


Creating Our Future

Results of the National Arts Participation Survey



Tumbalong Gatherers celebrating First Nations poems on light boxes with artwork by Koori David Cragg in Darling Square and Darling Quarter for NAIDOC 2018. Courtesy of LendLease.

Literature factsheet

Creating our Future: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey is the fourth report in a landmark series by the Australia Council for the Arts, exploring Australians' engagement with and attitudes towards the arts and creative activity.

Building on the 2009, 2013 and 2016 editions, *Creating Our Future* provides vital new evidence about the essential role that arts and creativity play in Australian communities, showing the arts are a public good infused and embedded in the fabric of our daily lives.

The survey was conducted not long before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our world, lives and the cultural and creative industries. The survey results provide a benchmark of Australians' arts engagement before the impacts of the pandemic, providing much needed information as doors reopen, audiences are rebuilt and the cultural and creative industries are re-ignited.

The full report includes detailed insights into different art forms, including literature.

Key findings about creating and participating in **literature** activities are included in this factsheet.

2.2

book or literary events
attended for every
Australian in 2019

22%

of Australians
attend literary
events or festivals

72%

of Australians
read a book

14%

of Australians
produce creative
writing themselves

Introduction

The literature sector is a vital part of our arts and cultural ecosystem. Findings in *Creating our Future* reinforce the centrality of literature to the daily lives of Australians. Overall, reading has increased 17 percentage points since 2016, and an increasing number of Australians are attending literature events and producing creative writing themselves.

Australians are seeing reading and writing as a creative outlet. In depth engagement with literature is a refuge from everyday life, with substantial evidence of the positive effects of the arts in restoring our wellbeing and providing numerous health benefits.¹

While general reading levels have increased over the last few years, the COVID-19 pandemic saw an even greater increase in book buying. According to data from Nielsen BookScan, for the first eight months of 2020, adult fiction sales were up 12% compared to the same time period the previous year.² During this time, books have been an important escape, helping to entertain people and providing a release from the pressures of living through the pandemic. Over the course of 2020, sales of books in Australia grew nearly 8% overall.³

Literature is often seen as the domain of print books; however, *Creating our Future* shows the diverse ways in which Australians are engaging with literature, and the diversity of groups who are engaging and finding value in books, reading, creative writing and attending literature events. In response to the pandemic, writers centres and festivals moved to online models during 2020,⁴ and libraries saw large increases in borrowing of audio and e-books.⁵

Particularly high engagement by First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people reinforces the value of the sector to these groups and the contribution that literature makes to all communities.

It must be acknowledged that there is still a significant gap between the demand for books by writers of colour and the diversity of the people who publish those books. Australians are increasingly seeking out diverse writers and voices in literature and there is increasing demand for greater representation for books by writers of colour, including First Nations writers.⁶

Read on for more on Australians' engagement with literature...

For the full report and online resources see:

<https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>

1 World Health Organisation 2019, *Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67. What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing? A scoping review.*

2 Books+Publishing 2020, *Publishing and the pandemic: The Australian Book Market in 2020*, 30 September 2020.

3 Books+Publishing 2021, *Nielsen: Australian book sales up 7.8% in 2020*, 18 January 2021.

4 ArtsHub 2021, *Writers' Festivals in Australia 2021*, ArtsHub 20 January 2021.

5 CIVICA Libraries Index 2020, *Australian novels the most popular choices amongst readers*. CIVICA, Sydney, 25 May 2020.

6 Pam, C. 2020, *Where Are All the Editors of Colour? Kill Your Darlings*. Accessed online at: <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/where-are-all-the-editors-of-colour/>

Kembrey M. 2020, *Publishers rush to fill demand as books on race and racism sell out amid protests*. Sydney Morning Herald June 13, 2020. In a 2018 survey by Books+Publishing, of people employed in the Australian book industry, just 6% of respondents identified as a person of colour and one person (out of 349 respondents) as a First Nations person. See Books and Publishing Survey, 2018.

Attendance

Literature events, including book clubs, connect an increasing number of Australians

In 2019, 4.5 million Australians attended book or literary events or festivals, or 22% of the population aged 15 years and over – up from 15% in 2016.⁷

On average, those who attended book or literary events attended 15.6 events in 2019. Across the Australian population, this equates to 2.2 book or literary events attended for every Australian aged 15 years and over.⁸

What types of book and literary events do Australians attend?

- 8% of Australians attend **writer talks or book launches**.
- 6% of Australians attend **book clubs**.
- 6% of Australians attend **readings including poetry and storytelling**.
- 6% of Australians attend **writers festivals**.

Who attends book or literary events or festivals?

- Book or literary events attendance peaks **between the ages of 25–34 years** (35%).
- More than half of **First Nations respondents** attend book or literary events (53%).
- Two in five **CALD respondents** attend book or literary events (40%).
- Three in ten **respondents with disability** attend book or literary events (28%).
- One in three **parents with children aged under 16 years** attend book or literary events (31%).
- One in four **major city residents** attend book or literary events (23%).
- **Those with the highest household income** (more than \$200,000) have strong attendance (34%). Attendance at book or literary events decreases steadily with household income to 26% for those with a household income of \$100,000–\$139,999 and to 16% for those with a household income under \$40,000.

7 For consistency with the 2019 methodology, 2016 figures are reported for the online sample only and may differ from those published in the previous National Arts Participation Survey report, *Connecting Australians*.

8 Frequency of attendance does not include attendance at festivals other than writers festivals.

Creative participation

An increasing number of Australians are creative writers

In 2019, 2.8 million Australians produced creative writing, or 14% of the population aged 15 years and over – up from 9% in 2016.

What types of creative writing are Australians producing?

- 6% of Australians write **novels or short stories**.
- 5% of Australians write **poetry**.
- 4% of Australians write **creative non-fiction such as biography or history**.
- 3% of Australians write **instructional non-fiction such as cookbooks**.
- 2% of Australians write **plays**.
- 2% of Australians write **comics or graphic novels**.

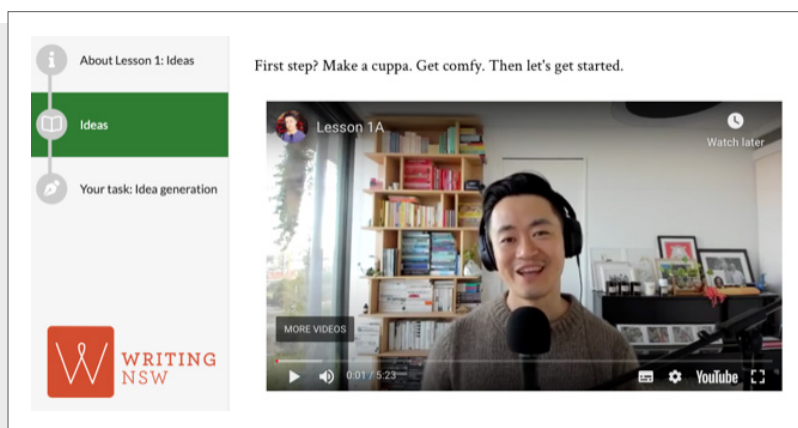
Who's producing creative writing?

- Creative writing peaks **between the ages of 15–24 years** (24%).
- A quarter of **First Nations respondents** produce creative writing (24%).
- Nearly a quarter of **CALD respondents** produce creative writing (23%).
- One in five **respondents with disability** produce creative writing (20%).
- One in six **parents of children aged under 16 years** produce creative writing (16%).
- Creative writing is strong among **those in the highest household income bracket of more than \$200,000** (17%) and decreases steadily with income to 15% of those with household income of \$100,000–\$139,999 and to 12% for those with a household income under \$40,000.

Writing NSW workshops

Writing NSW runs a rich and varied program of events for writers, including courses, festivals, industry networking events, publishing consultations and more. In the wake of COVID-19, Writing NSW rapidly expanded its digital content with a range of online professional development programs, to offer more than 50 seminars, interactive workshops, feedback programs

and on-demand courses online with established authors. In June, best-selling writer and broadcaster, Benjamin Law (pictured), taught a class on Writing Narrative Journalism which immediately sold out. His course provided emerging and developing writers with a suite of story ideas to work on, as well as new skills to transform those ideas into stories.



Benjamin Law teaching Narrative Journalism online for Writing NSW.
Credit: Writing NSW.

Reading

An increasing number of Australians read for pleasure

Despite the busy-ness of daily life and the array of digital distractions, Australians are increasingly reading for pleasure. In 2019, 14.8 million Australians read at least one printed book, e-book or listened to an audio book for pleasure, or 72% of the population aged 15 years and over. This is an increase of 17 percentage points from 55% in 2016.⁹

What types of content are Australians reading?

- Almost half of Australians read **novels or short stories** (47%).
- A third of Australians read **instructional non-fiction such as guidebooks or cookbooks** (32%).
- Almost one in three Australians read **creative non-fiction such as a biography or history** (31%).
- More than one in seven Australians read **graphic novels or comics** (15%).
- One in ten Australians read **poetry** (10%).
- 7% of Australians read **plays**.

Who are the readers?

- **Women** are more likely to read for pleasure than men (75% compared to 68%), particularly a novel or short story (55% compared to 39%).
- Reading for pleasure fluctuates with age, with reading strongest among **older Australians aged 65 years plus** (77%) and **younger Australians aged 25–34 years** (75%) compared to 67% of those aged 35–64 years. There are also generational differences by the type of content being read. While Australians aged 25–34 years are more likely to read poetry, plays, and graphic novels or comics; Australians aged 65 years plus are more likely to read creative non-fiction.
- Reading for pleasure is stronger among **First Nations respondents** (78%, compared to 71% of non-First Nations respondents), **CALD respondents** (81%, compared to 69% of non-CALD respondents) and **respondents with disability** (76%, compared to 71% of those without disability). All three groups are also more likely to read poetry, plays and graphic novels or comics.
- Reading for pleasure is strong among **those in the highest household income bracket of over \$200,000** (82%) and reading decreases with income to two thirds of those with a household income of under \$40,000 (66%).
- Reading for pleasure is strong among **those who completed post-graduate study** (85%) and decreases with level of education to 61% of those who did not complete high school.

⁹ For consistency with the 2019 methodology, 2016 figures are reported for the online sample only and may differ from those published in the previous National Arts Participation Survey report, *Connecting Australians*.

Who uses which formats?

- **Print books** are still by far the most popular format, read by 14.2 million Australians, or 69% of the population aged 15 years and over. Almost two in five Australians read a print book **at least once a week** and 15% read print books **daily**.
- One in four **Australians aged over 55** read **print books daily** (23%) and **women** are more likely to read **print books daily** than men (18% compared to 12%).
- Two in five Australians had read an **e-book** in the previous 12 months (41%) and one in five read e-books **at least once a week** (19%). **Men** are more likely to read e-books at least once a week than women (20% compared to 17%).
- Regular e-book usage is more widely adopted by **First Nations respondents** (37% read e-books at least once a week, compared to 17% of non-First Nations respondents), **CALD respondents** (34%, compared to 14% of non-CALD respondents) and **respondents with disability** (26%, compared to 17% of respondents with no disability).
- E-book readers also have a much younger profile than for reading in general. More than half of **Australians aged 15–34 years** read e-books (55%), compared to less than half of those aged 35–44 years (45%), and three in ten of those aged over 45 (29%).
- Almost one in three Australians listen to **audio books** (31%) and one in seven listen to audio books **at least once a week** (14%).
- As with e-books, those who listen to audiobooks at least once a week are more likely to be **men** (16%, compared to 12% of women) and have a younger age profile: almost one in four **Australians aged 15–34 years** regularly listen to audio books (23%), compared to 18% of those aged 35–44 years and 6% of those aged 45 plus.
- As with e-books, regular audiobook usage is also more widely adopted among **First Nations respondents** (37%, compared to 12% of non-First Nations respondents), **CALD respondents** (30%, compared to 9% of non-CALD respondents) and **respondents with disability** (22%, compared to 12% of respondents without disability).

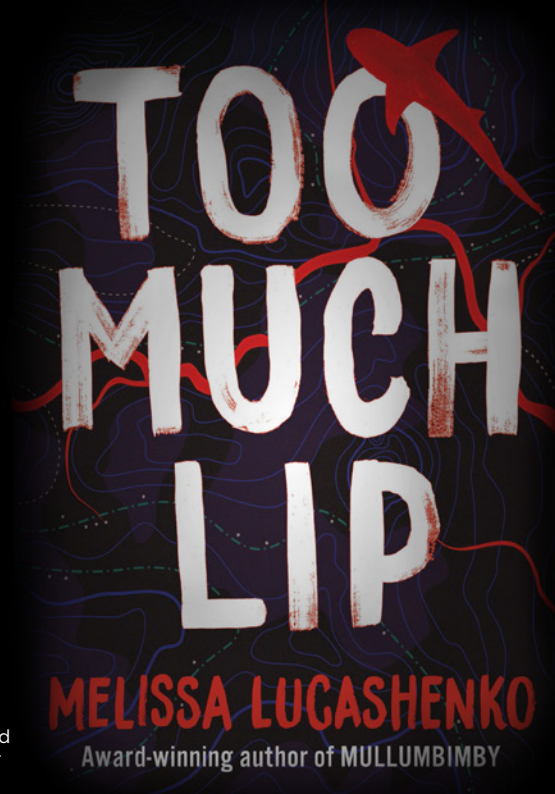
Despite the busy-ness of daily life and the array of digital distractions, Australians are increasingly reading for pleasure.

Liane Moriarty

Liane Moriarty's novels are exceptionally popular with Australian readers, selling two million copies in Australia and New Zealand, and over 14 million worldwide. Her sixth novel, *Big Little Lies*, debuted at number one on the New York Times bestseller list and also topped bestseller lists in Australia. *Big Little Lies* was adapted into a hit, Emmy and Golden Globe award-winning mini-series for HBO, produced by and starring Nicole Kidman and Reese Witherspoon. Moriarty's latest novel, *Nine Perfect Strangers*, became an instant best-seller in Australia and the highest selling fiction title in 2018. This was the third year in a row that Moriarty was the highest selling fiction author in Australia.

Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies*, 2020.
Credit: Andrew Ebrahim.





Melissa Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip* won the 2019 Miles Franklin Literary Award and the 2019 Queensland Premier's Award for a work of State Significance and will be published in the US and the UK in 2020.

MELISSA LUCASHENKO
Award-winning author of MULLUMBIMBY

Research approach

The 2019 National Arts Participation Survey was conducted from September to November 2019 with the survey sample of 8,928 Australians aged 15 years and over weighted to be nationally representative based on age, gender and location (by states and territories and metropolitan/regional Australia).

Evolving with the times, the survey went online in 2019 after being conducted through a mix of telephone and online surveys in 2016. Due to this change, the results that are most comparable for showing trends over time are the results from the surveys conducted online in 2016. **Given the changes made to the National Arts Participation Survey, the previously published results in the *Connecting Australians* report are different to the 2016 data used for trend analysis in the *Creating Our Future* report.**