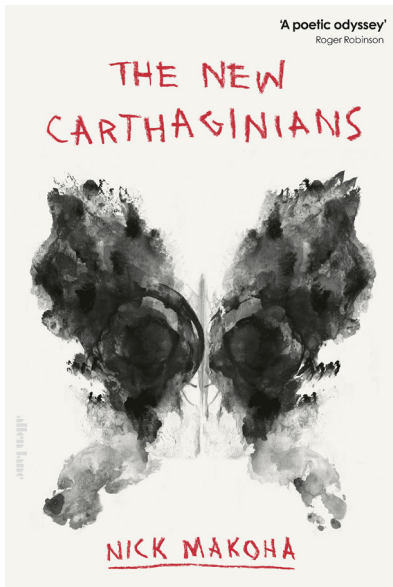


T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2025 READERS' NOTES

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.



The New Carthaginians
(Penguin Press, 2025)
by Nick Makoha. Search
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elsewhere, even through seemingly random or, at the time, incomprehensible connections or coincidences. Nick Makoha's recent collection of poems examines this butterfly effect with dizzying skill.' – Maria Jastrzębska, *The Writer's Mosaic*

'Makoha breaks the convention of ekphrastic poetry that seeks purely to describe works of art through poetic language. Instead, the poems themselves adopt the form of Basquiat's "exploded collages", a term that Makoha finds in the writing of critic and curator Diego Cortez. A note by the poet details how Cortez became 'particularly interested in the way Jean-Michel "explodes" the popular twentieth-century compositional device known as "collage" [...] The exploded collage [...] gives physical equality to all particles [...] and] the radical change is in the background as opposed to the iconic figures Basquiat places in the foreground.' – Esther Kondo Heller, *The Poetry Review*

On *The New Carthaginians*

'Like Dante entering hell through a rip in the universe, Makoha enters history, accompanied not by Virgil but by a Black Icarus with a microchip for a mouth, and the shade of the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. As we follow them, channel surfing and scoffing pepperoni pizza, fragments of the past fly around us like swirling leaves in a tempest – a Bruce Willis film projected on to a skyscraper, African herders caught up in a conflict over water, Freud lecturing on the interpretation of dreams. It's a dizzying experience, but anchoring it all is the recurrent theme of a 1976 hijacking: "Air France Flight 139 will depart from Tel Aviv [...] A German will ask for the freedom of forty Palestinians detained in Israel."

– Philip Terry, *The Guardian*

'The ancient, North African civilisation of Carthage was destroyed by the Roman empire; an act of vengeance to stop it ever becoming a challenge again. In his Prologue to *The New Carthaginians*, Nick Makoha warns us it is not only the living who die. "Futures die. So can a past." It's not hard to find parallels of such devastation today. "Have you seen my city on fire? Flames throwing themselves / at buildings the way the sea throws itself at rocks," he asks in the poem 'CODEX®'. What happens in one part of the world influences things

About the poet

Dr. Nick Makoha is a Ugandan poet based in London. His debut collection *Kingdom of Gravity* (2017) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and named one of *The Guardian's* Best Books of the Year. Winner of the Ivan Juritz Prize, the *Poetry London* Prize, the Brunel African Poetry Prize and the Toi Derricotte & Cornelius Eady Prize (for his pamphlet *Resurrection Man*), Nick has been writer in residence for the ICA, the Wordsworth Trust and Wasafiri. He is a Cave Canem Graduate Fellow, a Complete Works alumnus and founder of the Obsidian Foundation. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.



Photo © Dirk Skiba

'In [*The New Carthaginians*], I explore how Basquiat's 'exploded collage' can be used as a poetic device. The exploded collage allows for multiple codices of information and insight to be displayed all at once, free of social hierarchies. To these, Basquiat adds a sampling of experience, the way a DJ samples music. It is an active ingredient that provides paintings, pictures or pages with a new emotional charge. The seemingly nonsensical use of language, symbols, numbers and images are in fact a code for those willing to engage. I gleaned the phrase "exploded collage" from the work of one of Basquiat's critics and curators, Diego Cortez. Cortez curated the first public showcase of Basquiat's work, in the MoMA P.S.1 group show 'New York / New Wave' in 1981; he was drawn, he said, to Basquiat's use of line. Later, he became particularly interested in the way Jean-Michel "explodes" the popular twentieth-century compositional device known as "collage", which existed from Constructivism and Cubism to Robert Rauschenberg. The exploded collage, Cortez explains, gives physical equality to all particles and was Basquiat's ultimate achievement. In the exploded collage the radical change is in the background, as opposed to the iconic figures Basquiat places in the foreground.' – Nick Makoha, from *The New Carthaginians* notes

What do you think?

- 'She has me speaking in my fourth language / but my thoughts have us undressed in my first.' Consider 'Basquiat asks the Poet about Death' in relation to language, or register. What do you notice?
- Visit Wikipedia to find out more about the Jean-Michel Basquiat painting *Equals Pi* (1982), which gives the poem its title. Read the excerpt above in which Nick Makoha talks about his technique. What do you make of the phrase or technique 'exploded collage' in relation to both the poem and the painting?
- What is pi? What's its literal meaning; what is its meaning in the poem? What do you notice about the frequency with which it occurs in the poem? Why might that be?
- What does 'Codex©' say about camouflage and disguise?

Reply in writing

Look online to find a work by Jean-Michel Basquiat that speaks to you. Write a poem in response. Who in Basquiat's circle interests you – Warhol, Madonna, Rei Kawakubo, someone else? Write a poem about their work. Now widen out to their circle, eg Warhol's friends or Madonna's collaborators. Pick one person, and write about their work. Create a chain of ekphrastic poems, circle by circle. Where do you end up?

Find out more

Other work by Nick Makoha

Resurrection Man (Jai-Alai Books, 2017)

Kingdom of Gravity (Peepal Tree Press, 2017)

On screen & further reading

Hear Nick in a video recorded for **Kings College London** and in the **Wasafiri sub(VERSE)ive interview** series.

If you like Nick Makoha's work, try...

- **Roger Robinson**
- **George the Poet**
- **Warsan Shire**

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

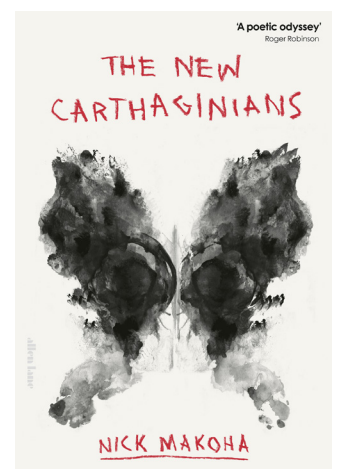
The T. S. Eliot Prize, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2023, is awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland. The Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. The T. S. Eliot estate 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 us for 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 are published on the T. S. Eliot Prize website. 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

Basquiat asks the Poet about Death

At a rooftop party, the night is the night, and we are watching death.
Or should I say Bruce Willis is walking barefoot in a skyscraper?
I wish I had taken a picture. The host, some newscaster you would
recognise from TV, has hired a firm to project the film onto the hotel
wall across the street. My date has just returned from the bathroom.
I am her plus one. Pointing to the open bar, I can feel the sun's heat
reflecting off the building. She has me speaking in my fourth language
but my thoughts have us undressed in my first. By the pool, a waiter asks
Are you ready to order? You recommend the Pad Thai with chicken
for two and if they are out of that you say we'll go for the snapper with
a snake-bean salad. DJ Shadow is connecting speakers to his decks when
his left elbow knocks the Blood Orange Champagne Mule to the concrete.
Even falling has its grace. Bruce Willis is at the top of the Nakatomi building.
Terrorists intend to blow it up. He is ready to face a paradox. A building burning
is a way of saying *you're not welcome here*. The waiter returns with our cutlery.
I can see my country in the steel with only weeks to go before it's bankrupt.
As if I needed the reminder that I can be in two places at once.



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Equals *pi*

1.

The three of us paddle in our kayaks to Pungume Island. Before the third morning, the future separates into sea and sky. In the fractured extension of broken time, everything depends on how you interpret it, just as a prayer is more than the order of its words. Take that corner of the sky –

notice how the brightness of a gleaming sun retreats from the world? The journey picks us up in Stone Town where all our food and drinks are catered. A lone fisherman beckons us to the far side of the beach. In the brief history of his silence, we set up camp for the night as the fisherman

tends to a fire under the baobab trees. I fall asleep to the flame. What if the spaces we use for testimony are equal to *pi*? Here is a burning bush. Moses was a fugitive who saw the whole of Egypt's harvest destroyed. He stood against a troop of magicians and had to believe that the God

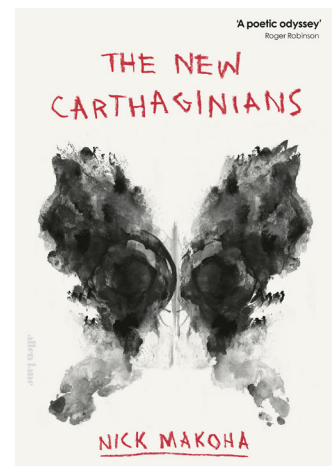
2.

who called to him from the flames of a burning thicket would terraform his reality. In the brief history of this other silence, he was talking to God, in the same way I'm talking to you. What theatre, to catch God mid-sentence. I wonder if he stresses his Ts? I wonder if when Kanye burns

his childhood home to rubble on stage if he is really drawing a line, a parallel to a burnt city which equals *pi*. What if the burning bush was God's cover blown? Or what if the flames were God's primer and the flames' crackle was the soundscape he embodied while he awaits another voice? The kind

of voice you might hear coming out of the drum kit of Max Roach while recording *Money Jungle* in the now. By now I mean, today is equal to *pi*. The pistol of a dead man is equal to *pi*. The year 1976 is equal to *pi*. Entebbe airport with its floor on fire is equal to *pi*.

poem continues overleaf



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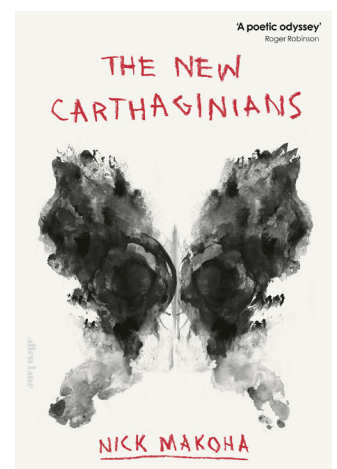
3.

The opening scene of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* will, if you allow it, have you standing on the sofa's edge for ninety minutes. The dance your heart makes in the closing credits is equal to *pi*. So are the number of times you watch it again as if for the first time.

The world trying to reset itself is equal to *pi*. As is the burden that arouses men to labour. That too is equal to *pi*. Do you notice a pattern? Ok! Don't focus on the spine but on what it holds up. The Future is an eroding witness, and she will tell you that war is not

about protecting the border but about how much blood was spilt within it. Tragedy belongs to such whispers. The bodies of your friends in a morgue are equal to *pi* and whatever flame is burning. Fame in a world like this is worthless – that too equals *pi*.

*My country is a woman in heat,
a bridge of lusts. Mercenaries cross her,
applauded by the massing sands. – Adonis*

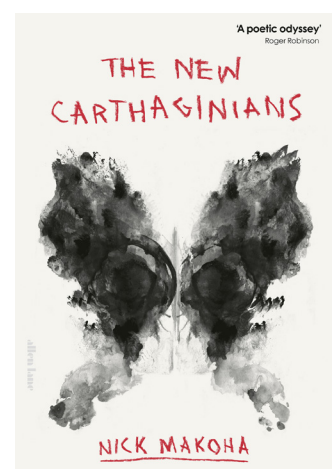


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Codex©

When death was a winged horse, I escaped
my country by taking a flight south. Clouds
between the sky and us. Between the earth
and us. I devoted my time to the background
turning slowly as engines roared, en route
to a waiting city. The night seemed to comprehend
and answer; it became a guardian that mistook
me for part of itself. Sometimes it was a gate
or face or a document. But as a desert bird
is silent so was I. As the light turned so did
the stretched wings of the plane. Maybe I'm
only here to wait, the way a mountain waits
for the valley below. The way the future waits
for our lives to take place, learning and watching.



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