



A Gathering Of Themes (above) by Edwin Thumboo (left) gathers 109 poems, from sweeping works on history and nationhood to reflections on religion to love poems about his wife.
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What's stalking Thumboo the poet

Edwin Thumboo, whose latest collection is titled *A Gathering Of Themes*, says the poetic process can be terrifying, in which 'the creature you energised, begins to stalk its maker'

Olivia Ho

In *To A Young Poet*, the poem that closes his new collection, pre-eminent Singaporean poet Edwin Thumboo writes: "You will learn that, near the end/ The creature you energised/ Begins to stalk its maker."

It is an unsettling way to look at the poetic process. "Oh, it can be terrifying," chortles Thumboo, who has been dubbed Singapore's "unofficial poet laureate".

"Sometimes, it's a person who talks to you all the time. You know it

is stronger than you. Sometimes, it speaks falsely, in other voices, in two or three languages removed – and then the problem is, when do you know it is really speaking to you? That is the secret."

He wanted to bring out his latest collection *A Gathering Of Themes* in part because he was concerned about his health. After his 85th birthday last November, he says, he experienced a "decline, a losing of energy".

"It has been quite frightening," he says. "For instance, if you had talked to me previously, I would have been at 100 per cent. Today I am at 80 per cent, but now I am wondering if I can go beyond 80 per cent anymore."

He is speaking in the office he keeps as Emeritus Professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where he was dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from 1980 to 1991.

NUS last month announced the inaugural Edwin Thumboo Prize,

which recognises outstanding pre-university student work in English literature. "It was a lovely surprise," he says.

Long considered one of Singapore's foremost pioneer poets in the English language, his list of accolades includes the first Cultural Medallion for literature and the Meritorious Service Medal.

His poetry includes the collections *Gods Can Die* (1977), *Ulysses By The Merlion* (1979) and *A Third Map* (1993).

His latest collection, *A Gathering Of Themes*, gathers 109 poems, from sweeping works on history and nationhood to reflections on religion to love poems about his wife, Madam Yeo Swee Chin, with whom he has two children and seven grandchildren. He believes this to be the greatest range of topics he has covered in a collection to date.

Some of the poems, such as the religious ones – he was born into a Protestant Christian family but baptised only as an adult – were con-

ceived when he was in his 60s, but written only in his 80s. "Certain poems you think about, but you can't do anything about them. Then years pass and when you least expect it, suddenly you can."

It has been more than a decade since his last major poetry collection, *Still Travelling* (2008), although he has also had several books published in the meantime, such as the retrospective *The Best Of Edwin Thumboo* in 2012, part of Epigram Books' Singapore Pioneer Poets series.

He approached Ethos Books, which published *Still Travelling*, again for this collection. Says Ethos publisher Fong Hoe Fang, 64: "Working with Prof Thumboo was a delightful journey into Singapore's past."

"He would normally point to connections on how his poetry is informed by his environment or the context of the time in which the poem was written. And while I did not always agree with some of the

connections pointed out, it gave me a good sense of the man and his thought processes, and helped me refine my own. And, of course, it helped me to appreciate the ethos of a time before I was born."

Thumboo does not intend *A Gathering Of Themes* to be his last book. He is currently occupied with being the poet-in-residence at the National Gallery Singapore, which he visits at least three times a week to contemplate the art. The work he produces during this residency will probably form his next book.

"A watercolourist is very different from an oil painter," he notes. "The watercolourist must be fast; the oil painter can wait three months, make a stroke and put it aside. I think I write more like the oil painter paints."

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• *A Gathering Of Themes* (\$29.96) is available from Books Kinokuniya and ethosbooks.com.sg