

Interview with Lídia Jorge

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When did you decide to become a writer, and what were the influences that helped you?

There is a considerable difference between writing as a way of being, which implies having an inventive attitude of mind to life itself and to being a writer, with all its professional and ontological implications. I know that I decided to write very early—at fifteen I was already publishing short pieces. I understood what it meant to be a writer only when I published my first novel. The idea of writing and being a writer had been taking shape in my head for a long time, without my being able to state it—it was possible only when my first novel had appeared.

*Is your first book *O Dia dos Prodígios*, to some to some extent autobiographical? If so, which are the elements of it that relate to your childhood experiences?*

The autobiographical elements of *O Dia dos Prodígios* are contained in the atmosphere, the imaginative experience of the rural world where I spent my childhood, the kind of relationships I consciously observed, particularly between individuals and the community in a world closed in on itself, but susceptible to dreams and fantasy. The physical space, the prophetic voices of the characters, the interpretation of life through metaphor, the slow pace of life, people's capacity for an almost enigmatic patience—these are all things I myself lived through and can be said to be autobiographical. Just as I endured a fear of snakes, strongly associated with the fascination unleashed by them. Aspects of some characters, such as Manuel Gertrudes or Jesuína Palha were drawn from real people. None of the rest were. But as for the rest of them, that is open to question.

Some passages in O Dia dos Prodígios describe the condition of women in minute detail; for example, Carminha washing a window. What are you wanting to say about the female characters in the book?

The women in *O Dia dos Prodígios* are still prisoners of “tent and clan,” that is to say, of home and family. Few ever leave that place except in their dreams and in their connection to an ideal of an outside world. Curiously, more or less the same thing happens to the men in Vilamaninhos. However, this should not be interpreted as an accusation. It is simply the case. Nobody knows why fine and good characteristics are not always balanced. The three female figures, Carminha, Carma, and Branca, who express the most their sense of imprisonment, are also the ones who make use of the rituals of magic. Carminha washes windows as if waving goodbye, and there she remains, still cleaning them. It is a gesture I associate with women, in all places and ages, an unspoken expression of feeling. It is an appeal and at the same time an affirmation.

As a woman writer, what do your novels say about the condition of women in Portugal?

I think my novels take stock of a Mediterranean image of woman. Their strength is powerful and subversive, more invisible than socially apparent. Politics may still pass them by. The family still seems as if a given by nature rather than by the culture. In my novels the women complain about their lot. As I am not a feminist writer, in the traditional sense, I don't portray them as victims; neither do I give them good characters to contrast the evil ones. I'm not constructing a simplistic dichotomy. Humankind has two faces—the angelic and the savage. My women have too. The lament I make about the human condition is staged mainly around the women because I am more familiar with them. And also Portuguese women have been the interpreters of the most violent change. I cannot help but echo such difficult times.

What kind of roles do the women play in your novels?

In general the men they love neither understand nor listen to them. The incompatibility of language between men and women is one of my themes, just as another theme is the lack of communication between citizens and institutions. When it comes to women, they are often in the company of their children, whose language also escapes them. I don't know if what I am saying is really true, but I suspect that the women in my books, in general, confuse

their love of men and their loyalty to God or country. They are not virile heroines. They are figures of protest.

Are you conscious of writing in a different way to other Portuguese writers because you are a woman?

We can't take ourselves to pieces. I am a woman of professional standing, and I have to say that some of my writings must be a record of the passing of time and others about life as I imagine it. How could I write at all without such a distinction—being a woman and being called Lídia? Certainly my books talk of a world of which another person couldn't speak at all. From my themes to the very structure of the text, everything has to be impregnated with my own style. Without wanting to judge myself, I recognize in myself a peculiarity, or even a certain style. Within that there is the memory of the girl I once was, of the books I read which touched me the most, of the music of the words that I was storing away in my head. Having been a girl must have marked my mode of expression.

O Dia dos Prodígios was first published in 1980. When did you start writing it, or thinking about it?

I started thinking about *O Dia dos Prodígios* after the Revolution¹ and it was written between 1976 and 1978. It was a book about a community which nonetheless originated in reality: my own grandfather, José Jorge Júnior, lying in his sick bed, confusing the dead with the living, my face with those of his wives and his lost daughters. In one hour the sky fell to earth. I believe this happened in 1975.

When was it finished? Would it have been possible to have published this earlier if you had wanted to? (that is, before 1974?)

I finished writing it in the summer of 1978. No, it would not have been possible to have published it earlier. In the first place because I myself would not have been able to have written it, and secondly because the book is rooted in a metaphor of liberation that wouldn't have been compatible with the previous régime.

How did this book relate to other writing being published at the time?

Around 1980 books started to be written by my generation about the themes of oppression and freedom, politics and ontology, if you can call it

that, that assumed a great importance. Older writers were also sensitive to the change. The public itself was receptive to this totally new way of seeing things as they are. The theme of liberation from oppression inspired us enormously.

Do you see yourself as belonging to a particular school of writing? (or group of writers) If so, how would you describe it and which other writers belong to it?

As I said earlier, I can't isolate myself from an experience at the very heart of the particular recent history of this country. I am part of a generation which has witnessed change very much its own, and includes writers Maria Velho da Costa, Almeida Faria, Mário de Carvalho, Teolinda Gersão, Lobo Antunes, João de Melo or Hélia Correia, to name but a few. But in relation to writing, each one of us has a personal way of spelling out what has to be told. From this point of view I feel much closer to some writers of other generations and other literatures. This has to do with my temperament and with my reading at the time my taste and literary personality were being formed.

What are your own views on European social and ethical questions? Are these reflected in your work?

I feel happy in large spaces. I like flags but not frontiers. The idea that Portugal could become included in a space far larger than the Peninsula always seemed desirable to me, especially because I observed firsthand what would be going to happen with Africa, which has become not unnaturally our second territory. The option of Portugal to link itself with other European countries, at a time when the Community was expanding, seemed to me not only to be a good idea but inevitable. Today, I fear what everyone fears: that the rich diversity is succumbing to changes in social organization which are now taking place, [and] also that Portuguese culture, although resisting, will survive only in a vestigial form. But this issue is being hotly debated. In other sectors of activity, some people may feel depressed. Those who are writers know that on this topic there always remains something to be said. Words exist to be spoken. Somebody is going to say what they mean. In my books, it is true, some of my characters are destined to be afraid of being themselves; they wish to be like everyone else, bowing down to the rest of the world and barely raise their own flag. It seems that is what I've said, but not on purpose. My second book *O Cais das Merendas* has this idea as its central motive.

How did the experience of living in Africa influence your work?

Living in Africa was a decisive experience. Africa spread before my very eyes the theatre of life. I'm referring to the end of the sixties and the first half of the seventies. From the position in which I found myself, I understood what it was to oppress and to be oppressed, what it was to have a comfortable life as well as to be alienated, what it was to be a guerrilla and a soldier. But, as time went on, life as lived in the Portuguese colonies also taught me that what exists on one side is found also on the other. Each is a mirror image of the other. Death and amputation, too often present, made this duplicity clear. These conditions proved in the main that insofar as one Utopia is being built up, another will be about to fail. Liberation would be followed by another war and another betrayal. The wheel of civilization and history was plain to see. It was impossible for me to disengage myself from Africa's future. My writing was almost writing itself, with the destiny of that land as its horizon. *A Costa dos Murmúrios* is a novel about the memory of war in Mozambique at the end of the sixties. It is a record of a lull in the drama of a confrontation between cultures, and it was written to assist in preserving the memory of that time.

Your last book, O Jardim sem Limites has been immensely popular. What is it saying about living in Portugal today?

This is an unusual book, but not too far removed from earlier ones. Its youthful characters marginalize themselves in Lisbon as it becomes an international city. They want to belong to this cosmopolitan world, which they perceive as a garden. But in contrast with those who were indeed born in Eden, born between the fantastic rivers which surrounded it, the characters of *O Jardim* have to make the circuit of the garden which they are exploring. The book tells of their bitter, violent, and fragmented journey, in a language of their own which portrays their lifestyle. They are heroic, tenacious, with enormous staying power. I am writing about people who make use of these capacities without knowing how. It is a book about the new indifference. This tribe of young people wanders the streets of Lisbon, blinkered from each other. They are not just a group of young people: they are also ourselves. The Rua Augusta, the street where the characters roam about, is superimposed upon a much larger canvas. That too is ours. If this were not the case, I wouldn't have written it.

Do your books sell well in Portugal?

Well, in Portugal there's no way you could sell as many as ten million copies of a novel—editions of 3,000 are customary. So, I can't complain—some of my books have run to ten impressions, and one sold over 50,000 copies in under a year. Not all sales have been as good as that, but I don't think things have been too bad.

Which titles are selling best?

The titles that have sold best are *O Dia dos Prodígios*, *Notícia da Cidade Silvestre*, *A Costa dos Murmúrios*, and *O Jardim sem Limites*.

What type of readers do you think read your books?

I don't really know how to estimate this. I think my public is very mixed. Although reader surveys indicate a mainly sophisticated or academic readership, I have been surprised by a scattered readership from very diverse backgrounds. In Portugal, the percentage of women readers is high, and this is an important factor. I suspect that many of my readers are women.

How are women writers regarded now in Portugal?

I think that today there is no discrimination at all—either positive or negative. There are fewer women writers than men, but they progress through the normal channels and gain a public that corresponds to their styles of writing. Any tensions that do exist are due more to personalities or the works themselves, rather than to gender.

Have attitudes towards women writers changed since your book was published?

When *O Dia dos Prodígios* was published, other women writers were also emerging. We were newcomers at the time, and it was said that there was feminist solidarity around our books. I really don't accept that. Other types of solidarity were created, both vis-à-vis male writers and in support of already known women writers. I think this continues to be the case—that qualities which make a work unpopular with one section of the public can make it appreciated by another. I'd like to believe that as far as published writing goes, Portuguese women's writing is as much respected or disrespected as writing by men.

What do you think was, at that time, the real significance of the New Portuguese Letters, by "The Three Marias"? Did it influence your work?

The *New Portuguese Letters* is about female desire. This was considered a crime in the seventies. Through the discourse itself, and the audacity of those amazing women writers, this book became a literary icon. It opened a way for us, which we have all more or less followed. Today, sensuality and eroticism are expressed in free and fluid language through fictional characters, helping to define their personalities. These are different times. Nowadays, assertion of our independence in matters of sexual behavior no longer has any great literary impact. This has now been achieved throughout western culture. Now the thematic contradiction, which we are struggling to resolve, focuses on the diffuse subject of love, which appears to be almost unattainable. This is a major theme of today.

Are there more women writers now than there were then, and do you think that women writers are still under-represented in contemporary Portuguese literature?

The number of women writers has been increasing, but yet comparatively little writing is being produced, due not to lack of talent, but to pressures upon their lives. I'm talking about professional and personal lives. The literary promise of woman writers, with some notable exceptions, continues to be less incisive and less productive.

Into how many languages has your work been translated?

Spanish, French, American English, German, Italian, and Dutch.

Which books have been most translated?

A Costa dos Murmúrios, O Dia dos Prodígios, and Notícia da Cidade Silvestre.

What do you think of your readership abroad? Is it different from that in Portugal?

I think there isn't much difference. My books aren't very popular. I think they are bought by the public interested in Portuguese literature; other readers are curious to read books originating in an Iberian culture, written by a woman. I don't know about the rest.

Have they been selling well?

Some have, especially those published in German by Suhrkamp. In Spain and France, luckily, sales seem reasonable.

Which books are being translated at the moment?

O Jardim sem Limites and various short stories are now being translated into German, French, and Spanish.

What do you know about other Portuguese writing in translation? Does it fall into any particular category?

Some Portuguese writers are having a lot of success in translation. Apart from Fernando Pessoa—the great discovery of this last decade!—and some young novelists and poets, there are older writers such as José Saramago,² Lobo Antunes, Agustina Bessa-Luís, João Cardoso Pires, and Vergílio Ferreira. I think there is a fascination with writers judged to be difficult, who can tackle poetic themes within structures that have a certain complexity, that deserve careful attention. I think that people who are acquainted with Portuguese fiction may also appreciate it as being from the outer limits of Europe, and as having unusual inventiveness and original patterns of development. This is without mentioning the not displeasing impression it gives of life in this country. As one knows, Portugal is a nation which, due to its history and geography, has acquired clearly defined relations with other cultures. I'm not saying that Portuguese literature has been overlooked, but a great deal would be lost if one were to do so.

An abridged version of this interview was published in October 1997 by the European Bookseller, London, UK.

Notes

¹ The Portuguese Revolution, 25th April 1974.

² Winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature.