

Piñon, Nélida. *A Doce Canção de Caetana*. Rio de Janeiro, Guanabara, 1987. 353 páginas.

Let us not burden Piñon's ineffable new novel with the fact that it is her eleventh nor with a reaffirmation of her absolute unique place among Brazilian contemporary writers. Throughout her career, from the earlier mystical and philosophical tendencies (e. g. *Guia-Mapa de Gabriel Arcanjo, Madeira Feita Cruz*) to the epic (e. g. *O Fundador*) to the lyrical eroticism of which *A Casa da Paixão* is the best example, her work reveals a coherent and original vision: the role of the writer in society and the role of literature as it tries to break away from its canons. In the family saga of the semi-autobiographical novel *A República dos Sonhos* (1984), the author maintains her themes but moves away from what was characteristically her innovative style to a more "traditional" form of writing like social realism.

It is most appropriate that her last novel, *A Doce Canção de Caetana* should follow the same style, since it is set in the 70s, the period of military dictatorship in Brazil, of which Piñon was an outspoken critic. This is a rare case of a novel that echoes the political and social events without being journalistic, and that explores deeply the national character, while avoiding parochialism. Furthermore, it details the fragility of modern human relationships with a comic touch that nears the hilarious.

The novel tells the pathetic love story between two aging people set in a typical small town in Brazil, Trindade. Polidoro is an old man, a scion of the wealthiest landowners in the region, who had a great, unforgettable love affair with Caetana, an aspiring circus artist. She leaves the town to fulfill her dreams of becoming a great artist and singing in the great house of art in Brazil—the Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro. Twenty years later, frustrated in her aspirations and devoid of any illusions after "eating the gust of the road," Caetana announces her return

to Trindade in order to realize her dream of “singing” an opera at the local theater. Her return stirs pent-up emotions in everybody in town: first and foremost, Polidoro, who has remained loyal, if not faithful, to Caetana and offers her his love, nourished by twenty years of devotion; second, two women, whose lives were affected by Caetana and who do not receive this news so gladly. Polidoro’s wife, still jealous and fearful of her husband’s folly prepares to engage the bourgeoisie to oppose Caetana’s presence in the town; Polidoro’s present lover and an old friend (a possible lover) of Caetana feels ambivalent about her return but eventually joins in the festive mood that takes over the town.

The central plot of this novel is the geriatric courtship of this aging and stubborn “artista manqué” obsessed by a final opera performance, by an elderly suitor persistent in his romantic commitment, and impatient and clumsy in his sexual longings. The love story is told amidst the gossip, the buzz of community judgment, and the dreams, hopes and fears raised by the galvanizing presence of this picaresque circus performer. The major themes that permeate the narrative are awareness of death, the torments of memory and the inexorability of old age. The issues of the military dictatorship like repression and torture, and Brazilian hopes in World Cup Soccer, play in the background, but nobody seems to care about politics. However, Piñon surrounds her characters’ indifference with her own observations of class prejudices, corruption of official, and the decline of an old rusting traditional society. There is a flaubertian touch in the irony, in the unsparing detail of a certain mediocrity of mind and soul – in the pathetic description of Polidoro who becomes a male version of Mme. Bovary. *A Doce Canção de Caetana* aims to deal with desire and mortality and fortunately doesn’t fall into libido and self-deceit. Nélida Piñon is a writer with the knowledge and skill of her craft—the Word. She certainly knows how to envision this craft beyond the purely verbal perspective in order to reach poetic heights in momentous passages of her novel.

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