

National Cultural Policy Submission

Melanie Joosten

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:

The Centrality of the Artist

Artists are not central in Australia. Writers are not central within Australian arts policy and funding. It seems there is very little support for the role of artists, particularly writers. Govt responses (and economic support) to artists during the pandemic, including writers, demonstrated this. Not being employed by an organisation or institution, writers had less support than publicists, designers, publishers, editors, booksellers...everyone involved in the creation of books.

Writing is treated as a hobby by the industry and by funding bodies. It is something to be picked up and put down depending on funding and other employment. Short term grants – the availability of which has declined over recent years – require artists to stop their ongoing employment to make use of the time/funding granted. And then back to employment in other industries. Every writer must also work in other employment, because even publication and sales do not translate into a viable income.

The publishing industry and the governments treat writing as a hobby - so it is by necessity, artists must treat writing as a hobby. It becomes something to do in spare hours, for the love of the craft, for the personal challenge, for consolation. It is not a career, a vocation, a job or even a gig.

It must become a hobby, and we must come to terms with this if we wish to write. We cannot afford to invest time, money, skill, education in writing. We cannot become good (really good) at it and the Australian publishing landscape reflects this, with undercooked books being published (that do a disservice to readers and to the long-term viability of a writer's career) and a lack of support to writers.

Reaching the Audience

All writers need an audience, but it should not be forgotten that an audience for a writer is a reader, and reading is often solitary. The focus by arts organisations and governments on the 'social' elements of the publishing industry, and particularly the focus on social media and promotion, forgets that for a book to reach its audience it must be read – not just attractively photographed on Instagram. For books to be read, they need to be good. For books to be good, they need to be written well. For books to be written well, writers need to be supported in developing their craft, and having it properly edited and critiqued. The little time they have to write should not be sucked up by 'visible' writing-adjacent activities just because they are easier to count and quantify (eg. Number of attendees at events). Audiences for writing can happen quietly at home – support the writers and that supports the readers.

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:

First Nations

I strongly support celebrating the centrality of First Nations cultures to Australian artistic identity. However, every artist/writer needs more than singular grants or programs. First Nations writers need ongoing income and support to develop their craft. More than anyone they should not be made reliant on piecemeal handouts from governments but have an ongoing living wage to support the development of their writing craft.

The Centrality of the Artist

I have had success as a writer. I have written and published three books (two fiction and one non-fiction). One of these has been made into a movie. I was once named Australia's best writer under 30 by the Kathleen Mitchell Award, and I have received positive recognition for my work. However, even with this I cannot place my own artist self even at the centre of my own life. In order to have an income, pay a mortgage, look after my children – and be able to contribute to society in a way that is recognised – I have a job in a different field. My income comes from being a social worker/researcher and policy adviser. I write from 5.30 to 7am in the morning then go to work. It takes years to write a novel in this way. But there is no other way. If I get this novel published I will receive an advance of \$5000-\$8000. I may, if I am lucky, sell movie rights for \$100,000. This has happened for 1 of my 3 books, and who knows if it will ever happen again. I may sell into other territories for a few thousand dollars here and there. That's all, that's the income of a writer for a book written in snatched hours over 5 years. In those five years there will be editors, publishers, booksellers, designers, publicists, event organisers etc, who have earned a wage well over the \$10-20k I have. And so they should, let's not pretend that in the female-dominated publishing industry anyone is making big wages. But how is it any industry can support everyone else involved in making a book – except the person who writes it?

I have been successful with Australia Council and Arts Victoria grants in the past, which have allowed me to take time away from paid work to do writing. But this means cancelling contracts and quitting jobs – then going out to find them again when the grant money is used up. It's hardly sustainable, it looks terrible to a mortgage broker. In the last 4 years have applied multiple times to Australia Council and Create Vic with no success – there's not enough money to go around and as I spend less time writing I can feel my hold on my craft slipping away. I'm not the writer I once was. I will never be the kind of writer I aspire to be because I cannot afford it.

Australian governments do not truly believe in supporting the centrality of the artist. Australian artists find it a futile exercise. The only people who truly support the centrality of the artists are readers, audiences and all the Australian people who regularly read books, go to libraries, theatres, gigs, festivals. Who still get excited when I mention I'm a writer and tell me about the latest book they've read. Who ask what I'm working on and if I love spending my days devoted to words. Who cannot quite believe that it's impossible to make a living as a writer in Australia, and it's impossible to become the sort of artist or writer you had hoped to be.