

# Editing *The Penguin Anthology of 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Poetry*:

**E**ditng an anthology is an audacious act of discernment. Whom and what does the editor include? Whom and what does the editor leave out? When the staff of the *Writer's Chronicle* heard that Rita Dove was editing an anthology of 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry, we worried about her. After all, an anthology editor must be willing to suffer the barbs and blogs of outraged poets. To negotiate royalties for permissions to anthologize famous poems, the editor must pass among the fangs of media empires, which seek to drain every ounce of value from their intellectual property, including poets and poems. The following interview relates some of Dove's adventures and misadventures in editing *The Penguin Anthology of 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Poetry*.

Rita Dove served as Poet Laureate of the United States and Consultant to the Library of Congress from 1993 to 1995 and as Poet Laureate of the Commonwealth of Virginia from 2004 to 2006. While serving as President on the AWP Board of Directors in 1987, she won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. The author of several books of poetry, a novel, and a book of essays, she is a playwright and librettist as well. Her play *The Darker Face of the Earth* had its world premiere in 1996 at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and it was subsequently produced at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the Royal National Theatre in London, and other theatres. *Seven for Luck*, a song cycle for soprano and orchestra with music by John Williams, was premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood in 1998. Her most recent collection of poems is *Sonata Mulattica*. She is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

# An Interview with **Rita Dove**



PHOTO BY FRED VIEBAHN

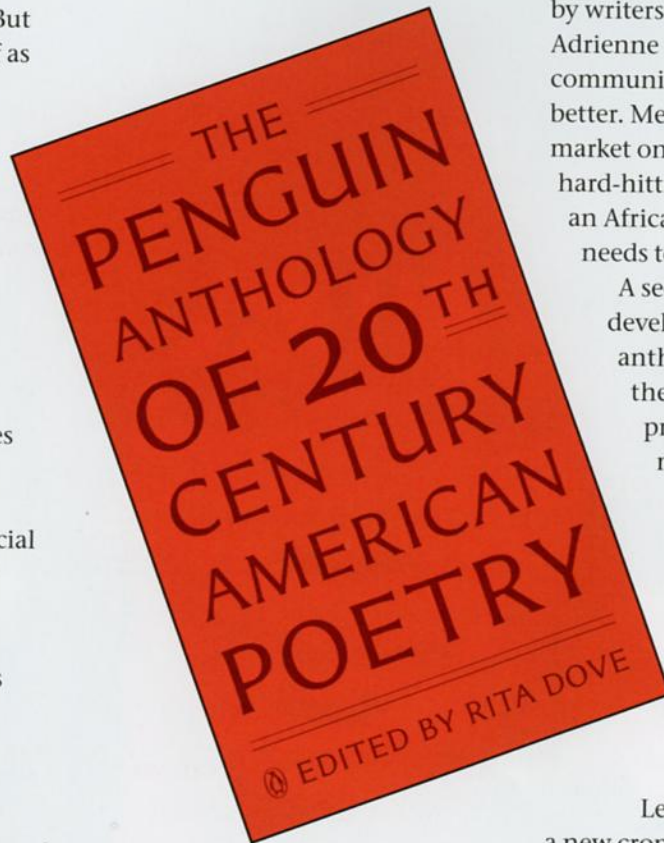
*Ironically, there has always been a strong female presence in the poetry audience, even with mostly men pontificating in print.*

**AWP:** How might the audience for your anthology be different from the audience of older anthologies of modern poetry, such as the early editions of Richard Ellman's Norton anthologies of modern poetry, published back in the 1970s, when you were in college? In what ways might today's twenty-year-old poetry reader be different in comparison to a young poetry reader of the 1970s?

**Rita Dove:** So much is different that the entire interview could consist of me answering this one question! But I'll try to be organized and as brief as possible. The huge amount of information we have nowadays—literally at our fingertips—was just a foreboding back in the 1970s. Since then, Internet technology has brought us closer together, yet, for better or worse, also allowed us to move further apart. It's tempting to think we're connecting on websites and so-called social networks, while we're actually turning into physical hermits in the guise of social butterflies, fluttering about in our quotidian cocoons of cyberspace. This has changed audience access and perception in traditional areas as well, including poetry. Poems are being discussed and dissected in momentous blogs; anyone the world over can get an immediate audiovisual impression of poets reading their poems simply by pulling up video clips on YouTube.

Separate from these developments—yet interwoven on the perceptual level—more poetry by women and ethnic minorities is being recognized by the mainstream publishing industry. Although attempts to preserve the “good ole times” of white male dominance certainly continue, by and large they've been relegated to rearguard struggles; whereas in the 1970s, white male dominance was a bulwark. To

illustrate, a memory that's still vivid in my mind: in 1994, while I was U.S. Poet Laureate, I was obliged to host a reading of the chancellors of the Academy of American Poets at the Library of Congress, in celebration of the Academy's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This was at a time when the chancellors were still elected for life; when a chancellor died, the surviving chancellors would nominate and then cast their votes for his



replacement—clearly a mechanism prone to favoritism. In the commemorative photos, I'm surrounded by ten male poets. (One of the two female chancellors, Amy Clampitt, had just died a couple of weeks earlier, and Mona van Duyn was ill that day.) The pathetic clinging of the Academy chancellors to male dominance and total exclusion of ethnic minorities right up to the turn of the millennium was a paradigm of those rearguard actions.

Ironically, there has always been a strong female presence in the poetry audience, even with mostly men pontificating in print. And it was impossible for me to ignore the fact that America's poets were predominantly male well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; I could not in good conscience skew historical facts in the service of “political correctness.” Fortunately, thanks to sociopolitical upheavals in general and concurrent rebellions by writers like June Jordan and Adrienne Rich, the American poetry community has changed for the better. Men no longer have the market on sensitivity, women write hard-hitting stuff unselfconsciously, an African-American poet no longer needs to scream to get attention.

A second, nearly parallel, development: when Ellman's anthologies came out in the 1970s, creative writing programs were just gaining momentum; I call it Creative Writing's second wave, where for the first time a significant number of poets who had experienced writing workshops as students themselves—Levine, Justice, Kumin, Dobyns,

Levis, Wright—were raising a new crop of MFAs. Then this new batch went out and “spread the word” in American academia, sustaining the relatively few existing writing programs while founding new programs coast to coast. The apparatus supporting creative writing programs expanded to include literary journals, indy and university presses, reading series, grants, festivals, etc. Consequently, more poets were given a chance to hone their craft, and a lot more poetry was being published—which in the process increased and altered poetry's audience. The schools of poetics

t's tempting to think we're connecting on websites and so-called social networks, while we're actually turning into physical hermits in the guise of social butterflies, fluttering about in our quotidian cocoons of cyberspace.

that coalesced in the second third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the Beats, Black Mountain, and New York schools, to name a few—were no longer a viable way to go. There were too many fairly good poets out there, with their individual stories and histories; “schools” couldn’t hold them. This is why poets born during the ’40s and ’50s are represented relatively generously in my anthology—not only were they the start of the exponentially proliferating poetry

generations; they have also had sufficient time to prove themselves by century’s close.

The presence of poets in academia, as well as in other areas of our society, certainly helped to take off some of poetry’s elitist edge. My guess is that over the past two decades, the phenomenon of slam poetry, no matter its literary merits, may also have lowered the threshold of fear where poetry is concerned; today’s audience is broader, more curious,

and diversified. And though I don’t believe that serious poets will ever fill sports arenas or concert halls in this country, we can certainly attract more than the dozen or so die-hard aficionados who’d show up for most poetry events half a century ago.

To return once more to your reference points—Richard Ellman’s Norton anthologies—we must not forget one vital difference. His and similar anthologies of modern/contemporary American poetry were compiled while their editors were smack in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, looking at the culture around them from inside out—the century was still evolving. Today’s hypothetical twenty-year-old poetry readers consider the 20<sup>th</sup> century a done deal—after all, they would have been children at the turn of the millennium; and with that attitude, I suspect, might come a detachment in their appraisal of the poetry in my anthology, which

covers the 20<sup>th</sup> century exclusively—only poems published from 1900 to 2000. The Penguin anthology is a time capsule, because it affords us the opportunity to see the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the eyes of its poets after the gate has been shut.

**AWP:** One of the many great services of an anthology like this is that it encapsulates for us the lineages of literary influence while it shows how complex that influence can be. An influential poet is not merely someone who inspires a certain style or range of subject matter in others; an influential poet can also be someone against whom many other poets felt compelled to rebel. Which poets seemed to be the most influential as you assembled this overview of the last century?

**Dove:** There are influential poets, and influential poems. Early on in my introduction to the anthology, I envision the poetry of the last century in the form of a pop-up book: The jungles of the Beats and Confessionals, a cityscape intersected by the nearly parallel thoroughfares of Pound Boulevard and Eliot Avenue. All of which is a way of saying that there are different topographies whose vegetation or populations spread in different ways. Stevens gets a solitary Great Oak and Hart Crane's doomed Dutch Elm stands of course for his grand opus "The Bridge," which had a profound effect, though it's rarely read nowadays. Twin rows of poplar for Bishop's geometric elegance, which we all pass through but cannot seem to touch. William Carlos Williams earns a patch of sycamores, since his impact zigzags through as many schools as solitary camps—say, from Black Mountaineers to Naomi Shihab Nye. Langston Hughes is an American maple dropping its colorful leaves. And so on.

Let me mention just a few examples of influence, inspiration, maybe

cross-pollination over time and space in 20<sup>th</sup> century American poetry that I try to show in more depth in my introduction: Jeffers came first, Roethke and Stafford really opened up the West's poetic possibilities, while James Wright brought the Midwest closer. Cummings cracked the language apart; Bly burrowed into the subconscious; Sexton celebrated the human body.

And yes, rebellion against influential predecessors counts as influence—at times profoundly so. The Robert Frost backlash of the '60s which lasted at least into the '70s not only buoyed the proponents of the lyric but helped propel a whole bunch of styles we don't necessarily peg as directly antagonistic: new surrealism, meditative and urban poetry, political verse. And then there were the Language poets, reacting to everything in their own deconstructive way!

Looking at poems that freshened the air while lending new weight to the craft, what comes to mind are "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock," "The Fish," "Middle Passage," "We Real Cool," and "I know a Man." Also the first 77 Dream Songs, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," "They Feed They Lion," and "homage to my hips." Not to forget "Howl" and "Daddy," of course—both of which, incidentally, are not in the anthology, for reasons over which I had no control. But that, as they say, is another story entirely.

**AWP:** Frances Mayes wrote a piece for us about how expensive, complicated, and exasperating it was to secure permissions to assemble an anthology ["May I Have Your Permission," February 1993]. Our own experiences here at the *Writer's Chronicle* suggest that publishers and poets' estates have become even more mercenary since then in demanding ever higher fees for permissions to reprint a few poems, even though publication of

he presence of poets in academia,  
as well as in other areas of our society,  
certainly helped to take off some of  
poetry's elitist edge.

a small sample is great marketing for the poets and their books. It is one of our pet peeves here—the high fees for promoting a poet's work! Besides "Howl" and "Daddy," were there other poems that you wanted to include but which required too high a ransom?

**Dove:** Yes, there were; unfortunately, that's the name of the anthology game these days. According to my contract, I was not supposed to be involved in permissions in the first place; on the other hand, there was a firm budget. I entered the permissions negotiations very late in the game, having devoted my energy solely to the editorial process for three years, under the naive assumption that even in today's market my budget was more than bountiful. When I heard rumblings that asking fees for my picks had far surpassed that budget, and realized that the final selection couldn't be made (thereby clearing the way for the actual production) until all permissions were not only secured but also covered by the budget, I began to press for hard figures—my first step into the morass. Penguin's rights agent confided that the asking prices for a relatively small minority of the most expensive poems alone added up to an insane amount, effectively decimating my entire budget. Contributing to an already grim predicament was the fact that the demands for a number of living poets were even more immodest than for some major deceased poets. I was suddenly-faced with the question: had this labor

of love been totally for the birds, or could I salvage the project by tackling the monster personally? In an unorthodox last-minute approach, I wrote to scores of publishers, estates, agents, even poets, explaining my dilemma, stating the fees I could offer according to my own calculations, and asking them to reconsider or, in the case of living poets, to intercede with their rights holders. Nearly all the contemporary poets, save one or two, responded promptly and generously; they contacted their agents or publishers, urging them to

adjust fees accordingly. And after I gave assurances that I would not be robbing Peter to pay Paul, i.e., using the funds saved by one's generosity to pay off a more recalcitrant contributor, most publishers and agents were quite understanding.

However, not all parties placed more value on having their poets represented in a major anthology than on making a buck, even though I had made it clear that there wasn't a buck to be made if I were forced to abandon the whole project or drop unaffordable poems. I find the rising trend among some publishers to regard their authors as commodities rather devastating to the state of the literary union. I know, it's a business... but to allow financial wonks to control culture is a dangerously slippery slope. One publishing house, for instance, "offered" its authors the option to forfeit their share in royalties in order to meet my request



## THE HEIGHT IN BETWEEN

poems by

TIMOTHY  
HOUGHTON

In this book Houghton has achieved a stance that by moving toward love and tentativeness emerges as the affirmation our times want, need, require.



available from your bookseller, Amazon, or directly from  
ORCHISES PRESS • BOX 320533 • ALEXANDRIA, VA 22320-4533

for adjustment, while the publisher did not adjust its own share—pretty calloused behavior towards its poets, wouldn't you say?

But the worst offender by far was the publisher of Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg, whose “couldn't care less” attitude resulted in none of this house's authors being included in the end. I can just hear the keyboards clicking as readers of this interview swing over to their computers to look up the rights holders for Ginsberg and Plath! I'll save them the trouble: the holdout was HarperCollins. Negotiations with their intransigent permissions director dragged on literally until the day when the anthology went into production; seeking common ground, I offered several solutions, including reducing the overall number of poems by Ginsberg, Plath, and Sterling Brown while meeting their exorbitant line fees—a standard last-ditch strategy

employed by anthology editors in order to stay within budget. The answer was nothing less than shocking: all or nothing. In other words, if I didn't pay the same high line fees for all their poets as well as, unbelievably, take all the poems I had initially inquired about, I couldn't have Ginsberg or Plath. Was this some kind of literary hardball poker? Well, I wasn't bluffing. I had no choices left. There was no leeway in the budget, and even if there had been, I would not, could not betray the good faith of all the other rights holders. Pleas from upper Penguin management and even from one of the affected poets, who declared his willingness to forgo royalties, fell on deaf ears; the day before the anthology went into production, HarperCollins withdrew all pending contracts and declared the negotiations closed.

At that point, I confess, I felt a twinge of paranoia. The permissions

director at HarperCollins knew that the editor of this anthology was an African-American woman, a first in the industry for such a major mainstream undertaking. Did he resent my intrusion into a white and mostly male domain? Could that resentment, at least subconsciously, have been behind his condescending attitude and his final imperious attempt at derailment? Well, if there was an ulterior motive, it didn't succeed. Penguin supported my decision to continue without Ginsberg and Plath.

Although the loss of those two 20<sup>th</sup> century icons was distressing, at least their poems can be easily found online and in public libraries for free. What I hated most about this unsettling affair was seeing other, less iconic poets held hostage by the very company they had trusted to promote them. But there is also a bit of poetic irony in the fact that HarperCollins

is part of News Corporation's media empire, and as such a corporate sister to Fox Television. Just imagine—Allen Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath are the property of Rupert Murdoch!

**AWP:** It's nice to see a relatively large sampling of Robert Hayden's work in your anthology. Like Elizabeth Bishop, he was sometimes unfairly belittled during his lifetime for being something of a dainty miniaturist, in spite of the mastery of craft and the huge intellect and heart at work in the poems. Are there other voices included here that you hope will serve as introductions to those who have been overlooked?

**Dove:** When it comes to recent anthologies, it's rare to find anything by Alice Moore, Dunbar-Nelson, or Angelina Weld Grimké. I think it's important for readers to realize that African-American women

were writing taut, fervent poems protesting their dual servitudes while William Carlos Williams danced naked in his front room, Robinson Jeffers observed April storms, and Cummings's balloon man was whistling merrily away. Sometimes, in other anthologies, Sara Teasdale doesn't make the cut; critics think her poems too obvious and even sentimental, yet "There will Come Soft Rains" is one of the most insidiously beautiful and powerful antiwar poems to come out of the First World War. Plus, as my foreword reminds us, she was ten years younger than Robert Frost yet died thirty years before him, so we'll never know how she may have evolved as a poet if she had lived longer. You'll find Melvin

B. Tolson and Countee Cullen well represented in African-American anthologies, but mainstream anthologies tend to pigeonhole them by concentrating on just one aspect of their oeuvre. I wanted to publish Tolson's "Dark Symphony" as well as an excerpt from his masterpiece *Harlem Gallery*, so that (a) he wouldn't be classified as a one-shot wonder and (b) readers could see what a giant leap he made from the calculated paces of "Symphony" to the wild riffing erudition of *Gallery*. Countee Cullen, on the other hand, is known mainly for his "black" lyrics,

carries is the desire to understand the poem, rather than the desire to be understood by the poem. I once knew a scholar who was obsessed with the idea of applying methods of literary analysis. He was developing a codification for creativity, and at one point asked me to fill out a multiple-choice questionnaire that was supposed to translate my creative process into a pie-chart—into bar graph clarity. "We're gonna find out how you think!" he said—he actually chortled—and scurried back into his office. What a wrong-headed approach!

A critic, of course, isn't an automaton and usually, we hope, enters the battlefield driven by an intense love for the genre he or she is reviewing, and normally less with a desire to deconstruct it in a scholarly manner;

what's different,

even in the best of circumstances, is that the critic also reads with an exterior agenda, and therefore is driven by an ulterior motive. He knows that in the end, he will have to formulate a comprehensive written response to the book under his nose. A poetry aficionado, however, is a connoisseur who has little patience for deconstruction and forced reflection. She reads on a more visceral level—for pleasure or solace, for the enjoyment of the music of language—and typically enters the poem with less armor on. If you are such a reader, you will thirst for those moments when it seems the poem is speaking to you and you alone; when the poem understands *you*. I know of poems that have changed the way

**B**ut there is also a bit of poetic irony in the fact that HarperCollins is part of News Corporation's media empire, and as such a corporate sister to Fox Television. Just imagine—Allen Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath are the property of Rupert Murdoch!

while the quietly elegiac complexity of "To John Keats, Poet, at Spring Time" is underappreciated and, therefore, largely unread. Another oft-overlooked poet in danger of being forgotten is Hayden Carruth.

**AWP:** Do you think a poet as editor brings a different kind of selectivity to an anthology, in comparison to the kind of discernment a scholarly critic or theorist would provide?

**Dove:** Absolutely. In fact, I tried to be aware of this—to sensitize myself to the difference—at every stage of the editing process. Both the literary critic and the scholar-theorist, however, bear looking at separately. The scholar approaches the poem from the top down; the baggage she



I look at imagery, cadence, subject matter—poems that fail to inspire critical acclaim yet nevertheless assume near iconic status among other poets who then spin off sparks that do get noticed. Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery* was trashed by critics, who sniffed that his high-energy, truly multicultural diction wasn't "black" enough; but for his chutzpah in claiming the entire world as his rightful oyster, the sly music of some contemporary poets—Frank Bidart, Harryette Mullen, Marilyn Chin, Barbara Hamby, to name a few—

might have had a harder time being appreciated.

**AWP:** It's a brave and thankless occupation, serving as a gatekeeper, especially in this egalitarian age. Every poet believes an anthology should be an homage to his or her own work and literary circle. Publication of a major new anthology is often an occasion for the character assassination of its maker. What made you willing to brave the opprobrium of becoming the editor of an anthology?

**Dove:** It might sound hokey, but when I was approached by the director of Penguin Classics, Elda Rotor, her request—which hit me out of the blue—triggered in me a flash of the trajectory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how it played out in terms of its poetry. That sounds pompous, I know. But I don't mean this in an encyclopedic sense—it's more as if I could feel the shape of the century and wrap my mind around it; there was a definiteness about it, a clear frame secured between the numbers 1900 and 2000. By definition there was no chance of going further back nor reaching forward toward today. It was the end of the millennium as well. Subconsciously, we've brushed off our hands with a "That was it," and shut the door. So I *sensed* the contours of the literary map, and figured that the nooks and crannies would reveal themselves as I surveyed the field.

I also hoped that the challenge would do me good—you know, the school assignment I'd always wished someone had made me do. And though I felt I had read most if not all of the important American poets of the last century, it had been spread over years of school, college, apprenticeship, teaching, reading in the here-and-now. How cool it would be, how exhilarating and nourishing, to read everything again, and more, in a concentrated period? Is that nerdy? Old-time school ethic dies hard!

Once I began selecting, however, I realized that it wasn't enough that a poem was good, or even great: it also had to be either representative, emblematic, transformative, or indicative. Representative and emblematic are pretty self-explanatory—the poem captures the mood of that particular space in time, like "The Wasteland." Haki Mahubuti's work was transformative, because it broke open the prosodic cage and woke up the oral possibilities in a poem; we're still seeing the

**EMERSON COLLEGE**  
BOSTON MASSACHUSETTS

**Creative Writing Fiction**  
Maria Flook  
Lise Haines  
DeWitt Henry  
Margot Livesey  
Kim McLarin  
Pablo Medina  
William Orem  
Pamela Painter  
Ladette Randolph  
Frederick Reiken  
Jessica Treadway  
Steve Yarbrough  
Mako Yoshikawa

**Nonfiction**  
Jabari Asim  
Richard Hoffman  
Megan Marshall  
John Trimbur  
Jerald Walker  
Douglas Whycott

**Poetry**  
Jonathan Aaron  
Christine Casson  
Gail Mazur  
John Skoyles  
Daniel Tobin

**Publishing**  
Bill Beuttler  
Lisa Diercks  
David Emblidge  
Gian Lombardo  
John Rodzvilla  
Daniel Weaver

**Recent Visitors to the Reading Series**  
Willis Barnstone  
Claudia Emerson  
David Ferry  
Tony Hoagland  
Marilyn Nelson  
David Shields

**MFA in Creative Writing**  
Fiction • Poetry • Nonfiction

**MA in Publishing and Writing**  
Book • Magazine • Electronic

**Home to Ploughshares and Redivider**

emerson.edu  
gradapp@emerson.edu  
617-824-8610

repercussions today, not just with Spoken Word poets but all over the field. Indicative applies to those poems that comment on their era, much like a social anthropologist would—Kenneth Koch’s “Fresh Air,” Audre Lorde’s “Power.”

Every person I’ve met who’s edited an anthology has warned me that poets will hate me either for not including them or for not choosing more poems or not the “right” poems. Friends will mope, acquaintances will smolder, enemies will gleefully throw the first stone, and perfect strangers who’ve never been in any anthologies will help gather additional ammunition. I confess I didn’t contemplate the possible fallout at all when I said “yes”; I was bent on exploring what mattered in the last century, what mattered both to me and American poetry at large, what brought us to where we are right now. So I said yes to poetry, not to ego or ambition. Only later did it occur to me that I might have jumped into a pool with lurking sharks, and only since the struggles over rights and permissions have I felt some unease that I’ve set myself up as an easy target for “character assassination.” Luckily, I’ve had time now to expect the worst and shield myself emotionally. Whatever happens, happens—let the naysayers have their day.

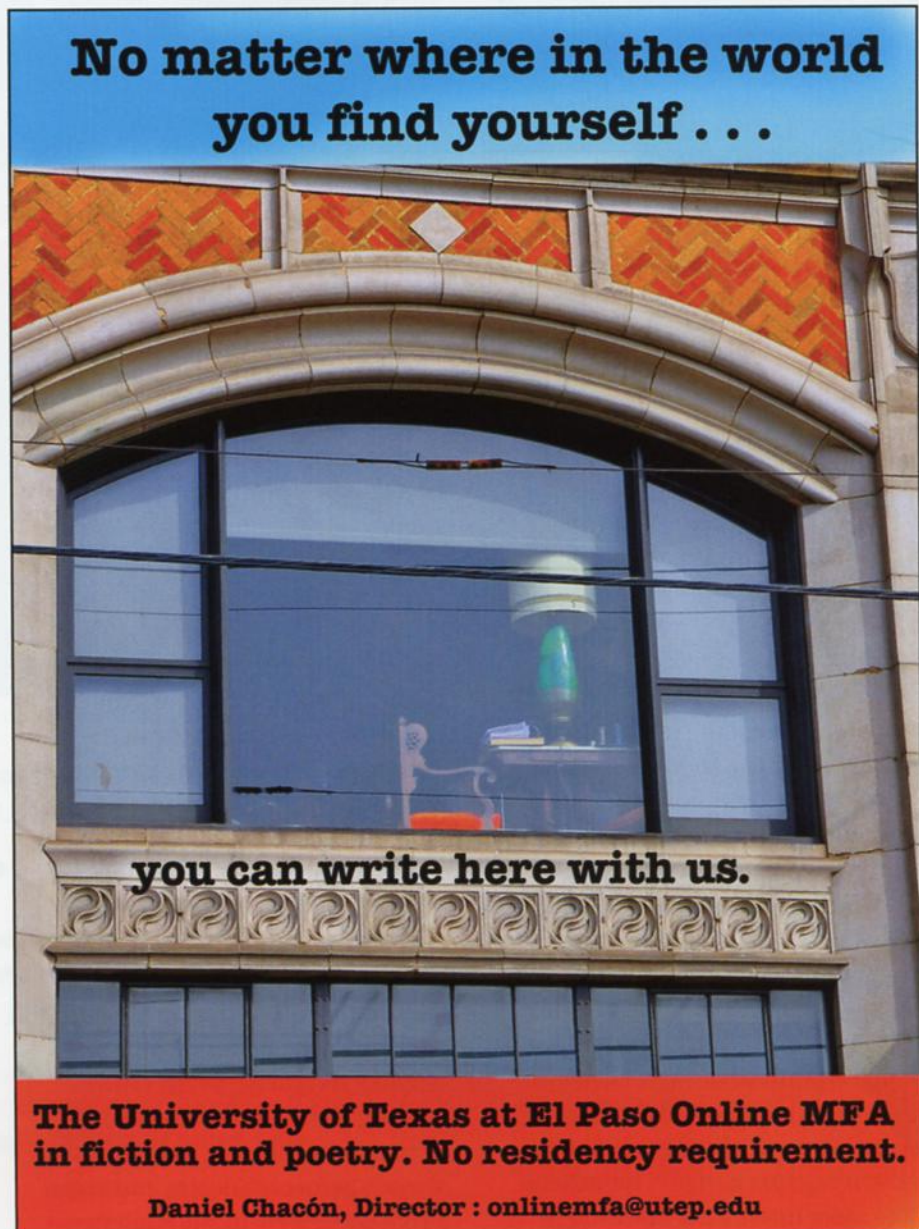
**AWP:** For the teacher out there who may wish to test-drive this anthology in a future workshop or in survey of literature class—are there any critical essays you would recommend that would serve as good complements to help readers differentiate one current of poetics from another?

**Dove:** Of course there are tons of critical essays out there, but I’m loathe to be drawn into the old way of interpreting and teaching poetry. In my introduction, I attempt to nudge the reader into a fresh view. Rather than corral poems into schools or

trends, why not observe them in their own habitat—the *Zeitgeist* that inspired the poet to set pen to paper? There are a thousand different ways to look at the poetry of the last century—I’m exaggerating, though not by much—but I doubt any one of them can organize the schools and sub-schools, prosodic offshoots, and tangential modes that seem to spiral off into different directions as soon as a new thesis is posited. A century’s worth of humanity—and by extension, the poems borne of that humanity—cannot be contained by critical theory. Just read my

introduction—I promise it’s not dry!—and then dip into the rest of the book as you would plunge into a swimming pool.

Poetry workshops will find a profusion of riches here; after all, writing workshops, by definition, should be driven less by poetics than by practical application, and what better resource to learn from, and strain against, than a broad and deep survey of the poetry we have been breathing in all these years, in America? A poetry anthology is doomed to serve many masters; it’s a treasury, an instruction manual,



**No matter where in the world  
you find yourself . . .**

**you can write here with us.**

**The University of Texas at El Paso Online MFA  
in fiction and poetry. No residency requirement.**

**Daniel Chacón, Director : [onlinemfa@utep.edu](mailto:onlinemfa@utep.edu)**

Poetry is alive and well, and has been so through the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are more poets writing and publishing in America than ever before. No university worth its salt can do without creative writing workshops.

a panorama, and a spiritual time capsule. But when I look at this anthology, I think of it as the best kind of traveling companion—one who knows how to listen and, when the journey grows long, has an infinite repository of stories to share.

**AWP:** Many critics have argued, since the 1980s, that American poetry is dead, or that it is in need of resuscitation, or that it is in need of a redeemer (especially a savior like the critic himself), or that it is too self-absorbed to embody the world, or that it has become an assembly line for the mass production of duplicates, etc. What is your diagnosis on the health of American poetry in the latter half of the last millennium?

**Dove:** The alarm has sounded before and will sound again—it's usually a signal that the world as the alarmist knows it is changing, and whoever is set in her or his ways feels uncomfortable with any shifts that threaten their easeful status quo. Computers will impede contemplative thought, and therefore undermine serious literature; the electric typewriter makes it too easy to turn out reams of wordfill; the manual typewriter fills the room with mind-numbing clatter rather than the quiet liquefaction of ideas poured through ink onto foolscap. I could go on and on; for some, anxious griping is as human as striving for change is for others. The more interesting question is:

why do some scholars and readers regard the more elitist outpourings of the past—poems written by Ivy League-educated practitioners of High Modernism, especially—as the festooned standards fluttering atop Mount Olympus whose slopes, in their minds, American poetry has been descending ever since women and ethnic minorities have gained admission to those privileged institutions? Why should receiving an MFA degree, the certificate of official apprenticeship in what Dylan Thomas so aptly called our “craft or sullen art,” suddenly become an emblem of poetry's decline? To me, these pronouncements on the death of poetry are nothing more than loud-mouthed provocations.

Poetry is alive and well, and has been so through the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are more poets writing and publishing in America than ever before. No university worth its salt can do without creative writing workshops. We've got numerous reading series at colleges, in bookstores, and in community centers. We continue to have first-rate poetry societies, academies, and foundations that have actually become stronger. At the National Book Festival in Washington this September, I ran into an old friend who, gazing at the crowds surging from pavilion to pavilion, remembered hearing Auden read shortly before his death, and about fifty people were in the audience—

can you imagine? In the introduction to my anthology I extol, albeit not without criticism, the rise of MFA programs and the solidification of creative writing courses in academic curricula; in general I see this as a boon, not a detriment. It may have become harder to distinguish the trends, to mark off territory into aesthetic schools—but is that a bad development?

Yes, our literary pie is being nibbled at on all sides, which incites panic among those who used to have it all to themselves. At best, it's premature—at worst, hysterically adversarial—to call our still rather youngish workshop culture an assembly line for the mass production of duplicates. There can never be too much poetry. And if much of it cannot overcome mediocrity, so what? Aren't there hordes of amateur painters and pianists populating our civilization, bringing pleasure to themselves and those around them with no detrimental effect? Shall poetry be the only art form ordained to play itself out in the Elysian Fields? Although I wouldn't be terribly surprised should the number of truly great poems remain fairly constant, rather than increase exponentially with the number of poets, I believe that among those growing stacks of well-intentioned, lesser specimen will be poems that can also entertain, nurture, and sustain the lives of their readers.

AWP

## AWP Job List Call for Submissions

We welcome submissions of articles on professional advancement for writers & teachers, as well as articles about academic and nonacademic job opportunities for MFA graduates.

**Send a submission of approximately 2,000 words to:**

Sara Flood, AWP Job List Editor  
joblist@awpwriter.org  
Carty House, MS 1E3  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA 22030