

*Bullfights with Vovô*, by Zachary Ramos

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While searching for recent publications in children's literature, *Bullfights with Vovô* grabs our attention. Intended primarily to honor his Portuguese American grandfather, the author tells the story of a grandson's joy for attending his first bullfight with his *vovô*.

Games with bulls go as far back as 1500 AC, as seen in the beautiful Minoan frescoes, in Knossos, Crete. They are still practiced in Spain, Portugal, France, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, and Ecuador but have been banned in five countries. This popular community event is a topic of both of fascination and criticism. The criticism has to do with the violence against the animal: the way it is treated before the bullfight, to weaken it and anger it; the spilling of blood with *bandarilhas* and the sword; the panic and the confusion felt by the animal as it is taunted, hurt, and overwhelmed by being put in a threatening situation—where he is, of course, the victim. Bulls are uncastrated oxen.

Very much appreciated in the archipelago of the Azores, especially in Terceira Island, as well as in mainland Portugal, over the centuries bullfights have attracted crowds and “aficionados” who admire the confrontation between man and a very strong animal by using courage and skill. Adults, youngsters, and children from varied social class backgrounds attend these shows where horses, bulls, and people give their best performances.

In *Bullfights with Vovô* the child is, at the beginning, afraid of seeing the animal being hurt, but Vovô explains that this is a humane event. Bulls are not hurt anymore. In fact, the Portuguese bullfights give relevance to the interplay between the horseman (*cavaleiro*) and the bull, as public bullfights were started by the aristocracy in the mid-17th century. The *cavaleiro* aims to stick the *bandarilha* on the bull's back after a great show of skill on his part and the horse's. In the book, this is achieved by using Velcro on the tip of the spears and on the back of the bull, without leaving a single scratch on the animal's back, a practice pioneered in Southern California, and also used in Dundalk, Ontario, for the last 20 years.

Another highlight of a Portuguese bullfight is when the bull tacklers (*forçados*) confront the animal on foot. In 1836, during the reign of D. Maria II, a ban on the death of bulls in the arena was decreed and, to finish off the cavaleiro's *lide* (toil), the practice of literally taking the bulls by the horns was initiated. A group of about nine men taunts the bull with bare hands and lots of attitude, and then the front man charges the bull and they all wrestle it to a standstill, one grabbing the animal by the tail.

Their bravery, as well as each of the three parts of the bullfight, is shown in the 17 colorful and naïve illustrations done by Helia Borges de Sousa, each facing a page of text.

The child is delighted with the show. Indeed, the show is worth seeing if one can put aside one's feelings of empathy for the bull. It has all the beauty and color of a grand, aristocratic event: the exciting music, which regularly and purposefully intervenes; a whole cast of characters, which range from the horseman, dressed as an 18th-century noble, to the *toreador*, an artist who (on foot) delights

with his elegance and skill with the cape and the *bandarilhas* (not with his sword, reserved in Portugal to hang the cape from). The *forcados* are a stand-in for the everyday man, dressed in 19th-century clothing, and the helpers are in charge of picking up fallen objects and of clearing the grounds by driving the bull out of the arena with a group of cows (and not of bulls, as little Zachary perceived them to be).

Portugal is now considering the Velcro practice in bullfighting as pioneered by Azorean immigrants in North America to save a traditional and ancient art form, and then, perhaps, other modern little boys and girls will be able to attend them without hurting their urban sensibilities.

What strikes the reader of *Bullfights with Vovô* is the togetherness of two family members of different generations, cemented by sharing the discovery of a new and exciting activity. The cultural heritage of our ancestors is a value that any grandparent will try to transmit to his/her grandchild. In this book an ancient tradition—now modernized and blood free—is shared, and the grandchild will never forget it and the excitement it brought to his life.

*Bullfights with Vovô* was self-published by the author in 2020.