

National Cultural Policy Submission

from *Australian Book Review*

Australian Book Review (ABR), one of Australia's major cultural magazines, presents high-quality journalism and new writing to its fast-growing international audience. It engages with all the arts, not just literature. It is diverse in terms of content, writers, and programs. It provides a needed forum for new Australian writers and reviewers, and it is committed to raising the standard of arts criticism in Australia.

ABR – truly national in title, mission, authorship, circulation, influence and partnerships – is most grateful to the federal government for its financial support over the years.

SUBMISSION

3. The Centrality of the Artist

Of all the cultural branches, Australian literature is surely one of the most successful artistically and commercially, prestigious internationally and maintaining a level of penetration in local markets that is the envy of other cultural sectors. *Australian Book Review* has been a keen player in that diverse and vibrant community of writers and readers since 1961. Our unique record in showcasing 3000 Australian writers over the years sharpens our sense of responsibility to writers and general readers.

However, it seems paradoxical to *ABR* that despite the success story that is Australian literature, annual surveys reveal that writers on average earn a pittance. We know from our 300-plus annual contributors that paid work is diminishing and that access to the forms of support that writers are entitled to expect – mentorship, encouragement, first-rate editing, promotion, access to world markets – are scarce.

Uppermost in our minds is the need to pay writers well, to meet industry standards, and to nurture new talent. *ABR* currently pays freelance writers 70 cents per word and aims to reach \$1 per word as soon as possible. Here, subscription revenue and support from states, foundations and private donors are crucial. But the federal government's role is critical too. *ABR* trusts that in a highly competitive market there will be due appreciation of and support for those magazines that match their rhetoric with action, rising payments, public advocacy, and proud solidarity with the writers who critique and enrich our national literature.

4. Strong Institutions

Literary magazines and the writers who look to them for freelance work to bolster their often precarious incomes depend in large part on Gough Whitlam's great creation, the Australia Council. We all know that the literature component of its budget has languished for decades (now just 4% of the current budget), despite the artistic prowess and economic contribution of the literary sector. An urgent review of that budget seems essential if more magazines are going to be able to extend their programs and increase payments to writers. Multi-year grants embolden these engines of literary

endeavour. Given the admirably arms-length nature of government funding via the Australia Council, we look for experienced, representative, outcomes-driven assessment processes that reward performance and advance those organisations that make an unambiguous commitment to industry standards and that have the proven capacity to meet them.

We strongly feel that more should be done (through longer grant periods of three to five years) to support successful, long-standing arts organisations that meet their obligations to government and society and that – year in, year out – underpin the work of Australian writers.

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