

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation
As an artist
As an individual

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

For this section - I will speak to the Place where I create my art and where our Writers Collective and Riverina Writing House has come into being. (Leeton, NSW)

We live on the lands of the Wiradjuri Nation. As storytellers – we tell stories of the landscape and the place – that is built on the stories and traditions of our first storytellers.

We have a strong community of Wiradjuri artists and cultural knowledge-keepers in our town and in our Place – I want to work as closely to them as I can – to help them tell their stories and interweave them with all the other diverse stories that shape our community and our rural Australian life.

I remember working with Tom Calma years ago and he made a speech where he said something that really stuck with me ever since – he wanted to see a situation where we didn't celebrate Indigenous culture as something exotic, strange, eclectic, foreign and belonging to 'them' – the First Australians. He wanted every Australian to embrace Indigenous culture, art, story, songline, language, history, land management practices, music, philosophy, rituals – he wanted it to be OURS. That we all celebrate it, know it, live by and learn from it, as a holistic and inclusive AUSTRALIAN culture. Not separate from white culture – not an 'other' but integrated and fully understood.

I have grappled with this idea through my work for a long time. I am a rural Australian – my great great grandparents are buried in the soil of the Wiradjuri lands/Riverina/Western NSW. I grew up on a farm and in Nature. I belong to that place and that land. I write sometimes with Wiradjuri words in my poetry – the language makes sense to me, it describes place and things in a very particular and familiar way, I love the words – they speak Place – they ARE place, the language is the land – and I feel a strong spiritual sense of peace and relief when I return to Country (get back to the home lands of the Riverina). I don't mean as a form of appropriation but as form of cohesion, honouring, celebrating, acknowledging.

To see Wiradjuri language being taught in primary schools – and Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country being standardised – and the children growing up with more awareness of history is very heartening.

Riverina Writing House, as an independent rural publishing house focused on Place and the Riverina Aesthetic – would be very interested in publishing Wiradjuri stories and books. Collaborative projects that build the shared sense of belonging, cohesion, story – so that we all know how to belong together in this place – and so that the community has a true sense of its own identity as multilayered – that would be an incredible foundation to be able to move forward together.

I am acutely aware that we have moved backwards on these matters in recent times – even the Acknowledgement at the start of speeches and events seemed to slip away under the previous government. The narrative and stories of First Nations people is fundamental to shaping who we are and having a proper, intimate and deep understanding of the country we live in.

Coming from the same part of the world as Linda Burney – I am so proud of her, and believe passionately in the Uluru Statement. And with Stan Grant growing up in the neighbouring town of Griffith – we have powerful local role models in these Indigenous figures. I want to see outreach including ALL young people – First Nations role models can help all the young people who feel lost and without a sense of belonging and story. There are local-level grassroots actions and interventions that build the cohesiveness – language, art, conversation, visiting cultural places, communing with the natural landscape, the river, the hills, the bush etc.

Money to deliver this kind of all-encompassing program – there are people willing and able to take this forward but MONEY in regional and rural areas is a real problem. Not just for First Nations artists and practitioners but for all artists. The struggle for money can be crippling to arts practice. (more on this later)

But also – if you are serious about protecting and honouring our incredible ancient cultural heritage, you must act on the following:

- *reverse the decimation of cultural heritage legislation in WA and across the country
- *immediately protect and list on the world heritage list the Burrup Peninsula – site of the world's first art gallery and at risk from mining
- *close Don Dale Detention Centre (NT) site of crimes against children
- *address immediately the shocking and shameful incarceration of Indigenous children and young people, and women and girls
- *make sure there are NO towns and settlements in Australia that do not have safe drinking water and proliferate social housing everywhere

The voices of First Nations artists – and the honouring of First Nations art and artists – cannot happen separate from the social disadvantage and the disregard for our history and sites.

As a poet and writer myself, as the Founder of the Leeton Writers Collective and Riverina Writing House – I seek to work with First Nations people, and tell stories about place that intertwine and celebrate all our diversity and belonging.

A Place for Every Story

Australian Content – absolutely critical to the creation of our strong cultural identity. There is perhaps nothing more crucial, more fundamental and central. The heyday of Australian content must be resurrected. Australian TV content, Australian movies, Australian children's TV and movies, Australian literature, music, theatre, dance. I want my children and grandchildren to have a sense of themselves in the world as Australians – connected to Place, to each other, to the past, to stories that link us all.

Riverina Writing House aims to publish books that matter – the voices of those in the local community given the chance to be heard. Young people, old people, people from diverse backgrounds, women, men, migrants, settlers, Indigenous – all the stories that have a right to be spoken.

The power of having an independent publishing house located in the heart of a small country town – makes the manifest the belief there is a place for every story.

We have a young writers group, for example, where the young people have the chance to express their opinions, ideas and explore their imagination. I note – a very important point – that in a landscape absolutely saturated with information, images, feeds, stories, internet bombardment, where everyone can ostensibly have their say on any topic at any time – the young people feel silenced. They have no forum to feed their views into the public discourse of a town, a school, a community or a place. Art and creative writing become critical tools for them to become themselves, to build confidence and find their voice.

The Leeton Writers Collective has a very diverse membership – people who you would never think have a secret life writing their stories, their thoughts, their poems, novels, and giving people an opportunity to be published – to see their names in print and to share their ideas in a book – is very critical to self-worth, and the sense of collective identity and making art that matters.

We must celebrate every story – in all the different media – and making books is a perfect, unique and lasting way to do that. The infrastructure of Riverina Writing House and my leadership of it – with financial support – will deliver enormous benefits to the community.

This can include interviewing old people about our history, farmers, immigrants, First Nations, old families, artists, people with links to the past – capitalising on the legacy of literature we have in Leeton – Henry Lawson, Jim Grahame, Dame Mary Gilmore, Agatha Christie etc

We are positioned as a boutique organisation, and myself as both artist and community leader to be able to support, develop and promote the vision for this pillar – rural and remote Australians have a unique perspective – books celebrating all that we offer and the propagation of the particular canon of work that constitutes a Riverina aesthetic – with a all the diversity and uniqueness that entails.

The Centrality of the Artist

I have been a writer all my life. It took me a long time to embrace the notion of myself as an artist – that this was not valid, or was pretentious or disconnected from real life. I write because I have to. It is the only way for me to make sense of the world.

I have written in the most difficult and precarious of circumstances – a lonely terrified young girl, a student without a place to live, a young single mother with a little baby to feed, through trauma, domestic violence, raising my three children alone, working in various jobs, including public service, through the night, on lunch breaks, while breast feeding, in cars and in cafes and parks. Always compelled to write. Always afraid because poverty was a heartbeat away at all times.

Through the journey – I have managed to publish five volumes of poetry so far, with a sixth nearly ready for publication. My work has been recognised in unexpected places. My friendship with the great Les Murray enabled me to find solace, support and mentorship – he loved my writing and published my poems twice in Quadrant. Former American poet Laureate the late Donald Hall – wrote me a letter saying I was writing “beautiful stuff”. I have been included in Best of Australian Poetry. and shortlisted for the ACU poetry prize three times.

I have raised my children alone, and kept writing. As a result of COVID, I found myself locked down in my home town – hence, the formation of Leeton Writers Collective, and Riverina Writing House. I teach writing, mentor writers, now publish new writers., promote and advocate for writing,

literature, poetry and story as essential to us all as human beings. The work brought comfort, support and hope to many during COVID – we found our writing and our fellowship kept us hopeful, positive and allowed us to deal with the many dark thoughts that COVID sometimes provoked.

I write every day. I now can call myself a Poet. I am also Founder of Leeton Writers Collective and Founder of Riverina Writing House. I want to grow an institution that will celebrate and promote writing, literature, our part of the world, independent voices, and give people a chance to have their stories told. We have a patron in Professor Adrian Piccoli (a local). We have interest from various places including Frankfurt Book Fair. We have an international collaborative book project about to launch.

BUT the threat of poverty hangs over me still every day. There is no mechanism to protect me from this. All my own resources have been spent to build the RWH project. I am still responsible for my children's wellbeing, while they finish their studies. While I reside in both Leeton and Canberra – my housing status in Leeton is very tenuous.

I have a whole program of work to deliver through the publishing house – but even if my time is completely for free, there are cost involved in making books.

My work as an artist and poet is important in its own right, but the work for the publishing house, writing centre and the writers collective enriches, uplifts and brings hope and opportunity to the whole community.

And all its needs to bring it to fruition is money. A year's worth of running costs. That buys me time to do what I must do. To be the artist and leader, without the constant fearful hustle for money. One night a few months ago I had \$4 in the bank. I was awaiting a small amount of sponsorship money that had been delayed.

I have operated on sheer will, faith and a sense of the importance of the project to my community. And to the artists and writers whom I support.

BUT if you want genuinely to have a cultural policy that puts the artist first, you must recognise that the artist needs money to live. A South American model – where poets receive a stipend to be able to do their art is not a bad idea.

In our town of Leeton – in 1947 – Poet Jim Grahame – best friend of Henry Lawson and in his day known I have been a writer all my life. It took me a long time to embrace the notion of myself as an artist – that this was not valid, or was pretentious or disconnected from real life. I write because I have to. It is the only way for me to make sense of the world.

[p2 - 02 Dec 1947 - The Murrumbidgee Irrigator \(Leeton, NSW : 1915 - 1954\) - Trove \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

The grant processes in the arts are broken – they take too much time and resources, are completely loaded toward who you know, how much you can spend producing an application, with vague criteria and impossible-to-understand templates and requirements.

If you want the artist to be central – you MUST put in place mechanisms to allow us to practice in peace – with food in our bellies and a roof over our heads. Discretionary funding for objectively worthy and deeply valuable projects and enterprises.

I won't ever stop writing. I can't. I would not survive without it. But I want to be able to write without being afraid, afraid of my children going without, afraid of becoming unwell, afraid of not having a secure house to live in. I haven't travelled, I don't care for jewellery or fancy clothes, I simply wish to be able to write and work without worrying about daily basics.

As well, sometimes the impacts of poverty affect my health – mental and physical – and I can feel there is writing I need to do, but it gets put off because of the hustle and stress.

This is an honest account. The reality of being an artist in a place like Australia has become. It has become an unsafe place to be an artist in many ways. Where once we were a bastion of creativity, freedom and creative expression that produced the greatest of works. I always remember reading that Richard Flanagan was about to go work in the mines when he won the Booker. Not that there is anything wrong with working in the mines, and I myself have worked as a fruit picker, cleaner, aged care worker, as well as speechwriter and teacher...

I think there is an element of being a mother and an artist that is particularly complex -a single mother, with three children, compelled to write poetry.. while trying to survive. These things bear thinking about.

Strong Institutions

This is a critical element. Strong institutions that uphold values, strive for excellence, support creative endeavour set a standard and create a sense of gravitas and authority that is both stabilising and inspiring:

1. I have begun a new cultural institution. Riverina Writing House is an independent publishing house and centre for writers and writing that I intend to build to become a permanent cultural institution that lasts for generations – providing a vehicle to promote the stories of our community, and to honour books and promote book culture, reading, writing and creativity. I believe in this project and see it as a way to enrich and uplift the whole community. We will build links with other institutions, including writers centres, book festivals, universities, libraries and schools locally, nationally and across the world.
2. ABC – expand and deepen the reach and impact of the ABC – regional ABC is critical to local stories and identity and we have had amazing support from ABC Riverina. ABC as a beacon for journalism – and quality journalism, investigative journalism, and as a parent or mothership for all the local news outlets, local newspapers and hardworking rural journalists. Radio Australia into the Pacific and SE Asia must be restored to its former glory. Lots of funding for local and Australian content – so many amazing story tellers, film makers, artists, actors, TV producers, writers. Give scope for artistic, high quality, deep thinking creation of content – for adults, for children, Australian stories – built on the canon of film, literature, art, theatre, dance. Central to our identity moving forward.
3. Extending from this – journalism and small newspapers and radio stations must be part of our cultural policy – the role of a local newspaper in a small rural community is the lifeblood. So many local newspapers perished during COVID – these must be protected and resurrected. Journalism as a profession funded supported encouraged – maybe scholarships made available to entice people back to journalism.
4. Libraries – the great libraries of the world are sacred sites protecting knowledge and housing our history and the history of being human. A lot of libraries have been debased, defunded, or disbanded during the last decade or more. Under Abbott many government department libraries were simply dismantled and all material thrown away or archived. Libraries in small towns are part of critical infrastructure – to support vulnerable people, to provide social glue and to give people a window to the world. More funding for libraries.

5. Schools – and curriculum - schools are under fire. Teachers are abandoning their professions under the weight of the terrible burdens they carry. Without strong public schools, and inspired and supported teachers – there is no cultural policy. I would – bring back the study of literature as compulsory, fund arts and art programs and teachers – resurrect the study of Australian literature in our schools and indeed in our universities. I worked in a government high school last year – and the students were bright and keen but had almost zero knowledge of Australian authors – they didn't know who Les Murray was, or Bruce Dawe, or Tim Winton, or just the whole plethora of wonderful wonderful writers and books that make us who we are. We must start back at the start. Books -new books – in that school were just such a rarity. Ban mobile phones, bring back pen and paper – and immerse students in Australian culture and stories – film, art, literature, everything.

6. Create NSW, Regional Arts NSW, the Australia Council etc – please make arts funding bodies more open, accessible, transparent and flexible. They have become remote, complex, distant and so very hard to navigate. They have favourite types of applications, the criteria for being assessed on grant applications has become more and more ugly and complicated – in a sense they have become internecine and exclusive. We need fresh eyes with fresh authority – more money, more flexibility. Conversations could replace some of the grant processes – meetings to travel out and see what is going on – make the artist feel valued and central and honoured, not like a vagabond tapping desperately at a back door for scraps. Better resourced, remove the politics, and open these organisations out so that artists can come with ideas and be validated and supported.

7. Leeton – Local Institutions a foundation for Growth – Leeton Community Roxy Theatre and Roxy Institute of Performing Arts (RIPA) – our Art Deco Heritage Theatre is being upgraded and will house the Roxy Institute of Performing Arts (a partnership with NIDA) in years to come. An institution like this is an incredible asset for a small rural community and the region as a whole. There is a strong appetite in town for culture and arts. With the Roxy, the Leeton Museum and Gallery, The Historic Hydro Hotel and Riverina Writing House – we have the opportunity for genuine rural renewal through arts and culture. Culture and agriculture go together – the old traditional arts. Providing world-class economic, social, creative and educational opportunities for local communities. Federal government investment in institutions at the local level like this is a powerful and simple way to bolster our cultural life and future.

8. Make Poetry Important – a centre for poetry and poets – the essence of our cultural identity can be found in our poetry

9. Art galleries – programs to encourage collaboration between artists – exhibitions, opportunities – telling the Australian story.

Reaching the Audience

Making books is about getting stories to the world. The audience for our books is our local community, our region, our state, our nation and our world – we want to reach all kinds of audiences in many different ways. It enriches the local community to read their own stories in a book. It also enriches others who learn about Australia and rural Australia from our books.

We need support to build our website so we can make online sales. We have a growing social media presence, but with more time and resources we could really grow that exponentially.

We have had interest from international book fairs and Australian book fairs, and media. My work to build those networks brings great benefit to our community, to our writers who are being published for the first time and to their families.

Being a physical presence in our town with a physical venue that is Riverina Writing House all is a very important grassroots way to connect with audience.

We could get promotion from government – DFAT could have a soft diplomacy role for eg – or a body that actively gets the word out there about what we are making and creating. Not just big blockbusters – but all the boutique films, short films, poetry books...the small, the local, the bespoke and the very very place-based.

As an artist I want people to read my poetry – I want my poetry to be included on local school curriculum – so local students can learn about their own writers, stories and sense of identity and belonging.

How do we reach our audience? An Office for the Promotion of Australian Literature and Poetry might be a wonderful idea. Reaching into the poetry and literary world and finding the wealth of lifetime writers who have contributed to our poetic and literary life all their lives. A literary hall of fame – every child in Australia should know the names Les Murray, Peter Porter, Bruce Dawe, Alli Coby Eckerman, Judith Wright, Kenneth Slessor, Clive James, Rosemary Dobson, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, James McAuley, Dorothy McKellar etc etc etc

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

In my own work, I want to explore my relationship to First Nations culture, stories, language. I explore my relationship to place – the place I love and belong to and long for – my home country which is Wiradjuri Country. I explore the brutal tensions and complexities of the life we share together, black and white. I feel hungry to learn as much as I can about past, history, story, language, songline, spirituality.

To work with Indigenous artists to build stories of belonging together, to support them to tell their stories, which are also our stories.

As Founder of the Leeton Writers Collective and Riverina Writing House, I want to work with First Nations storytellers – to make books out of their lives, history and creative experiences, to weave that together with all the other stories of Place to shape a true deep and complex sense of belonging to Place and being Australian that encompasses and honours all aspects of all of us.

I am honoured to work with and be surrounded by talented, diverse Indigenous talent in our local area and I look forward to creating work with them into the future.

A Place for Every Story

Stories from rural Australia and rural and remote communities are fundamental who we are as Australians. There are unique perspectives, characters, histories and struggles that are born out of the unique rural Australian experience – and that shape and underpin our national identity in a myriad of ways that deserve to be recorded, shared and celebrated. These stories matter. They are complex, they are unique, and they reveal an incredibly complex relationship to land, landscape, place, to climate, to nature, to Mother Earth. In the true stories of these remote communities we find clues to who we are, where we come from, who we are, what we can become.

My mission is to give voice to these stories – and reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary. There must be a real, tangible, funded, revered and respected place for these stories in our national discourse. It is not enough to only tell our urban and coastal stories. We must have a cultural policy that reveres and upholds what Australian-ness is in its many complexities. Culture and creative expression and art that is the most particular and local, the most linked to the intimate details of

place – here is where we find the most universal truths and the deepest connections with one another.

I have made a place for stories – at the writing house – and in the writers collective. I want this to be supported, respected and funded by our cultural policy. What makes us who we are? Our stories. The humble, personal, detailed, private stories of Australians brought to life and honoured in books.

I want my story to have a place – and the stories of all the people in my part of the world to be part of our national conversation.

The Centrality of the Artist

If we have a Cultural Policy and a national approach to culture that respects, honours and celebrates the artist – then we will find mechanisms and resources to allow those artists to flourish and grow and take their place in helping us define ourselves and to practice their art out of the shadows.

If the centrality of the artist as a principle means that funds are applied accordingly – it will empower and liberate artists to do what they have to do – as they always have – and be at the heart of Australian identity. We need to restore the artist to the place of primacy and value – something Australia has always been a leader in – it will help me be able to be a poet and writer and live that reality, as well as supporting fellow writers and helping them grow.

Strong Institutions

If our cultural institutions are strong, and focussed on honouring Australian stories, artists, literature, film and theatre and music – and all the art in between – then that will flow through to every aspect of our lives.

We need institutions that allow and celebrate art for the sake of the way it enriches our lives, psyches, mental wellbeing, social cohesion and sense of self. To provide enough funding for artists to work and tell stories – without having to focus on the market and making money. Free us from the pressure to monetise our art, Let ordinary people have the means to find their creative hearts. Explicitly state that arts and culture matter and are central to who we are, and celebrate it every day.

Open up the bodies that oversee the arts – that would make it so much easier for someone like me to be able to discuss needs, get support to create the work I need to create and help others to express their inner thoughts too.

Especially for our young people – the government MUST signal that the arts are revered and valued – so they can find ways to express their ideas and the fears and concerns about the world we find ourselves in.

Reaching the Audience

I want to reach audiences with my own writing, and with the output, events, workshops, retreats and support that RWH offers. Bringing art and audience together – can take many forms – and in fact devolving events, opportunities, funding and institutional support out to the regions will help grow audiences.

The Australian audience appetite for Australian content must be actively built and courted. Can there be subsidies and encouragements to entice Australian audiences to go to Australian movies? Buy Australian books? Study and explore Australian poetry? Buy and listen to Australian music? Etc

A good example – Radio National used to have a wonderful show called PoeticA. This is where I got my first break. I was featured on here as a budding new poetic force. It was so exciting and changed my sense of myself forever. Bring such shows back. Go back to basics – the fundamentals of arts and culture that raise the spirit, challenge the mind and provide clarity and stimulation to help young minds grow and expand.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

I remember as a child the magic world of the Australian arts – magnificent movies like Sunday Too Far Away, Careful He Might Hear You, Picnic at Hanging Rock – the list is endless. From Playschool to 730 Report, to Four Corners, to Cold Chisel, The Saints, Patrick White, Judith Wright, Aboriginal legends in picture books, the Opera House, Mel Gibson, Henry Lawson, The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith ... strange, complex, diverse, sometimes, chaotic, always magical and provocative – Brett Whitely, Tim Winton... the list goes on and on. I lapped it up. It shaped me. It gave me some kind of context through which I shaped my own art. I read and read. We went to the Roxy and saw Olivia Newton John in Grease – a packed theatre of 800 locals singing along. The landscape shaped me too. The seasonal rhythms, the isolation on the farm, the storms, the hills – it all cradled me and shaped me into the writer I am.

It wasn't a safe world but it was a world that unlocked the mind – that taught us about ourselves. As I got older, I craved Death in Brunswick, The Big Steal, The Year my Voice Broke, Strictly Ballroom, Mad Max, The Man who loved Flowers .. magnificent Australian narratives – Rabbit Proof Fence, later, Glitch, The Kettering Incident, Somersault – all the sprinklings of magic and place and self – Offspring, You and your Stupid Mate, Romperstomper, Spotswood... these beautiful defiant bespoke, delicate, nuanced, so deeply deeply Australian pieces of art.

Later as my writing took shape, I read one book and then another – The Subhuman Redneck Poems – The Vernacular Republic, Learning Human – and my mind took flight. That is us in those poems – those words. Only we could truly understand that story. This is the crux of your whole Cultural Policy nexus. Ours. Where do we see ourselves and one another in the creative expression of our hearts our ideas and our struggles? In the art of Bangarra, in the painting of the ladies in the Leeton Art Society, in the books being written by the people with secret super powers in our writers group, or the man who is making a movie about my poetry – actor and producer Jake Speer.

It is now a battle to bring that back to supremacy. There has to be something fundamentalist, clear-eyed and definitive about it. Yes, we are saturated with everyone's information but if we don't give our own artists and storytellers the first lift up – we lose something that is absolutely indivisible from building a strong, healthy, genuine cohesive future for ourselves together.

I don't want to fight to stay alive as an artists, as someone with a vision for an institution built on a principle that will sustain us for millennia – books, stories and arts matter – and I want a national cultural policy that can work out a way for people like me, artists like me to be able to work and give and build and create without being destitute. In honour of all those who have gone before and our amazing cultural legacy.

Please find links to my work and the story of Leeton Writers Collective and Riverina Writing House:

<https://www.ginninderrapress.com.au/store.php?catalog/search/sarah+tiffen/date/1>
<https://www.facebook.com/Leeton-Writers-Collective-103032681737523/>
https://m.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100076305516767&_rdr
<https://www.irrigator.com.au/story/7585138/young-writers-a-focus-of-riverina-writing-house/>

Without your support, we cannot achieve what we need to achieve. I read the excerpt from Helen Garner's submission in the weekend papers – I wish that we could be in that world again – imagine all the great works that will be saved from obscurity if artists are given the support and faith they need.