



Chair's Report
Australian Society of Authors
Annual General Meeting
May 2016

I'd like to welcome all of you to the Annual General Meeting of the ASA, which is back in Sydney after rotating through other cities of the eastern seaboard. The decision to hold the meetings in different cities was made by the Board to provide members in other states with a greater sense of ownership of the organisation. I hope we can continue this initiative, and perhaps even venture further afield in future.

We have some new faces at the ASA. Some long-time board members have decided to stand down after making a great contribution to the organisation over many years. Few have made a more splendid and selfless contribution than Lyn Spender, who stood down late last year after occupying a variety of positions, most recently acting as Treasurer.

This year has seen the departure of long-time board members Ann James and Brian Dibble who have both provided the organisation with the benefit of their time and wisdom. On behalf of the board, I'd like to salute their contribution and their dedication to the cause of writers and illustrators. I'm sure that dedication will continue, whether or not they're on the board. Anne Maria Nicholson is also leaving the board and while her time as a director may have been shorter, she has brought an invaluable set of skills to the board table over the last two years and we are very sorry to see her go.

Their places have been taken by four new board members. Julianne Van Loon stepped in to replace Lyn Spender last year, while Suzanne Burdon, Sarah Mills and Ian Reid were all elected unopposed earlier this year. They each bring different talents and life experiences that will help to inform the board's deliberations. I welcome them all.

I'd also like to pay tribute to the former Executive Director Angelo Loukakis, who stepped down in January after spending six years at the helm. During that time, much was done to transform the ASA. And that transformation will continue, as it must, under the incoming Chief Executive Officer, Juliet Rogers, who has had a distinguished career in publishing and most recently as chair of the Indigenous Literacy Foundation. She will be ably assisted by our small but committed team.

It's been a year of continuing change and challenge for the organisation and its members. Although there are concerning political developments on the horizon, it's not all doom and gloom. The reports from the front-line suggest that books are back. The sales of e-books have stabilized and independent bookshops, while they might not be booming, are enjoying somewhat of a renaissance. This is warm ray of sunshine for authors. As well, members still enjoy the benefits brought to them over the years by the work of the ASA, whether it is the payments from the Copyright Agency or the Public Lending Right and the Educational Lending Right. However, the recent survey that reveals the worsening financial position of authors and illustrators, shows that we still have much to do.

A major role of the ASA is to speak up on behalf of authors and illustrators. And we put a lot of effort into that last year, meeting with politicians from all the major political parties, appearing before the Senate Committee into arts funding and making submissions to the Productivity Commission on copyright and parallel importation. We even arranged several author events under the auspices of the ASA at Parliament House in Canberra. A measure of our success was seen at the 2015 ASA Congress, which was attended by the Arts Minister George Brandis and his counterparts in the Labor Party, Mark Dreyfus and the Greens Adam Bandt. But there is clearly much left for us to do.

It's been a long time since we've had a government that is so openly hostile to the arts. Along with most others arts organisations, we were appalled by the successive cuts to the funding of the Australia Council and the diversion of some of those funds into a grants scheme directly controlled by the Minister's office. The pressure we were able to apply in tandem with other organisations saw those funding cuts partially reversed and a new Arts Minister, Senator Mitch Fifield appointed by incoming prime minister Malcolm Turnbull. However, the Turnbull government is yet to show any convincing evidence that it values writers or their work, and Senator Fifield has so far proved to be an elusive Arts Minister.

The promise by Tony Abbott to establish an Australian Book Council was taken up by the Turnbull government but was ultimately cancelled at the end of the year. The money that was taken from the Australia Council to establish the book council was not returned to the Australia Council, but instead was palmed back into the government's pocket. The need for a book council, where the whole publishing and bookselling industry can consult, remains a pressing one and the ASA will continue working with likeminded organisations to create one.

The on-again off-again book council was emblematic of the government's attitude towards the arts in general and literature in particular. The obsession with the free market as the answer to all ills has caused the government to re-visit twice-defeated

proposals to do away with territorial copyright. The right of authors to assert their territorial copyright is one of the essential cornerstones of publishing in Australia. As the experience in New Zealand has shown, abolishing it would see a further decline in the income of authors and the ability of publishers to support Australian writing. Yet this is what the Productivity Commission has recommended to the government in its recently released draft report. And the government seems hell-bent on accepting the recommendation. Rest assured that the ASA and its allies will do all that they can to prevent that happening.

Not content with just sweeping away territorial copyright, the Productivity Commission also wants to introduce the so-called 'fair use' system of copyright. There is nothing 'fair' about it. By exempting educational institutions from having to pay authors for copying their work, tens of millions of dollars will be lost to Australian authors and publishers. When that was done in Canada several years ago, it was a disaster for educational publishing in that country and for Canadian students who were forced to use textbooks written by American rather than Canadian writers. Paying authors for their work should not be optional, and the ASA will do all in its power to ensure that these retrograde measures do not succeed.

Apart from campaigning against the proposals of the Productivity Commission, we have been talking to politicians about the ways they can make it easier for authors to embark upon and sustain a career in writing. With a relatively small book market in Australia, such measures are essential to ensure that our literary culture does not go the way of the Great Barrier Reef.

Among the measures that we have been proposing are the inclusion of e-books within the PLR and ELR schemes. The three major political parties have all expressed support in principle and there is no practical impediment stopping them from doing so. It just needs an Arts Minister who cares sufficiently about books and their creators to implement it.

The ASA has also been arguing for literary prizes to be made tax-free. The Prime Ministers' Literary Prizes already enjoy that concession and it's time that other literary prizes were treated similarly. It would provide an added encouragement for excellence and a much-needed boost for the careers of our emerging and established writers. We are also campaigning for the Australia Council to be adequately funded and for literature to receive its fair share of that funding. It's unlikely that we'll be successful in this until we get a government and an Arts Minister with a vision for the arts and an understanding of the vital part that they play in our national life.

It's not only in Australia where authors have been experiencing an increasingly tough time. There has been growing concern among authors around the world about their

deteriorating incomes over the last decade or so. As one way of addressing this worrying development, the ASA has been working with our fellow authors in overseas organisations to establish a fair contract initiative, that is based on a set of basic principles to which publishers can subscribe. Earlier this year, under the umbrella of the International Authors Forum, the ASA joined with other colleagues around the world to open discussions with publishers on this issue. We hope to have more to report as the year progresses.

Underlying all this activity by the ASA is the basic principle that authors and illustrators are part of a profession, and they deserve to be paid fairly for their work. Only by recognising that we are part of a community of writers, and by joining together and acting collectively, can we have any hope of achieving this aim. Australia was created by storytellers and will continue to be sustained, shaped and redefined by each new generation of storytellers.

On a more practical level, and on top of existing services, such as the contract advisory service and the contract negotiation advice, the ASA has continued to provide an expanding range of services to members and to do so in ever-more innovative ways. Our hard-working staff have continued to administer mentorships for authors, along with the Asher Award, the Barbara Jefferis Prize, the CAUL-ASA Fellowship, the Children's Picture Book Illustrators Initiative and the Ray Koppe Young Writers' Residency. They have also organised a wide range of professional development courses at venues throughout Australia, as well as via the internet, and the online StyleFile has been developed to promote the work of our illustrator members.

Apart from servicing the needs of its members, it is clear that the ASA will have to continue defending the rights that its members have gained over the years, whether it is defending copyright law, the public lending right or the cash-strapped Australia Council, while pushing to extend those rights in ways that produce a more productive environment for authors to do their work. The ASA also continues its campaign to have the employers of authors, whether it be schools, libraries or festivals, commit to paying ASA rates.

To be successful in its endeavours, the ASA needs the support of its members, whether it is paying their membership fee, insisting on ASA rates, spreading the word to fellow authors, or approaching their local State and Federal MPs about issues of concern. The organisation has made great advances in the past on behalf of its members and their readers. We need your support to defend them and to make even greater advances in the future.

David Day

Chair

Australian Society of Authors

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