

READERS' NOTES

Welcome to the **T. S. Eliot Prize 2023 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.



Self-Portrait as Othello by Jason Allen-Paisant What reviewers say



Self-Portrait as Othello
(Carcanet Press, 2023)
by Jason Allen-Paisant.
carcanet.co.uk

'There are three broad themes threading through [*Self-Portrait as Othello*]: the experience of growing up without a father, the poet's remorse at not having been present at the death of Mama (the grandmother) who reared him, and an exploration of the parallels between his experiences living in Europe and those of Shakespeare's Othello. The individual poems weave together interrelated strands using different registers of language – Caribbean patois, English, French – to underscore the complexity of the experience of self in a globalised world.' – **Simon Collings, *Long Poem Magazine***

'This indispensable collection explores Shakespeare's pernicious archetype, observing how "the Moor remains invisible, despite the obsession with his body". Yet Allen-Paisant makes the historical impasse an occasion for deep, generous interrogation of masculinity, and a linked elevation of the maternal that is at the heart of so many Caribbean and other families: "I've been leaning in- / to my mother tongue." This book's mother tongue belongs to "Mama", a grandmother who raised the narrator. "Daddy", meanwhile, remains a longed-for absence, "Un-Dad". In this context of father-hunger, the "African soldier" who became the Moor of Venice at least stands for presence. Enriched by historical research, *Self-Portrait As Othello* celebrates representation, understanding and speech as acts of glorious resistance.' – **Fiona Sampson, *The Guardian***

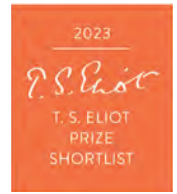
'I love how poets use characters to explore aspects of self, and in this second collection Jason Allen-Paisant takes that of Othello to dig inwards and evoke identity, in a search that has the poet proclaim "I am dismembered / I look for the different parts of myself"'. – **Mab Jones, *Buzz Magazine***

About the poet

Jason Allen-Paisant is a Jamaican writer and academic who works as a senior lecturer in Critical Theory and Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. He's the author of two poetry collections, *Thinking with Trees* (Carcanet Press, 2021), winner of the 2022 OCM Bocas Prize for poetry, and *Self-Portrait as Othello* (Carcanet Press, 2023), which won the Forward Prize for Best Collection. His non-fiction book, *Scanning the Bush*, will be published by Hutchinson Heinemann in 2024. *Photo © Jonathan Turner*



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Discussion ideas

- 'I / ring your name?' What does this phrase in 'Othello Walks' (see page 3) suggest to you? How might it relate to the title of the opening poem in the collection, 'Ringing Othello'?
- Do we know anything about the real Othello's father? (Do we know anything about the 'real' Othello?). To what degree or purpose is the speaker of the poem imagining Othello?
- 'To run Mama's voice over the tips / of our fingers' – it's as if the voice is on tape and the fingers the tape-heads of the body's cassette player. What does 'To Find Mama's Voice' have to say about reproduction? Have you recordings of lost loved ones' voices? Do you (can you?) listen to them?
- When you heat a sauce to reduce it, its flavour is intensified. Is that what's happening in the last image of 'Jamaica'? What's being tasted – that which is being boiled, or that which is lost? Can you describe the taste of an accent or a red village? Is this a poem about un-nameability?

Writing prompt

- Cobweb, Cordelia or Coriolanus: which Shakespearian character would you identify with? What self-portrait would you write? Or would you reject Shakespeare altogether, and find your doppelgänger elsewhere?

Find out more

Other books by Jason Allen-Paisant

Thinking with Trees (Carcenet Press, 2021)

Listen

Hear Jason Allen-Paisant talking about *Self-Portrait as Othello* on this Carcanet videocast:

bit.ly/carcenetallen-paisant

See also: www.jasonallenpaisant.com

If you like this poet's work, try...

- Anthony Joseph
- Nick Laird
- Denise Saul

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

The T. S. Eliot Prize celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2023. Awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland, the Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. It has been run by The T. S. Eliot Foundation since 2016. It is the most prestigious poetry prize in the world, and the only major poetry prize judged purely by established poets. The judges for the 2023 Prize are Paul Muldoon (Chair), Sasha Dugdale and Denise Saul. For more information, visit tseliot.com/prize

T. S. Eliot Prize 2023: join in

- Look out for **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 the poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Shortlist Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 14 January 2024. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book at bit.ly/TSEP23shortlistlive
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at bit.ly/eliot23reviews
- **Sign up to our weekly e-newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. Subscribe at bit.ly/eliotprizesubscribenews
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Twitter**, **Instagram** and **Facebook**



Othello Walks

Othello walks through
the marbled city;
his skin betrays him.

He is striving against
badmind. This is Othello's life –
trying to beat the odds.
And what is asked of him?

*To be more fair than black
If virtue no delighted
beauty lack.*

*

You're real to me as I
ring your name; more present
than the living. I imagine

scenarios that may have brought
you to this city. In one of them,
you're following your father's

footsteps across the oceans.
You're looking for him in the wind.



Self-Portrait as Othello (Carcenet Press, 2023) by Jason Allen-Paisant. carcenet.co.uk



To Find Mama's Voice

I look for Mama's voice in Dropbox
and old devices, anywhere
I may have inadvertently
captured the sound
back when I didn't think
her voice would be everywhere
and yet nowhere to be found.

The real thing?
I hear it all the time –
right here, filling the space.
What if I could produce the grain,
the texture and timbre by some fluke,
one day, by some intervention, some freak
of nature, and something was on hand to record?

One day I may open my mouth to speak
and her voice will leap out, so
strangers who never knew her
might hear it. I must find it. But where?
Mommy has no recordings.
Cousin Lee has not preserved it either.
No one thought we would want it.

And why have on tape
what we have in our heads
all the time? What would be the use
of sharing this sound?
To run Mama's voice over the tips
of our fingers, to know her now
as we've never known her before?



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Jamaica

above all
taste

of ac-
cent
taste

of red village in
bauxite dirt
taste

of soap sud drying
on limestone rock

above all
taste

of things sun
boils away



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