

Land of Our Authors

by Jo Bowers and Simon Fisher



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Context

Jo is lecturer in Initial Teacher Education at Cardiff Metropolitan University teaching Language, Literacy and Communication to PGCE Primary students.

Simon is a primary school teacher at The Rofft School in Wrexham and a book blogger, Family Bookworms Wales and keen on nurturing his own children's reading for pleasure.

Both are both keen on exploring books that reflect their reality from Wales and run OU/UKLA Teacher Reading Groups in Wales: Jo in Cardiff, South Wales and Simon in Wrexham, North Wales.

The new curriculum for Wales has a renewed focus on literature firing the imagination and inspiring creativity. As part of this, children are *"encouraged to experience and respond to literature that gives them insight into the culture, people and history of Wales as well as the wider world"*. In other words, teachers should be providing opportunities to 'reflect the reality' of the children in Wales and that was the basis for ensuring we included a focus on children's literature with a Welsh setting and written by authors based in Wales within our Teacher Reading Groups.



OU Research inspiration and rationale

One of the focuses of the OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Groups in Wales is to support and widen teachers' subject knowledge of children's literature (Cremin et al., 2008). Within the groups in Wales, we wanted to ensure that we included children's literature set in Wales, written by authors based in Wales to encourage and inspire the teachers to use these within their classrooms and wider reading communities back in school.

The TaRs research that we are seeking to develop by introducing this Welsh flavour of children's literature are:

1. Knowledge of children's literature and other texts.
2. Reading Teachers: teachers who read and readers who teach
3. Develop reading communities

The TaRs research found that these elements are essential for fostering children's reading for pleasure (Cremin et al. 2014).

Aims

For teachers to:

- be inspired by books set in Wales and by authors writing in Wales;
- increase their own personal book knowledge;
- see the value of having recognisable locations in books that children can relate to;
- share and use creatively their new book knowledge within their classrooms and school;
- develop and widen the teachers' community of authors, illustrators, publishers, bookshops and children's literature charities and organisations within Wales, e.g. Welsh Books Council, Literature Wales, BookTrust Cymru.

Outline

Simon Fisher wrote to all the Welsh publishers and asked if they would donate books to each of the OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group in Wales. He then distributed these amongst each of the groups. In addition to their OU book box, the Welsh groups received more books with a range of novels picture books and bi-lingual books. These became part of our library of books to share, loan out and discuss with each other during the sessions.



We focused some of our sessions on authors living and writing in Wales to enable the teachers to get to know canons of books by authors within Wales and for some, local to the schools where they were teaching. Two of these authors, *Nicola Davies* and *Eloise Williams*, Children's Laureate for Wales, visited our groups to talk about their work, read from their books and do Q&A. The teachers all agreed that meeting the authors enriched their knowledge of their work and their use of their books back in their classrooms.

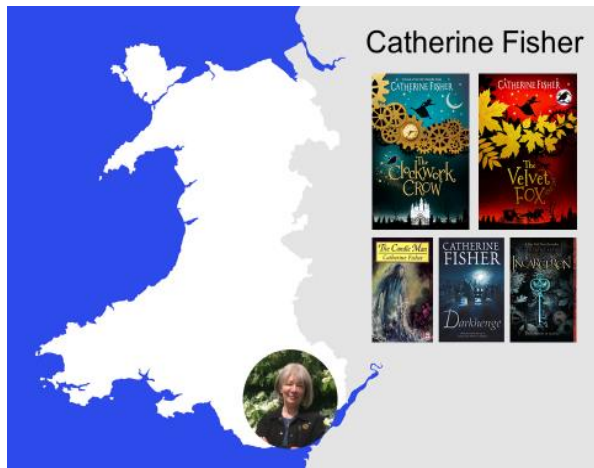


Both groups also worked with the Welsh Books Council to share **the Tir na n-Og (TNN) book award** with the groups to support our aims in books set in Wales and by authors writing in Wales. This is the only book award in Wales for children's literature with an authentic Welsh background that has been running since 1976. We found in both of our groups that this was not widely known in schools in Wales or indeed the UK. Each year, teachers in the group have the opportunity to receive a pack of the shortlisted books to shadow the award with their pupils. Some teachers also volunteered to write resources to accompany the shortlisted books to support the teachers using the texts in class, when shadowing the award. These resources are also available online to everyone here:

<http://www.cllc.org.uk/gwasanaethau-services/plant-children/gwobrau-tir-na-n-og>

Schools, teachers and their pupils attended the award ceremony and were able to meet the authors and get their books signed. Shortlisted authors visited some of the schools too. Welsh Books Council reported that involving children in the award ceremony made it the most vibrant award ceremony they have ever hosted.





Simon introduced a **'Recommendation Board'** in class for children to share books that had made an impression. Pupils were encouraged to leave post-it notes inside books if they had particularly enjoyed it. School staff have involved themselves too, it is a great way to learn the likes and dislikes of pupils, and build up knowledge of the children's reading preferences to help to recommend similar books. These teacher-to-pupil, pupil-to-teacher, pupil-to-pupil recommendations are now a fulfilling cornerstone to our reading classroom. *"Gradually two-way reciprocal recommendations and 'books in common' between teachers and children developed. These prompted discussions connections and enabled new relationships to begin."* (Cremin, 2019)



Quotes from children

e.g. on Secret Dragon, King of the Sky, Snow Spider

Simon has taken every opportunity to link the books with themes and topics. For example, during a Revolution topic, when looking at environmental activists around the world, inspired by Earth Heroes, he used a book by Monmouthshire based author and adventurer Lily Dyu. In *'Awe and*

Wonder', weird and wonderful fantasy locations were researched and Penarth, South Wales author PG Bell's *Train to Impossible Places* became the class reader.

Jo has embedded these books into her lectures and seminars with the PGCE Primary students she teaches too.



Impact

The impact of bringing in books written by authors based in Wales and books with a Welsh setting has been positive in a number of ways:

The teachers all said it has really widened their knowledge of children's literature. They have expressed how much they have enjoyed reading books set near where the children in their class live places they have visited on holiday or have relatives living. They also said how inspiring it was to meet and listen to some of the authors and that this enriched their practice as it enabled them to focus on one author in depth in the classroom.

"There is no doubt that the Teachers as Readers' Group improved by knowledge of books from Wales and hence my ability to recommend books to my class." Wrexham OU/UKLA participant 2018-2019

"It's been really interesting to see all the beautiful books that I never knew about. It makes me slightly ashamed that I was ignorant of them, but I am delighted to know them now!" Wrexham OU/UKLA participant 2018-2019

"I've found some excellent quality books that I can recommend to my class." Wrexham OU/UKLA participant 2018-2019

"When thinking about the new curriculum, providing our children with rich literary experiences that give an insight into the culture, people and history of Wales as well as giving children a greater sense

of identity, will be even more paramount. Our spotlight on Wales in books is supporting our literary choices within schools to deliver this.” Claire, Cardiff OU/UKLA 2018-2020

“The children in my book club were instantly interested when I told them I had some books by Welsh authors with Welsh settings.” Gethin, Cardiff OU/UKLA 2018-2020

Simon Fisher on taking the books into his classroom:

“Exploring the settings of books from Wales allows us to make connections (TO the books and BETWEEN the books) and supports our ability to improve knowledge of books from Wales. The Tir na n-Og Award Shadowing Scheme is a great starting place for this. Teachers and children can connect to books and locations that have personal relevance to them and look at others that might improve their cultural and historical knowledge.”

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

Bringing in children’s books set in Wales, written by authors in Wales, by publishers in Wales has been something we have both felt was an important part of the book discussions within our groups. If teachers are not knowledgeable about the authors and publishers within Wales, then children will not be experiencing them and so this has become a real focus of all the OU/UKLA groups in Wales to raise awareness and support teachers’ subject knowledge. At each session, we have ensured that this is not exclusive and sessions have focused on books extending outside this category too.

The TaRs research highlights the importance of teachers needing to have a rich reading repertoire in order to cater for children’s different reading needs and interest, so we will continue to introduce new books set in Wales and books written by authors living in Wales to our groups as our own reading and knowledge grows.