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Poetry

When She Named Fire: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry by American Women
Andrea Hollander Budy
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Unwieldy and heavy, promising as much backache as discovery, the poetry anthology is a staple of the college classroom. It is difficult to imagine such a text being as enjoyable as it is educational, but recently the anthology has gotten a makeover. Independent presses are tackling smaller areas of the poetic landscape, and the result is books that can be read cover to cover. *When She Named Fire* is substantive, weighing in at 461 poems, but it is not unmanageable. This text belongs on a nightstand as easily as it belongs in American Poetry 230-a credit to editor Andrea Hollander Budy.

The title of the collection is also the title of one of Budys poems. In some ways, “When She Named Fire” is about the limitations of language, not being quite able to name something accurately, but trying all the same. Many of the poems struggle with a similar dilemma: how to identify and celebrate the modern American woman. Rita Dove writes in “Daystar,” “She wanted a little room for thinking: / but she saw diapers steaming on the line, / a doll slumped behind the door.” The poems of domesticity are there, but they are as likely to reject as embrace wifely and motherly expectations. Part of the difficulty of defining the American woman is locating America. Is it with Marie Howe hailing a taxi in New York City, or with Ginger Andrews cleaning a house in North Bend, Oregon? Of course it is with both, and everywhere in between. Again and again, these remarkable poets carve out a place for themselves and their work.

Despite a professed mission to be all-inclusive, anthologies are inevitably about exclusion-who or what didnt make the cut. There are very few lyric selections and undoubtedly someones favorite writer has been neglected, but what remains in *When She Named Fire* is a reminder of the breadth of American poetry. The poets in this collection are Pulitzer Prize-winners, poet laureates past and present, and young writers beginning to make waves. They are all in the business of naming things exactly. In “Nurture,” Maxine Kumin scoffs at critics who

call the speaker too maternal; instead, she imagines taking in a feral child: “Think of the language we two, same and not-same, / might have constructed from sign, / scratch, grimace, grunt, vowel: // Laughter our first noun, and our long verb, howl.” (2008)

Erica Wright