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Reviews

PEDRA CANGA

Tereza Albués

Translated from the Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers

Reviewed by Jean Raber

Pedra Canga, Tereza Albués' 1987 magical realism novella, has been reissued by Green Integer Press, a small company that claims to publish works "as may appear necessary to bring society into a slight tremolo of confusion and fright at least." Certainly *Pedra Canga*, with its human-faced peccaries, headless mules, satanic rituals, and pale zombie-like hoards fits the bill.

Pedra Canga, the eponymous fictional village, lies in a remote part of Brazil. It is dominated by the Mangueiral, a stone estate separated from the village by walls topped with barbed wire and broken glass on three sides, and the Saranzal River full of snakes and alligators on the fourth. The action of the novel is bracketed between two monumental storms, the first of which leaves the Mangueiral abandoned.

Interestingly, "pedra canga" means "stone yoke." Perhaps "millstone" with all its connotations would be a good idiomatic translation, since the Mangueiral and the despotic families who have lived there are a stone around the necks of the villagers. And yet, the supernatural occurrences at the estate form a powerful narrative that gives the villagers a common identity that, though they squabble over it, holds them together.

All magical realism is essentially about the transformational powers of forces seen and unseen. But the residents of Pedra Canga have a hard time giving up their old narrative. Who are they without the Mangueiral? How will they transform?

As they wait, the old estate continues to spark potent magic. Hundreds of silent and corpse-like strangers come to ransack the place; they might be zombies or they might be the villagers, unrecognizable even to themselves. The narrator, a young woman in the village who wants to be a writer, visits the abandoned Mangueiral for herself and searches for meaning in the horrors she finds in its cellar. Marcola, a mystic, in tune with the old gods, tells her:

Your soul wasn't there. Things didn't happen on the plane in which you persist on basing your truth. The mind deceives itself when it has as its only objective finding a material explanation for things that happen in other realities.

Bento Sagrado, the oldest man in the village, offers a more prosaic explanation:

The people of Pedra Canga have always looked upon that house as a symbol of hidden forces, arrogance and evildoing because no one had access to the Mangueiral. Now that it has become available, they still attribute powers to it; they can't see it as an ordinary house in ruins. [The owners of the Mangueiral] were very powerful.



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They mistreated many people for many years and were never punished by human justice. It is natural that when such power ceases to exist, the people see a divine punishment in everything, that they create myths and attribute to the supernatural any fact that, in other circumstances would be nothing but commonplace.

The villagers are thus caught between two worlds, in a kind of limbo, waiting for some kind of justice to emerge. The climax and transformation comes with the second storm, though to discuss that here would ruin an ending that is deeply satisfying and moving.

Readers should be cautioned that although *Pedra Canga* is a satisfying read, it introduces 41 characters who span five decades in the first third of the book. Each has a distinct personality and is related to the other characters in some way. An assiduous reader would do well to have a pencil and paper handy to make a chart or list of the characters and their relationships.

Tip: Write small.

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