



6 September 2011

RE: Senate Inquiry into recent ABC programming decisions

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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To whom it may concern

On behalf of the Australian Society of Authors we wish to make a submission to the Inquiry into recent ABC programming decisions.

Formed in 1963, the Australian Society of Authors is the peak professional association representing Australia's literary creators. Our 3,000+ members include biographers, illustrators, academics, historians, cartoonists, scientists, food and wine writers, children's writers, ghost writers, librettists, travel writers, romance writers, translators, computer programmers, journalists, poets and novelists.

As an organisation advocating on behalf of Australian authors and more broadly supporting Australian cultural producers as artists and as participants in creative industries, the ASA is concerned at the recent reduction of in-house arts programming at ABC Television. This compounds a longer-term trend towards an infotainment 'magazine' approach to the arts at the expense of more critically robust programs on ABC TV.

Of equal concern is the tendency to rely on international, particularly British arts documentaries, while the National Broadcaster has made very few documentaries in recent years about Australian artists. For example British authors are well covered in purchased documentaries from the BBC and other UK production houses, while very few Australian authors have been deemed worthy of documentary treatment.

The ASA views the decision to establish a Senate Inquiry as an opportunity to recommend some long overdue improvement to ABC Television's coverage of

the Australian arts and culture, particularly our literary culture and the work of Australian authors.

Remarks by ABC Managing Director Mark Scott and Director of ABC Television Kim Dalton that the cuts to in-house arts programming will be compensated by more arts documentaries produced by independent documentary makers is welcome, but the ASA believes the ABC should provide the public and arts community with the details of specific funds and commissioning arrangements that will enable this arts documentary initiative.

How will content makers be invited to tender proposals for these documentaries? The ASA is particularly concerned to know what criteria is in place to ensure some focus on Australian authors, past and present. While *First Tuesday Book Club* is supported by the ASA for its lively encouragement of books, reading and writing, the program seldom ranges beyond fiction, and its light entertainment panel style does not provide the critical value or indeed aesthetic innovation that is to be found in groundbreaking arts documentary around the world.

Also of concern to the ASA is the paucity of drama on ABC television based on the novels, short stories and narrative non-fiction of Australian authors. Drama series based on the works of British novelists purchased cheaply from the United Kingdom are routinely featured on ABC TV while our local literary tradition is ignored. While the commissioning of a series based on Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap* is to be commended, where are the drama series based on the recent novels of Kate Grenville, Peter Carey, Anita Heiss, Steven Carroll, Helen Garner, Frank Moorhouse, Ouyang Yu?

Why does the ABC not draw on the treasure trove of Australian classics written by much-loved authors such as Marcus Clarke, Henry Lawson, Christina Stead, Patrick White, Tom Keneally and David Malouf? What of our Australian genre authors working in crime, the gothic, science fiction, fantasy and illustrated novels? What of Australia's wealth of classic and contemporary children's literature? ABC 3's magical and much loved *My Place*, based on Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins' illustrated children's book of the same name, demonstrates what can be achieved when a drama is based on a literary source.

In the 1970s and '80s the ABC treated us to drama series based on Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory*, Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians*, Kylie Tennant's *Ride on Stranger*, Eleanor Dark's *Timeless Land* to name but a few. Today new generations of Australians will discover the British literary canon on their ABC, while our own literary tradition is ignored. This represents a return to the cultural cringe that threatens our children's cultural birthright and future dreaming.

Finally, as the representative organisation for authors, the ASA notes that whereas BBC drama and documentary engage the services of British authors as screen writers – for example Jimmy McGovern – the ABC and its partner

production companies rarely employ novelists, short story writers or essayists to script its dramas or documentaries. The quality of Australian screen writing could be significantly enhanced with more crossover between literary and broadcast cultures.

In summary, ASA recommend that:

1. assertions that cuts to arts programming will be compensated by more arts documentaries be formalised in a 'cultural documentary' initiative that has a publically transparent budget and commissioning criteria.
2. Australian authors past and present be included within the remit of this documentary initiative.
3. a larger proportion of dramas commissioned by ABC Television be based on Australian literature, both classic and current.
4. in the spirit of convergence and creative collaboration, the ABC engage literary authors as screen writers on dramas, documentaries and other genres, as occurs in other countries such as Britain and the United States.
5. The ABC's audience research area to use the resources of ABC Online to canvass audience ideas about arts programming in order to better inform commissioning decisions.
6. In commissioning various genres of programming from independent content providers, whether large production houses or small independent documentary-makers, it is important that public money be allocated transparently and equitably and that the ABC and parliament rigorously monitor this provision of funding to ensure that particular private providers do not come to dominate the schedule.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Tony Moore, Board Member
Angelo Loukakis, Executive Director
for the Australian Society of Authors