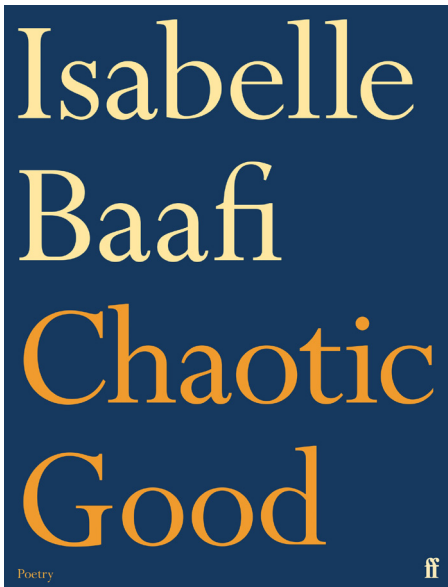


T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2025 READERS' NOTES

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.



Chaotic Good (Faber & Faber, 2025) by Isabelle Baafi. Search 'chaotic good' at www.faber.co.uk

On *Chaotic Good*

'Neatly structured in five sections – separation, childhood, adolescence, marriage and rebirth – *Chaotic Good* is a lesson in pain management: "Every day I lost a pain, but you / gave me another to take its place." For Baafi, pain, however scarring, is a teacher, and poetry is an effective pathway for self-growth, a "modality" that helps redefine stigma and trauma: "When I return to the poem it is much changed – / harsher. It won't answer to its name." Many forms of anger appear in the book, addressing fatherlessness, school bullying, racism and sexism. Baafi's speakers hold on to anger as a source of self-determination: "I burned all the bridges beneath my feet / and was so fly I didn't even get wet." Although it could be more nuanced and condensed, this well-organised debut offers a fierce critique of a toxic marriage and a redemptive vision through poetry.' – Kit Fan, *The Guardian*

'I think of someone attempting to wrench herself from an enmeshed unity, the kind that occurs when a partner is subsumed in a marriage or by a sense of duty. [Baafi's poem] 'The Mpemba Effect' (whose title refers to the phenomenon whereby hot water freezes faster than cold) begins with a relationship on the verge of boiling over. Jagged line breaks give the impression of a situation off-kilter, reaching a tipping point;

the poem hinges – literally and figuratively – on "[eating] around the rot". The experiences being conveyed in this collection go beyond the dissolution of a marriage and likely could not be relayed without an exploration of "the rot". Baafi has a palate for what decays; she leads with the gut. The result is a fermented beauty.' – Zakia Carpenter-Hall, *Jhalak Review*

'Each section begins with a poem named after a psychological or scientific phenomenon – as if to create a behavioural taxonomy or set of conceptual laws that govern the movement of the book. [...] *Chaotic Good* exposes the fault lines within these logical frameworks. [...] Baafi's technique observes the violence that lies in syntax, presenting how words harm and re-harm, like a wound continually pressed.

The collection's gift is to trust the reader to register tonal rupture, to trace the markings between infatuation and erasure. Baafi cautions, "Owning and loving have the same texture" ("One side of a conversation with the bailiff at my door").' – Chloe Elliot, *The Poetry Review*

About the poet

Isabelle Baafi is a poet, editor and critic. Her pamphlet *Ripe* (ignitionpress) won the Somerset Maugham Award and was a Poetry Book Society Pamphlet Choice. Her poetry and prose have been published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Poetry Review*, *The London Magazine*, *Oxford Poetry* and elsewhere. Her debut collection, *Chaotic Good* (Faber & Faber), is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and the winner of the Forward Jerwood Prize for Best First Collection 2025.

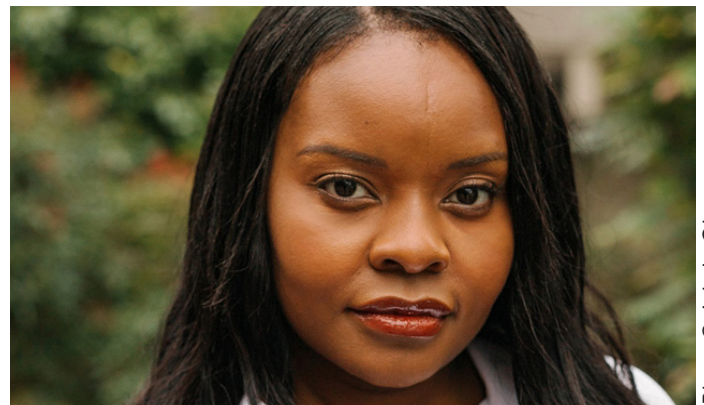


Photo © Jolade Olusanya

T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2025 READERS' NOTES

What do you think?

- If someone sent 'The Maelstrom' to an agony aunt, what would her advice to the speaker of the poem be? Is the cinema tip-up chair incident in the poem slapstick or not?
- 'Chaotic Good' as a descriptor of a character's ethical and moral perspectives is key to the game-playing world of Dungeons and Dragons, although its use has spread. According to Wikipedia, 'A chaotic good character does whatever is necessary to bring about change for the better, disdains bureaucratic organisations that get in the way of social improvement, and places a high value on personal freedom, not only for oneself but for others as well. Chaotic good characters usually intend to do the right thing, but their methods are generally disorganised and often out of sync with the rest of society.' Examples might include Robin Hood, Batman and Mulan. Who is the chaotic good character in 'Chaotic Good'?
- If you were to make a film of 'Chaotic Good', you'd have a good note for the costume of one of the characters: bob wig and a low-cut 'trashy' blue dress. How would you dress the speaker of the poem?
- Who lives in a cottage in the woods in fairy tales, in horror stories? Is 'The Cottage' one or the other? What's the dividing line between the two types of fiction?

Reply in writing

Pick one fairy story and one horror story – 'Snow White' and *The Blair Witch Project*, perhaps, or 'The Little Mermaid' and *Jaws*. Write a seven-stanza narrative poem which combines elements of both stories, and put yourself – or a version of yourself – at the heart of it. Pitch the 'rating' of the poem where you like – PG to 18, wherever is comfortable.

Find out more

Other work by Isabelle Baafi

Ripe (ignitionpress, 2021)

Audio, video & further reading

Listen to Isabelle Baafi at **sub(VERSE)ive**, Wasafiri's online video series, and on the **Planet Poetry podcast**, both available on YouTube. See also her fascinating exchange with Lavinia Greenlaw, her editor at Faber, at **faber.co.uk**

If you like Isabelle Baafi's work, try...

- **Rita Dove**
- **Rachel Long**
- **Nuar Alsadir**

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 'writer's 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



The Maelstrom

And after in the kitchen, crouched like dogs abundant with shit,
we sweep shards of frosted glass into the dustpan's horrified mouth.
You would've caught the vase if you'd seen it was the wedding gift
from your ex. And I would've thrown it harder if I'd known
you wouldn't duck. Silence blisters, then it breaks. At our antipode
two currents collide. Twist each other in a dance they cannot quit.
Like an ocean, a marriage is only ever as powerful as it is deep.
Make me a fathom I cannot fathom. Humble me with the plum pits
I would've choked on if you hadn't cut them out. Even though
I am hard water, even though I trapped you in a cinema tip-up chair.
When we sleep, the pinwheel on the balcony spins both ways.
When the shower drain is clogged it means you are thinking
of choking me. How unapologetically a knife performs its duty.
And how dutifully I became the place for you to drown.



Chaotic Good (Faber & Faber, 2025) by Isabelle Baafi. Search 'chaotic good' at www.faber.co.uk

Chaotic Good

Friend, that wasn't you last night at the cinema – the one with sticky floors and seats that smell like nachos and cum. You would never be caught dead there. You always said that your laugh became a shriek in the dark: people forget themselves when no one's looking. As for me, I notice more. You cross your ankles when you sit, even on the bus. As quiet as a boiler's hum, milk-sore and motherly. Faithful even to the ammonia in your cloth, peeling you back. And so I know it wasn't you at the cinema, in the lobby, wearing the bob wig I lent you. With one hand in the pocket of a man who is not your husband, the other wrapped around a long pink can of raspberry gin. Your cleavage spilling out of the blue dress that you fingered when we went shopping and called so *trashy* with a smirk. How could it have been you? The way he stood over you, his hand squeezing your waist as you threw back your head to laugh, his eyes plumbing the depths of your throat. How engorged your tongue must have been. How wet. How you never knew it could be. When we were thirteen, we saw a man fasten his girlfriend's seatbelt and you said, *I want to be loved just like that*. You followed every rule to its dead end, and became a monument to surrender. And so it couldn't have been you because you were at home, polishing your church shoes for the next day. You were oiling your scalp and ironing his briefs, trying not to picture the one who takes them off. Before bed, you called me and said we should walk together in the morning. You would wait for me by the spotless gate whose hinges are rusted shut. You would never take the shaded path, the one whose thorns reach for your skirt – even though you would come alive there. Even though you'd love the berries that would burst against your hands. That's how I know it wasn't you, and that's why, when I see you, don't worry, don't worry, I won't even bring it up.



Chaotic Good (Faber & Faber, 2025) by Isabelle Baafi. Search 'chaotic good' at www.faber.co.uk

The Cottage

The memory built me around it.
An abandoned trail. A forest with no sky.
I was both the wood of the axe

and the wood of the tree.
A cat was dying in my bag,
and when the leaves looked away

I snuck it crushed berries from the path
and dead sparrows whose hearts
had burst out of their chests.

The scarlet stained my palm –
whether the blood of the berry or of the bird,
I couldn't tell.

I was thirsty but afraid to drink.
When I reached the cottage,
you were waiting. You led me inside.

I offered you my hand, which you licked.
It was cleaner then
than it had ever been before.

Then you placed my hand on the door,
told me to cure it.
The door disappeared beneath my hand.



Chaotic Good (Faber & Faber, 2025) by Isabelle Baafi. Search 'chaotic good' at www.faber.co.uk