

Jonathan J. Webster, ed. *Essays on Edwin Thumboo*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2009. 113 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-4337-3.

Essays on Edwin Thumboo, published by Ethos Books and edited by Jonathan Webster, is a book which celebrates the influence of the poet and speaks to the worldwide community developed by Edwin Thumboo. The “Community of Edwin Thumboo” is not a specific group, but rather it is the people, writers and scholars who have been touched by the premiere poet of Singapore, Edwin Thumboo.

Jonathan Webster, the editor of the book is a close friend and colleague of Thumboo’s who has played an integral role in Thumboo’s spirituality and commitment to Christianity. The book not only is a labour of love, but it is also a comprehensive academic look at various aspects of the poet’s writing, including linguistics, nationalism, spirituality, and the writing’s “sacred geometry.”

In the preface to the book, Webster discusses “the element of mystery” to Thumboo’s work. Webster’s essays in the book, “Meaning Making Poetry: Words Alone are Certain Good” and “A Poet Reading” concentrate on the linguistics and the “geometry” of Thumboo’s work. No single scholar has dissected the linguistics of Thumboo as Webster has. One could call Webster the most prolific scholar on the “mechanics” of Thumboo’s poems.

The first essay, “Meaning Making Poetry,” breaks down the stanzas of Thumboo’s “Gods Can Die” into “elements in twos.” Throughout the essay, he uses diagrams to illustrate his points. He carefully analyses the poem “Conjunction,” breaking it down into a pentagram of five elements – earth, air, fire, and water, and the fifth element, “non-material Quintessence” (32). These elements are what Thumboo’s re-emerging spirituality has been addressing as of late, and Thumboo himself has been working with the concept in his own life. Webster has been groundbreaking in his analyses that have opened the poet’s eyes to aspects of Thumboo’s own words that even he may not have seen as religious, grappling with this “quintessence.” Webster’s essay is not for the faint of heart academic, however, but linguists will find it fascinating. Webster states, “The textual function of the language has to do with the logico-semantic relations between constituents of the text which contribute to its cohesiveness and coherence” (9). Certainly, beginning academics might have to read these lines and the essay several times to comprehend its deepest meanings.

Webster’s other essay in the book, “A Poet Reading,” is about the Biblical poems of Edwin Thumboo, where he looks at the poem of that name, addressing the issue of who the pronoun “she” is. To Webster, there is a sense of “timelessness, forever being and becoming” in the poem (102). He discusses

the “sacred geometry” of the poem, and the five elements and their correspondences. He calls a poem an act of “creation and revelation” (11). If the reader is able to decipher the words such as “tetragrammaton,” they will be able to see the unpacking of this poem as a spiritual message. Again, linguists will find this essay very interesting. Webster is the academic who has looked most deeply into the structure and the linguistic aspects of Thumboo’s work.

Thiru Kandiah, another author in the book is an authority on other aspects of Thumboo’s work. His essay “Edwin Thumboo’s Poetry and the Linguistics of Post-colonial Literary Creativity in English” looks at how avant-garde, postcolonial/poststructural critiques of Thumboo’s work may have let the linguistic elements of the work be glossed over, shrouded by political-cultural perspectives. Kandiah astutely looks at Becker’s “wordscape” to point out Thumboo’s Singaporean English and its connotations (49). Kandiah discusses Thumboo’s symbol of his Uncle’s abacus as “resonating regeneratively” (53); Thumboo’s language, according to Kandiah, being a site where forces operate. To Kandiah, Thumboo brings out the “value and dignity of the words.” Kandiah, in looking at Thumboo, is actually giving us a new theory of how to view all writings from former colonies, a framework that has not been addressed in such a manner before.

In “The Theology of Feeling: The Biblical Poems of Edwin Thumboo” Lily Rose Tope, another close friend and member of the “Thumboo Community” has brought out the spiritual aspects of the poetry. I am reminded of a lunch with Thumboo and associates with Tope present, sitting around at Thumboo’s beloved eating stall in Singapore. Tope conducted the prayer before the meal.

In the essay, she mentions another member of the “community of Edwin Thumboo,” Dennis Haskell, who notes the Power of language in Thumboo’s poetry. Tope quotes Wimal Disaanayake’s connection of Indian spirituality in the poem “Shiva” (64). She discusses the parallels of Buddhist and Christian miracles as well. She describes Thumboo’s connection to the Bible as “humanistic and poetic” (86). Tope connects to the uniquely Asian aspects of his poetry about Ruth, from the Bible, showing her own role as part of the ASEAN scholarly community. A Western writer would not have seen this poem the same way. She discusses also the poet’s journey to God in a way that gives us a new perspective on the icon, Edwin Thumboo.

In “Nation-building and the Muse: Reading Edwin Thumboo without Theory” Wong Phui Nam discusses how Thumboo helped with the “emotional allegiance” to Singapore (77). He gives an excellent chronology of how Thumboo developed along with the country, wishing perhaps that we had even more Thumboo poems from the early period of his writing. He states that “he is not finished yet” (83). He gives us a way to see a country not just as buildings and laws, but as words and voices. Wong Phui Nam, another close associate of

Thumboo's, is in the "Community," showing the reader new ways to view the poet's place in history.

All the four essays in the book represent an excellent, albeit highly academic, fresh view on the works and the worldwide "Community of Edwin Thumboo."

Carlotta Ladyizumi Abrams
Estrella Mountain Community College, Arizona, USA