

## University of New England

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### Wearing many hats: Literary creative practice in New England

#### Abstract:

It's never been easy making a living as a writer or illustrator, of course, but in the last fifteen years or so, literary creators have experienced significant disruption and change, due to the transformation of the publishing industry and the challenges – and opportunities – of the internet and other technological developments. Wearing many hats, for most writers, is no longer an option; it is a necessity. For those living in regional areas, who face additional issues related to geographic distance from major publishing centres, it is even more important.

This article explores the lived experiences both of individual creators based in the New England region of northern NSW, and that of the local Writers' Centre, which for over twenty years has provided creative and professional development opportunities for writers and illustrators in the region. Against a background of the history of the New England Writers' Centre and a description of the author's own career, it profiles how several other New England creators, interviewed by the author, view the advantages and disadvantages of being based regionally, and the role of their local Writers' Centre. This presents an intimate insight into what it's like to work as a creator within the literary ecosystem of a distinctive regional area with a rich cultural fabric, but which also faces issues of geographic distance common to most non-metropolitan areas.

#### Biographical note:

Sophie Masson is the award-winning author of over 60 books for children, young adults and adults. Her most recent book is *War and resistance* (Scholastic Australia, 2019). She completed a successful PhD at the University of New England in 2018, and her scholarly articles have been published in journals including *New Writing, Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*, and *Bookbird*. Earlier publications in *TEXT* were 'Breaking the pattern: Established writers undertaking creative writing doctorates in Australia' (20 (2)) and the creative piece, 'A feather of Fenist the Falcon' (*TEXT* special issue no 43). A former chair of the Australian Society of Authors, she is the current Chair of the New England Writers' Centre and a Board member of the Small Press Network. In January 2019 she was awarded an AM in the

Order of Australia for her significant service to literature as an author, publisher and through service to literary organisers.

Keywords:

writers' centres – regional writers – New England creators – regional creative practice

## Introduction

There has never been stability in arts careers: in fact, as Ruth Bridgstock has observed, the so-called 'new phenomenon' across a wide range of contemporary careers, of a lack of employment security twinned with the need to remain constantly relevant professionally, is nothing new for artists, who have faced this challenge for centuries (Bridgstock, 2005). But in the last fifteen years or so, literary creators have experienced significant extra disruption and change, due to the rapid transformation of the publishing industry and the challenges – and opportunities – of the internet, social media and other technological developments. In October 2015, *Book authors and their responses to changing circumstances*, a major study conducted by David Throsby, Jan Zwar and Thomas Longden of Macquarie University's Department of Economics, who had surveyed over 1,000 Australian authors, reported marked changes in authors' financial positions as well as in their creative and professional practice (Throsby, Zwar and Longden, 2015). Furthermore, as explored in interviews with over 40 established writers in *The adaptable author: Coping with change in the digital age* (Masson 2014) whilst it is no harder – or easier – to first become published, *staying* published has become more of a challenge, with many established writers reporting increased difficulties. However, the interviews also reveal some interesting practical strategies developed by established writers to maintain their careers when difficulties strike. These ranged from self-publishing to enrolling in PhDs; from redesigning their online 'brand' to adopting a pseudonym; from seeking out more writing-related work such as tutoring or editing or manuscript assessment to leveraging long-term knowledge of the industry by starting a new literary enterprise, such as a small press, a speakers' agency, or a writing school. Wearing many hats, for a writer, is not just an option; it is a necessity. And for those living in regional areas, it is perhaps even more the case.

This article briefly profiles my own lived experience as a regionally based creator, as well as exploring the experience of other individual New England-based<sup>1</sup> creators through a series of interviews<sup>2</sup>. It also examines the lived history of the local New England Writers' Centre, which for over twenty years has provided creative and professional development opportunities for writers and illustrators in the region. This twin focus is intended not to present an abstract picture of regional creative practice, but rather to give an intimate insight into what it's like to work as an individual creator within the literary ecosystem of a distinctive regional area with a rich cultural

fabric, but which also faces issues of geographic distance common to most non-metropolitan areas.

### **Writers' networks**

Writing is by its very nature a solitary activity. Yet the image of the isolated author scribbling in his or her garret has never presented a true picture of what it's like to be a working writer. For centuries, informal networks of writers have existed. And that's still very much the case today. Writers may create works alone at our desks, but we love to get together, to exchange tips and gossip, bouquets and brickbats. People may meet face to face or through social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. For example, writers' groups focussing on specific genres, such as historical fiction, children's books, illustration, and others, are popular forums on Facebook for news, discussion and exchange.

As well as those informal networks, there exists formal, professional ones geared towards the needs and interests of writers (and book illustrators). In Australia these range from national bodies such as the Australian Society of Authors and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, to state-based organisations such as the various Writers' Centres. As observed by Robyn Sheahan-Bright, despite the popularity of writers' centres, there has been very little research done on their role and impact on writers' careers and the literary scene generally in Australia (Sheahan-Bright 2006). This is even though since their establishment in the early 1990s, not only have many new writers been nurtured through their programs, mentorships and appraisals, but professional writers have been offered teaching and presentation opportunities within the centres, thus adding to the viability of literary careers.

It is noteworthy that within the Writers' Centres network, NSW is unique in that it not only has one capital-city-based Centre (Writing NSW, previously known as the NSW Writers' Centre, based in Sydney) but also several regionally based Centres: Hunter Writers' Centre; South Coast Writers' Centre; Northern River Writers' Centre; Booranga Writers' Centre (based in Wagga); Broken Hill Writers' Centre, and the New England Writers' Centre. There was once also a small Central West Writers' Centre, but this folded after funding difficulties a few years ago.

The existence of the regional writers' centres in NSW was a happy consequence of State arts policies in the early 1990s which recognised the importance of locally based creative and professional opportunities for regional writers, whether aspiring, developing, or established. It was not simply assumed that these could be delivered remotely or by outreach from writers' centres based in capital cities. Recognising not only the challenges faced by regionally based writers but also the diversity of regional communities, the establishment and maintenance of regional writers' centres continues to be an important factor in the flourishing of literary cultures in the communities they service. Their importance to the health of these literary cultures cannot be overstated, especially as, despite severe operational and financial challenges at times, they have managed to stay relevant and offer new opportunities for regional writers in the midst of a changing industry. Some, like the former Northern Rivers

Writers' Centre (now renamed Bryon Writers Festival), and the New England Writers' Centre, established a national presence as well – in the former's case through Byron Writers Festival events, in the latter's through the New England Thunderbolt Prize for Crime Writing. Most of the regional centres are run by a volunteer board, with one or two paid part-time staff members. Principally funded by modest but much-appreciated government grants from bodies such as Create NSW and the Regional Arts Fund, with perhaps some local government and business sponsorship, the regional writers' centres offer programs which aim to enhance skills, information, and creative and professional development opportunities for their members and the wider local literary community.

### **A New England literary career: a personal reflection**

Before moving to a close examination of the New England Writers' Centre and its place in regional literary culture, I will briefly profile my own professional literary career, as an example of the trajectory of a regionally based but nationally and internationally – published author. As a child and young adult, I lived in Sydney, with regular interludes in rural France (my French parents worked as expatriates in Australia). I first moved to the New England region with my partner and first child in the late 1980s. Over the whole of the 29 years since my first book was published, I have lived and worked in the New England region, first in Guyra and then in the Armidale/Uralla district. Our home is equidistant from both centres, but we are focussed more on Armidale.

New England has a rich literary history, with classic writers such as Rolf Bolderwood, Dymphna Cusack and Darcy Niland all having started their careers here, and later, with the opening of the University of New England, nurturing dozens of well-known writers in all genres and across many age ranges.

When I first started sending out my manuscripts in the late 1980s, the New England Writers' Centre didn't yet exist, so most of this literary atmosphere was fostered by groups within the University, which also had an enviable reputation in Australian literary studies. There was a very active local poetry scene, as well as two small literary presses, Kardoorair Press, a co-operative helmed by author Anthony Bennett, and Fat Possum Press, run by poet Michael Sharkey and artist Winifred Belmont, around which gathered many local writers, especially poets. These small presses had been operating since 1979. As Sharkey explained in an article in *Meanjin* in 1987, they had contrived to find inventive ways around the issues that came with being a small press in a regional area (Sharkey, 1987).

In the early part of my career, most of my book 'pitches' were sent via the post to publishers in capital cities, or through contacts via my agent, who is based in Sydney. Family commitments allowing, I travelled when I could to festivals, conferences, talks, anywhere where I might meet not only fellow writers but also industry professionals. None of these, at the time, were in New England, which meant, of course, substantial travel expenses. To build up a profile I wrote a great many reviews and articles and conducted interviews with writers and illustrators – for a long time,

freelance writing for various magazines was a major source of my income. I also wrote copy for brochures and reports, conducted workshops in schools and libraries, not only in my region but around the State and occasionally outside of it, and cultivated good relationships with local booksellers and those further afield: in short I never missed an opportunity to wear another hat and add to my writing-related income so as to help keep my actual creative writing career afloat. And of course, in the middle of it all, I had to write the novels whilst not totally ignoring my children. I am lucky to have a very supportive partner.

Living and working in New England had and still has many advantages: the opportunity to own our own home, due to much cheaper prices; the access to the University and undertaking degree programs; the easy access to excellent teaching facilities and staff, including in the creative arts, for the children; even the lack of traffic delays! As a writer, I also felt that living in New England, with the peace and beauty of its natural environment and welcoming, diverse community, gave me the perfect context in which to create. But I knew, too, that despite its rich literary resources and academic opportunities, and even though many of the challenges I faced were similar to those of my peers in Sydney, there were some that were unique to my situation as a writer living and working in a regional community. In short, distance and barriers to accessibility led not only to increased cost but also to less opportunity to take up lucrative speaking gigs without good notice or speak face to face with my agent and publishers, although phone calls were frequent. Those same challenges, however, also meant I became very nimble at devising strategies for getting around them.

The growth of online facilities has of course eliminated some issues, with, for example, most submission, editing, proofing etc now done remotely through email, and Skype, WhatsApp, Facetime etc adding to communication possibilities, but the necessity of wearing many hats remains. Today, as a well-established writer with a long career and over 60 books published, I'm still constantly going in different directions and adding to my skills and expertise. As well as contributing to regional bodies, I have been involved in national literary organisations such as the Australian Society of Authors, where I served on the Board for several years, including three years as Chair, and the Small Press Network, where I am currently a Board member. Some recent changes of direction, or rather, additions to the mosaic of my creative and professional practice, include co-founding a boutique children's book publisher based in Armidale which has published acclaimed books by both established and emerging writers; undertaking a satisfying and successful creative practice PhD at the University of New England; and writing picture book texts, something I have always wanted to do but which somehow didn't click for me properly until about three or four years ago.

### **The New England Writers' Centre: a short history**

If things have evolved for me as a creator, they have also evolved in the region's literary ecosystem as well. In 2018 a report from the Regional Australia Institute confirmed what literary professionals in the region have known for a while: Armidale

is one of the top regional creative hubs in Australia when it comes to the publishing sector. Not only does this small regional city have a vibrant community of literary creators, both writers and illustrators, it also hosts three small-press publishing houses with a national focus: our own Christmas Press, children's picture-book publisher Little Pink Dog Books, and Lacuna Publishing, which focusses on adult fiction, non-fiction and poetry. The University, meanwhile, which inaugurated a very successful Writing program some years ago, has expanded the range of courses available within it, and is taking an active part in literary events again. And of course, the New England Writers' Centre has greatly extended its reach, both regionally and nationally.

As previously mentioned, at the time I started my professional career as an author, the New England Writers' Centre did not exist. Its establishment in the early 90s, during a period which saw many writers' centres established across Australia, was a real turning-point for the fostering of locally based literary talent. It wasn't just that the Centre offered great opportunities for aspiring and emerging writers to hone their craft through workshops, seminars and other presentations without having to travel hours from their homes to do so; it also offered developing and more established local writers the opportunity to get professionally-renumerated work in their own region, as presenters – and be showcased for it. And through bringing in visiting writers and industry professionals, it exposed local audiences and practitioners to fruitful interaction with literary people from beyond the region. As well, the Centre facilitated connections between local informal writing groups and ran networking events, providing a focal point for literary endeavour in New England. Under its founding, long-serving Director, writer, composer and musician Lesley Sly, the New England Writers' Centre pursued an energetic program of enrichment and encouragement of both potential and actual literary talent in New England.

But as time went on, and the NSW government changed its thinking on arts policies, difficulties began to arise regarding what was seen as a 'traditional' way of delivering arts funding to the regions. In 2008, there developed a serious concern amongst the regional writers' centres in NSW that a government consultancy process then underway was intended to produce a recommendation that all funding to the regional Centres be eliminated, and that instead the centrally based NSW Writers' Centre in Sydney could provide outreach and remote access programs instead (ABC News, May 30, 2008). Although fortunately this did not eventuate, funding cuts to nearly all the regional Writers' Centres affected their operation, including that of the New England Writers' Centre.

I became Chair eight years ago and the next year, in 2012, we faced a major crisis when, for reasons unclear to us, NEWC did not receive any operational or program funding from Arts NSW, the previous incarnation of Create NSW, the main arts-funding body in NSW. This made it impossible for the Centre to continue in its previous form. We could not, for instance, continue to pay our Director's wages, and so, regrettably, she resigned. But after we went public with our plight, an unexpected and very generous donation from a writer who had been brought up locally but now worked in a senior finance job in Asia helped the Board not only to continue to pay

our administrative officer, but galvanised us into devising new strategies to ensure the Centre's continued survival. Though the funding cut had been a shock, it had also, in a way, functioned as a prompt for us to reconsider how things were done and to work out what should be done to continue to support local literary culture in ways that would be relevant to the changing times and the requirements of contemporary writers in a rapidly evolving industry.

As an individual writer, I'd had to adapt to changing circumstances and refresh and reinvent my own creative and professional strategies over the years. I'd had to be flexible, improvisational and lateral-minded to make sure I could stay published. I'd also had to accept that I had to do a great deal of extra work, such as maintaining an online presence across several platforms – a presence not just about marketing, but about enabling readers to connect directly. And I certainly wasn't alone in any of that – most writers I knew who had kept publishing had had to adapt. And if that was the case for individual writers, then an organisation servicing them, like a writers' centre, must also adapt and keep pace with the times. Whether it's individual artists or arts-based organisations, all you can be sure of is that nothing can stay fixed, nothing can be taken for granted. It's pointless to bemoan the situation or panic when things go wrong; it's necessary (if not easy!) to find solutions that are not just quick Band-Aids but that will improve sustainability in the long term. And in our case, we also did not want to let down our generous benefactor, who had showed so practically his high regard for the Centre's work and its importance for regional literary culture.

Over the course of one hectic year, we worked like Trojans to achieve a good result within our resources and capabilities, offering a slimmed-down but imaginative program and redoubling our efforts to convince the funding bodies of our sustainability and innovative practices. It worked: program funding was restored the following year. Today, the New England Writers' Centre gets regular funding from Create NSW, the Regional Arts Fund and the Country Arts Support Program, as well as support from local organisations, businesses and institutions such as the University of New England, which has been a major partner for us in several programs. As well, the visibility and reputation of NEWC not only in the region but well beyond our borders has also been greatly enhanced by new initiatives such as the New England Thunderbolt Prize for Crime Writing. A national competition for short-form crime writing, in just six years of operation the Thunderbolt Prize has been recognised as one of the most prestigious awards in the genre in Australia, launching the career of at least one rising crime fiction star (interestingly, a regionally based writer, but from Victoria), and showcasing many others. We've also launched highly successful pitching programs which not only provide local authors with access to major publishing professionals but also prepare them extensively, so that they can best use the opportunity. The latest of these, Pitch Independent, held in 2018, was unique in bringing creators and small-press and independent publishers together and attracted national as well as regional attention. And we have created and nurtured many important links and partnerships with local schools, the University, and other local arts organisations, such as the New England Regional Art Museum, the Children's Book Council, and Arts North West. In recent years, the establishment and development of the successful Writing Program at UNE as well as a major partnership

project with Arts North West, regional museums and a media organisation has meant that greater potential than ever exists for very productive cross-organisation linkages.

It's still not easy, for the New England Writers' Centre; the modest level of our funding means we still can't afford to pay even a part-time Director, so the Board not only creates the program but up till the end of 2018 has run it, with individual Board members acting as co-ordinators for specific events. For 2019, due to careful financial management, we have been able to appoint a paid part-time Program Manager to assist the Board. Grant applications and acquittals, website maintenance and social media pages and publicity campaigns have mostly been undertaken by Board members as well, while our only paid staff member (till 2019) handles all office administration matters in just eight hours a week. It's been a lot of pressure on a Board composed of volunteers, who also have very busy working lives; and the appointment of the Program Manager reflects the fact that stress and burnout are major factors in retaining Board members. Furthermore, it's not cheap to run big programs such as the pitching events; as any regional arts organisation knows, getting visiting professionals into the regions is both logistically complex and financially taxing. But we are nevertheless proud of what we've achieved under difficult circumstances, and even prouder of the fact that the feedback from local creators and funding bodies alike has been so positive.

### **Is literary creative practice harder in a regional area?**

In a 2017 piece published online in *Overland*, with the provocative title of 'You can be a successful writer, but only if you live in Sydney or Melbourne', Ben Walter describes the ways in which what he calls geographic disadvantage – i.e. distance from the major cities – may make things much harder for regionally based writers, especially with city-based literary organisations turning a blind eye to their own privileged status as inhabiting cultural centres with easy access to opportunities. But is that the whole story? Can the geographic factor be an asset as well as a hindrance? It's certainly been the case for me, as I profiled in the overview of my own career; but is it so for others? To learn more, I interviewed several other New England-based literary creators, both writers and illustrators, who have also been involved with the Writers' Centre in one capacity or the other. They are at different stages in their careers, and include bestselling science-fiction and fantasy author Ian Irvine; emerging children's book illustrator Simone Hale; established poets John C Ryan and Yve Louis who have both published several collections of poetry, as well as emerging poet Catherine Wright; non-fiction author and aspiring crime-fiction writer Virginia Tapscott; non-fiction writer Helena Pastor; and author-illustrator Trish Donald, who has had one children's book published, with another on the way. Most of the interviewees are based in Armidale and district, while Virginia Tapscott is based in Narrabri and Ian Irvine in Dorriggo.

Interestingly, with one exception, they considered that their individual literary creative practice has been enhanced by the fact they live in a regional area, and not only because of the peace and quiet and relative affordability. Established author Ian Irvine observed that it gave him a different perspective from that of writers who live



in cities: ‘In country communities one mixes with people from various social strata, rather than one’s own social strata or interest group’ (Irvine, private correspondence, email interview, October 1, 2017). Simone Hale, an emerging children’s book illustrator, spoke of how living in a regional area had enhanced her adaptability:

Living in the city, I wouldn’t need to improvise, bend and twist so much in order to find an income from my skills and so my creativity would have been used in a different way. It’s forced me to really challenge myself and learn new things and gain new skills and it’s really stretching me regularly. (Hale, private correspondence, email interview, October 3, 2017)

Poet Catherine Wright, whose work has won prizes and been published in journals, referred to the major inspiration provided by her location in a beautiful rural area a short distance from Armidale, as well as the practical fact that:

[d]aily life is less hampered by the depleting stress of negotiating traffic and affords a clarity of purpose and writing I personally find difficult to achieve when living in the city. In addition, as Armidale is a town well-equipped in cultural and literary opportunities, I have found that being in a small community makes those opportunities more visible and therefore accessible, and, where opportunities might not otherwise exist, the other writers I have met simply set about creating them which in a sense seems more straight forward than to do so in the city. (Wright, private correspondence, email interview, June 19, 2018)

She was not the only one to stress the importance of a supportive and inspirational local literary community, which I had found so important in my own career in the region. For example, Trish Donald, author–illustrator, commented:

In a regional community you can feel that you can be part of the creative community and make a difference. I think it is easier to have a voice and be able to contribute. I think in metropolitan areas it would be easy to feel like you were lost and not heard. (Donald, private correspondence, email interview, October 4, 2017)

The impact of the natural regional environment was mentioned several times by interviewees, with published non-fiction author and aspiring crime-fiction writer Virginia Tapscott remarking on what she sees as fertile creative ground:

There are less distractions and less man-made constructions which tend to obstruct creative flow. It doesn’t necessarily matter if the subject is rural or urban, the benefits are the same. I see my location in the bush as a distinct advantage in writing creative non-fiction and fiction. (Tapscott, private correspondence, email interview, October 11, 2017)

Award-winning poet and UNE postdoctoral Fellow John C Ryan said he specifically moved to Armidale to write about regional Australian life and landscape:

My interest in wild flora is fulfilled abundantly by the national parks and reserves of the Northern Tablelands. I have, moreover, been able to develop skills in teaching and mentoring literary creative practice (poetry) to a greater degree than had I remained in an urban area. On a related note, I have found it easier to develop cross-

genre collaborations, for instance with botanical illustrators, because of our common interest in regional matters and the value of rural living. (Ryan, private correspondence, email interview, October 1, 2017)

However, everyone agreed there weren't only advantages of course, and creators also mentioned the challenges of maintaining a creative practice in a regional area. Issues relating to distance and cost of attending events outside the region were of course high on the list, but there were others. John Ryan mentioned a common perception:

Publishing creative work outside of the New England region could become a challenge when most literary publishers are based in Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane and, therefore, might not be interested in work having to do with a regional setting or in artists based in regional areas. (Ryan, private correspondence, email interview, October 1, 2017)

Catherine Wright concurred:

I have found a somewhat patronising attitude in some publishing professionals about the bucolic country life which I am aware acts as perceptual barrier to me and my work and making contact with the publishing sector and other professional development opportunities is definitely more onerous compared with writing in the city. (Wright, private correspondence, email interview, June 19, 2018)

Virginia Tapscott observed that despite expanded online possibilities for research, such as Trove, not everything was available online, and physical access to major research facilities was more difficult for regional writers: 'In the city you could be a bus ride away from a state library or museum which would be an advantage in research'. (Tapscott, private correspondence, email interview, October 11, 2017)

Helena Pastor felt that distance from major centres was a big disadvantage in terms of creating and maintaining wider professional networks, an issue which has become greater for her over time:

I think things are getting harder ... I never used to think living in a rural area was a problem, but over the years I've realised the importance of networking. Sometimes I think lack of networking opportunities may hinder opportunities to be awarded grants and prizes that are peer reviewed. I often feel a bit 'out of things' because I live in a rural area. (Pastor, private correspondence, email interview, October 24, 2017)

However, in contrast, Trish Donald felt that '[n]etworking is definitely harder being in the country, but I think once contacts are established networks are easier to maintain due to social media, email etc' (Donald, private correspondence, email interview, October 4, 2017).

### **The role of the New England Writers' Centre**

The presence of the New England Writers' Centre was a crucial factor in overcoming those challenges, with both Trish Donald and Simone Hale directly crediting NEWC for progress in their own burgeoning careers. Trish Donald observed:

I am finding my feet as an author/illustrator largely due to my involvement with the Writers' Centre and NERAM and a few key authors/illustrators who are of a very high calibre in the region, who are experienced, generous, with information and time and encourage me. I think NEWC contributes a massive amount to the community. (Donald, private correspondence, email interview, October 4, 2017)

Meanwhile Simone Hale said:

It's because of the New England Writers Centre that I have gotten as far as I have ... I think they are extremely generous to the public who sometimes don't realise what they have on their doorstep. (Hale, private correspondence, email interview, October 3, 2017)

Catherine Wright agreed:

I think that some things are getting easier in our region due to the energy, vision and generosity of spirit of key individuals in the Arts sector in Armidale, which is generating a gravitational force for other activities. The Centre is pivotal to local literary culture in the scope and scale of the events they organise, facilitating access to national and international workshops, festivals as well as local opportunities and events which provide connections and professional development for writers at any and every stage of experience. (Wright, private correspondence, email interview, June 19, 2018)

But Virginia Tapscott also pointed out that writers themselves needed to be proactive to take advantage of the opportunities:

I feel like the support is definitely there for those who wish to seek it out and make an effort to develop professionally. Help won't necessarily fall in your lap in the bush like it might in larger city centres. (Tapscott, private correspondence, email interview, October 11, 2017)

In terms of highlighting New England literary culture, Yve Louis was of the opinion that for a long time the Writers' Centre had drawn attention to the fact that 'here, in New England, there is a vibrant and sophisticated community of writers – from all genres, e.g. from fiction, to non-fiction, to meta-fiction, to poetry, to drama' (Louis, private correspondence, email interview, October 4, 2017).

John Ryan also raised the benefits of partnership:

I think there are opportunities, for instance, for visiting writers at universities to participate in programs (readings, workshops, panels) through independent writing centres such as NEWC: essentially a sharing of resources based on a common vision for the future of literary culture in a regional area. (Ryan, private correspondence, email interview, October 1, 2017)

## Conclusion

Learning to wear many hats is an essential survival skill within any successful writing career, but in regional areas this skill is even more vital. Regional creators need to be even more proactive than those living in metropolitan areas, to overcome challenges

of distance and access. However, whilst writers and illustrators in New England face disadvantages caused by geographical distance and metropolitan areas' perceived lack of understanding of the region, they also enjoy advantages which for many has enhanced rather than restricted their creative practice. Some of these are due to the activities of an active literary service organisation, the New England Writers' Centre, which both individually and in partnership with other organisations, has led local efforts to enable access to creative and professional opportunities that otherwise would not exist, as the interviewees in this survey all acknowledge. In New England, this has helped to forge a common vision for the development of regionally based literary creative practice and practitioners. A common vision doesn't mean one size fits all; instead, it is about the wearing of many hats, accommodating within them different strands and ideas, but all geared towards a sustainable, indeed thriving, future for literary culture in the region.

## Notes

1. The electorate of New England in northern New South Wales covers an area of 66,394 km<sup>2</sup>, from the Queensland border in the north to Scone in the south. Main regional centres include Armidale, Tamworth, Tenterfield, Inverell, Glen Innes and Scone, with many other smaller towns. The region is mainly agricultural but also has some light industry. Tourism is also important here, with several important National Parks and historical sites. Armidale is a major educational and cultural centre, with The University of New England being based there.
2. These interviews were conducted in October 2017 and June 2018, by email. All interviewees have given their permission to be quoted in full.

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