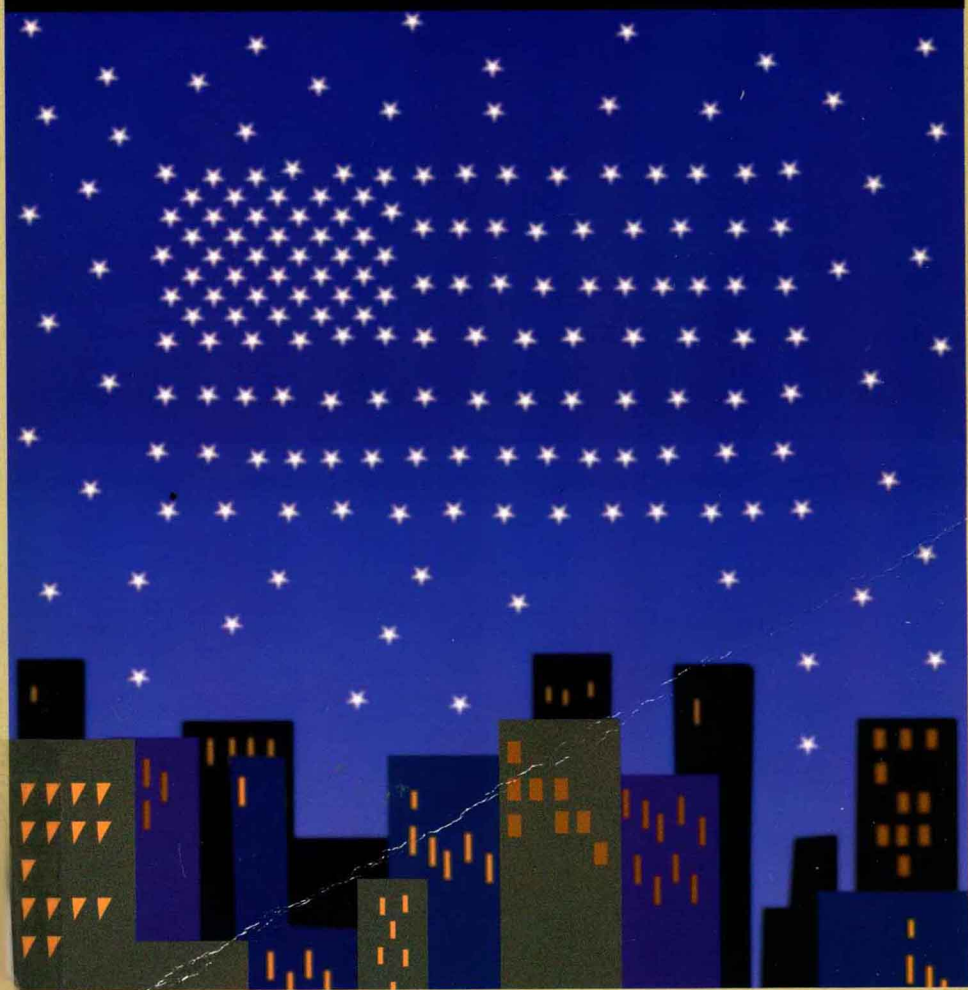




PENGUIN ACADEMICS

CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
POETRY

R. S. GWYNN • APRIL LINDNER



Contemporary American Poetry

A Pocket Anthology

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Preface

The present collection builds on the proven success of *Poetry: A Pocket Anthology*, which has been used over the last decade by upwards of 25,000 students and is now in its fourth edition. Using many of the poems by recent American poets in that volume as the core, we have assembled a new anthology of contemporary American poetry that we hope will address many of the wishes and concerns of teachers of literature and creative writing and likewise will prove valuable to students and general readers.

Our primary concern was to compose an anthology that was truly contemporary, beginning with poets born in 1920 and concluding with poets born in the 1970s. (Dates for the first book publication and/or the composition dates of the selection are printed below each poem.) While we acknowledge that there are poets born before our time frame who continue to speak strongly to today's readers, we feel that the most important among them—Gwendolyn Brooks, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Hayden, Weldon Kees, Robert Lowell, and May Swenson come first to mind—are now represented by complete editions of their works and might more profitably be studied in greater depth than the selections in a brief anthology can provide. At this writing, of the more than 150 poets who appear here, over 90 percent are still alive and productive, and all address the present situation of American life and letters.

Second, we have attempted to produce a collection that accurately reflects the diversity of contemporary American poetry. Reviewers of our table of contents have offered us many valuable suggestions about poets whom they would like to see included, and we have taken their recommendations—as far as the scope of our anthology allows—into account in making our final selections. To be sure, our primary focus has been to select representative poems that will provide a challenging and varied reading experience, but, in looking at the list of poets whom we have chosen, we are pleased to find that approximately one-third of them are women and that roughly one-quarter represent the ethnic and

cultural complexities of American society—percentages, incidentally, that are substantially increased when one considers the poets born since 1940 who are now at the heights of their careers and who reflect the accelerated expansion of the poetic canon during the last three decades. We believe, however, that an accurate representation of poetic diversity should not be limited solely to matters of gender and ethnicity. Accordingly, we have tried to provide examples of poems from the many schools and styles that have appeared in American poetry in the last half-century, and we have done this in various ways. As an aid to readers, we have included an essay, written in the form of a “field guide” to contemporary American poetics, and following it a glossary detailing the many literary movements that seem to us most prominent in shaping the current scene. As a further assistance to users of the book, we have suggested, after entries in the glossary, lists of poets in the anthology on whom instructors might focus if they wish to examine the works of groups who share affinities of style and subject matter. Our selections, taken from the broadest base possible, range from avant-garde works to traditional styles, from prose poems to sonnets, from surrealism to neo-classicism, and from revolutionary political stances to conservative ones. We are especially happy to include examples of poetic genres often overlooked or under-represented in anthologies: mid-length and longer narrative poems, dramatic monologues, and a wide range of poems in both experimental and traditional forms. While geographical diversity, yet another of our concerns, may not play as large a role in American literature as it once did, we have nevertheless tried to reflect the regional qualities that have characterized American poetry since the nineteenth century and still lend it strength, including poets from virtually every state and major territory in the country. Additionally, we have included individual poems by a dozen poets born in the 1960s and 1970s, all of whom have already produced first and, in some cases, subsequent collections that indicate that these younger writers may well represent the best qualities to be found in the next generation of American poets.

Third, we aimed at compactness and affordability. Most of the competing anthologies run to twice the length and, in most cases, demand more than three times the price—while actually containing the works of fewer poets than included in *Contemporary American Poetry*. Our aim was to offer, with no sacrifices in format or overall production quality, an inexpensive anthology with a wide range of selections. In essence, we have provided a flexible core textbook which one group of instructors might find sufficient to their needs, or which another might

wish to supplement with a second, more specialized anthology, or which another might combine with some sort of instructional or critical text, or which yet another might augment with individual collections of poets whom they wish to teach in depth—all with the aim of not saddling students with excessive demands on their budgets. Any anthology, we realize, reflects the many compromises that have shaped its final form, but we hope that *Contemporary American Poetry's* “pocket” size, “pocketbook” net price, and the useful “pocketful” of extra material provided in the form of brief biographical introductions, explanatory essays, indexes, and appendices, will prove attractive to both instructors and students.

We wish to express our thanks to: Mary Gilman and Beverly Williams, whose hard work on this anthology was invaluable; The Saint Joseph's University English Department, with special thanks to Owen Gilman and Richard Fusco; Mary Martinson and Tamara Jackson of the Francis A. Drexel Library; and to the Research Council of Lamar University for a grant that aided in the completion of this project.

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APRIL LINDNER

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