

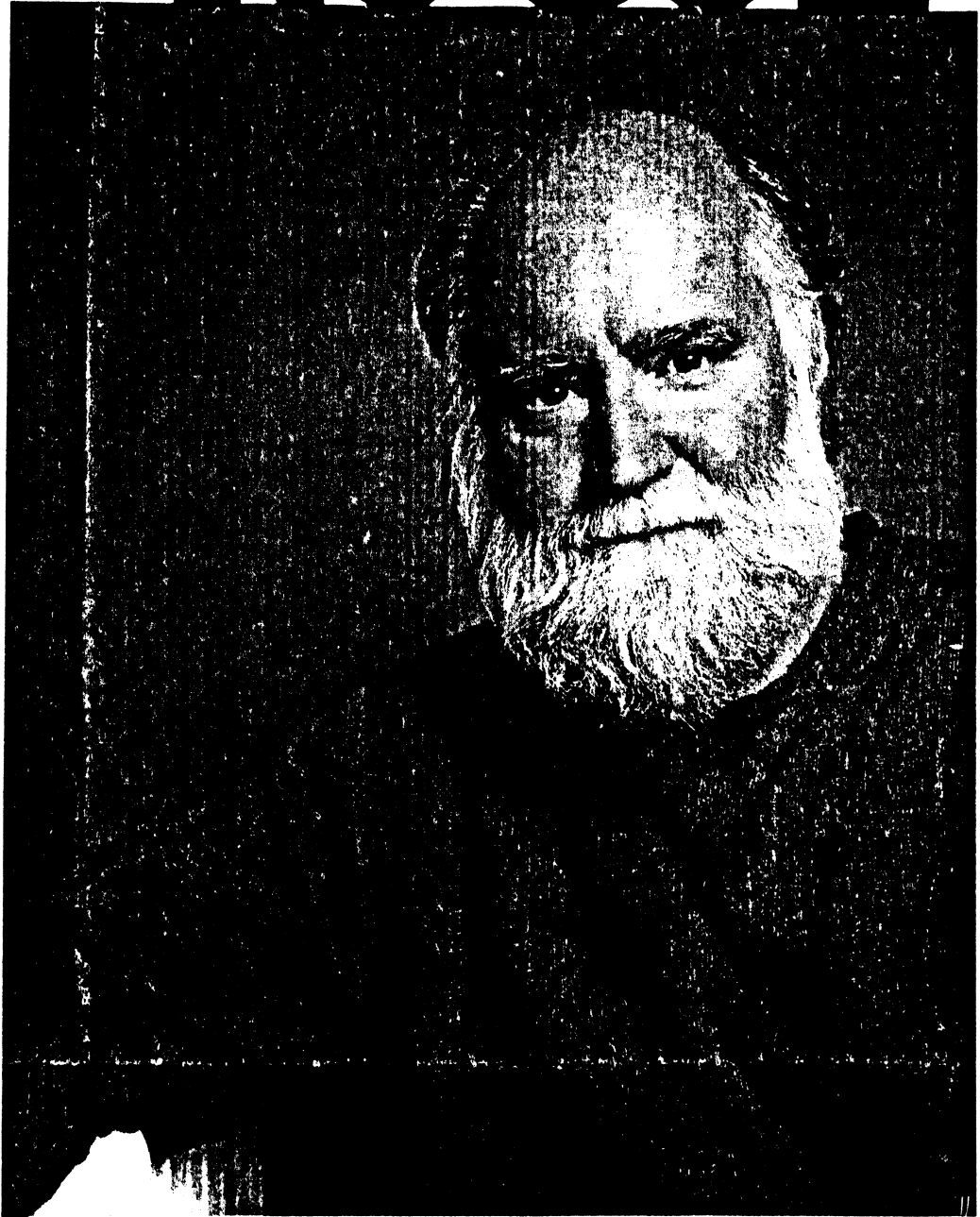
# A LITERARY ROGUE

Anthologist  
author stops  
in Madison  
on book tour

By Lisa Reisman  
Special to the Times

**F**or aspiring poets, here are eight tips from the fictional Paul Chowder, the narrator of New York Times bestselling author Nicholson Baker's latest novel "The Anthologist." Provided, of course, that you're willing to follow the advice of a middling poet that the white-bearded Baker, who appeared at R.J. Julia Booksellers on a recent Friday night in Madison, describes as "a study in failure."

1. Scroll back through your mind to the best moment of your day; then write it down.
2. Jot down every story you hear in a twenty-four hour period. This can be while you're standing in line at the supermarket or at the ATM machine or watching your clothes rotating around the dryer at the laundromat. So long as it's not on a screen or coming through a speaker system, it will do.
3. If an idea comes to you as a result of the above, don't save it for another day. Immediately scribble it onto a sheet of paper. Life is an infinite subject matter, but there's not an infinite amount of time and patience for inventories of the finite.
4. If none of the above works, find a book of poems, open it to a page, and copy it out into a notebook with a ballpoint pen. Open to another page and do the same. Then do it again.



For the last two decades, the 52-year-old Nicholson Baker has made a career as a literary rogue, breaking taboos and pushing buttons.

5. Keep your expectations low. Most poets, after years of labor, write only a few great poems. And most of those poems have only one great line: "give me my scallop-shell of quiet," from Sir Walter Raleigh's "His Pilgrimage," to take one example.

6. Further lower your sights. A country can really sustain only 15 poets at a time, for one thing. For another, to write great poetry, you must be both tortured and screwed up—not merely, like Chowder, a little messed up. By the end, Edna St. Vincent Millay threw herself down a flight of stairs. Vachel Lindsay drank a bottle of Lysol in his basement. His paramour Sara Teasdale, another poet, took morphine in the bath and died.

7. Don't try anything on Thursdays. According to Chowder, Thursday is the day when you begin to realize another week of your "one precious life" is gone and you still haven't composed a great poem.

8. Stop writing poems for a year. This mandate applies only to published poets, including Chowder, who indicts himself as a contributor to the burgeoning GPP (Gross Poetic Product). There's too much poetry in the world that no one reads and, unless poets take this temporary retirement, there's no way to make it end.

That some of these guidelines are in earnest and others are not should come as no surprise. For the last two decades, the 52-year-old Baker has made a career as a literary rogue, breaking taboos and pushing buttons.

His novel "Vox," which Monica Lewinsky infamously gave to President Clinton, con-

sists of an episode of phone sex between two young singles on a pay-per-minute chat line, and raised the hackles of groups ranging from conservatives to feminists.

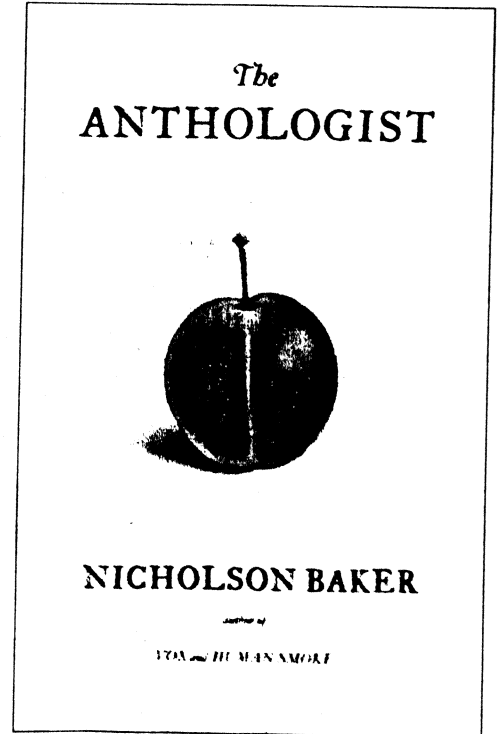
His follow-up "Fermata," the story of an office temp who has the power to stop time and uses it to undress women and place them in compromising positions (always, in the character's view, with respect and love), caused such a firestorm of controversy that Random House shipped the book to retailers with a clear plastic band.

In "Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper," he took aim at librarians for replacing and often destroying original issues of newspapers and books during the microfilming boom of the 1980s and 90s for the purpose of saving shelf space. And "Human Smoke" was an attempt to redistribute ethical responsibility for the World War II more equally between the Allies and Axis powers and portrayed both FDR and Churchill as warmongers.

Nicholson Baker is no less provocative in "The Anthologist," though this time his targets are those inhabiting the world of poetry. While the story follows the second-rate poet as he contends with a monumental case of writer's block by imparting to the reader what he has learned about his craft, the book can be read as both a meditation on the artist's struggle to compose work that matters and the vagaries of literary celebrity. As the novelist put it: "the literary universe is full of sudden bursts of glory and self-importance, and on the other hand, some people go through decades of obscurity and quiet merit. It's all

very confusing."

In the end, perhaps the most lucid advice in "The Anthologist" comes from a woman Chowder, on a date at an orchard, is trying to impress with his artistic sensibility. "Let's just pick blueberries," she says.



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