

The books for this month are a holiday gift list:
books to broaden the library and the mind,
to provide pleasure and enjoyment,
to give to oneself and others.

LITERATURE

The Cave, by Jose Saramago; translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa. Orlando, Fla., Harcourt, 2002, 320 pp., \$25.00; \$14.00 (paper, Harvest Books, 2003).

Jose Saramago lives in the Canary Islands, where he writes in Portuguese. Being from a small country, and writing in a language that is not English or Spanish, he is less well-known in the United States than his work deserves. Although Portugal has been a nation since 1143, and had conquered much of Africa, India, and Asia (the Japanese word for "thank you" [*arigato*] derives from the Portuguese *obrigado*). The Treaty of Tordesillas in 1506 confirmed the division, by Pope Alexander IV, of the Christian world between Spain and Portugal. The dividing line, from the North Pole to the South Pole, gave Brazil, Africa, and Asia (except for the Philippines) to Portugal and all the rest of the Americas to Spain (1). As a result, most North Americans know the Spanish masters, such as Cervantes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but not the great writers of Portugal.

The *Washington Post Book World* has called Jose Saramago the "world's greatest living novelist." He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998. His body of work consists of remarkable feats of imagination and humanism, with profound expositions of the psychology of existence and the nuances of communication. Thanks to translator Margaret Jull Costa, those of us who cannot speak or read Portuguese (the third most widely spoken European language) can enjoy a prose that, unlike the poetry of Frost's definition, is not lost in translation.

The Cave is the simple story of a potter, his daughter, his son-in-law, and a stray dog. They live in a humble home in a small village, near an expanding industrial/residential complex governed by a mysterious bureaucracy. Our hero, Cipriano Algor, 64 years old, is a widower who sells his pottery in the city. We are not told the era, the name of the city, or the country, but in lucid prose a story unfolds with the intensity of an epic adventure story, pulling us into the lives of this small family. Although the story may be allegorical, the almost surreal texture is not forced; rather, the language is quite plain, and the sentences are often very long, with no delineation of voice between characters in a "he-said-she-said" manner. As a result, the narrative flows as natural conversation, without the discontinuity that putting every speaker in quotes may produce. The profound wisdom expressed in this novel is so clear that one may think, "Yes, I knew that," but never did you hear it expressed so well. Even (or especially) the psychology of the dog is narrated in a way that will cause any pet owner to realize that these creatures exist to console and help their owners. The stray dog, whose inner thoughts are as valid as

those of the humans, is in fact a character in the story. Konrad Lorenz may have not had such a grasp of the mind of the dog.

Saramago was born in 1922. Although not university educated (he was trained as a technician and employed as a laborer), he became a translator, and he has described himself as an essayist turned novelist. His work has been translated into more than 20 languages, a testament to the universality of the human emotions expressed in his novels.

In *The Cave*, Cipriano's son-in-law has a job as a security guard in the city. To be promoted, he must move to company housing in the city with his wife and, of course, her father. The huge apartment complex in the city looks onto a shopping mall interior, without a blade of real grass but with every accommodation technology can provide. However, no dogs are allowed. The proposed move becomes a family crisis, made more complicated when plastic utensils and mass-produced containers supplant the demand for Cipriano's pottery. Cipriano then attempts to start a new venture, producing pottery dolls, small figures of clay, fired in his ancient wood-burning kiln.

This may sound like a trite nature-versus-technology story, but it is much more than that. The family dynamics, the strained loyalties among parents, children, and in-laws, the prospect of love after the death of a spouse, and the disruptions of career and home are themes important to all people, not just to psychotherapists and social workers. It is with great detail and description of the commonplace that Saramago moves the narrative. His powers of observation provide insight into the life of his characters, allowing readers to make their own conclusions regarding their psychology. These are characters one learns genuinely to care for, and to wish well.

In another book by Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (2), one of the characters is a dead poet, and the protagonist is a character in one of his poems. This may sound contrived, but, as in *The Cave*, the small details of daily life illuminate the action. In *Blindness: A Novel* (3) an epidemic of blindness spreads through a city. In an internment center established to contain the epidemic, the brutality and violence of mankind emerges in microcosm. The blind see bright white, instead of darkness, from which readers may draw their own conclusions about the metaphor of world war and the modern age of violence. In *The Stone Raft* (4) the Iberian Peninsula separates from the European continent and drifts out into the Atlantic. This rather unlikely scenario is related in matter-of-fact prose describing a classic quixotic quest with a Deux Cheveau automobile instead of a horse named Rocinante. Like the dog in *The Cave*, the car in *The Stone Raft* has thoughts and feelings, too.

Saramago, like Kafka, portrays the horror of unresponsive bureaucracy and, like Dostoyevsky, the moral struggle to understand the nature of evil and the meaning of life. *The Cave* harkens back to Plato, but unlike prisoners chained in the

dark observing shadows on the wall, the readers of *The Cave* understand that although things are given names, pure forms are philosophical concepts that may only be aspired to by great literature such as that produced by Saramago.

References

1. Ergang R: Europe From the Renaissance to Waterloo. Boston, DC Heath, 1954, pp 102–103
2. Saramago J: The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis (1984). Orlando, Fla, Harcourt, 1991
3. Saramago J: Blindness: A Novel (1995). Orlando, Fla, Harcourt, 1998
4. Saramago J: The Stone Raft (1986). Orlando, Fla, Harcourt, 1996

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Elizabeth Costello, by J.M. Coetzee. New York, Viking Books, 2003, 230 pp., \$21.95; \$14.00 (paper published by Penguin Books).

Eight years ago J.M. Coetzee was asked by Princeton to give the annual Tanner Lecture on Human Values. Coetzee, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003, chose to present the lectures in the form of a fictional account of a distinguished woman, a writer and literary critic like himself, giving similar lectures at a college much like Princeton. Mrs. Elizabeth Costello, I take it, is Coetzee's alter ego or perhaps his Jungian anima. Coetzee knows better than most of us that the fact that she is a woman will make a difference in contemporary discourse, where the gender and race of a person may be at least as important as what they say. Mrs. Costello, we will learn, has many things she feels she needs to say or perhaps that Coetzee wants her to say for him. She has long been a vegetarian and is passionate about animal rights. Instead of lecturing about literature at her fictional Princeton, this "vegan," cat-loving, elderly woman delivers a polemic on animal rights. Ignoring the fact that she will offend the Jews in her audience, she compares the way cattle and poultry are treated to the Holocaust. She insists that the treatment of animals is even worse than the Holocaust because we all know it is happening and we do not care. At the fictional Princeton her audience is rattled if not offended, and one Jewish faculty member conspicuously refuses to attend the dinner in her honor. He writes her a note: "Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle died like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words I will not accept....Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man."

I do not know how the actual Princeton audience reacted to Coetzee's reading of *The Lives of Animals*, as he later called the published lecture (1). Is an author personally responsible for his offending fictional character? In this case I must confess I thought so and felt deeply offended. Coetzee is a man who calculates better than most of us. I assumed he was hiding behind the persona of a woman, using the Holocaust to make a rhetorical point, and since he is himself a South African émigré, it seemed to me he should have been moralizing about how his Boer ancestors slaughtered the Hottentots like animals so they would have unencumbered land to graze their cattle. I dismissed Costello/Coetzee as both cruel and sentimental; they were the fictional and living proof of the philosopher Ian Hacking's thesis that the arguments for animal

rights are emotionally very powerful but in the end not rationally or morally compelling. Still, something about Mrs. Costello stuck in my craw; she was more infuriatingly memorable than most real Tanner Lecturers on Human Values.

Lives of Animals was my first encounter with Coetzee. I've since read several of his novels and discovered that he has done all that could be asked in confronting his South African legacy of guilt. Furthermore, I discovered he was a great writer with a powerful mind and began to think I had misjudged Costello/Coetzee. Fortunately, Coetzee decided to inhabit the mind of his anima, and in his latest work, *Elizabeth Costello*, he follows her around as she gives other moralizing lectures in different venues. These picaresque adventures are presented as a series of "lessons"; a slightly revised version of the *Lives of Animals* represents two of those lessons. Mrs. Costello has reached that age when she cannot always distinguish between her self-righteous indignation and the truth of the matter. If we follow her on her travels and read this brilliant and intellectually exciting book with the care it deserves, we may begin to appreciate that the line between them is vanishingly thin and only a writer like Coetzee and a character like Mrs. Costello could fully reveal this to us. The confused and tententious old lady I remembered became a Don Quixote taking on the false nostrums of our times.

It becomes clear that Mrs. Costello is a woman of enormous literary erudition, and all of this wisdom makes her a more vulnerable human being rather than providing a wall she can hide behind. As Coetzee imagines her past, she made her literary reputation and became a feminist icon by taking Molly Bloom—the vain and sensual woman of James Joyce's *Ulysses*—and making her the protagonist of a novel, *Eccles Street*, in which she appears as a complete person in her own right rather than as the object of a Joycean "yes" "yes" "yes" erotic fantasy.

Mrs. Costello is now at an age when her past is at least as important as her present. She is no longer looking for love or partners, she has had enough of that, thank you. She has had many experiences, and she feels both morally compelled and entitled to speak her mind, even though she knows diplomacy might be better. Mrs. Costello hates to be patronized by her children and their spouses. Coetzee published two pages in the *New York Review of Books* describing a meeting in the South of France between Mrs. Costello and her children (2) that ought to be required reading for any psychiatrist who literally believes that old age is a second childhood and that your children can become your parents. Certainly not for the fiercely independent Mrs. Costello; she may be fragile but she will not be patronized. She is full of life, and it is the life of the mind reflecting on experience. The picaresque adventures on which Coetzee takes Mrs. Costello are as much mind trips as real travels. She confronts literary and philosophical challenges. Often the issue is the shallowness of trendy academic life, but whatever the issue is Costello/Coetzee will make you rethink your own assumptions.

In the last of her travels Mrs. Costello reaches a village where to pass through the symbolic gates she must be judged. Now she is in the surreal world of Kafka, in which it is unclear on what grounds you are charged. She thinks of herself as the very particular person the reader has come to know. In her vexation she asks the inscrutable clerk if he has ever seen anyone like her. He lays down his pen, folds his hands, regards her