

Portraits of Brazil during Slavery

Eduardo de Assis Duarte*

The grandson, on his father's side, of enslaved Blacks, Machado de Assis was born in Livramento, Rio de Janeiro, in 1839. Though self-taught, with no access to formal schooling or university education, the author of hundreds of published short stories, subjective essays, poems, novels, plays and critical writings became, in the words of the North-American literary critic Harold Bloom, "the greatest Black writer in Western Literature to date".

Though he remains the unrivaled reference among Brazilian authors, Machado de Assis was long accused of having betrayed his origins and defected to the bourgeoisie; of having been omissive in his defense of the abolition of slavery, and of never properly addressing the issue in his work. However, a careful reading of his writings, especially those first published in the press, where they met with a wider readership, soon puts such recriminations to bed. Yes indeed, because, in addition to being an author, he was an active contributor to the press, publishing widely in newspapers and magazines. He was also a partner in *Gazeta de Notícias*, the nation's leading abolitionist newspaper.

Machado de Assis fought against the slavocratic regime, and not only in his writing. As a citizen and civil servant posted to the organ responsible for overseeing compliance with the Free Womb Law, he managed to liberate hundreds of victims who should have been freeborn, but were denied that freedom by having their birth certificates falsified to pre-date the new legislation.

In these first decades of the 21st Century, those who want to read striking stories from Machado's time and the legacy it left us, the present volume is a genuine treasure trove. The book contains six riveting tales that will enthrall the hearts and minds of youths of all ages, rendered in the ingenious and inventive pen-strokes of Masanori Ninomiya,

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in partnership with Caeto, master of the comic book and graphic novel, responsible here for the adaptation and final art. These are tales of pleasure and pain, in a sequence of actions that enchants the reader while triggering unexpected emotions about a past that many do their best to forget, but which lingers in the socioeconomic, racial and gender inequality we still see today.

The first of these, “The Case of the Cane”, tells the story of Damião, a rebellious young seminarian at loggerheads with his authoritarian father, and Lucrecia, a child enslaved at the age of eleven, victim of the perversity of Madam Rita, the lady she works for. The girl’s hands are full of burn marks and she wears a scar on her forehead, presumably the sign of previous trauma. Distressed by the threat of further punishment hanging over the girl, Damião vows to protect her. The ending is as surprising as it is thought-provoking: finding yourself on the knife-edge between empathy and self-interest, what do you do?

In “Mariana”, Machado, Masanori and Caeto deal with the theme of forbidden love, a trope of Western literature since *Romeo and Juliet*, and so many other dramas besides. Once again we have two young lovers: Coutinho, the white heir to a comfortable social standing, and Mariana, the beautiful house slave, and the object of the family’s “affections”—so long as she knows her place... Dignified, driven by passion, and willing to go to the end for what she wants, the burgeoning woman has an unexpected denouement in store for us.

In “Father against Mother”, Masanori and Caeto put a first-rate graphic-novel spin on Clara and Cândido Neves, products of the ingenious imagination of Machado de Assis. Once again, Brazil’s social dilemma is on full display, this time in the story of a young man and woman looking to get by, urged on by the dream of the future represented by a newborn son they may have no choice but to give up. In a flash, we find ourselves faced with a challenge that steps out of the boxes of the comic book and into our conscience: in the end, who has the right to a mother and a father?

Another lad who calls attention right from his name is Máximo, a student in love with the beautiful dark-haired Eulália, who doesn’t give him the time of day. This really gets to him, but between a love letter sent and a poem composed for his beloved, a windfall changes everything: Máximo comes into an inheritance that leaves him rich overnight... How will the lass react to this turnaround in her suitor’s fortunes? And how will Máximo react after so much disdain?

Question after question, Masanori and Caeto rise to the challenges set for characters and readers alike by the ingenious Machado. A case in point is the story of the young man embarking on a promising military career who comes to the conclusion that he has two souls, one inner and one outer... Come again? And what does that have to do with the mirror that shows us our outer soul? What's more, what does it have to do with the slaves who flee overnight, leaving the young officer alone with this mirror in an otherwise empty house?

The last graphic story in the book is based on a poem—"Sabina"—and is basically a hymn to the feminine. The main character is once again a girl on the cusp of womanhood reduced to the condition of house slave to the lady of a 19th-century ranch manor. During the holidays, the young master Otávio, away pursuing studies in the capital, comes home to visit, fanning the flame Sabina has nurtured for him since childhood. While many see her as a mere object, Sabina asserts herself as a subject, the owner of her own body and desire, who will pursue to the very end a passion teetering between life and death.

Geared towards entertainment that never loses sight of emotion and intelligence, *Machado de Assis em quadrinhos (Machado de Assis in Comics)* fills the eyes with images and situations that dialogue with the thought-provoking fiction of "the greatest Black writer to date", making us think about life and ourselves, history and the nation—past, present and future.