

It's all about the money, honey

Written by Jen Webb, Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, University of Canberra

On 8 June, with less than a month before the 2016 election, the arts advocacy group ArtsPeak staged a national debate on the topic of arts policy. Minister for Communications and the Arts Mitch Fifield, Shadow Minister for the Arts and Shadow Attorney General Mark Dreyfus, and the Greens' spokesperson for the arts, Adam Bandt, spoke to the question: "What's your vision for Australia's arts and culture and what's your plan for making this happen?"

As each took the stage, he expressed the conventional encomiums about the arts (it's good for you, it's good for the economy, it's good for the country). There is some validity to this view. The Australia Council for the Arts shows that this sector contributes four per cent of our GDP: more than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined.

When it comes to social and cultural wellbeing, the data is also convincing. The majority of Australians (85%) report that art provides them with a richer and more meaningful life; and a majority of Australians report that they read literature (87%).

This supports the politicians' comments about the value of art to the community and the economy. However, very few individual creators get much economic benefit from their contribution to the arts sector; and this brings us to the second focus of the politicians' comments: which was to affirm the inherent value of art.

This is a view that sails close to the 19th century doctrine of "l'art pour l'art" —that art must be without purpose if it is to have purpose.

These two lines of thought bring to light the complexity of art, and the contradictory roles it plays. On the one hand, art is a space of autonomous practice, where creators make their work free from political or economic or other imperatives.

On the other hand, it is an important site for the making and selling of commodities, for the representation of national identity, and for contributions to employment and GDP and social wellbeing. We must make art, for art's sake; we must contribute to the society in which we find ourselves.

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And, to add a degree of difficulty, writers and other artists must support themselves financially. But, as David Throsby and colleagues have demonstrated, Australian writers earn less than \$13,000 a year from their creative work, which doesn't cover even basic living expenses.

The best way to fund yourself is to ensure you have wealthy parents; or try to win the Lotto. More practically, it is possible to make a living as a generalist, producing advertising copy, politicians' speeches, didactic panels for cultural institutions et al. But this sort of portfolio career is characterised by precarity and deep economic insecurity. Selling a story here, picking up a short-term contract there: it's not a good option for anyone wanting to support themselves.

It is possible to make a living, too, writing marketable genre fiction — or more than a living. A truism attributed to James Michener is:

A writer can make a fortune in America, but he can't make a living.

Ian Rankin, an extremely successful crime novelist, says that it took 14 years of writing and publishing before he began to see financial returns. JK Rowling did indeed make a fortune, but her experience is akin to winning the Lotto: that is, not likely (the chance of winning was recently estimated at one in 8,145,060).

If neither the precarious life nor the genre fiction life appeal, a further alternative is to find a steady job doing ... well, almost anything.

If this is your choice, you will enter what Bernard Lahire calls "the double life of writers". In one of those lives you will enjoy stability and continuity, along with freedom from economic want and precarity. But in your other life — your writing life — your daily job spent working as teacher or public servant or taxi driver will eat into the time, and the emotional and intellectual energy required, to write literary works.

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Of course there may be little in the matter. Even Richard Flanagan, one of our top literary authors, contemplated taking a job in the mines just to make ends meet; and his earnings from the much-awarded [The Narrow Road to the Deep North](#) are unlikely to sustain him for the rest of his life.

This is a bleak picture for anyone eager to build a life as a writer. But the impossible contradiction at the heart of writing, between the imperative to make art and the counter-imperative to make a living, is one that many writers tackle, successfully.

Australia has an impressive list of writers, both experienced and emerging, who maintain a commitment to their creative practice. It's not for everyone; but if you must write, you will find a way to do it.

Disclosure

Jen Webb receives funding from the Australian Research Council.

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