

Poetry book explores Filipino culture

Any serious reader could not have missed the controversy around the publication of “American Dirt,” Jeanine Cummins’ new novel about the Mexican migrant crisis.

Latino writers have raised questions of cultural appropriation and the publishing industry’s failure to support writers who can authentically represent the stories of marginalized communities in the U.S.

Certainly, there are counter-arguments that can be made for the right of any author to imagine and create characters outside of their personal experience. But I hope most of us recognize that if the publishing gatekeepers rely primarily on white writers to share the complexities of the lived experiences of people of color, America’s 21st century literary canon will be warped and irrelevant.

The stories we tell, and the stories we consume, matter. We’ve already seen that without a better understanding of what others in our society are experiencing, our capacity for compassion is failing.

That’s why I recommend with some urgency “The Galleons,” a slim but powerful volume of poems written by Rick Barot.

Born in the Philippines, raised in the Bay Area, and now director of the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University just outside of Tacoma, Barot contends with his own family’s immigration story in poems scaffolded with crisp couplets.

Of the more than two dozen poems in

This Week’s Book

“The Galleons” By Rick Barot

Milkweed Editions — 88 pp — \$16

this collection, there is an important subset of 10 ‘Galleon’ poems.

In ‘The Galleons 1,’ Barot reflects on his grandmother’s voyage to America: “Her story is a part of something larger, it is a part / of history. No, her story is an illumination / of history, a matchstick lit in the black seam of time.”

He goes on to muse over the idea that she, as a Filipina war bride after World War II, crossed the same “blue void” as the Spanish galleons that ploughed through the waves three centuries earlier.

A few pages later, in ‘The Galleons 2,’ Barot writes about those ships of old that left Cebu and Manila with kimonos, sapphires, cinnamon and slaves — goods delivered to Acapulco — if they didn’t get swallowed up by the ocean.

And in ‘The Galleons 3,’ Barot tells of his chat with the long-haul trucker sitting next to him on an airplane. When he shares that he is trying to write a poem about a galleon, the trucker responds with his own story about the goods he has transported across the country in his rig: televisions, hazmat materials and Victoria’s Secret products.

Precious cargo, it turns out, means different things in different times.

Barot juxtaposes this constant, freighted sense of transit and displacement with the evanescence of time and memory, and life’s fragility.

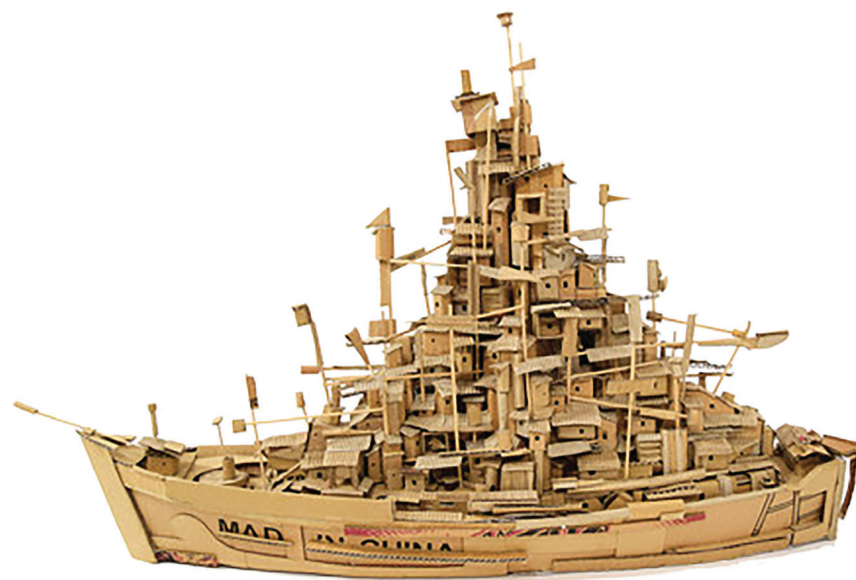
Interspersed between the Galleon poems are other pieces that provide additional context. Barot offers lustrous particulars, creating deft imagery which leads to quiet, but sometimes wrenching, revelation.

Barot offers a perspective worth listen-

ing to. “The Galleons” should be appearing in bookstores this week — watch for it.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.

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The Galleons

poems **RICK BAROT**

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