

## ANTHOLOGY

A literary anthology is a collection of works by various authors in a single volume. In Greek, the word is a combination of *anthos* (flower) and *logia* (collecting). The Greeks used the word to describe a compilation of epigrams which, like a gathering of flowers, brings the loveliest specimens together in one place.

In the classroom, the advantages of anthologies are obvious. Teachers want to cover as many representative works as they can; students would like to spend as little money as possible. Anthologies offer a convenient, relatively inexpensive alternative to syllabi made up of a long costly list of books by single authors. Anthologies may attempt to cast a very wide net indeed—witness *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*—or they may focus on particular eras (the Beat Generation, nineteenth-century Ireland), groups (working-class writers, African American women), or specialized genres (science writing, travel essays). However, even when it has a limited scope, an anthology can still showcase a variety of writing within that field.

In four-year colleges and universities, creative writing students are often English majors. These students will have been exposed to canonical authors in other courses; however, they may not have read much contemporary writing. Anthologies featuring the best work published in the past year or years can move toward rectifying this situation. Scribner, for instance, publishes a *Best American* series in a variety of genres: fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and so on. Anchor publishes *The O. Henry*

*Awards for fiction and the Anchor Essay Annual. The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses* contains a sometimes more adventurous annual selection of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. In addition to being conscientious editors, Robert Atwan, series editor of *Best American Essays*, and David Lehman, series editor of *Best American Poetry*, are also accomplished writers themselves in the genres they cover. They clearly take their missions seriously. Unless the reader is independently wealthy and has no time constraints (few college students or instructors fit this description), she can rest assured that an editor has read far more examples of a genre than she ever could herself.

And yet, even if they read hundreds of stories or thousands of poems a year, anthologists will miss plenty of good work. After all, there are thousands of literary *magazines* published each year. Moreover, every anthologist will have his or her bias. In his introduction to the 2001 edition of *The Best American Poetry*, Robert Hass, editor of that year's volume, notes his differences with Lehman: "Reading for a while, I was aware that David had, on the whole, favored a poetry of wit and that I, on the whole, had singled out poems that were a little spiky or raw, and intellectually demanding. He was drawn to charm and I was drawn away from it" (21). This variation in taste is all the more noteworthy because, seen from a distance, the work of Hass and Lehman is not strikingly dissimilar. When two poets who share a fairly common aesthetic disagree with each other, we can expect a much greater gap between writers from two distinct camps. And if these opposing anthologists should each publish anthologies, whose should we trust as the most characteristic of the age? Whose is the best? Whose should we be reading?

Perhaps the most (in)famous anthology war in America this century was the "confrontation" between *New Poets of America and England* (1957), edited by Donald Hall and Robert Pack, and *The New American Poetry: 1945 1960* (1960), edited by Donald Allen. The former book contained poets such as Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, and Howard Nemerov—all of them writing in traditional forms—while Allen's anthology featured the experimental work of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Frank O'Hara. Pack later claimed that "in marked contrast" to Allen's book, "which promoted the incandescent, brief revolt of the Beats," his and Hall's anthology "centered upon many of the most important and lasting poets of the last 40 years" (McWilliams, 2002). Writing from a distinctly different vantage, Paul Hoover, editor of *The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry*, calls the poems in *New Poets of America and England* "decorous and

well made" (1994, xxix) by "contributors . . . not eager to reject the influence of British letters in favor of a home-grown idiom" (xxviii). Even in these polite summaries, made decades after the battle of the anthologies, one can hear condescension and disdain lurking just beneath the surface. How much less likely is an anthologist to be sympathetic to the opposing camp in the heat of an ideological war!

One of the most searing indictments of the anthology phenomenon appears in Jed Rasula's *The American Poetry Wax Museum*. In a chapter entitled "Anthologist's Ontologies," Rasula argues convincingly that anthologies breed uniformity, precluding "the appearance of an anthology that is at once eclectic and representative" (1996, 447). He notes how poems become established by appearing in one anthology after another, with editors apparently making their selections primarily by choosing from each other's anthologies. Whether it is for marketing purposes, or simply because the anthologist wants to make a clear aesthetic statement, work is selected with an eye to making disparate parts resolve into a unified whole. The result, Rasula says, is that poems, "like women on view in a Miss Universe pageant, look more like one another than like anybody around them. Any breach in this façade—this means of advertising coherence, unanimity of purpose, and 'universal' relevance—amounts to a disabling infraction" (466).

Finally, though, one suspects Rasula's judgment is too harsh, too sweeping—and too little cognizant of the mitigating effects of time. Adrienne Rich was one of the few women in either *New Poets of America and England* or *New American Poetry*. Her early formalist work fit nicely in Hall and Pack's anthology, yet in the 1960s she rejected what she saw as the patriarchal principles operating in traditional English verse. Had they published their book ten years later, it is doubtful they would have included Rich's poetry. And while Pack's aesthetic has not changed markedly over the years, when Donald Hall edited *The Best American Poetry* in 1989, he included several avant-garde poets who would never have made it into his earlier anthology. The right moves left and the left moves right. As Hoover notes, "The distinction between bohemia and academia was clear in 1960. Today that difference is harder to establish, as many avant-gardists make their living by university teaching" (1994, xxix). The simple fact that Norton anthologies of postmodern poetry and fiction even exist suggests the extensive transformation of the literary landscape. Things change, and even the most polemical anthology may one day find its authors in the canon.