

MICRONESIAN

JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol. 3, n° 1–2

December 2004

BOOK REVIEW

Valentine N. Sengebau (2004) *Microchild: An Anthology of Poetry*. Northern Mariana Islands Council for the Humanities. 68 pp; ISBN: 1-878453-68-8

reviewed by

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Microchild: An Anthology of Poetry brings together all the poetry of Valentine N. Sengebau that was previously published in the late 1970s in the *Micronesian Reporter* (the official quarterly magazine of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands government) and the *Marianas Variety* (the weekly newspaper of the Northern Marianas). The production values of the collection are high. With an Introduction, a Foreword and an Epilog to contextualize the material and the poet, it is a collection that is accessible to readers beyond the Micronesian Islands of which Sengebau wrote.

From this added material we learn that Sengebau was a Palauan who spent the last twenty or so of his years in Saipan, in the Northern Marianas, dying there in 2000. His work was lost in a house fire so the editors relied on the archives of the two newspapers to collect the poems, forty-one in all. They are divided into four sections: *Cultural Identity*, *Politics*, *Love* and *Images*, and are footnoted where necessary to explain words from Palauan or Chamorro and names and places a wider audience are unlikely to recognize. This ordering and the thoughtfulness adds to the reading for non-Micronesians, though there are inevitably

times when the topicality and specificity of allusions deny any easy translation into today's world (see for example "To Bernie & Ted").

Sengebau was writing directly from his own experience which included an education at the University of California at Berkeley where he was witness to the US civil rights movement and student protests against the Vietnam War. This may explain the many poems in the first two sections that tend toward declamatory protests about the state of the islands during this period in the late 1970s, a period of change when what he calls the 'Micronations' were once again moving toward separate nationhood. It is a poetic form of the time that often reads more like political declaration and less like poetry. Indeed "The Task", if written out as prose, could act as a manifesto for pride in and continuance of traditional culture, and "Rairecharmoracherchar" is a history of the islands condensed into two pages.

The loss of traditional ways is a riff of sadness through the section on *Cultural Identity*, through poems such as "Torn Sail", "Rungalk" and "Kerreel" (*To be reminded/Of the cultural erosion/Our dependency of outside*). There are also heartfelt comments on change such as with the

This contribution is not peer-reviewed.

© *Micronesian Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* ISSN 1449-7336

Letao Publishing, PO Box 3080, Albury NSW, Australia

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Japanese invading as tourists in "Children of the Rising Sun" and the return of young people from school elsewhere in "The Watcher":

*And to everyone's dismay
He sported long hair
Like the island's girls,
And wearing darkies
As if repelled
By the sight of his homeland*

The universality of the themes of love poetry are evident on the section *Love*, and it is in *Images* that the reader returns to more culturally specific evocations of the land and the environment Sengebau inhabited. For anyone who has been to Saipan, "Flame Trees" is a wonderful reminder. The language in all is straight to the point with little lyricism, though there are some images that remain with the reader, such as equating offers of *friendship* to *exquisite plastic*

flowers/Without any sincere aroma/Where no bees collect nectar. In essence, it is a collection of poetry of its time and is valuable to read as such.

It is stated that this is the first volume in a planned series to "make the works of local authors available to an international readership". Thus it is fitting that the Council for the Humanities has begun with a search through the archives and a commemoration of a past writer like Sengebau. This can be a foundation for future work—work that responds to the environment here and now, as a vibrant continuation of an ancient storytelling tradition. Seeing someone from their "Micronations" community in print should encourage young and/or new (not necessarily young) writers to put their words down and capture *their* time. Something for a readership in other nations to look forward to.