

Pedro Letria. *The Club*. (N.P. [Edition One Books], 2012).

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When I was growing up “the club” was the Clube Juventude Lusitana, then (and now) at 10 Chase Street, in Valley Falls (Cumberland), Rhode Island. Started in the early 1920s, its founders, I suspect, thought of themselves as the Portuguese youth in exile from the Beira Alta district of continental Portugal. These pioneers grew old, their children grew old, and newcomers joined successions of “old-timers” to carry out the business of the “clube,” unto this day. Much like Mr. Nunes, our next-door neighbor—all spiffed-out in suit, tie, folded handkerchief adorning his suit coat pocket, and his best (maybe only) felt hat—set out not for church but for the “clube” and the society of their fellow communicants.

The Clube Juventude Lusitana of Valley Falls is not represented among the photographs in Pedro Letria’s engaging and inviting book *The Club*, but the Portuguese Social Club in Pawtucket is. In fact, this nearby club, whose band my uncle Temudo directed in the 1930s and 40s, is generously represented. But the metonymy of the individual photographs—pictures taken in the Rebelo Funeral Home on North Broadway, East Providence suggest all other Portuguese mortuaries, just as one Portuguese grocery store suggests the many—is reflected in the open-ended suggestibility of these pho-

tographs, taken *in situ*, as parts of the whole of the Portuguese and Portuguese-American experience in Southeastern New England, if not elsewhere in the U. S. as well.

*The Club*, which started out as the author's master's thesis at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), is comprised of three texts, or, if you will, three not entirely discrete layers. These layers are (1) the beautifully presented photographs, (2) the captions, which are sometimes straightforward texts that offer useful identifications of individuals and places but more often than not reveal something of what the author-photographer freely associates with the photograph (either an interpretation or some anecdotal material), and (3) the running underlying text (at the bottom of the page) in which the book's maker ruminates about the photographer's art and the textual art he is drawn too. This third level allows the photographer-author to search through previous writings, theoretical and autobiographical, in his quest for what will suffice—references to Roland Barthes, Stieglitz (at one remove), Walker Evans, Gilles Peress, and Morris Dickstein come into play—as to the meaning of his hybrid art and the point of his personal dedication to it. Something of the impulse behind the third layer of this investigation in search of meaning is evident in the following quotation: "Writing about Robert Rauschenberg's layering of photographic imagery in *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, Craig Owens posits that a broad allegorical discourse underlies any attempt to discuss the work. Namely, that in an 'allegorical structure, one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent or chaotic their relation may be' and that the allegorist 'does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter.'"

By and large, however, the reader is thankful, less for the problematizing of texts and the theorizing over possible resolutions of personal conflicts—photographic or textual—than for the author's commentaries on the individual photographs. For instance, his observation regarding the barman's careful arrangement of liquor bottles placed in front of the back mirror no bar can do without. He sees it as a sign that the bartender runs an orderly place, which is appreciated by his customers and something that goes a long way toward enabling them to tolerate his small cash register thefts. Of course,

there are other possible explanations for the man's penchant for this kind of order. One might say that placing the bottles of liquor in alphabetical order by brand name helped the man to locate the liquor asked for without much fuss, much as seating students alphabetically (as once was the custom) and the use of a seating-chart helped teachers learn student names more quickly and efficiently.

Undoubtedly, some photographs will conjure up personal memories—women cooking those red meat-and-potatoes dinners run periodically to raise money, groups of men standing fully alert to a football match on television, a scruffy musician blowing away into his instrument pretty much for the love of it, the grocery store's orderly rack shelved with crockery, dishes, *tchotchkes*, and plastic chamber pots (two of them on the top shelf—clearly visible but knowingly set at the end of row as if they were an after-thought. In short, all the themes—birth, life, exile, recreation, food, religion, death, excretion, etc.—are, in one way or another, covered.

Because *The Club* tries to do at least three important things at once—photographs of reality, a ruminative personal text, and a more or less theoretical journey—it will appeal to individual readers for different reasons. I do not profess to have any special expertise in any of these areas, but their combination, and especially the manner of their presentation on three planes that at times barely touch one another, but it does strike me that this coffee-table sized book as a whole is rather unique.

Let me end with a personal anecdote that I was reminded of when I came upon the photograph of men playing cards. The game is *sueca*. And here is Letria's comment on what the photograph shows us—four pairs of hands, one set of them counting cards, a second set keeping score:

It might be understood from the meekness with which the hands belonging to the two gentlemen on the left rest on the table that they were the losers of the last round of *sueca*, and that the expediency displayed by the others may be synonymous with victorious good fortune, but given the normal distribution of players, which instructs that partners should sit opposite each other, nothing could be farther from the truth, and unless there are more discrete terms

of agreement, we are in the presence of genuine goodwill.

Maybe. But what I see it is the quiet before the storm, that inevitable moment when the game will break up in the midst of accusations when a player berates his partner with having played horribly, thereby blowing the game. I guess I'm just prejudiced, having witnessed too many friendly games of *sueca* played down in the finished half of the basement of my aunt and uncle's house, which always ended in an accusatory hissy fit, in which, on one occasion, one player on the losing team screaming at his partner that he did not believe that they had been fathered by the same person. Genuine goodwill in a game of *sueca*? In "a pig's eye," as we used to say in The Valley of my youth.