GRACILIANO RAMOS (1892-1953)

Vidas Sêcas (1938)

translated into English as

Barren lives (1965)

Some say that this is a naturalist novel and others claim it is modernist, a socio-psychological interior monologue ....
A terse, incisive, poignant account of a vaqueiro with his family and their dog retreating from the scorching heat, migrating southwards in search for a better life in some large city.

Set in the 1930’s northeast of Brazil, in the sertão, during one of the dreaded drought cycles evoking some of the landscape in Os Sertões by Euclides da Cunha as the reader’s gaze is guided to the two huge evergreen juazeiros in opening lines!

[* by Euclides da Cunha ** mistranslated as ‘jujube’]

From the mid-1930’s, reference to Graciliano Ramos had already been included in the US academic journals Books Abroad and Handbook of Latin American Studies and, subsequently, in The Inter-American Quarterly.

A linguistic masterpiece echoing authentic local colour.

Curiously, this novel was published before The Grapes of Wrath.

One of the winners of the 1962 Ibero-American Award of the William Faulkner Foundation

DETAILS OF AVAILABLE PUBLICATIONS:

ENGLISH


PORTUGUESE

The novel continues in print - the latest 128th edition, 2015 by Editora Record ISBN978850106734-0

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SHORT HISTORY OF THE BOOK AND TRANSLATIONS

*Vidas Secas* (current spelling without diacritic) started as series of short stories or episodes published in various newspapers and magazines over a period of approximately two years. Although initially Graciliano Ramos thought of writing a novel, he needed to make ends meet so used the artifice of serializing self-contained stories under various guises and sold them to Argentina; the episodes would later become assembled into a novel.

In the context of the Argentine foreign policy at the time, the ‘Biblioteca de Autores Brasileños Traducidos al Castellano’ (launched on 16th July 1936), Benjamín de Garay, an acquaintance of G. Ramos, poet and translator of Brazilian literature, had asked the author to send him some tales about the northeast so he sold episodes to him (published in newspaper *La Prensa*). He also sold them to other newspapers and magazines.

It was the biographer and historian Francisco de Assis Barbosa (1914-1991), who published a biography on 50th anniversary of the author) in searching the originals realized the reason why there was an apparent lack of narrative sequencing in this novel. He found the original separate stories: the original ‘Baleia’, chapter 9 (‘whale’, name of the dog), records that it was completed on 4th May 1937; a month later, chapter 4, under the heading ‘Sinha
Vitória’ and the first chapter ‘Mudança’ was completed by 16th July. Further evidence of the process can be found in one of the literary profiles by the book collector João Condé (1912-1996), in the 1944 Arquivos Implacáveis, published in the magazine O Cruzeiro (1952 – 1958). The author tells us how he assembled the novel Vidas Secas.


Arquivos Implacáveis O Cruzeiro

Biographers often link the tales with the author’s memory of a cycle of droughts in his childhood in the town of Buique in the State of Pernambuco and the fictional time of the novel (1930s), when migration to the southeast of Brazil intensified. However, the novel is far more than a biographical account of the challenging living conditions in the 1930s northeast of Brazil.

A key central multifaceted theme, eternal recurrence, is contained in the novel: cycles of droughts, of death and rebirth in nature, of social economy, of psychological fear of uncertainty, of poverty and hunger, as well as a mythical facet – trials and tribulations, which need to be overcome for the hero to reach his/her ultimate goals, recurrent in all literatures since time immemorial, have a marked presence in this novel.

For instance, we find an omen regarding the inevitable return of the droughts in chapter O mundo coberto de penas (translated as ‘The birds’). There is a natural counterpoint of cycles of droughts in the sertão (northeast) and floods in the south of Brazil and records show that they do occur at intervals of some 15 years and lasting for two/three years. The Book Club members, who read Euclides da Cunha’s Os Sertões, no doubt will be recall how the sertão climate was described there and Graciliano Ramos does make thematic and intertextual reference to Cunha’s masterpiece.

There is a curious twist in the manner that the title of the novel was eventually chosen. Originally, O mundo coberto de penas (literally, ‘The world covered in feathers’) appeared in the pre-print proof. Suggestions that the novel should receive the title Vidas amargas (Bitter lives) came from friends whilst Graciliano Ramos considered ‘Fuga’ (Flight) as a good name. However, it would be the argument by Daniel Pereira, the publisher’s brother (José Olympio Pereira Filho, 1902-1990), that O mundo coberto de penas had nothing to do with the novel won, with his alternative suggestion Vidas Secas. It was published under this name in March 1938. Although the first edition of the novel of one thousand copies took ten years to sell, it continues in print to date (latest 128th edition) with various adaptations to other media.
In the 1930s, the US academic journals *Books Abroad* and *Handbook of Latin American Studies* made reference to the works of Graciliano Ramos. Appraisals of the quality of his writing would appear subsequently in *The Inter-American Quarterly*, one of the first journals to be dedicated to literatures, history and arts of the three Americas, which was launched through the foreign policy developed on the basis of the commitment of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945) at his inaugural address (1933), the ‘Good Neighbor Policy’. He created the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs and its mission was cultural diplomacy promoting hemispheric solidarity in the 1940’s and, by the same token, to counteract the influence of Axis powers in Latin America. That policy also promoted the translation of Brazilian literature into English. At that time Samuel Putnam (1892 – 1950), a US translator of Romance languages, would write an essay entitled ‘The Brazilian social novel (1935-1940)’ published in *The Inter-American Quarterly* in which he hails the impressive emerging talent, Graciliano Ramos.

Ralph Edward Dimmick (1916-2015) translated *Vidas Sêcas* into English as *Barren Lives* (1965) published by Texas Pan-American Series of the University of Texas Press. The translator included an introduction (rather dated and a mirror of its time, broadcasting a label of ‘regionalist’ fiction) and the book is illustrated by Charles Umlauf.

Ralph Edward Dimmick, born in Pennsylvania in 1934, attended the University of Harvard. After teaching English for three years in Brazil, he returned to the United States to teach Romance languages and literature at Harvard and at Northwestern University. In 1952, he joined the General
Secretariat of the Organization of American States in Washington, DC (serving as assistant to the Director of the Department of Cultural Affairs, assistant to the Secretary General, working there for four decades). In addition to his translations, he also published an edited translation of a section of the 1940 *Noções de história das literaturas* by Manuel Bandeira (1886-1968) as *Brief History of Brazilian literature* ... [from the relevant section of *Noções de história das literaturas*], introduction, and notes Pan American Union, 1958, revised 1964 (New York: Charles Frank Publication).


**BIOGRAPHY**

**GRACILIANO RAMOS (1892-1953)**

“A palavra não foi feita para enfeitar, brilhar como ouro falso.
A palavra foi feita para dizer.’

[The word was not made to embellish, to glitter as fool’s gold.
The word was made to say. NK]

Graciliano Ramos was born in the town of Quebrangulo in the State of Alagoas in 1892, the first of a brood of 17 children. His father, a salesman,
moved the family to Fazenda Pintadinho, in Buíque, in the sertão of the state of Pernambuco. In 1899, the family moved again to the town of Viçosa in Alagoas. His first written work appeared in June 1904, a short story *Pequeno Pedinte*, at *O Dilúculo*, a newspaper of the Viçosa boarding school, which he attended. He moved to the capital of the state, Maceió, to attend high school (Colégio Quinze de Março). In 1906, he edited a short-lived quarterly periodical *Echo Viçoseense* (2 issues) and published sonnets under the pen name Feliciano de Oliveirça in the *Rio de Janeiro* magazine *O Malho*. In 1909, he started to write for the *Jornal de Alagoas* under the pen name Almeida Cunha, Soares de Almeida Cunha and other such names for poetry and signing Lambda for texts in prose.

When he turned 18 (1910), he moved to the town of Palmeira dos Índios and wrote for *Correio de Maceió*, signing Soeiro Lobato. In 1914, he moved to the Federal capital, Rio de Janeiro, together with his friend Joaquim Pinto da Mota Lima Filho to try his luck as a journalist. He worked revising texts for various newspapers and also writing for the *Jornal de Alagoas*, signing R.O. (Ramos de Oliveira). Those articles were published posthumously in *Linhas Tortas*.

In the following year, he returned to Palmeira dos Índios as he lost his sisters and brother and a nephew to a bubonic plague outbreak. He got married there to Maria Augusta de Barros and they had four children; his young wife died giving birth to his fourth child – a daughter in 1920. He also stopped writing for the newspapers to look after a fabric shop (Sincera).

In 1921, he began to write again for the local weekly newspaper *O Índio* under various pen names (J. Calisto, Anastácio Anacleto, J.C. and Lambda). In 1925, he began to write his first novel *Caetés*, which he completed in 1928. He then got elected as mayor of the town of Palmeira dos Índios (1927). He married again in 1928 to Heloísa Leite de Medeiros, who was 18 years old.

Palmeira dos Índios was originally an indigenous Xukuru village; the Portuguese settlers created the parish in 1798 and was transformed into village in 1835. Currently, it is the 4th largest city in the state of Alagoas, located in the agreste, which can be seen in the background to the Graciliano Ramos monument below.

A bit of luck helped Graciliano Ramos. He impressed the governor of the state of Alagoas, Augusto Frederico Schmidt (1906-1965), with quality of his
1927 municipal accounts report. Augusto Frederico Schmidt was also the editor and owner of the ‘Livraria Schmidt Editora’ in Rio de Janeiro, who procured Graciliano’s writings and also published Caetés in 1931.

In 1930, he published in the Jornal de Alagoas signing as Lúcio Guedes but, in April, he resigned from his post as mayor and moved to Maceió with his six children. He was appointed as the director of the state Government Printing Bureau (Imprensa Oficial), from which he resigned in 1931. The following year he wrote his novel São Bernardo (published 1934); by then he already had eight children (one passed away). In 1933, he was appointed as the director of Public Education of Alagoas and edited the Jornal de Alagoas, where he published various works (e.g. Comandante dos Burros, Doutores e Mulheres).

He was arrested in Maceió in March 1936 under the suspicion of being a communist (unproven) and taken to a prison in Rio de Janeiro. In the same year he published his third novel Angústia (Editora José Olympio – RJ) for which he was awarded the Lima Barreto Prize of the Revista Acadêmica. He was released from prison in January 1937. His first work for children A Terra dos Meninos Pelados followed, which was awarded the Children’s Literature Prize of the Ministry of Education. The following year, he published his most important work -Vidas Secas and gets a civil service job as an inspector of secondary education in Rio de Janeiro in 1939.

He translated the memoirs of Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856-1915) as Memórias de Um Negro, in 1940. He continued writing and on his fiftieth birthday, he was awarded the Felipe de Oliveira Prize for his oeuvre. He wrote a novel Brandão Entre o Mar e o Amor, a modern experiment in joint writing, with the writers Jorge Amado, José Lins do Rego, Aníbal Machado and Rachel de Queiroz, which was published by Livraria Martins in São Paulo in 1942. He also translated the 1947 novel La Peste (The Plague) by Albert Camus (1913-1960) into Portuguese in 1950, published by José Olympio.

Graciliano Ramos served as the president of the Brazilian Writers Association (Associação Brasileira de Escritores - ABDE), in 1951 and re-elected in 1952. The Association was founded in 1940, originally as a group contesting the lack of freedom of expression during the Estado Novo; the entity would become the Society of Brazilian Writers (Sociedade dos Escritores Brasileiros), a professional body launched by Mário de Andrade and Sérgio Milliet in 1942, the year that Brazil entered the World War II. Later, the São Paulo section of the Associação Brasileira de Escritores merged with the Sociedade Paulista de Escritores creating the Brazilian Writers Union (União Brasileira de Escritores, UBE) in 1958. The Brazilian Writers Association underwent various changes on account of political ideology, particularly, from the very left-wing members of the Brazilian Communist Party with various disagreements.

When Graciliano Ramos was at the helm of the Brazilian Writers Association, he led campaigns against the atomic bomb, for world peace and
state monopoly of petroleum as well as intellectual property rights/copyright. He gained some prestige and recognition and was invited to attend the 1st May 1952 celebrations in the Soviet Union by the central committee of the local Communist Party. He travelled to the USSR, Czechoslovakia, France and Portugal from April to June. His accounts in Viagem (1954) provide insights of how restricted he felt by the accompanying USSR officials, shedding light on his disappointment with what he saw, contrary to the marvels in official propaganda. In September, he was operated in Buenos Ayres, Argentina and returned to Rio de Janeiro in a poor state of health, suffering from cancer from which he died in March 1953.

In 1953, the Brazilian National Library in Rio de Janeiro held an exhibition honouring the author - ‘EXPOSIÇÃO GRACILIANO RAMOS 1892 – 1953’ using archival materials from the Heloísa Ramos Collection and Livraria José Olympio Editora Collections. The exhibition catalogue remains an invaluable source for both historians and researchers.


There are numerous portraits by famous artists and caricatures of Graciliano Ramos. There are also many photos and other archival sources can be found on the official website of the author: http://graciliano.com.br/site/
Vidas secas was adapted to the cinema in 1963, a key film in Brazilian Cinema Novo, was directed Nelson Pereira dos Santos (1928-) for Herbert Richers. The film was listed for the 1964 Cannes Festival prize and awarded the best film by the Office Catholique International du Cinéma – OCIC.
Attendance is free, but booking is essential: nadia.kerecuk@itamaraty.gov.br

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