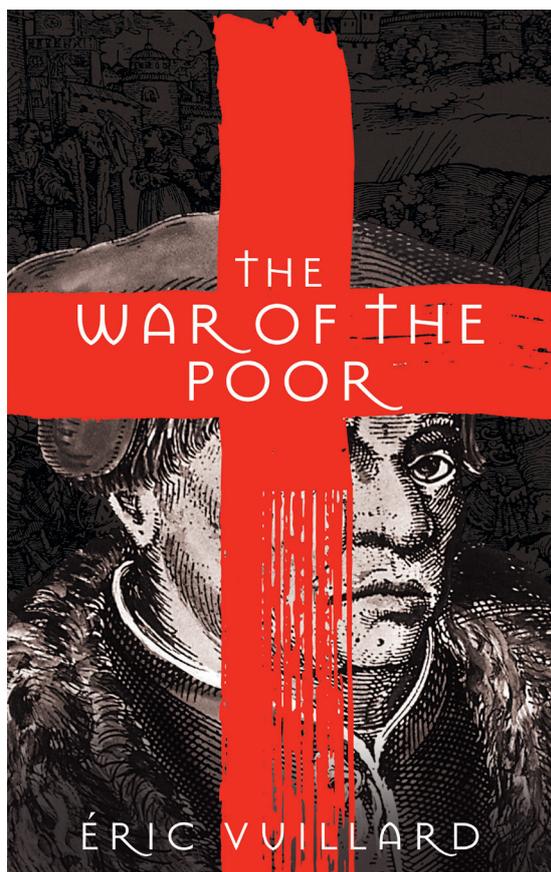


The
2021
International
Booker
Prize

From Judging Room to Living Room A Discussion Guide for Readers



The War of the Poor

Éric Vuillard

Translated from French by Mark Polizzotti

Picador

thebookerprizes.com

What the judges decided

'From the very first paragraph of this blazing piece of historical fiction Vuillard has the reader transfixed. Set at a time when religious differences sent nations to war and individuals to the pyre, Vuillard's account of the life of a largely forgotten visionary is both a dazzling piece of historical re-imagining and a revolutionary sermon, a furious denunciation of inequality.'

What the judges discussed: ideas to explore

- *The War of the Poor* is the shortest book on this year's shortlist, yet one judge described reading it as 'like being in a strong wind and being swept along'; another likened the book to a 'visionary revolutionary tract'. What makes it so powerful?
- *The War of the Poor* is set in the early 16th century, but it is a very angry book. For Thomas Müntzer, the book's hero, the fight for equality begins in the streets. One judge said 'It comes from a place of great urgency. You think he's writing historical fiction, but really he's writing about now.' How did it remind you of the world today?
- Thomas Müntzer was born in 1490 or thereabouts. He believed that the end of the world was nigh and that it was up to the true believers to side with God in bringing in a new era for mankind. This is not unlike what many radical evangelical Christians believe now. To what extent do you see the similarities between them, despite the fact that they are separated by more than 500 years?
- The author likes to remember Jean-Jacques Rousseau's saying: 'You are undone if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody'. How does that lesson come across in *The War of the Poor*?

About the book

The history of inequality is a long and terrible one. And it's not over yet. Short, sharp and devastating, *The War of the Poor* tells the story of a brutal episode from history, not as well-known as tales of other popular uprisings, but one that deserves to be told. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century takes on the powerful and the privileged. But quickly it becomes more about the bourgeoisie. Peasants, the poor living in towns, who are still being promised that equality will be granted to them in heaven, begin to ask themselves: and why not equality now, here on earth? There follows a furious struggle. Out of this chaos steps Thomas Müntzer, a complex and controversial figure. Sifting through history, Éric Vuillard extracts the story of one man whose terrible and novelistic life casts light on the times in which he lived – a moment when Europe was in flux. Inspired by the recent *gilets jaunes* protests in France: a populist, grassroots protest movement - led by workers - for economic justice. While *The War of the Poor* is about 16th-century Europe, this short polemic has a lot to say about inequality now.

About the author and translator

Éric Vuillard was born in May 1968 in Lyon, France. He is a writer and filmmaker who has written nine award-winning books, including *Conquistadors* (winner of the 2010 Prix Ignatius J. Reilly), and *La bataille d'Occident* and *Congo* (both of which received the 2012 Prix Franz-Hessel and the 2013 Prix Valéry-Larbaud). He won the 2017 Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary prize, for *L'ordre du jour*. He lives in Rennes, France.

Mark Polizzotti was born in July 1957 in New York, USA. He has translated more than 50 books from French, including works by Gustave Flaubert, Patrick Modiano, Marguerite Duras, André Breton, and Raymond Roussel. His translation of Éric Vuillard's *The Order of the Day* was a finalist for the French-American Foundation Translation Award. A Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and the recipient of a 2016 American Academy of Arts & Letters Award for Literature, he is the author of 11 books, including *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton*, which was a finalist for the PEN/ Martha Albrand Award for Best Nonfiction; Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*; *Bob Dylan: Highway 61 Revisited*; and *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto*. He directs the publications programme at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and lives in Brooklyn.



The author says...

‘It seemed to me that, by relating the life of Thomas Müntzer, tracing the course of his tumultuous existence and of human precariousness, I could — through this fanatical, talented preacher — evoke the anonymous crowds that surrounded him. The masses, the ones we used to call “the wretched,” are what we always know least about.’



The translator says...

‘Éric’s writing beautifully balances moral authority with controlled rage, passionate conviction, and, when appropriate, acid irony. Finding the right voice in English with which to convey these shifting registers was a stimulating challenge, even as I felt honoured to help bring the story of Thomas Müntzer to an English-speaking audience.’