

The best way to support writers is to feed them new ideas

Written by Julian Novitz, Lecturer, Writing, School of Media and Communication, Swinburne University of Technology



Writing has never been easy, but sending writers out to find new ideas and people might be one way to help. Shutterstock.com

Books and writing seem to be [as popular as ever](#) , but writers are having a hard time making a living from their work. While [writers may have always struggled](#) , a number of recent ideas have been put forward suggesting ways to help them out.

Writing in [Meanjin](#) , Frank Moorhouse proposed, among other measures, renewable ten-year “national contracts” for mid-to-late career writers. And in [the Sydney Review of Books](#) , [Ben Eltham](#) describes an initiative that he is working on that would aim to provide literary fellowships for fixed periods of three to four years.

Both writers make the valid point that, as fewer successful writers are able to sustain themselves via book sales and royalties, the role of public support becomes more important. They both argue for the need to radically expand the range of fellowships available to writers.

While more secure fellowships are certainly welcome ideas, there are other ways to support writing that address the current economics. So in the spirit of keeping the conversation going, here are a few thoughts.

The value of books

Moorhouse and Eltham both seem to be arguing for fellowships that might provide the long-term security that many working writers currently lack. This suggests a fundamental shift in the purpose of this kind of writing support.

Individual grants and fellowships have typically been provided as a short-term investment in a writer or author, with a duration ranging from a few months to a year. They are there, ideally, to

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encourage new projects and innovation – offering opportunities for a concentrated period of work, for research, for travel. [The University of Melbourne Asialink arts residencies](#) program is a strong example of this. It offers support to a range of Australian writers and artists to live and pursue creative projects in Asia for six weeks to three months.

Longer-term fellowships would certainly have many benefits for established writers. They help compensate them for cultural labour that is not always adequately rewarded in the literary marketplace. As Moorhouse observes, the value of a book often goes beyond its cover price. Books are read and reread, loaned to family members and friends, speculated upon and debated. They inspire insights, arguments and critical and creative forms of engagement. Singular sales and royalty payments cannot reflect this hidden or social value of a book.

However, the criteria that Moorhouse proposes for his ten-year contracts – multiple publications, international distribution, being the subject of academic research – could cluster a lot of funding around a small number of conventionally successful authors.

A particular kind of writing?

In his article, Eltham suggests that a lack of individual fellowships has contributed to the rising importance of literary prizes in Australia. According to Eltham, prizes have become “the closest thing to a fellowship most Australian writers can aspire to”. In the same vein as Ivor Indyk’s [20 15 Sydney Review of Books article](#), he argues that “prize literature’ is now a discernible genre of its own, taken to represent a certain form of middlebrow that is accessible, appealing and safe.” The implication is that the exclusive pursuit of prizes results in stylistically homogenous literary fiction, and that more individual grants and fellowships would provide writers with more freedom to experiment and take risks.

However, shifting a writer’s focus from winning a literary prize to appeasing a grant committee or funding body will not necessarily result in more adventurous fiction. Writing in 1971 about the Commonwealth Literary Fund (which subsidised Australian writers from 1908 to 1973), [Maurice Dunlevy](#) reflected on the value of literary fellowships, observing that “the fund has yet to aid the birth of a genius” or even a “classic Australian novel”.

He went on to claim that “the overwhelming number of fellowships have been awarded to

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well-known mediocrities who have produced mediocre work.” I won’t pretend to know exactly how fair Dunlevy is being to the fellowship writers of this period. But his critique can easily be compared to some of the contemporary objections to Australian prize culture.

There are a number of questions any new fellowships would need to answer. What kinds of literary work and lives would they encourage writers to work towards? What kinds of writing would be eligible for this kind of support? Would it favour the writer who produces a steady output of moderately successful publications over a powerful single work? Or the traditional print-based author over a writer creating innovative material for digital platforms?

Meeting the world

I don’t want to argue against more fellowships for writers (especially since, given the state of arts funding, this would likely be an argument over imaginary money). But we should question whether fellowships of the length that Moorhouse and Eltham are proposing are sustainable or even desirable.

In his 1991 lecture, [On Writing](#), the Canadian author Robertson Davies expressed some of his reservations about the culture of writing grants, noting that even as they seem to offer freedom for writers they also potentially isolate them. Davies argues that, for a writer, a job isn’t just a distraction from the serious business of their craft. It is also a valuable opportunity to “meet the world” in their own particular way, and to find a daily task that keeps them from “writing too much” to the point where “their talent has become diseased, hypertrophied because of the continual gross and indecent solicitation of the imagination”.

I can’t pretend to share Davies’s distain for writing grants, having been the grateful beneficiary of a couple myself. But I think that there is a spleeny contrarian wisdom to his critique that is worth considering.

Relatively few successful authors throughout history have lived [professional lives](#) that were focused solely on writing. For many, the kind of subsidy that Eltham and Moorhouse have proposed might not be particularly useful. Being able to focus solely on writing for three, four or ten years might offer some incredible benefits, but it also presents the possibility of isolation, insularity, and a continued dependence on this kind of funding that might be detrimental for a writer’s work in the long run. As Davies writes: “Nothing - including grants - is for nothing”. The kind of freedom they offer always comes at a cost.

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On balance, individual funding might be more suited to providing opportunities for travel (like the brilliantly conceived [Antarctic Arts Fellowship](#)), cultural exchange, or residencies. These require engagement with the life and rhythms of unfamiliar institutions, offering both emerging and established writers new ways of meeting the world.

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