

15 August 2022

Dear Minister Burke,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to this consultation and describe the life of a typical Australian writer in 2022. This submission responds directly to pillars 2, 3 and 5 of the new policy, in particular: the centrality of the artist.

Writers are exceptionally flexible, entrepreneurial, energetic and resourceful workers. We can be considered primary producers for many diverse forms of the creative arts, from books to films, theatre, opera, television and games. Public investment in funding for writers is exceptional value for money – apart from keeping poverty (just) at bay, it benefits the wider community as books and literature are proven to promote social cohesion and mental health, improve literacy and numeracy and have a powerful community-building function across our nation.

During our various pandemic lockdowns, people have turned to the art forms we make. Despite this, writers are in serious economic difficulty and they need your help.

Income from books

Writers in Australia earn negligible income from sales of their books. Just a tiny handful of us earn as much as the average Australian wage from our writing. Many people believe writers are financially supported by their publishers, so it's a surprise for them to learn that writers earn just 10 per cent of the cover price of a book (around \$2.50 per new book sold). Experienced, prizewinning and highly respected writers are routinely paid advances of under \$15,000 for a book that may have taken five years to write.

Only since the 2015 publication of *The Natural Way of Things*, my seventh book and a surprise bestseller, have I been able to make a living purely from my books. For the first 15 years of my publishing life I worked several poorly-paid part-time jobs at once to make ends meet, only just paying off a maxed-out credit card and other debts, was often behind in my tax returns and, in my early writing years, sometimes had to choose between having the phone or the electricity cut off for inability to pay the bill.

The widely-quoted average income from books of just under \$13,000 per annum includes writers of all types of books – including textbooks, cookbooks, sports books and so on. When we think of

‘the arts’ and books, the iconic Australian stories that have defined our culture in so many ways – the *Cloud Streets* and *Too Much Lips* and *Jasper Jones’s* and *Secret Rivers* and *The Slaps*, the *Carpentarias* and *Narrow Road to the Deep Norths* - we’re talking largely about literary fiction. In this literary genre, an author’s average annual income is even more shockingly low: around \$4000 on 2008 figures. Between 2008 and 2015, the median creative income for writers *fell by 33 per cent.*¹

Many extremely high profile and highly respected writers have struggled on or near the poverty line for years. Before he won the 2014 Booker Prize for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Richard Flanagan was on the verge of leaving Tasmania to find work driving trucks in the northern Australian mining sector. Before she won a Copyright Agency fellowship and subsequently the Miles Franklin Award, Melissa Lucashenko had survived by being an Uber driver. The prizemoney for these awards range from around \$60,000 to over \$200,000. Of those prizes, only the Prime Minister’s Literary Award is tax free. And most writers who win a prize will have that experience only once in their lives.

Income from other sources

Obviously, in order to survive, we writers do other income-earning work. But even combining all income sources, the *median total gross income* of writers in 2015 was \$35,000.

Most writers I know have at least one and often three degrees. They are highly educated, highly motivated and highly skilled workers, but in order to make time to write they must accept work that is flexible, casual, part-time, freelance, poorly paid and precarious.

We work in hospitality, in teaching (privately, in workshops and occasional classes as well as in universities and schools), in the endangered species of work known as freelance journalism (where pay rates have been dropping for decades), copywriting for corporates and community organisations. We work – when these jobs exist - as dishwashers in airline catering centres, behind cinema ticket counters, in supermarkets and call centres and shops and libraries, in women’s refuges, in hairdressers’ and on building sites. We repair bicycles for a living, deliver for Uber eats, drive Ubers and taxis and soft-drink delivery trucks. We study. And in the hours available to us, we write.

¹ <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/making-art-work-throsby-report-5a05106d0bb69.pdf>

If they are any of these workers *and* writers of colour or living with disabilities and/or from cultural or economic backgrounds in which the idea of being a professional writer is alien or shameful, the barriers to writing are vastly greater.

The impact of public funding

‘Life-changing’ is the way writers often describe the receipt of one-off grants from public funding, from the Australia Council, the Copyright Agency or other bodies. Usually these grant amounts are pitiful compared to normal incomes – a grant might be \$40,000 or \$20,000 or \$10,000 - but writers make that money last longer than seems humanly possible.

It must be noted that every cent of public funding for writers and all prizemoney (except the PM’s award) is also subject to income tax – so a \$30,000 grant or prize soon shrinks. Income averaging benefits only a very few writers.

All of the above has been made much worse by the continuing vast inequity in funding available to literature through the Australia Council. Funding for the Major Performing Arts sector is quarantined from any of the cuts repeatedly made to the Council. The remaining funds are shared among all other art forms, but literature suffers the most.

According to the Australia Council annual report 2018/19, literature is the least funded art-form by dollar value other than Emerging and Experimental Arts in the contestable funding rounds, with \$5 million given to literature. This is about half the spending on music (\$10.6 million), theatre (\$14.1 million) and visual arts (\$12.7 million). Yet books inspire stories across all these art-forms.

A solution to this would be to vastly increase funding for the Australia Council, and mandate that literature receives an equitable portion of those funds. We need protected, quarantined, decent funds to go to writers, focusing on individual grants as much as (or more than) organisations.

Writers are crucial primary producers of Australian culture – our books are adapted for screen and film and stage and opera; we write fiction *and* screenplays, stage plays *and* short stories, poetry, novels *and* journalism. Without writers there is no publishing industry, no bookselling industry, there are no literary agents, no book reviewers or printers, no book and mixed arts festivals drawing tourism to regional areas out of season. Without writers there is no film

CHARLOTTE WOOD WRITER

industry, no theatre or television. With our imaginations and our intellects we create jobs of many different kinds in all these industries.

Primary producers in agriculture and mining are offered subsidies, incentives and business development opportunities, but none of that is available to us; instead we are offered the smallest possible – and diminishing – proportion of federal arts funding.

And yet - optimism!

Australian literature is central to how we see ourselves and how we want the world to see us. We define ourselves through our favourite books' evocations of landscape, history and character. The international success of our writers – the likes of Tom Kenneally, Patrick White, Richard Flanagan, Liane Moriarty, Shirley Hazzard, Jane Harper, Kate Grenville, Mem Fox, Gerald Murnane – inspires us and builds national pride.

Bookshops, literary festivals and libraries have created positive ways to rebuild communities affected by bushfires, drought and other hardships. Reading was one of the central ways by which Australians pulled through the tough times of COVID lockdowns.

Literature is the most democratically available art form of all, in that you can partake of it in its pure, original form, for free (through libraries), anywhere you live. You can't see the real Blue Poles unless you go to Canberra. But you can read the real, original *A Fortunate Life* or *Possum Magic* anywhere, anytime. This is indeed magical, and crucial.

Writers are superlatively creative, resilient workers and have much to offer in re-imagining a post-COVID world. All we need is some basic, sustained, protected, equitable financial support to do so.

Thanks so much for reading. If there were any opportunity in future to meet and discuss the needs of writers in more detail I would be most grateful.

With sincere best wishes,



Dr Charlotte Wood, AM
The Luminous Solution
The Weekend
The Natural Way of Things
& other books



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