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## Review of Green's "Coal: A Poetry Anthology"

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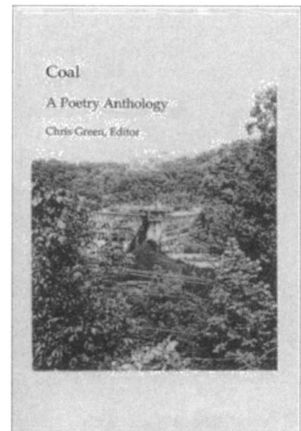
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**Coal: A Poetry Anthology.** Edited by Chris Green (Ashland, KY: Blair Mountain Press, 2006) \$15.00, paper. ISBN: 0976881713, 311 pp.

In his Introduction to *Coal: A Poetry Anthology*, editor Chris Green tells us that the poems included are “floating on rivers of history and culture.” He suggests that by “following the flow of the poems, you may perhaps better discern the story of the landscapes that have brought these poems to you.” The longer you think about that claim, the grander it seems—but it’s no grander than the book.

This impressive volume begins with a Preface by novelist Denise Giardina and an Introduction by the editor. It ends with an Afterword by mining safety activist Jack Spadaro; a bibliography of books, films, and websites about coal and central Appalachia; and biographical notes about the contributors, usually noting their tie to the industry. In between those helpful materials are six generous, thematically categorized sections: (1) Miners and Work, (2) Disasters and Mining, (3) Family and Community, (4) Life After the Mines, (5) Environmental Degradation, and (6) Resistance.

I’ll confess that when I first saw a 310-page anthology about coal, I doubted that the narrowness of the topic could support the weight of the work. After repeated readings, however, what impresses me is its variety and breadth. A look at the book’s six sections suggests just how broadly conceived an apparently limited anthology can be. In fact, while the book is consistently about coal, it is about coal drawn large, large enough to include the culture that surrounds that mineral in the bituminous mining region of central Appalachia—here defined as West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, western Virginia, and southern Ohio. Within



that region, nothing lies wholly outside the culture of coal, and Green has thus cast his net widely: coal culture can include not just the stories of miners and mining, but everything from reflections on the agricultural way of life coal displaced to the environmental death it may summon, with every socio-economic aspect that falls between those poles.

Having said that, I should say that Green didn't play loosely with his theme—which I think some anthologists do. He didn't simply use coal as a metaphorical jumping off point for a literary collection about central Appalachia: almost without exception, each poem in each thematic section *directly and overtly* relates to coal. But why not? Maybe any complex profession, including mining, is worth a good book of poems. The great dangers, both catastrophic and chronic, involved in coal mining make it appropriate stuff for twice-told tales. The mining families and towns (often company-owned) make for engaging stories of home and community life; and the fluctuations in the coal industry, coupled with the region's dependency on the coal economy, have created a diaspora within which many of these poets find their coal connections. Given the historical universal role that landscape plays in poetry, it's little wonder that contemporary mining practices would draw the poets' vatic responses. Then, because good people say *no* to bad practices—bad labor practices *and* bad environmental practices—resistance makes an appropriate conclusion.

There is admirable variety not only in subjects considered but also in the writers who consider them. As Green explains in his Introduction, his call for submissions drew 300 poems, 80 of which he included. In addition, he reviewed thousands of contemporary and historical published pieces which address the subject, and he included 70 of those as well. As a result, we naturally see a good many poets we would expect to find in any anthology of Appalachian literature. The book gains a certain importance—*library worthiness*—by including appropriate poems by such folks as Don West and James Still, Louise McNeill and Jim Wayne Miller. In addition to important figures of Appalachian literary history, we also find leading contemporary writers who are associated with Appalachia, people such as Mark DeFoe and Diane Gilliam Fisher—and even a few who are not: it's interesting to see work, for example, by poets Robert Wrigley and Harry Humes. That said, it's greatly to Green's credit that he did not wander outside the region or stretch the seams of his topic *just* to get big names in the volume. Indeed, Green was generous with his space, featuring a considerable amount of work by relatively new writers, and, just as importantly, poems by established Appalachian writers whose work has been far less widely circulated than it deserves—poets such as Jane Hicks, Ron Houchin, and Ken Slone.

An expansive spectrum of poetic styles shines through the collection as well. Green notes that he has chosen poems that show a “range of experience, voice, and style—a range, in other words, of aesthetic, audience, and purpose,” and that's certainly true. While most of these poets use free verse, their approaches vary widely, from the deceptively conversational to the overtly formal. Poems like Ray Allen's “I Am Looking” and James B. Goode's “No Breast Augers in Heaven” give a carefully crafted illusion of off-handedness, while works like John F.

Keener's memorable "Thomas Mason Kelley" and Roy Bentley's "Another Shoot-Em-Up on the Drive-In Screen" follow a more overtly constructed free verse poetics. At further extremes, some poets have used the "found poem" genre, in particular Bob Henry Baber's "The Broad Form of the Company's Deeds" and Brenda L. Morris and Mike Yarrow's jointly compiled "Woman and the Underground Brotherhood"; and a few, most notably the late Louise McNeill, successfully craft traditional meter and end rhyme. Such variety keeps the collection aesthetically interesting and makes it a natural choice for use in poetry writing workshops, providing students with exposure to excellent models in a range of verse types.

I suppose the book's weakness, too, might fall under the heading of variety. Simply put, there are various levels of quality here, as is inevitable in a thematically focused anthology. But as weaknesses go, my judgment is that Green has chosen to gamble in exactly the right place. Granted, he could have made a more consistently high quality volume by making it 50 pages shorter. But he has made a better decision for an anthologist of primarily contemporary poems: to err on the side of broader inclusion. Humility suggests that without the filter of years to help us, none of us necessarily know what the best poems of our era will have been. What we gain by having more poems here far outweighs what might be lost by including a rare dull piece.

That is particularly true in the compilation of an anthology that is intended to be read not only by poets or literature students but also by a broader public. Readers who pick up the book because it's about coal or their part of the country may be more engaged by an accessible, average poem that speaks to their interest than by a finer poem that doesn't. Most poetry journals and volumes today are read by only one group—other poets—and it could be argued that poets and scholars are about the only folks who *can* read them. But readers needn't have nurtured the poetry habit to engage this collection. If there's one trait nearly all these poems share, it's accessibility; most of them will be gratifying to any reader on a single pass. As a literature professor, I'm accustomed to being told, "I love to read, but I just don't like poetry." It's hard to imagine any reader with an interest in the topics not finding plenty to like in this book.

Poetics, after all, was not Green's only concern. His Introduction suggests that this volume is a kind of social history, a history told by poets. By arranging each of the book's six sections chronologically in order of the subjects portrayed, he has furthered that intention. And he has enhanced it yet again by placing the poets' names below their work, not above. That apparently simple editorial choice allows readers to downplay the poet's halo or lack thereof and maintain narrative focus on the subject area: a culture that evolved around the coal industry. Read in such a way, the volume is a complex and detailed drama about the relationship of one element of the planet to the people who inhabit it.

For what it reveals about Appalachian life—and as a testament to the region—this volume is an important and lively artifact of our time. Chris Green

has made a significant and lasting contribution to the canon of Appalachian literature and, maybe more importantly, to the literature of a world coming to terms with how our resources and the ways we use them transform our lives.

**WILLIAM JOLLIFF**

Bill Jolliff grew up just outside Magnetic Springs, Ohio, and now teaches at George Fox University in Oregon. His article "The Economy of the Inward Life: John Woolman and Henry Thoreau" appears in a recent issue of *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*.