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The Oxford Book of American Poetry

May 31, 2012 Dennis Ray Bob Dylan, Desolation Row, Fred Chappell, Great Nasal One, James Dickey, Robert Morgan, Spain

by Ted Olson

The Difficulty of Anthologizing American Poetry

In 2006 I purchased the then brand-new *Oxford Book of American Poetry*, a rather massive anthology published by the Oxford University Press and edited by New York City-based poet and critic David Lehman. It was interesting to learn what Lehman considered to be the most significant poems in the history of American literature. (I had previously read a number of other historically comprehensive American poetry anthologies, including one edited by Dana Gioia, another accomplished poet-critic of Lehman's generation.)

Compiling a major anthology is a logistical challenge, as an anthologist must contend with such factors as copyright restrictions, budgetary limitations, and the vagaries of individual aesthetics. By most accounts, Lehman did a commendable job representing this nation's poetic traditions. I certainly welcomed being introduced to some lesser-known poets (such as Wisconsin's underappreciated modernist master Lorine Niedecker) and to lesser-known poems by established poets, and I appreciated the book's interpretive head-notes, which were intended to provide the reader with background information on a given poet, but which also established for the reader an appropriate mood for appreciating that poet's work.

Yet Lehman's anthology, perhaps inevitably, is not without flaws. One could certainly maintain that Lehman occasionally panders to generational tastes—the book, for instance, incorporates as a poem Bob Dylan's lyrics to his major mid-1960s song *Desolation Row*. I'm an avowed fan of Dylan's work, but those lyrics seem particularly desolate without the Great Nasal One's mesmerizing voice and without that particular track's intense instrumental accompaniment.

Yet for me, a more serious shortcoming in *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* was the fact that—while limiting the book to poets born before 1950—Lehman primarily featured poetry by poets with northern and, to a considerable degree, urban affiliations; the book generally neglects Southern and Appalachian poets. There are no poems in the volume, for example, by such significant poets from the southeastern U.S. as James Dickey, Wendell Berry, Fred Chappell, Robert Morgan, Jeff Daniel Marion, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Thomas Rain Crowe, and David Bottoms, among others—poets who by virtue of their indisputable achievements and the longevity of their impact deserved to be represented alongside their fellow Americans.

The American literary establishment, long based in the urban North, historically marginalized the cultural life of the South (for evidence of this attitude one might read H. L. Mencken's famous 1920 essay "The Sahara of the Bozart," in which Mencken characterizes the American South of that era as a cultural wasteland). One would expect a contemporary culture leader like Lehman to look beyond old and tired stereotypes about Southern culture and acknowledge the breadth and depth of cultural life in the South over the past century or so.

I read Lehman's anthology for about a year. When in early 2008 I left for Spain to teach a semester in Barcelona, I took that book with me, and it served as a solid, dependable textbook for students in the American poetry class I taught there. All of the students who borrowed the book from me—mostly students from Spain, with a few from other European Union nations—discovered some American poems they found intriguing, even inspiring. The book proved so popular among the students that, when the semester drew to a close, I (rather than lug the book around airports) donated my copy of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* to that particular school's small library of American literary texts.

I don't regret giving away that book, but I'm glad I read it.