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All the Names

by Jose Saramago

Through a Glass Vaguely

A Review by John Banville

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When I was but a lad, and had not yet learned to beware the *faux amis* lying plausibly in wait for me in the playground of the French language, I imagined that the term *la nouvelle vague*, then much in vogue, meant not "the new wave" but something like "the new vagueness." *La nouvelle vague* was a journalistic appellation for the new young cinéastes, Truffaut, Resnais, Godard, and the rest, but in my mind, presumably because of the faux-homophony between *nouvelle* and novel, it became applied also to practitioners of the *nouveau roman* such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philippe Sollers, and Nathalie Sarraute, those bright but distant stars in my slowly expanding literary firmament. "The new vagueness" seemed to me to describe very well the work of these writers, with its willfully jaded dynamics, its studied aversion to specifics, its degree-zero style.

I came to have an image of the quintessential post-modern (though the word was still only a gleam in the eye of Jacques Derrida *et ses amis*) European novel. There would be a faceless anti-hero, trudging the great avenues and the squalid back alleys of a nameless city, following some mysteriously ordained quest which he knows he can neither complete nor abandon, and which is, anyway, merely a metaphor for the real task in which he is engaged, namely, the search for an Identity. Even the pages of this *ur-roman* would have a characteristic look to them: high and narrow and somehow tottery, with squeezed margins, few paragraph breaks, and no passages of dialogue where in more conventional tales the weary reader could pause to paddle in the shallows.

All very earnest, all very enigmatic, and all maddeningly vague. And this kind of novel is still being written in mainland Europe. Every year it wins one of those little-known but highly lucrative literary prizes offered by this or that unpronounceable foundation with affiliations to the European Union. Some of these novels even deserve a prize. Some of them are even read, or at least bought, by surprisingly large numbers of people. But it is all a far, far cry from the glory days of the European novel, when a new work by Thomas Mann or Alberto Moravia or Gunter Grass would set the Sunday supplements humming with excitement.

Fiction in Europe is now generally an etiolated, unassuming, apologetic affair, a tired voice out of what seem exhausted cisterns. Opening Jose Saramago's *All the Names*, with its severe, oddly punctuated pages, each one tall and almost as black as the monolith in 2001, one might be forgiven an involuntary small sigh of foreboding, like those sighs with which, in another age, we used to greet some poetaster's latest slim volume of verse. Despite the many graces of *All the Names*, such

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a first response to it would be not entirely unjustified.

Saramago was born in Portugal in 1922, in what one of his English publishers calls "a small farming community north of the Alentejo," and when still a boy he moved with his family to Lisbon. He left school early, and worked as a mechanic, a draughtsman, a civil servant, and in publishing. When he was twenty-five he published a novel, presumably without success, and his literary career did not begin in earnest until he was in his middle forties. He produced three volumes of poetry, he was a journalist and translator, and then he published his second novel, the wonderfully titled *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* (one gleefully imagines the confusion in bookshops, not to mention library catalogues). In 1988, his novel *Baltasar and Blimunda* appeared in English, and the following year he had a modest success in the English-speaking world with what is perhaps his best-known, if not his best, novel, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. Other works have followed, including *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, and the extraordinary *Blindness*. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1998.

The finest of these books are *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* and *Blindness*. The former is a sort of Portuguese *Ulysses*, and it can probably only be fully appreciated, as Saramago himself has suggested, by readers who are themselves Portuguese, calling as it does for a considerable knowledge of Portugal's history as a great empire and later as a dictatorship under Salazar. Ricardo Reis was one of the very many pen-names, or better say, one of the very many identities assumed by the elusive Portuguese poet and aphorist Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), and much of the novel is a recounting of meetings and conversations in Lisbon in the 1930s between Reis and his creator, who, when the narrative opens, has recently died.

Yes, it is that kind of book. Still, Saramago here avoids the self-consciousness and the risible portentousness of so much fantastical fiction that has emerged in recent years from the "Latin" countries, from South America and, especially, from the Indian subcontinent. *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* bubbles with underground laughter, and despite the absurdity of its central premise - a deceased writer conversing at length with an invented version of himself - which would have been unbearably whimsical in the hands of a lesser writer, it keeps its feet firmly set on that mundane ground where the novel is at its strongest:

"Ricardo Reis goes to lunch, on this occasion to the Chave de Ouro, for a steak...and with so many hours to go before nightfall he buys a ticket for a movie, he will see *The Volga Boatmen*, a French film with Pierre Blanchard, what Volga can they possibly have invented in France."

Saramago has a light, graceful, ironical touch, and he maintains a welcome restraint in his use of the paraphernalia of magical realism, that literary dead-end into which so many talented writers have stumbled over the past two or three decades, chasing like lemmings after the ghosts of the colorful Buendia clan. Saramago is well-aware that, contrary to popular notions, one of the novelist's primary duties is to keep his imagination under tight control. In fantastic fictions, what is presented as exuberance is often merely unruliness. For the rule of magical realism is that there are no rules. When you can say anything, however, the danger is that you will do exactly that: say anything. The inventor of magical realism did produce a masterpiece, but the judicious critic might say of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* what T.S. Eliot said of *Finnegans Wake*, that one book like this is enough.

The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis is moving, and wise, and in places slyly funny. But there is not much fun to be had in *Blindness*, a dystopian account of what happens when everyone in the world suddenly goes blind, with the exception of one woman, the wife, suitably enough, of an ophthalmologist. In a chilling twist, what the epidemic of blindness brings to its victims is not

darkness, but a blank white glare. There is an awful inevitability to the descent into anarchy and internecine warfare that the book traces (it was Eliot, again, who foresaw such warfare as the future of mankind, "people fighting each other in the streets"), but Saramago resists the temptation to indulge in Burroughs-esque grotesqueries. Here are perfectly ordinary people struggling to cope with total catastrophe - or, at the other end of the human scale, seizing the opportunity to indulge their basest urgings.

The section of the novel in which a gang of thugs forces a group of women to submit to sexual degradation in return for food is truly horrifying, not least because it is so calmly described. It is possible, reading such passages, to believe that posterity may well set *Blindness* on the same lofty shelf as the works of Swift and Céline. All the same, at the end a little light does dawn, when people's eyesight returns as suddenly as it vanished, although what they have to look on is a world in ruins.

At the end of *Blindness*, the woman who all along could see encounters a blind writer who has continued at his craft despite not being able to read what he is writing.

The doctor's wife asked, "May I?" Without waiting for a reply she picked up the written pages, there must have been about twenty, she passed her eye over the tiny handwriting, over the lines which went up and down, over the words inscribed on the whiteness of the page, recorded in blindness, I am only passing through, the writer had said, and these were the signs he had left in passing.

Something of the same obsessiveness and dogged refusal to abandon a dubious enterprise is displayed, alas, by the protagonist (if that is the word) of Saramago's latest novel, *All the Names*.

This is the story (if that is the word) of a lowly clerk working in the Central Registry of Births, Marriages, and Deaths who embarks on a search to locate a woman whose birth certificate finds its way by accident into "his extensive collection of news items about people in his country who, for good reasons and bad, had become famous." The clerk's name is Senhor Jose; we are assured that he also has surnames, "very ordinary ones, nothing extravagant," but everyone, including his creator, knows him simply as Senhor Jose. In fact, he is the only character in the novel who, despite the book's title, is given any kind of name, all the others being identified simply by what they are or what they do. One supposes this is meant to Mean Something. Are we back to the quest for identity?

Senhor Jose lives in a small, shabby house attached to one of the massive walls of the Central Registry, to which he has direct access through his back door. In the Registry there is a strict hierarchy of command: at the bottom are Senhor Jose and his fellow drudges, at the top is the remote and olympian Registrar, "who knows all there is to know about the kingdoms of the visible and the invisible." It is under the withering and all-seeing eye of this potentate that Senhor Jose goes in search of the "unknown woman." He identifies the school where she was a pupil, and breaks into it at night in search of her records - this is a mournfully funny episode - and from there goes on to discover where she lived, learns that she married, and was divorced, and was a teacher at her old school, and at last, at a genuinely startling juncture in the narrative, that she is dead, and by her own hand. Even this fact, however, does not deter Senhor Jose, this hapless Orpheus who will follow his unknown Euridice even into the land of the dead.

All the Names is a curious mixture of the portentous and the absurd. It has strong echoes of Borges, Beckett, and, of course, Kafka; but its voice is distinctive and thoroughly its own. Despite the reticence of tone and the lugubrious nature of the action (such as it is), the reader will have an unflagging sense of something profound going on just beyond the limits of comprehension. The book

is Modernist rather than Postmodernist - or Humanist rather than Post-Humanist; Saramago, for all his elusiveness and sly humor, is concerned that we should understand and appreciate the seriousness, the deadly seriousness, of the quest that his poor, Quixotic protagonist has embarked on, and which, it seems, will never be brought to an end, except by death.

In the course of a long address to his staff, the Registrar seems to provide a motto that his clerk might carry with him on his errantry: "Just as definitive death is the ultimate fruit of the will to forget, so the will to remember will perpetuate our lives." I do not pretend to know exactly what this pronouncement, and many other such pronouncements, may signify, but they do seem to signify something worth knowing. When Senhor Jose finally gains access to the book's version of the Chapel Perilous - that is, the unknown woman's empty apartment - the narrative delivers what seems both a valediction and a validation:

Here lived a woman who committed suicide for unknown reasons, who had been married and got divorced, who could have gone to live with her parents after the divorce, but had preferred to live alone, a woman who, like all women, was once a child and a girl, but who even then, in a certain indefinable way, was already the woman she was going to be, a mathematics teacher whose name while she was alive was in the Central Registry, along with the names of all the people alive in this city, a woman whose dead name returned to the living world because Senhor Jose went to rescue her from the dead world, just her name, not her, a clerk can only do so much.

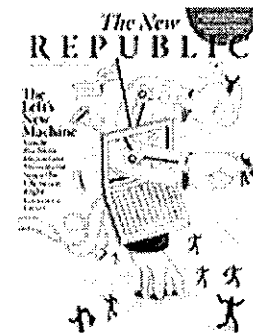
What can any of us do, Saramago seems to be saying, except - like the blind writer, like the unknown woman, like Senhor Jose himself - leave a few scribbled signs for those who come after us to read as best they can? But if this is so, then surely it must also be our duty to make the meaning of our signs as tangible as possible for those who come after us. Otherwise all we will have done is put impediments in the way of the blind. Vagueness may be fashionable, but clarity is timeless.

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NovelList

Level: Adult

All the names

Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa

Author: Saramago, Jose

New York: Harcourt, copyright 1999, 238 p.

Subject Headings:

Office workers
Birth and death records
Vital statistics
Obsession
Portuguese fiction -- 20th century -- Translations into English
Lisbon, Portugal

Notes:

Translation of Todos os nomes

Reviews for this Title:

Publishers Weekly Review: The deceptive simplicity of Nobel Prize-winner Saramago's prose, and the ironic comments that he intersperses within this story of an obsessional quest, initially have a disarming effect; one expects that this low-key exploration of a quiet man's eccentric descent into a metaphysical labyrinth will be an extremely intelligent but unexciting read. Unexciting: wrong. Within the first few pages, Saramago establishes a tension that sings on the page, rises, produces stunning revelations and culminates when the final paragraph twists expectations once again. The title refers to the miles of archival records among which the protagonist toils at the Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths in an unnamed small country whose inhabitants still live by ancient rules of hierarchical social classes. The registry is quixotically disorganized so that the files of those most recently deceased are buried under miles of paper at the furthest remove of the massive building. After more than two decades at the job, 50-year-old Senhor Jos is still a mere clerk in the bureau. A penurious, reclusive, lonely bachelor, Senhor Jos has only one secret passion: he collects clippings about famous people and surreptitiously copies their birth certificates, purloining them from the registry at night and returning them stealthily. Purely by accident, the index card of a 36-year-old woman unknown to him becomes entangled in the clippings he steals. Suddenly, he is stricken by a need to learn about this woman's life. Consumed by passion, this heretofore model of punctilious behavior commits a series of dangerous and unprofessional acts. He forges official papers, breaks into a building, removes records from institutions and continues to enter the registry after dark. Dall punishable offenses. To carry out his mission, he is forced to become practical, clever and brave. But the more risks he takes, the more astonishing events occur, chief among them that the remote, authoritarian Registrar takes a personal interest in his lowly employee. Meanwhile, Senhor Jos himself discovers shocking facts about the woman he seeks. Saramago relates these events in finely honed prose pervaded with irony, but also playful, mocking and witty. Alternately farcical, macabre, surreal and tragic, this mesmerizing narrative depicts the loneliness of individual lives and the universal need for human connection even as it illuminates the fine line between the living and the dead. First serial to Grand Street, the Reading Room and Doubletake; QPB and Reader's Subscription Club selection; author tour. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Cahners Business Information.

Library Journal Review: Senhor Jose is a low-level clerk in the Portuguese Civil Registry of births, deaths, and marriages, where it is next to impossible for him to squeeze out of that rigid hierarchy even one miserable half-hour off work. A middle-aged bachelor with no interest in anything beyond the dates and facts that are his daily fare, he is especially fascinated by the vital statistics of celebrities. One day he becomes particularly preoccupied by the birth certificate of an anonymous young woman who he learns is a mathematics teacher. As he becomes more and more obsessed with her, his resolve to learn all that he can about her leads to tragedy. The loneliness of people's lives, the effects of chance and sudden flashes of recognition, and the discovery of tentative love are all skillfully woven together in this imaginative parable of the living and the dying. Saramago, the 1988 Nobel literary laureate, has here written a tantalizing anatomy of an obsession. [Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 6/1/00.]--Jack Shreve, Allegany Coll. of Maryland, Cumberland Copyright 2000 Cahners Business Information.

Kirkus Reviews /* Starred Review */ The resonant themes of identity and autonomy are examined with keen precision and

rich humor in the Portuguese Nobel laureate's most recent (1997) fiction, a novel that compares very interestingly with Saramago's fascinating *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1997).

The unprepossessing Senhor Jos?, a middle-aged bachelor, works as a clerk in a nameless large city's Central Registry (of Births, Marriages, and Deaths)?an Orwellian maze whose largest section is eternally extended backward, to accommodate the records of the ever-increasing ranks of the deceased. Senhor Jos? lives in a small house literally connected to the Registry's main building, and meekly devotes himself to his occupation?while also surreptitiously working on his private collection, which documents the lives of miscellaneous celebrities. Allegory rears its head (as it so often does in this writer's books) when a chance fascination with an unknown woman whose card he discovers sends him on an odyssey of discovery: a journey that lures the timid civil servant dangerously far out of his shell, involves him in forgery, burglary, and other misdeeds, while simultaneously risking his health (if not his life), and courts the displeasure of the all-knowing, omnipotent Registrar?who, in the dazzling finale, will determine Senhor Jos?'s fate. Saramago tells his (surprisingly dramatic) story in a style featuring his characteristic run-on sentences and pages-long paragraphs, frequently interpolating authorial commentary that positively glitters with summary concision and compassionate irony. And Senhor Jos? is unforgettably characterized as both a Thurber-like milquetoast and a moral and intellectual hero who pits himself against the tide of regimentation and anonymity that steadily engulfs him. Indeed, when he enters the labyrinthine "archive of the dead," he earns the implicit comparisons to Theseus confronting the Minotaur, or Aeneas in the Underworld.

Mischievous, saturnine, and commandingly eloquent fiction.

(*Kirkus Reviews*, August 15, 2000)

Author Web Sites:

1. <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/saramago.htm> - Books and Writers-Jose Saramago

Other Contributors:

Costa, Margaret Jull: translator

Other titles associated with this book:

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ALL THE NAMES.(Review)(Brief Article). Henry Sheen.
New Statesman (1996) 128.4457 (Oct 4, 1999): p57.

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Jose Saramago

The Harvill Press, 244pp, [pounds]15.99hb, [pounds]10.99pb

A sense of time past and time passing impresses itself on any visitor to Lisbon. Once a vibrant port sending ships out to discover the unknown earth, it now slumbers listlessly in the heat. In its serpentine streets and blind alleys the generations are rudely juxtaposed: decrepit widows poke their faces from their windows into the night, while brazen music thumps out from the fado houses, nightclubs and bars all around. It is this marriage of the living and the dying - and the melancholia that it engenders - that so strongly characterises the writing of Jose Saramago, the Portuguese Nobel laureate.

His new novel, *All the Names*, overbrims with metaphysical resignation. This will surprise none of his readers. Neither will his prose: the sentences linger, reaching false ends, then being resuscitated with parentheses, as meditation gives rise to further meditation. Dialogues are written without speech commas, some real, some imagined, including the memorable exchanges between the central figure, Senhor Jose, and the ceiling of his shabby room. It is a style unlike any other, perhaps wearying at times, but appropriate to the subject matter.

The event of the novel is the Central Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths, of no place or time, and the machinations of one of its clerks, Senhor Jose. Bereft even of surname and physical description, the clerk is as faceless as the office he works in, but has set himself an unusual and quite unnecessary task- to reconstruct the life of an anonymous woman whose file is incomplete. Saramago's interest is, as always, the inner life: the clerk's foibles, obsessions (he collects the details of famous people), anxieties, fears, torments, his very peculiarity which prompts him to this task. Anonymity is the theme of the book: nameless characters blankly defined by their social roles, coming to be and passing unseen and unheard away, all with inner lives which we presume to be there, much as we have to attribute minds to persons. The inner life of the anonymous woman must remain beyond the reach of the clerk, for she, it transpires, has killed herself. He cannot find the reason, the motive for her suicide can only be speculated. He goes to the cemetery to visit her grave, passes the night there. In the morning, a shepherd tells him he has switched the numbers, so that the dead might really rest in peace.

This shocking anonymity and insignificance is, it hardly needs saying, redolent of Kafka, Orwell and Koestler; the Central Registry itself of impenetrable Dickensian institutions such as the Circumlocution Office and the Law. The writing, however, has an imaginative bent strongly derivative of Borges: the first chapter - the description of the Central Registry - is as precise and measured as Borges' account of the bookshelves and staircases in his short story "The Library of Babel". Like the great fabulist, Saramago's

concern is the unspeakably bizarre nature of our inner lives and the bizarre world in which our bodies act.

All *The Names* does not have the imaginative daring of *The Stone Raft* with its vision of the Iberian peninsula detaching itself at the Pyrenees and floating off into the Atlantic; nor the sustained melancholia of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. The latter, however, is very prominent. There is a line from *St Luke* that seems present throughout: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" For here the demarcation between the living and the dead is hardly discernible, simply the shifting of a file from one shelf to another. The end of the novel sees both the living and the dead located on the same shelves. The distinction disappears. Just as Ricardo Reis is dead without being aware of it, so the anonymous woman, having killed herself, is as alive for Senhor Jose as she ever was. The authoritarian figure of the registrar, the deputies, the clerks, Senhor Jose, there is nothing to distinguish them from their predecessors. They play out their parts; they, too, are simply record cards filed away in the labyrinth of the Central Registry.

Named Works: All the Names (Book) Book reviews

Source Citation: Sheen, Henry. "ALL THE NAMES.(Review)(Brief Article)." *New Statesman* (1996) 128.4457 (Oct 4, 1999): 57. *InfoTrac OneFile*. Thomson Gale. Farmington Community Library. 13 May. 2007
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experience, part of the loneliness of individuality. Translating for two heads of state, Juan misinterprets what they say, just to see what happens. There are no consequences. Marias's novel mixes philosophy and kinkiness, suspense and contemplation. As in the works of Martin Amis and Paul Auster, the elements of mystery writing are used as a catalyst for existential observation. Everyday events coalesce into tragedy. Connections are made, symmetry forms, but discovering truth has a way of making life more complicated. Even when people speak plainly, it seems, it is hard to know whether they have learned anything about their true selves. [Ben Donnelly]

Günter Grass. *Too Far Afield*. Trans. Krishna Winston. Harcourt, 2000. 658 pp. \$30.00.

Grass's wonderful novel is to be read by anyone interested in the role of literature at the end/beginning of the century. Like the sofa stuffed with secrets in the Ministries' basement, *Too Far Afield* bulges with German cultural history, opening with a chronology (1598-1990) and emphasizing the political and literary from Luther forward. Creating a partnership reminiscent of *Faust* between two contemporary East Germans—Theo Wuttke (a minor lecturer and clerk in the Stasi archives with a “time-defying understanding of politics and literature”) and his shadow, the Havana-smoking, suddenly appearing Ludwig Hoftaller—the novel unravels their intersections and that of their historical doubles, Theodor Fontane (for whom Wuttke is called “Fonty” because he seems to know, write, speak Fontane's every word) and *his* spy/shadow, Tallhover. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries echo with similar occurrences—German unification in the Franco-Prussian War (celebrated by Fontane) and at the fall of the Wall (doubted by Wuttke); also, Grass's characters' lives repeat Fontane's plots; Turks have replaced the Jews as the alien group. An archivist (the Fontane Archive is in Potsdam) provides the narrative perspective while his group embodies the spying techniques that are such a part of German history; the archivists observe, speculate, fictionalize, and include various perspectives on an incident to fill in gaps in knowledge. The five-section structure—as well as references to *Macbeth*, the tragedy of over-reaching—suggests drama. While the novel ends without resolution, the necessity that doubt replace Luther's absolute reliance on faith comes along with the fear that the future once again will repeat the past. [Richard J. Murphy]

José Saramago. *All the Names*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. Harcourt, 2000. 238 pp. \$24.00.

All the Names is the story of Senhor José, a largely solitary and blandly consistent clerk employed on the lowest rung of the city's Central Registry of Births, Marriages, and Deaths. Having no life, no connections outside of

his job, José entertains himself by collecting newspaper clippings, keeping track of the most notorious and most photographed celebrities. One day, by accident, he stumbles upon the birth certificate of an unknown woman. He becomes obsessed with discovering all he can about her, though it puts his job and his life at risk. The Central Registry, a massive and labyrinthine building in which researchers must hold to a thread or become lost, seems a setting lifted from Kafka. Indeed many of the elements that appear in *The Trial* are to be found here: a seemingly anonymous clerkish bureaucracy, an arcane hierarchy with rigid etiquette, a stifling mass of records, a sense of the irrepressible weight of all that remains unavailable to the central character. Yet, finally, *All the Names* moves toward a (sometimes tenuous) sense of human connection that Kafka would eschew. As José follows the thread of the unknown woman's life, making connections he has always shied away from, he gradually discovers how little can be known about anyone, including oneself. But rather than leading him to despair, such discoveries open his life up in ways he cannot imagine.

Stylistically, *All the Names* employs the devices of Saramago's earlier work: multicaused and sinuous sentences in long paragraphs, with little done to set off the difference between narration and quoted speech. The novel has many of the strengths of Saramago's most compelling novel, *Blindness*, yet while *Blindness* has a velocity and brilliance in its first half never quite equalled in the second, *All the Names* manages to sustain its force to the end. Symbolically permeating the line between life and death, *All the Names* is Saramago at his most compassionate and least sentimental, at his very best. [Brian Evenson]

David Mitchell. *Ghostwritten*. Random House, 2000. 448 pp. \$24.95.

Nine narratives told from a corresponding number of far-flung locales compose this ingenious first novel by David Mitchell. The wildly alternating voices and settings of *Ghostwritten*'s chapters (a Japanese cult member, an Irish physicist, a New York disc jockey) are so compelling and authentic that one may initially mistake this novel for a book of stories. Each first-person chapter introduces a new character, and the connections that the reader draws among all these voices ultimately form the novel's core. The overlap among the novel's sections varies from direct contact between characters to implied metaphors, but the end result is a finely woven tapestry that is nearly seamless. It is to Mitchell's great credit that the novel's odd links never seem forced or contrived. *Ghostwritten*'s great achievement is that it incorporates fairly heady scientific ideas into its structure while remaining readable, intellectual, and humanist. While the novel is sufficiently confounding to upset any easy conclusions, ultimately that's part of its allure. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle roughly means that the more you try to conduct an accurate measurement, the more you interfere with what's being measured. In a sense *Ghostwritten* cleverly mirrors this theory, for a reader who can draw on a working knowledge of quantum mechanics may have more unanswered questions than those who cannot. De-

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★★★★★ **A brilliant, addicting read,** July 23, 2001

Reviewer: **Grady Harp** (Los Angeles, CA United States) - [See all my reviews](#)

TOP 10 REVIEWER

REAL NAME™

Jose Saramago is a genius wordsmith. To the novice opening a first book by this Pulitzer Prize winning Portuguese novelist, Saramago may seem a bit mad, if not just frustratingly bizarre. Pages without paragraph indentations, with conversations unpunctuated or without speaker identified, no use of quotation marks, abrupt changes of time and place within one ongoing endless sentence. These impediments to reading a novel often tend to make the reader begin to simply scan the way through the book, hoping to find the end to this strange means. BUT! It is precisely the "means" that places Saramago in the category of Greatest Living Writers. (More than a little praise is due his able translator!!) "All the Names" is a journey of obsession by a Kafkaesque little nobody who works in a metaphorical General Registry that houses all the names of those born, married, and died in an unknown land/place. Saramago pulls us like a powerful magnet into this meticulously ordered conundrum and we are walking beside (and sharing the inner side of the skull of) a little clerk determined to place an identity of one unknown woman. This is at once a journey through Existentialism, through the anonymity of living in the world today, a study of the depersonalization of society. Yet out of this microscopic examination of details we come to understand the significance of maintaining individualism, of finding connection, of fighting against a meaningless passage on this earth. Though no one is named in this novel, save the main character, Saramago paints the peripheral characters with such clarity that names are the least important designators. This is not an easy read: many great books are not easy reads. But the work required to stay with the author to the end is compensated by luxuriating in a wordbath that is found only in strolling through the process. I think this is a brilliant book by a unique writer who has discovered a style of writing that only enhances his uncommonly interesting tales. Spend time here. You'll be rewarded in countless ways.

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★★★★★ **Thanks Nobel Prize Committee!**, January 16, 2001

Reviewer: **R. Rockwell** (Brooklyn, NY USA) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™

If he had never won the Nobel Prize, I would never have heard of Jose Saramago. I have read all of his novels and am captivated by his elegant and beautiful writing. It was with a mixture of hopeful anticipation and dread that I read this book: could it possibly measure up to my favorites Blindness and Baltasar and Blimunda. Well I need not have worried, Saramago drew me into his labyrinth from the first sentence. I was reminded of Kafka and Dante's Inferno when reading this story of a lonely public official Senhor Jose who is isolated by institutions and his work. He represents all of modern humanity in it's struggle to survive emotionally. The book tells of Senhor Jose's attempt to find connections to other human beings, of having to fight all of the barriers erected by modern life. He is the "everyman" of the Twentieth Century. The glimpses of love that he finds during his obsessive quest is enough to transform him into another person. Read the book very slowly to savor the taste of Saramago's prose. He will be remembered as a great writer in distant times.

[Comment](#) | Was this review helpful to you? ([Report this](#))

Customer Reviews

Average Customer Review: 

Write an online review and share your thoughts with other customers.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful:

******* All the lives...**, March 11, 2006

Reviewer: **Fateh A. Bazerbashi "Akujin"** (Damascus-Syria) - [See all my reviews](#)

though short it may seem ,this novel took me a month to go through with ,in many of my reading-marathons sessions ... it took me many packs of cigarettes as well but again ... i was satisfied.

all the names is a one long monologue narrated by Don Jose - the only name we will encounter in (all the names)- : a lone wolf ,eccentrically monotonous clerk ,whose greatest pleasure is keeping track of famous people and collecting their info in files of his own.

One day , while searching for some info for his secret hobby, he accidentally stumbles upon the civilian card of some unknown woman ,and absurd as it may seem to him (and to his ceiling - yes ceiling you didnt read that one wrong) ludicrous as it may seem ,he starts a don quixotian quest in order to find this woman ... to transform this insipid ,one dimensioned image of a (paper-being) into something (else) he has never seen before.

All the names is a gloomy,despondent journey with a Sisyphean antihero ,that may awaken us from the slumber we are going through to go beyond the names into a colored ,multi-dimensioned life.

[Comment](#) | Was this review helpful to you? [\(Report this\)](#)

2 of 6 people found the following review helpful:

******* GREAT**, November 4, 2005

Reviewer: **Susie** (Kifissia (Athens) Greece) - [See all my reviews](#)

There is not much that I can say about this book, except that it was THE best book I've ever read. The unspoken medaphors and the underlying currents made reading this book bliss. I will say this, however. They don't use quotation marks (sometimes a tad annoying) and you must be in a rather reflective/melencholy mood to read this. THIS BOOK ROX MY SOX!!

[Comment](#) | Was this review helpful to you? [\(Report this\)](#)

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful:

******* A Story of a Name...**, August 28, 2005

Reviewer: **Space** (Different Planet) - [See all my reviews](#)

It is the second book I read for Jose Saramago after "Blindness", and I am still amazed with his writing style, and his ability to captivate the reader from beginning to end. He keeps the reader so close to the story, the details get you very involved, the turn of events keep you interested, and the concealed message is even much greater than all this excitement.

Saramago's "All the names", the search of a complete story just by following a name could be full of surprises, headaches, and twists that could lead to too many unforeseen surprises, but more importantly gives you another meaning to life, and how each name is related to a life cycle!

[Comment](#) | Was this review helpful to you? [\(Report this\)](#)

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful:

☆☆☆☆ **Another Great Novel By Saramago**, August 28, 2005

Reviewer: **Daniel King "Dank"** (San Francisco, CA) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™

Along with "Blindness" and "The Stone Raft" Saramago deftly shows his complete and utter control of prose. With his witty and detail laden writing style Saramago details the ongoings of a lowly official of the and his adventure as he attempts to find a woman. With unpredictable twists and an utter snapshot of humanity, Saramago has done it again. Read this novel.

[Comment](#) | Was this review helpful to you? [\(Report this\)](#)

Fiction Discussion Questions

These questions are meant to be used with works of fiction. It is likely that you won't get to all of them during your meeting. Choose the questions that you think are most appropriate to your group and the book you've read, and feel free to modify them any way you need to.

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not? Are you sorry/glad that you suggested it to the group (ask again after the discussion)?
2. Did you think the characters and their problems/decisions/relationships were believable or realistic? If not, was the author trying to make them realistic, and why did he or she fail? Did the male/female author draw realistic male and female characters? Which character could you relate to best and why? Talk about the secondary characters. Were they important to the story? Did any stand out for you?
3. How was the book structured? Did the author use any structural or narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How did this affect the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it? Whose voice was the story told in (from whose point of view is the story told)? How do you think it might have been different if another character was telling the story?
4. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read their favorite couple of passages out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) Was the language appropriate to the story? Was it more poetic or vernacular? Did it stand in the way of your appreciation of the story, or enhance your enjoyment of the book? If poetic, did the characters speak in vernacular language, or in the poetic language of the author? Was the dialogue realistic sounding? Was there a rhythm to the authors style, or anything else that might be considered unique about it?
5. Was the author fairly descriptive? Was he or she better at describing the concrete or the abstract? Was the author clear about what he or she was trying to say, or were you confused by some of what you read? How did this affect your reading of the book?
6. Talk about the plot. What was more important, the characters or the plot? Was the plot moved forward by decisions of the characters, or were the characters at the mercy of the plot? Was the action believable? What events in the story stand out for you as memorable? Was the story chronological? Was there foreshadowing and suspense or did the author give things away at the beginning of the book? Was this effective? How did it affect your enjoyment of the book?
7. What were some of the major themes of the book? Are they relevant in your life? Did the author effectively develop these themes? If so, how? If not, why

not? Was there redemption in the book? For any of the characters? Is this important to you when reading a book? Did you think the story was funny, sad, touching, disturbing, moving? Why or why not?

8. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book? What will be your most vivid memories of it a year from now? Or will it just leave a vague impression, and what will that be? Or will you not think of it at all in a year's time?
9. Talk about the location. Was it important to the story? Was the author's description of the landscape/community a good one? Talk about the time period of the story (if appropriate). Was it important to the story? Did the author convey the era well? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the events in the story? Why or why not for all of the above? Was pertinent information lumped altogether, or integrated into the story? How did this affect your appreciation of the book?
10. Finally, what else struck you about the book as good or bad? What did you like or dislike about it that we haven't discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Did this book make you want to read more work by this author?

If you need further assistance in leading your discussions, keep the following in mind:

Questions that allow your members to express their opinions work better than those that simply have them pull answers from the book (like a high school exam). Ask your group to back up their comments with specific examples from the book. Sometimes it might even help to play devil's advocate with the group. Take a stance that's different from the consensus of the group (if there is one) and force the members of your group to defend their opinions of the book.

Another option is to go through the book, chapter by chapter, pointing out scenes or passages that were especially touching/memorable/interesting to you, and then asking the group what their reaction to these selections are. And don't be afraid to let the discussion go where it will --- if one particular aspect of the book really captures your group member's attention, allow them to stay on this theme, rather than rushing them through all the questions you have prepared.

Finally, if all else fails, you may want to ask each member to bring a couple of questions of their own to the discussion.

-- Prepared by Liz Keuffer

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General Book Discussion Tips

It is likely that you won't get to all of the questions during your meeting. Choose the questions that you think are most appropriate to your group and the book you've read, and feel free to modify them any way you need to.

If you need further assistance in leading your discussions, keep the following in mind:

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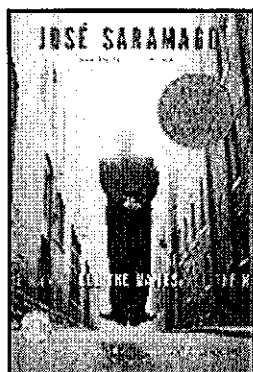
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All the Names

By *Saramago, Jose*

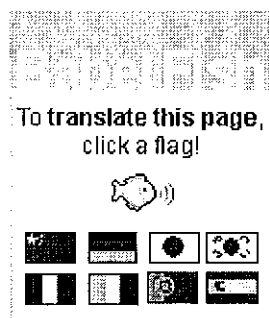
Translator *Costa, Margaret Jull*

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Portuguese novelist Jos Saramago introduces Senhor Jos, a clerk in the city's Central Registry and collector of clippings of the famous and notorious, who becomes obsessed with a young woman after coming across her birth certificate.

Publisher Comments

Senhor Jose is a low-grade clerk in the city's Central Registry, where the living and the dead share the same shelf space. A middle-aged bachelor, he has no interest in anything beyond the certificates of birth, marriage, divorce, and death that are his daily routine. But one day, when he comes across the records of an anonymous young woman, something happens to him. Obsessed, Senhor Jose sets off to follow the thread that may lead him to the woman -- but as he gets closer, he discovers more about her, and about himself, than he would ever have wished.

The loneliness of people's lives, the effects of chance, the discovery of love -- all coalesce in this extraordinary novel that displays the power and art of Jose Saramago in brilliant form.



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Biography Resource Center

Jose Saramago

1922-

Nationality: Portuguese

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2004.

Entry Updated : 10/21/2004

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"Sidelights"

José Saramago is an accomplished Portuguese writer who has distinguished himself as an author of fiction, poetry, plays, and essays. Saramago is best known, both in his native Portugal and among English-language readers, for his novels. In 1998, Saramago was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first Portuguese writer ever to receive the award. The Swedish Academy cited Saramago for work that "with parables sustained by imagination, compassion and irony continually enables us to apprehend an illusory reality."

Saramago was already in his early fifties when he published his first novel, *Manual de pintura e caligrafia* ("Manual of Painting and Calligraphy"), in 1976. This work concerns the maintaining of ideals in a world of materialism and superficial values, and is narrated by an unnamed, mediocre painter who adheres to his own sense of dignity and artistic purpose while fulfilling a commission from a rich patron. A conflict eventually develops between painter and patron, and the painting commission ends abruptly. The narrator thereupon rejects payment, choosing to retain the incomplete painting instead of compromising himself.

Saramago followed *Manual de pintura e caligrafia* with *Levantado do chao* ("Raised from the Ground") in 1980, a grim tale of repression set during the dictator Salazar's reign in Portugal from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s. Gerald M. Moser, reviewing *Levantado do chao* in *World Literature Today*, praised Saramago as "a born storyteller."

In 1982 Saramago published *Memorial do convento* ("Memoirs of the Convent" translated into English as *Baltasar and Blimunda*), a novel that is often ranked foremost among his artistic triumphs. *Baltasar and Blimunda* is set in eighteenth-century Portugal during the Inquisition, and concerns the efforts of two young people, handicapped war veteran Baltasar and visionary Blimunda, to transport themselves into the heavens. The vehicle for this unlikely journey is a flying machine created by a priest similarly eager to leave behind the Inquisition. The existence of this flying machine, built by Baltasar and powered, fantastically enough, by human wills captured by the hypersensitive Blimunda, ultimately brings the main characters into opposition with the Inquisition's repressive church leaders. Running parallel to the tale of the flying machine in *Baltasar and Blimunda* is a narrative concerning the construction of the Mafra Convent by seemingly all available Portuguese men prior to a date foretold as that of King John V's death. In recounting this storyline Saramago provides compelling depictions of the construction process and detailed descriptions of life in the Portuguese royal court.

Baltasar and Blimunda has been hailed as a masterful blend of the fantastic and the historical, the romantic and the realistic. *New*

New York Times reviewer Walter Goodman described the novel as "a romance and an adventure, a rumination on royalty and religion in 18th-century Portugal and a bitterly ironic comment on the uses of power." Irving Howe, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, called *Baltasar and Blimunda* a "full-bodied novel" and noted that it is "organized as a series of contrasts between rulers and ruled, those who luxuriate and those who labor." And Richard Eder, in his critique for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, deemed Saramago's novel "elaborate" and added that it concerns "the melancholy of magnificence." John Gledson, meanwhile, wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement* that *Baltasar and Blimunda* is "a strange but exciting novel."

The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis, Saramago's 1991 novel, is a rich tale set in Portugal during the early years of Salazar's dictatorship. Ricardo Reis, the novel's protagonist, is a middle-aged poet-physician who has recently arrived in Lisbon after a stay in Rio de Janeiro. Once back in Lisbon, Reis finds himself romantically drawn to Marcenda, a young woman with a deformed arm. Reis commences a physical relationship, however, with Lydia, a thirty-year-old maid, and the relationship develops as Reis begins to appreciate Lydia as more than a mere physical entity. Also prominent in this tale is the ghost of Fernando Pessoa, the great Portuguese poet who died in 1935. It is Pessoa's ghost who proves to be Reis's fitting companion as the hero lives his final hours.

Upon translation by Pontiero into English in 1991, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* gained approval as further indication of Saramago's impressive, imposing talent. *New York Times* reviewer Herbert Mitgang called the book "a rare, old-fashioned novel-- at once lyrical, symbolic and meditative" and characterized it as being "written in a classical style, formal and cerebral, with a surreal story that lingers in the imagination." Likewise, Shaun Whiteside wrote in *New Statesman and Society* that *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* constituted "very much a novel of ideas, subtly textured and rich in symbolism, written in a style redolent of the age of high modernism." And Gabriel Josipovici, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, concluded that Saramago's novel "is the work of a fine and interesting writer."

O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo, which Saramago originally published in 1991, was published in English in 1994 as *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*. This controversial novel provides what John Butt, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, described as "an idiosyncratic, satirical, bitter and frequently comical account of Jesus' life." In Saramago's tale, the immaculate conception is a questionable explanation of Christ's origin. Similarly, Christ's rather unworldly holiness is itself portrayed as rather dubious in Saramago's rendering. In the book Christ is, in essence, the wandering son of a carpenter. Inevitably human, he even enters into sexual relations with Mary Magdalene. God serves as the villain of Saramago's tale. Butt noted that Saramago portrays God as a "cynical bureaucrat, cheerfully disposed to extend his influence by founding on the blood of an innocent a religion that will bring pain, death and intolerance to mankind." God's exploitation of Christ, as delineated in the novel, results in a concluding crucifixion that is undeniably moving, if blasphemous by some readers' standards.

With *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, Saramago drew further recognition as an important writer. *Nation* reviewer Ilan Stavans noted that in *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* "Saramago works wonders with the Passion story." Stavans added that the novel "is enough to assure [Saramago] a place in the universal library and in human memory." Richard A. Preto-Rodas, writing in *World Literature Today*, noted the novel's controversial, provocative nature, and he concluded, "It is obvious that [*The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*] will hardly validate traditional beliefs, but it will definitely provide much food for thought."

The Stone Raft, another of Saramago's novels translated in 1994, concerns events that ensue after the Iberian peninsula breaks free from the European mainland and begins drifting through the Atlantic Ocean. This unlikely incident sparks considerable bureaucratic chaos even as the drifting Iberians struggle to cope with their extraordinary predicament. Prominent among these people are five individuals who undergo some typically incredible experiences, and eventually come together to realize a greater understanding of the entire Iberian phenomenon. Richard Eder, writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, speculated that *The Stone Raft* "may be Saramago's finest work," while Amanda Hopkinson, in her review for *New Statesman and Society*, hailed Saramago's novel as "the best new book I have read [in 1994]."

Saramago's 1995 work *Blindness* was published in English in 1997. The novel concerns an epidemic of blindness that afflicts an unnamed town. "Nobody has a name in *Blindness*, José Saramago's symphonic new novel. Indeed, there are no proper names of any kind. The city in which this catastrophic epidemic of blindness breaks out is never identified. There are no street names. This is any city at almost any point in the modern era. This is everybody's disaster," summarized Andrew Miller in the *New York Times Book Review*. As the epidemic spreads, societal structure quickly breaks down.

In *Blindness*, . . . so great are the horrors witnessed by the doctor's sighted wife that the simple privilege of sight over blindness begins to seem the worst privilege, begins to seem its inversion," wrote a critic for the *New Republic*. "In the country of the suddenly blind, the one-eyed man is not, in fact, king. He is the slave of all the blind, and the most unhappy one of all, because he sees their degradation. Yet Saramago is most like the Greeks--and like their Renaissance heirs, such as Montaigne--in the manner in which he keeps in balance both skepticism and realism, or uncertainty and health. . . . Omniscient narration generally affirms how much we know, how much we have in common, but Saramago uses it to illuminate how little we know." "The prose,"

commented Miller, "with its minimal punctuation, its flickering of tense and subject so that we glide between first and third person, between stream of consciousness and wry objectivity, is this Portuguese novelist's trademark style." Miller concluded that *Blindness* contains "a powerful sense of the folly and heroism of ordinary lives. There is no cynicism and there are no conclusions, just a clear-eyed and compassionate acknowledgment of things as they are, a quality that can only honestly be termed wisdom. We should be grateful when it is handed to us in such generous measures." Kevin Grandfield in *Booklist* wrote "Saramago's novel deftly shows how vulnerable humans are, how connected and how blind."

Saramago's 1999 work *The Tale of the Unknown Island* is a brief parable concerning a man who wants to sail for an unknown land. The short story "departs from his [Saramago's] signature dense, inventive linguistic style and historically encompassing subjects to offer a simple, intriguing fable," argued a critic for *Publishers Weekly*. Although Ray Olson in *Booklist* was annoyed by the publisher's strategy of releasing this "short story at the price of a trade paperback," he commented that "when the story proves as ingratiating as Saramago's, one's annoyance is considerably lessened."

Saramago's "panoramic and sweeping characterization of the Portuguese and peninsular existence has struck a chord not only among his compatriots in Portugal, but also in Spain and beyond," argued Irwin Stern in the *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the Twentieth Century*. "his fiction is not only a continual dialogue with the Portuguese character and the nation's history but also a revelation of basic human desires and fantasies."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born November 16, 1922, in Azinhaga, Ribatejo, Portugal; married Pilar del Rio; children: one. Addresses: Home: Canary Islands. Agent: Ray-Guede Mertin, 1 Friedrichstrasse, 6380 Hamburg 1, Germany.

AWARDS

Winner of Grinzane Cavour Prize, Mondello Prize, and Flaliano Prize; Premio Cidade de Lisboa, 1980; Premio PEN Club Portugues, 1983, 1984; Premio da Critica da Associacao Portuguesa, 1986; Grand Premio de Romance e Novela, 1991; Premio Vida Literaria, 1993; Premio Camoes, 1995; Nobel Prize in Literature, 1998; honorary doctorates from the University of Turin (Italy) and the University of Sevilla (Spain), both 1991.

CAREER

Writer; previously worked in a publishing company; worked as a journalist for newspapers, including *Diario de Noticias*; worked as a translator, 1975-80.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

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- *Memorial do convento* (title means "Memoirs of the Convent"), Caminho (Lisbon, Portugal), 1982, translation by Giovanni Pontiero published as *Baltasar and Blimunda*, Harcourt (San Diego, CA), 1987.
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- *A jangada de pedra*, Caminho, 1986, translation by Pontiero published as *The Stone Raft*, Harcourt, 1994.
- *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo*, Caminho, 1991, translation by Pontiero published as *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, Harvill (London, England), 1993, Harcourt, 1994.
- *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, Caminho, 1995, translated by Pontiero as *Blindness*, Harvill Press (London, England), 1997.

- *Todos os nomes: romance*, Caminho, 1997, translation by Margaret Jull Costa published as *All the Names*, Harcourt (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Caverna*, translation by Margaret Jull Costa published as *The Cave*, Harcourt (New York, NY), 2002.
- *The Double*, translation by Margaret Jull Costa, Harcourt (New York, NY), 2004.

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- *Manual de pintura e caligrafia* (title means "Manual of Painting and Calligraphy"), Moraes (São Paulo, Brazil), 1976.
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- *Discursos de Estocolmo* (Nobel Prize lecture), Caminho, 1999.

Also author of *Blimunda* (opera libretto for Azio Corghi's musical score; adapted from Saramago's novel *Baltasar and Blimunda*; also see above), 1990, and *Chiapas, Rostros de la Guerra*, 2000. Editor of *O poeta perguntador*, 1979.

Saramago's works have been translated into more than twenty-five languages.

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- *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the Twentieth Century*, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1999, pp. 32-33.

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- *London Review of Books*, March 23, 1995, p. 26.
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