*Some Lines of Poetry from the notebooks of bpNichol*, edited by Derek Beaulieu and Gregory Betts ( Coach House Books)

bpNichol is not well known in Britain, although he crops up here and there in anthologies and reviews, and is a big name in the Canada poetry world. He died back in 1988 and this book was published to celebrate what would have been Nichols' 80th birthday.

The book is a healthy and surprising mix of outtakes, works-in-progress, poetics, notes, translations, homages, visual poems and a lecture, revealing the myriad influences and confluences that informed Nichol's writing.

His visual poems are as likely to be concrete and typewritten as hand drawn, and in several places he works on an idea in several iterations and variations. For instance, 'fish swimming out of alphabet' is opposite 'nothing swimming out of alphabet', both composed on the same day; and, elsewhere five 'Turin texts'.

Sometimes, the mutating texts or drawings are laugh-out-loud funny, other times they are elusive and obscure: 'some lines of poetry' simply extends lines out from a handwritten word, poetry, down from the stem of the p, up and across from the t, up from the final loop of the y, whilst the bird of 'Seascape With Bird' is the u lifting off from a handwritten seagull. Both are wonderful, but despite knowing who Kurt Schwitters is and what he wrote, I do not 'get' the drawn shape of 'Homage to Schwitters'.

When he is most successful, Nichols' work reminds of me of Robert Lax's. Playful, focussed and profound, with just enough going on to make a point, to draw attention to a facet of language or experience, to make the reader think, to say something in a different way.

Elsewhere in this beautiful paperback edition, work seems less finished, with various examples of annotations, ideas and possible revisions. Arrows suggest digressions or flights of associative imagination, sometimes it seems that poems are first imagined as instructions or diagrams rather than language, whilst 'IM: mortality play' presents revisions and scribbled notes in a far more traditional way.

The piece I have reread the most, however is the lengthy closer 'Don't Forget the Author' a transcript of a 1985 lecture given at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. Despite being a formal piece it is in many ways the most personal and revealing work in the book, and is an intelligent and informed piece of writing – along with the discussion that followed the lecture – about writing, editing and publishing, in the widest sense.

So, although there is mention of marketing and sales here, there is much more about writerly intent, contractual negotiations, book design, freelancing, audiences and reader/writer expectations and relationships. It's clear that Nichols was a realist, sometimes prepared to compromise, but also that he positioned himself within the (mostly) small press world to get the work and books he wanted published, published in the way he wanted.

The poems here evidence a playful, generous spirit. Yes, the work is often experimental but it invites the reader in, to wander and wonder, whilst the lecture is serious but also self-deprecating, amusing and truthful. The same spirit informs the editor's foreword, enticing readers to read on, to engage with what they call 'Nichols' wild, free literary thinking', noting further on that '[h]is range is, as always, astonishing.'

Considering that this, as the blurb puts it, 'is a map of hidden corners' and 'a guidebook to poetic play', I am looking forward to engaging further with bpNichols main body of work.

Rupert Loydell

(590 words)