

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.



The Ink Cloud Reader by Kit Fan What reviewers say



The Ink Cloud Reader
(Carcanet Press, 2023)
by Kit Fan. carcanet.co.uk

“What I need now, to change / the half-course of my life,” writes poet Kit Fan, “is to be struck by lightning / and survive it, like Hokusai.” Like the celebrated artist of the Edo period, who is said to have adopted 30 pseudonyms and moved houses 93 times over his life, the Hong Kong-born, Britain-based author of *The Ink Cloud Reader* is a consummate shape-shifter. If one pays attention to the undertones of violence in the book, one might consider Fan’s words to arise from the aftermath of life-altering events. From an unnamed illness to referencing Hong Kong’s decade of protest and crackdown to depictions of queer sexuality, he transforms everyday loss and violence into something sublime.’ – Shawn Hoo, *The Straits Times*

‘Lucidly and elegantly, Fan uses metaphors of reading and writing to explore some of the most elemental themes of the human condition: love, loss, politics, place, and literature itself. As suggested by its title, *The Ink Cloud Reader* centers on the object of the book and its constituent parts and processes. Ink, pen, paper, and the acts of reading and writing are the materials and modes through which the Hong-Kong born writer processes the events of his own life.’ – Lili Nilipour, *Asian Review of Books*

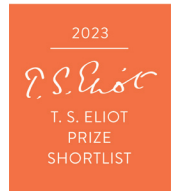
‘Kit Fan as technician is a poet of courage. He experiments with various structures in *The Ink Cloud Reader*, neither afraid to break rules nor to keep in touch with tradition. In ‘How to Be a Fern’ a small act of courage lies in the final denial of the central metaphor: “I’m no fern”. It’s not the only dismissive gesture, and not only a dismissive gesture. “Tell me how to be, and I’ll learn / and unlearn” opens the window a little way and retrieves the hope for future change.’ – Carol Rumens, *The Guardian*

About the poet

Kit Fan was born and educated in Hong Kong before moving to the UK, aged twenty-one. His debut collection, *Paper Scissors Stone* (HKUP, 2011), won the Hong Kong University International Poetry Prize. *As Slow as Possible* (Arc, 2018) was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and one of the *Irish Times* Books of the Year. He won the Northern Writers Awards for Fiction and for Poetry, *The Times* Stephen Spender Poetry Translation Prize, and *Poetry Magazine* Editors’ Prize for Reviewing. His debut novel is *Diamond Hill* (Dialogue, 2021). *The Ink Cloud Reader*, his third collection, was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection 2023. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2022.



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Discussion ideas

- Read up about Hokusai and the lightning strike. Do you recognise the desire to be struck by lightning in mid-life, like the speaker of 'Cumulonimbus'? How do we claim to have reached mid-life?
- What does 'barochory', the last word of 'Green Rain' mean? Did you know, or have to look it up? Is it the word in 'the edge of the word'? Who is the 'we' of the poem? What are they wondering?
- Have you visited Derek Jarman's garden at Dungeness? Are you inspired to visit? Are you an admirer of Jarman's work? His garden had no fences, so visitors (and strangers) could wander right up to the walls of his house. Is that what this poem is doing? How directly and closely does the speaker of the poem address the 'you' of the poem?

Writing prompt

- Write a poem about someone you feel an affinity with – but don't address it directly to them, write about something close to them instead: their car, their house, their clothes. Or their garden.

Find out more

Other books by Kit Fan

Paper Scissors Stone (Hong Kong University Press, 2011)
As Slow as Possible (Arc, 2018)

Listen

Hear Kit Fan on two Carcanet videocasts at bit.ly/carcanetfan and bit.ly/kitfanlaunch

See also: www.kitfan.net

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

- Andrew McMillan
- Mary Jean Chan
- Theophilus Kwek

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**

2023

T. S. Eliot

T. S. ELIOT
PRIZE
SHORTLIST

Cumulonimbus

Halfway through my life
the reeds by Meguro River
where the ducks made love
stop whistling. I fear I've over-
inked, or the linseed oil
sourred the sky. The wind
tastes of oysters grilled
over autumn soil.
A fish draws a ripple,
or did a raindrop win?
My papers will topple
the house before the tin
roof falls. I'd better make haste
and find a new address.
A long-legged fly by the watercress
skates upstream, brazen-faced.
What I need now, to change
the half-course of my life,
is to be struck by lightning
and survive it, like Hokusai.



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carcanet.co.uk



Green Rain

We heard it falling
at the edge of the wood

though the wood
was blunt and nothing fell
quite like rain.

It didn't slip
through the clamshell
of parched hands.

It was a sound
I misunderstood.

We stood dead quiet
at the edge of a word
wondering.

Was it a hornbeam?
Persephone?
Barochory?



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Derek Jarman's Garden

You dwelt in impossibility.
First the waves spoke Shinglese but the shingle
didn't sing in a single tongue.
It clicked like dice rolling in cupped hands.
It hummed like the uranium in Dungeness.
Then, the moon fought for every speck,
every freckle, dimple, pimple, every facial expression
of the shingle lost to the sun's daily repossession.
But the moon was the most loved anthology
of repeatable failures. The simple equation
was not time times labour equals growth.
Take the troubled dog rose pressed against the flint,
betting its spiky luck
on a bank that catches a leeward damp.
Take the almond-white sloe flowers devoured
in a good year by browntail moths.
For some, home is less bothersome when they cease
to root in one place, say the dandelions
you were frightened of as a child, or the sea kale
with its psychedelic blue-violet-orange-green
red-indigo-yellow (it even has white flowers!)
spreading promiscuously. Delicious, though radioactive.
As to form, structure, and the instruments –
here the old handle of your rake and there the wires you sculpted –
they too are infectious like the music of rust;
that prompt metallic tick-tock ruling over us
busy old fools, as our bodies yellow slowly but surely
like mould lichen pollen
on this unlikely land where knowledge
is not concentrated in a single tree
but disseminated to every neighbourly shape and shade:
your blackwashed cladded fisherman's hut
of superior doors and numerous windows.
Your bright ochre window-frames filter
the heat of sunflowers, night-wind off the sea.



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