

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.



Foretokens (Chatto & Windus, 2025) by Sarah Howe.
Search 'foretokens' at
www.penguin.co.uk

On *Foretokens*

'Sarah Howe follows her prizewinning *Loop of Jade* with *Foretokens*, picking up on themes of personal history, colonialism and the west's engagement with China. Emily Dickinson's "tell it slant" becomes a reminder of playground slurs, while pieces on Chinese artworks reflect on their mislabelling and how they came to be in European galleries anyway. A brilliant poem teases out the ramifications of her mother's obsession with laundry; another, 'Sad Party', concerns her father's death. A formally inventive and intellectually stimulating collection.' – **Suzi Feay, *Financial Times***

'Howe's second collection is a reaffirmation of the keen, probing intelligence and ability to layer telling detail that underpins her poetry. Taking on the biggest of subjects – genetics, time's relativity, becoming a parent – as well as re-examining her mother's occluded history in Hong Kong, there is now an anger in Howe's tonal range, which brings a pleasing sharpness to her investigations: "child of a hoarder / I am not immune / to this mania this malaise / this inherited dream / of an archive / so complete nothing / could ever hurt again". *Foretokens* is a quite brilliant return.' – **Rishi Dastidar, *The Guardian***

'Ten years have passed [since the publication of *Loop of Jade*] and Howe is now a mother; there are poems about a dead father; her memory reaches back to student days, as though eased by the distance. Images are erudite: a child is like a "shuffled // deck of eclectic traits / this personal / Babel chromosomal". There's a whole poem about laundry that fittingly cycles back in time, first to Howe's mother; in a later poem to "my body formed / within the body / of her grandmother".

There's more Russian doll-like layering going on in 'Waking' [...] What I like about it is how subtly the foetus and narrator are entwined – both are described in the language of water. You watch them sail, "day by restless day", into the "glaring world of after". It's a work of supreme concision. Not a word is out of place. – **Lucy Thynne, *The Telegraph***

About the poet

Sarah Howe is a British poet, academic and editor. Born in Hong Kong to an English father and Chinese mother, she moved to England as a child. Her pamphlet, *A Certain Chinese Encyclopedia*, won an Eric Gregory Award, and her first collection, *Loop of Jade* (Chatto & Windus, 2015), won the T. S. Eliot Prize and the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award, and was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. *Foretokens* is her second collection and is the Poetry Book Society's Winter Choice. In 2014, she co-founded *Prac Crit*, an online journal of poetry and criticism. She is currently the Poetry Editor at Chatto & Windus and an Honorary Visiting Professor at the University of Liverpool.



Photo © Marc Lixenberg

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What do you think?

- Find the poem 'I Leave This at Your Ear' by W. S. Graham on the Scottish Poetry Library website. How is it in communication with Howe's poem 'Waking'?
- How many definitions does the word 'wake' have? How many are used in the poem?
- Well, have you? Ever taken a DNA test? Did the results give you similar circular thought processes as the ones in 'Have you ever taken a DNA test?'?
- Read 'Parallax' aloud – to someone else, or just out into a room. What do you notice about rhyme in the poem? Is there anything that rhymes – or half-rhymes – with 'closed'? Why might that be?

Reply in writing

Write a seven-word poem which – when formatted as a perfect text circle – contains multiple meanings. Looking for a theme or topic? Imagine it's a poem which is to be engraved on the inside of a wedding ring.

Find out more

Other work by Sarah Howe

Loop of Jade (Chatto & Windus) – winner of the T. S. Eliot Prize 2015

On screen & further reading

Find our interview with Sarah Howe and hear her readings from *Loop of Jade* on the **T. S. Eliot Prize Gold Playlist** on YouTube. Visit the poet's page at www.penguin.com

If you like Sarah Howe's work, try...

- **Fiona Benson**
- **Bhanu Kapil**
- **Hannah Sullivan**

www.sarahhowepoetry.co.uk

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

Waking

after W. S. Graham

These heavying months, my nights have bobbed in your wake –
quiet passenger in your heart-lulled craft, asleep
to the glaring world of after. Soon we will make

our introductions: this is called *home*, this a *tree*,
that bite at your cheek is *winter*. You can't yet hear
our voices' muffled cello; your dial's tuned to sea.

My steps lengthen and slow, but my fears lope before
me: laid out on a gurney, gut a sinking stone,
straining to hear the pitch of ocean at your door

to find the room silent: unthink it. I will take
each day by restless day until we hear your cry
rise among the liquid stars assembled as you wake.

FORETOKENS



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Have you ever taken a DNA test?

lost there are things
stay which should



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Parallax

after Neruda, Sonnet XVII

For a few months around two-and-a-half you mixed up *you & I*.
Poems, of course, do it all the time. I'd say, *Wait, you need your hat!*

& you took that *you* as a fixed star to navigate by, not knowing yet
how stars, according to the position of the viewer, shift in the sky.

It would take me a moment to adjust, & your face, in that glitch
of light delay, took on the disconcerting air of telepath or scryer

deep into my heart, young & ancient at once: *You want milk*. Do I?
Or one performing the toddler Jedi mind trick with a finger twitch.

I come here: an entreaty in your mouth, waiting for the other, me,
to step through into the rippling mirror world, and embrace you

whole again. Things you'd rather not know, children show you
in yourself. Viewed from earth, stars trace nervous loops. How time

would crawl & race those early days, our worlds still so intertwined
your face was mine, your head nodded into sleep, & my eyes closed.



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