

Editor's Introduction

By Tenille McDermott

We end 2025 and begin 2026 amidst crisis and loss. Our theme for this volume, "Disconnect," was chosen in early 2025, but feels increasingly prescient. Arts organisations are being robbed of funding. Universities are cutting subjects and contact hours, replacing face-to-face interaction with YouTube lectures and optional Zoom tutorials. Corporations and institutions are buying into generative AI hype. Our algorithms are increasingly siloing us from dissenting opinions. And in Palestine, a horrific genocide continues, mediated by a mainstream media that insists any criticism of Israel's wholesale slaughter equates to anti-Semitism.

These are not isolated aspects of contemporary life. They are deeply intertwined, a direct result of unchecked capitalism, systematic oppression, and rampant anti-intellectualism. Universities have lost their social license, prioritising enrolments over education, while tech companies try desperately to convince anyone with cash that generative AI is a boon to productivity, even as those very same companies face billion-dollar losses. Meanwhile, the decimation of the Palestinian people is unquestionably being driven by extractive settler-colonialism. We are being herded to a frictionless



existence, all comfort and convenience, at the cost only of our autonomy, our creativity, our critical thinking skills, our compassion.

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Like many writers, I've been an avid reader from an early age, and have wanted to be a writer for as long as I can remember. My first book was written at the tender age of six, a subversive fairy

tale in which an evil witch tries to lure a princess into the PIT OF DEATH—stylised, of course, in all caps—but, because even at six I was a feminist, the princess tricks the witch into the pit herself, no prince required. (She does, however, still marry the prince at the end, because I’m also a romantic at heart.) I also illustrated the book, spending many hours perfecting the cone hat with silk trailing from it that I was convinced all medieval fantasy princesses wore.

All through primary school, when I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, my unhesitating response was “a writer.” I didn’t really know or understand how that worked; I didn’t know any writers, or anyone involved in publishing, or even how books were produced; but it was the only thing that really made sense to me. As I grew older, however, it began to seem like an increasingly unrealistic ambition. I continued to write, but, as someone who did well at school, particularly in the sciences, I felt pressure to begin answering that question with other responses. In year 10, I said I wanted to be a neurosurgeon, because my mother, an admin assistant, worked for doctors and they were the doctors she admired most; in year 11, an aerospace engineer, because my dad, an electrician, had always wanted to be an engineer but his parents couldn’t afford to send him to university; and in year 12, a theoretical physicist, because I’d read Brian Greene’s books on string theory and it just sounded cool.

So when I started university—the first in my

family to attend—I enrolled in a science degree with a physics major. But, dazzled and intrigued by the array of subjects offered the arts courses, I decided to do a double degree, and this was to be a decision that would shape the next twenty or so years of my life.

I discovered very quickly that, to reach the strange beauty of quantum mechanics, one must first grind through a lot of basic classical mechanics and complicated mathematics, and grinding was something that I was never good at, as a chronic procrastinator. My modus operandi all through high school had been to memorise everything the night before the exam, which proved to be a remarkably inefficient method of study at university level. My arts subjects, however, were another story – pardon the pun. I’d chosen to major in English on something of a whim, and I was soon immersed in subjects on Shakespeare, the avant-garde, translated literature, and modernism. I even took a subject in which we learned Middle English and read the original text of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. After two years, I dropped the science half of my degree entirely, and graduated with first-class honours in literature; I went on to do a masters degree in creative writing. It was an immense privilege to have access to such a rich education as a regional, working-class, first-in-family student.

Access, for me, is an important word; a vital word. Students like me—living in regional Australia, with parents who work in trades,

families who don't read as a leisure activity, who don't attend the theatre or classical music concerts or dance performances not because they don't want to, but because they can't afford to, or are not even aware that those things are an option—rely on this kind of access. As an emerging writer living in regional north Queensland, I can attest to the challenges of building a writing career in a city so far from the publishing hubs of Sydney or Melbourne. Networking is difficult; social media evens the playing field somewhat, but it's not the same as going to a book launch every couple of weeks alongside literary agents and publishers. Learning how literary journals work, what the submission etiquette is, how to even get your work published, is a challenge when you don't know any other writers who can show you the ropes. And now, of course, those literary journals, so essential to the development of writers, are being subject to cuts. Funding for both national and local arts groups is short-term; so much energy is expended on applying for grants in a one or two year cycle, energy that could instead be directed towards producing creative work and further building programs to support emerging artists.

We are facing a crisis in the arts. In Australia, we are now in the midst of a long-term decline in creative arts enrolments at universities after more than 40 courses and degrees have been axed in the last ten years; my own university has suffered deep cuts to its Arts degree, and its Creative Arts courses have disappeared entirely. This is deeply

troubling. Not every student can afford to travel to Sydney or Melbourne to study. Not every student has the money, or the family support; not every student has the knowledge that this is even an option. I was fortunate to be able to discover my love of the arts at university, and I am furious that other students in situations like mine are being robbed of the same opportunity. This is not just an issue in north Queensland, but across Australian universities more broadly, as governments continue to implement legislation like the Job Ready Graduates program to discourage enrolment in degrees that teach, first and foremost, critical thinking skills and an appreciation of the arts as worthy in and of themselves, not just as a vehicle for capital. I don't think this is an accident.

Simultaneously, the arts industry is also facing the looming threat of generative AI, as billionaires who care nothing for art and everything for profit desperately try to insist that a statistical generator built on stolen work can replace human creativity. Generative AI only exists because of the large-scale theft of copyrighted, creative work; there are an enormous range of ethical issues surrounding it, some more complicated than others, but what is undeniable is that there is no ethical way to use ChatGPT, or Claude, or Gemini, or any large language model or image or video generator. When we use these programs, we participate in the theft of intellectual property, alongside contributing to the immense environmental

impact of these systems, and the labour exploitation inherent in their construction.

So we're at a crossroads, now; at a position where we must fight. We must fight for access to the arts in the regions, for universities to value subjects and courses beyond business and engineering degrees. We must fight for funding for local creatives, and refuse to continue lining the pockets of technocrats who earn more money in a minute than the rest of us could hope to in a lifetime. We must refuse to use generative AI for any purpose, and make clear that we value the human in the arts and humanities. We must keep protesting and fighting for the right to free speech and the rights of the oppressed. And we must do this so that every six-year-old out there who is right now crafting their own version of a fairy tale has the opportunity to write, and to create, and to engage with and contribute to the extraordinary cultural legacy that we, as a species, have built. We must do this because as human beings, we are driven to create and explore, to ask and answer, and to make the world a more

beautiful, more complex, more empathetic, more profound place, not just for ourselves, but for everyone in it. We must reject a frictionless, comfortable, heteronomous existence. Art is not in the output. Art is in the striving.

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There has been another great loss to Australian literature in 2025. We were deeply saddened to hear of the death of Moya Costello, a stalwart of the Australian literary scene and a champion of Australian writers and journals, including our very own. Moya has been a supporter of *Sūdō Journal* since its earliest days, and it was a great privilege to publish her extraordinary reminiscences of the twentieth-century Australian literary scene, "[Variegated, Fissiparous Animations: An Australian Writing Memoir](#)", in our 2024 volume. Moya will be greatly missed, but her legacy, and her dedication to promoting Australian writing, will live on. Vale Moya.

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