

Celebrating the work of Alun Lewis

Alun Lewis was the most significant writer to emerge from World War II. His first book of poems, *Raiders' Dawn*, went into six editions, and his stories, *The Last Inspection*, into three. But both the nature of his death in Burma in 1944 and rumours of a romantic involvement in India led to a curtain of silence descending upon him, one that has still not fully lifted, despite the support of writers like Robert Graves, John Berryman, Dylan Thomas and R. S. Thomas.

2015 marks the centenary of his birth in the Cynon Valley on 1 July 1915, and heralds a new appraisal of his work. In many respects, Lewis's work is the finest record of the economic hardship of the inter-war years, while his account of army life is searching, sensitive to the cost to men who wage war but discovering in it an impersonality that appealed to his poetic nature. As a love poet and letter writer, he is without peer, as the recent publication of *A Cypress Walk* (2006) proves.

To mark the centenary, a number of events have been organised, including two sessions at the Hay Festival on 26 May. At the same time, Seren are issuing paperback editions of his *Collected Stories* and *Letters to my Wife*, a new critical and biographical account, *Alun, Gweno and Freda*, by John Pikoulis, and *Morlais*, a novel written by Lewis in 1939 but unpublished until now.

John Pikoulis



Alun Lewis

Annual Meeting

This year's annual meeting of the Friends of the Welsh Books Council will be devoted to Lewis and takes the form of a discussion between M. Wynn Thomas and John Pikoulis at the Green Street Chapel, Aberdare, at 2 p.m. on Saturday, 3 October. The event is open to the public.

Losing friends

The Books Council has recently, sadly, lost three dear friends, who gave many years of service to the organisation. In February, Gareth Davies Jones, Vice-chairman of the Council and Chairman of the Welsh-language Publishing Grants Panel for many years, sadly passed away. Gareth had a background in education and was conscious of the reading needs of children and young adults. He was also aware of the need for attractive books for both the classroom and the home, and always insisted on the highest standards. We also sadly lost Professor Geraint Gruffydd, a former Chairman of the Council.

Dewi Morris Jones, who contributed greatly to the Council's work for over thirty years, passed away in April. Dewi served as officer and later as head of the Editorial Department, and will be remembered fondly for his consistently high standards and for his support for new editors.



Gareth Davies Jones / Geraint Gruffydd © University of Wales / Dewi Morris Jones



From the Chair Ion Thomas

In a room on the upper floor in Castell Brychan, the home of the Welsh Books Council, there hangs a portrait of Alun Creunant Davies, the founder of the Friends of the Council. He saw the need for a body of people willing to promote, support and oversee our world of books in Wales. In my very first meeting of the Friends, as the Aber sun shone, a new chairperson was sought among the assembled members. All eyes seemed to rest on me and thus, under the founder's watchful eye, I humbly took on the mantle of this prestigious post.

This situation seems to be a lesson. Every 'I' is important in our small nation in order to power our literature forward. There is work to be done. Recently I was surprised during Ifan Saer's annual visit to the school in his role as marketing officer for the Books Council. It wasn't his appearance, I hasten to add, that caused my surprise, but the fact that there were books and titles published that had gone under my personal radar. I believe that this might be the case with others who pride themselves on being avid followers of literature, not to mention those who are occasional readers. Indeed, colleagues of mine are not aware of the volumes published in Wales. Our responsibility as members of the Council's Friends is to raise awareness of the books published in Wales and to support the hard work of the authors and publishers of our country. One way of doing this is to get others to become Friends too, and in doing so they will receive all the benefits of becoming a member. With every friendship there comes responsibility, and friendships need to be nurtured, otherwise they dwindle and die. I therefore ask each Friend to invite one other like-minded reader to join our ranks so that the sun may continue to shine on the Welsh Books Council and all its endeavours.

First-time author scoops Tir na n-Og Award



Cardiff-raised author, Giancarlo Gemin, has won the annual Tir na n-Og Award with his debut book, *Cowgirl*.

This award – organised by the Welsh Books Council, and sponsored by CILIP Cymru/Wales – celebrates the best English-language title with an authentic Welsh background. In a prestigious event held at Swansea Central Library on 14 May, the award was presented to Giancarlo Gemin for his book *Cowgirl* (published by Nosy Crow).

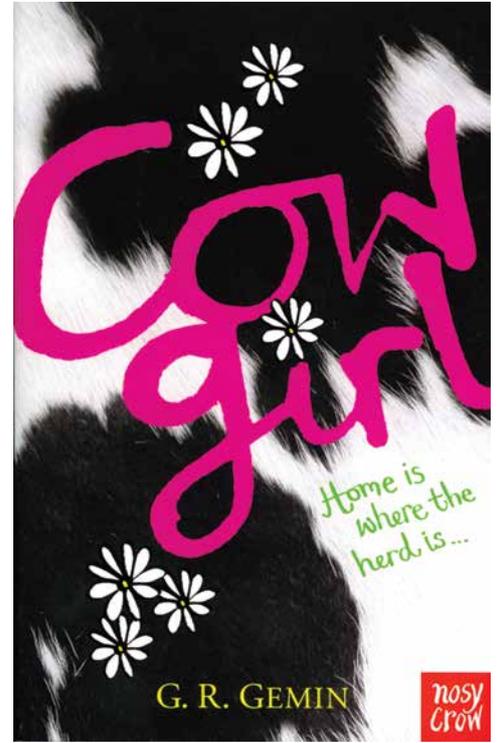
Cowgirl is the funny yet moving story of

Gemma. Growing up on the embattled Mawr Estate in south Wales, all Gemma sees are burglaries, sadness and boredom. With a dad in prison and a mum who has given up hope, she's holding out for better times ahead. With the abrupt arrival of Cowgirl, the big angry weirdo girl from school, everything in Gemma's life starts to look different.

The panel of judges agreed that *Cowgirl* skilfully showed aspects of contemporary life in Wales, and is brimming with personality.

Bev Bannon, Chair of the Tir na n-Og English-language Panel, stated of the winner: '*Cowgirl* is a great read and Giancarlo has done a superb job in developing that feel-good factor in the novel.'

Giancarlo Gemin, who is currently developing his second novel based on the Italian-run cafes of south Wales, stated, 'I'm delighted to win the Tir na n-Og Award – it's great to win this important prize for my first book, as it certainly encourages me to keep writing. I was very moved and proud to receive such an acknowledgement from my native country. *Cowgirl* was the first book I decided to set in Wales, and in writing it felt immediately at home.'



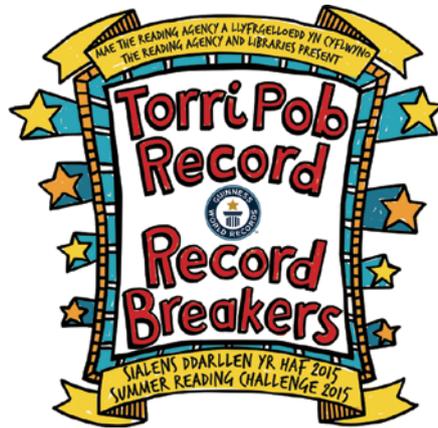
Elwyn Jones, Chief Executive of the Welsh Books Council, said: 'A number of exciting books were considered for this year's Tir na n-Og Award, reflecting the quality and range of titles available for children. It is with great pleasure that we warmly congratulate Giancarlo Gemin and Nosy Crow on their achievement.'

Record Breakers

Record Breakers is the theme for the Summer Reading Challenge 2015, and this year we've teamed up with Guinness World Records to celebrate achievements from all over the world.

The epic mythical adventure that took place in libraries across Wales during the summer of 2014 was a great success with over 42,000 children taking part. What's more, their parents and teachers discovered the benefits too.

Children who take part in the challenge return to school after the summer as more fluent, confident and happy readers.



Here are some key results from the 2014 Summer Reading Challenge in Wales:

- 42,091 children registered to take part in the challenge
- 44% of the children were boys
- 25,338 children (60%) completed the challenge by reading six books (the UK average was 58%)
- At least 4,418 joined a library as new members
- There were over 835,000 children's library issues in Wales over the summer
- 16 visually impaired children took part using the VI resources supplied by the RNIB
- At least 27 young people (aged 12–24) supported the challenge through volunteering.



Hay Festival 2015



Once again this year, in conjunction with the festival organisers, books from Wales had a strong presence in the Hay Festival, which ran from 21 to 31 May and attracted a record breaking attendance. There were numerous events on each day of the festival which involved Welsh publishers, and these covered a diverse range of subjects.

On the opening weekend, the 150th anniversary of the first Welsh passage to Patagonia was celebrated as Jon Gower discussed his new book, *Gwalia Patagonia*, a tale of legendary giants, Andean condors, devil spirits and chapel worshippers, told in Jon's unique literary style.

An epic journey was also the focus of John Harrison's talk as he discussed his new book, *1519: Journey to the End of Time*. Harrison described how he followed in the footsteps of Hernán Cortés, whose expedition caused the fall of the Aztec Empire. Harrison's journey was a four-month undertaking, while he was recovering from cancer.

Jonathan Edwards, author of *My Family and Other Superheroes* and winner of the 2014 Costa Poetry Prize, along with Paul Henry, author of *Boy Running*, gave lively poetry readings and described in vivid detail the various characters in their work.

In a talk entitled 'Finding her Place', Jasmine Donahaye discussed the recently published novel by Lily Tobias, *My Mother's House*, as well as her own memoir, *Losing Israel*.

The younger audience were also catered for with appearances by Paul Magrs, whose new novel for young adults, *Lost on Mars*, led to a discussion about the essential elements of the ever-popular sci-fi genre.

Eddie Butler, best known as the BBC's voice of international rugby, introduced the Hay audience to Gonzo Davies, back-row forward, builder and the main character in his first novel *The Head of Gonzo Davies*.

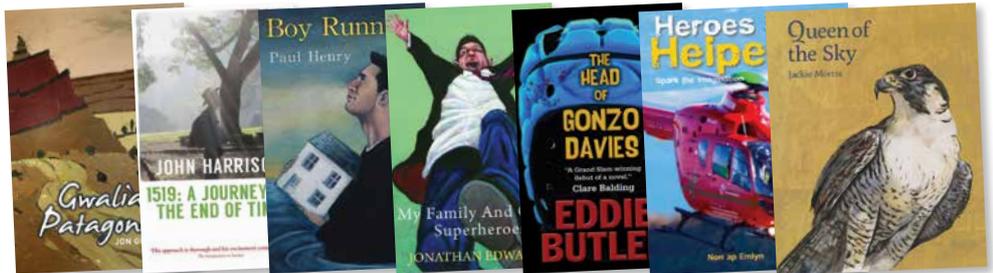
Real-life heroes from the Wales Air Ambulance captivated their audience with some incredible stories which form part of the Spark Series: *Heroes and Helpers*, while



Liz Pichon, author of the Tom Gates (Twm Clwyd) series, at Hay 2015

the touching story of the rescued peregrine falcon was the subject of Jackie Morris's talk which she recounted in her new book, *Queen of the Sky*. It tells the story of how the falcon was rescued from the sea off the remote coast of west Wales, nursed and released into the wild.

In addition to the festival stock there were over 200 titles of books from Wales for sale in the festival bookshop. This included a wide variety of titles in both Welsh and English across the spectrum of publications for readers of all ages.



Wales's Children's Poet Laureate announced

The time has come for Aneirin Karadog to pass on the prestigious baton of Welsh-language Children's Poet Laureate to his successor, but who will that be? Aneirin has spent two successful years in this role, and as a result has travelled hundreds of miles throughout Wales, has conducted hundreds of workshops and has spent time with thousands of young Welsh poets. What a busy period!

The project is a collaboration between the Urdd, S4C, the Welsh Government, Literature Wales and the Welsh Books Council, and it's a popular and energetic scheme that promotes literacy in a direct and practical manner.

The long-awaited announcement was made from the Urdd National Eisteddfod stage at Caerffili in May. The newly-appointed Welsh-language Children's Poet Laureate, who will remain in post for two years, 2015-17, is Anni

Llŷn. Anni is already a familiar face to Welsh youngsters as she spent five years as one of S4C's Stwnsh presenters, and is an author of books for children and teenagers. Anni also won the crown at the Urdd Eisteddfod in 2012, so she's an experienced writer.

Anni is originally from Sarn Mellteyrn, in Llŷn, and is delighted to accept the invitation to become Wales's Children's Poet Laureate: 'It's a great honour to be offered this title and I promise I will work hard with, and for the children of Wales. I'm very much looking forward to it.'

This year, for the first time in the project's history, both Aneirin and Anni will work together and will spend time at our national festivals during the summer period, before Anni officially assumes her role in September. This will be a valuable opportunity for Aneirin to offer some words of advice to Anni, whose energy, enthusiasm and unique way of empathising with youngsters, will



Anni Llŷn © Emyr Young

ensure that the Welsh-language Children's Poet Laureate will remain an important position in Wales.

We thank Aneirin for inspiring so many young poets, and best wishes to Anni at the beginning of this exciting chapter in her career as Welsh-language Children's Poet Laureate 2015-17.

My Favourite Books

It will not surprise anyone who knows me that my first choice is by the nineteenth-century novelist Thomas Love Peacock.

It is *Crotchet Castle*, one of three novels he wrote which are set in Wales. I was introduced to it when I was at school and it made such an impression on me that I immediately sought out all Peacock's other novels in my local library. The story begins in Surrey and moves on to Meirionnydd – both counties I had never visited at that time. It was published in 1831 but is unlike any other novel of that or any other period. Among many good things, it includes two heroines, one of whom is reputed to be based on Jane Gryffydd from Maentwrog whom

Peacock met in 1810 and married in 1820.

The twentieth-century novelist I re-read most often is Barbara Pym. I love her witty style and her ability to create homely and humorous dramas on a small canvas. It is difficult to choose a favourite from among her novels but, if pressed, I should probably go for *Some Tame Gazelle*.

Poetry is important to me and of all poets, Hardy is the one I admire most because of the way he looks at life and his amazing ability to recreate in a few lines situations and emotions which affect us all. As I grow older I realise how good he is at describing the passage of time and its effect on us. Any list of my favourite books would have to

include the chunky *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems* edited by James Gibson.

As someone who has learned Welsh, I am acutely aware that reading poetry is the hardest thing to do in one's second language. It took a long time but when I was finally able to read R. Williams Parry I felt that I had encountered a poet who, like Hardy, speaks directly to me – despite the enormous difference in the number of poems they wrote. Because it is a much-treasured gift, I most often read him in Thomas Parry's Gregynog Press selection, *Cerddi Robert Williams Parry*.

I am obsessed with reference books. The one I have on my desk and refer to constantly is *Geiriadur yr Academi: The Welsh Academy English–*



Welsh Dictionary by Bruce Griffiths and Dafydd Glyn Jones. Without question, this is the most useful book I have ever possessed – an invaluable source of information and guidance on the language and its use.

Lionel Madden

Wales Book of the Year 2015 winner



Patrick McGuinness © Barney Jones

On Thursday, 4 June 2015, Literature Wales announced that *Other People's Countries* by Patrick McGuinness is the winner of the English-language Wales Book of the Year Award 2015. *Other People's Countries*, published by Jonathan Cape, topped the Creative Non-fiction category, and judges Alex Clark, Tessa Hadley and Paul Henry

concluded that Patrick McGuinness's illuminating memoir was the volume that deserved this year's award.

Other People's Countries is centred on the town of Bouillon on the Belgian border, the childhood home of the author's mother, and a town the author himself has been visiting regularly since he was a child. This is the second time Patrick has won the Wales Book of the Year Award, having been awarded the main prize in 2012 with his novel *The Last Hundred Days* (Seren).

Paul Henry, on behalf of the English-language judging panel, said: 'The stylistic quality of this brilliant, lyrical memoir is best described through a simile from the book where a bracelet of water "doesn't run over the stones but flexes like clear muscle over its riverbed". It's a poet's prose at its best – perfectly paced, effortless in its devices. Tender, humorous, moving and, in places, profound, *Other People's Countries* reminds us how great writing approaches the essence of memory.'

The winner of the Roland Mathias Poetry Award 2015 was *So Many Moving Parts* (Bloodaxe Books) by Tiffany Atkinson, an eccentric meditation on the awkwardness of body and spirit and their unexpected, often unwanted intrusions into everyday life.

The winner of the 2015 Fiction Category was *The Dig* (Granta) by Cynan Jones, a searing novel built on the interlocking fates of a badger-baiter and a disconsolate farmer.

The winner of the Wales Arts Review People's Choice Prize 2015 was Jonathan Edwards with his poetry collection *My Family and Other Superheroes* (Seren). Jonathan's

debut collection has gained critical acclaim, having won the Costa Poetry Prize 2014, and was shortlisted for the Fenton Aldeburgh First Collection Prize 2014.

The winners were announced at a ceremony held at Galeri, Caernarfon, in the company of the judging panel, shortlisted authors and their guests, publishers of the successful books and members of the reading public. During the ceremony each category winner was awarded £2,000, and the main award winner in each language received an additional £6,000. Each winner was also presented with a beautiful stainless steel trophy designed and created by Angharad Pearce Jones.

