



PHOTOS ZÉLIA GATTAI COLLECTION/CASA DE JORGE AMADO FOUNDATION

LITERATURE

# Why love Jorge?

Re-edition of the complete works brings about a critical review of one of Brazil's most popular authors

GONÇALO JUNIOR

*Published in April 2008*

Jorge Amado:  
efficient  
connection  
between  
literature and  
the public

**T**he release, in March, of the first six volumes of the new edition of the complete works of author Jorge Amado (1912-2001), from the state of Bahia, by the Companhia das Letras publishing house (to be concluded by 2012, with 32 books) is not only the company's most ambitious editorial project ever, but it is also the most challenging.

It intends to encourage critical reading and to provide the 'father' of Gabriela, Tieta and Dona Flor with the literary value the company believes he deserves. After 33 years, Amado will no longer be published by Record and will now be published in São Paulo. His new publishing house beat six other bidders in the struggle to publish his complete works last August.

Attracting the Brazilian intelligentsia will involve a parallel investment in promotion, ranging from lectures and workshops with famous authors and artists to shows, movie showings and even cartoon versions of some of the novels – currently, cartoonist Spacca is working on "Jubiabá" together with Lilia Schwarcz. Lilia, in fact, is the editorial coordinator of this endeavor, together with diplomat and author Alberto da Costa e Silva, considered the greatest authority alive in Brazil on Africa and one of the country's most important intellectuals.

The strategy is ambitious. Since mid-March, the most important bookstores have carried floor and counter displays, plus excerpts of the first novels in the form of booklets distributed to customers free of charge. The frontal attack also includes an advertising campaign in newspapers, magazines and online, with photos and testimonials by lovers

of Amado's books. The publishing house resorted to the often enthusiastic testimonial of people such as Rubem Fonseca: "His splendid stories show our country and our people in a moving manner, with a universal tone capable of bewitching readers worldwide." In his own style, José Saramago observes: "In Jorge, the art of making love was spontaneous, never premeditated." Editor Thyago Nogueira enthusiastically states: "We want people to read his books; we'll encourage debates, and because of this we're also developing special postscripts for each book." He adds: "We'll train teachers nationwide, providing extra school material, shows, etc. We'll look for new readers among the young and not-so-young. Hence all the activities, such as competitions for teachers and students."

Actually, there are two challenges. Aside from the possible reviews, Companhia das Letras wishes to turn Amado into good business again – although the sale of his works are still significant – among young readers, much like it managed to do with the works of Nelson Rodrigues in the 1990s.

Alberto da Costa e Silva knows that selling the author to opinion leaders will require persistence. As he sees it, the political aspect of Amado's books was important only at a certain very specific time, which does not justify labeling Amado as an involved author. "His creations prevail over political vicissitudes." He prefers to remember that his work enjoys major appreciation in certain sectors and eras. "His works are admired and enjoyed by

\* The title is a pun on the author's surname: "Amado" means "loved" in Portuguese.



Magical pen:  
mystical Brazil  
stands out  
in his books.  
Jorge and  
his wife, author  
Zélia Gattai

colleagues of his generation and by the most important authors of the two subsequent generations.”

The diplomat admits that there is a certain resistance to authors who achieve popular success among academics and on the part of the critics. “His work is rich in shades and colors, and even serves as an example of a certain interpretation of Brazil.” Academia, says Costa e Silva, has in fact found it difficult to analyze Amado’s work. “Certain intellectual sectors are fascinated with formalism and Jorge is an anti-formalist by nature. Much like it is

difficult to study Manuel Bandeira’s and Cecilia Meireles’s poetry, it is easier to focus on João Cabral de Melo Neto, because of the very clear formal features of his works. In other words, there are greater chances of doing a brilliant job with little effort on an author as good and original as Guimarães Rosa.” Jorge is in this second group. “In his case, one must have a deep knowledge of Brazilian sociology and anthropology. His books show the hard, magical Brazil, mixes that come together after being mismatched. Those that dislike and even despise his works lack the special sensitivity needed for life itself, and not only for literature.”

Literary critic and author José Castello agrees that Amado paid a high price for his political participation. “To this day, although he has passed away, Amado continues to pay this price. It is similar to the case of Saramago, another declared communist. Both suffer from extra-literary prejudices that hinder and diminish their writing. This is very unfair. Obviously, one may dislike Amado or Saramago, but not because they are communists. Or because they are Christian, Muslim, Atheist or conservative, or even fascist. Céline was a fascist, but a genius in spite of it.” Castello says that the literary environment, even today, is contaminated by issues and ideological stubbornness hidden under the beautiful cover of ‘theoretical positions’. “People are part of closed groups; they only consider their equals, searching only for similar things and repetition.” There are also enthusiastic advocates of Amado in academia. German citizen Claudius Armbruster, professor of Romanistic philology and director of the Portuguese-Brazilian Institute at the University of Cologne, focused on Brazilian literature in his post-doctoral work (submitted at UFBA, the Federal University of Bahia UFBA), and, specifically, on the role of miscegenation in Jorge Amado’s works. He considers the notion of prejudice against Amado because of his communist activism to be exaggerated. “In fact, despite his involvement with politics, he was always a successful author, both in relation to critiques and financially speaking.” The researcher believes that the relevant as-

pect of Amado's works is that he expresses its literary value through a combination of popular culture, oral voices, political contexts and "readability."

Mara Rosângela Ferraro Nita, who is currently working on her doctoral dissertation entitled "Jogo de espelhos: A ilustração e a prosa de ficção de Graciliano Ramos, José Lins do Rego e Jorge Amado" (Mirror Reflection: Illustration and prose fiction in Graciliano Ramos, José Lins do Rego and Jorge Amado) at the Arts Institute of Unicamp, focuses her study on literary illustration. She says that she had read some of Amado's novels prior to starting her research and she was aware that most critics were not interested in his works. "Maybe this unfavorable opinion didn't affect me because I'm an average reader; I have no academic background in literary studies. I must confess that my initial interest was awakened by the magnificent illustrated editions of his works published by Ariel, Record and Martins, in particular." However, over the course of her studies she became fond of Jorge Amado's prose.

In the dissertation *Jorge Amado: romance em tempo de utopia* (Jorge Amado – Novels at a time of utopia) by Eduardo de Assis Duarte – which became a book published in 1996 by Record – the author studies the context of the production of Amado's works. He especially analyses how his leftist orientation interfered in the writing of his first novels, from *País do Carnaval* (Carnival Country) (1931) to *Os subterrâneos da liberdade* (The Underground of Freedom) (1954). Duarte highlights the nuances that derive from the use (or lack of) of the guidelines referred to as "party aesthetics." In the thirties, Duarte explains, ideological radicalism challenged artists and intellectuals to position themselves politically. This activism is found in the social criticism and the idealization of people and in political participation, especially regarding leaders, such as Prestes, known as the "Knight of Hope." Duarte shows that Amado's writing does not strictly reflect "socialist realism". In *Seara Vermelha* (Red Corner), for example, there is a strong critique of self-sufficiency and mistakes by the leaders of the so-called communist uprising in 1935.

According to Ilana Seltzer Goldstein, Jorge Amado always discusses issues related to national identity, whether as a political activist at the start of his career, or as a novelist that praised the miscegenation of the people, their feasts and flavors. "This was what led me to study Amado from the sociological viewpoint, focusing on the image of Brazil that he helped build." To her surprise, she found "very few" theses and dissertations by Brazilian sociologists, anthropologists and historians on Amado, perhaps two or three. "This only made my interest grow," she says. She is currently working as a consultant for Companhia das Letras on the Amado collection.

According to data that the publishing house sent Ilana, only from 1975 to 1995, the total number of copies sold in Brazil totaled 20,050,500. She stresses that, besides novels, Jorge Amado, as a journalist and contributor to periodicals, wrote more than one hundred articles on a fair range of subjects. He also held several positions in the intellectual field, including writing criticism and prefaces, and being a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters. Not to speak of the television adaptations of his works, the honors he received and the lectures he delivered abroad, where Amado was seen as a symbolic ambassador of Brazil. All this helped him an important opinion leader, a public man whose ideas significantly influenced several social classes in several parts of Bra-

zil and the world. According to Ana Paula Palamartchuk, who has a PhD in history and wrote the book *Os novos bárbaros: escritores e comunismo no Brasil* (1928-1948) (The new barbarians – authors and communism in Brazil, 1928-1948), there is no such thing as prejudice against Amado. She admits, however, that there is a certain memory built on his life that does not really accept its role in his literary experience. Amado himself fostered this, she says. *O mundo da paz* (World of Peace) (1952), his travel narrative about his trip to the USSR, was published as a "contribution to the struggle for peace. I wrote it in honor of comrade Stalin, from a Brazilian writer, on his seventieth birthday, wise leader of the people of the world in the quest for human happiness on earth," as Amado wrote. Years later, in his book of memoirs, *Navegação de Cabotagem* (Coastal Navigation) (1992), he stated: "I got *O Mundo da Paz* out of circulation, I struck it from list of my works, I try to forget it..." "Political activism, however, is an ongoing element of his literary creation, especially from 1933, when he published *Cacau*" (Cocoa), to 1954, when he published the trilogy *Os Subterrâneos da Liberdade*. Thereafter, when he left the Communist Party, this political activism appeared in his works as though absent, in an attempt to provide another meaning to his previous path. This absence is offset by the people and the popular culture that provide the linking element in his works." ■

