

New England Alchemy

By Kevin O'Connor

Book Review

Booker's Point, by Megan Grumbling,
University of North Texas Press, 2016.



Equal parts oral biography, meditative local history, and ground-level pastoral ode, *Booker's Point*, by Megan Grumbling, marks the debut of a distinctive and self-assured poetic voice. Grumbling composes a narrative collage around the life of her New England neighbor Bernard A. Booker, “born in the same Maine town as Moxie [the soft drink],” and Booker’s authentic dialect strikes the keynote in the book’s opening lines:

He coaxed a pregnant woman right across
the river, and it weren’t no easy bridge.
A cousin of an in-law, broke as dirt,
she come up visiting from the Vermont too poor
to buy a license. Booker paid it . . .
 (“Some Kind of Hunter”)

The poet also goes beyond these free, indirect assimilations of voice and plays her lithe first-person lyrics off Booker’s mentoring lore, canny know-how and backwoods wisdom:

I knew this point before I dared
to know him, knew that tricky gold
of sandbar—treacherous, could tear
hell of the till—and knew the glow
of knowing it . . .
 (“On Ell Pond”)

Whether sailing, uprooting trees, bagging mulch, hunting for white quartz stones, or telling tales, the octogenarian Booker not only comes

to personify the ethos of New England but also serves as reliquary guide to deeper truths of environmental history and human character.

Booker's Point works as a unified and polyphonic book because the voices of Booker and the poet stay in dialogue with the natural setting they share. Grumbling breathes the same air as Frost, and the legacy she enacts is both authentic and self-conscious:

Something there is that loves a stone beyond
the hold of walls. Though some will move to save
proof of the human bounds we've made (so brief
a spell within the ancient span of rock),
a friction wears away beauty from use.
The stones outsleep this harvest and the rest;
for now, worth might as well awake in walls.
("Stone Harvest")

This passage, like her version of "Birches," acts not as clever allusiveness but as explicit response and homage. As in Frost, Grumbling's language at its best—marked by concrete nouns, propulsive verbs, and hard enjambments—captures the rhythms of human work in nature:

Begins
with axe to earth as he hacks width and height,
breaks up the loam with half a dozen swings.
We heave, have at the ground by turns, and land
the blade square as we can.
("Good Digging")

"Good Digging" also echoes the signature poem of Seamus Heaney, but Grumbling's approach is fresh and all her own. She is profoundly humble before Booker's experiential teaching, nature, and language itself—but audacious in the task, "the work of knowing." Poetic making recapitulates and helps complete the process of first-hand discovery and history:

And though time's split
syntax and grain, we'll fit it back
together, moved to salvage writ

from splinter, riddling in time
 lapse, trial and error as we mistake
 how seams link characters. Align
 all knows: That haystack was the place
 where Trafton Hatch once manned the High
 Pine Railroad.
 ("By Piece")

Grumbling's surprising and fitting enjambments ("time's split / syntax and grain") supply the torque here, while her rich assonance supplies an ineluctable sonic movement toward binding work with names.

Grumbling blends precise descriptions and colloquial speech so deftly that her use of traditional forms (especially blank verse and the sonnet) seems seamless. Presenting poetic work as important but secondary, she insists upon the primacy of nature's art:

This crop is so much greater than our work
 could ever capture, even as we press
 it in, right close, to fill October's urge,
 but we have cleared a windfall just the same:
 A clarity, the season's morning hues,
 and our sweet chore have gathered close to art.
 ("Raking Near the Great Works")

The poetry of *Booker's Point* grows out of ethnographic oral history—the alchemical interplay of documentary and design, the empirical with the expressionistic—as when Grumbling gives us Booker's take on language and an old man's mortality:

. . . *they'll just go on and on—*
'Don't he look good.' Must be some kind of art
 or joke, something, I guess from his guffaw,
 his wise-ass wink. *Write a poem about that.*
 ("Never Looked Better")

This book answers well its subject's posthumous challenge.