

Literature Wales Mentoring Scheme and Bursaries Bursaries Panel Chair's Report 2019

On behalf of the Literature Wales Mentoring Scheme and Bursaries Panel, I would first like to thank Literature Wales' Writer Development Manager, Petra Bennett, for her clear leadership and diligent support throughout the process of awarding the Bursaries this year. It was a difficult year for Literature Wales, with a great deal of uncertainty about the future of the Bursaries Scheme in its current form, so the fact that this was an extremely successful year for the Scheme – in terms of the number of applicants, the quality of the applications and the effectiveness of the organisation – should be a source of pride for the talented and committed staff of Literature Wales. I am confident that the administration of these schemes will be just as efficient, flexible and strategic next year under the supervision of Petra and the team.

The Panel would also like to note our thanks to the National Lottery who fund the Bursaries through the Arts Council of Wales. During this troubling economic time, with stories almost every week about local authorities cutting budgets for art projects and venues, the financial sponsorship and practical support provided through the Bursaries and Mentoring Scheme are more important than ever to Welsh culture.

Following the introduction and implementation of a number of changes to the process of awarding Bursaries last year, it was encouraging to see that the emphasis on encouraging writers to apply for support at a vital time in their artistic development has been both effective and successful. There was evidence of this in the increase yet again this year in the number of new writers who applied for support, and in the fact that so many also applied for a New Writer's Bursary, as well as the Mentoring Scheme, with the opportunity to gain a place on a residential course at the Tŷ Newydd Writing Centre and one-to-one sessions clearly being appreciated by the writers of Wales.

A total of 153 applications were received for the two writer development schemes, namely the Bursaries and the Mentoring Scheme. We received 131 applications for a Writer's Bursary, seven applications for a Support Bursary, and 15 applications for the Mentoring Scheme. Compared to last year, there was an increase in the number of applications for

Bursaries from new writers (89) and seven of these were from writers who were 25 years old or younger. The vast majority of the applications were from writers who had not previously received any support via a Bursary, proving that the Scheme is managing to reach and develop new talents, at various stages in their writing careers. Following a somewhat disappointing response last year in terms of applications from writers with work in progress written in Welsh, this year we saw the fruits of a successful marketing and promotion campaign by Literature Wales, with the number of applications from Welsh language writers having increased considerably. There was also an increase in the number of candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds, as well as writers who stated that they were from a working-class background.

The Panel's task was to award up to twenty Writer's Bursaries worth £3000 each, with six of the twenty Bursaries having been ringfenced for new writers, and one of those for a writer under the age of 25. As well as the Bursaries, we also received applications for the Mentoring Scheme, with 10 places to be awarded on the scheme; as well as applications for Support Bursaries available to support writers with disabilities or health issues. The Panel was also glad to be able to support such applications for support this year from two extremely promising writers, and I would like to take this opportunity to encourage more writers who need specialist or specific support to apply for Support Bursary funding, in order to ensure even more diversity within our literary community.

A total of 53 candidates for a Bursary were longlisted; these were all candidates whose work demonstrated the highest talent or potential. The Panel was in agreement that a number of the applications received this year were exceptional, from both experienced as well as new writers. Although the main criterion in awarding a Bursary is literary excellence, managing this extremely competitive process was a real challenge this year, with the discussions and evaluations being intense and extensive at times. The Panel is keenly aware of the disappointment felt by talented and promising writers when we have to reject applications for support due to the financial limitations of the available budget. Alongside our thrill at being presented with examples of world-class writing, seeing a genre in a new light or witnessing a new, exciting energy, we also feel a great deal of anguish and frustration at not being able to award deserving applications due to a lack of funding. We therefore implore those who were not awarded this year not to lose faith and to continue to develop their ideas and skills. It was a pleasure to be able to award one writer who applied again this year

having narrowly missed out last year, the added refinement seen in his work having ensured his success this year. Do not give up!

Those elements that are such an influence on our current social and political discourse – aspects of identity, #MeToo, class politics, the uncertainty of Brexit and the impact of the growth of right-wing populism – were very prominent themes in the work we received, with a number of writers dealing with these topics in an imaginative and intelligent way. Themes including disability, the experience of minorities, gender and economic deprivation were explored in essays, creative non-fiction, poems, novels and short stories. The Panel was pleased by the quality of the large number of poetry applications submitted this year – and the work of one young poet managed to “take away the breath” of the *Prifardd* (Chief Poet) on our Panel, whilst great excitement was felt at hearing a new slant to the work of another *Prifardd* after a long period of silence. There were also examples of literature for children and young people that was of the highest standard, with five writers receiving a Bursary for work that will hopefully inspire the next generation of readers. In light of the conclusion of Dr Siwan Rosser’s report on the lack of original books for children and young people in Welsh, we would have liked to have seen more Welsh language applications in those genres. There were no Welsh language applications within the Children’s Literature genre.

I would like to congratulate the 26 writers awarded this year, some of them being experienced writers who wish to take a step in a new direction, and others being new writers who will gain confidence and have the opportunity to develop their skill in light of their success. We hope that both the financial support and the mentoring will lead to the creation of work that will enrich our culture. Thank you to everyone who applied and to my fellow panellists for their care and passion in undertaking their task. Thank you especially to Malachy Doyle, Julia Forster and Ceri Wyn Jones who are leaving the Panel after six years of invaluable service.

Sioned Williams, January 2019