

Nicholson Baker Surprises with His Lucid Perspicacity

by Richard Amero

While written in a simplistic vein, Nicholson Baker's novel *The Anthologist* (Simon & Shuster, New York, 2009) will appeal principally to readers who have some prior knowledge of what he is writing about. The major and minor plots can probably be reversed, but, to me, the principal subject or theme is poetry. Paul Chowder, the anthologist of the title (who was also the narrator) was partial to a kind of poetry that was popular in the nineteenth century and in pre-World War II high school text books, but not in post-World War II college courses. The sub-plot concerns Chowder's involvement with Roz, a love partner who has walked out on him. When he is not ruminating on the decline of rhyme in poetry or on the horrors of run-on lines, also known as "enjambments", Chowder is wondering how he can lure Roz, who is nine years younger than he, back into his bed and table (her potato salad is almost as tempting as her). Here the charismatic dog "Smacko," whom Roz adored, figures prominently.

Plots fit together well, though, there is too much talk about iambic pentameter and whether or not it is iambic or pentameter and whether stops or rests between lines exaggerate, reinforce or dramatize lines. This talk about tetrameter, duplets, triplets, etc. obscures the fact that poems have content and transmit emotional wallops. Chowder/Baker is amazingly prescient when he describes why the best poets are sad.

While the "will-she, won't she" plot does not resolve itself; Chowder achieves a victory when he writes a long-delayed introduction to his anthology of rhymed poetry. His absconded girlfriend has bought furniture for her new abode and wants to spend time enjoying it. (Who is to say a divan isn't better than a bed?)

Chowder admits that he writes free verse and that he is not good at finding rhymes. He thinks that even the best poets have written only a few poems (hence the need for anthologies) that "may last as long as the language survives" (a cliché!). The rest may or may not be "garbage," a much-used word. He vacillates a bit here.

This is a novel that would benefit from the use of an index because the list of poets and of lines and even just words from their poems is given fleeting, but, generally, loving attention . . . "sometime" (Thomas Wyatt); "quiet" (Sir Walter Raleigh). Chowder makes a good case for the importance of simple meters or beats and of rhymes in poems by tracing their roots back to nonsense verse in infancy and to their conscious and unconscious use in popular music. He has high praise for the meters and rhymes of Cole Porter, Rogers and Hart, John Lennon, and Paul Simon. I never guessed before how rhyme could steady a person in an emotional crisis!

Sara Teasdale is Chowder's main heroine. Perhaps because of copyright or space limitations he does not include specimens of her work, but the reader is encouraged to look up her poems on the internet or in anthologies. Vachel Lindsay, a highly regarded poet of the early 20th century and today forgotten (especially by poets who teach courses

in college) was Teasdale's brief lover. Louise Bogan, whom Chowder reveres with an intensity equal to his liking for Teasdale, had a similar short torrid affair with Theodore Roethke, whose poking and prodding poems could not be lightly brushed off. These salacious asides have little to do with poetry but they whet the reader's appetite. Similarly intoxicating is Chowder's dream of meeting long-dead poet Edgar Allen Poe in a Laundromat in Marseilles, France. When Chowder asks Poe what his now poem *The Raven* is about Poe responds, "It's about a man who has a visit from a raven." Wisely author Baker uses the fantasy gimmick sparingly, not like, say, James Joyce.

Chowder regards teaching poetry as repellant, but he is not averse to participating in poetry conferences if they pay and they are in far-away places like Switzerland. Who wants to read the amateurish effluvia of teenage girls and boys? Chowder (and presumably author Baker) is well-informed about the clash between rhymers and free-versers. He traces the conflict back to Thomas Campion during the Elizabethan period. Since his preference is for the rhymers he castigates the works of those in the other group. Despite his excavations in Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry (helped by the selections of other anthologists), he thinks contemporary free-versers got their start with the ideas of Italian Futurist Filippo Marinetti though translators of English poetry into French, like Jules Laforgue and Stephane Mallarme, also get a going-over. He disdains the poems of T. S. Eliot (except for *Prufrock* (it has good beats and rhymes!), proto-fascist Ezra Pound ("the source of all evil") and (Gloucesterites read this!) Charles Olson, whom he refers to as "crazy" and "wacko." He is dazzled by the creativity of Algernon Swinburne (but wishes he was more concise), impressed by Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*, likes Longfellow's *Driftwood*, and thinks John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a lot of mush. References to the poetic skills of Edward Lear, Rudyard Kipling and Ted Geisel (Dr. Seuss) show that Chowder (or author Baker) is not a snob. Not so Carl Sandburg, who gets a kindly, dressing-down because he is more impressive when he is heard on tape than when he is read. As with any anthologist, Chowder, and author Baker, omit many poets. Nonetheless, those who are intermittently or casually mentioned are worth checking out. James Fenton may or may not be the best poet alive today (Chowder's comments about the poem *The Vapor Trail* sound like religious worship!) and John Ashbery, may not be the worse poet alive, though he is today the most awarded and acclaimed.

The Anthologist is a good book for literature majors to read. They will find the names of many poets who are not mentioned by their professors. They may be inclined to resuscitate their memories of high school and to recall the pleasures of oral recitations, in which beat, rhythm and melodic emphasis were overwhelming. (I can still hear the rhythmic chords of Alfred Noyes' *The Highwayman* and Gilbert Keith Chesterton's *The Battle of Lepanto*.) I doubt any reader will accept completely Chowder's defense of rhyme and of four (ballad stanza) beats in poems. True, all poems that are not formal, short, precise, and lyrical, may not be poetry, in Chowder's sense (he calls them "plums"), nevertheless these poems reverberate with the grandiloquent language used in the King James' Version of the Bible, with the penetrating keenness of Shakespeare, with the broad vision of Walt Whitman, and with the best, if fewer works, by such imagists and

poets as Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Mary Oliver and by many of their less talented disciples.