



I want to say thank you for the opportunity of being the first Children's Laureate Wales. It has been an interesting time to be Laureate. A time of adversity, uncertainty and great change. The shifts and anxieties this has caused are, I think, immeasurable at this stage.

We know that reading and creative writing can help young people through times of uncertainty and anxiety, and that it helps them to find ways to express their concerns and pathways to self-acceptance. We know that the more young people read about others, the more they walk in other people's shoes, the more empathy and understanding they gain, the better they can negotiate their own lives. It's a fact that stories help with mental health, with finding self-worth and with making us feel we are not alone.

It is so sad to know then that some young people do not own a single book. Why is this when books are so important? If young people don't have access to books at home, for whatever reason, surely, schools should be able to provide a wide range of reading material. Why then are there schools without libraries?

I've seen too many schools without libraries or with libraries which are funded by teachers' own salaries. All schools should have a library. It is fundamental to developing independent thinkers. Education is not just about what you know, it's about how you think about what you know and reading teaches us to think for ourselves and ways in which to express our thoughts.

We need somewhere to go when we seek the space to think. As a quiet adult, and an even quieter child, libraries have saved me in a world full of noise. I found a place where I could be myself. A sanctuary where I could sit with my thoughts, and in that freedom explore other people's thoughts and other people's worlds, and then, consequently, form new thoughts.

Now, more than ever, things are moving so quickly. There is such pressure on young people to keep up, join in, achieve. Where is there time to just be? They deserve quiet time with a book to lose themselves, and subsequently find themselves. To dream and imagine. We need to value our young people and celebrate their right to stories. We need to be asking questions about why schools aren't given enough money for libraries and why children don't have books.

There are some important discussions around diversity and representation going on. We all need to see ourselves in books to feel valued. All young people need to see themselves well-represented, respectfully represented. We can all learn how to have conversations about our wonderful multicultural society in better ways. Listening, learning and celebrating.

Authors all over Wales are working hard to break down barriers to creativity and reading, and I am delighted to have been a part of that. I truly believe that we are all storytellers. Words belong to all of us. I hope that we will soon have a Wales where authors and young people will work together so often, we will get to the point where elitism in literature is yesterday's story.

Finally, the work I have done in the past two years is just a beginning. As with so many other people I have had difficult personal circumstances to deal with in the last two years and stories have got me through. Who wouldn't want to share that gift? That chance of escape and happiness? Please, give a young person a book if you can. Go to a bookseller or a librarian to make sure it's a good book. A book well suited to the individual. It might change that young person's life, because to own a book is to own a key to your thoughts.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again, I don't know much, but what I do know deep, deep, deep in my bones is that reading gives children joy, empathy, knowledge, understanding, self-worth, and power. Empowering young people to find the joy of reading and writing is one of the greatest things we can do, and we can all be a part of that. We can all help young people to write a better story for themselves and for the future of Wales.

Eloise Williams, Children's Laureate Wales

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