

Book Review of ‘The New Normal’

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Any book that Prof Maley edits or writes cannot not be good. I say this with conviction as someone who has read quite a few of his books and articles ranging from poems, books on ELT, edited volumes on theoretical aspects in ELT, etc. He is many senses ‘a citizen of the world’ (unlike the character created by Goldsmith) who has been around the world and understood the culture of different places including India. He brings this rich experience in his writing in the form of anecdotes, illustrations and generalisations. And that makes his articles as unique as their titles.

The present book stands as a proof of the wide contacts he has across the world. The pandemic has bothered most of us, but we have resigned ourselves to its vagaries and confined ourselves to homes. Our life style has become sedentary, and several of the chores, including the academic pursuits have taken a backseat. But not with Prof Maley. He has used this time to get in touch with his friends across the globe and encouraged them to write poems describing their experience with the pandemic, their reactions to it. Forty-seven of his friends from fourteen countries have responded and a total of seventy-eight pieces (poems and a few prose pieces) have gone into making of this volume.

Before looking at the contents, let us have a profile of the authors – many are well known poets who have been part of Asia-Teacher-Writers Group (a group that was formed about ten years ago), and some of them seem to have tried their hand at writing a poem for the first time. Quite a few of the contributors are from the field of ELT (which is one of the areas that is close to Prof Maley’s heart) noted teacher educators and materials developers. This goes to prove that when you feel strongly about an issue, and your emotions are stirred, the expression that comes out is often poetic. At least this is what a reader feels going through each piece.

Rather than comment (as is the wont in any review) on the contents, I propose to quote from a few pieces and make a comment or two on such quotes. What made me choose these few quotes and not the entire book? This is a legitimate question anyone can ask. The answer perhaps is my limitation, I might not have understood those parts that I have not quoted.

The poems in the book can be divided into five broad themes as follows: Death, the most predominant theme, the changing lifestyle, separation, anguish among the people, and schooling. In quoting and commenting on the poems, I have gone more sequentially and not according to the themes for there is an obvious overlap of these themes in every

poem. Can death be separated from anguish; can lifestyle be different from the prevailing situation? I leave it to you to decide whether each quote confines itself to one theme or covers all of them comprehensively.

I propose to begin with the most popular theme, the Death. It is death that leads to the rest of the themes mentioned above. The intensity of death is experienced in the following lines:

Let us begin with Nguyen Thi Hoai An, who has contributed two pieces, a poem and a short piece of prose. Here is the full text of his poignant prose for you to read:

On a sad afternoon, he got the news of his father's death. His heart was broken but he could not go home. He could not hold the wrinkled hands or touch the high forehead. He was in quarantine due to COVID-19! No goodbye for his greatest love in life!

How much more powerful the passage will be if the third person pronoun is changed to the first!

Sarita Dewan expresses her sorrow in very realistic terms. Here is what she has to say in just about 50 words:

Happy New Year! *I reply wishing the same. I am waiting for his funny jokes and videos. I sent a message **Hi! What's up?** No reply. I forward some funny pranks to him, waiting for his usual prompt reply . . . still no message. And today I received an obituary message with his photo.*

These are not isolated experiences. Thousands among us must have faced a similar tragedy, but when someone expresses this, our hearts are touched - true catharsis.

The next quote I choose is from a sonnet which carries a powerful symbolism. It talks of a dead tree, and concludes with the following lines with multiple layers of meaning:

*And now I'll chop it down, and it will spark
next winter's fires, more fuel against the dark.*

These lines acquire greater significance when you read them with an earlier line in the middle of the sonnet:

*..... All summer long
A straight and open casket, one more death. (Kirk Branch)*

Here is an Indian poem where we see a woman reflecting on the how her mother used to engage herself in making pickles. And see how the poem ends:

*I say to Mama, seated amidst turmeric and limes
She looks at me with the brightest smile,
Bringing me a jar covered with soft textile.
"Pickled things last long, pickled things stand strong"*

says Mama. She is never wrong. (Nishita Chhabra)

Are we being pickled in the warm interiors of our homes to 'lost long'?

Here is a poem from Dat Bao titled 'Waking Up'. In this poem Bao provides a graphic description of the year 2020 when everything has gone topsy-turvy. The power equations among the nations have changed, the work culture has changed (work from home) and many have had problems in coping with it. Here is a rebellion who says in a strong voice:

*Dreams of evil stop over, night after night
About times I woke up to feel alive
You threatened me enough Mr. Pandemic
Now get lost and take away all that is toxic! (Dat Bao)*

The next piece I want to comment on is by Sylvie Decaux who has contributed write-ups which form a sequence. The write-ups are a mix of prose and poetry. (One is reminded of J M Synge while reading these pieces.) To begin with there are twelve definitions of the new normal, and here are a few sample definitions of the new normal:

The new normal is:

- *fighting the desire to stay on my phone all day.*
- *being allowed to work from wherever we want: our bed, the garden, the train. . .*
- *to wear a beautiful top and sweatpants when you have to turn your camera on.*
- *to be shocked when you see somebody without their mask for the first time.*
- *being paranoid.*

The author brings out the anguish very well, here are just two samples:

*From 8 am to 6 pm in front of a computer
With no social interaction whatsoever,
Stuck in this invisible prison
Forgotten by all.*

*I'm 19 and I feel I'll never be allowed to live again. Because **this cannot be called life.**
(emphasis mine)*

Take a look at the poem 'Hideouts'. I will just summarise this poem and not quote any line (it is a difficult job to choose). A girl of twelve loses her grandmother. The grandmother wore a gas mask when she was twelve and hid herself in the cupboards on listening to alarms. (Days of the WW II) The girl was shocked to believe such things could be true. Today, grandmother is dead, and wearing masks and isolating oneself has become the new normal. This is how the narrative ends:

*and it has become normal
to watch stories on screen
in an attempt to numb
the ones inside our heads.*

'Old wives' Tale' is a familiar idiom and often, we use it to dismiss some news as false by labeling it so. At best, it is a euphemism for a fib. But a poem with this title by John Kay gives us a different story. Here is the full text of the poem"

1. *The old man said he was happy
to have locked down.
Said I spent far too much time,
out.*

2. *Said the Covid nonsense was just
an old wives' tale.
Flu, he said. Couldn't take it
seriously*

3. *It took him quickly
So quickly none of us
could believe it.*

4. *Left me
to tell the tale.*

(The numbering of the stanzas is mine)

There are three poems by Alan Maley (the editor). The first of this is called the New Normal. It is a poem of twenty short lines, each line listing an essential service provider such as a florist, footwear, hairdresser, town museum, library, restaurant, and what have you. Against each of these you have just one word repeating itself 'CLOSED', and finally the poem ends portraying a grim picture:

Funeral Directors – Day and night service. . . (Alan Maley)

Jayashree in her poem 'The return of the Covid' describes the change that has come upon the world in a graphic way.

*The world has become
a Zoo Story
where nobody comes
and nobody goes
and those who go
never come back. (Zoo Story, is a play by Edward Albee)*

In her second poem titled 'Rage' she explains, every one of us has been feeling frustrated but without knowing how to vent our anger. The anger is eating us from within. The casual social conversation is restricted to keeping count of the number of deaths around us. And the punch line says:

*the concert is over
yet the notes
of the violin
echo
in the streets
peopled
by choked silence. (Jayashree Mohanraj)*

It is not just the adults who have seen a change in lifestyle and have problems in coping with it. The school going children are not spared either. See how Prithviraj

Thakur portrays it in his poem 'The Kid and the Covid'

*Our kids are fed up, learning online
Behind Corona clouds, losing their shine.*

*PCs, Tabs, Cellphones – teachers pour in
Truckloads of information, empty within
Innocent kids, how can they sustain*

*Children pay for the sins of the father
With every passing day, darker clouds gather.*

(Prithviraj Thakur)

We have plenty of time at home, no need to go to office, how do we occupy our time (besides working on our computers) – watching news on the television. The idiot box, dishes out a lot of stuff related to Trump's election, war between two countries, deaths, mayhem and what have you. But the TV is silent on:

*These are all important news
But the most important of all – that you
Left me in a huff
And haven't returned yet –
Is neither on TVs
Nor in the newspapers. (Vishnu S Rai)*

When you are isolated from the rest, does the world grow small or large? Technology has of course rendered the world very small, but what has covid done to it. This is how Spiro captures it:

*Something in this world of falling away
is sticking. We are living smaller now.
The earth does not let go.
I do not need to fly again. (Jane Spiro)*

I like to end this review with two more poems. One of these is an acrostic poem while the other is a poem that tells us how expensive some of our innocent slips can be.

Zero Patient

*I saw a bat tonight
And it didn't look well
The zigzag of its flight
Was lacking in pell-mell.
bats are my company*

....

It dribbled and trailed some spit

Corona Virus

*Chaos rises behind those doors
Out on the streets, the people roar.
Running men, finding new hope
On hopeless days, in the darkest of times
Now we know that, no place to hide
As the disease is like rising tide.*

Victory? Can we even try?

*on my sympathetic palm,
and dropped dead. I threw it
in the disposal can.
But alas, I forgot
To wipe it off, and for my sin
Has spread to my kith and kin*

*Incomplete souls, infernal lives,
Radical changes, a different life.
Unhappy, unlucky, unblessed,
Sinking us deeply down, under,
into depression,
surrounded by fears. (Tram Nguyen)*

Thus, epidemics begin. (Augustus Young)
And as the saying goes, one for the way, and that is a haiku for you:

*Vaccination hub
Under the cathedral nave –
The prick of conscience (Alan Maley)*

This review is a sampler for you to go through the whole book and share your feelings with the authors.

S. Mohanraj has teaching experience of more than 40 years and has published nearly 200 research papers in national and international journals. He is the recipient of the Professional Teaching Award from TESOL in the year 2010. At present he is working as academic advisor to the Netaji Subhash Open University in developing their curriculum and courseware for MA ELT program.