Too much prose and not enough poetry

*The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem: From Baudelaire to Anne Carson*,
ed. Jeremy Noel-Tod (480pp, hbck, £25.00, Penguin)

Whoever came up with the ingenious idea to tunnel back into time from now for this anthology, is a genius! That simple reversal of the expected allows readers an intriguing new point-of-view of the subject, starting with the now before stepping back to 'the postmodern' and then 'the modern' at the back of the book. (It does of course beg the question why the subtitle hasn't been reversed!)

Anyway, I have to say the book is somewhat over-spaced and the poems set in an oversize font; it would have been good to have a more compact edition than this library-size volume. And, like most anthologies I guess, it's somewhat unnerving to find what is included and excluded here. I mean three cheers for Luke Kennard, Carrie Etter and Sean Bonney (and, indeed many others here) but much of the contemporary work here is instantly forgettable and neither unusual nor groundbreaking. There are other poets working far more at (and much harder with) prose poetry than the likes of Simon Armitage. Is he included as a nod to populism, or is this an anthology of occasional prose poems by poets who don't normally write prose poems?

Meanwhile, the 20th century offers us an interesting mix of the known and unknown. A selection of Hill's 'Mercian Hymns' rubs shoulders with Fisher's 'City', as well as work by Madge, Gascoyne, Ponge and Tagore. But why a Borges short fiction or a piece by Brecht? There is much to enjoy though: Carolyn Forché's marvellous 'The Colonel' is here, Barbara Guest and Rosmarie Waldrop, Coolidge, Turnbull, Bonnefoy, Simic and Strand all have work included. But again, there is some token work by Seamus Heaney and others mostly known for poetry.

The final, 'modern' section is the most obvious, and with good reason. One can't anthologise the prose poem without Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Ponge, Jacob and Stein; the inclusion of parts of Auden's 'The Orators' is interesting too, but I am less convinced by the inclusion of Eliot, Mansfield, and Wilde (see my comment about Armitage, above). In fact they made me realise what is wrong with this anthology: there is too much prose here and not enough poetry.

Noel-Tod can go on all he likes (as he does in his 'Introduction') about the musicality and poetic nature of prose poetry, evidenced when one reads aloud, but much of what is gathered here is simply very short prose, or at best poetic prose. By narrowing down his field of selection, Noel-Tod has edited out what is most interesting in the prose poem, namely that which lurks at the edges of the genre, or even *between* genres. Where is the diaristic? the contemplative? the (Westernized) haibun popularised by Ashbery and Murphy? the experimental? There is much to enjoy reading here, and it is many ways a clearly focussed anthology. Unfortunately it's also sometimes dull and repetitive in the kind of work it presents. It feels like a sanitized view of a still-evolving genre (or group of genres), an anthology assembled after a period of excitement and hybridisation has happened, by an editor who either didn't notice or chose not to.

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