If we truly wish to encourage diverse voices, we must provide secure economic pathways for those willing to commit themselves to the arts.

The centrality of the artist. Most artists and writers wish for little more than the time and the space to create. Financial instability is the enemy of a vibrant cultural industry. Increased grants to artists, tax-free grants and prizes and multi-year grants would be fair recognition of the centrality of the artist in making the entire arts industry profitable. Every piece of creative work has the potential to generate income for thousands of other arts workers for generations to come.

Cultures that value the contribution of the arts to the community do so by making it economically viable work. The Irish model of a higher tax threshold for income generated by royalties and guaranteed multi-year income for thousands of artists offers a successful example of how to invigorate cultural industries and recognise that artists are central to culture.

Artists and writers are too often required to subsidise arts organisations through offering their time and expertise for less than industry rates in the guise of promotion. Creators are expected to be grateful for recognition and usually respond with generosity to requests for their time and expertise in support of festivals, the education sector and cultural institutions. Until everyone recognises the value of writers' and artists' time and pays them industry rates and superannuation for appearances, advice and other forms of engagement, Australian artists will struggle to sustain their careers.

Even with income averaging, financial planning for artists and authors is fraught. A book or significant work of art can take years to complete. As welcome as it may be, securing a grant or winning a prize can be destabilising, generating unexpectedly high tax bills and creating a nightmare of administration, particularly for low-income artists who may be partially dependent on social security. A tax system that is more sympathetic to the unique challenges of creative life would bring benefits to the entire cultural sector and the wider community.

Strengthen the capacity of the sector. Fellowships, residencies, institutional grants, and Australian institutions that celebrate Australian stories are crucial to sustaining Australian writers and artists. Cultural institutions should not be subject to efficiency dividends. Efficiency dividends at the National Library of Australia and the National Museum of Australia have directly impacted on writers and artists by reducing commissions, undermining the publication of Australian stories, and destabilising the publishing arms of these important supporters of Australian voices.

Ensure Australian creativity thrives here and abroad.

Australia may share a language with other English-speaking countries but our first priority must be to our own people and our own stories. If the measure of success must always be recognition by foreigners, then we condemn our artists and writers to produce works that are derivative shadows of other cultures. Not every work of art nor every story will speak to people from other cultures. First and foremost, we must celebrate the stories that focus on our country, our people, and our unique experiences.