

READERS' NOTES

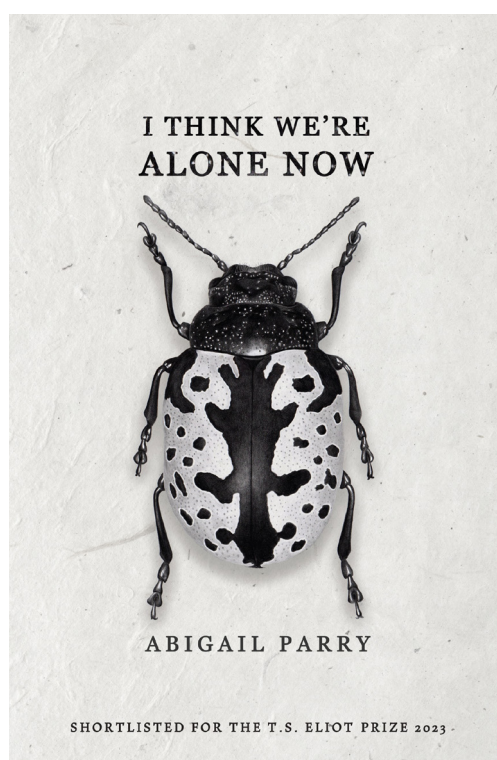
Welcome to the **T. S. Eliot Prize 2023 Readers' Notes**, in which we present the ten exciting collections shortlisted for this year's prize. The Readers' Notes offer introductions to some key poems, with reviews and biographies of the poets, and suggest creative writing prompts. Take the notes to your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

I Think We're Alone Now by Abigail Parry What reviewers say



I Think We're Alone Now (Bloodaxe Books, 2023) by Abigail Parry.
bloodaxebooks.com

'*I Think We're Alone Now* takes both its magnificent title and its jaunty sonnet-like title poem from the song first released by Tommy James and the Shondells in 1967, but which is doubtless more familiar to readers of this paper from the pop-tastic cover version by Tiffany in 1987. (Parry's range of reference in this book, as previously, is extraordinarily wide and, if anything, growing wider, extending from pop and rock, including Pulp and Radiohead, to C. S. Lewis, Rilke and Richard Rorty.) [...] What makes this collection thrilling is Parry's relentless and immense curiosity, often signalled by her breaking into asides and parentheses [...] For all its involutions – "each mental irk and imp", as Parry puts it in 'English-speaking learners' – and for all its allusiveness and its continual sidelong glances, *I Think We're Alone Now* is entirely companionable.' – Ian Sansom, *The Daily Telegraph*

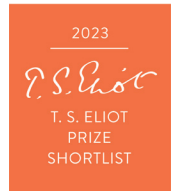
'There isn't a poem in this collection that I didn't think wasn't aided admirably by its spatial setting-out. And the number and nuance of voices, too, are plenty and true, rising far above predictable, over and beyond passable, into profound and poised – other enough to be unusual and interesting yet familiar enough for the reader to fully believe in their truth. A general inventiveness adds greatly to proceedings, throwing up further unpredictability throughout the collection via unique images and original, astoundingly apt metaphors: "all the saints / polite as china mice up on the shelf"; "The days that come and go / like dull beads on a joyless abacus". The poet's PhD in wordplay is apparent, too, with juicy use of language, plus techniques such as assonance and alliteration, giving the poems a liveliness and zest that's very appealing. [...] Parry is a poet who's "more scared / than I let on, but also full of love / sometimes joy" and these make for a heady mix as one reads this beetle-shiny, brilliantine, brain-bug of a book.' – Mab Jones, *Buzz Magazine*

About the poet

Abigail Parry spent several years as a toymaker before completing a PhD on wordplay. Her poems have been set to music, translated into Spanish, Serbian and Japanese, and performed or exhibited in Europe, the Caribbean and the USA. She has won a number of prizes and awards for her work, including the Ballymaloe Prize and an Eric Gregory Award. Her first collection, *Jinx* (Bloodaxe Books, 2018), was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Seamus Heaney Prize for Best First Collection, and named a Book of the Year in the *New Statesman*, *The Telegraph* and the *Morning Star*. *I Think We're Alone Now*, her second collection, is published by Bloodaxe Books. She lives in Cardiff. Author photo © Richard Arnold



READERS' NOTES



Discussion ideas

- The lines in italics in 'In the dream of the cold restaurant' are taken from A. A. Brill's translation of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Do you think that the poem is an accurate retelling of a dream? Does it matter if not? What's the difference between a poem and a dream?
- Are other people's dreams very dull? Is the 17-year-old waitress's 'brutal certainty' a straight take or an ironic one? What was your last dream about? How would you interpret it?
- The note to 'I Think We're Alone Now' reads 'The italicised spindle around which the poem is wound is taken from the 1967 hit 'I Think We're Alone Now', written by Ritchie Cordell and recorded by Tommy Jones and the Shondells.' What does unicursal mean? How does the term relate to the song, the subject of the poem, the poem itself?
- 'Oversight' is set in a west London pub called Paradise by way of Kensal Green, named for a line in the G. K. Chesterton poem. How do the two poems speak to each other? What does the Rilke quote add? It's a line from A. S. Kline's translation of the *Duino Elegies*. Is this a religious or a secular poem?

Writing prompt

- Take an excerpt from an earworm song, and interleave the lyrics with additional lines of your own to create a totally new piece.

Find out more

Other books by Abigail Parry

Jinx (Bloodaxe Books, 2018)

Listen

Hear Abigail Parry read from *I Think We're Alone Now* in the Bloodaxe videocast at bit.ly/parrybloodaxealonew

See also: www.bloodaxebooks.com (search Abigail Parry)

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

- Ella Frears
- Daisy Lafarge
- Shivanee Ramlochan

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 and for the livestream at bit.ly/TSEP23livestream
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at 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
- View the dazzling **video reviews of this year's Shortlist by the Young Critics** on our **YouTube channel**, in the second year of our partnership programme with The Poetry Society's Young Poets Network
- **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 **X** (formerly Twitter), **Instagram** and **Facebook**

In the dream of the cold restaurant

the man with the buttonhole and broad lapels
is folding and refolding a white napkin.
Look, say his hands, at intervals. A swan.
A dancing girl. An intricate scale model
of the Maugham Library on Chancery Lane.
The man adjusts his buttonhole and coughs

as each one fails, precisely, to entertain.
A waitress intervenes, bringing two plates –
fluted, plain, translucent. And quite empty.
Such is the gaunt extravagance of dreams.
That waitress, though. All elbows, wrists
and hips. A strip of exposed skin reveals a scar

on the nub of bone that finishes the spine.
No – not a scar. A burn. A full-blown wet rosette,
just like the one you earned at seventeen
from a fuck on a nylon carpet – a carpet
not unlike this carpet here, lalling its beige
hoops and braids around the table's feet.

Meanwhile, on the mezzanine,
someone lifts a book and reads the line
*he left his knee exposed, and dreamed
of travelling on a mail coach by night.*
Well quite. When you offer up your plate
it turns, beneath your hands, to a crumpled swan.

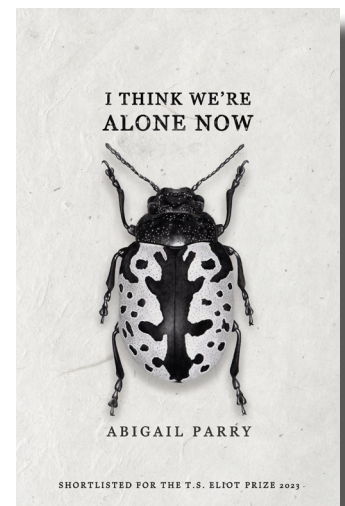
The man, of course, has gone.
Such is the glib economy of dreams.
So find a way to bear it, if you can –
the man who folds and folds and cannot please,
the cheap carpet, telling its idiot riddle,
the girl who has not learned to move between

compassion and contempt. But then,
other people's dreams are very dull,
as the waitress knows with all the brutal
certainty of being seventeen. And she's gone too.
She'll pull this city to the ground before
she'll take your plate, let alone your pity.

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I Think We're Alone Now

It's stuck in there, the thought.

Running just as fast as we can

Holding on to one another's hand

It's wound up really tight.

Trying to get away into the night

Two minutes only to complete

its unicursal not-quite-circuit

And then you put your arms around me

the loop where you and I play out

those stubborn gestures on repeat –

And we tumble to the ground

the crickets bleat their string quartet,

the synth does its forever bit

And then you say

I THINK WE'RE
ALONE NOW



SHORTLISTED FOR THE T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2023

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Oversight

Rilke had Angels, had
Junctions of light, corridors, stairs, thrones,

but look what we've got: the blue afternoon
and the pavement. A pineapple soda.
A hangover fit for two sinners

and man, did we earn it.

Come on, let's go.
Let's bother that seraph
who's curled like a wretch
on the stucco outside of the Kingdom.
All bed hair and one beamish buttock, a wing
pulled over his head like a coverlet.

Not now, he says. Maybe later.

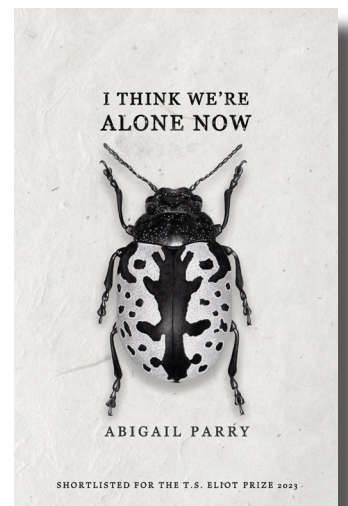
Let's run along down to the cemetery then,
let's read all the stones.

Let us pray

that Heaven will spare us the sudden,
the solitary mirror. I know that you've seen it,
old friend, and let's face it,
the news is unkind each day.

So let us be thankful. Let's say

that if we must do this, if we must rehearse
our senescence by feeling like death
every weekend, for God's sake let's do it together.



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