

# National Cultural Policy Submission

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Stephen Orr

1. My name is Stephen Orr. I'm a high school teacher and writer of novels, short stories, non-fiction (essays, columns & c.).
2. My most recent novel is *Sincerely, Ethel Malley* (Wakefield Press, 2021). My first novel was *Attempts to Draw Jesus* (Allen and Unwin) 2002. Both books (and most in between) have surveyed themes, characters, ideas of a particularly Australian nature. This submission primarily discusses my main area of knowledge: literature. Its messages are intended to be more general.
3. I first started writing fiction as a teenager. At the time, I understood little about the business, my (possible) place in it, what it took to be a 'writer'. In retrospect, there was very little knowledge, very few mentors, no one to look to for help. Most young writers, then as now, are on a solitary journey through Australia's literary landscape.
4. I'm writing this submission not as any expert in the business of culture, of publishing, of knowing what levels of funding might be suitable (I notice much of this has already been covered in other submissions). Instead, I'd like to offer some personal views about what's at stake, what we're losing as a culture.
5. I'm well into middle age. I've published ten novels and two short story collections. I've always enjoyed stories, believed this is the best way for people, for *a* people to understand and evaluate themselves (and continue developing their best features!). But I still teach full-time, give the majority of my life over to telling young Australians about the 'great' American and English authors. Now, though, I've stopped writing. After years of trying – of having to find ways to feed children, pay bills, service mortgages, all the time (as with most artists, and whether we're right or not) wondering what I might have been able to achieve *if* – after all of this, I've given into the most dangerous thought any artist can have: why bother? The fact is, most artists are tired, kept going by a spirit of determination and generosity, or maybe the knowledge that they're not good at anything else! The proof of this is in the careers of so many talented artists who have gone overseas (still do, in great numbers), given up, stuck to day jobs, found some version of their creativity in the academic sector – and worse things, often as a result of a struggle that was never to be won. Even our success stories are archived. As though the only greater need than ignoring is forgetting.
6. I'm not sure I believe the adage that a people get the culture they want. More, the one they're used to. At present, Australia is set up as a consumer of other cultures, of (it is assumed) better practitioners (after all, they've sold more books, more albums, attracted a bigger audience). I

think this is the result of lazy thinking, second-rate politicians (with a few exceptions like Don Dunstan, Gough Whitlam), arts departments that are more concerned with process and social indicators than anything inspiring, life-changing.

7. I dream of a society where children are exposed to the best Australian books, ballet dancers, chamber orchestras (I could go on) from a young age (there are ways to make this happen). Who grow up with at least a taste of what's beyond the Great Australian Emptiness. It's hard to believe any government policy might achieve this, but it happens in other places, and could happen here. Most Australian politicians love sharing a beer at the footy, but few make it to book launches, fewer (except for someone like Paul Keating, supporting Geoffrey Tozer) making it clear what good the arts can do for people. Of course, much money will be wasted (no one can pick a winner on every race), but the gradual accretion of successes will produce something that adds value to our daily lives.
8. It's tough for Australian writers at every stage of their career and, in a sense, the cause of this is the fact that Australia has a small market for books, an even smaller desire to read them. It was no coincidence that the rise of Australian publishing in the 1970s and 1980s was accompanied by an interest in local cinema, art, experimentation, new music, popular music. These things rely on the laws of ecology. I grew up watching and reading *Storm Boy*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Breaker Morant* and dozens of other texts that gave some intimation as to who I was, where I fit in, what was possible as a writer.
9. I see the opportunities slipping away, and feel we're at a stage where we have to decide whether our kids will be brought up on an endless diet of American superheroes, or quiet, considered ideas and stories. I'm not sure what recommendations I might make, but I think the idea of an artists' living wage, regular grants, proper funding for infrastructure, audience development, touring writers (and other artists), subsidising local libraries to host writers, better supporting small publishers, literary magazines, cheap (and free) Aussie books for school kids, subsidised theatre tickets, a group of paid mentors for young artists – the opportunities are endless. Continue talking to writers, asking them what they need. Look to the unhelpful practices of government bodies. For example, the Australian Taxation Office chasing provisional tax after writers have one good year or, strangely enough, grant (or what about a generous tax-free threshold for works produced locally in the 'national interest'?).
10. Any cultural arts policy will rapidly have to move from the conceptual to the specific if it is to have any positive effect.

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