

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.



Manorism by Yomi Şode What reviewers say



Manorism (Penguin Poetry, 2022) by Yomi Şode.
penguin.co.uk

'*Manorism* [...] is an exploration of the black British male experience, in which, alongside the Italian artist [Caravaggio]'s recurring presence, other figures appear in unlikely pairings: David Starkey and the rapper Dave, Diane Abbott MP and Ant McPartlin. While society stereotypes and pigeonholes black men, Şode insists on multiplicity. Recounting the time his son asked how to whistle, his mind goes to the frenzy of a new love affair fifteen years earlier. In another poem, he recalls a "lady, drunk or too familiar" asking him: "Do you want to be white?" while he worked during a writing retreat. We all have the right to be various. This collection, which is both vigorous and tender, rallies against the reality that for some that comes more easily than for others.'

– Ellen Peirson-Hagger, *The New Statesman*

'Şode is unflinching and fearless as, with disarming candour, he details the generally unspoken feelings that make us feel unworthy, like the desire to run away while the illness progresses in 'Confessions of a Penitent' [...] and even more so after death, where he tells us of his speaker's comfort eating and so not fitting into his funeral suit. *Manorism*'s real gift to us as readers is, ultimately, Şode's deep and unfailing humanity. This is a book in which love can be found: "You are Black and of different colour, but in Jesus' name, // you shall be located, no matter how hard" ('My Mother's Prayer'). – Rishi Dastidar, poetryschool.com

'It's also a book that performs an autopsy of our justice system and its involvement in the consistently unequal treatment of Black vs white defendants. As evinced in [Fugitives]: "because white skin is white skin everywhere; because privilege, irrespective of time, allows a grace period".' – Oisin Harris, *The Publishing Post*

Yomi Şode

Yomi Şode is an award-winning Nigerian British writer and lives in London. He was a 2019/20 Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellow and was shortlisted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize 2021. His acclaimed one-man show *COAT* toured nationally to the Brighton Festival, Roundhouse Camden, Battersea Arts Centre and elsewhere. In 2020 Yomi's libretto *Remnants*, written in collaboration with award-winning composer James B. Wilson and performed with Chineke! Orchestra, premiered on BBC Radio 3. In 2021, his play *and breathe...* premiered at the Almeida Theatre, London. *Manorism* is his debut collection. *Yomi Şode photo: Jolade Olusanya*



READERS' NOTES



Discussion ideas

- What do you know about the structure of the sestina? How does Yomi Şode manipulate the form, and to what purpose in 'A Sestina, for the Curious Öyünbô'?
- The stanza that begins 'My mouth fails me' in 'On Fatherhood: Teaching My Child to Whistle' – does that belong in 2002 or 2017?
- Inspirations for 'The Martyrdom of Michael, from the Block' include Caravaggio's 'The Martyrdom of St Michael' and the TV show *Top Boy*, specifically season 2, episode 4. Do you know the painting, did you watch the show? Does that matter to your appreciation of the poem?
- Andrew Graham-Dixon, art historian and author of *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane*, said 'Yomi Şode writes with clarity, anger and love. *Manorism* reminds me of the paintings of Caravaggio. Empathy and chiaroscuro. More shadow than light. But that is the way of the world'. How do you see shadow and light at play in the poems of Yomi Şode that you've read so far?

Writing prompt

- Write about teaching a skill to a child, thinking about who learns what in the process.

Find out more

Other works by Yomi Şode

and breathe... (play, Almeida Theatre, 2021)
COAT (one man show, 2017)

See also: yomisode.com

If you liked Yomi Şode's work, try...

- Will Harris
- Claudia Rankine
- Inua Ellams

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** 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!

READERS' NOTES POEMS

A Sestina, for the Curious Òyìnbó

This lady, drunk or too familiar, decided tonight
was the moment to ask, *Do you want to be white?*
My watch reads 2:30am. I am on a retreat, trying to write
but brought short by behaviours turned bold in the dark.
I laugh, suppressing my anger. *Are you being serious?*
Her stare, a rifle dotting my head with intention.

Her back is straight. She grips the table through the tension,
hammering her words in as though to ignite
my ara, to flush the 'real' me out. Ridiculous:
what is this, a test? I hold my anger in, remain polite.
I'm struck by her slyness – like I don't feel my noir
in the room most mornings when I sit down to write.

Fucking with white men's forms, writing out their rites.
She probes my ghazal as though I'm a fluke: the notion
of my writing the better poem! How foolish, at this dark
hour, to have thought she could rein in her envy and spite.
I can't believe you asked me that. To which she says: *I know I'm white.*
Slavery ended years ago. It shouldn't be my burden. (Jesus!)

Emotions already strained, I give a serious
yet measured response to this lady. I'm thinking, *I just want to write,*
not explain myself to every òyìnbó in sight.
My watch reads 2:47; I am tired. This lady's intention
has little to do with man's poem & more with easing her plight:
her denials and ignorance, set loose from the dark;

her closest encounter with a man who looks like me, *aláwọ̀ igi* as bark –
too close for a closed mind; her fall, the fall of Icarus.
She shouts to offset my refusal to react. This isn't my fight.
I'm ignoring the tearful, implicit demand that I check if she's alright.
You think it's racist to ask? I have mixed children! My question
wasn't meant to offend. Now you're making me feel bad. I can't help being white!

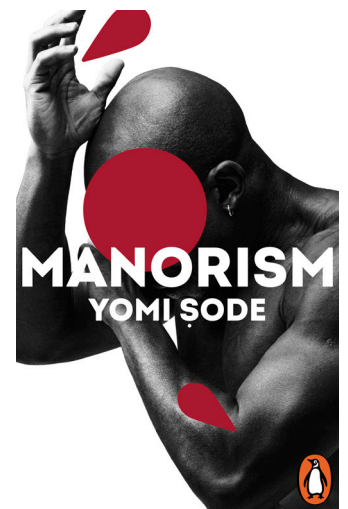
And there. I watch as this òyìnbó steers herself towards the light,
to clarity & fire. I know this dark feeling, this dudu,
expected to speak about trauma with ease. Her sincere invitation
to talk – she says – has gone wrong. *How did it get so serious?*
My watch reads 3:25. I'm pausing my rewrite
while this lady gets done with sucking man's blood, a parasite.

Firing projections, spurious.
All her whiteness emerging from the dark.
I say *goodnight!* I leave with all my body. My Black ara, infinite.

2022

T. S. Eliot

T. S. ELIOT
PRIZE
SHORTLIST



from *Manorism* (Penguin Poetry,
2022) by Yomi Şode.
penguin.co.uk

On Fatherhood: Teaching My Child to Whistle

It is 2017.

My son asks me to teach him how to whistle.

I pout my adult mouth, and puff my cheeks
like a blowfish. My dainty tongue, a vessel,
prepares to shape a profound breath.

It is 2002, and I am romanticizing a love my eyes are unripe to see. Tucking my hand in her back pocket, I squeeze as November's chill sanctifies our closeness. I nudge my chest, an ambivalence of wonder and chaos, into her. Our young mouths meet beneath a lamppost; tiny particles hover above us like confetti. Fam, if you look from a distance, you will notice the heavens' light on the hottest new couple in Aylesbury that evening.

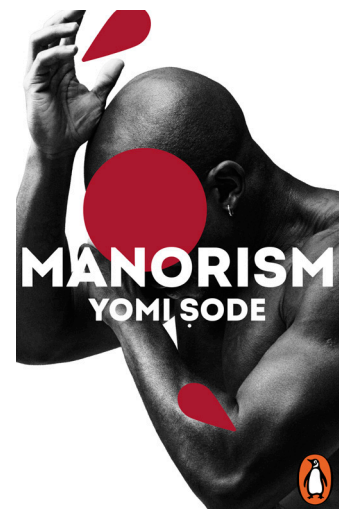
Go on Daddy! my son yells,
his eyes as pure as the world should be.
I blow, expecting a clear note, and produce a silent breeze.
Just a breeze. I try a second time. A third...
until he is bored.

The DJ spins the last song in the dance. I hear myself shout *Let's go, man!* and mandem buss up at my suggestion. What kind of fool leaves within the last twenty-five? Leaves this haven of a whine, a push-back so hard it requires a shoulder to lean on for support, a waistline so commanding that time becomes an afterthought. Black bodies as silhouettes, grinding their absolutions on moist walls. Black bodies like vampires, hands tightly cupping each other's necks before the music stops, the dance dun, and light casts them into hiding.

My mouth fails me in a way it has never done before.
I whisper *Sorry* in place of *That's how you do it*.
What ground have I failed to walk? I think. What experience
have I not undergone, that I'm unable pass this on?

Sixth attempt.

He waits. *I don't know to how whistle, I say.*
I try again. *A breeze,*
just a breeze.



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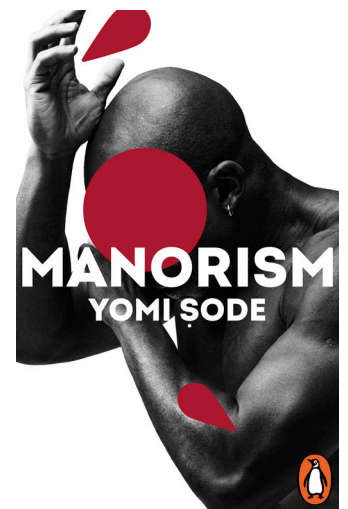
from Top Boy: Summerhouse

THE MARTYRDOM OF MICHAEL, FROM THE BLOCK

After Caravaggio's The Martyrdom of St Matthew

Michael calls down to the man he made his God
and is thrown from the tenth-floor balcony
to an untimely death. A dented car roof becomes
a crucifix reimagined. His legs are crossed, his arms
open, in their final act of praise.
His God bears witness to the sacrifice –
and runs to safety.

Should have been him is whispered within tired walls.
Many more will fall in Dushane's name before that day.
Tonight, when Michael's mother gets the door,
it will not be because her son has forgotten his keys.



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