

# 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.



## **Balladz** by Sharon Olds What reviewers say

SHARON  
OLDS



Balladz

CAPE POETRY

*Balladz* (Cape Poetry, 2023) by Sharon Olds.  
[penguin.co.uk](http://penguin.co.uk)  
(search Olds)

'Sharon Olds recently turned 80 and, as one reads her latest collection, one wonders: over a long writing career, do you get to sound more, or less, like yourself? It is inspiring to be able to report that, in *Balladz*, she proves triumphantly evergreen: a woman who still steps across prudishly conventional lines as playfully as a child absorbed in French skipping. She writes about sex, love and the landscape of the body with zany intimacy. And there is something new here too: a freshly evolved conscience, a chafing sense of her own privilege ('New Year's Song' ends: "For a moment the core of my life / was not desire, but the knowledge of my unearned luck") and an extended empathy (When I looked out ends: "in my 78th year, my eyes opened / a little wider to the suffering of others").' – **Kate Kellaway, *The Guardian***

'Olds's latest collection, *Balladz*, was written largely during quarantine. It is, accordingly, a sad and lonely book. Olds's longtime companion, Carl, died in February 2020, just weeks before Covid shut down the world. She spent the next two years, alone, in a house in the woods in the Hudson Valley. The poems hold that isolated energy. Olds writes, with her usual shocking openness, about Carl's death – she compares the two of them, pressed together in his hospice bed, to a tightly coiled sprout emerging from a germinating seed. She writes about masturbation and sex dreams. ("Sometimes I sleep with a different man in my sleep every night.") She writes a poem about not killing a spider ("With a juice glass / and a large postcard, / I trapped the glorious dancer") and two consecutive poems about killing a centipede. Once again, she imagines her own death. And of course she returns, with fresh intensity, to her parents, especially her mother. When Olds read the finished manuscript, she told me, she was shocked. "No one should read more than one poem at a time from this book," she said. "Someone might get a serious stomachache from reading several of these in a row.'" – **Sam Anderson, *The New York Times Magazine***

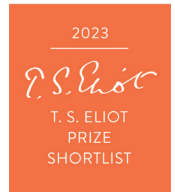
## About the poet

Sharon Olds was born in San Francisco and educated at Stanford University and Columbia University. She is the author of thirteen books of poetry. *Balladz* (Cape Poetry, 2023), was a finalist for the National Book Award and was longlisted for the 2023 Griffin Poetry Prize. Her collection *Stag's Leap* (Cape Poetry) won both the T. S. Eliot Prize 2012 and the Pulitzer Prize. Olds holds the Erich Maria Remarque Chair at New York University's Graduate Program in Creative Writing, where she helped to found workshop programmes for residents of Coler-Goldwater Hospital, and for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Author photo © Hilary Stone



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## Discussion ideas

- Are you a Keats fan? There are at least two references to Keats's poems in 'My Hand' ('This Living Hand' and 'Ode to a Nightingale'). How does 'My Hand' compare to 'This Living Hand'? Do the poems themselves hold hands?
- What's the most powerful line break in 'My Hand'?
- Both Sharon Olds's and Katie Farris's T. S. Eliot Prize-shortlisted collections reference Emily Dickinson. A coincidence, or are we in the middle of a Dickinson renaissance? If so, why now?
- What does the word 'Improv' mean to you? In this poem, do you think it refers to the subject of the poem or the manner of its creation? Bob, Toi and Vivian: who are these people? Do you need an introduction? Do you feel welcomed into their world?

## Writing prompt

- Write a love poem to the ageing body – yours or someone else's.

## Find out more

### Other books by Sharon Olds

*Selected Poems* (Jonathan Cape, 2005)

*Stag's Leap* (Jonathan Cape, 2012)

*Arias* (Jonathan Cape, 2019)

### Listen

Hear Sharon Olds read from *Balladz* at the 2022 National Book Awards at [bit.ly/oldreadsballadz](https://bit.ly/oldreadsballadz)

See also: [sharonolds.net](https://sharonolds.net)

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

- Fleur Adcock
- Pascale Petit
- Penelope Shuttle

## 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](https://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](https://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](https://bit.ly/TSEP23shortlistlive) and for the livestream at [bit.ly/TSEP23livestream](https://bit.ly/TSEP23livestream)
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at [bit.ly/eliot23reviews](https://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](https://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](https://bit.ly/eliotprizesubscribenews)
- View the dazzling video reviews of all the titles on this year's Shortlist by the **Young Critics on the T. S. Eliot YouTube channel**, the outcome of the second year of our partnership programme with The Poetry Society's Young Poets Network
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **X** (formerly Twitter), **Instagram** and **Facebook**

## My Hand

When I look at my hand, and at the back of my wrist,  
gleaming with the petrolatum which I've  
rubbed into its chap – mineral oil,  
ceresin, lanolin, panthenol, glycerin,  
bisabolol, I see the fine  
wrinkles, many making diamond shapes,  
some of them long cicatrice wobbles –  
it looks touching to me, and lucky. And I like  
the veins which bulge up from the back of my hand.  
I'm a member of a couple. My partner is in  
a linen shift, a pine box,  
a New Hampshire earth – sacred in the Jewish  
cemetery. I say to you, Carl,  
my darling, it's O.K. your tissue  
will melt with the dirt when spring comes,  
it's O.K. you cannot change the shock-  
shape of your body I love, you are innocent  
of death, you are good.  
We are a couple. Remember when I climbed into your narrow  
hospice bed, when you could hardly move,  
and as soon as I fitted myself in  
along you, like the last piece of a puzzle,  
we both passed out into sleep. When I drove north,  
out of a city of plague, my car –  
your car which you sold me for the list price –  
was packed with notebooks in which our stories  
are held, balanced in their slow dance  
up and down and up. My epidermis  
looks pretty, to me, tonight, frail  
and real, like rills in sand which water  
rippled. I liked to talk with you about the  
golden crown the internet rabbi  
said you would be wearing, after death,  
at the feast. And I love, now, seeing  
in the web of my glistening wrist-skin that I am  
already part with thee, tender and  
permanent is the night.

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## Amherst Ballad 10

When I came to Emily's – House – late –  
I remembered the feel of my Rough – Porous –  
Presence in my life – my Spirit  
Accidental – Chancy-ish.

In my mother's garden – I danced with Cabbage  
Roses and peonies – Hollyhock –  
And Snapdragons hid Faeries –  
Like the sweet –

Agony – of the Wings – between  
A girl's legs. Though I did not think  
Flight would be granted to me – or Eggs  
Or Milk or the Knot of a Pen and Ink

Rosette one could make like a silk Coat's Frog –  
Then its Panels undo –  
And slip off Satin Covering –  
And – Be – one's Soul.

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## Improv

On the morning of the drive from sea-level  
to the mountain, I asked if we could stop for *melted  
cheese!* at the Mexican place in Truckee.  
Then I worried, does Bob think I'm a diva?  
Am I always asking for things? And I thought of Toi's letter,  
and I know she is the locus of a gift –  
and I am too, a spiral of energy, a genie, a dust-devil,  
I was born with it, a life force,  
it does not belong to me, or to anyone else,  
I'm the container of it, the guardian.  
And I love to let it out toward people –  
nectary nosegay gusts of it.  
My mother would ask me to rub her back,  
she said that I had Vivian Hands,  
like her college best friend's –  
the palms of my hands would listen for what  
my mother's muscles wanted – as now,  
I seem to be writing, but I'm listening for what you want,  
it would be my joy to give it to you.  
There is so much joy on the earth even as it is being dis-inhabited  
by the other animals, and over-inhabited by us – as it is being  
knocked off course and smoked and drowned.  
While we have food, let us share it and eat it.  
There is so much action required of us now.  
And pleasure is required of us.  
O my darlings, so much pleasure is required of us.

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