



## Forward Prizes Shortlist Collections – Book Group Introduction

The Forward Prizes have been highlighting the very best poetry being published in the UK since 1992. This year's jury, chaired by Shahidha Bari, read 204 new collections, selecting the ten exciting books which make up the Best Collection and Best First Collection shortlists. Why not use the lists – and our notes, below – as a jumping off point for a poetry book club session?

You could even bring your fellow members to the [Forward Prizes ceremony](#) on October 20<sup>th</sup> at the Southbank Centre to hear the poets live.

Book groups that have tried poetry tell us that the conversation sparked by a handful of poems is often hugely rewarding...and, unlike discussions of long novels, there's no guilt about failing to finish some massive tome. Plan your meeting ahead as poetry might require a different format from other writing you discuss. If a collection seems too much then pick out a few poems or themes to focus on – or buy copies of the [Forward Book of Poetry 2020](#) for samples from all the shortlisted books. We recommend you start your session by taking it in turns to read a poem aloud to the group – each member could pick a favourite and say why they like it. It may also be useful for one or more members of the group to research the poet and their collection. We've come up with a few questions you can use to initiate conversation, but there is no wrong way to approach poetry, or to appreciate and discuss it. Just dive in and enjoy!

### Best Collection Shortlist

#### Fiona Benson – Vertigo & Ghost (Cape Poetry)

This is a collection that speaks out against the abuse of power. In an extended, graphic sequence the Greek god Zeus is refigured as a serial rapist, whose violence against women is both exposed and overlooked. This is followed by an intimate insight into early motherhood, with its all tenderness and anxieties – reaching from the back garden to global geopolitics.

1. What contemporary debates does Benson enter into with her presentation of Zeus? Do you need to be familiar with the myths referenced to engage with these poems?
2. What is the effect of having different voices, including Zeus's own, in the poems in the first section of the book?
3. What is different about the second section of the collection? Does the register as well as the subject-matter change? How do these areas and themes relate to and interact with the opening sequence?

### **Niall Campbell – Noctuary (Bloodaxe Books)**

These poems live in the late nights and early hours of the morning which feature so prominently in early parenthood. Here Campbell discovers the joys and anxieties of caring for another, new life. The outside world – both human and natural – creeps in through the drawn curtains, illumined and recast by fatherhood.

1. Is it unusual to see early parenthood documented from a father's perspective? What does Campbell show us that isn't often shared?
2. What is the register and tone of these poems? Who are they spoken by, and to? How loud are they? What music do they have?
3. What different types of work are explored in these poems? Are there connections as well as contrasts?

### **Ilya Kaminsky – Deaf Republic (Faber & Faber)**

Like a play, this collection has a cast, settings, scenes. But instead of sitting in the audience, we are intimately close to these characters – acting as extras in the drama that unfolds. Sign language punctuates the poems, as occupying troops kill a young deaf boy and the town reacts by using deafness as a form of resistance. In the midst of tragic circumstances we find a love story and everyday heroism.

1. Why do you think the town becomes deaf? What roles do deafness and quietness play?
2. What imagery stands out to you from these poems? Are images more important than sounds here?
3. What changes between Acts One and Two? And what remains the same? How did you feel at the end?

### **Vidyan Ravinthiran – The Million-petalled Flower of Being Here (Bloodaxe Books)**

Sonnets are whispers which are intended to be overheard and here they share the intimacies of a marriage with the reader. Though they are formal, these poems speak with

conversational ease of life in northern England for a mixed-race couple, collapsing the divide between the political and personal to look directly at the origins of our contemporary discontent and the role love might play in its remedy.

1. What contemporary political issues does Ravinthiran tackle in these poems? How do these connect to the personal relationship at the heart of the book?
2. When the word 'we' is used in these poems, who does it include?
3. In a Guardian review, Ben Wilkinson wrote that this collection 'approaches divisive politics with humanity and warmth'? What do you think he means by this? Do you agree?

### **Helen Tookey - City of Departures (Carcenet)**

The departures of this collection's title could be taken to indicate the variety of its contents. On the other hand it could refer to the spaces these poems inhabit – neglected houses and gardens, wrecked boats, seemingly unpeopled hotels. Yet, though the reader seems to haunt deserted streets and structures, this book has much to tell us about the relationship between the world and art, the past and present, others and ourselves.

1. What echoes and connections exist between these poems which move between voices, times and places? What atmosphere or tone is evoked through such disparate and different pieces?
2. Tookey uses the form of the prose poem a lot in this collection. Why do you think this is? What is the impact of the dense layout of the long prose poem which closes the book?
3. This collection contains many references to visual art and its creators. What questions does Tookey raise by looking at the works and the people behind them?

### **Best First Collection Shortlist**

#### **Raymond Antrobus – The Perseverance (Penned in the Margins)**

Ranging across history and continents, these poems operate in the spaces in between, their haunting lyrics creating new, hybrid territories. Meditations on the d/Deaf experience and mixed race identity sit alongside complex and ambivalent takes on masculinity and complicated feelings of grief. But as much as this is a book of loss, it is also one of what is gained in these contested spaces.

1. What role does sound play in these poems of d/Deafness?
2. What conversations take place in these poems? Between individuals? With other poems and poets?
3. In what ways does this collection raise issues of colonialism and its legacy?

### **Jay Bernard – Surge (Chatto & Windus)**

This combination of archival excavation, public memory and contemporary experience is a work of witness and activism. In 1981, thirteen young black people were killed in a house fire at a birthday party in south London and the indifference with which the tragedy was met by the state triggered a new era of race relations in Britain. This collection acts as a memorial to the lives lost in the New Cross fire, but also interrogates that moment and its links with our present situation, tracing a line to Grenfell.

1. Who is speaking in this collection? What voices are brought to the page and back to life? And who are they speaking to?
2. What different types of music and rhythms are present in these poems?
3. Are there moments of pride and celebration alongside the outrage in this book? What is the balance between them? What is the overall impact?

### **David Cain – Truth Street (Smokestack Books)**

This collection finds the poetry of tragedy in ordinary language pushed to its limits. On 15 April 1989, during the opening minutes of the FA Cup semi-final between Nottingham Forest and Liverpool, 96 men, women and children died in what remains the most serious tragedy in UK sporting history.. Published to mark the 30th anniversary of the Hillsborough Stadium disaster, this epic poem is part oral history and part documentary theatre, constructed using verbatim testimony and witness statements from the second inquest.

1. What is the effect of having the events presented chronologically, almost like a script, in this way?
2. Why do you think Cain decided to use the words of the witnesses and relatives alone and not add his own? Why does he not correct grammatical errors?
3. What sorts of imagery and phrasing do we find in the testimony presented here? What does it tell us about the capacity and limitations of language?

### **Isabel Galleymore – Significant Other (Carcenet)**

These poems bring us nature, in all its baffling, brilliant variety. Detailing the extraordinary and alien-seeming life on our own planet, these precise and attentive lyrics illuminate own relationships with each other and the species we share our world with. Interrogating metaphor and cliché, this collection asks us to renew our understanding of connection, and our responsibilities to each other and all life.

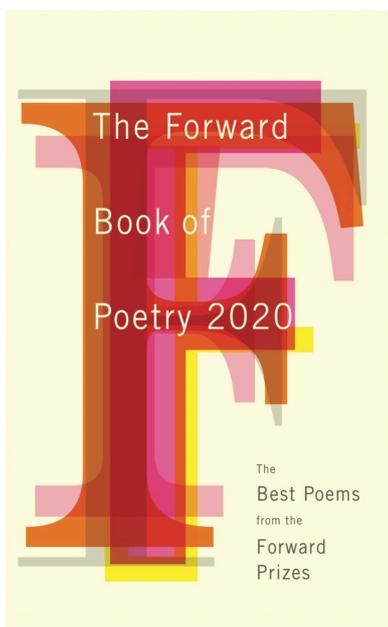
1. Many of the species depicted here might be considered exotic, while others are distant because they go unseen, living on the ocean floor. Why do you think Galleymore chooses to look at these creatures rather than ones we are more familiar with?
2. In what ways might we read this as a collection of love poems?
3. Most of these poems are short and compact in form. Why do you think this is?

### Stephen Sexton – *If All the World and Love Were Young* (Penguin Books)

This is an elegy you would not expect; an exploration of grief played out in a video game, with a voluminous list of 'Credits' at the end. The poet retraces the illness of his mother, her death and his grief, mapping them on to the levels of Super Mario World. Here we access the individual imagination through universal grief and the real world through the pixels of a virtual one.

1. The sections of this collection all mirror one another. Why do you think there is this repetition and recurrence?
2. What imagery is present in these poems? Which senses does it evoke? Is it describing the real world, or a virtual one?
3. What does this book tell us about grief and memory? How does it deploy language to reflect these emotions and states?

### The Forward Book of Poetry 2020



[The Forward Book of Poetry 2020](#) brings together a selection of the best poetry published in the British Isles over the last year, including the winners of the 2019 Forward Prizes - and a foreword by jury chair Shahidha Bari.

She and her fellow judges - Jamie Andrews of the British Library, plus poets Tara Bergin, Andrew McMillan and Carol Rumens - read a year's worth of new collections plus selected poems from magazines and competitions before arriving at their choices.

In celebrating today's fresh voices alongside new work by familiar names, this anthology offers both an overview of the current poetry scene and a great introduction to contemporary poets.

'These annual anthologies of the poems in the running for the Forward Prizes remain the best way of encountering the richness that new poetry has to offer.' *Daily Telegraph*