



Brazil seen from the farm

Studies about Monteiro Lobato reintroduce the complexity of the writer in all his contradictions

Carlos Haag

Monteiro Lobato (1882-1948) summarized his beliefs in a very precise way: “A country is made of men and books.” He tried to improve, modernize and bring together this trio, without much success, and was harshly criticized, misunderstood and disillusioned because of this same threesome. He stuck his “little nose” in all aspects of Brazilian society with a degree of wisdom worthy of Dona Benta, one of his main characters, attacking the antiquated knowledge of the “*sabugosas*” and accurately describing the national backwardness with an accurate aim. He seems to have taken a “talking pill” and with his “little faucet” spilled out criticism against the country’s problems. Above all, he was an endless source of contradictions.

“Lobato is a little like all of us Brazilians. He was either assuming controversial positions, or ahead of his time. I grew up reading his books and a good deal of my creativity and freedom of thought I owe to his texts, which lead to reflection and which go beyond time constraints. He was a made-to-order Brazilian,” explained Marisa Lajolo, professor at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) and Mackenzie Presbyterian University, winner of the 2009 Jabuti Award for *Monteiro Lobato: livro a livro*, (Monteiro Lobato: book by book), her paper resulting from the thematic project entitled *Monteiro Lobato and other Brazilian*

Illustration by
Belmonte from
1936 for the
*Sítio do Picapau
Amarelo* group

modernisms, supported by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) and conducted between 2003 and 2007. “Inevitably, the multiple presences of Lobato in the life of his time featured violent passions, contradictions and dichotomies. It is precisely for this reason that his work demands a far-reaching analysis which, far from avoiding the contradictions or softening them, intensifies the contrasts, placing its actions in broader and broader contexts,” noted the researcher.

It is in this spirit that the team for this thematic project is now preparing a new study, this time dissecting his adult works “book by book.” These works are little known and appreciated, overshadowed by the success of his children’s works. Over the years, the history of literature has crafted a multi-faceted and somewhat contradictory image of the writer. On the one hand, as Lajolo noted, he is said to be inventive, considered to be the creator of our children’s literature; on the other, he is scorned as the art critic

who mocked the innovative works by modernist painter Anita Mafalti. He is seen in a bad light as the farmer who ridiculed his peers in the figure of Jeca Tatu, at the same time as he is exalted as the progressive citizen who defended domestic oil production.

The multi-faceted career of Lobato was the result of a daring and modern world view, which was always in perfect harmony with his historical moment,” said Lajolo. “He left deep marks on Brazilian culture and his legacy is present in the widest possible variety of places. For example, it can be found in the modern profile of the book-selling industry he created, and also in the problematization of different aspects of national practices of reading and writing, of the publishing and circulation of books. He was one of the first, and rare, intellectuals to perceive the profound change that books and reading were undergoing in modern times,” she noted. To achieve this, he used both what he had and what he did not have.

This is also proven in unpublished letters recently discovered by researchers at the Special Information and Memory Unit of the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar). In these letters from 1925, Lobato asked farmer Carlos Leôncio de Magalhães, who is better known as Nhonhô Magalhães, for financial help to save his publishing house from bankruptcy. “In the first letter, Lobato told Magalhães that if he helped the publishing house, maybe one day his children would be interested in books. In the second letter, Lobato said that if Magalhães helped him, he would not only be helping Brazil, but also helping to save his life, taking a much more emotional tone,” said professor João Roberto Martins, coordinator of the Special Unit. Magalhães sent his reply in an impersonal typewritten way, explaining that he no longer engaged in business dealings since he “needed rest.” “This keen awareness of the economic dimension of books and literature is one of the greatest hallmarks of Lobato’s modernity,” according to Marisa Lajolo.

Hence the importance of delving deeply into his production, especially into the almost forgotten non-children’s literature, which began to be published again after 2007, when Editora Globo signed a contract with

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The covers of *Marquez de Rabicó*, 1925, by Voltolino; *Chave do tamanho*, 1949, by Augustus; and *Emília no País da Gramática*, 1934, by Belmonte



Illustration by J. G. Villin for the book *Reinações de Narizinho*, 1933

the heirs after years of dispute with the Brasileira publishing house, which held all the rights to Lobato's works. After the works were republished, the brisk sales of books for adults came as a surprise. For example, *Urupês*, the collection of stories that introduced Jeca Tatu in 1918, is now in its fourth reprint. "Although the role of reformer of Brazilian's children's literature is unquestioned, the new times call for a reevaluation of the journalist, art critic, essayist and polemicist. The focus on modernism in São Paulo threw Lobato into limbo. He became the villain. In recent years, this view has been revised," said Lajolo. "Besides, he is an excellent story teller, who is funny, harsh in terms of social criticism, and uses stripped-down language."

According to Lajolo, those who only know Lobato as the incredible inventor of *Sítio do Picapau Amarelo* (Yellow Woodpecker Farm) may be familiar with the best Lobato, but even so, are losing out on a lot of the personality of this writer from São Paulo who was not one to mince words. "Between 1882 and 1948, this writer lived between two different Brazils. One was more agricultural, patriarchal, traditionalist. He settled accounts with this Brazil by inventing a farm run by a matriarchy, where instead

of cattle, there was a talking donkey and a wise corncob puppet. The other was the Brazil whose face was changed by industrialization. For the latter, he was a made-to-order citizen." Working in the Paraíba Valley, Lobato fought against the slash-and-burn agriculture of the backwoodsmen and bashed Jeca by calling him a parasite and predator of nature.

In less than ten years, he changed his mind: it was the lack of health care that he had called laziness, and he wrote new articles redeeming Jeca and denouncing the precariousness of Brazilian health care policies. "Twenty years later, he turned the tables again. Lobato now believed that Jeca was the victim of the Brazilian land-ownership structure, and began to write about it," Lajolo recalled. His relationship with the present was never the best: he fought against the *Estado Novo* (New State) due to the lack of freedom and the general disinterest of Brazilians in exploring for petroleum, a task to which he dedicated himself with exacerbated enthusiasm, to the point of once again losing his assets and being thrown in jail as a subversive. At the end of his life, Jeca, now transformed into Zé Brasil, was no longer fighting against endemic diseases but against the large rural estates and the unfair distribution of land.



“I want to make books so that children can live in them, like I lived in *Robinson Crusoe*”

“Monteiro Lobato dove into the collective imagination and simultaneously fertilized it; he wrote new ideas about childhood in shorthand that circulated among the different cultural spheres of his time, like the theories of the New School movement, and transposed them into his literary work,” noted researcher Cilza Bignotto, professor of literary theory and Brazilian literature at the Federal University of Ouro Preto. “Likewise, he perceived and recorded in a very unique way the ideas about childhood that existed in those social segments that made up the ‘archaic Brazil’: the *cabocla* [half-breed] communities, groups of hillbillies who lived in the countryside of São Paulo state, and the poor people who lived in the shantytowns that were beginning to appear on the outskirts of the state capital,” according to Bignotto. In fact, it was through a finding by Bignotto that the thematic project coordinated by Mariza Lajolo received top quality raw material. While working on her Master’s degree, she came across reams of unpublished material by Lobato in the basement of a bookstore in Santos and used money from her FAPESP grant to purchase these treasures. She decided to make them available to the public by donating it all to the Institute of Language and Literature at Unicamp. This made establishment of the Monteiro Lobato Fund possible; today it

has a collection of over two thousand items, including original works, letters, photos, first editions, etc. It was “Lobato’s trunk” that helped researchers to enrich the papers produced under the thematic project *Monteiro Lobato and other Brazilian modernisms*.

Analysis of the new finds added new pieces to the jigsaw puzzle that the group is still putting together, revealing an even more complex Lobato. After all, as Lajolo noted, Lobato was always in tune with his reality and knew how to incorporate information that often coincided with the school curriculum into a fictional work driven by fantasy and humor. Unlike conventional schools, which were the target of frequent criticism by Lobato’s characters, *Sítio do Pica-Pau Amarelo* appears as an alternative school. In it, knowledge of grammar, mathematics, geology and even the rudiments of a nationalistic petroleum policy are presented and assimilated in a critical manner, that is independent and always question-

ing, especially in the teaching-learning relationship between Dona Benta and her disciple Emília.

“I want to write books so that children can live in them. Not to read and throw away, but to live in them, like I lived in *Robinson Crusoe*,” he wrote in a letter to his friend Godofredo Rangel. The Old Republic preached the ideal of serious young people, miniature adults, who were quiet and ready to obey and accept the established values. At that time, books reproduced the system; in other words, children who acted up were punished. “He broke away from this authoritarian tradition, inspired by and inspiring others in the educational reform project established after the revolution of 1930, when intellectuals began to advocate a new teaching system as a way to solve the county’s problems,” Bignotto noted. Prominent among them was Anísio Teixeira, an educator from the state of Bahia, with his New School, which sought to make knowledge more democratic, making it fun for young people. Lobato knew how to trade mischief for adventure, putting the liberating gesture within the reach of children in the figure of Emília. Lobato fought for this until he died, or rather, until he became “intelligent gas,” his metaphor for death. In spite of the passage of time, he remains the ideal nonconformist for modern times, which are so conforming. ■

On the left is the first drawing of the Emília rag doll from 1920, by Voltolino

To the right is the Minotaur, by Augustus, 1949

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SCIENTIFIC ARTICLES

LAJOLO, M. P. Mário de Andrade e Monteiro Lobato: um diálogo modernista em três tempos. *Teresa* (USP). v. 8-9, pp. 141-60, 2008.

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FROM OUR ARCHIVES

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