

Submission on National Cultural Policy

Jennifer Rowe AC

I have been an author for 38 years. At first, I combined writing with a career in book publishing and then as Editor of *The Australian Women's Weekly*, but I have been writing full time since 1992. Most of my books have been for children, published under the pen-name Emily Rodda.

I fully endorse the submission made by the Australian Society of Authors, of which I am a member. I therefore see my own submission as an addition, narrower in scope but based on my experience with many thousands of children, parents, teachers and librarians over a period that has seen vast changes in Australian book publishing and Australian reading habits.

I'm probably preaching to the converted when I say that it's vital for children to become readers—readers for pleasure as well as for practical purposes.

We know that reading stimulates the imagination, as the author talks directly to every reader and that reader creates scenes in his or her own mind, instead of simply drinking in images created by someone else.

We know that books teach empathy by following characters' thought processes in a way movies and games can never do. Books give insights into other people's feelings, provide chances to walk in someone else's shoes. More—even the simplest text helps encourage logical thinking, and no grammar lessons can teach a child how to *write* grammatically and coherently as well as avid reading can.

If that isn't enough, we know that by encouraging our children to become constant readers we're giving them a lifelong gift—the freedom to imagine, a solace in sad, lonely or worrying times, a key to other worlds and other minds.

We know that reading is a skill that must be learned and that many children don't find it easy. It's very different from staring at a screen. It's very different from being read to in the classroom or at bedtime. Most children need a lot of practice before they will pick up a book without being urged to do it, expecting to enjoy reading for themselves.

Reading stamina is the key to becoming a lifelong reader, and if our children develop the habit of reading for pleasure in primary school, there's a good chance they'll go on reading.

We know all this. We know, too, how important it is that our children have access to stories written and illustrated by Australians, reflecting Australian culture in all its variety. And yet, at a time when books and reading are facing such serious competition from other media for childrens' time and attention, government support for literature in Australia is tiny compared to the support given to other cultural areas.

Most Australian creators struggle on small incomes which are decreasing as E-books, which do not at present attract PLR/ELR, replace hard copies in libraries. Libraries and literary festivals survive hand-to-mouth. Schools find it hard to pay for author visits. Teacher-librarians, people skilled at finding the one special book that can turn a reluctant reader into an avid one, are vanishing from schools.

For a long time, we've taken our literature for granted. To a certain extent, we've taken a literate population for granted. But if we value literacy, imagination, logical thinking and empathy—if we believe these things don't just enrich individual lives but enrich every human pursuit from science to social work, and promote a tolerant, caring, inventive society—then for the sake of the future we'll urgently put literature—books and reading—back on the agenda.

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