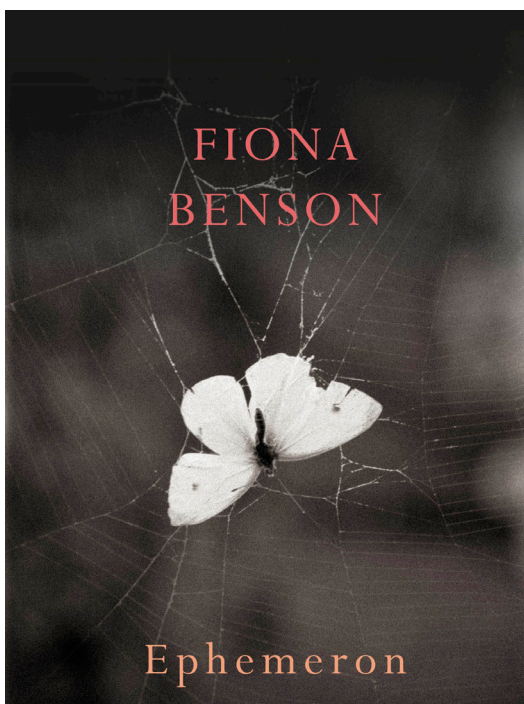


READERS' NOTES

Welcome to the **T. S. Eliot Prize 2022 Readers' Notes**, in which we present the ten exciting collections shortlisted for this year's prize. The Readers' Notes offer introductions to some key poems, with reviews and biographies of the poets, and suggest creative writing prompts. Take the notes to your book group or poetry workshop, or respond individually to them in your own time. English teachers – if you're preparing your students for any Unseen Poem papers, hone their skills on this year's list.



Ephemeron by Fiona Benson What reviewers say



Ephemeron (Cape Poetry, 2022) by Fiona Benson.
penguin.co.uk

‘A new collection of Benson’s wise and vivid work is a real occasion. Divided into four sections, *Ephemeron* highlights her unusual range. Insect Love Songs, a commissioned series of ecological poems, is followed by two sequences of confessional poetry and a long sequence, Translations from the Pasiphaë. [...] But the book’s most exciting work, fully inhabited and multi-faceted, is contained in the sequences Boarding-School Tales and Daughter Mother. Avoiding the contiguous snares of sweetness or scatter-gun emotion, they transcend their context of social privilege to enter into the high stakes of real life, in which every daughter must learn “how if you are female or small, you must run”.’ – **Fiona Sampson**, *The Guardian*

‘This is Benson, still sounding the alarm. She wrote in similar vein in her Forward Prize winning second collection *Vertigo & Ghost*. [...] In *Ephemeron*, Benson again uses the material of ancient myth to consider and confront something entirely contemporary, and comes to a similar conclusion. Men and Gods – especially those diminished in their territories – can be brutal, and our basic urges towards sex and dominance often do damage, mostly to women.’ – **Hilary Menos**, *The Friday Poem*

‘The insect poems in *Ephemeron* are a clear continuation of the poetics of maternity and myth that Benson explored in *Vertigo & Ghost* (2019). By imposing gender on her insect subjects, she probes the mindlessness of self-perpetuation: “what survives is code”; “call it the fierceness / of our own genetic code / call it love”. [...] Later, after the mass death of the specimens: “My single self sickens, understanding itself / as a slave to DNA – all the blood-flesh agonies of love / to end as husk on your knees”.’ – **Stephanie Sy Quia**, *Times Literary Supplement*

About the poet

Fiona Benson has published two previous collections, both of which were shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize: *Bright Travellers* (Cape, 2014), which won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry’s Prize for First Full Collection, and *Vertigo & Ghost* (Cape, 2019), which was shortlisted for the Rathbones Folio Prize and won both the Roehampton Poetry Prize and the Forward Prize for Best Collection. She lives in Devon with her husband and their two daughters.

Fiona Benson.
Photo: Jessica Farmer



Discussion ideas

- Is 'Love Poem, Lampyridae (Glow Worms)' a lament? What might it mourn?
- Madonna's 'Like a Prayer', see bit.ly/prayermadonna. Whose perspective interests you most in Benson's 'Like a Prayer' – the performers', the parents', the boys'? Where's the gym teacher? Who made the song choice?
- What does the phrase 'mothers move in the dark like shining wounds' (from 'Edelweiss') mean to you?
- Who would you give 'Edelweiss' to?

Writing prompt

- Fiona Benson's Insect Love Songs sequence features glow-worms, mosquitos, cicadas, caddisflies, mayflies, butterflies, cockroaches, wasps, moths, fireflies and crickets. What's missing? Write an insect love song featuring the bee, the beetle, the bedbug or any other insect that interests you.

Find out more

Other titles by Fiona Benson

Ariadne (Broken Sleep Books, 2021)

Vertigo and Ghost (Cape, 2019)

Bright Travellers (Cape, 2014)

See also [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiona_Benson_\(poet\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiona_Benson_(poet))

If you like Fiona Benson's work, try...

- Anne Carson
- Shane McRae
- Clare Pollard

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

The T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, awarded annually to the author of the best new collection of poetry published in the UK and Ireland, was inaugurated in 1993 to celebrate the Poetry Book Society's 40th birthday and honour its founding poet. Since 2016, the Prize has been supported and run by the T. S. Eliot Foundation. It is the most prestigious poetry prize in the world, and the only major poetry prize judged purely by established poets. It is also the most valuable in British poetry. The judges for the 2022 Prize are Jean Sprackland (chair), Hannah Lowe and Roger Robinson. For more information, visit tseliot.com/prize

T. S. Eliot Prize 2022: join in

- Look out for the **video recordings of interviews and poems** recorded by all ten of the shortlisted poets, as well as past winning and shortlisted poets, on our YouTube channel: bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube
- Join us and the poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 15 January 2023. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book at bit.ly/eliotprize22sbcreadings
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at bit.ly/eliot22reviews
- **Sign up to our weekly e-newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. To stay up to date with Prize news, subscribe at bit.ly/eliotprizesubscribenews
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Twitter, Instagram and Facebook**: @tseliotprize
- Who is your pick for this year's T. S. Eliot Prize? Share ideas at **T. S. Eliot Prize shortlist shared reading events** such as the one run by the Poetry School at Southbank Centre, London, held on the day of the Eliot Prize Readings (see poetryschool.com) – or you could set up your own!

2022

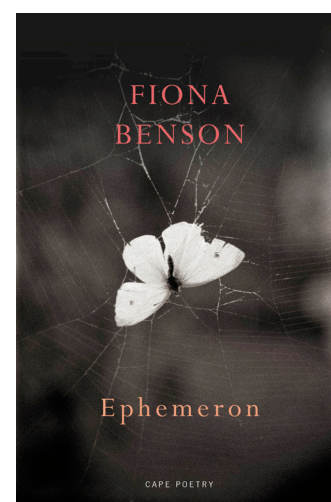
T. S. Eliot

T. S. ELIOT
PRIZE
SHORTLIST

Love Poem, Lampyridae (Glow Worms)

Lampyris noctiluca

The female born again with little changed
except she has no mouth and may not eat,
except she has this urge to climb, this light
she must raise and twist; the male born again
with little changed except he has no mouth,
except he has this urge to search, and wings –
oh she must twist and turn her tail's green fire
like bait, its little stab of brightness in the night,
and he must search with wings through troubled air
to find her pinhole lure, its single, green,
seducing star... All night she signals him in:
come find me – it is time – and almost dawn;
all night he looks for her in petrol stations
villages and homesteads, the city's neon signs:
where are you – it is time – and almost dawn . . .
Once were humans wandered in the lanes,
led astray by fairies, foxfire, who found
their stranger selves and brought them home.
Now the dark is drowned, but some things
you can only find beyond the light,
and it is time and almost dawn and love,
my love, there is no finding then.



from *Ephemeron* by Fiona Benson
(Cape Poetry, 2022).

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Like a Prayer

(school gym & dance display)

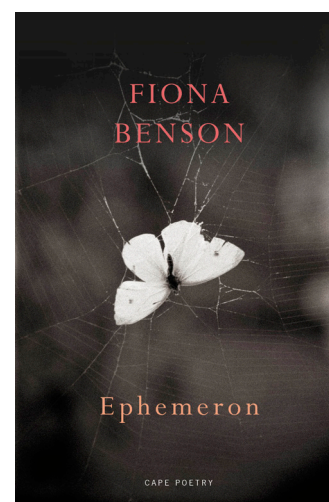
Dressed in dazzling, Byzantine white
we arched luxuriously to the opening bars
then ripped off Velcroed skirts
to dance bare-thighed
as Madonna's gospel-faux kicked in.

Acolytes in her sexed-up church
we knew what it meant
to *get down on our knees*,
our awakening manifest
in every choreographed shrug and thrust

as our Mums and Dads shifted
in their plastic, tip-up seats,
tightening their lips as our desire
rubbed up against them like a cat in heat
its rawness, its want,

our virginity shining like the pristine white tips
of a new pair of Converse
demanding to be scuffed,
the way we scuffed and scratched and bled
when it came to it,

and though we hadn't yet been touched by boys
we knew in our souls how to scramble down
the thin poles of their bodies
and draw them from themselves
and teach them – shudderingly – to pray.

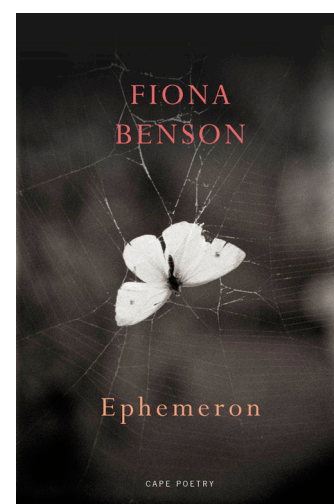


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Edelweiss

Sometimes I walked my daughter in her pram indoors; drew the heavy curtains so we moved in velvet blue, then rocked her back and forth, back and forth, to try and get her off to sleep. She was relentless in her wakefulness, and I was bloodshot and twitching, reeling under the weight of my own exhaustion. She wouldn't take a bottle, insisted on the breast. At every painful station of the night I prised myself from sleep, dreams sluicing off my skin, brought her into bed, and sat up shivering to feed her, the mouth for whom my body was made. The muscles of my neck kept easing, snapping back: exhausted puppet, doll-head. Afraid I'd smother her, or drop her, afraid to sleep. In the middle of the day I'd wheel her in the second-hand, Victorian-style pram that lurched along on its shot suspension, as its capacious black hood slipped inevitably back like a broken concertina, a retracting fan. How I loathed the thing: its thoughtless summoning of the nineteenth-century's infant dead, its black bassinet like a hearse, and our baby girl staring up from its deep bed with her vast dark eyes shining and alert, as if she felt my fears and didn't mean to sleep. That day, I wanted a lullaby to soothe us both but couldn't recall a song, couldn't remember being sung to, and sadness was upon me as I faltered on the only hush-thing I could improvise, 'Edelweiss' – the same two half-remembered lines crooned over and over again, a fragment of song for a tiny flower, its gleaming shred.

All round me the dark was rising tenderly:
our false-created night, its texture and felted weft
thickening like an alpine meadow, its softly flowered grass,
and I was falling in its dark blue lush, its reservoir of stars
as my Grandma Bairstow, who'd been dead for years,
took my hands off the pram and laid me down
to rest, then began to wheel her great-granddaughter,
who seemed to know her, and resumed the song;
she knew all the words, knew all the sore
and phosphorescent work of raising children,
how mothers move in the dark like shining wounds,
like gaps in being. She sang, and all the hurt
and beautiful universe, all the souls
came crowding in.



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