



22 October 2020

Committee Secretary
Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's Creative and
Cultural Industries and Institutions
PO Box 6021
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via email: communications.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Chair and Members,

The **Australian Young Adult Literature Alliance**, more affectionately known by our social media hashtag **#LoveOzYA**, is a national organisation promoting Australian youth literature, supporting diverse representation and 'own voices' in Australian YA.

LoveOzYA centres the experiences and aspirations of Australian teen readers and aims to connect them with great Australian young adult (YA) books and authors. We do this by:

- Promoting national and international awareness of Australian YA books and authors;

- Encouraging readers of all ages to discover and read Australian youth literature;

- Undertaking collaborative initiatives with organisations in the education and arts and cultural sectors, including schools, publishers, booksellers, libraries, cultural organisations and communities;

- Advocating for the success and reputation of Australian youth literature in all its diverse and varied forms

Why Australian stories are so important for Australian young people

It should hardly need to be stated why a strong culture of reading among young people is important for our nation. Research has demonstrated reading for pleasure has positive impacts on school achievement across all subject areas, including mathematics, and is positively correlated with finding jobs and career success.¹ Reading books also helps teens in their social and emotional development. Scholar Vivian Howard writes "in their pleasure reading, teens gain significant insights into mature relationships, personal values, cultural identity, physical safety and security, aesthetic preferences, and understanding of the physical world, all of which aid teen readers in the transition from childhood to adulthood."²

The written word, as an art form, is uniquely placed to shape, support, and empower young Australians. When we can name a feeling, we can learn about it. When we can recognise ourselves in other people's stories, we can dream up new, exciting ones of our own. Perhaps more than any other art form, literature crafted for young readers can play a vital role in engendering both empathy and self compassion: empathy, because there is real power in learning about peoples' experiences through the intimate interiority of prose; and self compassion, because when we go on a journey with someone who tries something,

stumbles, then tries again, we learn the most important thing isn't being a hero, but rather, giving things a go.

Our young people deserve to see themselves reflected in the books they read. Australian based narratives allow Australian teens to self conceptualise and to explore and interrogate Australian identity. The American publishing industry is already colossal in comparison to Australia, resulting in American YA titles getting far more media coverage and shelf space than Australian titles. In crowding out our stories, our landscapes, our voices, international titles are silent on our experiences. They contain no trace of our essential First Nations voices and narratives. They provide little that resembles the daily experiences of young Australians living in regional and remote towns.

For young Australians to read Australian books, we need a healthy literature sector

For authors, and the institutions that support them to create and publish outstanding books, the sector is anything but healthy. The Australian literature sector as a whole, is shamefully undervalued. Writers are some of the lowest paid creatives across all art forms and literature receives the least government funding.

Before COVID, the average income of Australian writers was just \$12,900.³ In order to make a sustainable living, most authors supplement their writing income with teaching, speaking and events. This is especially true of authors of children's and YA books who traditionally receive much smaller book advances and royalties than those paid to their peers. A large portion of the average Australian YA authors' income comes from school and library visits. COVID has not just robbed YA authors of much needed income, it has also meant the loss of vital cultural connections for young people through our schools and libraries.

Total literature funding at the Australia Council has decreased by 44% over the past six years from \$9 million in 2013 14 to \$5 million in 2019 20. Literature has no representation at all in the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework, and so out of a total grants investment of \$187 million, literature receives just 2.6% from Commonwealth arts funding.

The poverty of literature funding affects all aspects of the Australian writing and publishing sector. It is not only felt in terms of fewer grants to support authors to write new books. It is felt in community writers festivals across regional Australia. It is felt by the small, independent publishers, some staffed by volunteers, who take the largest share of risk for publishing new and emerging writers, and who collectively publish more Australian authors than their multinational counterparts. It is felt by literary organisations who provide skills development, mentoring, audience engagement and advocacy. It is felt by public libraries and schools who invite authors to engage with children and young people across Australia.

And yet Australians love books and reading

One may think the appalling underinvestment in Australian literature is merely a reflection of how important books and reading are to Australians. The reality is more Australians are reading, writing and attending literary or festival events than ever before. Reading is the second most popular way Australians engage with arts and culture. 72% of the population aged 15 years and over read for pleasure (i.e., they read at least one book or audio book per year), an increase of 17 percent in three years.⁴ Writers' festivals are proliferating and

attendances growing with 22% of Australians attending a book group, writers' festival or event in 2019. Libraries shine as hubs of social and cultural connection and inclusion in our urban and regional communities.

Writers produce creative content which reflects and informs contemporary Australia. Some of our most successful stories which have provided inspiration for other creative productions including film, theatre and opera, have been children's and young adult books, from Colin Thiele's iconic *Storm Boy* to Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones*, from John Marsden's *Tomorrow When the War Began*, to Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*.

Digital platforms offer opportunities to engage young people

While much digital disruption has occurred in the publishing industry over the last decade, including the mainstream embrace of ebooks and digital reading, research shows that Australian teens still prefer paper based reading.⁵ However, we also know that digital and social media plays an increasingly central role in young lives. At LoveOzYA we are interested in enhancing teens' engagement with Australian texts through the social connections and sense of belonging they can develop through digital platforms. We have already seen this occur with the popular adoption of the #LoveOzYA hashtag over the past four years.

This is of particular relevance to young Australians based in regional and remote places where the opportunity to engage with authors in person is very limited. Special attention must be paid to the factors driving digital exclusion and connectivity to ensure all young people have equal chance to engage with Australian YA books and authors.

Recommendations

The Australian Young Adult Literature Alliance makes the following recommendations to the Committee:

- Fund a national Australian Books and Literature Strategy, on par with the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, Major Festivals Initiative and National Performing Arts Partnership Framework, to ensure the sustainability of the writing sector.
- Ensure literature experts are included in the Creative Economy Taskforce (a representative of our world class independent book retail industry would be ideal)
- Establish a Youth Reference Group to the Australia Council for the Arts to ensure the perspectives, experiences and voices of Australian young people inform policy, strategy and funding decisions.
- Ensure local councils, the jurisdiction of our essential public library network and youth engagement programs, have a voice in the Cultural Ministers Council.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our contribution to this inquiry.

Sincerely,

Kate Eltham
Chair
Australian Young Adult Literature Alliance (LoveOzYA)

¹ Cited in Rutherford, Leonie, Merga, Margaret Kristin and Singleton, Andrew 2018, Influences on Australian adolescents' recreational reading, *The Australian journal of language and literacy*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 44-56.

² Howard V. 2011, The importance of pleasure reading in the lives of young teens: Self-identification, self-construction and self-awareness. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*. 2011;43(1):46-55.

³ https://research-management.mq.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/122625541/3_Authors_Income.pdf

⁴ Australia Council for the Arts 2020, Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey.

⁵ Deakin University 2017, Printed books still draw youth in the digital era, Deakin University. Available <https://phys.org/news/2017-05-youth-digital-era.html>