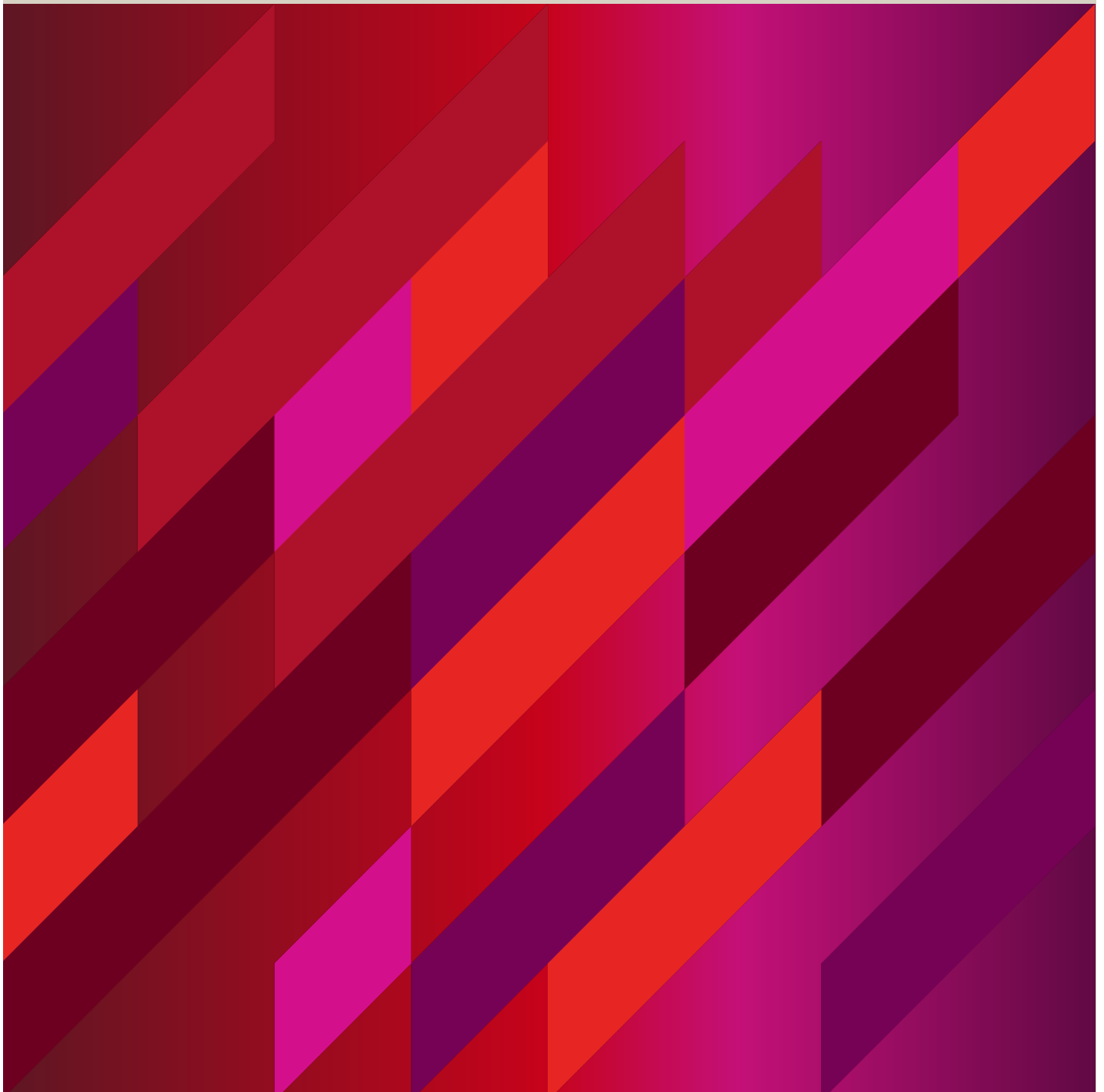


2022 National Survey of Australian Book Authors

Industry Brief No. 2: Demographics

November 2022

Jan Zwar, Paul Crosby and David Throsby



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This industry brief is part of a series prepared for Australian book authors and other members of the Australian book industry to highlight key findings of the [2022 National Survey of Australian Book Authors](#) conducted by Jan Zwar, Paul Crosby and David Throsby.

Thank you to all the authors who gave generously of their time and expertise by participating. The complete series of industry briefs about this survey is:

1. *Key Findings*
2. *Demographics*
3. *Authors' Income*
4. *Impact of COVID-19*
5. *Authors' Allocation of Time*
6. *Authors and Publishers*
7. *Rights Sales, Translations and Piracy*
8. *Promotion*

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TOTAL NUMBER OF AUSTRALIAN BOOK AUTHORS

In the 2016 Australian census 4,736 people nominated “authors, and book and script editors” as being their main occupation in the week prior to filling out the census questionnaire. For the purposes of this current survey, this figure is not sufficiently accurate because it includes script editors who have not published a book, and conversely, it does not include people who may have published a book but who did not list “book author” as their main occupation. A 2017 survey of professional artists in Australia conducted by Throsby and Petetskaya (2017) estimated that there were approximately 7,900 practising professional writers in Australia in 2016, but some of these writers (e.g. playwrights) may not have published a book. In short, while we do not have an exact number for the population of Australian book authors, it is likely to be somewhat higher than indicated by the Census data – probably within the range of 5-6 thousand.

The present survey was conducted online in April and May 2022. After validating the screening process and removing clearly questionable responses, rank outliers and those where important variables had missing values, the analysis is based on 1152 responses from book authors who reside in Australia. Further detail about the survey methodology is available in the final report, [available here](#). Section 8 of the report utilises the 2016 Census and the 2017 survey of professional artists to confirm that the sample generated for the present survey is a suitable and sufficient representation of the population of Australian book authors from which we can draw valid inferences.

PROFESSIONAL STATUS

We asked authors to classify themselves as a “professional” (full- or part-time) or “semi-professional or serious amateur” writer. An additional category was added to allow for those who are professional in some other field where writing is an important output, such as academics, journalists etc. Table 1 shows the proportion of authors in each professional status group as a percent within their genre. One quarter see themselves as full-time professionals and nearly one third as part-time professional writers. A small number of authors (fewer than 6%) are unable to place themselves in any of the given categories. This group may include individuals who have published books but who do not in fact see themselves as “writers”, and those emerging writers who do not regard themselves as professional or even semi-professional.

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%). Poets represent the highest proportion of part-time professional writers (40.3%) followed by genre fiction (35%) and creative non-fiction authors (35%). The majority of scholarly and nearly half of education authors are professional in another field where writing is an important output (68.8% and 48.7%), and other non-fiction authors have the highest proportion of trade authors (29.2%). Roughly between one fifth and one quarter of trade authors in the various genres groups are semi-professional or serious amateur writers, apart from children’s, which has the lowest representation (13.5%), and few scholarly authors fall into this category (3.1%).

Table 1 - Professional status: percent within each genre

	Literary Fiction	Genre Fiction	Children's	Creative non-fiction	Other non-fiction	Poetry	Subtotal (trade)	Education	Scholarly	Total (all authors)
Full-time professional writer	26.9	30.6	34.2	19.5	18.0	19.4	26.6	12.8	0.0	25.4
Part-time professional writer	30.1	35.0	38.7	32.3	26.1	40.3	33.5	15.4	12.5	32.3
Professional in another field where writing is an important output	16.7	6.1	11.0	13.5	29.2	16.4	13.3	48.7	68.8	16.1
Semi-professional or serious amateur writer	18.6	24.9	13.5	26.3	18.6	17.9	21.2	17.9	3.1	20.6
None of the above	7.7	3.4	2.6	8.3	8.1	6.0	5.4	5.1	15.6	5.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
n	156	409	155	133	161	67	1081	39	32	1152

Changes since the 2015 survey

In the survey there was a strong response from trade authors, which enabled us to make broad comparisons with the 2015 survey responses (noting that these two survey responses are from two overlapping but not identical groups of authors, rather than a longitudinal study). In the following, we focus on changes relating to trade authors.

In regard to changes within each genre group, the proportion of children's authors who are full-time has increased the most (from 26.3% to 34.2%), with other notable increases including other non-fiction (from 13.7% to 18%), and poetry (from 14.3% to 19.4%).

Where did the changes to full-time authorship come from? In children's, there was a decrease in semi-professional or serious amateur writers (from 20.2% to 13.5%). In education the most notable decrease was in part-time professional writers (from 26.5% to 15.4%), and this was also evident among literary fiction (from 36% to 30.1%) and other non-fiction authors (from 30.5% to 26.1%).

We don't know why these changes have occurred, but the following factors may be relevant. First, the average income of children's authors has increased since the 2015 survey, and the extra income may be enabling more children's writers to work as authors full-time. However, overall the average income for Australian book authors remains very modest, and average income for creative non-fiction authors has gone down in real terms so it's hard to see a consistent pattern. (See *Industry Brief No.3: Authors' Income.*)

There was an increase in part-time professional poets (from 29.8% to 40.3%) and a decrease in poetry writers who are professional in another field (from 22.6% to 16.4%). Likewise, there was an increase in part-time professional creative non-fiction authors (from 27.6% to 32.3%) and a decrease in creative non-fiction writers who are professional in another field (from 28.4% to 13.5%). There appears to be a shift in the way some serious part-time writers view their role as authors, with the change being most noticeable in these genres.

There are also unexplained shifts, for example there was a decrease in the proportion of part-time professional literary fiction authors (from 36.0% to 30.1%) and a small increase in “none of the above” (4.5% to 7.7%).

DEGREE OF ESTABLISHMENT IN CAREER AS A BOOK AUTHOR

We asked authors whether they consider themselves to be emerging/developing, established or established but working less intensively than before. These are standard categories and we assumed that in classifying themselves, authors used the conventions in the genre that they nominated as their specialisation.

Table 2 shows that 42.4% of all book authors are emerging/developing and nearly the same proportion are established (39.4%). The highest proportion of established authors within a genre group is children’s (51.6%), followed by poets (40.3%), genre fiction (39.6%), other non-fiction (36.6%), literary fiction (36.5%), creative non-fiction (34.6%), scholarly (34.4%) and education (30.8%) authors. That is, with the exception of children’s authors and poets, around one-third of authors regard themselves as established.

Table 2 - Degree of establishment as an author: percent within each genre

	Literary Fiction	Genre Fiction	Children's	Creative non-fiction	Other non-fiction	Poetry	Subtotal (trade)	Education	Scholarly	Total (all authors)
Emerging/developing	46.8	48.9	32.3	38.3	47.2	37.3	43.9	17.9	18.8	42.4
Established	36.5	39.6	51.6	34.6	36.6	40.3	39.9	30.8	34.4	39.4
Established but working less intensively than before	13.5	11.0	15.5	21.1	13.0	20.9	14.2	51.3	40.6	16.1
None of the above	3.2	0.5	0.6	6.0	3.1	1.5	2.0	0.0	6.3	2.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
n	156	409	155	133	161	67	1081	39	32	1152

Changes since the 2015 survey

Overall, there is a notable increase in the proportion of established authors (from 31.6% to 39.4%). This is evident in literary fiction (from 21.3% to 36.5%), genre fiction (from 29.8% to 39.6%), children’s (from 37.4% to 51.6%), other non-fiction (from 26.3% to 36.6%), and poetry (from 31% to 40.3%). The only genre in which there is a decline is scholarly authors (from 45.5% to 34.4%).

One possibility could be that the income from writing earned by authors across all these genres has improved to the extent that they can now regard themselves as established. However, authors’ income overall does not reflect such an increase (See *Industry Brief No 3: Authors’ Income.*)

Other possibilities are a greater proportion of authors are recognising that they are established in their careers as authors despite the limited financial remuneration for many. The decline in the proportion of established scholarly authors (from 45.5% to 34.4%) may reflect heavy staff cuts in the university sector in 2020-2021 during the pandemic. Table 5 below shows a decline in the proportion of authors aged 40-59 years. It’s possible that emerging/developing authors in this age group found it too challenging to continue their practice as an author and left the profession.

NUMBER OF BOOKS PUBLISHED DURING AN AUTHOR'S CAREER

We asked authors how many books they had published during their careers. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3 - Number of books published during career: average number of books

	Literary Fiction	Genre Fiction	Children's	Creative non-fiction	Other non-fiction	Poetry	Subtotal (trade)	Education	Scholarly	Total (all authors)
Published during career	3.4	5.9	10.9	6.1	8.8	10.4	7.6	12.6	6.3	8.1
n	220	993	439	443	619	208	2922	264	124	3310

SEX

Women make up about two thirds of the author population. Table 4 shows the distribution of authors across sexes, broken down by genre. Children's authors are predominantly female (81.3%) followed by genre fiction (75.3%), other non-fiction (69.6%) and literary fiction (70.5%) authors. There is no genre category with markedly more male than female authors. Scholarly and education authors are the closest to an even distribution. The introduction of additional categories identified non-binary/gender-diverse authors, with poetry having the highest percentage (3%).

Table 4 - Authors' sex, by most important genre: percent within each genre

	Literary Fiction	Genre Fiction	Children's	Creative non-fiction	Other non-fiction	Poetry	Subtotal (trade)	Education	Scholarly	Total (all authors)
Woman	70.5	75.3	81.3	57.1	69.6	55.2	71.1	48.7	50.0	69.8
Man	25.6	23.2	18.1	41.4	29.2	41.8	27.1	48.7	46.9	28.4
Non-binary / gender diverse	1.9	1.5	0.0	0.8	0.6	3.0	1.2	0.0	3.1	1.2
Please tell us	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.6	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.3
Prefer not to say	1.3	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	2.6	0.0	0.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
n	156	409	155	133	161	67	1081	39	32	1152
% of authors	13.5	35.5	13.5	11.5	14.0	5.8	93.8	3.4	2.8	100

Changes since the 2015 survey

Changes since the 2015 survey are more subtle, but it's interesting to note a decrease in the proportion of female children's authors (from 86.9% to 81.3%), creative non-fiction authors (from 65.3% to 57.1%) and poets (from 60.7% to 55.2%).

AGE

Professional book authors are relatively old compared to Australia's population.

Table 5 - Summary of author age

	2015 survey	2016 census	2022 survey	2021 census
39 years or younger	12%	52.5%	12.8%	51.7%
40-59 years	49.6%	26.2%	43.1%	25.3%
60-69 years	24.9%	10.6%	24.9%	10.9%
70 years or older	13.3%	10.6%	19.4%	12.1%

Table 5 compared the authors' age with ABS statistics examining Australia's population distribution by age. The comparison shows that authors are under-represented in the younger age bracket (39 years or younger) compared to Australia's population. It could be that Australians need to gain significant writing experience, confidence and opportunity before they can achieve their goal of becoming a published book author. There are more authors in the 40-59 year age bracket compared to the distribution of Australia's population, suggesting that this is a significant age bracket for Australian authors. This higher representation continues in the higher age brackets but at a lower level. The data could be interpreted in various ways. Australians still have the opportunity to become a book author for the first time at a later age. Indeed, some notable Australian authors published their first book in their late 50s or older. On the other hand, Australian authors may leave the profession in their later years as a matter of choice (they have other ways they wish to use their time, or they have no more books they wish to write) or it could be that continuing a career as a book author is too challenging. Our data do not enable us to explore these issues further.

Changes since the 2015 survey

The most notable change is a decrease in the proportion of authors aged 40-59 years (from 49.6% to 43.1%), and an increase in the age of authors aged 70 years or older (from 13.3% to 19.4%). It's possible that some authors aged 40-59 found it too difficult to stay in the profession during the pandemic and gave up their practice as an author. Referring back to Table 2, these may be emerging/developing authors, reflecting a decrease in the proportion of emerging/developing authors as a proportion of the profession. However, as noted in the previous paragraph, we can identify shifts in this data but not the underlying explanations.

LOCATION OF RESIDENCE

Table 6 shows that, like the Australian population at large, the majority of authors live in New South Wales and Victoria. The comparison below shows that the proportion of authors living in NSW has decreased slightly and is now roughly equal to Victoria. This shift is occurring at a higher rate than population shifts in the ABS data, also in Table 6 below.

Table 6 - Summary of location and comparison with national figures

	2015 survey %	ABS %	2022 survey %	ABS%
NSW	35.0	44.7	29.9	38.8
VIC	28.3	29.1	28.1	31.4
QLD	13.4	11.1	11.8	15.0
SA	7.5	4.1	7.8	4.1
WA	7.4	4.7	9.4	5.5
TAS	2.7	1.8	3.0	2.1
NT	0.7	0.5	1.2	0.4
ACT	5.0	3.9	4.1	2.6
Prefer not to say	0	0	4.7	0
Total	100	100	100	100
<i>n</i>	993	N/A	1152	N/A

Nearly two-thirds of authors live in a capital city, with one-fifth in regional cities or towns. Nearly one in ten authors live in semi-rural areas, and slightly less than one in ten live in rural or remote areas.

Over half (58.6%) of authors who live outside of a capital city find that this has influenced their practice as an author. Of these authors, approximately half assess the influence as being positive, and nearly one-third find it has been negative. Authors referred to disadvantages in their comments. These include the cost of travel to attend launches, festivals and workshops, and to teach creative writing at universities in capital cities. Other factors include less access to writing and author forums, and access to state library material which is not online. One established author referred to the greatest challenge as “credibility and visibility”, because “paid appearance opportunities and most literary prizes remain focused on eastern seaboard states and their authors”.

LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Authors as a group have a markedly higher level of formal education than the general population, with more than 80 percent having attended university (see Table 7), compared to around 50 percent for the population as a whole. Nearly half of all authors have completed a postgraduate degree, with the highest proportion of educational qualifications held by scholarly writers. However, postgraduate qualifications are notable across all genres.

Table 7 - Highest level of education completed: percent within each genre

	Literary Fiction	Genre Fiction	Children's	Creative non-fiction	Other non-fiction	Poetry	Subtotal (trade)	Education	Scholarly	Total (all authors)
Completed Primary school	0.6	0.5	0.6	2.3	0.6	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.7
Completed High school or equivalent	3.2	7.1	8.4	6.8	5.6	6.0	6.4	0.0	0.0	6.0
Completed Trade Certificate/Associate Diploma/Advanced Diploma	5.1	9.8	14.2	8.3	11.8	7.5	9.7	7.7	0.0	9.4
Completed Bachelor Degree	17.9	31.1	38.1	16.5	24.8	19.4	26.7	25.6	0.0	26.0
Completed Postgraduate Diploma	8.3	15.6	14.8	11.3	11.8	9.0	13.0	17.9	6.3	12.9
Completed a Postgraduate Degree - such as a Masters (but excluding a Doctorate)	25.0	22.0	16.1	21.1	23.6	20.9	21.6	28.2	6.3	21.4
Completed a Postgraduate Degree – Traditional Doctorate	16.0	7.3	2.6	26.3	15.5	17.9	12.1	20.5	87.5	14.5
Completed a Postgraduate Degree – Creative Doctorate	23.7	6.6	5.2	7.5	6.2	19.4	9.7	0.0	0.0	9.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>n</i>	156	409	155	133	161	67	1081	39	32	1152

Changes since the 2015 survey

The educational profile of authors overall has increased slightly, with a greater proportion of authors having completed a postgraduate degree in literary fiction (up from 58% to 64.7%), genre fiction (up from 28.7% to 35.9%) and poetry (up from 51.2% to 58.2%). The proportion of authors with a traditional postgraduate degree remains approximately the same, and the proportion of authors with a creative doctorate has increased (from just under 6% to 9.1%).

COUNTRY OF BIRTH AND FIRST LANGUAGE

Three-quarters of Australian book authors were born in Australia. This includes Australian First Nations authors, who are represented in the survey findings. At this stage, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey participants is not large enough to use as a basis for specific findings about their experiences as book authors. However, this may change in the future as the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander book authors increases.

Table 8 - Country of birth

	%
Australia	75.9
England	9.6
New Zealand	3.0
United States of America	2.2
Canada	0.7
Croatia	0.1
Egypt	0.1
Germany	0.2
India	0.3
Indonesia	0.2
Ireland	0.4
Italy	0.4
Malaysia	0.2
Malta	0.1
Netherlands	0.2
Papua New Guinea	0.2
Philippines	0.3
Poland	0.3
Scotland	0.7
Singapore	0.2
South Africa	1.1
Taiwan	0.1
Turkey	0.2
Wales	0.3
Zimbabwe	0.2
Other	3.0
Total	100
<i>n</i>	<i>1152</i>

Table 8 above shows that Australian book authors are very likely to have been born in Australia or another anglophone country.

Table 9 shows that the vast majority of Australian book authors speak English as a first language (96.2%). By way of comparison, the 2016 ABS census found that 72.7% of Australians speak only English at home. There is no dominant second language in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017).

The survey data do not capture the multicultural backgrounds of Australian authors writing in English. In recent years, Australian and overseas English-language publishing industries have implemented initiatives to promote the diversity of authors published, including establishing specialist imprints, reviewing hiring practices within the book industry and ways to support the careers of talented emerging writers from diverse backgrounds. This has also been the subject of academic research, and future surveys of Australian book authors may have scope to examine the effects of these initiatives over time (see, for example, Bowen & Driscoll 2022).

Table 9 - Is English your first language?

	Literary Fiction	Genre Fiction	Children's	Creative Non-Fiction	Other Non-Fiction	Poetry	Sub-total (trade)	Education	Scholarly	Total (All authors)
Yes	95.5	97.8	96.8	91.7	96.3	97.0	96.3	94.9	93.8	96.2
No	4.5	2.2	3.2	8.3	3.7	3.0	3.7	5.1	6.3	3.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>n</i>	156	409	155	133	161	67	1081	39	32	1152

The highest proportion of book authors who do not speak English as a first language is creative non-fiction authors (up from 2.1% in the 2015 survey to 8.3%). There was no particular pattern in the first languages of these creative non-fiction authors: a mix of diverse Asian and European locations. Scholarly and education authors were next most likely to have a first language other than English, perhaps a reflection of the international mobility association with some academic careers in the case of scholarly authors.

AUTHORSHIP IN LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH

We also asked authors whether they have written a book in a language other than English (Table 10). Thirty-nine authors responded yes, with education, scholarly and creative non-fiction authors most likely to be represented.

Table 10 - Have you ever written a book in any other language?

	Literary Fiction	Genre Fiction	Children's	Creative Non-Fiction	Other Non-Fiction	Poetry	Sub-total (trade)	Education	Scholarly	Total (All authors)
Yes	3.2	1.2	4.5	6.0	3.7	4.5	3.1	7.7	6.3	3.4
No	96.8	98.5	94.8	92.5	95.0	95.5	96.3	89.7	93.8	96.0
Unsure	0.0	0.2	0.6	1.5	1.2	0.0	0.6	2.6	0.0	0.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>n</i>	156	409	155	133	161	67	1081	39	32	1152

At these small numbers it is not meaningful to extrapolate statistically further. No one language other than English predominates and each of the languages specified was noted by only one or two authors. However, it's relevant to note this very small undercurrent of multilingual authorship. The languages, in alphabetical order, are:

- An Australian Aboriginal language
- Arabic
- Bahasa Indonesia
- Chinese (Mandarin and/or Cantonese)
- Czech
- Danish
- Dutch
- Estonian
- Finnish
- French
- German

Greek
Hindi
Italian
Japanese
Korean
Latin
Norwegian
Polish
Portuguese
Spanish
Swedish
Tetum

We didn't ask authors about books written in a combination of English and another language, but it's worth noting that a prominent attribute of some important literary, genre fiction, children's and other books has been the use of Indigenous languages in combination with English.

Changes since the 2015 survey

The overall proportion of authors who have written a book in a language other than English remains low (up from 2.1% in 2015 to 3.4%). Within this slight increase, there was the most change in education (from 2.1% to 7.7%), scholarly (from 3.1% to 6.3%), creative non-fiction (from 3.1% to 6%) and children's (from 1.0% to 4.5%).

DISABILITIES

Over one in ten (11.8%) of authors identify as a person with a disability. Of these, 54% responded that this has negatively impacted their practice as an author, while 6.5% found it has been positive.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, the survey data are broadly consistent with the 2015 survey findings. Australian book authors are older than the age distribution of the Australian adult population. The reasons are not identified in the data. It may take years before aspiring authors achieve the goal of publishing a book. We don't know if this is due to the time it takes to achieve the necessary skills and to write a book that a third-party publisher accepts for publication, if the author does not opt for indie (or self) publishing, or whether there are challenges relating to the time required to write a book, the need to earn an income and other pressures on authors' time. There may be other factors.

The data show that a shift to full-time authorship in some genre groups, notably children's, since the 2015 survey although the underlying explanation for this shift is not clear. There is also a decline in the proportion of authors aged 40-59 years compared to the previous survey. It's possible that emerging/developing authors entering this age group found it too challenging to continue their practice as an author and left the profession. However, once again, the reasons for this shift are unclear. Another consideration is whether the COVID-19 pandemic affected the demographic profile of Australian book authors, as well as their ability to work as an author. This is examined in *Industry Brief No.4: Impacts of COVID-19*.

Australian authors are predominantly Australian-born. They are very likely to speak English as their first language. Australia's book industry is a significant English language market, and this has positioned Australian authors, agents and publishers to achieve success in international rights sales into other key English language markets, and also translations into other languages (see *Industry Brief*

No.7: Rights Sales, Translations and Piracy). However, the survey data does not enable us to examine in detail important new developments in Australian publishing: the role of First Nations writers and publishing industry initiatives to promote opportunities for authors from diverse backgrounds. Future surveys may be able to address the changes in the demographics of Australian authors over time.

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