

National Cultural Policy Submission

Kate Mildenhall

I am a mid-career writer and podcaster living on Wirundjeri country on the outskirts of Melbourne. My latest novel, *The Mother Fault* (2021) was published in the middle of Melbourne lockdown and was shortlisted for Longlisted for the 2021 ABIA General Fiction Book of the Year and Shortlisted for the 2020 Aurealis Awards, Best Science Fiction Novel. My debut novel, *Skylarking* (2016) was longlisted for Best Debut Fiction in The Indie Book Awards 2017 and the 2017 Voss Literary Prize.

I am currently writing my third novel, which is under contract to my publisher, and undertaking a PhD in creative process at RMIT University.

I co-host The First Time podcast with writer Katherine Collette, where we interview Australian and International writers about their debut writing experiences and what they've learned over their career. The podcast is now in its fifth season and we have published over 180 episodes reaching an ever-growing audience (currently 195k downloads).

I regularly teach writing, mentor other writers, host events with other writers and am invited to appear at festivals. I am a member of ASA and Writers Victoria.

I have been lucky to have been awarded two Creative Vic grants for my writing, and have benefited from awarded residencies at Varuna, Bundanon and upcoming at Michael King Residency in New Zealand. My income is made up of a PhD scholarship, an advance for my second novel and small payments from royalties, PLR/ELR, teaching and workshop work, mentoring and a small amount (approx. \$4k - 2022 only) from income now generated through the podcast. I am fortunate to also be supported by my partner's income. I would not be able to support my two children on my own current income and I am aware that my writing income is higher than many in the industry.

In 2022, we decided to focus on some of the most revered and established writers working in Australia as our guests for the podcast. What many of these conversations have revealed is the vast discrepancy between the kind of financial and broader cultural support these writers feel they were afforded as emerging artists who were then able to establish careers. Helen Garner, Michelle de Kretser, Christos Tsiolkas, Sophie Cunningham, Bernadette Brennan and others have all mentioned the early and ongoing support they had from publishers (and grants) that did not necessarily correspond with book sales. Anecdotally, what we hear again and again from the emerging and early career writers we speak to is that they are not getting opportunities to publish their second or third novels because they did not meet sales targets.

If we want a thriving, diverse, exciting literature sector there must be more support for writers (and artists in general) to create and promote their work regardless of, and sometimes despite the crude measures of book sales data.

It must also be acknowledged that writers do an extraordinary amount of unpaid labour in the promotion of their colleagues (through endorsements, events, informal mentoring, career advice) that has become, it seems, an integral part of the writing and publishing industry and which is not valued or accounted for in any financial regard. This must be rectified.

The funding of the Australia Council for the Arts should be not only restored, but increased and fairly distributed.

In preparing this submission, I want to acknowledge the unpaid labour of writer Jennifer Mills, whose words I have used as template above and in the summary below. I would also like to acknowledge what I imagine will be the gap in submissions to the National Cultural Policy from the many, many writers who are unable to make a submission because of the already untenable demands on them.

In summary, a robust and sustainable National Cultural Policy should:

1. Acknowledge that artists are essential workers;
2. Acknowledge that culture forms part of the foundational economy, and that access to art and culture is a fundamental right;
3. Follow and support First Nations leadership in arts and culture and learn from First Nations understanding of the importance of arts and culture;
4. Restore and increase Australia Council funding with a focus on small to medium organisations and the direct funding of independent artists and writers;
5. Make all public funding for arts and cultural projects contingent on fair pay;
6. Increase the number of fellowships offered to reflect the value and breadth of our working artists and writers, and pay them a living wage;
7. Invest in long-term ways to fund working artists and writers more sustainably, such as a Basic Income and public employment schemes;
8. Abolish punitive mutual obligation requirements for artists who are out of work, and for everybody;
9. Invest in arts and culture by employing working artists and writers throughout education, literacy and reading initiatives, public libraries, and health care settings. Establish and fund salaried residencies in schools, libraries and health care settings;

10. Extend the Public Lending Rights scheme to include Digital Lending Rights, and develop a National Strategy for Literature to support and protect Australian literature into the future;

11. Invest in Australian arts and culture by protecting the working conditions of artists and writers, regulating gig work, ending sham contracting, and creating fair access to superannuation, leave entitlements, collective bargaining, and dispute resolution;

12. Remove tax on prizes and grants, change superannuation and tax legislation to ensure working artists and writers are eligible for superannuation on all payments, and clarify our rights as workers in employment law.

Yours sincerely,

Kate Mildenhall