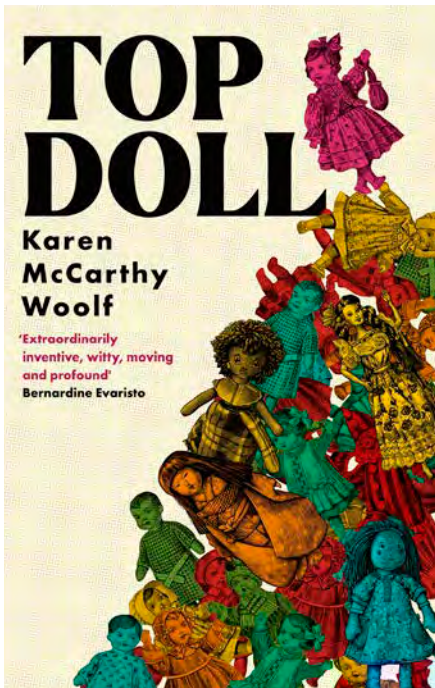


# T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2024 READERS' NOTES

The T. S. Eliot Prize 2024 Readers' Notes offer a selection of poems from each of the ten exciting collections on our Shortlist, plus reviews, reading suggestions, and a writing prompt or two for those inspired to respond creatively. We hope the Readers' Notes will aid your deeper reading as an individual, with friends, or within a book group or writing workshop. English teachers: if you're preparing your students for any Unseen Poem papers, why not hone their skills on this year's Shortlist? And don't forget to check out the T. S. Eliot Prize Young Critics Scheme.



*Top Doll* (Dialogue Books, 2024) by Karen McCarthy Woolf. [bit.ly/kmwtopdoll](http://bit.ly/kmwtopdoll)

## On *Top Doll*

'On her death in 2011, at the age of 104, the reclusive heiress Huguette Clark left behind an estate worth more than \$300 million – and a vast collection of dolls [...] In *Top Doll*, Clark is only glimpsed, a silent, pitiful enigma shuffling from room to room, her elderly face disfigured by “carcinoma-nasty” (as the dolls call it). Her toys, by contrast, won't shut up, nattering in a cacophonous mix of dialects and verse styles as they prepare for Clark's departure for “the hospital”.

Miss Ting speaks in Jamaican patois; Lady Mamiko glides between prose and haiku; the Barbies all boast in abecedarians, a silly, irritating poetic form exactly suited to them. They're all stock types, apart from the anxious, bossy, distractible Top Doll, simply known as “Dolly”, who pipes up in sonnets with runs of skewed half-rhyme (“chandelier” and “derrière”, “Rockefeller” and “America”), in a Franglais voice halfway between Miss Piggy and the TV meerkat: “This is maximums accurate blurbs!” – Tristram Fane Saunders, *The Telegraph*

'Hedonism typifies the lives of these cosseted poppets in direct contrast to the abstinence of their hermit-like owner: at the Barbieville discotheque, they snort lurid pink powder, “cherry-

blossom”, or doll cocaine, through “helter-skelter” straws, while indulging in mass orgies under giant glitter balls [...] Dolly frets about her owner's diet of “sardine crackers and orange juice”, as well as the “carcinoma-nasty” (cancerous lesion) that blights Clark's face, convinced that cherry blossom powder blended into thick shakes can save her owner if only Scientist Barbie would get a move on replenishing the dwindling supply [...] McCarthy Woolf has, through the stylish inventiveness of her prose, breathed new life into this well-worn trope (*Mannequin*, *Toy Story*... erm *Chucky*), adding poignancy to the book's “stranger than fiction” tale of a heiress who preferred dolls to people.' – Yvonne Singh, *Writers Mosaic*

## About the poet

Karen McCarthy Woolf FRSL, born in London to English and Jamaican parents, is the author of three poetry books and the editor of numerous literary anthologies. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar at UCLA, she was writer in residence at the Promise Institute for Human Rights. Her debut *An Aviary of Small Birds* (Carcanet Press, 2014), was an *Observer* Book of the Year and her second collection, *Seasonal Disturbances* (Carcanet Press, 2017), was a winner in the Laurel Prize. McCarthy Woolf has performed her work worldwide – in the US, Caribbean, Asia and across Europe at venues for Poetica Electronica, which showcased music collaborations with dance and techno producers. Her poems have been translated into Turkish, Swedish, Spanish, Polish and Dutch, produced as an animated and choreographed short film, exhibited by Poems on the Underground and dropped from a helicopter over the Houses of Parliament. She was awarded a 2024 Jerwood Poetry Award by the Royal Society of Literature.



Photo © Yasmine Akim

# T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2024 READERS' NOTES

## What do you think?

- Visit [bit.ly/huguettebiog](https://bit.ly/huguettebiog) to find out more about Huguette Clark. Is hers a story you knew about? Did you play with Barbies? Is CEO Barbie a model you recognise? Did you play offices with your dolls? If this poem is a game, what sort of game is it playing?
- In what proportions is 'Barbieville Discotheque' a poem, a photograph, a still life or a stage set? Different dolls (individuals and categories) are associated with different poetic forms and types of text throughout *Top Doll*. How does that set scheme relate to the themes of the book?
- Is 'Obituaries as Found' a piece of biographical writing? (Another poem called 'Obituaries as Found' is the first in the book.) Is *Top Doll* a biography?
- Living toys – here they all are at [bit.ly/livingdolltoys](https://bit.ly/livingdolltoys). Who are your favourites – Winnie the Pooh, Bagpuss, Woody & Buzz? – and why? What relationships do living toys have to your own childhood? What about the next generation(s) down, to your own children or those of your friends and family? Does *Top Doll* have things to say about childhood?

## Reply in writing

Think of a beloved toy from your childhood, and start to write in its voice. What happens if it encounters a less beloved toy, or a toy belonging to someone with whom you have an intense relationship. What situations and conversations ensue?

## Find out more

### Other work by Karen McCarthy Woolf

*Seasonal Disturbances* (Carcanet Press, 2017)

*An Aviary of Small Birds* (Carcanet Press, 2014)

### Something to watch

You can find the Eliot Prize videos of Karen McCarthy Woolf reading from *Top Doll* on the Eliot Prize YouTube channel. View the launch of the book at [bit.ly/launchtopdoll](https://bit.ly/launchtopdoll)

### If you like Karen McCarthy Woolf's work, try...

- Bhanu Kapil
- Daljit Nagra
- Rachel Long

[www.mccarthywoolf.net](https://www.mccarthywoolf.net)

## About the T. S. Eliot Prize

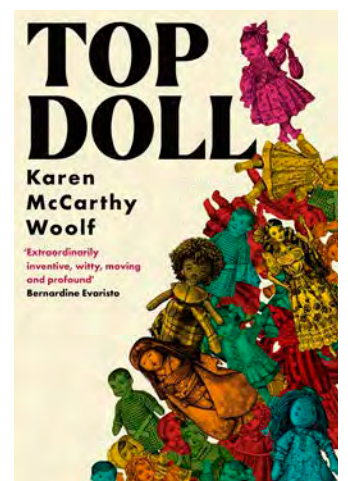
The T. S. Eliot Prize, which celebrated its 30th anniversary last year, is awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland. The Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. It has been run 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 2024 Prize are Mimi Khalvati (Chair), Anthony Joseph and Hannah Sullivan. For more information, visit [tseliot.com/prize](https://tseliot.com/prize)

## T. S. Eliot Prize 2024: join in

- Hear our shortlisted poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 12 January 2025. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book for in-person tickets at [bit.ly/eliot24reading](https://bit.ly/eliot24reading) or for the live stream at [bit.ly/eliot24livestream](https://bit.ly/eliot24livestream)
- Explore the Shortlist with Eliot Prize winner Joelle Taylor at the **Poetry School's Preview Workshop**, 2pm, Sunday 12 January 2025. See [bit.ly/2024eliotpreview](https://bit.ly/2024eliotpreview) for details.
- Look out for the latest additions to our amazing **video archive of interviews and poems** with Eliot Prize poets on our YouTube channel: [bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube](https://bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube)
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at [bit.ly/eliot24reviews](https://bit.ly/eliot24reviews)
- Browse the brilliant **Writers' Notes series**, devised by our partner the Poetry School, in which Eliot Prize shortlisted poets reflect on the writing of their nominated collections at [bit.ly/writersnotes2024](https://bit.ly/writersnotes2024)
- **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)
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Instagram, X** and **Facebook**: @tseliotprize

## CEO Barbie

As a Senior Business Professional I'm never without my  
briefcase even at the beach! My polka dot bikini & cerise  
cravat tied in a pussy-bow tucks between the lapels of my  
double-breasted power suit & my glossy stare A Chief  
Executive must know how to delegate! I told Dolly:  
fax me darling! I'll have my people look right into it Crack the  
glass ceiling? Sure! I'm vintage 1985, a ball breaker, obviously  
head hunted, Cherry Blossom that's my brand This is my  
itinerary: breakfast briefing, let's do lunch! My dream  
job is Right Now! My desk faces the door Feng Shui says  
killer heels should be sharp & pointed as a You're Fired! memo  
Luck isn't relevant in business! Or politics They're governed by  
market forces! Before Maman got real sick Dolly  
negotiated a crazy deal with our head of production I was  
obliged to overrule in the same way my role model Nancy kept  
President Reagan in check! I mean everyone agrees his IQ was  
questionable, his PR skills slightly better He even angled  
ROI on the Iran-Contra affair! There's money in arms  
sales but drugs are so much more effective in the long  
term, particularly when you declare War on them: gear's  
ubiquitous as shoulder pads All Dolly wants is a  
VIP guest list while I keep my head down under my  
wide-brimmed hat Our business plan involves a lot of  
Xanax which was big back then! Anxiety is through the roof  
year on year I took a lot from my corporate Bible: Sun  
Tzu's *Art of War* It says *strike the weak!* Just like Ron & Nancy



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## Barbieville Discotheque

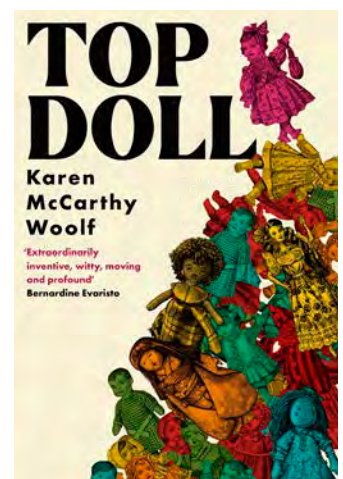
A glitterball dangles from the ceiling, an array of desk lamps point up, scattering its rainbow-like Skittles across the chequered dancefloor. DJ Kenny Ken rollerskates underneath in green and white basketball shorts and vest, a Sony Walkman on his head. A black mixing desk constructed from two transistor radios turned on their side is garlanded by a Cartier charm bracelet, its ruby cupids and emerald-tailed lovebirds glinting in the corner to reveal a tangle of naked Barbies and Kens. Centre stage we see Malibu Barbie coiled around one of the silver poles that run the length between each shelf. Swiss Barbie is holding her long plait to one side as she leans across a booth, snorting a lurid pink powder through a helter-skelter straw.

Dolly blinks and tosses the photograph aside.

Christie Barbie sits cross-legged in a rattan chair, nodding her head and mouthing the chorus to Crystal Waters' 'Gypsy Woman', *la da di da de da, she's homeless*, while blowing smoke rings from a hookah pipe and waving a stick of nag champa. Dolly is slumped over a booth, a cocktail umbrella in her hair, her skirts & petticoats pulled up above her waist, revealing her jointed wooden legs. A Martini glass is topped over.

In the bottom right-hand corner, something furry and blurry—there's no door to the adjacent, double-aspect living room, but a mouse, harnessed to a Sylvanian Families horse and cart loaded with confetti, scurries along the skirting board and disappears into an arched hole—

—These vinyl-faces are not caring for Dolly! It is abominations, when Maman is missing and we are facing deep devastations. —Non, non, non. non. Dolly is too much the martyr with these special photo projects! This is yesterday! We must be readying tomorrow & last nights! We must be avec les valises—she shakes her head, her four little teeth biting down onto her top lip, puts on a black eye mask, tucking the elastic behind her petite ears and lies back down on her bed, her thoughts swirling noisily as she goes over the events of the last few weeks in her head before eventually drifting into listless sleep.



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## Obituaries as Found

On 26 March, 1991

she was admitted

with ruthless and unprincipled cancers

700 European dolls

filled out the standard initial assessment

Unravelling Some Mystery

a 50 year-old refrigerator

'helping with her affairs'

agreed to speak only on the condition

of anonymity

she had been managing poorly at home

– reclusive – not eating

dolls dollhouses were everywhere

an expert

working with pictures

from the collection

her lip, right cheek and

right eyelid had been pilfered

her only support system

her doctor's widow

Doctor's Hospital

a great place for

Michael Jackson, Marilyn Monroe

Arrested development? The last child

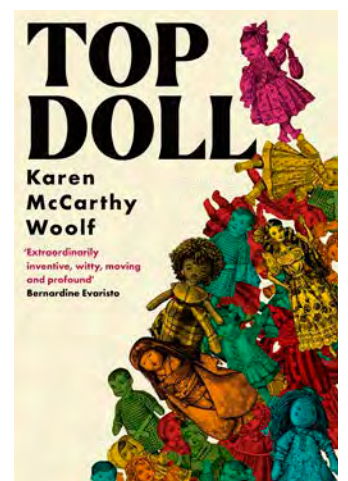
of the Gilded Age

would live in the hospital

for 7,364 nights

Her casket was carried up 18 steps

A single bouquet of daisies was left.



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