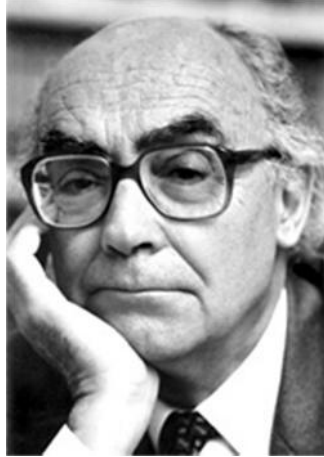


Nobel Prize in Literature 1998



José Saramago

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1998 was awarded to José Saramago *"who with parables sustained by imagination, compassion and irony continually enables us once again to apprehend an elusory reality"*.

"who with parables sustained by imagination, compassion and irony continually enables us once again to apprehend an elusory reality"

The Portuguese writer José Saramago will be 76 in November. A writer of prose, from a working-class background, his first major success did not come until he was 60. Since then he has attracted a great deal of attention and frequently been translated. Today he lives on the Canary Islands.

Saramago's "Manual of painting and calligraphy: a novel", which was published as early as 1977, provides a key to what was to come. Its basic theme is the genesis of the artist, of a painter as well as a writer. It can to a great extent be read autobiographically, but in its exuberance it embraces the theme of love, ethical issues, impressions from the author's travels and reflections on the individual and society. The liberation following the fall of the Salazar regime in 1974 provides an illuminating closing vignette.

Saramago's breakthrough came in 1982 with his novel "Baltasar and Blimunda". This is a rich, multifaceted and polysemous text that at the same time has a historical, a social and an individual perspective. The insight and wealth of imagination to which it gives expression is characteristic of Saramago's works as a whole. The Italian composer Corghi based his opera "Blimunda" on this novel.

One of Saramago's major achievements is "The year of the death of Ricardo Reis", which was published in 1984. Formally the events take place in 1936 in Lisbon during the dictatorship, but there is a skilfully evoked atmosphere of unreality. This is accentuated by the repeated visits made by the dead poet Fernando Pessoa to the protagonist (who is himself one of Pessoa's creations) and their conversations about the conditions of existence. On his final visit, they leave the world together.

The writer uses a typical device in "The stone raft", published in 1986. A series of supernatural events culminates in the severance of the Iberian peninsula so that it starts to float into the Atlantic, initially heading for the Azores. The situation that Saramago devises provides him with ample opportunity to comment, in his own very personal way, on both trivial and important aspects of life and to ironise about the authorities and politicians, perhaps especially about the major players in power politics. Saramago's acumen is at the service of wisdom.

There is good reason also to mention "The history of the siege of Lisbon" (1989), a novel about a novel. The narrative derives from the wilful addition by a proof-reader of the word *not*, an impulse that reverses the course of historical events and at the same time provides the author with scope for his inventiveness and delight in narrative without preventing him from delving deeply.

"The Gospel according to Jesus Christ" from 1991, a novel about the life of Jesus, contains in its outspokenness memorable reflections on important issues. God and the Devil negotiate about evil. Jesus questions his role and challenges God.

A recent novel adds appreciably to Saramago's literary stature. It was published in 1995 and has the title "Blindness: a novel". Its omniscient narrator takes us on a horrific

journey through the interface created by individual human perceptions and the spiritual accretions of civilisation. Saramago's exuberant imagination, capriciousness and clear-sightedness find full expression in this irrationally engaging work. "Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see."

His most recent novel is "All the names", which is expected in a Swedish translation this autumn. It deals with a minor official in a population registration office of almost metaphysical dimensions. He becomes obsessed with one of the names and begins to track it down with a tragic conclusion.

Saramago's idiosyncratic development of his own resonant style of fiction gives him a high standing. For all his independence, Saramago invokes tradition in a way that in the current state of things can be described as radical. His oeuvre resembles a series of projects, with each one more or less disavowing the others but all involving a new attempt to come to grips with an elusory reality.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1998/press.html