

# DECORUM SERVES THE RICH

a zine about author income

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## Puttin' the prole into prolegomena

Sometimes, people – friends – make remarks to me, well-meaning ones, that show me they assume I make a living from book sales. They know I'm a writer, they know I've written books; ergo, my income must come from those books. It's a logical assumption, on the surface. Teachers teach, cleaners clean, plumbers plumb, so writers... write, right? For a living?

That's when I have to say — yeah, nah, it doesn't work like that. I see their faces fall when I quote hard numbers: book sales, income earned from royalties, what a royalty rate is. Friends and acquaintances who are artists too – dancers, musicians, people who know how hard it is to make a living in Australia (or anywhere) from creative labour – even they can be prone to a curious idealism, a false optimism, when it comes to thinking about writers' incomes. Again, I can kinda understand how this happens: if you see the same book by the same author in four of every six bookshops you walk into, it's logical to assume that (a) those books are selling, and (b) those sales are enough to constitute a living income for the author. But that's not how it is for the majority of authors, especially not in Australia, so I'm writing this zine-pamphlet thing as a means of demystification.

Publishing is an industry more than half a millennium old now. Some things about publishing have changed radically over that time, but others have barely changed at all. When Mr Gutenberg gave the world his movable-type printing press circa 1450, thus ushering in publishing as we still sorta know it today, literacy was not widespread. Only a minority of people, generally very wealthy people, and often people connected to the Catholic Church, were literate, which meant, in consequence, that only a small number of wealthy and often powerful people could either write, publish or buy books. If your wealth derived from the fact that you were a member of the landed gentry making an income from your rent-paying tenants, then making money from your book sales would not have been of great concern to you. Ditto if you were a Catholic cardinal made rich

by the plunder of the church, an explorer well-recompensed by your royal patrons, or indeed a royal or a noble yourself. These are the people who read, wrote and bought books circa the 15th and 16th centuries.

The problem for publishing – or rather, the problem for contemporary writers and readers – is that nearly 600 years later, in an age of mass literacy, the idea that writing books is a gentleman's pursuit still structures the publishing industry. To put this as simply as possible: most publishers don't pay enough money, and most authors don't sell enough books, for the majority of authors to make a living from writing those books. The authors who can spend all their time writing books are – with exceptions, like yr gazillion-selling Stephen Kings – still people who arrive at authorship with pre-existing wealth, in part because *this wealth has bought them the time to write in the first place*. They're minor royals or major celebrities, rentiers, business owners or early, self-funded retirees. They might have been born into wealth, or they married it, and tough for you if you weren't, and didn't — if you, like me, are a chump who persists in trying to write books, especially non-commercial books, despite having no material fortune. It's gonna be hard, and it's gonna be harder than you think.

A caveat: most of what I will outline here applies to Australian publishing, or at least to what it means in material terms to be an Australian writer based in Australia, even if your books, like mine, have been published overseas. Our population is very small in global terms, which means that our publishing industry is also small, and once we're dealing with what is broadly termed “literary” publishing – fiction, non-fiction and poetry books that sit outside commercially viable genres like crime and romance (leaving aside the question of how and why “genre” gets constructed in the first place, and what genre has to do with commerce) – it's really, *really* small. To give just one figure, in order to try and illustrate the difference between Australian publishing and US publishing: if you wanna make the famed *New York Times* Bestseller list in the States, which is a weekly measure of the US publishing industry's most commercially successful books, then you've gotta be selling somewhere between 5000–10,000 copies of your book *per week*. In Australia, the average – the *average* – local literary title,

excluding yr crime fiction and yr ghostwritten 'Test cricketers' memoirs – will sell 1500–2000 copies *in total*. Even a very successful “genre” crime title by an Australian author will likely top out at 10,000 sales *max*. If you're an Australian writer who's published a literary title in Australia and it's sold more than 2,000 copies, congratulations: your book is a success by the standards of Australian publishing. But will you be making a living from your book? Hah. No.

What follows is a breakdown of the economics involved in writing and publishing the two books I've written and published so far: advances (or lack of), royalties, grants and the income from jobs that are *not* writing books that has enabled me to write those books. Like I said before, I'm trying to demystify this publishing business – in the context of Australian publishing, in particular – from a writer's perspective, for the benefit of anyone interested. Being a gentlemen's industry, gentlemen's decorum has prevailed in publishing for too long: it's considered rude, even taboo, to talk about how much you got paid, or how many books you sold, unless that conversation is confined to “shop talk” with your publisher, agent or other writers. You're not supposed to talk about this stuff in public, but I think writers *should* talk about it, often and loudly, 'cos keeping quiet about how little money most of us earn serves no one: not ourselves, not each other, and certainly not readers. Our discretion about money only benefits the very wealthy people who own and run publishing houses. *Decorum serves the rich*, as my friend Elias put it recently, which is such a good slogan that I've swiped it for the title of this zine. (Thanks, Elias: your recompense is glory, as is so often the case.)

## Live like this

My first book, *Live Through This*, on the 1994 Hole album of the same name, was published in early 2015 as a volume in the long-running 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> monograph series, currently published by Bloomsbury. I was 33 years old when it was published, which felt fitting.

For anyone reading this who doesn't know, and why should you, the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> series is a long-running series of critical monographs on landmark albums in popular music. A monograph is, in general terms, a written study of a single subject or an aspect of it, and it's a common form in academic publishing, in particular: the original publisher of the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> series was an academic publisher called Continuum that published a lot of books about music, film, sound and other aspects of popular and mass culture.

The academic aspect is important to mention, in so far as when Continuum got bought out by Bloomsbury and all the Continuum titles changed publisher, the conventions of academic publishing were kept in place, even though Bloomsbury as a whole is not an academic publisher. And what I do mean by “conventions of academic publishing”? Remember what I said earlier about the assumption within publishing that writing books is a gentleman's game? The same goes, but double, for academic publishing, the economics of which rest on an increasingly false assumption that authors of academic books don't need to be paid for writing those books because they already have a comfortable salary as a full-time, tenured academic; they should be grateful simply for the chance to write a book (for free)! Those books don't even need to be written for an academic readership for the assumption to hold: the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> books are aimed at a general, non-academic readership of music fans.

My book *Live Through This* came about because, around 2012, Bloomsbury put out an open call for proposal submissions for new titles in the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> series. Hundreds of people, including me, wrote proposals, and these were whittled down to a longlist, which was made public, and from the longlist Bloomsbury picked about 20 proposals to go ahead with, and mine was one. This is a fairly unusual way to end up with a book contract, but as I was to discover, almost everything about the way that Bloomsbury administers and publishes the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> series is pretty unusual, if not dubious, even by the deeply dubious baseline standards of publishing.

Bloomsbury bought Continuum in 2011, and I think – though I can't be certain – that my book *Live Through This* was one of the first “batch” of titles acquired by Bloomsbury for 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> after the series changed publishers. Bloomsbury publishes the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> books through its imprint Bloomsbury Academic, and again, for those who don't know (and why would you know this stuff unless you work in publishing or bookselling), an imprint is a subsidiary publisher-within-a-publisher, just like big record labels have subsidiary labels. This is where the norms and assumptions of academic publishing come back in: Bloomsbury isn't an academic publisher, but Bloomsbury Academic *is* an academic imprint of a general – or “trade” – publishing company. Bloomsbury is the largest and wealthiest independent trade publishing company in the world. They made billions of dollars – and I mean *billions* – in the early 2000s from the terf J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, a once-in-a-century profit bonanza. My time as a bookseller pretty much coincided with the *Harry Potter* era, and boy did those books sell. And sell. And sell.

(An aside: the publishing industry is broadly comparable to the music industry in terms of its structure: there are corporate publishers and there are indie – independent – publishers. Just like in music where you've got the “big three” corporate record labels – Sony, Warner and Universal – in publishing you've got the “big five” corporates: Penguin Random House, Macmillan, Hachette, HarperCollins and Simon and Schuster. The corporate publishers are – you guessed it – owned by larger corporations: HarperCollins is a subsidiary of NewsCorp, which means it's ultimately owned by Rupert Murdoch. Simon and Schuster is owned by Paramount Global, which also owns, among other things, the film studio Paramount Pictures, the American television networks CBS and MTV, and the Australian free-to-air TV station Channel 10. There used to be many more publishers, particularly medium-sized publishers, just like there used to be many more record labels. Capitalism, however, loves a monopoly, and the trend in publishing over the past 20 years has to be towards mergers and buy-outs — hence Bloomsbury buying Continuum, for instance. As I write this an important anti-trust court case is being heard in the United States because Penguin Random House, already by market share the world's biggest publisher,

created by a 2013 merger of the corporate Random House with the once independent Penguin Books, wants to buy Simon and Schuster, to make a Leviathan-sized mega-publisher. None of this – the decimation of medium-sized publishers, the Blob-like merging of the corporate publishers into one Mega Publisher of Everything – is good news for non- or anti-commercial writers who don't or can't write the kind of books that can be cross-marketed with television programs or adapted into blockbuster films. Contemporary corporate publishing, like contemporary corporate music and corporate cinema, is a game of exploiting intellectual properties across as many formats and digital platforms as possible.)

I knew that I'd be getting a raw deal from Bloomsbury as soon as they issued a call-out for proposals in the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> series, because, to their credit I guess – and this is about the only thing they'll get credit for, from me – they were upfront about contract conditions during that initial call-out. They announced from the start that they wouldn't pay an advance. No advance means that you, the writer, get paid no money up front by the publisher when you sign a contract to write a book; in such a case, your only income from the publisher is gonna be through royalties. Bloomsbury Academic set my royalty rate at 10% of net sales. Translated from publisher talk, this basically means that I get 10% of the cost price of each copy of *Live Through This* that is sold. A standard royalty rate in publishing is 10% of the retail price (minus GST, in Australia), and retail price is obviously higher than cost price. But the lower royalty rate is, again, not unusual for academic publishing, even if it *is* unusual for trade publishing. 10% of cost price is something like 80 cents, in this case. I get about 80 cents for each copy sold of a book that retails for AU\$19.98.

A shit sandwich, then — no advance and a miserly royalty rate. But I swallowed it because, like most human beings, I don't make decisions based on perfectly rational economic calculation. I wanted to write the book in part because I'd already been writing about music for a long time and I was interested to see if I could do it at extended length; I wanted to write a monograph about *Live Through This* for a monograph series that, when I submitted my proposal, had more than

90 published titles already but barely half a dozen on women musicians or written by women authors (an issue I pointed out in my proposal to Bloomsbury).

It took me most of 2013 to research *Live Through This*, which included doing a lot of interviews. Do I mean by this that I sat down and researched the book full-time for year? LOL. No. I wasn't being paid any advance by the publisher, remember, and I sure as hell didn't have a year's worth of income saved up. 2013 was the year I quit working as a bookseller; my main employment that year was as a casual university tutor. Towards the end of 2013, having not really done any freelance writing for a few years, I got a call out of the blue from the then editor of *The Monthly* magazine, John van Tiggelen, to ask if I would be their music critic. I'd never written for *The Monthly* before and I couldn't work out how they'd even got my phone number. My instinct, as always, was to say no, but I knew that if I said no they'd just ask some grey-haired Baby Boomer bore, so instead I said yes, out of curiosity as much as anything. Anyway. That's another story.

I just looked up my tax return for 2013-14, so I can tell you that I earned \$29,798 that tax year. My rent at the time was \$230/week. I remember having to think hard about whether to spend \$2 on a newspaper, or buy a takeaway coffee. I researched and interviewed for *Live Through This* on my days off from wage work, and at night (just like I'm writing this at night, and in between other tasks), and before I knew it, it was late 2013 and I had a deadline looming for a 35,000-word manuscript I hadn't written yet. In this case, it was a perverse "advantage" that I was employed as casual tutor and so, like most casual university staff, had no work or wage from the university over the summer break between semesters. *The Monthly*, who had just taken me on as their music critic – freelance, mind you – also didn't and doesn't publish over the summer, so I wasn't getting any pay from them, either. I signed on for the dole, being officially "unemployed", and I wrote *Live Through This* in about seven weeks on dole money.

I wasn't really going anywhere but my desk, so I didn't feel the Centrelink penury as hard as I have done in previous spells on the dole. Almost every day of that

summer, after hours at my desk, I would walk to the nearby 7-Eleven and treat myself to a Diet Coke and, say, a Freddo Frog. That's the glamour of authorship for you. The two months or less during which I was claiming the dole would later land me in the path of robodebt, 'cos Centrelink's automated debt repayment algorithm did that now-infamous thing where it averaged the data for my year's income as a tutor and freelancer over 26 fortnights of the year, rather than take into account the months in which I wasn't earning any income, so then I spent almost a year fighting Centrelink's spurious claim that I owed them money (I didn't). Pretty sure that Lord Byron didn't have to contend with this shit when he busy writing *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. A gentleman's game, you see. A gentleman's game.

Bloomsbury – after sitting on my submitted manuscript for almost all of 2014, which happened to be the 20th anniversary year of *Live Through This*, the album, and therefore would have been a really smart time to publish *Live Through This*, the book, but what do I know, I'm only a writer – finally published my book so close to the end of 2014 (December 13 or something?) that its official publication date on the inside front cover is actually 2015. My book came out in 2015, effectively. I could write a whole other sidebar here about how no competent publisher puts out anything but a Christmas book in fucking *December*, but I'll save my breath.

One more thing to bear in mind: the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> series is run out of the Bloomsbury Academic office in New York, which means that when the book was published it was effectively published worldwide. The question of which territories (to use an industry term) a book is published and/or distributed into has implications for all writers, and especially for writers from countries like Australia, where publishing locally with an Australian publisher by no means guarantees a book's publication or distribution overseas. An Australian author's book might be published with Bloomsbury Australia, for instance, and not by Bloomsbury in the US or UK. But my book *Live Through This* sits under the editorial auspices of the global hegemon, the good ol' US of A, and is consequently available through Bloomsbury everywhere. Bloomsbury also has what's called worldwide rights to

the book, which means that if for any reason another publisher wanted to publish it – in translation, say? – they would have to buy the publication rights from Bloomsbury (not from me, note).

My most recent royalty statement from Bloomsbury arrived in December 2021. (Publishers generally pay royalties either once or twice a year.) In the seven years, more or less, since the book's publication, it has sold 3305 copies worldwide. That's pretty good for a book of its type, and for the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> series it's also right in line with expectations: the titles in that series generally sell somewhere between 2000 to 5000 copies, with occasional outliers like Carl Wilson's (excellent) *Let's Talk About Love*, which is massively popular. According to my royalty statement, I have earned US\$2135.22 in royalties (before tax) from selling 3305 books, which is about \$3100 in Australian dollars. However you slice it currency-wise, this means I've earned less than a dollar per book, yeah? Yeah.

Sometimes royalties only tell part of the story of an author's earnings from a particular book. For some authors, for some books, there might also be things like audio book sales, film or TV adaption rights (known as options), serialisation rights for magazines, and so on and so forth. But a critical monograph isn't that kind of book, so unless Courtney Love hires me as the screenwriter for what must be the inevitable Courtney Love biopic, my 80-ish cents a copy is all that *Live Through This* is ever gonna earn me.

## A digression upon advances

The part that still rankles about my 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> experience is not getting paid an advance by Bloomsbury, because the truly unfair thing – aside from having been paid no advance! – is that authors who published in the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> series both before and *after* the “batch” that I was published in *mere* paid advances, in the region of US\$5000 each. I took this up with Bloomsbury several times, pointing out the inconsistency and unfairness of their approach. I would have rather have had US\$5000 as an advance than less than half of that amount in royalties.

According to Bloomsbury, the 20 or so authors whose books were contracted via that open call-out for proposals back in 2012 and who were *not* paid an advance were “participating in an experiment”. An experiment in not paying us, I guess? I reached out to a couple of other authors who'd also missed out on advances for their 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> books and we emailed the executive editor of the Bloomsbury Academic imprint. But you know, a handful of largely first-time authors against a big publishing company is never gonna get very far, complaints-wise. It's almost as if authors could do with... collective bargaining? Now where have I heard that idea before...

A word about advances, in general. The notion of an advance is often misunderstood outside of publishing and (again) the music industry, which are about the only two industries that use advances so extensively. An advance is a “market signal”: it's a translation into cold, hard cash of the commercial expectations that a publisher (or record label) has for any given book (or record), *in advance* of its release. The advances that make news are the rare, enormous sums paid to the Barack Obamas of this world — existing members of the ruling class with accumulated power and wealth, to whom publishers hand over fistfuls of millions. But these really are the outliers.

There are many problems with advances, and one is that the sums involved are rarely spoken about, as if that were rude (it isn't). Writers don't generally know what other writers are being paid in advance by their publishers; we don't know, for instance, what other, comparable writers are being paid for other, comparable books in the same genre or subject area, and without knowing, everyone is left to guess as to what they should expect to be offered as an advance by a publisher. If you have an agent then this might go better for you, as agents are paid to know, rather than guess, what a good or bad offer from a publisher is. They know the market. Agents are also paid to make the kind of financial negotiations with a publisher that you, as an author, might feel too uncertain or powerless to make, because you want your book published and are trying not to piss off the publisher. (The power imbalance is real.) I should probably point out here that I've so far signed three book contracts without an agent, and only acquired an

agent last year after being approached by one for the first time in my career. This, again, is partly a quirk of Australian publishing, where the industry is so small that having an agent matters a lot less than it would in the northern hemisphere.

Secrecy is one problem is with advances: it prevents writers from knowing the material conditions in which we're actually working, and how we might improve these conditions collectively. According to a 2021 survey by the Australian Society of Authors (ASA), which is the professional member body for Australian authors – but is not a union – a staggering “58% of respondents indicated they received no advance for their work.” Furthermore:

80.6% of respondents received advances under \$5,000. Only 13% of respondents reported receiving an advance over \$10,000; a marginal decrease from 14.6% in 2020.

In plain terms, almost no author in Australia is being paid an advance that constitutes a liveable income – what you're getting, if you're lucky, is one or two month's rent.

Another problem, perhaps an even bigger problem than advances being paltry (or non-existent) in the first place, is that an advance is really a kind of loan, not an outright payment (and by no means a wage). It works like this: if a publisher pays you a \$5000 advance for a book (like Bloomsbury might have paid me, but didn't), you as the author have to earn that money back *before* you are paid any royalties for your book sales. And most crucially, *you have to earn the advance back at your royalty rate.*

Let's say you've received a \$5000 advance, and your book is gonna retail for AU\$24.95, and your royalty rate is the standard 10% of the retail price minus GST (in Australia). \$24.95 minus GST is \$22.45, which means your royalty rate is \$2.24 per copy sold (and *only* per copy sold, you'll get big fat nothing for unsold copies). You're gonna have to sell (divide 5000 by 2.24) 2,232 copies of your

book just to earn out (as it's called) your advance, effectively paying your advance back to your publisher *in royalties.*

Now, provided you earn out your advance, you're at \$0: you don't owe the publisher money anymore, but, because you've been paying back your advance, you haven't been paid any royalties yourself on those initial sales of 2,232 copies. (And remember, in Australia, if you've even sold 2,000 copies of a literary title then you're doing well.) You'll get paid your \$2.24 per sale only *after* you've cleared your debt to the publisher. (If for some reason your book doesn't get published after you've handed in the manuscript – if, for instance, there's a legal problem with something you wrote – you might well be on the hook for paying back your advance despite the fact that the publisher won't publish your book.) Meanwhile, you'll be paying income tax on your *entire* advance even though it's a really weird and contingent form of “income”. Fun times!

Even more fun: to quote that ASA survey again, 40% of respondents indicated that they did *not* earn out their advance – in other words, they ended up in debt to their publisher for a book that didn't sell as many copies as the publisher thought it would. Does this mean it's better to not be paid an advance at all, and to start earning royalties on any sales straight away because you're not earning back a debt to the publisher? This was Bloomsbury's argument when they wouldn't pay me an advance for *Live Through This*. If I *had* been paid a US\$5000 advance, I wouldn't have seen any royalties from sales even now, more than seven years after the book's publication: 3305 copies sold at a royalty rate of 80 cents per book would not have earned out that advance. *But*, I still would have had US\$5000 to begin with, rather than US\$2135.22 in royalties paid in dribs and drabs over a seven-year period. I'd still be ahead, financially. By declining to pay me an advance, Bloomsbury saved itself nearly \$3000, at my expense. Now multiply that by all the other authors in the same situation.

It's worth bearing in mind here that large advances – the headline-generating kind – can be a “too good to be true” proposition, particularly for debut authors. When I hear about a “promising” debut author paid a large advance by a



corporate publisher on the basis of hype, say an advance in the high six-figure range, I tend to feel sorry for them, even if that seems counterintuitive. If said author doesn't earn that big money back in sales then they're screwed, to put it bluntly. The publisher might make an author pay back the advance, or part of it, anyway, despite the lack of sales, in order to recoup their costs. (An advance is more like a bank loan than you might think.) The author probably won't get another contract with that publisher, and perhaps not with any other publisher, either, because they're seen in commercial terms as a failure. Publishers, in effect, are betting on you, and if the bet doesn't pay out then they won't gamble on you again. This is another argument in favour of advances being transparent and regulated, so that every writer gets paid a decent but not an insane amount, rather than a few writers being paid millions and many writers getting nothing, or some writers getting heaps and then ending up in hock to their publisher when the glittery dream of a bestseller doesn't come true. Or, you know, we could just burn the whole advance system to the ground and pay authors wages, instead, which they don't have to recoup for their publisher? There's an idea.

## A short interlude on the concept of the “debut”

*Live Through This* was a reasonably straightforward, self-contained project, so far as books go. Maybe I should have held out for some splashy, “literary” debut, but the publishing industry's bizarre fetishisation of debut authors has only really solidified in the near-decade *since* I wrote LTT, and, frankly, that fetishisation is rank. I'd made zines and art, and published blogs and worked as a freelancer, for way too long by the time LTT came about to want to be made by a publisher to play the role of blushing, aw-shucks first-timer. Sydney Writers' Festival even has a “debutante's ball” these days for authors putting out their first books. What next, we get invited to shake the mayor's hand? Grow the fuck up, everyone.

Writing, like upholstering or baking or sewing or woodworking or dancing or acting or playing a musical instrument, is a cumulative skill. You get better at it over time (in theory), and in order to get better at it, you have to put things out

into the world, which means not being precious about every damn thing. The publish industry's relatively recent notion that everything – *everything*, including a writer's whole future career – rides on an artistically immaculate, brilliantly reviewed, best-selling debut is absolute horse shit, in part because it depends upon the commodification of the writer themselves. You, first-timer, are become the product to be sold, and you'd best believe that you'll be superseded when the new one comes along. Better to sidestep that crap as elegantly as you can, I think.

Aaaaanyway. This is a roundabout way of getting to the economics involved in writing and publishing my second book, *No Document*, which was also my first book that was gonna end up entangled with the world of “literary” publishing – with grants and festivals and potential prize nominations and that palaver. You will have figured out by now that I have *deeply* ambivalent, if not hostile, feelings about the publishing industry, and particularly about that part of it that has tickets on itself for being “literary”, which is often just an excuse to exploit people more ruthlessly in the name of *art*.

## The breakdown

Let's work backwards with this one. I received my first royalty statement from Giramondo, which publishes *No Document* in Australia, in March 2022, for sales and earnings during the calendar year of 2021. The book was published in Australia in April 2021, so this royalty statement represents about eight months' worth of sales and earnings. Here's what that royalty statement looks like:

Bookshop sales: 965  
Online sales: 218  
Total sales: **1183**

Royalty 10% of \$24.50 (\$26.95 less GST)  
On 1183 copies **\$2,898.35**

Overseas English language edition (80%)  
Transit (80% of USD\$2,000.00) **\$2,131.38**

Less advance -\$4,000.00

Balance owing **\$1,029.73**

Make sense? Not quite? Let's break it down.

In the eight months from April 2021 to December 2021, *No Document* sold a total of 1183 copies in Australia. This means that at my royalty rate of \$2.45, which is 10% of the recommended retail price (RRP\$26.95) minus GST, the book earned \$2,898.35 in royalties. Did all of that money go straight to me? No, because Giramondo paid me a AU\$4000 advance for the book, which is money I had to earn back for them first.

Along with book sales, what helped to pay back my AU\$4000 advance was the sale of North American publishing rights to Transit Books for US\$2000.

Giramondo keeps 20% of that US\$2000, because they have worldwide rights to the book and 20% is their cut of any rights sales to other territories (bearing in mind that Giramondo only publishes in Australia and Aotearoa, which means that *No Document* has to be acquired, in the language of publishers, by a US publisher to see publication in the US, and so on and so forth for every separate territory). Had I had an agent broker this rights deal, they would have also taken a cut, but I didn't: the sale of US rights was negotiated directly by Giramondo, so the remaining 80% of the US\$2000 that Transit paid for the right to publish the book in North America went to me, the author — or rather, it went to paying off the balance of my Australian advance, getting me back to \$0 with Giramondo. I earned out my advance.

The balance of \$1,029.73 is what I earned in 2021 royalties *after* I paid back my AU\$4000 advance to Giramondo through a combination of book sales and the US rights sale to Transit. \$1,029.73 is what I have been paid in royalties so far, for a book that took me nearly four years to write.

## Ordinary penury

I want to emphasise – in contrast to Bloomsbury's way of doing business, which is unusually parsimonious and dodgy – how absolutely average, how commonplace, in the context of Australian publishing, these sorts of numbers are. \$4000 is, objectively, not a lot of money for an advance, but given the size of the publisher in question (tiny) and the kind of book that *No Document* is (extremely uncommercial), it's *not bad* – in fact, I remember being pleasantly surprised that I was offered \$4000 as advance, having expected something more like \$2000. Recall if you will that ASA survey I quoted above: more than 80% of Australian authors are paid less than \$5000 as an advance, and more than 50% are paid no advance at all.

(Another quick side note here: it's standard in publishing for half or even one-third of an advance to be paid when you sign a contract with a publisher, and the

balance to be paid only when you submit the manuscript, which is one way that publishers guard against you doing a runner with their money. I was paid \$2000 by Giramondo when I signed a contract back in mid-2017, and another \$2000 in March 2021, after I submitted the final manuscript. Again, had I had an agent negotiate this contract, which I didn't, the agent would have taken a cut of the advance.)

We might also pause to note here that Giramondo, an indie publisher that puts out about twelve books a year and has about four full-time employees, saw fit to pay me a 4K advance, when Bloomsbury, which publishes hundreds if not thousands of books a year and has the staff to match, paid me nothing. US\$2000 for the North American rights is also an average amount for a publisher of Transit's size – effectively a two-person operation – to pay, and, again, it's a reasonable “market signal” of a publisher's expectations for the kind of non-commercial book that *No Document* is, especially a non-commercial book by an Australian writer published into the US.

It may sound as if I'm trying to justify the conditions of book publishing here, as if it's cool and fine and sustainable for authors to be paid only a few thousand dollars for books that take them years to write. To be absolutely clear, I don't think this is a fine state of affairs by any means. My point is that it's ordinary: beyond the glitz and distraction of the very few authors who are bestsellers, and who really do make a lot of money, and get paid massive advances, this is the reality for the majority of working writers. Publishing is not an industry magically exempt – because *books!* – from the stratification of wealth and resources that defines the rest of life under capitalism. Quite the opposite. Publishing, the music industry, the art world: these largely wage-free zones (for the artist) are in some sense the purest iteration of market logic. The worth of your art is the money it makes when sold — nothing more, nothing less. I dunno. I was much smarter about this stuff when I was 16 and extremely well-versed in Marxist theorisation re: the disappearance of the avant-garde, before wage labour knocked it all out of my brain.

## Incomes in the stream

Ok, so what about other income streams, to use that terrible language, connected to a book being published? Have I earned anything from an audio book version of *No Document*, for instance? Audio books have become quite a big thing in recent years, which is pretty funny to contemplate if you, like me, remember a time when audio books were massively expensive 15-CD sets that gathered dust on a neglected shelf of the bookstore 'cos no one ever bought them. Unfortunately for me, the audio book publishers all turned down *No Document*: it's a book without market value. It also hasn't been acquired by any overseas publisher apart from Transit: no publisher in the UK has picked it up, for instance, and no translation rights have been sold, so that also leaves that income stream at \$0, beyond the initial Transit sale that went to paying back my Giramondo advance.

One way that authors can earn extra income when their book is published is through appearances at writers' festivals. This isn't an especially lucrative way to make money: a panel fee at yr average Australian literary festival is around \$250, *but*, if you are programmed for several events at the same festival, and/or you appear at several festivals, it can add up to a nice little sideline, at least. Without wanting this to devolve into a rant about writers' festivals, lemme just say that programming at writers' festivals bears little relation to *writing*. It's about ticket sales for the festivals, which again, means an in-built bias towards commercially successful authors and/or famous people – fucking TV journalists! fucking politicians! – with a shitty “idea” to flog. Corporate publishers with their big publicity teams and sales power have a lot of sway when it comes to festival programming: gotta move those units.

In 2021 I was invited to two writers' festivals. One of these festivals was cancelled due to lockdown, which is the other thing: I was one of those lucky, lucky writers who saw their book released in the middle of a once-in-a-century global pandemic. Fun, fun times! At the other festival that *did* go ahead, I appeared twice, once to talk about *No Document* and once to join a panel about

criticism. For each of these appearances I was paid \$200, bringing the total of my income from writers' festivals in 2021 to \$400.

For the sake of argument, let's add the festival appearance during which I talked about *No Document* to my earnings from royalties: I've now made \$1,229.73 from this book — and, what the hell, let me chuck in the one (1) writers' festival appearance I've made so far in 2022 connected to the book (the industry moves on: too bad if you put out a book in 2020 or 2021, because there's always new product in the pipeline), for which I was paid \$300, bringing the grand total of my earnings from *No Document* to \$1,529.73 (before tax, of course). The US edition of the book wasn't published by Transit until June 2022, so there are no royalties there yet to include, and it also hasn't been reviewed anywhere in the States, which rather puts the lid on sales.

I should add, in the interests of transparency, that *No Document* was shortlisted for the Stella Prize in the first quarter of 2022, after my 2021 Giramondo royalty statement had been calculated, which means that come early 2023, when I receive royalties from 2022, I will expect to see a bump in Australian sales due to publicity associated with the prize, though probably not a massive bump. The lion's share of financial gain from any big literary prize – the increased sales, the prize money – goes of course to the winner. Talking of prize money, though: I got \$1000 for being longlisted for the Stella Prize (bought a sofa, the first I've ever bought), and \$4000 for being shortlisted (which went to paying off my tax bill). And if you haven't read or listened to 2022 Stella Prize winner Evelyn Araluen's barnstorming acceptance speech, which tackles many similar issues to the ones I'm raising here in this pamphlet, then can I recommend that you do?

## So how the fuck...?

No author alive, not even the strictest breatharian, can live on a mere thousand dollars in royalties. Nor does a \$4000 advance, which has to be earned back, represent a living wage for the thousands of hours that I spent writing *No*

*Document*. I'm not married or partnered to anyone who can support me financially, even for a few months, while I write books; I'm resolutely single. This is not a minor point: a 2013-14 study by Macquarie University found that the average annual earnings of an Australian author for their books (including advances, royalties, rights payments, etc) was \$12,900, and that fully 37.3% of surveyed authors cited "partner income" as the financial source they relied upon to live. Our economy is not designed for single people, still less for single women, still less for single women on low incomes.

I won't inherit wealth or property; I make no money from other people's rent or labour; no one pays my rent or bills for me; I don't have rich friends or parents who can lend me a rent-free house to live in while I write. This leaves two possible ways to earn the money on which to live while I try to write a book: paid work, which includes other writing, and grants. (My dole solution, which I used for *LTT*, is really only effective if you can budget to live on the dole for a very short period of time.)

You will have noticed the catch here already: writing a book *is* work, a lot of work. If you have to work on top of that work, which most writers do, you're gonna end up overworked. You ever wonder why some promising writer whose first one or two books you loved vanishes, never to be heard from again? It's unlikely to be because that writer ran out of ideas. It's because they burnt out. I'm at burnout point right now, which is part of why I'm writing this – in case I never finish the other books I want to write. I want people to know that there are material reasons why this happens.

The publishing industry's debut author obsession creates the illusion that publishing brims with material promise; every keen hopeful is represented as a potential new bestseller, as if the bountiful sales will compensate for all those unpaid hours that you, stupid schmuck, put in. Now, one book is maybe tolerable to write on a tiny advance (or no advance) around your other jobs, especially if you're young and in possession of a fair bit of stamina. But if that book doesn't sell a lot, and perhaps especially if it was never going to sell a lot, because of the

kind of book that it is, then by book two, when you're still writing around all your other jobs, you're already feeling tired. Three or four books in and your life is a bad joke, and no one wants to be that punchline, so writers walk away. Women in particular, who are made disproportionately responsible for reproductive labour and care work, walk away; they simply don't have time to write in between looking after other people. Working-class writers, or those who are otherwise structurally discriminated against in publishing, walk away. Maybe the field of debut authors looks level (it isn't), but after a few books – that's when wealth, or the lack of it, really shows.

## The hunger grants

We return to the tiny size of the Australian publishing industry — proportionate, sort of, to our population, but unusually small when compared to the US or UK publishing industries, each of which, by the way, tend to think of Australia as at best a tertiary market for *their* exports.

Let's say your advance from an Australian publisher is \$4000, like mine was for *No Document*. That'll get you by for a month, maximum two, given the cost of living, and you won't get half of it until you've finished writing the book, anyway. So now what are you gonna do, if you don't have a private source of income? You'll have to earn enough money to pay for the time it will take to you write the book through doing other work, and/or you will need to apply for a grant from a funding body, most likely the Australia Council or one of the state-level arts ministries, or some other kind of fellowship or paid writer's residency. Australian writers are unusually reliant on this kind of money for all the structural reasons we've already canvassed, and let me tell you – some of you may already know this, in your bones – writing grant applications is also, very much, *work* (unpaid!), which you will have to find the time and energy to do in between the work of writing a book and the wage labour by which you are putting food in your mouth.

I received two writer's fellowships during the time it took me to write *No Document*. The second, in 2017, was a paid, year-long writer-in-residence position at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), funded by the Copyright Agency (CAL), worth \$40,000. The first, in 2016, was an Emerging Writer's Fellowship awarded by Create NSW, the state arts body, worth \$30,000. The latter fellowship no longer exists, in yet another example of an arts funding body running out of money / energy / interest in an idea about 5 minutes after they launched it.

I received the Create NSW fellowship about seven months before I started work on what would become *No Document*, initially with the idea that I was going to write a book about the body in popular music (I did not write this book). A condition of the fellowship – these things always come with conditions – was that no more than half of it could be spent on wages, i.e. the recipient paying themselves to write, and the rest had to be spent on professional development and/or research, which could include travel. I duly took a trip to the States to do some initial research on what I thought was gonna be the other book, including in the archives of music critic and second-wave feminist Ellen Willis, which are held at Harvard. On that trip I felt my book idea dissolve, as ideas sometimes do — but not before I'd been to the Guggenheim in New York to see a rare display of the museum's founding collection, which included two or three paintings by the late German Expressionist painter Franz Marc, which got me thinking about a whole lot of other stuff... On the back of thinking about all this other stuff, I then took a second research trip in mid-2017 to Germany, using money from the same Create NSW fellowship, and it was this research trip that really got me properly started on what would become *No Document*. A few months after returning from that trip I applied for, and won, the UTS/CAL fellowship, which was specifically granted to a writer working on their second or third book — a rare and welcome specification, given the publishing industry's general obsession, as I have already discussed, with first books.

\$70,000 in fellowships is pretty sweet, yeah? It is, yeah. I'm very thankful for the opportunities, particularly the research opportunities, that those fellowships provided me with. The UTS appointment, for instance, came with full academic

access to the university library system, which meant I spent a lot of happy (?) hours researching the history of abattoirs (for instance).

I began work in earnest on the writing and research that would become *No Document* in roughly May 2017, and “finished” it about a day before it went to the printer, in February 2021. That’s almost four years of work. Now, 70k divided by four years... is not a living income. It’s an income *subsidy*, and that subsidy made a difference, for sure. It meant that there were a couple of semesters from 2017-2021 when I didn’t have to work as a casual tutor. (To be clear, I don’t have a PhD and am not on an academic ‘career path’.) It meant that I could do less freelancing: in 2020 I took about three months off from my music column at *The Monthly*, for instance, in order to concentrate for a while on writing the book manuscript. (I quit *The Monthly* entirely in July of 2021, for the record.) I wouldn’t have been able to make those choices without the income subsidy provided by the grants. Money equals time, it’s as simple as that, and without that 70k (minus tax, remember, and minus superannuation: grants are always paid as *gross* amounts, which makes life very confusing for the average maths-averse writer) I would have had less time to write *No Document*, and it probably would have taken me five or six years to finish, which is still not a long time by book-writing standards, and now perhaps you understand, if you didn’t already, why it can take a person five or six or ten or fifteen years to write a book.

(I’ve just looked at my tax returns again: there’s only one year between 2016 and 2021 during which I earned more than 50k (but less than 60k). There were two years in that time during which I earned more than 30k (but less than 40k), and two years in which my earnings were less than 30k. According to the 2021 Census data compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the median annual personal income in Australia as of 2021 is \$41,900. The average annual personal income is far higher, at \$95,435 – cue explainer on the difference between median and average – but again, however you wanna slice this, my annual income is almost always low, and often very low. If you know you me personally and you’ve sometimes wondered to yourself why I’ve been wearing the same sweater every winter for a decade, well, this is part of it.)

But let’s zoom out from me for a hot minute, in order to think about writers’ grants in Australia more generally. Author and critic Jennifer Mills, who has done a lot of advocacy and organising work about writer pay and conditions over many years, posted some illuminating statistics about Australia Council funding for writers recently on Twitter, and I want to draw on her excellent research.

The Australia Council is the peak national arts funding body. Though it’s often associated with the social democratic reforms of the Whitlam years due to the Whitlam government restructuring it into seven autonomous, area-specific “boards” (a Literature Board, a Music Board, etc), the Australia Council was in fact initiated by the government of Harold Holt in late 1967, not long before he drowned / got kidnapped by aliens / [insert your favourite HH theory here]. Leaving aside the *many* complex ramifications of having to rely on government money to fund your arts practice, not least the possible self-censorship – or actual, top-down censorship – that ensues, let’s just look at some of the figures that Mills dug out.

In 1979, the Literature Board of the Australia Council awarded fellowships to 49 writers. “Senior fellowships were \$12,500/year (less for women?)”, Mills wrote. “The average wage was then \$11,900.”

In 1983, the Literature Board funded 101 writers, wrote Mills, “including 32 fellowships of \$20,700 a year. The average wage was \$18,700.”

Yadda yadda fast forward to the artists’ boycott of Sydney Biennale in 2014, a thing I was involved in organising to a minor degree along with a bunch of other activists and artists who wanted to draw attention to the fact that the Biennale’s major sponsor, Transfield, was contracted by the federal government to run its hellish immigration detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island. Several artists who were set to exhibit in the 2014 Biennale withdrew over Transfield’s sponsorship, there was a heap of publicity and noise, and the Turnbull government, as was, absolutely lost its shit. Malcolm Turnbull himself called

artists who were protesting “ungrateful”, translation “shut up and smile and look nice for the rich people, art proles”. In retaliation – though of course this motive was denied – Turnbull’s arts minister George Brandis cut the Australia Council’s overall funding by one-third – \$26 million dollars – in the 2015 federal budget, not before he also withdrew a huge chunk of literature-specific funding from the Australia Council in late 2014. Yes, it is *absolutely* a problem when a nation’s entire arts industry is structurally dependent on government funding and the government of the day decides that it hates you.

The Australia Council no longer has artform-specific Boards. Instead, the much-reduced pot of money that the Council receives every year from the federal government is split into two tranches. The first and by far the largest tranche of Australia Council money goes to what is known in arts bureaucracy as the Major Performing Arts companies.

The MPAs comprise, as of 2021, 36 organisations that receive, year on year, nearly 60% of the available Australia Council funding. These organisations, unsurprisingly, tend to be the big, mainstream performing arts companies, like Opera Australia and the Sydney Theatre Company, that have wealthy audiences, robust and lucrative commercial sponsorship arrangements in addition to their government funding, and which attract large philanthropic donations. These are the kind of arts companies that arts ministers and philanthropists love: glitzy opening nights, lotsa photo opportunities with Artistic Directors on handsome salaries who’ll *happily* shut up and smile, and artistically conservative, if not moribund, programming. Not all the MPAs are creaking theatre companies with an average audience age of 70+ whose idea of “risqué” is a Noël Coward play, but some of them are. The real kicker is that these MPAs aren’t subject to peer review, and their Australia Council funding is ring-fenced: every year they get funding no matter how little they need or deserve it.

This leaves everyone else – the medium-sized arts companies, the small arts companies, and right at the bottom of the pile, individual artists – to fight it out for the second, smaller tranche of Australia Council funding. Because there are

no discipline-specific Boards anymore, artists in different forms are competing with all other artists, and the result, in case you’ve been wondering where all this is going, is that not only do independent working artists get the least amount of federal arts funding – Australia Council grants to individual artists, as opposed to arts companies, fell by a third between 1999 and 2019 – but writers get the smallest slice of this already shrivelled pie. Both federally and at state level, the funding that goes to literature in Australia is about 2% of the *total* arts funding available, bearing in mind that Australia spends less than 1% of its GDP on the arts in the first place. As Jennifer Mills tweeted: “Let’s skip forward to 2021: Ozco funded 50 writers (myself included) with grants averaging \$31,700. The average wage was \$90,800. ONE literature fellowship was awarded, at \$40,000/year.”

Writing’s resistance to external measurements of “progress” or “outcome”, to the bums-on-seats hoo-hah of performing arts (sorry, theatre friends), is what disadvantages writers when it comes to arts funding bodies, philanthropic donors and the general public. Writing is an invisible, unsexy, anti-social kind of labour. There’s a reason that almost no film director has ever made an interesting biopic about a writer, or at least not about that writer actually *writing*: the work of writing is dull. Weeks and months and years sitting on your own in a room with only the drugs of your choice, and possibly a loyal pet, for company. Nothing happens, no one comes, no one goes – it’s awful! A lot of the work that goes into writing – the thinking, reading, staring out the window stuff – doesn’t even look like “work”, but like wasted time, which is kinda the point, my friends!! The thing that all writers need is time: uninterrupted, unmeasured, “unproductive” time. But from where comes the money to pay for that time?

I applied for and received an Australia Council grant – my first – at the end of 2021. The amount of that grant is \$47,000 gross for an 18-month research and manuscript development period for a book idea that I’m working on. I also applied for and then received, almost simultaneously, a grant from Create NSW (the state arts ministry) for the same project, for the same 18-month time frame, for a gross amount of \$29,792.00. Combined, this is a fair chunk of money:

\$76,792 — then deduct income tax and super. (I keep saying this to remind myself, as much as anything — if you make the mistake of spending it all, you're cooked.) I am extremely fortunate; I also spent a maddening amount of time applying for these grants, time I probably wouldn't have spent had we not all been stuck in our homes for four months straight during 2021's lockdowns. And, to be honest, I have yet to take proper advantage of this windfall, yet to really spend the time this funding has bought me, locked as have been inside the long-term freelancer's perpetual loop of anxiety: *must keep working, must keep working, must keep working*. Today, as I write this, I quit a shitty job. I have turned down other work, recently. It is hard, very hard, in a world that does not value writing, to convince oneself that writing is also work, that one should not constantly have to prove oneself by also “working” on top writing, when the opportunity to write — just write — comes along. I have to teach myself to value what I do. I remind myself that the opportunity will be temporary.

## **We want everything**

The thing that all of us need — not just writers but everyone, everywhere — is time: uninterrupted, unmeasured, “unproductive” time. *Live without dead time!* An end to wage labour, to the theft of our time. I'm one of those sad freaks who wanted to be a writer as soon as I could hold a pencil, but at this stage of my life I have stopped dreaming that I will ever earn a full-time living from it. I've written two books that have sold less than 5000 copies and earned me less than \$5000 combined; I'm currently under contract for a third (advance: \$2500) and researching the fourth. If — and believe me, it's a big *if* — I can hold on for long enough to see books three and four to completion, then I'll be sorely tempted to chuck this all in, because I'm tired. I'm *exhausted*. Between writing and art-making (my other penurious hobby) and wage labour, there has never *not* been a time in my adult life when I haven't been working on multiple *things*, labouring on many fronts, simultaneously.

I know that all of this probably sounds like a complaint — 10,000 words and counting of complaint. Poor *me*. It's so *hard*. No, and yes. No, because — and this is important — what I've outlined here is not what failure looks like. *It's what success looks like*. In terms of my writing “career” taken as a whole, in an Australian context, I am successful. My second book was shortlisted for a major prize and — leaving aside false modesty — was critically acclaimed. I have won several competitive grants and fellowships. I wrote for eight years for a national magazine (eight years during which I was never paid an actual salary). I won a Walkley for my writing in that magazine: \$5000 of prize money came with the award, which was pretty sweet, particularly in 2021, but I quit the magazine soon after, in large part because I was sick of being a perpetual freelancer, without the security or benefits or enforceable work rights of an employee. Then again, in an ideal world I don't want to be an employee either. I want to be a free human being: someone whose labour is not compelled by the fact that it's the only thing I have to sell. We want more for all of us; we want everything. So yes, yes, this *is* a complaint, because I don't know why any of us should have to settle for these fucking crumbs, and by any of us I mean whatever your job, whatever your work, if that's all you have to live on, because I don't know anyone who isn't working far too many hours — who isn't anxious, frayed, appalled.

The ultra-leftist part of me thinks: fuck worrying over federal arts policy, fuck funding models, fuck royalty rates. All of this is mere dust in the storm of history, comrades! It's true, it's true. But the rest of me that has to live — like all of us — in the midst of ever-worsening material conditions believes that we have to, that I have to, think and talk about this stuff. Yes, I want publishing houses the world over made as workers' soviets in which everyone from typesetter to printer to editor to writer is equal, in which art is at last free of the commodity form, but I don't think we're gonna get there without properly understanding what is wrong, and *why*, with the status quo. The owning class thinks we should be grateful, deliriously grateful, eternally *thank you, sir* and *what would I have done without you*, for every damn thing, including the blessed opportunity to write books for a pittance. No, *sir*. I am not grateful. I am done.