

Literature Wales Bursaries and Mentoring Scheme

Report of the Chair of the Bursaries Panel for 2020

It was a privilege to chair the Literature Wales Bursaries and Mentoring Scheme Panel again this year, and it has been an extremely successful year: The number of applications received was the highest since Literature Wales began administering the Writer Development Scheme in 2004, and the high standard seen in a substantial proportion of the applications was very encouraging. As we face new and worrying social and cultural challenges, the role of writers at a time of reactionary politics, to imagine and amplify a range of voices and experiences, is absolutely vital, and the Panel would like to thank the National Lottery who fund this vital support for Welsh writers through the Arts Council of Wales. It was a pleasure to welcome three new members to the panel this year: Professor Matthew Jarvis, Dr Tomos Owen and Elinor Wyn Reynolds, who brought new expertise, energy and vision to our work considering the applications.

The Panel's task was to award up to twenty Writers' Bursaries worth £3000 each, with six of the twenty Bursaries earmarked for new writers who would also receive a place on the Mentoring Scheme, one of which was ring-fenced for a writer under 25 years of age.

In addition to the twenty Writers' Bursaries, the Panel was also given the opportunity to award Support Fund Bursaries to assist writers with disabilities or health problems. Although we were able to reward a well-deserved and exciting bid this year, the relatively low number of applications for Support Fund Bursaries is an annual disappointment. Funding is available to purchase specialist equipment and pay for specific travel costs, training opportunities and secretarial support for writers with disabilities or mobility problems. I urge organisations and associations representing and supporting individuals who need specialist support to spread the word about this great opportunity for writers whose skills and talent are so important to develop to receive invaluable practical support.

For the first time, one of the four places on the Mentoring Scheme was ring-fenced for a writer who translates literary work from Welsh into English or from English into Welsh, through a partnership with the National Centre for Writing in Norwich and Wales Literature Exchange. I very much welcome this pilot given the important role translators play in helping to open up and nurture social and cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, something that is more important than ever in this day and age. I look forward to seeing the fruits of the partnership develop, and in the case of the application that was awarded this year, supporting a Wales-based translator, thereby enabling a Welsh language literary novel to reach new audiences.

In all, 186 applications for support were received for Bursaries and the Mentoring Scheme, with an increase once again in the number of applications for Bursaries from new writers (95) and writers under 25 years old. There was also an increase in the number of applications from published writers (60) and in the number of those seeking specific support from the Mentoring Scheme only (25), which offers the invaluable opportunity of securing a place on a residential course at Tŷ Newydd Writing Centre and one-to-one sessions with an experienced literary mentor. Considering the fact that the overwhelming majority of applicants have not previously received any form of support from the Writer Development Schemes, these statistics show the essential value of the Schemes for Wales-based writers and the success of Literature Wales in engaging with a wide range of our writers at various stages in their careers to promote the opportunities available for their development. It was good to see more writers from ethnic minority backgrounds and writers who indicated they were from a working class background among the applicants again this year, and there was also an increase in the number of Welsh language writers applying for support from the Mentoring Scheme.

In total, the applications received for Writers' Bursaries and Support Bursaries amounted to £470,040. The funding available for award through the 2020 Bursaries and Support Bursaries was £61,192. This is a clear demonstration of the urgent demand for support from Wales-based writers and the challenge faced by the Panel in awarding Bursaries this year. A long list of 53 applicants was considered, which entailed a detailed discussion on the quality, vision, promise and originality of each sample of work submitted. The process was inevitably a tough one, and given the inevitable disappointment of the unsuccessful applicants, I would like to emphasise that the Panel could have awarded at least double the number of applications actually supported based on the standard of the work submitted. It should also be remembered that perseverance and determination to develop and experiment as a writer, sometimes changing direction completely, can bear fruit. Many of the successful recipients this year had applied unsuccessfully in the past, and some of those who received a Writer's Bursary on this occasion demonstrated the positive influence and impact of the Mentoring Scheme on their ideas and craft.

It was striking, though not surprising, to see such a dystopian flavour in the work of the writers who applied for this year's Bursaries and Mentoring Scheme. A variety of narrative techniques and genres were used to explore social and economic deprivation, oppression and prejudice based on class, race and gender, and the impact of the climate crisis – with science fiction, gothic literature, and criminal, historical and fantasy fiction featuring prominently in the work submitted. Of the 25 writers awarded this year, 20 were women, and the female experience of yesterday,

today and tomorrow, at all stages of life, in Wales and beyond, is a major theme in the work of the majority of these. The Panel was particularly pleased to read the work of some of the younger writers, with young voices, in the words of one panel member, “bouncing off the page.” It was also pleasing to see examples of the highest quality in genres that are important for development in the Welsh language – children and young adult literature, graphic novels and science fiction – being awarded. There were examples of experimental, innovative poetic works; striking, bold and brave creative non-fiction work; and powerful and challenging children and young adult literature. It was a pleasure to read emerging works of such outstanding quality, and the Panel was excited and inspired by the work of writers old and young, new and experienced alike.

On behalf of the Panel, I would like to thank all those who applied for Bursaries and the Mentoring Scheme this year, and warmly congratulate those who were successful in a highly competitive process. We very much look forward to seeing the progress of these talented writers; we hope to see the support leading to some writers’ first volume and giving others the opportunity to pursue a new creative path. I would like to thank my fellow panellists for their support and their detailed and in-depth advice with this work, and we are all deeply indebted to Literature Wales’ Writer Development Manager, Petra Bennett, for her thorough and effective support and guidance throughout the process of awarding the Bursaries and Mentoring Scheme.

Sioned Williams, January 2020