The novelist Amanda Lohrey is highly regarded for her essays, reviews and journalism. Her essays appear regularly in Australian newspapers and periodicals.

In 2003, Peter Craven commissioned her to write a 20,000 word political essay for Quarterly Essay called 'Groundswell: The Rise of the Greens’.

Amanda’s most recent book is the critically acclaimed The Philosopher’s Doll. Her other works include The Morality of Gentlemen, The Reading Group and the award-winning Camille’s Bread.

Peter, with characteristic nobility, has talked about the form and I, with characteristic avarice, will talk about money - because, one of the questions I most often get asked is, ‘Why don’t you write more essays?’ And the answer is, ‘Because no one will pay me to do it.’ And by pay me I don’t mean a lot of money; I mean at all. But there’s also the additional problem that there are some things I’d write about for nothing, but most of our outlets - indeed, really all of our outlets - will not publish anything of length. And 10,000 words are considered to be absolutely out of the question. A leading investigative journalist on one of the serious broadsheet newspapers is allowed 4,000 words for a major news-breaking story. And I remember Margaret Simons, who is one of the best journalists and one of the best writers in this country, was triumphant when she wrote a piece on the Helen Demidenko controversy because she had cracked the 4,500 word limit. Now, this is one of the leading journalists in the country, who’s won many awards, and she had persuaded the feature editor to run 5,000 words - an extra five hundred words - and this was the first time in her considerable career that she had managed to do this.

Joan Didion writes wonderfully in a collection of hers called About Henry about the old Los Angeles Times in the ‘80s, when it was one of the great papers in the world, nevermind in the US. And she talks about a slogan that the then editor had which was ‘say it once and say it long’. And he would allow his best journalists, and sometimes commissioned writers like Didion, to run to 20,000 words on a story, and he would even do the unthinkable on a newspaper and serialize. So he might run it in two lots of 10,000 words. This is in a daily paper. [He allowed this] if it was a particular subject of interest, or it was a particularly good writer like Didion writing, say, about the Democrat convention, or it was someone writing about the exploitation of peasant labour - Mexican labour - in Southern California.

Now you see the absolute antithesis of this in this week’s Sydney Morning Herald. If, like me, you have an interest in the recent Indian elections, then every day you pick up the Herald, and every day it has something about the Indian elections, and every day it tells you the same thing that it told you the day before. Every day it tells you that Sonja Gandhi was born in Italy of a merchant family that supported Mussolini, and is not an indigenous Indian and therefore can’t be Prime Minister. Every day, you check, you look in the library. Now, the Herald is assuming about its readership, either that it has Alzheimer’s, or that people are not reading newspapers regularly – that they are scanning them, they are dipping into them; maybe Monday, maybe Wednesday, maybe Friday. So you’re getting the same repetitive grab every time. Will you see a long piece on one of the miracles of modern politics which is a free, mostly
uncorrupt election in a country of a billion people? Where they have to count three hundred and twenty million votes? Where they’re going to have the first Sikh Prime Minister ever? Who is going to be the leader whose deputy is a woman whose mother the Sikh’s assassinated? I mean, this is truly one of the great stories of our era. Are you going to see any kind of think piece on this? No, you’re not. And you’re not going to see 5,000 words nevermind 10,000. So, there is a whole culture, and Didion writes well about the decline of this culture in the Los Angeles Times. She points out that she no longer writes for them - they will no longer allow her to write a long piece. There are certain things that you can’t say anything useful about in under 5-7,000 words, but basically 10,000 is your minimum if you want to write something comprehensive.

So, there are special problems in Australia, but this kind of virus of the ‘dumbing down’ is occurring in the US as well in its newspapers. Not of course in the prestigious magazines like the New Yorker, although the New Yorker had its unhappy time under Tina Brown where it seemed every time you picked it up there was a profile on Jack Nicholson or Michelle Pfeiffer. It’s now under a new editor who is an ex-news journalist for the New York Times. The New Yorker featured most recently Seymour Hersh breaking the story on the photographs on the torture in Iraq - not strictly speaking an essay, although written with all the skills of the very best writers.

So, in Australia we have no equivalent. People who want to write that kind of writing – if they’re willing to do it for nothing - have no outlet. Even the small literary magazines will blanch if you say you want to do something of 10,000 words. It may sound like a lot to you, but believe me, its actually not a lot. You could read it in an hour – bliss - depending on your reading speed. And there’s a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy that people have short attention spans, and they’re busy, and they haven’t got time to read long pieces. That simply isn’t so.

In the early ‘90s, a then Sydney writer called George Papaellinas started up a small magazine that came out in book format twice a year called RePublica. Published by Harper Collins, one of its main aims was to foster the essay form. In the first publication I wrote an essay called “Australia Day, 1994”. It was an account of twenty-four hours in Darling Harbour on Australia Day, but it was the Australia Day when there was the fake assassination attempt on Prince Charles. Remember that one? And there was an awful lot going on then about who we were. And so I wrote this piece. Even George blanched at 10,000 words but he published it. And I got an amazing correspondence after this and people would say, ‘Why, why can’t we read more of this type of thing? Where can we read more of this?’ So it’s not true that there isn’t an audience there. Peter Craven in later years has demonstrated this comprehensively, because the collections of essays always sold particularly well, much better than the collection of short fiction, if I’m right. I know because I was in the fiction.

There have been some other horrible attempts. The Australian Book Review, which comes out monthly, has run an essay series for some years, but generally these run to 3-4,000 words, which in my view is not enough. They, given their publishing constraints, feel it’s the most they can run to. You often read one of those essays and you feel that the writer is just – just - getting into their stride and that the length has stopped them literally in their tracks.
Then there was the unhappy event of the *Australian’s Review of Books* which came out for a few years with a massive subsidy from the Australia Council. It was published by the *Australian*. Do you remember that? Here was an unprecedented opportunity to use public funding to subsidise an essay culture, to kick-start an essay culture. Not only was this option not taken up, but in the end we were reading, not the best critics in the country in this publication, but staff journalists. Murdoch staff journalists were doing most of the so-called book-link, essay-link review essays. And it died the death it deserved to die. Consequently, because it was mismanaged, we have no equivalent of the *London Review of Books*.

Just recently, anyone who reads the *LRB* has been able to read excerpts of Hilary’s forthcoming memoir, which has been one of the absolute treats. We have nowhere, nowhere, in Australia that is prepared to do this kind of thing; that would excerpt a work of major significance. Not even one excerpt, nevermind a series of them. In the mid ‘90s, one of our best ever editors, Peter Brown, who used to edit *Australian Society* in the ‘80s (a wonderful publication mostly focusing on social issues) became the non-fiction editor at the University of New South Wales Press, a very good small university press. He put to the Literature Board a submission that he publish a series of short essays - this was before *Quarterly Essay* got going - and asked them for what was a very modest subsidy per book. They said ‘no’. Now there’s a very interesting issue there to me because quite a lot of money goes into subsidizing - and this is probably my most controversial statement for the festival - quite a lot of public money and grants go into subsidising poetry. Almost none goes into subsidising the essay form. And I think this is one of those moments when we look at public funding of writing, which is essential to our culture with our small population, and ask the question, “Have we got our priorities quite right, given the readership that is around for either genre?” And I won’t say any more than that. I am not on the literature board. I am also one of the few Australian novelists that regularly reads and buys poetry, let me tell you. So I am not here to poet-bash, but it does seem to me there is a discrepancy in the amount of public funding that goes into these two genres.

Finally, there is another recent initiative which I commend to you if you haven’t already noticed it and it’s a small literary magazine that comes out of Melbourne called *Overland*. It has recently instituted a series of public lectures called the *Overland Lecture*, but those lectures are in a kind of essay form and they are published four times a year in *Overland* and they’ve been really quite exceptional. Peter has included one or two of those in his anthologies.

The only time I’ve written an essay of major length was when Peter asked me to do the one on the Greens, and of course I jumped at it. You don’t get asked to do this very often in Australia, and it was a very risky thing for him to do actually because I’m not an acknowledged expert in this field. I’m not an unacknowledged expert in this field. I’m not any kind of expert in this field. He could have asked a lot of people who had published in the area of environmental studies, but he didn’t. Like a really good critic, he stuck his neck out and took a risk because of his conception of the essay form as something where the engaged amateur, who is also a professional writer, has a crack at something where they see a gap and where they think they can bring a particular sensibility which doesn’t normally inform the writing in that area. The writing in the area of environmental studies, and the environment generally, is
largely professional and of a very high calibre in Australia. Where you do have publishing support such as Black Inc was providing, you can take those kinds of risks; you can make those kinds of innovations. They won’t always come off, but they’re always interesting and they’re always exciting.

The long essay does enable a writer to do a recap of certain historical moments, such as a professional historian cannot bring themselves to do. There were a lot of people who wanted to know where the Greens came from. That was the subject of my essay. They were never going to read 100,000 words on it. They were never going to buy a book, however worthy, on that subject. But they did want to get a kind of overview at a particular moment in time when this was a burning political issue. And it still is.

The essay form, the long essay form, as Didion says in After Henry, enables the writer to do several things at once. One of them is to historicise, to contextualise, so we’re not in Alzheimer’s mode. We can rework memory, and we can create cultural memory if it was never there, or we can draw on it fruitfully if its there residually, which is what I tried to do in the Greens essay. So it is a marvellous form, but Quarterly Essay does not make a profit. It sells at the most amazingly democratic price, I think they’re about $11, but the man who publishes these basically makes his money elsewhere and he subsidises this with his income as a property developer. So this is a kind of philanthropy in the writing sphere, and I think it’s time the Australia Council, which funds writers through grants, came to the party to some degree and accepted the essay form [as an essential one]. We have a strong writing culture, but this is one of our ongoing weaknesses. I think if you’re in the business, and some of you must be, it’s time we lobbied for a little more support so that the next time a small publisher like the University of New South Wales Press puts in a really good submission - and I saw it, it was a first class submission - they get a little bit back.