

= Edwin Thumboo =

Edwin Nadason Thumboo B.B.M. ( born 22 November 1933 ) is a Singaporean poet and academic who is regarded as one of the pioneers of English literature in Singapore .

Thumboo graduated in English from the University of Malaya in 1956 . Although he applied for a position at the university , he was rejected as few locals held academic posts at that time . He therefore worked in the civil service for about nine years before finally joining the university , then renamed the University of Singapore , in 1966 following Singapore 's independence . He received a Ph.D. from the university in 1970 . Thumboo rose to the position of full professor in the Department of English Language and Literature , heading the department between 1977 and 1993 . After the merger of the University of Singapore and Nanyang University in 1980 to form the National University of Singapore ( NUS ) , he was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from 1980 to 1991 , NUS 's longest @-@ serving dean . Thumboo was the first Chairman and Director of the university 's Centre for the Arts from 1993 to 2005 , and continues to be associated with the university as an emeritus professor , a position he has held since retiring from full @-@ time teaching in September 1997 .

Thumboo 's poetry is inspired by myth and history , and he is often dubbed Singapore 's unofficial poet laureate because of his poems with nationalistic themes . A pioneer of local English literature , he compiled and edited some of the first anthologies of English poetry and fiction from Singapore and Malaysia . His own collections of poetry include Rib of Earth ( 1956 ) , Ulysses by the Merlion ( 1979 ) and A Third Map ( 1993 ) . His latest anthology Still Travelling , consisting of almost 50 poems , was published in 2008 . Thumboo has won the National Book Development Council of Singapore Book Awards for Poetry three times , in 1978 , 1980 and 1994 . He has also received the inaugural S.E.A. Write Award ( 1979 ) , the first Cultural Medallion for Literature ( 1979 ) , the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ( ASEAN ) Cultural and Communication Award ( Literature ) ( 1987 ) , and the Raja Rao Award ( 2002 ) . He was conferred a Bintang Bakti Masyarakat ( Public Service Star ) in 1981 with an additional Bar in 1991 , and the Pingat Jasa Gemilang ( Meritorious Services Medal ) in 2006 . He conceived the first National Poetry Festival for Singapore in 2015 .

= = Early years = =

Edwin Thumboo , born in Singapore on 22 November 1933 , was the eldest of eight children of a Tamil schoolteacher and a Teochew Chinese @-@ Peranakan housewife from a Singaporean merchant family . He and his siblings grew up speaking English and Teochew . The family was financially comfortable ; their home in Mandai was the only one in the neighbourhood with electricity . Because of his mixed parentage , as a child he was sometimes called names and marginalized . This was said to have fostered determination and self @-@ respect in him . He completed his primary education at Pasir Panjang Primary School in 1940 . During the Japanese occupation of Singapore ( 1942 ? 1945 ) , he helped his family by selling cakes , tending goats , and working as a salesboy . Following the war , he studied at Monk 's Hill Secondary School ( finishing there in 1946 ) and Victoria School ( 1948 ) . It was at the latter place that he began writing poetry at the age of 17 years , encouraged by the senior English master Shamus Frazer . Thumboo considers Frazer his spiritual father , and later dedicated Rib of Earth ( 1956 ) , his first collection of poetry published while an undergraduate , to him . At this time , Thumboo was also a member of the Youth Poetry Circle , which counted among its members other early literary pioneers of Singapore such as Goh Sin Tub and Lim Thean Soo .

= = Education and career = =

Thumboo majored in English literature and history at the University of Malaya . As a freshman , he was a member of the editorial board of Fajar ( Dawn in Malay ) , a radical leftist journal published by the University Socialist Club . The seventh issue of Fajar which appeared in May 1954 contained an editorial entitled " Aggression in Asia " which advocated independence from the United Kingdom .

Three days later , Chinese middle school students clashed with the police . As a result , after two weeks Thumboo was arrested by the British colonial government together with seven other students and put on trial for sedition . Minister Mentor and former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew , who was the Club 's legal adviser and a Fajar subscriber , arranged for British Queen 's Counsel D. N. Pritt to act in their defence , with Lee himself as junior counsel . The students were acquitted of the charge by District Judge F. A. Chua .

Thumboo graduated with a Bachelor of Arts with honours ( B.A. ( Hons . ) ) in English in 1956 . Hoping to teach and pursue a further degree , he applied for a position at the university but was rejected as few locals held academic posts at that time . He therefore entered the civil service , working for the Income Tax Department ( 1957 ? 1961 ) , Central Provident Fund Board ( 1961 ? 1965 ) , and the Singapore Telephone Board ( 1965 ? 1966 ) where he was an assistant secretary . In 1966 , the year following Singapore 's independence , he joined the University of Singapore as an assistant lecturer . Conducting doctoral research into African poetry in English , he received his Ph.D. from the university in 1970 . He became a full professor in the Department of English Language and Literature , heading the department between 1977 and 1993 . The University of Singapore and Nanyang University merged in 1980 to form the National University of Singapore ( NUS ) , and he was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from 1980 to 1991 , NUS 's longest @-@ serving dean .

As an academic , he taught Elizabethan and Jacobean drama , the Romantic poets , Malaysian and Singaporean literatures , and creative writing , among other subjects . His research interests included the modern novel ( E. M. Forster , D. H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad ) and the novels of Empire ( such as Rudyard Kipling ) , Commonwealth literature ( including Botswana writer Bessie Head ) , and William Shakespeare 's Roman plays . When he headed the English Department , it introduced the study of Commonwealth / New Literatures in English , and of English language as a major so that graduates would be better equipped to teach English in schools and junior colleges . Thumboo was appointed a Professorial Fellow by NUS in 1995 and continues to be associated with the university as an emeritus professor , a position he has held since he retired from full @-@ time teaching in September 1997 . He served as the first Chairman and Director of the university 's Centre for the Arts from 1993 to 2005 .

Thumboo also held visiting professorships and fellowships at universities in Australia , the UK and the US . He was Fulbright @-@ Hayes Visiting Professor at Pennsylvania State University ( 1979 ? 1980 ) ; Chairman of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies , VII Triennium ( 1983 ? 1986 ) ; Writer @-@ in @-@ Residence at the Institute of Culture and Communication , Hawaii ( 1985 ) ; Ida Beam Professor at the University of Iowa in 1986 ; a member of the International Advisory Panel at the East @-@ West Centre , Hawaii ( 1987 ) ; Honorary Research Fellow at University College , University of London ( 1987 ) ; a member of the Committee of Jurors for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in Oklahoma , USA ( 1988 ) ; CAS ? Miller Visiting Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana @-@ Champaign ( 1998 ) , Visiting Professor and Writer @-@ in @-@ Residence at University of Wollongong in New South Wales ( 1989 ) ; and Visiting Fellow at the Department of English , Australian Defence Force Academy ( 1993 ) . In 1991 , Thumboo worked with the Ministry of Education to help establish the Creative Arts Programme for secondary school and junior college students in Singapore . He continues to mentor young poets under the programme .

= = Poetry and influence = =

In the 1950s , Thumboo wrote mostly lyrical poetry based on personal experiences . Displaying the influence of the English literary tradition on him , they dealt with aesthetic and metaphysical themes . By the mid @-@ 1970s , he had shifted his focus to the public sphere , believing that poets of post @-@ independence Singapore should work towards creating a national literature . Singapore 's national life was a key subject of his collection of poetry Gods Can Die ( 1977 ) , and it has been said that the subsequent anthologies Ulysses by the Merlion ( 1979 ) and A Third Map ( 1993 ) " established his reputation as a national poet committed to articulating a cultural vision for a

multicultural Singapore ". Thumboo is often dubbed Singapore 's unofficial poet laureate because of his poems with nationalistic themes , notably 9 August ? II ( 1977 ) , and Ulysses by the Merlion ( 1979 ) which was published in the anthology of the same name , as well as his role in promoting Singapore literature , for example , through his work as General Editor of the literary journal Singa . Ulysses , which references an iconic statue of a beast with the upper body of a lion and the tail of a fish called the Merlion that faces Marina Bay , was inspired by the use of Irish mythology and history by W. B. Yeats . The Irish poet has asserted a significant influence on Thumboo , as Thumboo recognizes parallels between Ireland 's nationalistic struggle and Singapore 's breakaway from colonialism . He describes himself as a myth @-@ inspired poet , and sees myths as ancient narratives and structures which provide a stable point of reference for a multicultural society . Ulysses has prompted other Singaporean poets such as Alfian Sa 'at , Vernon Chan , David Leo , Felix Cheong , Gwee Li Sui , Koh Buck Song , Lee Tzu Pheng , Alvin Pang and Daren Shiau to write their own Merlion @-@ themed verses ; it is often joked that one cannot be regarded as a true Singapore poet until one has written a " Merlion poem " . A copy of Ulysses is installed on a plaque near the statue .

History also features strongly in Thumboo 's poetry . He has said :

... History enters my writing , as it ought to enter the writing of others , because of its importance in our lives . I go back to this point about the historical moments we occupy . As a former colony , a multi @-@ racial one , created by the British , we need history for a sense of things ; to re @-@ inscribe ourselves ; discover and , in certain areas , define ourselves as individuals , as groups in a multi @-@ racial society . They give you a sense of their belonging , which also happens to be mine . They give you an inherited identity that you put together by being conscious of what you have absorbed , or taken . I live in Singapore ; I have likes and dislikes , a set of interests , a set of values , a set of responsibilities and so on . History I see as fully inclusive , fully in terms of one 's personal limits . And it includes beliefs , and anything of significance ... nothing is irrelevant .

In August 2008 , The Straits Times said that Thumboo 's " most powerful legacy " was " spearheading the creation of a Singapore literature in English " , although Thumboo himself downplayed his pioneering role by commenting : " There were not that many people writing in 1965 , so you had the feeling that you had to create something . But you don 't stand there and say , ' Look , I am a pioneer ' . There is a need to do something , to help go about creating something , and you do it . " He compiled and edited some of the first anthologies of English poetry from Singapore and Malaysia , including The Flowering Tree ( 1970 ) , Seven Poets ( 1973 ) and The Second Tongue ( 1979 ) . He was also the general editor of two multilingual anthologies sponsored by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ( ASEAN ) Committee of Culture and Information entitled The Poetry of Singapore ( 1985 ) and The Fiction of Singapore ( 1990 ) . In addition to the collections of poetry already mentioned , he has published two volumes of poetry for children called Child 's Delight ( 1972 ) , and another collection called Friend : Poems ( 2003 ) . Still Travelling , an anthology consisting of almost 50 poems , was published in 2008 .

On 29 October 2001 , at the launch of a book entitled Ariels : Departures and Returns ? Essays for Edwin Thumboo at the Singapore Art Museum , Associate Professor Robbie Goh said :

... Edwin Thumboo ? s dual discourses ? the analytical and theoretical discourse of the scholar , and the emotive and associative discourse of the poet ? enable him to capture the flow of our experience , and to present it in a variety of different ways , accessible to a variety of individuals . ...

I 've come to see that Edwin Thumboo writes incessantly , because he is driven to communicate something of a better world ; he rolls his sleeves up to act , because he is impatient with waiting for this world to change ; and he forges friendships , because these represent the hope for a better world even within this imperfect one . His impact cannot be measured by words alone , but words ? the tools of his own trade ? may capture the " covenant " of his ideas and values .

In 2015 , Gods Can Die was selected by The Business Times as one of the Top 10 English Singapore books from 1965 ? 2015 , alongside titles by Goh Poh Seng , Daren Shiau and Amanda Lee Koe .

= = Awards = =

Thumboo has won the National Book Development Council of Singapore Book Awards for Poetry three times , in 1978 for *Gods Can Die* ( 1977 ) , in 1980 for *Ulysses by the Merlion* ( 1979 ) , and again in 1994 for *A Third Map* ( 1993 ) . He also received the inaugural S.E.A. Write Award in 1979 , the first Cultural Medallion for Literature in 1979 , and the ASEAN Cultural and Communication Award ( Literature ) in 1987 . In October 2002 , he presented the keynote address at the biennial meeting of the International Association of World Englishes at the University of Illinois at Urbana @-@ Champaign . There , he was presented with the Raja Rao Award for his contributions to the literature of the Indian diaspora .

Thumboo was conferred a Bintang Bakti Masyarakat ( Public Service Star ) in 1981 with an additional Bar in 1991 , and the Pingat Jasa Gemilang ( Meritorious Services Medal ) as Distinguished Poet and Literary Scholar in 2006 .

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A fuller list of works by and about Thumboo may be viewed at Articles & papers by Edwin Thumboo , Centre for the Arts , National University of Singapore , 11 July 2005 , archived from the original on 15 April 2007 , retrieved 13 August 2008 . The bibliography edited by R. Ramachandran and Phan Ming Yen provides the most comprehensive listing of works by him and on him .

A selection of his poems is available at Poems , Centre for the Arts , National University of Singapore , 11 July 2005 , archived from the original on 18 April 2007 , retrieved 13 August 2008 .

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= = Personal life = =

Some of Thumboo 's poems have biblical themes , reflecting the fact that he was born into a Protestant Christian family and baptized as an adult . Thumboo and his wife Yeo Swee Ching live in Bukit Panjang , a suburban area in the central northwestern part of Singapore . They have a son Julian , the head of rheumatology at the Singapore General Hospital ; a daughter Claire , who is a physician ; and seven grandchildren to whom he dedicated Still Travelling ( 2008 ) .

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