

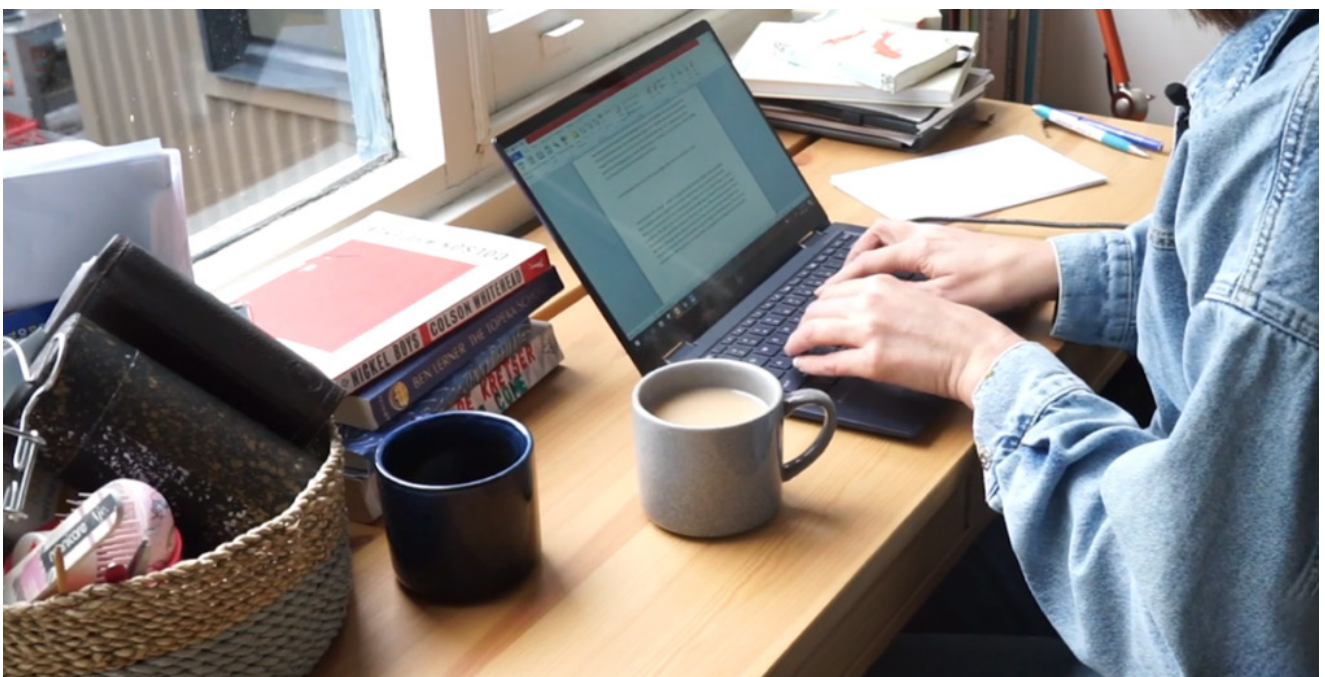
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# 2022 National Survey of Australian Book Authors

A summary prepared by the  
Australia Council for the Arts

By Paul Crosby, David Throsby and Jan Zwar, Macquarie University

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The desk of Australian author, Jacqueline Maley. Image: Courtesy of HarperCollins.

## **Acknowledgements**

The Australia Council for the Arts, Copyright Agency and Macquarie University proudly acknowledge all First Nations peoples and their rich culture of the country we now call Australia. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge First Nations peoples as Australia's First Peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the lands and waters on which we live.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of First Nations peoples and communities to Australian life, and how this continuation of 75,000 years of unbroken storytelling enriches us. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards ensuring an equal voice and the equality of outcomes in all aspects of our society.

This report is a summary of *2022 National Survey of Australian Book Authors* by Paul Crosby, David Throsby and Jan Zwar, Macquarie University. It has been prepared by the Australia Council for the arts.

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# 2022 National Survey of Australian Book Authors

## A summary prepared by the Australia Council for the Arts

The Australian book industry is one of the most important among our cultural industries, both in the contribution it makes to the economy and in its role as an essential element in Australia's cultural life. Recent data for the book publishing industry indicate a market size of \$1.7 billion,<sup>1</sup> and the Australian Publishers Association estimate that the industry employs between 28,390 and 43,347 people. The cultural value generated by the industry is evident in the many ways in which books entertain, inform and inspire local and international readers, providing a diverse picture of Australian society and culture.

The *2022 National Survey of Australian Book Authors* investigates the practice of Australian authors in the contemporary national and international book industry. It examines authors' experiences of publishing, promotional strategies, changes in income, and copyright infringement. It also examines whether authors are changing their creative and work practices in response to shifts in the industry, including those shifts brought about by COVID-19.

This work was conducted by Paul Crosby, David Throsby and Jan Zwar from Macquarie University, supported by funding from the Australia Council and the Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund. The report updates findings from a 2015 survey of Australian book authors which was conducted by the same authors along with colleagues in the REACH network (Research in the Economics of Art, Culture and Heritage) at Macquarie University, providing insights into how the industry has changed over time.

The Australia Council recognises the valuable contribution that Australian authors make to our country's cultural imagination and to the storytelling and economy of the wider creative industries. We hope this research will help to improve understanding of the circumstances of book authors in Australia today, and that it will support efforts to foster the growth of a sustainable and productive book industry.

For the full report and eight Industry Briefs, see the [Macquarie University Business School website](#).

## Methodology

**The online survey** received responses from 1,152 book authors who reside in Australia. This was a different, but likely overlapping, cohort of authors who participated in the 2015 study.

The survey was distributed and promoted by more than 55 Australian writers' organisations and institutions to reach as wide a range of authors as possible. Surveys were completed during April and May 2022.

**The project's definition of a professional book author** was consistent with the 2015 survey and used as a screening question to assess eligibility to complete the survey. Participants were asked:

“Are you the author of one or more published books including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, short stories, graphic novels, educational books and scholarly works?”

A book publication includes: traditional print publishing, epubublishing, self publishing, multiplatform works or other equivalent booklength publications (including other digital platforms and related performance works). It does not include: marketingbased activities on websites, blogs or social media, online games, TV programs or films.”

1 Chapman W 2021, Book Publishing in Australia, IBISWorld Industry Report J5413.

## Headline findings

The picture of the creative practice of Australian book authors that emerges from the data presented in this report is one of persistence and resilience in the face of profound changes in all aspects of working life that have occurred in this country over the last several years.

- The average annual income from practising as an author is \$18,200.
- While this is a slight increase from 2015 (adjusting for inflation), it is still an extremely low income, particularly given that, as a group, authors have a markedly higher level of formal education than the population as a whole.
- The financial position of writers of literary fiction is on average worse in the 2022 findings than in 2015. Average earnings from practising as a literary author have dropped from \$15,400 in FY2013/14 (adjusted for inflation) to \$14,500 in FY2020/21.
- With the need to generate income from other sources, writers typically spend only around half their working time producing original work. This represents a huge amount of untapped potential.
- While the most common form of publishing is with a traditional publisher, self-publishing is increasingly prominent. At least one-third of authors have self-published a book during their career, and one-fifth of authors in the past year. Self-publishing is most popular among genre fiction authors, with almost two-fifths of genre fiction authors having used this model.
- Traditional reviews remain important, particularly for writers of literary fiction and creative non-fiction. Online platforms and social media have also elevated the role of reader recommendations, making these increasingly important compared to previous years.
- More than a quarter of authors had had their copyright infringed in Australia or overseas and a further 25% were unsure if this had occurred.

An additional theme that emerged throughout different parts of the survey findings is that authors value recognition and respect for their work. Income is one measure, and there are others: respect from and connection with their peers, treatment by their publisher/s, connection with their readers, and prizes and reviews.

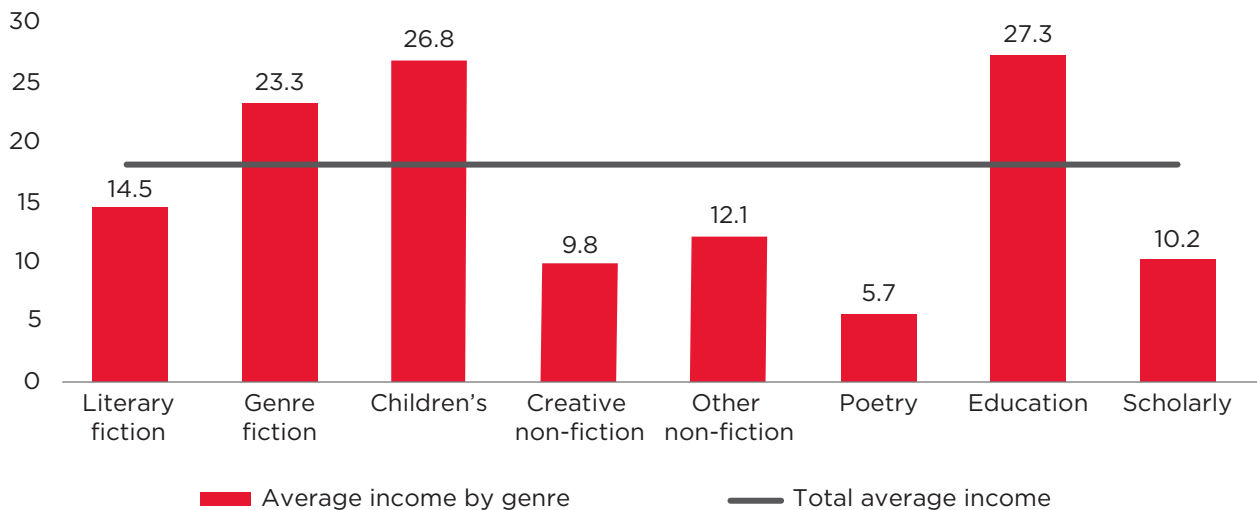
Live events at schools, libraries, festivals and bookstores are important for reinforcing the value that authors contribute to society. Recognition from the government is also valued by authors.

## Authors' income

### Income from creative work

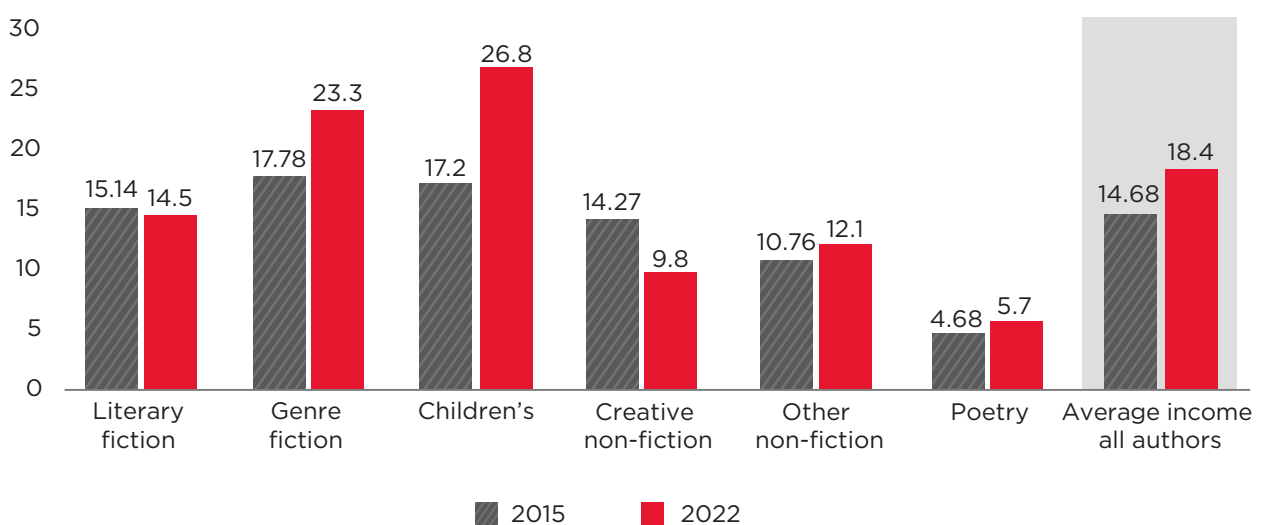
- The average income derived from practising as an author is \$18,200, with significant variation across the genre groups (see Figure 1, below). Annual incomes from practising as an author lie between \$5,700 (poetry) and \$27,300 (educational books).

**Figure 1: Average income from practising as an author by genre in FY2020/21 \$,000 AUD**



- Average incomes from practising as an author have increased from \$14,630 in FY2013/14 (adjusted for inflation), to \$18,200 in FY2020/21. However, this remains an extremely low figure, particularly compared to similarly educated professionals in other occupations. And there is significant variation between genre groups (see Figure 2, below).

**Figure 2: Comparison of authors' average income from practising as an author in FY2013/14 and FY2020/21, \$,000 AUD**



Note: Unlike in Figure 1, these total average incomes do not include data for writers of education or scholarly books.

- The financial position of literary authors on average is worse in the 2022 findings than in 2015. Average earnings from practising as a literary author have dropped from \$15,400 in FY2013/14 (adjusted for inflation) to \$14,500 in FY2020/21.
- For authors of genre fiction, average earnings from practising as an author have increased, rising from \$17,780 in FY2013/14 (adjusted for inflation) to \$23,300 in FY2020/21. Sales of genre fiction increased during the pandemic, and it is likely that these figures reflect this. It is also possible that the increased sales of books by best-selling genre-fiction authors have lifted average earnings for this category as a whole.
- For authors of children’s books, average earnings from practising as an author have increased, rising from \$17,200 in FY2013/14 (adjusted for inflation) to \$26,800 in FY2020/21. However, the average total income for children’s authors was the lowest of all genre groups (see average total income below).

## Overall income

- The average total income for authors, including all sources of income, is \$64,900. This ranges from \$58,000 for children’s book authors to \$95,100 for scholarly authors.
- Earning a total income comparable to the average annual Australian income remains challenging and many authors rely on multiple sources of income to make ends meet. Two-fifths of authors rely on the income of their partner and two-fifths rely on income from a job that is unrelated to being an author.<sup>2</sup>
- Just over one-fifth of authors rely on a job that is related to being an author but does not directly lead to the production of a creative work, and 17% relied on unemployment and/or other government benefits.
- Looking at total income from all sources, only 35% of authors earned more than the average Australian annual income of approx. \$70,000. This is down from approximately 43% in FY2013/14.
- Only 23% of authors reported applying for funding through grants to support their creative work. Due to the competitive nature of these grants, only 2% of all survey respondents reported ‘always’ receiving grants. 13% reported receiving them ‘sometimes’.

## Working patterns and allocation of time

- With the need to generate income from other sources, writers typically spend only around half their working time producing original work. This represents a huge amount of untapped potential and unrealised Australian literary work.
- On average, authors spend nearly 18 hours per week working in their creative occupation as a writer, 11 hours working in another occupation that utilises their skills as a writer, and 8 hours working in an occupation unrelated to their writing. An average of 5 hours per week are spent on voluntary or unpaid work.
- Time spent writing was approximately consistent between 2015 and 2022. However, on average, authors were spending 6 hours more per week working on non-creative practice in 2022 than they were in 2015.
- Only 6% of authors said there were no competing demands on their time that prevents them from writing. Domestic responsibilities (61%) and insufficient income and the need to earn income elsewhere (57%) were the most frequently cited competing demands.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents could select multiple options as appropriate.

## Publishers and publishing

- While the most common form of publishing is with a traditional publisher, self-publishing is increasingly prominent. At least one-third of authors have self-published a book during their career, and one-fifth of authors in the past year. Self-publishing is most popular among genre fiction authors, with almost two-fifths of genre fiction authors having used this model.
- Nearly one-third of poets have published with small, non-traditional start-up publishers.
- Just under a quarter of authors had licenced rights to their work overseas beyond Australia and New Zealand and more than a third had had their work translated into other languages.
- More than a quarter of authors had had their copyright infringed in Australia or overseas and a further 25% were unsure if this had occurred.
- Traditional reviews remain important, particularly for writers of literary fiction and creative non-fiction (three-quarters of whom say traditional reviews are important for sales of their work).<sup>3</sup> Online platforms and social media have also elevated the role of reader recommendations, making these increasingly important compared to previous years.

## Demographics

- The profession of book author in Australia is predominantly female. Overall, women make up two thirds of book authors.
- Professional book authors are relatively old compared with the Australian population. Over 43% of book authors in the survey were aged 40-59 years, and another 44% were older. Younger authors tend to be associated with genre fiction and poetry.
- Three-quarters of Australian book authors were born in Australia. This includes Australian First Nations authors, who are represented in the survey findings, but who do not form a large enough group for separate analysis at this stage.<sup>4</sup>
- Authors as a group have a markedly higher level of formal education than the population as a whole, with more than 80% having attended university compared to the 24% of the Australian population who have completed a Bachelor degree or above.<sup>5</sup> 58% of authors also hold a postgraduate qualification.
- One quarter of authors see themselves as full-time professionals and nearly one third as part-time professional writers. The highest proportion of full-time professional authors is among children's (34.2%), followed by genre fiction (30.6%) and literary fiction (26.9%).
- Approximately two-fifths of authors describe themselves as emerging or developing (42.4%). Nearly two-fifths (39.4%) identify as being an established author, an increase from 2015 (up from 31.6%).

3 'Traditional reviews' were defined in the survey as those in formats similar to print or online literary journals, weekend newspapers, or programs about books on radio and television.

4 The Australia Council has recently conducted a study on the First Nations literature sector, presenting the voices of First Nations writers, editors, publishers, and illustrators on the state of the sector and the conditions that will support sustainability and continued success in the future. This work will be published in 2023.

5 Australian Bureau of Statistics (Reference period: 2016)

## COVID-19 impacts

- The pandemic affected book authors just as it affected virtually all Australians. While one-tenth of authors found it had been beneficial overall for their career as an author, four times as many authors found it had been negative overall.
- Approximately one-third of authors reported a large or modest increase in levels of financial stress. Opportunities for promoting new books were reduced, with the cancellation of school, library and bookstore appearances, writers festivals and the closure of bookstores.
- Education and scholarly authors were most likely to say the pandemic had had no impact on their careers (41% and 34% respectively, compared to 17% overall).
- Just under a third of authors accessed government payments due to COVID-19.

