

## Hywel Teifi entertains the Friends with his stories



Professor M. Wynn Thomas presenting a gift to Professor Hywel Teifi Edwards accompanied by Tegwyn Jones

The Friends of the Books Council held its annual meeting in Aberystwyth on Saturday, 4 October 2008. These meetings are an excellent opportunity for members to hear Professor M. Wynn Thomas interviewing some of our most prominent authors. This year the invitation was extended to Professor Hywel Teifi Edwards.

Rather than examining his academic contribution – which spans his study of Welsh culture and literature as well as Welsh history in the Victorian era – Wynn Thomas probed him on the early influences on his life. We were then entertained by his reminiscences

of his upbringing in Aber-arth until his arrival at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, to study Welsh.

Hywel Teifi's storytelling ability is well known and one point of interest was his exceptional ability as a child to learn lengthy pieces of prose and poems in only a few hours. He also noted how his Welsh teacher at Aberaeron County School sparked his love of the Welsh language – something which is still apparent today.

### From the Chair Tegwyn Jones



To our October annual get-together as Friends of the Welsh Books Council, we invite a prominent figure from the Welsh literary scene to join us, who then in a face-to-face session, has his or her literary contribution gently and thoughtfully probed by the Council's chairman, Professor M. Wynn Thomas. This in my opinion is an event not to be missed. The meetings are open to the public and are held alternatively in Welsh and English, so why not make it a regular date, and if possible bring along a friend or two, who may then, perhaps, decide to become Friends as well. Among those who have accepted our invitation in the past are long-established authors such as R. S. Thomas, Jan Morris and Emyr Humphreys, as well as more recent arrivals such as Lloyd Jones, whose account of his literary background last year was something of an eye-opener. To see and to listen to authors of this calibre is to re-emphasize the rich and varied nature of the literary world in Wales, and the dynamic activity that characterizes it. That the end product of all this is so professionally presented to the public in Wales and beyond, is largely due to the sterling work carried out by the Welsh Books Council, and as Friends our aim is to support its efforts to the hilt. Good attendance at our meetings, and a determination to draw in more members can only make that task more effective.

## Members of the Steering Committee

Every three years, nominations are invited for members of the Steering Committee. Only the names of the present members were received on this occasion, therefore the names were confirmed at the Annual Meeting. The members will serve on the committee for a period of three years.

The members of the committee are:

Chair – Tegwyn Jones  
Vice Chair – Dr Brynley Roberts  
Secretary – Lyn Léwis Dafis  
Treasurer – Richard Morgan  
Committee Member – Marian Delyth

We are grateful to them for all their work. Although Richard Morgan had indicated his wish to retire as treasurer, we are thankful to him for agreeing to continue in the post for a further twelve months.

# My Favourite Books

Members of the Friends are invited to present their favourite books. Here is Chris S. Stephens's choice.



Chris S. Stephens

I think I've been really lucky to spend all of my working life surrounded by books.

And not just my working life but my childhood too. While my brother and I were at Castle Street Primary in Kendal my mother made her regular Friday bus trips to the town's Carnegie library and selected for us all – my father included. That's perhaps why my first choice is easy. It's *The Tale*

of *Squirrel Nutkin*. I grew up in the shadow of Beatrix Potter in the Lakes during the 1950s, meeting people who had actually known her, spending time in the landscapes of her watercolours, and observing the creatures she drew so meticulously. I never fail to return to Lake Windermere and Belle Isle as I open my original copy. Red squirrels, and I have to admit tawny owls too, have a special place in my memory, and my consistent love of nature. Wordsworth's poem 'Daffodils' has the same effect, I suspect for the same reasons. Although I wouldn't do it now, in the past I've picked armfuls of wild daffodils at Easter time to decorate a Lakeland church.

Mentioning a poet brings me to my second choice, an anthology of poems by Cornishman Charles Causley, with illustrations by Charles Keeping. Two for the price of one! The combination of words and pictures makes *Jack the Treacle Eater* an anthology full of excitement and atmosphere. I just love it! Although the majority of its poems are set in the south-west of England they have a universality that seems to appeal to everyone. Sharing 'Maggie Dooley' alongside Dylan Thomas's 'The Hunchback in the Park' with a class of Cardiff youngsters for a TV programme was a classroom experience I have found hard to match.

I've been inspired too by Melvyn Bragg's *Twelve Books that Changed the World*, a spin-off from a successful ITV series. Anyone who can write imaginatively about 'The Rule Book of Association Football 1863' deserves a medal. His discussion of Wilberforce's 1789 speech, 'On the Abolition of the Slave Trade', led me to further research into the repercussions of slavery for Wales, and I was fortunate to find Thomas Clarkson's diary of his travels across England and Wales, which is actually in the National Library at Aberystwyth. There I read that he visited Carmarthen, Milford and even Haverfordwest, setting up anti-slavery committees (and even recorded his mileage!). Perhaps not my favourite book – but certainly an exciting one to handle with white gloves in the Readers' Room.

From the old to the new. As is so often the case a recent read sticks in the memory and becomes a favourite choice. I have been fascinated to discover *Resistance* by Owen Sheers – such a powerful novel, so tightly written. Perhaps once again it's the pull of the natural world which attracts me. The interrelationship between the characters and the landscapes, throughout the changing seasons, reminiscent of Hardy, is fascinating. I thoroughly recommend it.

## Meeting Jasmine Donahaye Grants Officer (English)

Jasmine Donahaye comes to books from many different directions – author, editor, reader, scholar – and now she is the English Grants Officer at the Welsh Books Council. She began work at the Council about a year ago and the experience has been a revelation to her: "It has been very interesting to learn about quite another side to the publishing world, and understand the role of the Books Council in supporting and promoting English-language publishing in Wales."

Jasmine sees her role as an advocate for English-language publishers in Wales, and is interested in seeing them develop as sustainable businesses. "All the publishers work very hard indeed and do great things within very limited resources. The Books Council is helping to establish them on a more secure footing so that they can develop their lists and capitalise on opportunities."

Jasmine was born in England to Jewish parents (her mother is a kibbutznik) and has lived in Israel and California. She learnt Welsh at the University of California, Berkeley, where she did a degree in Celtic Studies and also studied Medieval Welsh. When I asked her why someone would choose to



Jasmine Donahaye

study Medieval Welsh her answer was disarmingly simple, "Because it is an interesting subject."

She gained a PhD at the Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales at Swansea University, where her thesis examined the Wales-Israel tradition in Welsh literature in both languages. As a scholar she has been interested in the relationship between the Welsh and the Jews, and between Wales and Israel/Palestine, and has published extensively on the subject. Since she began working in publishing four years ago, she has seen attitudes to Welsh writing in English change. "There is no longer an automatic reaction to a book coming from Wales, or from a Welsh author, and this means there are great opportunities for success for English-language Welsh writers, and for Welsh publishers." ▶

► High-profile success for a Welsh writer can also prove a challenge for Welsh publishers. "A successful writer may be approached by large English publishers, and it can be a challenge for a Welsh publisher to hold onto its successful writers. Sometimes it's appropriate to let them go, but one of the things that the Welsh Books Council can do is help our publishers compete more effectively in the broader market, and help publishers retain successful authors, particularly through the Author Advance Grant."

Jasmine is also a published poet with two collections

to her name: *Misappropriations*, published by Parthian in 2006, which was short-listed for the Jerwood Aldeburgh First Collection Prize, and a new collection which will be published next year by Salt.

It was no surprise, then, when I asked her what she was reading that the first answer was poetry – American poetry, Hebrew poetry, and Arabic poetry. "At the moment I'm reading

a lot of Arabic work in translation, particularly the work of Palestinian poets, such as the late Mahmoud Darwish, as well as Hebrew literature, such as the work of Yehuda Amichai or earlier poets Saul Tchernikovsky and Uri Zvi Greenberg. However, a lot of my reading is for research, so when I want to relax I often enjoy children's and young adult literature."

## Celebrating the Year of Reading!

The Year was officially launched by Jane Hutt, AM, Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, at Cardiff Bay on 13 March. Many library authorities sent their mobile libraries to the event and the Minister presented £30,000 worth of books to the 22 authorities, to be distributed among disadvantaged groups in their counties. During the launch, Jane Hutt set a challenge for the nation to hold 2,008 reading events during 2008. We now know that this target is within reach and we expect to celebrate reaching it by the end of the autumn.

Three key projects have been organised. Give a Book week – the first campaign – was held during the week of 7–12 July. This scheme encouraged the public to give books as gifts to one another during the week. The week itself was full of fun, with many familiar faces from Wales giving each other books. Schools presented books to the children who would be leaving at the end of the school term, societies such as Merched y Wawr gave books to charities and booksellers used the week's resources to decorate their shops and promote sales. The *papurau bro* (Welsh-language community newspapers) also took part in the campaign.

Give a Book Week was launched on 19 June, and Jane Hutt presented £1,000 worth of books to the Children's Hospital of Wales to note the occasion. Simon Weston also joined us at the launch, and books were distributed to members of the public on

the streets of Cardiff. An interactive micro-site was designed for the scheme within the main Year of Reading website ([www.yearofreadingwales.org.uk](http://www.yearofreadingwales.org.uk)).

The aim of the second campaign, which was based on the concept of 'Reading Cities' which have proved so popular in the United States, England and Scotland, is to encourage whole communities to read. Each authority was invited, through the Society of Chief Librarians Wales, to bid for two sums of £20,000 in order to present a programme of activities which would lead to the creation of reading communities. The winning bids were those of the Llanelli and Barry communities, and both library services proceeded to draw up a short list of books so that the public could vote for their favourite book in English and in Welsh. Once the voting was over, the titles of the winning books in both communities were announced and many events were held during the months of October and November to draw further attention to those books.

The last of the main schemes, entitled the 08 Clubs, is aimed at attracting

young people – and boys in particular – to books and reading. A network of regional coordinators has been used to establish 50 clubs across Wales. The clubs will meet six times during the campaign and all club members will be able to use the scheme's website to reflect the buzz of their fun-filled activities.

The 08 Clubs were launched at the Gôl Football Centre in Cardiff with Peter Enckelman, Cardiff City FC's goalkeeper, who is himself an avid reader. Also present were two of the campaign's authors – Ion Thomas and Paul Manship – and young people from Glantaf, Plasmawr and Fitzalan schools.

Co-ordinating the Year within an extremely tight schedule has been quite a demanding challenge, but it is hoped that some of the schemes will continue in some form or other, thus ensuring that the National Year of Reading 2008 will leave behind a valuable legacy in Wales.



Jane Hutt, the Minister for Education, launches the Give a Book Week campaign



Councillor Hampton announces the winners of the Barry Community Reads

## Alcemi: New talent and ambition

### Gwen Davies, Editor

This August, Y Lolfa's fiction imprint Alcemi was celebrating. Not only were we going to the Edinburgh Festival-hosted James Tait Black Memorial Prize ceremony, for which Alcemi's first title *Salvage* by Gee Williams had been nominated, but it was also only one year since we were founded. Plus the novel is the only small press and debut novel on the fiction short list. And we had also struck a deal with London's Granta Books for the sale of the novel's mass market and world English rights!

*Salvage* is a mystery revolving around Ellie's discovery of a washed-up finger bone complete with diamond ring. Remarkable for its supple voice, the novel is narrated by four characters. These are unified by the Llŷn cottage of hospital consultant Richard, which is witness to the shenanigans of its visitors. Failed author Ellie has fled with her husband Martin from classroom scandal in Goa. Martin is in thrall to Richard for his job; Richard's wife Pippa sublimates his affairs by nurturing her boys and her WAG-belt Chester home. Nurse Hayley is gorgeous, and not quite smitten enough with Richard to keep a certain ring he gives her. How did the ring, and its finger end up in the sea?

*Salvage's* success has helped us get noticed. We have just secured Inpress retailers for distribution beyond Wales and will keep seeking the holy grail of chain store 3:2 offers. This we attained for our third title, our best-selling *The Banquet of Esther Rosenbaum* by Penny Simpson, an extravagant picture of Weimar Berlin which the TLS found full of "humour, verve and hallucinatory strangeness". Titles for October are novels by singer-songwriters. Fflur Dafydd's *Twenty Thousand Saints*, a lesbian thriller set on Bardsey, is hailed by Hay Festival Director Peter Florence as "the most compelling novel I've read in years". American Jeb Loy Nichols' lyrical novel on addiction, *The Untogether*, meanwhile, has been endorsed by writers John Williams and Iain Sinclair.

New talent; ambition; getting our fine writers recognition far beyond Wales – that's what Alcemi is about. We are on [www.alcemi.eu](http://www.alcemi.eu), 01970 832304, [gwen@yloffa.com](mailto:gwen@yloffa.com)



## Why haven't books disappeared?

Catrin Dafydd



Catrin Dafydd at the launch of *Y Dyn Handi*

It makes me laugh when I think about all the experts that have repeatedly warned us that the fashion for reading books is going to come to an end before long. Before long. Before long... those words tickle me.

If the truth be told then a book is of lasting value. It is a mystic experience

to be the owner of a beautiful collection (though there are plenty of ugly collections as well!) of words put together by another human being. One cannot share the same experience by reading on the web or by watching a television programme. That does not mean that those media do not have their own strengths, but I am bold enough to suggest that books will have a unique and an everlasting value.

In my day-to-day work, I have the honour of writing for many different sorts of media. I write television scripts and I write plays for the stage, but writing novels is my first love. Even though every author's experience is different, my love for novel writing stems from the complete freedom it gives me as an author to develop characters and create new worlds. Very often these worlds can teach us new things about our world today. I find the experience of pouring words onto paper and fashioning a story to be similar to doing a puzzle. I must answer a story here, before bringing it to an end somewhere else, before I echo parts of it again in other places.

The book is not dissimilar to radio as a medium in the way the listener or the reader has ownership of the words and can fondle them as they like. A novel can be very intimate. An intimacy exists between author and audience. An intimacy exists between the reader and the words and an intimacy between the words themselves. Unlike media such as television and the stage play, the reader has complete freedom to set the stage in their head as they wish and to create the faces and the accents as well. This ability to personalise makes books very special in my opinion. It empowers all who are part of it. The writer is empowered and the readers are also empowered.

As I write novels I very often feel that this is the closest that I will get to being inside of another human being's head. In the first place because I leap into the heads of characters, but secondly because in time the mind of the reader will also be steeped in the subject.

Therefore, for as long as books exist I will read them, and I will certainly try to write them. While humans exist, they will read books.