

National Cultural Policy Submission

Anonymous

Submitted: As an artist

First Nations

While it is great to see the increasing number of stories of First Nations artists told from their perspective, this is not reflected in the arts bodies themselves – whether the government support organisations, or the industry bodies, particularly in publishing, the dearth of First Nations professionals amongst publishing and writing organisations means these stories will always feel like they're coming from "outside". Incentives and mentorships in publishing and editorial roles is as important as cultivating First Nations artists.

A Place for Every Story

As above, the lack of diversity in arts organisations, but especially in industry, such as publishing, with which I am most familiar needs urgent attention. Elevating artists from diverse backgrounds is central to representing truly Australian stories, however, this will always be limited if the businesses and decision makers in those businesses do not reflect this same diversity.

The Centrality of the Artist

Being an artist in this country is really hard. Financially, in particular. Sacrifices are made constantly, additional work is taken on to supplement income, inevitably limiting artistic output. In my own working life, I have taught at universities, run workshops, visited schools, developed my own teaching programs, spoken publicly and travelled widely, all in an effort to cordon off some time to write. I've been doing it for more than a decade now – closer to two. It's unsustainable, especially as I grow older. The midlist authors who earn little due to writing specifically Australian stories that do not sell overseas struggle with this the most. I am one of them. I can spend more than one year writing a book – two by the time it's revised and edited and marketed, etc. before it's on bookshelves, and for that I might be lucky to earn five thousand dollars. If it sells well, I might earn ten thousand. I've told stories that are uniquely Australian because I want to see our culture and our stories told, but the reality is, for me to sustain my creative practice, I've made a conscious decision to write a "universal", by which is usually meant an "American" novel next. I would rather write about my city, and write for young people here, but the truth is, it's highly unlikely to sell overseas as I do, which is basically the only way – short of the very competitive, underfunded grant and scholarships sometimes available to certain writers.

The current system is killing the Australian midlist which is, frankly, about 90% of the Australian literary community.

Strong Institutions

I'm not sure what happened to the Literature Board, but the lack of targeted literary / writing specific opportunities has been particularly notable in recent years. I understand that books and writing are less visible and perhaps less dynamic in the public cultural space, however, these other forms often spring from the writing, and are lesser without it. While it's great to engage in multimedia platforms, and across media and gaming, the emphasis on these platforms makes it even harder to tell stories that belong on the page. The stories that we grew up with. Stories for readers,

not just watchers and viewers. It's especially important to continue to engage children in reading, not just viewing of story telling – especially teens. The loss of the Centre for Youth Literature in Melbourne was a massive blow to the teen writers market and teen writers and readers. The role they played in advocating for readers and writers, especially local stories and storytellers, was enormous. There has been nothing like the same level of engagement with teen readers by any other organisation since. Giving up on teen readers is a huge mistake, but nor will it be covered by simply invest in “children’s literature”. Teens are not children, as such. Their interests and needs are specific and worthy of attention and expertise in order to better reach them. This is sorely lacking in any of the literature organisations that exist today.

Reaching the Audience

More engagement with overseas and international markets would help a lot – but again, this is impossible to afford on a midlist income. More opportunities for a wider range of authors, not just the usual suspects, would make a big difference to broadening the range of voices and stories heard.

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

A focus on telling Australian stories! Especially for teens and young adults. There has not been the investment or time lent to these areas specifically, which is why the handful of kidlit / teen lit writers who have succeeded financially by selling overseas are telling stories that are not especially Australian. They could be set anywhere. This needs to be addressed urgently, before we lose more writers to the reality of having to pay mortgages and bills that royalties don't come close to covering.