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The Seamstress
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Q: *The Seamstress* is your first novel. Can you briefly describe your process of composition, and how some of the central characters and ideas of the book first came to you?

A: Each time I returned to my family's farm in Pernambuco I visited an old man named Dr. Gilberto—a retired physician turned goat breeder—who told me stories about Ant'nio Silvino, an infamous cangaceiro from the early 1900's. He gave me my first book on cangaceiros.

Eventually, I wanted to know more about the female bandits in the canga'o but information was extremely hard to find. Only one woman—the famous bandit-bride named Maria Bonita (Mary the Beautiful)—had truly been studied. This lack of information made me think of my grandmother Em'lia and my great-aunts Maria Augusta and Luzia: They'd lived in the countryside when cangaceiros were prevalent. They were the kind of girls that could have been kidnapped and forced to join the canga'o. Luckily they'd escaped this fate and moved to Recife. But what if they hadn't?

This question was a source of inspiration for my novel. I wanted to portray cangaceiros as human beings—with flaws and virtues—and not just as folk heroes. I also wanted to write about urban Brazilian women of the time. Women in cities—like my grandmother and great-aunts—fought for suffrage, shorter hair and hemlines, the right to work, and the right to be considered more than just accessories to their husbands. These women didn't carry guns or rob farmers but, in their own way, they were just as brave as cangaceiras. Em'lia and Luzia—the main characters of *The Seamstress*—embody these rural and urban outlaws. Through these characters, I wanted to write a book that told dual stories.

Q: How would you characterize the experience of narrating a book from the perspectives of two very different characters who are deeply interconnected?

A: It was a challenge. I chose to write the story in a close third-person point-of-view and not in first-person, so there was some psychic distance between the book's narration and its two main characters. But I still had to filter all observations and conclusions through the distinct consciousness of each woman. Em'lia and Luzia would inevitably notice different things, value different things, and react uniquely to their surroundings. These differences grow as both girls mature. I discovered that I could not write one chapter and quickly move to the next chapter. I could not easily slip between consciousnesses. I had to give myself ample time to switch between voices. Ultimately, I had to focus on each girl separately and, in later drafts, make their stories interconnect.

Q: Why did you decide to title the book, *The Seamstress*, singular?

A: The book's title was one of the last things to materialize. I just crossed my fingers and hoped a title would pop into my mind by the time I'd finished writing the novel. In the end, I decided the simplest title was the best. I'd played with the plural, but "*The Seamstresses*" felt too clunky. And the singular can apply to both Em'lia and Luzia, as well as to Luzia's alter ego, and even to the Bergmann machine gun in the end of the novel.

Q: To what extent did your research into this era of Brazilian history enable you to better appreciate the political and historical challenges confronted by your ancestors?

A: Part of my research was interviewing older people, who had been alive in the 1920's and 30's in Brazil. I interviewed anyone I could find: farmers, housewives, midwives, you name it. Sometimes I interviewed their grown children too, because they often recalled their parents' histories. What I came away with was a deep sense of the fragility of human life. Today, many of us don't experience death until our own parents die, and this is often later in our lives. But in the 1920s and 30's, death was everywhere. If a rural mother gave birth to eleven kids, often only half of them would live to adulthood. And the statistics in cities weren't much better. Things like childhood vaccinations and local sanitation programs were just beginning. Life was precarious. Because of this, I think people back then had a deeper sense of the impermanence of human existence, and this gave them a certain stoicism and toughness.

Q: Who are some of the authors that you consider the greatest influences on your prose style?

A: I'm not sure. I know which writers I love though. When I say "love," I mean it. When I read these authors' works, I feel a deep affection well up inside of me even though I will never know these people personally. I love Rachel de Queiroz, a Brazilian author who wrote mostly about women in northeast Brazil. Her stories are almost always told in first-person, and are very intimate portraits. I love George Elliot and Edith Wharton and how they created entire social worlds in their books. Apart from being beautifully written, I think their books have survived because they communicate how interdependent human beings are. I also love Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jos' Saramago. People tend to focus on magic realism with these authors, but I admire their ability to weave epic tales. A tale is different from a story; I think a tale has a community of characters, must be told in several sittings, and seems deceptively simple but holds deep messages. The tone of Marquez and Saramago's writing is one of ancient knowledge, as if an elder is speaking to readers and telling them an important tale—one that should be retold for generations.