

# The New Criterion

## Fiction Chronicle

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### Margin walkers

by [Stefan Beck](#)

On *The Anthologist*, by Nicholson Baker; *Generosity: An Enhancement*, by Richard Powers; *Homer & Langley*, by E. L. Doctorow; and *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall*, by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Nicholson Baker may well be the most unpredictable writer working today. To take a random sampling of his output, which is the only kind of sampling his output permits, he has dissected his obsession with John Updike (*U & I: A True Story*); written a phone-sex novelization (*Vox*) that was given as a gift by the twentieth century's most infamous intern to her boss; and condemned Churchill's prosecution of the war against Germany (*Human Smoke*). His shifting interests resemble the trivial pursuit called a "Wikirace," wherein participants try to get from, say, "ukelele" to "stem cell research" in the fewest possible Wikipedia links.

It is thus not at all surprising that Baker's new novel, *The Anthologist*, is about a mid-list poet called Paul Chowder who is too inef ...

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