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Radio National

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Dear Christos

Thank you for your email about The Book Show. I believe you're writing in response to recent press coverage which carried a number of inaccuracies and didn't present the full picture of what has been proposed.

Our new Books and Arts program (working title only) will not diminish the importance of books in our programming mix. Importantly, across the week there will be no decrease in our commitment to books in the 10am-11am slot. This is because we have increased the length of the program to cover the full hour. Listener feedback and audience research has shown that the current *First Person* reading at 10.45am is not the best use of airtime within that hour. We believe with this additional airtime there is room in the hour to cover key specialist arts stories or issues of the moment which will be of interest to listeners engaged in the broader cultural life of the nation.

To answer your question, it isn't true that the program will only look at fiction. The brief for the proposed new program will focus on fiction, memoirs, literary criticism and publishing news. We want to continue our analysis and debate around identity, memory and story and our focus on memoir will enable us to do this. However, we do want to refocus the program on to fiction. You mention that most books sold in this country are non-fiction. It is also generally easier for non-fiction releases to get traction across Australian media, while fiction has long suffered through a lack of coverage. We are seeking to address this imbalance. We want to reinvigorate the interest in fiction, so that the voices of fiction writers can be better heard.

Non-fiction content is covered comprehensively on a range of programs across the network such as *Late Night Live*, *Life Matters*, *Breakfast* and *Saturday Extra*. Additionally, we are also proposing to enhance our Book Readings to bring listeners more contemporary releases to listen to and the draft schedule now places the *Book Reading* in the morning (separate to the new program.)

On Saturday nights, we are proposing that a new Books+ program (again working title) will cover fiction and non-fiction as well as publishing industry news as part of its arts journalism focus. We're also proposing to broadcast an omnibus of the week's book readings as we know listeners often miss one or two and believe that people will relish a quiet time for a more complete reading.

ABC Radio National provides more coverage of books and writing than any other Australian media outlet. This commitment continues strongly across the 2012 schedule. Conversations with writers, discussions, talks by authors, a dedicated poetry program, Australian drama, book readings and extensive coverage of writer's festivals remain key elements of ABC Radio National's offering to audiences.

Writers discuss their work across the day in many of our daily programs from segments like *Life Matters*' discussion with you about *The Slap*, through to *Radio National Breakfast*, and in depth interviews with Phillip Adams on *Late Night Live* (repeated weekday afternoons) which regularly features the best non-fiction writers; recently published works of non-fiction are frequently the inspiration for specialist feature programming in areas as diverse as history, religion and science. The expansion of *Big Ideas* (to four nights per week) in the new draft schedule will also create more opportunities to hear the very best of Australian and international writers talk about their work and engage with Radio National presenters – and audiences.

I'm sorry that you feel that our proposed changes signal the 'dumbing down' of Radio National. The new draft schedule in fact increases the number of original specialist programs across more genres. We are aiming to decrease the number of repeats, a frequent complaint from listeners, in the current schedule. In making changes to our programming mix, we are attempting to 'open up' Radio National, to reach more smart, thinking Australians interested in ideas and thought-provoking analysis of current events. We are not interested in chasing a mass audience. We are not interested in changing the core elements that make us unique in the Australian media landscape. We are looking to bring more people to the RN conversation.

At RN, we're interested in bringing debates and conversations about literature into wider cultural and artistic debates. Our Books and Arts program will reflect on cultural ideas and practices in an informed and engaging way, with a particular emphasis on new developments, emerging artists and Australia's cultural diversity. It will take an active and leading role in debates around arts, culture and writing in Australia and internationally. I'm sorry that you feel that you may no longer be a part of such discussion, but I'd like to assure you that commitment, dedication and knowledge is a hallmark of production teams across RN, and will also be a hallmark of the new Books and Arts program. We've received good feedback about our proposed changes from publishers and festival organisers around the country, and expect that the working relationship we have with them, and (more importantly) the authors they work with, continues.

We know that books are an important part of our listeners' lives, and we cater to this interest in many of our other programs, with many interviews and stories on the latest book releases across the schedule. The current management team have in fact increased the coverage given to books and writing. The network is deeply committed to the coverage of literature, giving over regular weekend programming to broadcast the Sydney, Brisbane and upcoming Adelaide Writers' Festivals in addition to the literary coverage in the regular schedule. Last year we also created a pop-up digital radio station entirely devoted to a writers' festival.

We're proud to say that no one covers books like Radio National, and we're gratified that writers of your stature want to engage with us about our programming mix. Thanks for your feedback, and I hope that on listening to Radio National next year, you feel that you can still turn to us for inspiration, challenge and debate.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Mason
Manager Radio National & Group PD, ABC Radio