

Re: Submission on National Cultural Policy
Grace Lucas-Pennington

I am an Aboriginal (Bundjalung Nation) book editor and poet based in Brisbane. My primary focus is the support and development of First Nations-authored manuscripts. I work across general and literary fiction, young adult, children's, poetry and memoir manuscripts with authors who are mostly, though not all, emerging.

I work in the publishing/literature industry in other varied ways, e.g. serving on Literature assessment panels for Australia Council for the Arts, guest lecturing for Creative Writing students, moderating panels at writers festivals, judging literary awards, delivering editing workshops, freelance editing for a number of Australian publishing organisations, and mentoring editors and writers. I am a Board Member of Byron Bay Writers Festival, sit on the *Griffith Review* Editorial Committee, and I am also a co-founder of the First Nations and People of Colour in Publishing Network, along with Camha Pham and Radhiah Chowdhury.

In my day job, I work in the Queensland public service four days a week leading State Library of Queensland's black&write! Indigenous Writing and Editing Project. I enjoy my job but wish I had the opportunity to work with First Nations writers just a little more – a lot of my job is time spent in project management and, unsurprisingly, funding applications.

The most important aspect of my role, as I see it, is mentoring First Nations aspiring editors, through the black&write! Editing Internship program. There are, thankfully, these days, many Fellowships, awards and mentoring opportunities for First Nations writers, but black&write! is the only targeted program for First Nations editors. We take two First Nations people who are interested in learning how to be a book editor and train them on the job while they receive a public service award wage.

This program is how I entered the literature and publishing industry. I had never dreamed of working in publishing, though I was an avid reader from a very young age. I never saw publishing as a career path for someone like me whom the education system did not fit. I was working hospitality when the opportunity came up in 2015 to apply for a black&write! Internship, and I was selected. I was mentored by Ellen Van Neerven, and eventually moved from an internship position to be a Junior Editor, and now I am the Senior Editor, mentoring our next intake of interns.

The cultural impact of books that I've worked on – including *Song of the Crocodile* by Nardi Simpson, *Terra Nullius* by Claire G Coleman, *Bindi* by Kirli Saunders, *BLAKWORK* by Alison

Whittaker, and many more – will be felt for generations to come. Like all great literature, these stories invite us, Indigenous or not, to deepen our understanding of the world.

Storytelling is at the very heart of being human. First Nations Australians have the oldest continuous storytelling tradition on this planet. But for centuries, the humanity of First Nations peoples has been hidden behind stereotypes, myths and prejudices, which are all present in the cultural output of this continent.

I can honestly say it has been the most rewarding experience of my life to contribute to the development of First Nations literature. I am so proud to do the work I do, helping more books by First Nations writers to be published, and for those books to be edited by First Nations people. I cannot overstate the importance of the editing relationship. Editors do not just fix spelling and punctuation – we collaborate closely with writers to identify the essence of their work and support the author to create the best possible version of the story. Can you imagine what it would be like to collaborate with someone who didn't understand your culture, or didn't know your history?

For too many years the stories of First Nations peoples have been told about us but not by us. Year on year there is increasing demand for First Nations stories, told by us, and stories need writers. Those writers need time, and money, to support their storytelling. Those stories need editors who understand our histories, who respect the authors' vision rather than whitewashing it, and who understand the ways those stories may impact broader communities. There is no substitute for cultural context. There is no substitute for allowing a writer's voice to develop on *their own terms*.

Everyone should be able to read books with characters who make sense to them, characters who reflect who they are with integrity and insight. Everyone should be able to read, watch, or listen to stories about First Nations Australians – whether set in historical or contemporary eras – that are accurate representations of our ways of thinking, being and knowing.

With a new government and arts minister, we have a once-in-a-decade chance to ensure that more investment in Australian writing is a top priority in a new cultural policy.

My biggest wish is an increase overall funding for literature within the Australia Council for the Arts budget. To date, this funding has not kept pace with demand. The Australia Council must have the capacity to thrive, to centre and celebrate First Nations literature, to be generous, and to be innovative in how it can help writers create new and exciting work. The Australia Council model has the independence and on-the-ground insight to target funding where it can be most useful.

My next biggest wish is that you consider ways to enable the production of First Nations stories in culturally respectful and safe contexts – and please understand this must not be confined to literature. We need editors, arts workers, festival directors, curators, music producers, publishers, peer assessors, events managers, and so on, who will work from a framework based on respect and First Nations story-sovereignty.

First Nations stories, songs and languages have echoed across our nations since the very first sunrise. Contemporary First Nations authors continue our storytelling traditions to celebrate, share and strengthen our cultures. These stories help make Australian literature into the fullest, truest picture we can create.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission.

Yours sincerely

Grace Lucas-Pennington