

Writers' Bursaries 2017

Report of the Chair of the Bursaries Panel 2017

This is my first year as Chair of Literature Wales's Bursaries Panel. It has been both a privilege and a challenge to step into a role so successfully filled by my predecessor, Katie Gramich, but it has also been a pleasure to undertake the responsibility in view of the number of applications received this year from Welsh authors, and to be able to support some very promising and talented writers. I wish on my own behalf, and on behalf of the panel, to acknowledge the work of Petra Bennett and to thank her for her willing assistance and thorough support in ensuring the process of awarding bursaries has been extremely effective and professional from beginning to end, and for guiding me for the first time along the path in such a patient and sure-footed way. As well as a new chair, another new member joined the panel this year, namely the literary critic and editor Catherine Phelps, who has taken the place of Catrin Beard.

This year saw the greatest number of bursary applications ever received since Literature Wales started administering the scheme in 2004. This is certain testimony to the quality and vitality of the literature culture in Wales and demonstrates awareness and appreciation of the support Literature Wales is able to provide to the writers of our country. 151 applications were received for assessment this year (compared with 141 in 2016.) Of these, 141 were English applications and 10 were for Welsh works. 83 were applications for a New Writer's Bursary and 68 for a Published Author's Bursary. 5 applicants for both categories of bursary had also applied to the Support Fund. Of the total number of applications, 18 had received a Bursary in the past (either from ACW, Academi or Literature Wales) and it was good to see 3 applications submitted by writers who had been mentored under Literature Wales's Mentoring Scheme, showing undoubted development in the confidence and ability of these authors.

The panel was glad the level of National Lottery funding had remained unchanged since last year, especially in view of the high number of applications this year; we therefore had £70,000 to distribute and £4,000 for the Mentoring Scheme. Having said as much, considering the total amount applied for was £866,000, the task of selection and allocation

was extremely challenging, even after sifting through the 151 to create a shortlist of 58. That process brought the total amount down to £358,000, but the huge funding deficit of £288,000 sometimes created a profound dilemma. It also created vexation in view of the brilliance of the work of several authors and their need for support. In light of the financial restraints, a number of applications worthy of support had to be rejected, and among them some well-known writers. It was therefore necessary to ensure a strict and fair process of prioritization, with consideration given to the detail and clarity of the applications, the strength of samples of work from the point of view of substance and originality, as well as financial need, alongside the literary standard of the projects being considered.

There is, of course, a positive aspect to the fact that the choice was difficult, and the standard of the work submitted was exceptionally high this year. The reports received by the panel noted work which was of 'world-wide standard', 'with a wide appeal ranging from the academic audience to the ordinary reader', and 'a truly new talent'. The shortlist included some familiar and acknowledged names, applying for a bursary (some for the first time) to allow them to experiment with theme and genre or undertake research for new projects. There were also entirely new names, varying in age, experience and background, asking for encouragement and support to fulfil the potential of their imagination and talent. The panel was in no doubt that a number of the typescripts submitted were certain to be of interest to publishers, to be welcomed by readers and to gain the acclaim and recognition of critics.

The applications this year included a wide range of genres – from brilliant short stories to poems of the highest standard in both strict and free measures, to exciting multi-media literary projects, revealing biographies, and lively and imaginative children's books. The novel in its various forms was, however, by far the most common genre with half the applications requesting a bursary for writing fiction. One popular theme this year was the landscape and history of Wales, which inspired contrasting literary responses, from creative travel books to poetry collections to biographical volumes that will throw new light on our relationship with our natural and social environment and at different times in the history of our nation. Other themes that presented themselves were science fiction and fantasy and dystopic works of fiction, including some that contain a strong element of

symbolism and political satire. The turbulent and violent history of the first half of the twentieth century provided the background to a number of the works submitted, works exploring the social change and exile brought in the wake of war and imperialism. Whilst that was to be expected as we remember and examine this period in the history of Britain in particular, it was good to see the contemporary life of Wales being explored by a number of authors, particularly by some of the most exceptional of the applications, with themes of feminism, sexuality, social deprivation and the effects of post-industrialism on our society surfacing in imaginative and well-crafted works.

Writing as therapy, and health and mental health as subjects, have come to the fore in the applications received, and the panel was struck by the number of post-graduate students looking for support as they completed, or having completed, their studies. It is evident that there is a specific group of prospective authors looking for support during the period between attending creative writing courses and becoming professional authors, with a number as yet unable to attain the standard required to obtain a bursary. Another feature of several unsuccessful applications this year was a request to fund foreign travel or extended research, or to pay for rent and day to day living costs. Although authors do have the right to request support to conduct research or to buy time from work, a number of these applications were a little bold in nature and there was no means of justifying their demands in respect of the outcomes of the expenditure.

As a panel, we were very pleased to be able to reward so many authors this year, although we jointly breathed a heavy sigh of regret at being forced to refuse several talented and promising writers because of a lack of funding. We do hope a good number of those who were unsuccessful this year will persevere and apply again in future, and more importantly that they will be able to continue developing their craft and to contribute to the literary culture of Wales and the world. As a reviewer and critic of literature, it has been an exciting experience to have such a privileged glimpse of the literary talent and promise which is teeming in Wales and to fully understand the crucial and important role of Literature Wales' Bursaries in the process of nurturing that talent and promise.

Sioned Williams

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