

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: As an artist

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:

Strong Institutions

Many of our cultural and educational institutions have been siloed, both conceptually and in practice. I find it depressing that government (and often private philanthropic) funding of institutions has become all about capital works, rather than the people who staff them, with all their skill and expertise, or those who perform or teach or mentor inside them. Policymakers have chosen to ignore that cultural institutions are interrelated, part of a general ecology of research and creative production. Instead, cultural institutions have been pitted against each other. Often populist ideologies win out, the excessive funding of the Australian War Memorial being a case in point, while other institutions such as the National Archives or the National Library of Australia languish. Creative people end up doing DCAs through universities because it's the only way they can get paid for what they do, while universities are squeezing their own humanities and creative arts departments, trying to get more fee-paying students even though there are fewer jobs in the cultural sector when they graduate.

Reaching the Audience

We are surrounded by content and every artform and entertainment outlet is competing with all the others for eyes on screens, bums on seats, subscriptions and so on. It's sometimes hard for Australian stories to rise above this and be seen. If the only big productions that get made here are those funded by Hollywood, everything else gets swamped and all the local skills that are developed will follow the money overseas.

Book publishing has the opposite problem. People in Australia want to read Australian stories, but it's a crowded market. I often wished there was money available to offer overseas publishers small sums (between \$5-10k) to buy rights to key Australian books and writers that deserved international audiences. Some of this would be used for translation, but even in English-language markets it could be a deal-sweetener that would be good for writer and publisher, but also be an act of Australian soft power. Canada is a good model of this, as is France.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

A Place for Every Story

As an editor and publisher (in addition to my work as a writer), I want to have the resources to work with writers who may be emerging or from backgrounds that haven't traditionally been represented in Australian publishing, on the page or in acquisitions and sales meetings. Because often people's decision-making is based on what has been successful before, taking a risk becomes harder. A bit of external funding via the Australia Council (for ongoing training and development, promotion and publicity, for developing writers' work) could shake this up.

The Centrality of the Artist

The work I do as a writer and magazine editor, and the work I did as a long-time book publisher at an independent publishing house, is in fact all about collaboration and teamwork, although it is the artists' name that goes on the front cover, or who gets the byline. Even though the book publishing industry is infamous for its low salaries, in-house staff were usually paid much better than any author, unless their book was extraordinarily successful and royalties rained down, a rare occurrence except for the most popular. The industry relies on freelance creatives — designers, editors, proofreaders, photographers, illustrators — who are generally not paid well either.

Because I work for a state government institution now, the writers I commission are better paid, at \$1 per word, than most I have published or edited through my whole career. Yet even still, while \$1 per word may be seen as the holy grail as someone pointed out recently, if Hemingway were being paid now at his rate he got in his prime, he would get \$21 a word. The digital economy has meant that we expect words to be free, but we must continue to push for writers to be paid properly. Government can be part of this push. The money that the big tech companies are paying media companies should trickle down to freelance writers; if it isn't, efforts should be made to ensure it happens. Most of the time, I am certain that where publishers are able to get Australia Council funding (an increasingly rare occurrence that will hopefully change), that money goes to authors.

When I think about my own writing, in the past year, I have published a well-received book under the imprint of a major multinational publisher and was paid the final amount of my advance, less what goes to my agent. I have done a lot of freelance writing for major media companies and other outlets. I was paid for narrating my audio book. I received a small PLR payment. None of my work was picked up by the Copyright Agency's sample. My income for what has been hundreds of hours of work is smack bang on the average for Australian writers: \$11,000.

Strong Institutions

I wonder if literature is so easily marginalised because it is so solitary. Or because it is so easily mythologised: a writer, it is popularly assumed, is a man who is happy to work in a garret subsisting on bread and cheap wine, doing it for love and the occasional low-paid freelance gig. Even if this imagined writer is lucky enough to receive a competitive literary grant, chances are that it will be less than the annual salary of the average Australian full-time worker. If this imagined writer, who is actually most likely to be a woman, as will be most of her readers, wins a literary prize, it will be taxed. If she wins the lottery it won't be. If readers borrow her ebooks from libraries, rather than in print form, she will not be eligible for PLR payments. If she works as a creative writing lecturer or tutor at a university, her job will most likely be precarious. Her university employer may be subject to wage claims. The work she does talking about books, on ABC radio for example, will be unpaid because they no longer have a budget for expert guests. She may write and research her book during working hours at a public institution such as a library, which thanks to funding cuts is open for fewer hours, with reduced staff, most of whom will be casual. If she does an event at a bookshop its staff will be happy to champion her but will only be making minimum wage themselves. If her book is not commercially successful, her increasingly risk-averse publisher may drop her advance next time around, assuming there is a next time.

I feel like the whole literary sector is ground down and fighting for crumbs. Talented and energetic writers, publishers, designers, reviewers and booksellers have become so used to doing what they do for so little reward that it has become normalised. I don't think it should be.

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

More money! That culture not be considered as some kind of indulgent, elitist afterthought, but integrated into the government and life of the nation. That the arts not be seen as some kind of worthy penance we must all engage in, separate to the rest of our lives. It can be fun and messy, and sometimes transformative or uplifting. That individual artists of all stripes be allowed to fail without precluding any further institutional support for the rest of their careers.