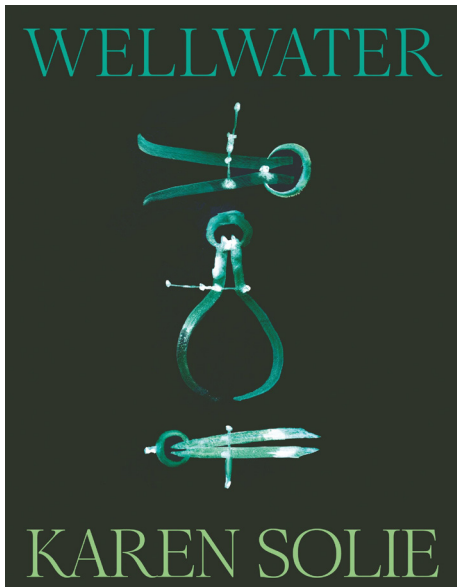


T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2025 READERS' NOTES

The T. S. Eliot Prize 2025 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.



Wellwater (Picador Poetry, 2025) by Karen Solie. Search 'wellwater' at www.panmacmillan.com

On *Wellwater*

'Karen Solie's [...] *Wellwater* is full of unheralded life forms that survive even our grisliest eradication attempts: "foxtail, cleavers, sow thistle, kochia". 'The Climbing Vine', one of the most striking poems in the collection, tells of a creeping plant that emerges suddenly and, troublingly, will not go away: "arm over arm in its wet clothes", the vine "hailed itself to the second-floor balcony" and "spread out". [...] Several poems in *Wellwater* are like this: they look to disquieting, compromised forms of life for lessons about how to persist in a time of climactic ruin. I hesitate to use this word, "lessons", because Solie is not a moralising poet. Neither are her poems' conclusions about how to live very clear, and certainly not very instructive. Instead, they are full of beclouded vision: fog, mist, wildfire smoke, freezing rain, dust.' – Diane Leca, *PN Review*

'Few poets now writing achieve such stringent economy. It's not that Solie's style is minimalist or fragmentary; her syntax at times unfurls with rhetorical eloquence as she casts her gaze over a capacious expanse of space and time. [...] The voice can express impatience: "I'm through with fiction. / From now on, only fact [...]" Will a novel about it make the whole / miserable business worthwhile?' ('Anne Dufourmantelle'). Yet what can seem dismissive may be no more than precise: "the dirty

realism of early spring" captures mud season in two words. "Money buys the knowledge it isn't everything." Aphoristic wisdom radiates from many such formulations; I found myself making a list of Solie's one-liners that is far too long to quote.' – Rachel Hadas, *Times Literary Supplement*

'[Solie] catalogues humanity's destructive impact on the natural world. It is human nature to prefer our landscapes neatly framed – walls and wooden fences create the illusion that the great outdoors can be controlled and contained. Yet [...] Solie's wildly unpredictable collection *Wellwater* flips the script. In this blazingly honest catalogue of human-made hazard and harm, we celebrate instead the contemporary landscapes refusing to be tamed.' – Jade Cuttle, *The Observer*

About the poet

Karen Solie grew up in southwest Saskatchewan. *Wellwater* (Picador Poetry) is her sixth collection of poetry and is also shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection. Her previous collections – *Short Haul Engine*, *Modern and Normal*, *Pigeon*, *The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out* and *The Caipile Caves* – have won the Dorothy Livesay Prize, Pat Lowther Award, Trillium Poetry Prize, and the Griffin Prize, and been shortlisted for the Derek Walcott Prize and the T. S. Eliot Prize. *The Living Option: Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books) was published in the UK in 2013. A 2023 Guggenheim Fellow, Karen Solie teaches for half of the year at the University of St Andrews in Scotland and lives the rest of the time in Canada.



Photo © Russell Hart

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What do you think?

- What use might the environmental activist group Just Stop Oil have made of 'Wellwater'? Is it a poem for a placard?
- What might you expect from a poem titled 'Autumn Day'? Does this 'Autumn Day' confound or confirm your expectations? Is this a religious poem?
- You can hear a version of the song quoted in the last two lines of 'Mourning Doves' on YouTube. What's the tone of this poem – is it a whisper or a shout? Why does it have no full stops?

Reply in writing

Explore the idea of the vulgar muffin. What does it look like, taste like? Who makes it, who buys it? What happens when you eat one – sugar crash or satisfaction? To whose birthday party would you bring a vulgar muffin?

Find out more

Other work by Karen Solie

The Caiplie Caves (Picador Poetry, 2019)

The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2015)

The Living Option: Selected Poems (Bloodaxe Books, 2013)

On screen & further reading

Find Karen Solie in the **T. S. Eliot Prize 2019 Playlist** on YouTube. Visit the poet's page at www.panmacmillan.com

If you like Karen Solie's work, try...

- **Kathleen Jamie**
- **Zaffar Kunial**
- **Jacqueline Saphra**

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

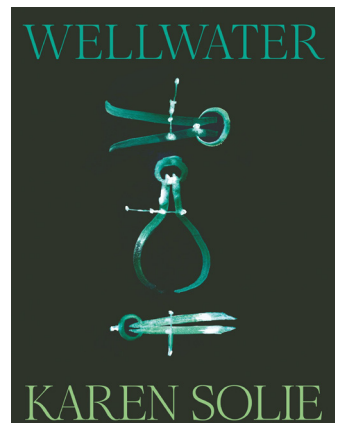
The T. S. Eliot Prize, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2023, is awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland. The Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. The T. S. Eliot estate has provided the prize money since the Prize's inception, and the T. S. Eliot Foundation took over the running of the Prize in 2016, following Inpress Books' acquisition of the PBS. 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 2025 Prize are Michael Hofmann (Chair), Patience Agbabi and Niall Campbell. For more information, visit tseliot.com/prize

T. S. Eliot Prize 2025: join in

- Join our shortlisted poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 18 January 2026. 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/eliot25readings or for the live stream at bit.ly/eliot25livestream
- 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
- **John Field's authoritative reviews** of all the shortlisted titles will be published on the T. S. Eliot Prize website over the coming months. Read them online at bit.ly/eliot25shortlist
- 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. Visit poetryschool.com and search 'writers' notes'
- **Sign up to our weekly newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. Subscribe at tseliot.com/prize
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Instagram, Bluesky, X and Facebook**: [@tseliotprize](https://www.instagram.com/tseliotprize)

Wellwater

I didn't know what I had,
drove the waterstruck underage to the well
in a swimsuit, anointed with baby oil
to encourage a uniform exposure,
a mild burn atop the tank as it filled
in that burgeoning era of means
to an end. It was a chore
to attend this site of worship
from which song was drawn to feed the souls
of planted trees not native to that place,
as we were not native to that place,
our glyphosate on the wind, our malathion,
dust of gravel roads that bore vehicles
of gas well company agents,
fracking derricks across the county
appearing before, as we said, we knew it.
Blondie tore a strip off the wheatfield,
the tank cooled as the level rose,
and I descended to start the engine
so the radio wouldn't drain the battery –
a mistake I'd made and lived to regret,
which is the only way I ever learn anything.
It took 75 minutes. The things you remember.
My last act before closing the tap
to take the hose by the neck and drink,
taste the cathedral's rock and temperature,
the water hard and the table high.
The water then, you could still drink it.

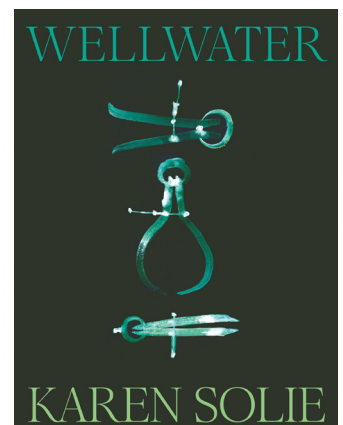


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Autumn Day

We queue to manage the balances of what we're owed
to what we owe, orderly as souls in private panic before the Judgement,
shuffling our documents as though judgement weren't already written
in the Cloud. From the shop adjacent wafts the incense
of coffee and the vulgar muffins, overstuffed as geese
with funnels down their throats, truly the muffins of a culture on the brink
of steep decline. To be no longer working bodes differently
for those of us who will not walk, as in the promotional literature,
upon the equatorial beaches, will never point excitedly
to the castles of Europe. Money buys the knowledge it isn't everything.
With the face of a poet no longer young and the manner
of a registered nurse, a customer service representative
translates the truth of our condition to a language even we
can understand: *Whoever has no house now, will never have one.*



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Mourning Doves

Sounds about right, panic shredding
the far edge of the vowel like a flag-end
in relentless wind

and you can't walk ten feet
without branches exploding
in your peripherals, you'd think

creatures so hopeless on the ground
would find their measure of grace in flight
but they rattle and creak like

prototypes, plod up the stairs
of the lower air as though from a train platform
laden with bags, it's awkward, really

painful to look at, the fields and paths
where they rise and are killed and rise
and are killed, but it doesn't

matter, there are so many, I would like
to afford them the respect of neutrality
but I don't want to hear them

anymore, don't want to see their
grey rags dropped from the drying line
grey smoke in the hawthorn tree or

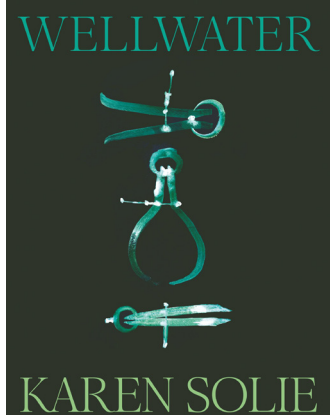
squatting on the eaves like taxidermy
stuffed with personal tragedy
and singing –

*If I knew a friend on all this earth
you've been a friend to me*

2025

T. S. Eliot

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