BRAZILIAN BILINGUAL BOOK CLUB | LUÍS FERNANDO VERÍSSIMO | OS ESPIÕES / THE SPIES / 19TH JAN, 6.30-9 PM

2017 - the year of #lovetoreadBrazil

LUÍS FERNANDO VERÍSSIMO (1936-)

Os Espiões (2009)
translated into English as
The Spies (2012)
The first non-commissioned novel by one of the best-loved and most followed satirical authors in Brazilian press (long before social media manias emerged!). Expect clever understated self-deprecation!

Set in a small town, Frondosa, in the southernmost state of Brazil!

More buffoonery than proper espionage! Neither a Dr. No nor The Spy that came from the cold: literary secret agents embark on a mission to find the real author.

A crime of passion & multiple fictional myths.

Consider this hilarious situation at Salon du Livre in Paris: A translator proudly tells L. F. Veríssimo how she chose ‘O Quase’ to be included in an anthology of Brazilian authors published in France (along with Drummond and Lispector)... However, the text is not his, but attributed to him. Could this have been the inspiration of our novel? Indeed, the author has expressed his concern on the proliferation of apocryphal texts circulating on the Internet...

DETAILS OF AVAILABLE PUBLICATIONS:

ENGLISH

(2012) The spies, translated by Margaret Jull Costa, MacLehose Press, an imprint of Quercus

PORTUGUESE

(2009) Os Espiões Editora Objetiva Ltda
ISBN: 9788560281992 ASIN: B00A3D9BOA

SHORT HISTORY OF THE BOOK AND TRANSLATIONS

Os Espiões was published in 2009, hailed as a huge success, and it is the first non-commissioned novel by the author. Luís Fernando Veríssimo gave an interview to Thiago Freire entitled ‘Veríssimo, the superlative writer. The author speaks about himself, literature, internet, music and ‘the Father’’ (NK) [ Veríssimo, o superlativo escritor. ESCRITOR FALA SOBRE SI, LITERATURA, INTERNET, MÚSICA E “O PAI”]. Published in the Folha dos Lagos, Cabo Frio, the author told his interviewer about the novel he was writing at the time under the provisional title Os Espiões. He mentioned how the novel had to do with the challenge of publishing books and the editorial market adding that ‘the character narrator works at a
publishing house and receives a mysterious manuscript, falls in love with it without knowing who the author is. The narrator and others engage in a sort of espionage to find out who the author of the manuscript is.’ The author also pointed out that he had not defined how it would evolve commenting that ‘it is difficult to explain as the business is complicated’.

Verissimo - O título provisório do romance é Os Espiões. Tem um pouco a ver com esse problema de publicar livros, de mercado editorial. O personagem narrador trabalha em uma editora e recebe um original misterioso pelo qual acaba se apaixonando, sem saber bem quem é o autor. Ele e outros começam uma espécie de espionagem para descobrir quem escreveu aquele original, mas é difícil de explicar porque é complicado o negócio. Não está bem definido ainda.
Source:  https://thiagofreitas.wordpress.com/2010/11/30/luis-fernando-verissimo/

Os Espiões carries numerous intertextual references, some are overt and others less so. The case of the Cretan myth of Ariadne and Theseus is a case in point.

The novel opens with a quotation attributed to Georgio de Chirico (1888-1978) in Portuguese ‘O que amarei se não for o enigma?’ [What shall I love unless it be the enigma?]. Has the author/narrator set an enigma for his readers through his deceptive quote?

De Chirico uses the same quote in Latin in his spring 1911 self-portrait: ‘Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?’ It is a work which precedes his well-known take on Ariadne (1913). According to Christopher Green and Jens M. Daehne, authors of Modern Antiquity: Picasso, De Chirico, Leger, Picabia (2011), the 1911 Portrait of Artist Himself ‘resembles a photograph of Nietzsche in 1882 with the same pose’, namely, ‘chin resting sturdily on the left hand, head slightly turned from the viewer, an expression that suggests both immersion in thought and disconcertment’. F. Nietzsche and De Chirico shared an obsession with the enigmatic nature of existence. Perhaps one could venture and say that Veríssimo’s narrative contains a covert mocking inversion of enigma, twisted noir, but predictable whodunnit.

Giorgio de Chirico was one of the most influential Italian painters of the 20th century, leader of the scuola metafisica art movement, which would greatly influence the surrealists. He painted a series of enigmas (e.g. The Enigma of an Autumn, of the Hour, of the Oracle, of the Afternoon).
His 1913 Ariadne is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Fifth Avenue NY - MET blurb:

‘A statue of a slumbering Ariadne is in the foreground of this image of a desolate public square, rendered in de Chirico’s distinctive simple and broad forms. According to the Greek myth, Theseus abandoned his lover Ariadne on the island of Naxos while she slept. Ariadne acquired great personal symbolic meaning for de Chirico after he moved to Paris in 1911 and entered a period of isolation and loneliness. A dreamy escape into the classical past, the painting also serves as a retreat into de Chirico’s memories of his childhood in Greece.’ [Gallery 901]

An interesting detail for readers of Brazilian literature is that De Chirico also painted an oil portrait of Clarice Lispector in Rome in 1945 (we mentioned this in an earlier posting on Clarice Lispector of our Book Club). This detail reminds us that there may be a further link as Luís Fernando Veríssimo’s father, Érico Lopes Veríssimo (1905-75), one of the most notable Brazilian writers, was closely acquainted with Clarice Lispector. Érico and his wife Mafalda became the godparents to Clarice’s children.**

Another significant intertextual reference in the novel is to the poem To Ariadne (deserted by Theseus) by Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). Sylvia Plath makes reference to De Chirico’s Ariadne in her journals (The Journals of Sylvia Plath published by her husband Ted Hughes, Knopf Doubleday, 2013). Of course, Sylvia Plath is an essential part of the plot in Os Espiões.
The reader will find many other references, for example, to detectives, secret agents or spooks as well as reference to authors or works in the body of the narrative as in a sort of stream consciousness process, recalling names or making somewhat remote allusions to philosophical or ideological ideas. Some of which superfluous, some multi-layered, perhaps echoing the fragmented multiplicity of references that names evoke in a modern reader, especially readers who have vaguely heard of a title or name of an author somewhere, but actually never read the said text or author. One could even argue that the metafictional narrative of *Os Espiões* lends itself to be read as a hypertext.

*Os Espiões* was translated into English as *The spies*, by Margaret Jull Costa (1949- ), and published by MacLehose Press, an imprint of Quercus, in 2012.

Margaret Elisabeth Jull Costa OBE (2014) is a British translator of Portuguese- and Spanish-language fiction and poetry, including the works of Eça de Queiroz, Fernando Pessoa, Javier Marías, Bernardo Atxaga, José Régio and the Nobel Prize winner José Saramago. In an interview with MacLehose Press on 23rd May 2011, she spoke of the books by Luís F. Veríssimo, which she had translated:

> Margaret Jull Costa: *The Spies* will be the third of Veríssimo’s books I’ve translated into English. It’s about a group of people living stagnant lives, who allow themselves to be
seduced by their own imaginations and led into a strange and dangerous world. Verissimo has a very black sense of humour and a very English sense of the absurd. *The Movie-Teller* is also about the power of the imagination. A young girl discovers she has a gift for re-telling films to her neighbours, who are too poor to be able to afford tickets to the cinema. This discovery changes her life; in the end, though, reality trumps imagination. [http://www.maclehosepress.com/2011/05/23/an-interview-with-margaret-jull-costa/](http://www.maclehosepress.com/2011/05/23/an-interview-with-margaret-jull-costa/)

This hardcover edition with a dustjacket is illustrated by Nelly Dimitranova, a Bulgarian artist and illustrator, who lives in the UK. She has exhibited at the Royal Academy. A short biography is available at [http://www.eastwing.co.uk/artist/nellydimitranova/biog.shtml](http://www.eastwing.co.uk/artist/nellydimitranova/biog.shtml).

There are a few instances of split words at the end of the lines, which regrettably escaped scrutiny of the editor. The diacritic (acute) in the name of the character Fúlvio is missing; some of the other proper names are spelled correctly.
The translated text reads quite well. However, a reader, who is well-acquainted with Brazilian flora will find the translation of ipê-amarelo, a native tree best loved and regarded as a symbol of Brazil (even a piece of legislation exists regarding its status), featured in the novel, is rendered in English as the rather odd catalpa (Catalpa speciosa, bignioides?).

The scientific name of ipê-amarelo used to be Tabebuia alba or aurea, depending of the colour of its florets. The botanical name was changed to honour the Brazilian botanist Oswaldo Handro (1908-1986), as such the new name of ipê-amarelo is Handroanthus, the most common being Handroanthus vellosoi and Handroanthus serratifolia. A very symbolic deciduous tree, greatly cherished and loved by all Brazilians everywhere and celebrated in numerous ways in all arts. It has also become known for its medicinal properties. You can find further botanical details about it in various sources***.

Futebol de salão is a sport which enjoys huge popularity in Brazil, often referred to as futsal, a short form or acronym for futebol de salão, or, literally, indoor/sport hall football (with slight differences in ball weight, also known as ‘esporte da bola pesada’). On page 27 of the translation, we find ‘futebol de salão, Brazilian five-a-side’, which springs to attention, and subsequently ‘five-a-side football’ replaces it in the translation. The character Mandioca plays futsal. The author is represented by the Riff Agency and their website informs us that rights were sold to France - Folies d’Encre, Netherlands: 2012, Athenaeum Portugal: 2009, Dom Quixote Romenia: 2012, Vivaldi Serbia and Montengro: (forthcoming), Paideia.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

LUÍS FERNANDO VERÍSSIMO (1936-)
LUÍS FERNANDO VERÍSSIMO is one of the most recognized contemporary writers in Brazil, a national top bestseller, an inveterate satirist, cartoonist, translator, and television writer, poet, playwright and novelist and musician. He plays the saxophone with band called Jazz 6. He has published over 60 titles and is a master wordsmith who has excelled at creating delightful satirical sketches. This ability to use language to maximum effect and make his texts bestsellers has also awarded him the playful sobriquet ‘Gigolô das Palavras’ (literally the Gigolo of Words). One could describe him as a national treasure of Brazil.

He was born on 26th September 1936 in Porto Alegre, the capital city of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. He is the son of Brazilian writer and diplomat Érico Veríssimo and lived with his father in the United States during his childhood and teenage years. His father lectured at the University of California Berkeley (1943–1945) and served as the cultural director at the Organization of American States in Washington (1953–1956). The author, thus, attended primary school in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and completed high school at the Roosevelt High School in Washington. The author is married to Lúcia Helena Massa (1963) with three children: Fernanda, a journalist, Mariana, a writer, and Pedro, a musician. He lives with his wife in Porto Alegre.

He started his working life at the Editora Globo in Porto Alegre in 1956. From 1962 to 1966, he lived in Rio de Janeiro, where he worked as a translator and copywriter and got married there. In 1967, he returned to his hometown working for the newspaper Zero Hora, initially as copy desk and, in 1969, he started his daily column in the newspaper as he was capable of creating good texts at great speed. His first columns were about football, the new Beira-Rio stadium and the matches of his football club, the ‘Internacional’. In the same year, he became editor of the
advertising agency MPM Propaganda. In 1970, he moved to the newspaper *Folha da Manhã*, where he would hold his daily column until 1975, writing short satirical stories about sport, cinema, literature, music, food, politics, society, attitudes and much more.

His 1981 book *O Analista de Bagé*, launched at the Book Fair of Porto Alegre, sold out its first edition in two days becoming a bestseller throughout Brazil. The story is about a character who is an orthodox Freudian psychoanalyst, who uses the Rio Grande do Sul - gaúcho variety of Portuguese with its accent, a comical narrative, originally created for a TV series. From 1982 to 1989, Veríssimo published a weekly delightfully sarcastic and humorous page with funny characters in the magazine *Veja*, which was very engaging and created a loyal readership for many years. Opening satirical shot on 15th December 1982 issue of *Veja*:

![Image of VEJA cover 7 July 1982]

‘The champion of humour’ - VEJA cover 7 July 1982

In 1983, he created one of the most delightful characters - *A Velhinha de Taubaté (The Old Lady of Taubaté)*, cast as ‘the only person who still believed in government’. Throughout the 1980s, Veríssimo became a phenomenon of popularity rare among Brazilian writers, with weekly columns in several newspapers,
publishing at least one book, which would make the bestseller lists, and writing sitcoms for Globo TV. In 1986, he covered the World Cup from Rome for the Playboy magazine living there with his family for six months. In 1988, he was commissioned by MPM Propaganda, to write his first novel, The Devil's Garden. In 1999, Veríssimo quit drawing As Cobras comic strips and changed publishers, leaving L&PM and choosing Objetiva, which began republishing all of his works. One of the anthologies, As Mentiras que os Homens Contam (The Lies that Men Tell) (2000), has sold over 350,000 copies. In 2003, he decided to reduce his workload in the press, from six to just two columns a week, now published in Zero Hora, O Globo and O Estado de São Paulo.

His publishers instigated him to publish a series of novels and romances: 


**SELECTION OF WORKS:**

**Chronicles & short stories:**

**Anthologies:**

**Novels:**

See:


- Publisher Objetiva page: http://www.objetiva.com.br/autor_ficha.php?id=264


Notes:

* see an article in about attributed authorship from 25th Feb 2009: http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/informatica/ult124u509013.shtml


** http://magiadailha.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/ipe-amarelo-flor-simbolo-do-brasil.html

Attendance is free, but booking is essential:

nadia.kerecuk@itamaraty.gov.br

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