

# READERS' NOTES

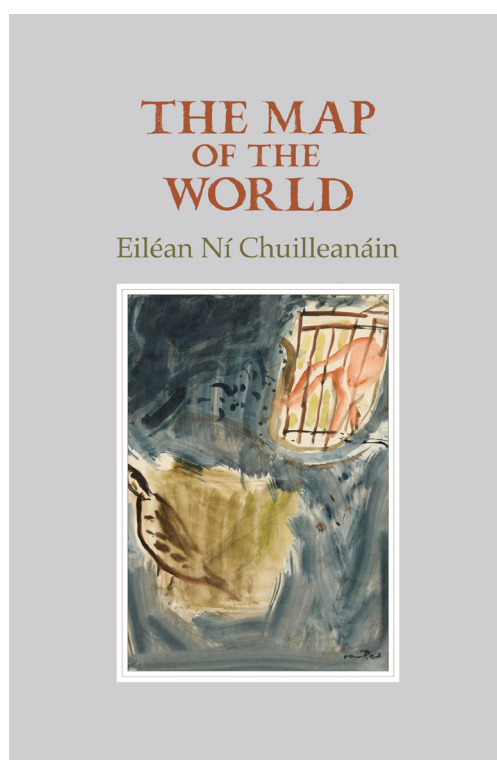
Welcome to the **T. S. Eliot Prize 2023 Readers' Notes**, in which we present the ten exciting collections shortlisted for this year's prize. The Readers' Notes offer introductions to some key poems, with reviews and biographies of the poets, and suggest creative writing prompts. Take the notes to your 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.

2023

T. S. Eliot

T. S. ELIOT  
PRIZE  
SHORTLIST

## *The Map of the World* by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin What reviewers say



*The Map of the World*  
(Gallery Press, 2023) by  
Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin.  
[gallerypress.com](http://gallerypress.com)

'Deeply attuned to poetry as an art of memory, metaphor and metamorphosis, the poet of *The Map of the World* writes both from the uncharted depths of grief and at the height of her powers, with an extraordinary command of line and colour and an unmatched ethical vision to capture, "the light / that also falls when there's nobody there to see it" ("What Happened Next?"). Though a slim volume, this is an immense, light-filled, multilayered book of tremendous musical sensitivity, elegiac feeling and visual intensity, that succeeds, as John Berger's *Monet* aspired, "to paint not things in themselves but the air that touched them".' – **Maria Johnston, *The Irish Times***

'Reading Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's rich and challenging poetry feels like clinging to Ariadne's thread in the pursuit of shape-shifting forms. Her light, shade, and colour, her interiors, landscape, art and language, and her myriad voices all enhance the experience – with poetic structures attuned to such subject matter.' – **Belinda Cooke, *The High Window***

'Although *The Map of the World* abounds in the tales half-told or hinted at for which Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry is widely admired this book reaches further into the ways one might confront misfortune and disaster and the whole weight of history. Her images present ideas about how to engage with the past and about other genres' representations of it. Already celebrated poems such as 'St Brigid's Well' and 'Muriel Gifford After Her Fever' mix with lines prompted by Milton and Marvell and the artists Nano Reid and Helen Moloney to "hold in view / history's patched lining, the sewing". Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's corruscating poems are like no one else's: "a stream is venturing a brisk melody". So satisfying is the experience of this poet's art a new collection of poems by her is an occasion for rejoicing.' – **The Gallery Press**

## About the poet

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's numerous awards include the Patrick Kavanagh Award, the *Irish Times* Award for Poetry, and the 1573 International Poetry Award, one of China's highest literary honours. Her collections, published by The Gallery Press, include *Acts and Monuments* (1972, winner of the 1973 Patrick Kavanagh Award), *Site of Ambush* (1975), *The Magdalene Sermon* (1989), *Selected Poems* (2008) and *The Sun-fish*, shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize 2009 and winner of the 2010 Griffin International Poetry Prize. Her *Collected Poems* (2020) won the Pigott Prize 2021. Ní Chuilleanáin is a Fellow and Professor of English (Emerita) at Trinity College, Dublin. She served as Ireland Professor of Poetry from 2016-2019.

Author photo © Brid O'Donovan for The Gallery Press



# READERS' NOTES



## Discussion ideas

- Look up Helen Moloney, to whom the poem 'A Shadow in Her Notebook' is dedicated. This poem appeared first in a publication in memory of poet Eavan Boland who died in 2020. Is this poem about making stained glass or about writing poetry? Who is the blind organist's daughter in relation to these acts of creation? What does it mean for a stained-glass artist to ask 'But could it not just be clear glass?'?
- Look up Muriel Gifford, the subject of 'Muriel Gifford After Her Fever'. What's the relationship between the poem-speaker's illness and Muriel MacDonagh's death? How does the grandmother relate to the pair of them?
- What do you think about the tense that 'War Time' is written in?

## Writing prompt

- Pick a window: the most complicated cathedral stained-glass window, or the simplest domestic double glazing. What can you see in it, what can you see through it? Write that poem.

## Find out more

### Other books by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

*The Sun-fish* (Gallery Press, 2009)

*The Boys of Bluehill* (Gallery Press, 2015)

*Collected Poems* (Gallery Press, 2020)

### Discover

Find out about the film, *Hunger's Way / Bealach an Fhéir Ghortaigh*, commissioned for the Strokestown International Poetry Festival, 2021, and featuring Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poem, 'The Miracles', at [bit.ly/ENCstrokestown](http://bit.ly/ENCstrokestown)

See also: [www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/eilean-ni-chuilleanain](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/eilean-ni-chuilleanain)

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

- Maura Dooley
- Gillian Clarke
- Paula Meehan

## 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](http://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](http://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](http://bit.ly/TSEP23shortlistlive) and for the livestream at [bit.ly/TSEP23livestream](http://bit.ly/TSEP23livestream)
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at [bit.ly/eliot23reviews](http://bit.ly/eliot23reviews)
- Read specially commissioned **Writers' Notes from the shortlisted poets** themselves on the Poetry School website. These new resources are designed to help writers develop their practice and learn from some of contemporary poetry's most exciting and accomplished voices. Visit [bit.ly/poetryschoolwritersnotes](http://bit.ly/poetryschoolwritersnotes)
- **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](http://bit.ly/eliotprizesubscribenews)
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Twitter, Instagram and Facebook**

## A Shadow in Her Notebook

(Helen Moloney, stained-glass artist, 1926-2011)

She sent a ten-pound note to the Poor Clares  
and imagined them in their brown habits, praying  
for her to find an idea. That was a start.

They sent her a fish, swimming and wavering, its head  
enormous in the dark water. They sent her a lion, then a star.  
She drew the lines of lead that held the sun in its place,

that funnelled the light through what was once the open air.  
The clouds paused on the mountain top:  
a gleam of weather somewhere else, then the storm

pounding overhead before it slid off northward,  
a dark prow. The lion raised his paw,  
coloured like the sun, glowing now

against a glass curtain, such a blue  
it seemed a kind of night. The darkened interior  
sucked in colours. Always the voice in her head

objecting: *But could it not just be clear glass?*  
No. The shadow of the bell tower, the woman  
dressed in brown, a shadow behind a screen:

they gathered around her clean white page, demanding  
indigo glass for the narrow tight window  
and oyster white, a little off-centre, for the loaf.

Just there on the border between the storm and the hush,  
the fish trembled in the light from the clouded sky,  
weaving like a hologram.

On her page the same tremble threw

a swimming shadow that covered the chancel floor.  
Only the blind organist's daughter will ever see  
how it shivers, floated safe in empty air.

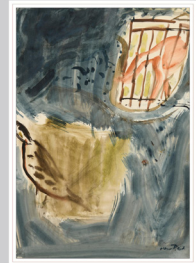
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THE MAP  
OF THE  
WORLD

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin



*The Map of the World* (Gallery Press, 2023) by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. [gallerypress.com](http://gallerypress.com)

## Muriel Gifford After Her Fever

Fluttering coiling a strand of hair a phrase,  
a tune remembered, not named —  
is it called *fever*? The weariness  
that comes after fever, even too weak to brush my hair?

(the mass of tangles at my neck like the leaves  
blown into a corner, piled  
by a feverish wind).  
The long strand of memory twisted and blended

entwines around my hand holding the brush, and  
the story my grandmother knew  
catches, my mother told me she gave her  
the way to untwist the long tangled locks of hair.

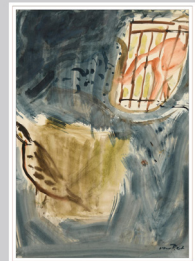
In those days they cut your hair off if you'd had a fever,  
but Muriel's hair was lovely,  
her husband prevented them cutting,  
he sat beside her and used the tip of the comb,

carefully combing all the way down, slowly  
stroking every long hair free  
until she could wind it again  
twisted in plaits and piled up as she chose.

When I finish my hair I'm too weak to begin the day  
putting on your heavy carved ring,  
with its dark green stone, and my mother's ring  
on the other finger. My hand feels light, something swept  
away, as they were swept  
by the firing squad and the stifling, coiling wave.

### THE MAP OF THE WORLD

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin



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## War Time

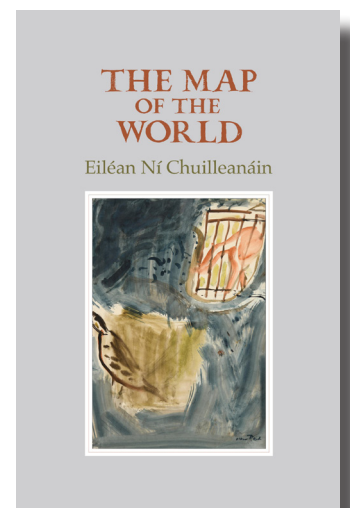
The convent now is full of women down on their luck,  
abandoned wives, mothers in law,  
nieces and daughters of men who needed  
to vanish for a while. Avoiding each other,  
waiting, reading a little or sometimes  
wasting an hour drafting a letter —  
they slip upstairs to dig in backpacks, hunting  
for the last envelope with a real address.

Where do they all sleep? The young ones camp  
in the refectory, under the frescoed arch.  
The girl who finished in boarding school has nowhere to go  
now, her home is beyond the new border.  
She practises scales on the tablecloth, breathing  
in four-four time. Then she begins the concerto,  
first with a gallop, then a long pause  
counting the bars, her fingers held up in the air.

It is time. The women have drifted singly down  
along the short path leading to the chapel,  
the sisters' voices heard, as the door opens,  
a brief crescendo. At the edge of the table  
she waits until a sign from her dead music mistress  
tells her to bring the spread fingers down.  
She holds the chord in place pressing her foot  
into the floor, the note sinking into time,

the time that's lost, the note so much older  
than the hand that conjures, filling the empty room.

2021



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