

An Interview with Ana Maria Machado

GLAUCO ORTOLANO

AS I WAS LEAVING my hotel on Porchat Island early in the morning, I contemplated for the last time the breathtaking view of historic São Vicente Bay, where the Portuguese established their first settlement in Brazil in the 1500s. I drove down the island toward the ferry that would take me to Guarujá, the starting point of my trip to Rio. It would be the first time in many years that I had taken the Rio-Santos highway, a delightful route along one of the most exuberant coastlines I've ever seen.

My journey to Rio de Janeiro had a purpose: I was to interview Ana Maria Machado, the latest recipient of the Hans Christian Andersen Award, often referred to as the "Nobel" of children's literature. But unlike the Swedish Academy, which has frequently overlooked the magnitude of Brazilian belles lettres — perhaps because it is written in Portuguese, a language still considered minor by many — the Andersen Award judges



have treated Brazilian authors very fairly. Lydia Bojunga Nunes was the first Brazilian writer to receive this prize, in 1982, placing Brazil second only to the United States in the number of awards received.

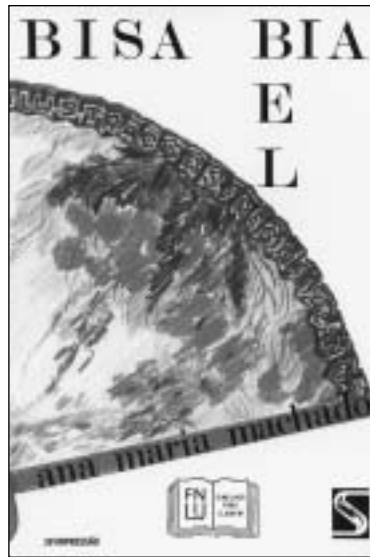
The trip to Rio was truly inspiring, as I had expected. After passing through the idyllic resorts of Bertioga, Ubatuba, Paraty, and Angra dos Reis, I finally reached my hotel in Rio late in the afternoon. I immediately called Ana Maria to schedule our interview, which we set for five o'clock the next day. Punctually at five, I was already announcing myself through the intercom at her elegant apartment building in Leblon, ready to meet her personally for the first time. Following the Brazilian tradition of hospitality, Ana Maria greeted me with a bright smile and offered me some cashew juice (the cashew is a juicy tropical fruit, and the famous nut is just a small part of it), which I gladly accepted. The temperature outside was

in the 100s, and the bittersweet taste of cashews was entirely appropriate for the moment, as we sat on her front porch gazing at Corcovado Mountain. For a moment there, life was just perfect. Here I was discussing literature with the distinguished Ana Maria Machado over some cashew juice in beautiful Rio. How could I ask for more?

As our conversation began, we talked about Brazilian literature in general, about *World Literature Today*, and about the Top Ten list of Brazilian novels I had recently compiled for *WLT*. Ana Maria demonstrated surprise as she read my list, not so much at my selections as at my familiarity with contemporary Brazilian authors, a familiarity she thought unusual for someone living abroad. I took her surprise as a compliment. The conversation passed smoothly from an informal *bate-papo* to more serious matters. After all, as Brazilian novelist Graciliano Ramos used to say, "Literature is flesh, and should always be taken seriously." Machado also spoke at length about her life and her career, as I will attempt to transcribe in the paragraphs that follow.

Ana Maria Machado was born in Rio de Janeiro in December 1941 as the first of her parents' eleven children. During her childhood she spent her summers at her grandparents' home in a small fishing village on the Rio coast. She recalls that the only evening entertainment the village offered consisted mostly of storytelling, as people gathered on her grandmother's front porch. So it was there and then that little Ana Maria began to hear the folk stories that would eventually appear in her own work. She also traveled extensively in her youth, residing at various times in Argentina, the United States, France, Italy, and England.

Even before her decision to take up writing, Ana Maria had already become a painter. She studied at the Modern Art Museum of Rio de Janeiro and at the MOMA in New York. Later she switched to letters and took a degree in Romance languages in Rio, then moved to Paris to study with Roland Barthes. After receiving her doctorate from the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, she taught Portuguese and Brazilian literature at the Sorbonne and then at the Universidade do Rio de Janeiro. As a journalist, she also wrote articles for *Elle* magazine in Paris, for the BBC in London, and for the



Jornal do Brasil, where she was responsible for a section on children's literature.

Ana Maria began to write in 1969, and at last count she had published some 110 books for children and adults in at least sixteen different countries. She has received numerous literary honors, including the prestigious Casa de las Américas Prize, the Américas Award (honorable mention) in the U.S., the APPLE Prize from Switzerland, and the Corcori Prize from Costa Rica, among many others, including of course the Hans Christian Andersen Award for 2000 and the 2001 Machado de Assis

Prize from the Brazilian Academy of Letters for the entire body of her work. She is a member of the Brazilian PEN Club, has been a Fellow at the Literature Seminar in Cambridge, and has taught at Berkeley as Distinguished Writer in Residence and Associate Professor of Brazilian Literature.

It is pleasing to see how Ana Maria grew and developed from the little girl who listened to fishermen's stories in her grandparents' village into a true master of the art of writing. She follows in the rich oral tradition of Brazilian literature, which she combines with her particular and sophisticated creative style to produce (or reproduce) stories that have won not only literary prizes but also the hearts and imaginations of millions of readers around the globe. At the time this article was written, her books had sold close to eight million copies worldwide.

As our conversation continued, we moved into her living room, nicely decorated with several of her own paintings. The interview was conducted in Portuguese. I myself have abridged and translated our discussion, using the transcript from a two-hour videotape of our lengthy exchange.

Glauco Ortolano During our conversation, you mentioned that although children's literature has given you much joy, it also puts you in a sort of "cultural ghetto." Could you explain what you mean by this?

Ana Maria Machado It is sometimes difficult to gain recognition as a writer of children's literature. In the

eyes of many, such writing is still viewed as a minor or lesser literary form. Many do not understand that achieving simplicity without being simplistic is the greatest challenge for a writer of children's books. As the poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade once said, "I value things that become simple, not the ones that are born simple." When I say that the "children's literature" label puts one in a cultural ghetto, I mean that it is hard to rid oneself of the stigma of being a writer of "simple" things, because many just cannot see that distinction between writing about things that are born simple, and writing about complex issues made simple enough so that a child can grasp the underlying principles. The creation of that essence is what separates a good writer from a mediocre one in children's literature.

GO But would you say that statement remains true even in the "Harry Potter era" of today?

AMM From a marketing standpoint, a best seller is a best seller, regardless of its content or literary value. When I say "cultural ghetto," I mean it in terms of the literary world and not just the publishing industry.

GO In that case, the Machado de Assis Prize awarded to you this year should have had special meaning for you.

AMM By all means. I received this prize for the body of my work, including my novels, my books of essays, and my books for children. It was important for me to be recognized also as an author of books for adults, which are supposedly written in a more "complex" language, and especially to receive such recognition from the Brazilian Academy of Letters. It adds credibility to my other books as well. The public can see that an author of children's literature can also sometimes write equally well for adults.

GO You wrote your first book for children when you were working on your doctoral dissertation with Roland Barthes in Paris, a dissertation on Guimarães Rosa, who



is one of the most complex writers of all time. From one writer to another, did you ever find it difficult to work with "adult" and "children's" language simultaneously?

AMM Not at all. At the time I was working on my dissertation on Guimarães Rosa with Barthes, I was raising a three-year-old son. So, just as with the spoken language, when I was writing for Barthes I was "speaking" his language, and when I was writing for my son I was "speaking" his. I always write my books with someone in mind. It's a lot easier that way. And that is the greatest chal-

lenge of any writer — to be able to develop such an ear for language that things don't sound artificial when put down on paper. And to supplement my answer to your previous question, just because someone is very successful at writing "complex" things for adults is no guarantee that he or she will be successful at writing for children. The writer must develop his ear and know his public intimately. I know some great writers of adult fiction who have failed completely when attempting to write for children. They just didn't know their audience well enough.

GO I understand that you, as a writer, were probably formed initially by your exposure to stories told during the evenings you spent in your grandparents' village. But in terms of writers and books that may have influenced you as a child growing up in Rio, which ones would you say had the greatest impact on you?

AMM Undoubtedly Monteiro Lobato had the greatest impact on me. Of course, most of the classic European writers of children's books — the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, Lewis Carroll, and many others — also had a great influence on me, but none like Monteiro Lobato. I read all of his books innumerable times and with great passion. His characters were so familiar to me that it was impossible not to identify with them. I am really thankful to have had Lobato in my childhood. He wrote in my native language about characters from my own surroundings and, at the same time, with a very universal approach. That was really important to me. He filled me with a sense of "Brazilianism" at the same time

that he transported me through a universe only someone as gifted as he could know so well — the universe of a child’s mind. As for other books, I read just about everything that was set before me, books like *Robin Hood*, for instance; I had a whole collection of them, in many different versions, which I compared one with the other. I enjoyed the story of Robin Hood so much that when I was thirteen, I translated it into Portuguese,



so that my younger brothers could also read it. But I must admit that I also read things that were not especially recommendable, such as the “Biblioteca das Moças” (Library of the Young Lady) series, the kind of sweet romances that would surely give you a toothache. And I read the whole collection as well, so . . .

GO You wrote your dissertation on Guimarães Rosa, as already noted. Is it correct to assume that he had a great influence on the young Ana Maria?

AMM No, I don’t think so. I had great admiration for Guimarães Rosa, but no passion whatsoever. Not like the passion I have for Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Machado de Assis, and Érico Veríssimo. His universe was very distant from my own. I also had a great passion for several of our modernists, like Oswald and Mário de Andrade.

GO Which side of Oswald de Andrade do you enjoy most? The anthropophagous?

AMM (*Laughs*) Yes, I simply adore Oswald the poet. But on second thought, I also adore Oswald the novelist. I think of *Sentimental Memories of João Miramar* as “the” classic of the modernist movement along with Mario de

Andrade’s *Macunaíma*. These two writers exercised considerable influence on me, Oswald as a poet and novelist and Mário only as a novelist. I thought his poetry was good, but not great like Oswald’s. They worked well together though, Mário constructing all the while even as Oswald was engaged in deconstructing — something similar to what Chico Buarque and Caetano Veloso do with popular music nowadays.

GO In children’s literature in Brazil, were two writers ever engaged in any similar construction/deconstruction dichotomy?

AMM No. In terms of children’s literature there was this great writer in the 1920s I mentioned earlier, Monteiro Lobato, who left an incredible legacy for writers like myself. Only in English literature, I believe, are we able to find a canon of children’s literature perhaps greater than that left by Lobato. He didn’t just write books. He created a whole universe for children.

GO What writers from other countries had an influence on you?

AMM It’s difficult for me to say who might have influenced me. I know I was an avid reader and still am. From North America, my first passion was Mark Twain. I remember asking my father for a book that would make me live through the story from within, very intimately with the characters. So, he bought me *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and that became an instant passion. Then came *Huckleberry Finn*, which has been the book I’ve read the most times. Eventually I read all his other books. Later, at age nineteen, I discovered John Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Hemingway. From these last two I’ve read all they have written many times over. It was pure passion, especially Hemingway, whom I consider one of that very select group of writers who have thoroughly mastered their craft. He is a writer I would like to emulate someday; his ability to give voice to the land, whether in Pamplona, the Gulf of Mexico, or Africa, is truly astonishing. He is so humble amid nature, and his quietness allows nature to speak for itself in his works. Faulkner, on the other hand, speaks more directly to me as an individual. He overwhelms me and never ceases to impress me with his sensitivity and the way he is able to express the ineffable.

GO Any other phases?

AMM Yes, well, then my French phase came up, and I started to read Camus, and to identify with many of his ethical concerns. He is like a brother to me. Only recently I felt the urge to read his works again, right after the events of September 11th, which affected me very deeply. Following the attacks, I went into a terrible depression; I felt a certain loss of hope. Fortunately, I had Camus once again to rescue me from the depths of hell. There is one phrase of his that still rings in my ears: "The roles of executioner and victim always alternate. We just have to remember to remain on the side of the victim."

GO Your literary formation resembles mine in many ways. We've both had some of the same influences from European and North American authors, but in my case, I only discovered the great Latin American writers later in life. Was that true for you as well?

AMM Yes, I discovered Borges, García Márquez, Paz, Neruda, Vargas Llosa, Juan Rulfo, and many other great Latin American writers only as an adult. It's true that some are my contemporaries, but I can't count any of them as having influenced my own writing. I was already a mature writer when I became acquainted with them in the 1970s. English-language authors are probably the ones that had most impact on me, because I began studying them at a very early age. If you mention a title or an author from that corpus of literary works, I will most certainly have read it.

GO When it comes to the actual writing of a book for children, do you start out with a responsibility in mind? I mean, do you feel compelled to entertain or educate a child?

AMM Actually, no. I write because I feel a strong urge to express myself. I feel an urge to write in my mother tongue, which is just so marvelous. But never to entertain or educate. I don't feel that responsibility over my shoulder. For instance, *História Meio ao Contrário* (Backwards) is a story I wrote when I was coming out of my first marriage. I was going through a lot of turmoil, crying for no apparent reason and asking myself why couldn't life be like a fairy tale and let us live happily

ever after. So, in that moment I decided to write a story that would start where most children's stories end: with the beginning of marriage. And when I wrote that story, I learned many things about myself, and I was able to express my innermost feelings. That is probably the main reason I write: to organize my internal chaos.

GO Ana Maria, I will end this interview by asking you to make two Top Five lists of works in contemporary children's literature of Brazil. The first list will include works by other authors, and the second will be a selection from your own books.

AMM (*Pauses for a moment*) That is a difficult task. All our books are like our children, and it's hard to select our favorites. I will give you some titles, though. From other authors I'd recommend *A Bolsa Amarela* (The Yellow Bag) by Lígia Bojunga Nunes, recipient of the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1982; *O Menino Maluquinho* (The Daredevil Boy) by Ziraldo; *Os Bichos que Eu Tive* (The Animals I've Had) by Silvia Orthof; *De Repente dá Certo* (It Could Go Right) by Rute Rocha; and *Uma Idéia Toda Azul* (A Colorful Idea) by Mariana Colasante. From my own works I'd choose *Bisa Bia, Bisa Bel* (Grandma Bia, Grandma Bel; 1982), *Coleção Mico Maneco* (Mico Maneco Collection; 1983-88), *De Olho na Penas* (With an Eye on the Feathers; 1981), *Isso Ninguém me Tira* (They Can't Take That Away from Me; 1994), and *História Meio ao Contrário* (Backwards; 1979).

GO Thank you very much for what has been a memorable time spent in your company. Is there anything else you would like to say?

AMM I just would like to add that I am pleased to see a prestigious literary magazine such as *World Literature Today* dedicating a whole section to children's literature, and doing so on a permanent basis, as it seems. It is a praiseworthy effort to give children's literature the importance it deserves instead of treating it as a minor category. **WLT**

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