

To the Commissioners,

I write as someone who has worked extensively over the past two decades, as a teacher and arts project development officer (children's and youth literature), to bring young people and books together, to promote reading for pleasure and, by extension, to support the creative and professional lives of Australian authors and illustrators for young people.

I am currently employed part-time in a funded position to develop programs to engage the young people of the greater Western Sydney region with reading for pleasure, and in developing their skills as both consumers and producers of literature. The demographic I serve includes young people from some of the most socially and economically impoverished communities in the country, as well as children from young, professional, "aspirational" families. This region has high numbers of Indigenous children and youth; second and third generation immigrant communities; young people from emerging communities, including recently arrived refugees. It is, of course, a highly multicultural region, with young people from a myriad of races and creeds.

What these children and teenagers have in common is that they are all Australians, and they need—and deserve—to see their lives and experiences reflected in the stories they read. This is not an argument for exclusivity, but for the need for Australian children from all walks of life to see their cultures and language reflected in the books they read.

We hear all the time in the media about concerns about the influence of US culture in particular on our youth, and yet the proposal for parallel importation of books suggests that a lively Australian literary culture, supported by local editors and publishers, may not be necessary. I find it difficult to reconcile these two positions.

We have barely begun to scratch the surface of publishing authentic, accessible and challenging stories about the contemporary lives of young Indigenous Australians; of refugee families; of the challenges facing the second and third generations of people from cultures with little or no tradition of written literature. We need to be nurturing and supporting emerging Australian writers from all backgrounds, not cutting them off at the knees before they even begin by casting their nascent careers on the interests, cultural understandings and imperatives and commercial concerns of an international publishing industry.

There are so many stories also of books that could only have ever been published in Australia by Australian editors and publishers. Books that speak in the Australian vernacular—such as the multi-award winning *Deadly, Unna?*—have struggled to find overseas sales, and yet have contributed vital Australian voices and stories to Australian audiences. The suggestion that our books can be published anywhere is made a nonsense of by the fact that they simply aren't now, and won't be in the foreseeable future.

The many writers who have already sent submission, raising their very real and deep concerns about the impact the proposed parallel import scheme will have on their ability to support themselves as writers—and thus to write at all—have made their case more eloquently than I could hope to do. The point I wish to make is that if these writers have no career, we have no literary culture, and succeeding generations of young Australians will be the ones to suffer the most.

I also wish to address the often-raised point that the parallel importation scheme will make for cheaper books. Again, this point has been discredited, or at the very least challenged, by many of the submissions received. I offer anecdotal evidence, from my 20+ years experience in the field, that lower-income families will indeed buy books for their children, given the opportunity and the information they require, regardless of our allegedly “too expensive” RRP’s on books.

I recently facilitated a publisher-sponsored author visit to a primary school in the heartland of working class Western Sydney. Prior to the event, I organised a booklist and delivery of books by the author for purchase at the school. The publisher reported back that they had sold more books at this supposedly “disadvantaged” school than at any other school on the author’s tour.

The parents from schools such as this one are often mischaracterised as not being able to afford, or not properly prioritising the purchase of books for their children. This incident, and others like it, have demonstrated to me that the real issue for families from disadvantaged backgrounds is not necessarily the cost of books (although that can be a factor), but access to decent book shops, and, more critically, access to information and recommendations about which books would be suitable for their children.

If the author who visited this school could not afford to have a career as a writer, and could not be published because her books are “too Australian” for international publishers, or had no local publisher to support and facilitate a tour which brought her, free of charge, to a school who could never otherwise afford an author visit, means that these Australian children would have missed out on what the principal described as a “fantastic opportunity”

*Our students were enthralled by her stories and ideas for writing. They were thrilled to purchase books and have [the author] autograph them herself. Thank you for organising this wonderful author and speaker to visit our school.*

Yours faithfully,

Judith Ridge

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