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The Australian, Australia
22 Sep 2016, by Hazel Edwards

Arts & Entertainment, page 15 - 273.00 cm²
National - circulation 101,980 (MTWTF)

ID 660511821 BRIEF COPYRIGHT INDEX 1

Rewards of a creative life also include copyright royalties

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I still live in the house where, 38 years ago, the roof leaked. This inspired me to write *There's a Hippopotamus on our Roof Eating Cake*.

You may have shared this book for children. It's the story of a small girl and her imaginary friend, a loveable pink hippopotamus who lives on the roof. The hippo, as the girl will tell you, can do what he likes, including eating a steady diet of cake. It has been a very important book for me and for the people who bought the millions of copies that have sold in the intervening years.

The book is still for sale and has been reprinted every year since it was first published in 1980. It has indirectly provided jobs for many people.

This year, in a dramatically and creatively satisfying development, it became a touring musical for children: *Hippo! Hippo! A Big New Musical Adventure!* Do I know why it has been so loved? Yes and no. I always knew it was special. There's nothing quite like inspiring a child's imagination to take flight — it's a gift to let them say, "Yes, I wish it was so."

On the practical side, that book, its five sequels and about 200 others I have written as a full-time, self-employed author, have allowed me to co-pay the mortgage, do drip drip drip renos over the years and given my family a place to live.

Real estate property rights differ from book property rights — or copyright — where the returns are precarious, especially when pirates want to enjoy my books unfairly for no payment.

On top of that there are people, who you think would know better, suggesting that the commercial life of a book is only 15 years and that copyright protection is "cast too widely" and lasts too long.

These are some of the insights contained in the Productivity Commission's draft report on intellectual property rules.

I am not an economist but I know that if I were unable to make money from my work as an author that I would not have kept going. As it is, I have been able to keep writing — I am not wealthy, perhaps not as wealthy as an economist working for the Productivity Commission — but I have made a good living. And I, and my collaborating illustrator Deborah Niland, have generated wealth for others — and by that I mean by inspiring in children and adults a wealthy imaginative life. That kind of wealth is very hard to measure. Some would call it priceless.

As a beneficiary of Australia's world-leading and fair copyright regulations, I would have to say that they work for me.

That's not to say everything is always perfect — but I certainly oppose changes such as the introduction of a US copyright doctrine that may mean organisations such as digital technology giants, schools and universities may be able to copy and share my work without making a fair payment. How can that be an improvement?

At the moment, should my grandchildren want to pursue a career in the creative arts, perhaps creating the next version of *Play School*, I might tell them to go for it.

But if the multiple small sources of income I rely on — from libraries, from the Copyright Agency for copying by schools and universities, and from publishers — are threatened, as I feel they are now, then what does that mean for our creators of the future? A creative life is richly rewarding in many ways — our work is well-loved and enjoyed by many people — yet few actually make a great living from it.

The recently completed four-month tour of *Hippo! Hippo! A Big New Musical Adventure!* proves that a story can have a long life of options and rights in new mediums, especially with ethical directors who pay royalties and respect copyright. Under the Productivity Commission's recommendations, this musical still could have happened but I would be cut out of the revenue stream. So would other creators. Does that sound fair?

It has been the height of my literary career to watch the involved audience in *Hippo! Hippo! A Big New Musical Adventure!* and listen to the cast play my characters and even sing to very hummable music.

And to know that this story has lasted emotionally for 38 years, but also that copyright royalties are being paid.

I still get children knocking at the door of my home to ask if this is the house where the hippo lives. So I say, "Have a look!"

Hazel Edwards is an award-winning Australian author whose recent book is the memoir Not Just a Piece of Cake: Being An Author.