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José Saramago

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JOSÉ SARAMAGO, the first Portuguese-language author to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, (in 1998), was born to a family of rural workers in Azinhaga in 1922. After publishing his first novel in 1944, *Terra do Pecado*, he did not publish again for nineteen years, though he worked as a translator and journalist.

His second novel, *Levantado do Chão*, received favorable notice, but it was *Memorial do Convento* in 1982 (published in the U.S. in 1987 as *Baltasar and Blimunda*) that won him wide international acclaim. This was quickly followed by *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, *The Stone Raft*, and *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*. *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991) was nominated for the European literary contest Ariosto until pressure from the Catholic Church caused the Portuguese government to ban the book from competition. Saramago soon moved to Lanzarote in the Canary Islands, where he still resides.

His prodigious output includes *Blindness*, a virtuoso horror story of the modern condition, and *All the Names*, followed by *Caverna*, a revisiting of the myth of Plato's cave, published in Portugal in 2000.

He once commented that Portuguese is a language of digression, and his prose is an impasto of erudition, historical references, authorial whimsical asides, and a belief in the vitality of memory and the supremacy of love. He describes his style as merely recording how people truly speak, without quotation marks hanging in the air.

Baltasar and Blimunda contains his most memorable love story. The arrogance of King Dom João V required the building of a monastery at Mafra larger than the Basilica at St. Peter's—a true event that bankrupted the nation. This arrogance serves in contrast to the lightness and carnal devotion of Baltasar and Blimunda. In the opening scene, the King unrobes to make unpleasant love to the Queen in order to produce an heir (while bedbugs writhe), in contrast to the tenderness of Baltasar and Blimunda, who wordlessly make the sign of the cross on his chest with her hymenal blood.

Saramago has a passion for calling our attention to “the ignored people,” and this sensibility is illustrated here in this passage from *Baltasar and Blimunda*. The men are required to move a stone to the site of the monastery to create its massive door. We have already spent pages of exhausting labor, going around a forest's corners and hearing the groan of the imperiled oxen. We are now obliged to remember Francisco Marques, who dies while thinking of going home to make love to his wife. It is impossible to read this section without afterward seeing the blood of countless people within the works of humankind.