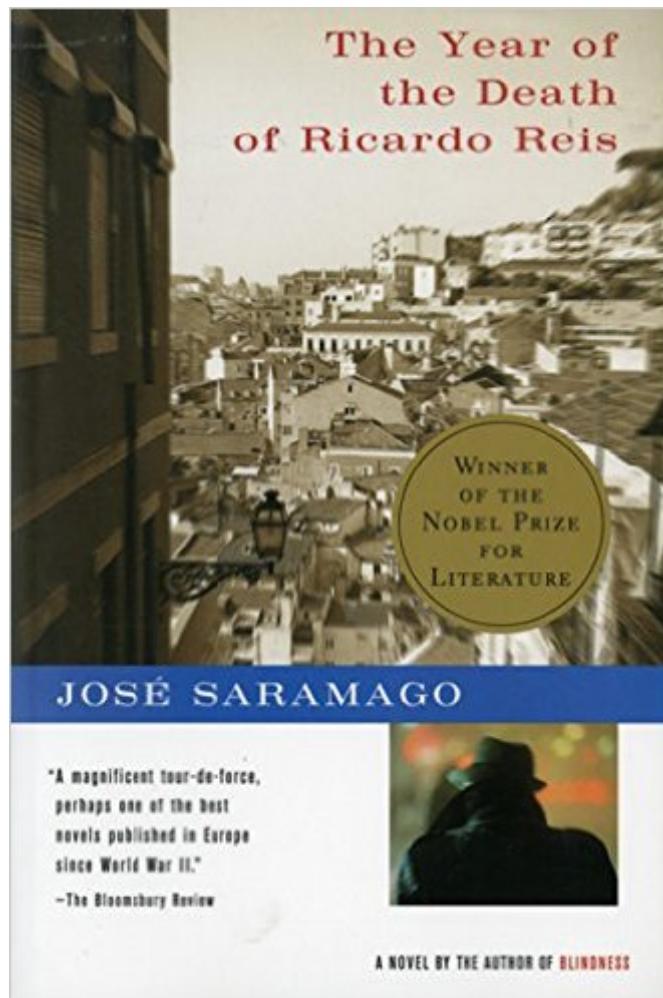


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The Year Of The Death Of Ricardo Reis



Synopsis

The year: 1936. Europe dances while an invidious dictator establishes himself in Portugal. The city: Lisbon-gray, colorless, chimerical. Ricardo Reis, a doctor and poet, has just come home after sixteen years in Brazil. Translated by Giovanni Pontiero.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) famously responded to what philosophy calls "the crisis of the subject" - that nagging sense that one's identity is contingent, relative and inherently unstable - by developing multiple authorial selves, or "heteronyms": Alberto Caeiro, a bucolic providore of rustic verse; Alvaro de Campos, a strident modernist; and Ricardo Reis, a meditative pagan and classicist. Each wrote a poetry the others did not and could not write. In this way, Pessoa solved his problems of identity and poetry simultaneously. He recognised his multiple "selves" and set them free. The cultural transplantation he experienced might account for this. He was born in Portugal, but educated in South Africa where he learned to speak and write in English. He spent the remainder of his life in Lisbon where by day he translated business letters, and by night was a figure in the local modernist movement. He was probably an alcoholic, and lived in fear of insanity. (See Michael Hamburger's excellent study of modernist poetry, "The Truth of Poetry", for a lucid account of Pessoa and the significance of his work.) For those who know the story of Pessoa, Saramago's long and luxurious novel offers a delicious premise: Fernando Pessoa is dead, yet Ricardo Reis still

lives. Indeed, three months after Pessoa's death, Reis returns to Lisbon from sixteen years of self-imposed exile in Brazil. It's 1936 and Europe is on the brink of war.

The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis Even 'great' nations someday lose their vitality and turn into mere spectators of the fast changing events. When they fall on bad times, strange leaders take charge, holding out promises to restore the lost national pride. The demoralised people watch helplessly the systematic manipulation of their traditional values and institutions by their new leaders in the name of initiating a healing process. Portugal in the 1930s experienced such political diminution and its shameful aftermath. This great sea-faring nation, which first charted the sea-route to India, was for years the world's foremost colonial power. Subsequent events, however, relegated Portugal to the background, leaving it clinging tenaciously to its few surviving colonies. By the fourth decade of the twentieth century, Portugal's journey to obscurity was complete with the emergence of new power equations in Europe. During this turbulent period Portugal fell into the hands of the economist-turned-dictator, Salazar. This provided the ideal setting for a novelist who wished to capture the nation's aspirations amid widespread despair and its creative urges amid moral decadence. The story of Jose Saramago's *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* begins with the quiet home-coming from sixteen years of exile in Brazil of the poet-doctor, Ricardo Reis. As he settles down in a hotel in Lisbon, we find him in the strange company of a dead poet Fernando Pessoa. Their encounters produce some of the most enigmatic moments in the narrative. Reis also strikes up relationships with two women, the hotel-maid, Lydia and an upper-crust girl Marcenda, with a paralysed arm.

The greatest literature poses a problem for those who wish to praise it. Almost by definition, words are inadequate, because they cannot do justice to the richness of the language, the plot, or the ideas of their object. That's the problem I face in trying to praise "The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis." Anything I say will sound inadequate. In fact, for a reason analogous to that which lies behind the joke about selling at a loss but making up for it in volume, the more I say the more inadequate my effort is going to be. So just a few words. I think "Ricardo Reis" is one of the great twentieth-century novels, a work that, by itself, justifies Saramago's Nobel Prize for Literature. Reis's obsessional behavior, his philosophical conversations with Fernando Pessoa, the evocation of a rainswept Lisbon just before World War II, the venality of petty martinets--all of these are presented with an awareness of universal truths and of human beings' complexity that reverberates deeply. It will enrich the life of anyone who reads it. I do have a couple of suggestions for anyone

who buys "Ricardo Reis." Look in an encyclopedia to see who Fernando Pessoa and Ricardo Reis were. It will help to understand the plot. And don't be put off by the way Saramago separates dialogue, with commas and a capital letter rather than quotation marks. It's not always easy to follow, but its effect, intended or not, is to give the dialogues a dreamlike quality that's part of the novel's appeal. Also, if, after reading "Ricardo Reis," you visit Lisbon and feel the urge to visit the Hotel Bragança or the small public square with Adamastor's statue, you can.

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