



The Seamstress

By Frances de Pontes Peebles
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Introduction

As seamstresses, the orphaned sisters Em'lia and Luzia dos Santos know how to cut, how to mend, and how to conceal. These are useful skills in the backcountry of Brazil, where vigilantes called *cangaceiros* make the rules. Em'lia dreams of falling in love and escaping to the city. Luzia also longs to escape their little town, where residents view her with suspicion because of her deformed arm and her quick temper.

But when Luzia is abducted by a group of *cangaceiros* led by the infamous Hawk, the sisters' quiet lives diverge in ways they never imagined. Em'lia stumbles into a marriage where her glamorous life is soon overshadowed by heartache and loneliness. Luzia, forced to trek through scrubland and endure a nomadic existence, begins to see the *cangaceiros* as comrades, not criminals.

Luzia will overcome time and distance to entrust her sister with a great secret one Em'lia vows to keep. And when Luzia's life is threatened, Em'lia will risk everything to save her.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does their shared childhood as poor, religious, orphaned seamstresses shape Em'lia and Luzia's unique perspectives on life?
2. How does access to water define political power in a country like Brazil in the 1920s and 1930s? How did the author's descriptions of extreme drought affect your appreciation of modern conveniences?
3. How does the Hawk's treatment of Luzia in the *caatinga*, or scrub, reveal Ant'nio's true nature?
4. What does Em'lia's reception into Recife society indicate about the esteem in which the Coelho family is held? To what extent is her mother-in-law, Dona Dulce Coelho, overly concerned about others' perceptions of Em'lia?
5. To what extent are secrets responsible for the marriage between Degas and Em'lia and, much later, for its disintegration?
6. How does Luzia's behavior in the initial aftermath of Ant'nio's death explain her success in becoming the new captain of the *cangaceiros*? In what other ways does her behavior change once the Hawk is dead?
7. How do Dr. Duarte's interests in phrenology and politics and his import-export business connect him to the government's search for *The Seamstress* and the Hawk?
8. At various points in the novel, how does Dr. Eronildes Epifano represent both salvation and damnation to the *cangaceiros*? What role does Degas play in alerting Em'lia to Dr. Eronildes's duplicity?
9. Given *The Seamstress's* attacks on innocent people, to what extent are Em'lia's efforts to communicate information to Luzia through newspaper articles and photographs ethically defensible?
10. How does the book's final image connect with earlier images of bones in *The Seamstress*? Why do you think the author chose to close her book with this image?

About the Author

Frances de Pontes Peebles was born in Pernambuco, Brazil and raised in Miami, Florida. A graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she has received several awards, including Brazil's Sacatar Artist's Fellowship and the Michener-Copernicus Society of America Award. Her short stories have appeared in *Zoetrope: All-Story*, the *Indiana Review*, the *Missouri Review*, and the *O. Henry Prize Story Collection 2005*.