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ALiterary Saloon&Site of Review. Trying to meet all your book preview and review needs. Contents: Main the Best the Rest Review Index Links to e-mail us: support the site the complete review - fiction - Tweet São Bernardo by Graciliano Ramos general information | review summaries | our review | links | about the author Portuguese title: São Bernardo Translated by Padma Viswanathan Previously translated by R.L. Scott-Bucleuch (1975) - Return to top of the page - Our Assessment: B+ - solid little (life-)story; impressive narrative voice See our review for fuller assessment. Review Summaries Source Rating Date Reviewer Sunday Times* - 5/10/1975 Jill Neville TLS* - 2/1/1976 John Parker (* review of an earlier translation): From the Reviews: "As a study of the toughness of life in Brazil during a period when revolutionary ideas were beginning to trickle through, this has an arid authenticity." - Jill Neville, Sunday Times "R.L. Scott-Bucleuch's translation is a distinct improvement on most attempts to render literature written in Portuguese. Some phrases sound strange when put in the mouth of the earthy Paulo Honório, and I do not feel Scott-Bucleuch has quite succeeded in capturing the narrator's very personal tone, but the novel still comes across with much of its force." - John Parker, Times Literary Supplement Please note that these ratings solely represent the complete review's biased interpretation and subjective opinion of the actual reviews and do not claim to accurately reflect or represent the views of the reviewers. Similarly the illustrative quotes chosen here are merely those the complete review subjectively believes represent the tenor and judgment of the review as a whole. We acknowledge (and remind and warn you) that they may, in fact, be entirely unrepresentative of the actual reviews by any other measure. - Return to top of the page - The complete review's Review: The São Bernardo of the title is the estate that narrator Paulo Honório has long lived on. Now fifty as he writes this account, he's proud of what he's achieved but doesn't dwell too much on how he accomplished it: until he was eighteen he: "hoed a hard row, earning five tostões for twelve hours' work" as a simple laborer on that very property. It was already in decline then: The property was falling to pieces: brushwood, mud, rove beetles like the devil. The manor house walls were crumbling and the roads nearly impassable. But what excellent land ! Setting his sights on taking it over, the determined and hard-working Honório rather easily does, from the son of his old boss. First, however, he does a stint in prison -- almost four years for knifing a man (over a girl) -- which was at least good for some schooling: that's where he learned to read. Honório remains a hot-headed but determined man, willing to work hard but also understanding how the games are played with the local authorities. He's a working-class boy with middle-class aspirations -- but without his heart truly being in much of that: he doesn't really respect the novel-reading bourgeoisie, or see the purpose of fancy book-learning. He has the basics he needs -- "I'm pretty well-versed in statistics, cattle-raising, agriculture, commercial accounts" -- but feels completely at sea beyond these. So also, this account reflects this lifelong pull between the would-be intellectual life (that he has no foundation in) and his work-the-land instincts: he begins eager to write the book but immediately imagines that even with a project such as this, a: "division of labor was the way to go". But everyone he wants to enlist in his project has different ideas from him as to how to go about it; determined to be in control, he finally settles on going his own way -- as he has with pretty much everything in life. One of his would-be writing collaborators explains resorting to a highfalutin style as necessary for anything 'literary': "If I wrote the way I talk, no one would read me". But Honório has little patience with that attitude and approach, in writing or in life: he's down-to-earth in every respect, and decides to plow ahead with this account in just that same straightforward, direct and to the point manner as he stomps through daily life. It makes the account a very personal one -- and very much a reflection of the writer behind it. Ramos pulls this ventriloquism-act off very well: much of the appeal in the novel is in its voice and straightforward presentation. Honório explains that his method involves: "to extract portions of events and dump the rest"; typically, he explains: I finished constructing my new house. No need to describe it. The main parts have appeared here or will soon; the rest is expendable, interesting to architects, maybe, but they probably won't read this. The short paragraphs and almost staccato style are effective: I insisted on offering him the wood. He started shaking. Our conversation was dry, our speech quick, our smiles cold. The mestizos were suspicious. My heart was thumping as I predicted the consequences of all this deceit. After the early romantic passion that led to his incarceration, Honório long did not have much to do with women, but, at age forty-five, he finds himself drawn to the twenty-seven-year-old schoolteacher Madalena (though, typically, he initially takes her to be much younger). Learning, when he asks about her, that she isn't just an educated woman, but one with some intellectual pretensions does scare him off a bit. I was discouraged. "Ah ! She writes articles !" Yes, sir. She's very learned ! What have you got to do with her ? "No idea. I had a plan, but the Cruzeiro contributions give me cold feet. I'd assumed she was sensible." Nevertheless, he courts and wins her over. It's a reasonably happy union for a while, but the differences between them make for an underlying tension that increasingly bubbles over. She believes in education, while Honório is more an old-fashioned hard-work kind of guy; he tells himself she really isn't one of 'them' ("I don't like clever women. The ones calling themselves intellectuals are abominations") but some of the signs are troubling: Madalena wasn't an intellectual, properly speaking. But she didn't care about religion and she read the foreign news. Honório eventually works himself up into a frenzy of jealousy: "The idea of catching her obsessed me" -- but what was there to catch her at ? It didn't matter: he convinces himself that she has wronged, and soon he can't see beyond that: My misgivings got unbearable. I had to confirm them. Madalena had some secret vice, no doubt about it. "No doubt about it, no doubt, understand ? No doubt." Repeating it over and over made me feel more certain. I rubbed my hands. No doubt about it. Far better this than flip-flopping from one side to another. Honório has always plowed ahead, with near-absolute certainty. It's gotten him in trouble -- like when he knifed that rival -- but for the most part it's also gotten him ahead. But it's made him a poor partner: while he sometimes shows a deft touch in handling people, he is, at heart, -- and sees himself as -- entirely the boss, imposing his will, right or wrong. It matters less with his underlings, but certainly does his marriage no good -- but he doesn't understand, and isn't capable, of the kind of give and take necessary in this kind of relationship. Typically, even the birth of a son -- the pride and joy of a continued family line -- doesn't move him much, with the young boy barely of any interest to the self-obsessed strong-man (though at least he laments his inability to care about his offspring: "If at least the child would cry ... I could never even feel any affection for my child. What misery !"). Things do not go well, personally and then politically, with Honório backing the wrong side in the latest upheaval -- leading to this bout of reflection that results in this book. It makes for an interesting life-story and fate, a slice of Brazilian of the times life from an interesting perspective, with a good cast of secondary characters (and, in particular, Honório's dealings with them) Above all, São Bernardo impresses for the voice of its narrator, mirroring his character so well; it's very well done -- and well captured in Padma Viswanathan's translation. - M.A.Orthofer, 27 May 2020 - Return to top of the page - Links: São Bernardo: Reviews: (* review of an earlier translation) Other books of interest under review: - Return to top of the page - About the Author: Brazilian author Graciliano Ramos lived 1892 to 1953. - Return to top of the page - © 2020 the complete review Main | the New | the Best | the Rest | Review Index | Links

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