

National Cultural Policy Submission

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About Me

I am a writer and academic living on Kurna Country in South Australia. My first novel, *A Curious Intimacy*, won a *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Novelist award, shortlistings for the Dobbie Prize for debut women writers and the Western Australian Premier's awards, and a longlisting for the international IMPAC award offered by Dublin City Council. My second novel *Entitlement* was well-reviewed, and my third book, *Hearing Maud*, won the Michael Crouch award for a debut work of biography and was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, the National Biography Award, the Queensland Premier's Award for a Work of State Significance and the *Courier-Mail* People's Choice Queensland Book of the Year Award.

I have been awarded national and international residencies and have received funding from Arts Queensland, Arts SA, the Australia Council for the Arts, the Copyright Agency and the Australia Research Council. I am a 2022-2023 Arts Leader for the Australia Council for the Arts and I am co-editor of a literary magazine, *Science Write Now*. I teach and research in creative writing and literature at the University of South Australia. I also mentor a number of writers through supervision of Masters and PhD degrees.

I am an executive member of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature and the Association for the Study of Environment, Literature and Culture, a member of the Australian Society of Authors and Writers SA. I am currently a peer assessor for the Australia Council for the Arts.

I have been deaf since I was four, and my disability was responsible for my decision to become a writer. The comments that follow are drawn from 26 years of experience of writing, research, and teaching, but they apply in particular to the last decade.

Adequate Remuneration for Writers

The last report into the wages of Australian writers was conducted in 2015 through Macquarie University. It found that the average income for an Australian writer was \$12,900. Writers have faced increased precarity as they have juggled part-time jobs against the rising cost of living, while funding for literature has decreased. In 2020-21, the Australia Council delivered \$4.7 million to literature, which represented 2.4% of the total funding. By contrast, the major performing arts organisations received \$120 million.

While authors are compensated through the Public Lending Right and Educational Lending Right schemes (established in 1975 and 2000 respectively) when their works are borrowed

from libraries, this compensation does not extend to digital loans. Storytelling was one the ways people occupied themselves during lockdowns. The Brisbane City Council noted that it signed up 6000 new temporary digital memberships during Covid related closures and restrictions, and that its digital library saw an increase of 500,000 loans than the previous financial year. This represents a loss of income that was sorely needed by Australian writers at this time.

Although the Australian Society of Authors has campaigned for the past five years for the introduction of digital lending rights, the Federal Government has not responded. Most recently, the ASA has requested a 20% increase to the Federal Government's Lending Rights Budget to fund the expansion of the PLR and ELR schemes to include digital formats, which would modernise the schemes and reflect the reality of library holdings. It is essential that a new National Cultural Policy responds to these calls for digital lending rights, for this will provide some of the income that Australia's writers need to produce new stories.

Decreased funding has an impact not only on individual writers, but also on the lifeblood of Australian literature: literary magazines. I began my writing career in 1996 and worked hard to publish my first novel eleven years later. During that time, I established my presence as a writer by publishing my work in literary magazines. However, many literary magazines are now fighting for survival, which has implications for Australia's future storytellers. If literary magazines cannot survive, emerging writers will not be able to access the support and publication opportunities they need to develop their literary careers. This is a critical issue for writers who may find it challenging to be recognised by mainstream publishing outlets (for example, First Nations writers, Deaf and disabled writers, and writers from CALD backgrounds).

Teaching and Researching Australian Literature

The income I receive from writing is so paltry (much less than the average \$12,900 p.a.) that I need another job to survive. My day job is in academia, and my field of expertise is in Australian Literature, a field which has been eroded over the past few years. New positions have not been created, retiring Chairs in Australian Literature have not been replaced, and Australia Research Council funding for research projects in Australian Literature is a rarity. The Australian Literature database, Austlit, is a critical piece of infrastructure that assists scholars with their research in Australian Literature. It, too, has been neglected.

Part of my role is to educate teachers who will go on to teach Australia's primary and secondary students about Australia's stories. Given the current funding constraints, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ensure that an understanding of Australian literature is conveyed to Australia's future teachers. Increased support for Australian literature in universities will help teachers educate students about Australia's writers and the ways in which they depict Australian life. In tandem with this is the need to support research into Australian literature, as well as the tools – such as Austlit – which facilitate such research.

Reaching Audiences

Australia's national identity is multifaceted, but the publishing industry has been slow to reflect this. Research by Dr Natalie Kon-yu published in *The Conversation* suggests that the universal subject of Australia's stories 'is still presumed to be a white, middle-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual and fully-abled male'. When I was growing up in rural Australia, I did not read a single book featuring a deaf character. The only novel I recall that presented a character with a disability was Colin Thiele's *Jodie's Journey*, the protagonist of which had

juvenile arthritis. Had I read of deaf characters (such as the protagonist of *Future Girl* by Asphyxia) I would have felt far less isolated and estranged.

One admirable aspect of publishing over the past few years has been the flourishing of storytelling by Australia's First Nations writers. These stories communicate the richness of First Nations' culture and the reverberations of colonisation. They are a critical part of Australia's literary ecosystem and should be supported where possible.

I am deaf and I rely on technology to hear. A huge amount of my energy is expended in asking for and arranging access at events such as writers festivals. I have essentially stopped going to festivals because accessibility, such as loop systems, as seen as an add-on and are not factored into festival budgets. However, approximately 20% of the Australian population has a disability, which means that festivals are not reaching or accommodating one-fifth of their audiences. Accessibility should be integral to our literary ecosystem.

Australian literature provides a place of connection for readers, particularly those on the margins, and in rural and regional areas. Supporting writers so that they can create stories that feature diversity in respectful ways will enhance readers' sense of community and wellbeing.

The Future of Australia's Stories

The 2019 merging of the Department of Communications and the Arts with the Department of Transport, Infrastructure and Regional Development signalled the contempt which the federal government held for Australia's artists and writers. The new National Cultural Policy offers an opportunity to reset and rejuvenate Australian creativity.

Australia's storytellers create connections in a vast and varied country, support the economy through the sale of their stories, and help young people recognise and think about their selves when they are forming their identities. A new National Cultural Policy that offers greater respect and funding for Australian writers and publishing outlets, and for the teaching and researching of Australian literature, is critical.

After all, stories help Australians recognise who we are and what our many cultures represent. Without stories, we are adrift.

Yours faithfully,
Dr Jessica White.