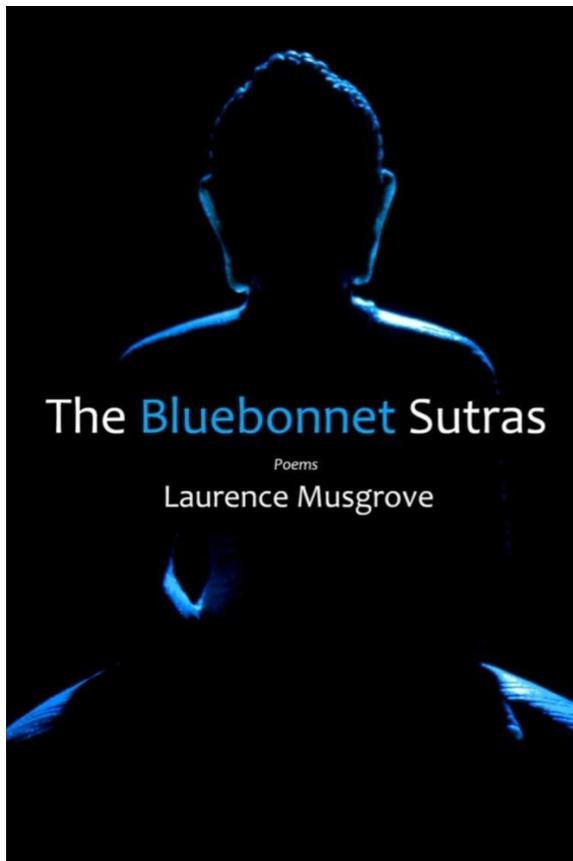


The Beaumont Book Beat

The Bluebonnet Sutras: West Texas Buddhism at its Finest

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Lamar University Literary Press publishes literary fiction, poetry, and nonfiction right here in Beaumont. The press specializes in Texas and regional authors and has won numerous awards. Check back for the latest news on publications and literary happenings in Southeast Texas.



West Texas is probably the last place one would expect to find a poet influenced by Buddhist tradition. That's why I was particularly surprised to read *The Bluebonnet Sutras*, a delightfully insightful book of poetry by Laurence Musgrove. These poems use metaphors gleaned from the mundane experiences of everyday life in West Texas to explore the foundational

concepts of Buddhist study such as the sources of suffering, goodness, and mindfulness in accessible, concise, and thought-provoking sutras that “whisper courage” into the “exhausted heart.”

The speaker in these poems records his internal conversations with the imagined persona of Buddha, who appears throughout his everyday life to speak wisdom and ponder life. In “Desire Sutra,” we get to eavesdrop on a conversation about the nature of suffering and how it comes from misdirected desire, and to avoid it, the Buddha reminds us to redirect desire “away from the darkness . . . and toward the light of self-understanding.” Musgrove illustrates this idea through numerous metaphors to make it easier to understand for his readers. In “Trout Sutra,” for example, the speaker shows us how we can become hooked like a trout by our daily responsibilities and fears. However, the Buddha turns the metaphor around by directing us to instead consider “the joy of release” the angler must feel as the fish swims away: “Every hook will be barbless when / you catch yourself being caught.” Suffering, then, becomes something we can overcome. In “Green Sutra,” Musgrove reminds us of the importance of suffering through dark and fallow times by comparing it to the seasons of the year:

The greenest of seasons
Is the favorite of many
Because we've waiting
So long for the sun's return
And we warm our whistles
To the harmony of birds.

Many poems also explore the concept of fundamental goodness. To me, it feels abstract, but Musgrove uses metaphors aptly to make it concrete. In “Throne

Sutra” the speaker, while struggling with his posture, learns to picture himself “on a throne / a calm kind of my bodily realm.” As he focuses on his breath, he feels “a bright compassion / sitting high on the throne” of the mind. The Buddha then teaches the speaker that each of our lives is a kingdom, and it’s our choice whom we allow to sit on the throne: fear and anger or peace and love. “Each of our minds is a throne / who do we want to sit there?” he asks as the poem closes. In “Onion Sutra,” the goodness within each of us is compared to the sweet bulb of an onion. As the speaker slices onions for supper, the Buddha looks up from his laptop and takes the opportunity to discuss this, comparing the hard, dry layers of the onion to the layers of anxiety and aggression that we develop to protect our inner selves from the harsh world. “The onion is no good to us / until that dry skin is torn off,” he states. The poem closes with a touching revelation—“many tears / will fall as you reveal the heart / you’ve waited so long to open.” Later in the collection in the poem “Dishes Sutra,” he see the speaker cleaning up after a meal he shared with the Buddha. And of course, over dishes, Buddha offers instructions for allowing goodness to shine throughout the world. He uses the meal as a symbol for goodness because “nothing / was wasted about its preparation / consumption, or even / the cleaning up afterward.” Even though the meal is “ultimately inconsequential / when set against the history / of human desire and hunger,” it’s a small symbol of what we can all do to make the world a better place, to work towards satiating our “everlasting appetite / for creating a better world.”

Perhaps the most important lesson this fictional Buddha imparts on the speaker, and therefore also us readers, is the idea of mindfulness. Nature and the natural world illustrate this concept perfectly. In “Spring Sutra,” the speaker spends a morning in his garden pulling weeds. The Buddha, his neighbor, calls him over to talk and praises

him for spending time outside. “When we add ourselves to nature,” he states, “we receive a lesson” of “spring’s confidence.” An early morning walk offers similar wisdom in “Start Again Sutra,” where the speaker describes his journeys before breakfast “along a narrow path in a small wooded area.” As he walks, he keeps “running into / spider webs invisibly strung across the path.” The Buddha, as always, uses this as a teachable moment. “Each morning, we start again in meditation / with small distractions that slow our practice,” like the spiderwebs the speaker encounters on his morning walk. However, “with diligence and patience, we open / a clear path that eventually leads us / to the benefits of owning our own minds.” My personal favorite poem in the collection is near the end, “Wings Sutra.” On another morning walk, the speaker comes across a “Cooper’s Hawk perched / high on a bare branch of a withering pecan.” As it flies overhead in a slow circle, the speaker wonders if perhaps he’s just received the hawk’s blessing. “What a feeling that must be,” he says to the Buddha, “to soar so effortlessly, without a care.” The Buddha replies, “Oh, you bet there’s effort ... it’s not that easy to turn stillness into flight.” Turning stillness into flight—what a great metaphor for what we all aim to do in life.

The Bluebonnet Sutras is a book chalked full of wisdom, inspiration, and beauty. The seemingly simple poems are laden with meaning that readers everywhere can apply to their everyday lives. It’s both poetry and spiritual guide. Buddhism in West Texas... who would have thought? Well, apparently, now both you and me!

The Bluebonnet Sutras (Lamar University Literary Press, 2019) is available in paperback at Barnes and Noble, Amazon, and locally at Fleur Fine Books in Port Neches!