

National Cultural Policy Submission

Dr Kate Grenville AO

Submitted: As an artist

National Reading and Writing

The appetite for the literary arts in Australia is growing all the time - for books, writing festivals, films and TV based on our books, audio books, podcasts, readers' groups and Creative Writing courses. All these generate economic activity of many kinds.

As well, Australian literary arts deepen and enrich our understanding of who we are - what it means to say "We are Australians". Without that understanding, we're just an outpost of the dominant cultures of the UK and USA.

My own experience as a writer, over a career spanning some forty years, puts specifics on some of these abstractions. This submission particularly addresses pillar 3 of the cultural policy, the centrality of the artist, and pillar 5, reaching the audience.

Small investment, big return:

Early in my career (in the 1980s) I received two modest Individual Writer grants from the Australia Council. They (along with part-time jobs) enabled me to keep writing. Without the grants, I would have had to work full-time and I wouldn't have been able to produce long-form writing.

It's extremely difficult for a debut or early-career writer to make a living from writing in Australia, but thanks to that early government support, I

was able to develop as a writer to the point that I can now support myself from my books.

Job Creation:

Government support for writing is amplified many times in terms of job creation. Behind every published writer stands an army of others employed as a result of what they produce: publishers, editors, typesetters, printers, distributors, delivery truckies, warehouse landlords, journalists, festival staff, podcast creators, teachers, the actors and technicians who make audio books, and booksellers large and small.

The trickle-down employment effect goes beyond the written word: when books are adapted for other media they create more jobs. In my own case, three of my novels have created jobs in the local film and TV industries (two feature films and a TV mini-series). The stage adaptation of one book, *The Secret River*, had a national, sell-out run in Australia. The production then travelled to London and the Edinburgh Festival, for a hugely successful run there, further supporting Australian actors, musicians and technicians.

It's not through love of books alone that every small town now has its books festival - those communities know that books are good business. A festival of reading and writing will bring many visitors, who'll support the local economy by spending on restaurants, accommodation, tours and travel. All of that supports local jobs.

Supporting small businesses:

Most writers are small businesses which, like any other small businesses, help keep the wheels of our economy turning. We spend and consume, we pay tax, and we directly employ literary agents, accountants, researchers, publicists, web designers and others. Creatives aren't just head-in-the-clouds dreamers - we're also hardworking entrepreneurs, taking risks in the hope of increasing the numbers of our customers.

Export Income:

All my novels have been published internationally and two of them (*The Idea of Perfection* and *The Secret River*) have been international as well as Australian best-sellers. All my fiction has been published in the UK and the US, and been translated into many European languages as well as Hebrew, Chinese and Japanese. Those successes generate export income, and are part of a healthy international market for Australian writing that spills over into recognition of the other products Australia can offer.

Enhancing Australia's place on the world stage:

As well as the dollars and cents of export income, Australian books have brought Australia to the world. In terms of my own books, *The Idea of Perfection* won the world's richest literary prize at the time (Britain's Orange Prize) and *The Secret River* was short-listed for Britain's Booker, among other prizes. The sell-out stage productions of *The Secret River* in London and Edinburgh were received with acclaim.

Every time an Australian book reaches an international readership (and our books punch above their weight in that regard), it gives our trading and cultural partners a deeper understanding of our nation, the way we think, our values. In terms of easing understanding between different cultures, books are diplomats and trade missions between covers.

Bringing understanding to our future citizens:

Australian books create Australian course content for schools and universities. This matters because it's an important way in which students learn to think about the society they're part of, and of which they'll become citizens. Without a rich body of our own Australian literature, the education of Australian young people becomes second-hand British or American.

Australians have our own values that aren't always aligned with other nations, and those unique values need to be reflected in what our young people read, and shape the discussions they have about what it is to be Australian.

We have our own history, too, that's not the same as anyone else's. That history has produced the dilemmas that tomorrow's citizens will have to try to resolve wisely. In particular, the effects of colonisation and dispossession on First Nations people finds rich expression in our national literature. Writers are at the forefront of presenting the issues created by our history, in ways that broaden perspectives and understanding.

Those issues - so important to our national sense of ourselves - can't be understood through the lens of imported writings.

Why the need for support?

So, if the literary arts have so much to offer, why can't they pay their own way? The answer lies in the inescapable arithmetic of population: the domestic market simply isn't big enough. Some writers are lucky enough to find an international market, but not all are able to. Some of the best Australian writing doesn't travel well, for the very reason that it's written for an Australian readership.

This is why government support for writing has been a part of the mix for writers for many years, as it is in many other smaller nations who value their unique identity. From the time government support was first given, back in the 1970s, that support fostered the growth of an outstandingly vibrant, varied, and popular writing industry. Now support has declined, and by any metric - jobs growth, economic activity, or national identity - that decline means that everyone is worse off.

It's easy to take for granted that we can walk into a bookshop and choose from a huge range of books that reflect our own lives and our own sense of ourselves as Australians. But that's a fragile privilege. It

didn't happen before there was government support, and it will wither on the vine unless governments give adequate, dependable and long-term support.

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