

HATOUM, Milton. *Dois irmãos*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000. 266 p.

Milton Hatoum's *Dois irmãos* is full of surprises. Tersely lyric, often explosive, this second novel by the forty-eight-year-old Amazonian author is a self-consciously biblical drama set in the middle of the great port of Manaus which became a magnet for commerce and immigration during the golden decades of the Rubber Boom (1860-1910). The story of twin brothers – Omar and Yaqub – who battle for the love of the mother who consistently favors one over the other, *Dois irmãos* consciously evokes the Old Testament story of Cain and Abel, with the important difference that it is far less easy to say who is who in the case of the novel. Hatoum's book also echoes the great nineteenth-century Brazilian writer Machado de Assis and his own "two brothers" story of Esaú and Jacó.¹ At the same time, it never ceases to be a distinctly Amazonian version of a drama that is at once universal and peculiarly Brazilian.

Dois irmãos is not exactly what most non-Amazonian readers would expect from a book by an Amazonian writer about the Amazon. And this challenge to expectations is ultimately the novel's greatest strength. The rain forest which has become a near-synonym for Amazonia in many corners of today's world is present in the novel, but it remains only one part of a larger entity which the great turn-of-the century Brazilian essayist Euclides da Cunha described as existing "on the margins of history."² The portrait of a city built over the confluence of two great rivers (the Rio Negro and the Solimões, which flow together into the Amazon), the book is full of competing eddies and constantly shifting surface reflections. The story of Manaus,

it also chronicles the ongoing evolution of a Brazil full of dangerous undertows and half-realized confluences.

The Amazon of *Dois irmãos* is composed of startling, often ironic, combinations that link past and present, city and interior. The fish vendor who was a backwoods tracker before a debilitating injury briefly reclaims his former self in the big city when he hunts down the son who attempts to flee his mother. The street on which the twins' parents establish their stately home is called the Rua dos Barés – a barbed reference to a group of Indians snuffed out by the Portuguese.

On the most immediate level, *Two brothers* tells the story of the family constituted by two young Lebanese immigrants who arrive in Amazonia at the beginning of the century. It is the story of Manaus after the end of the Rubber Boom and before the fateful opening of the Amazon to colonization, roads, and development accompanied by wide-scale deforestation in the 1960s and 1970s. The broader backdrop is Brazil before the military coup of 1964 in which the mantra of progress would become an all too frequent pretext for repression.

The family in question is at once absorbed and resists absorption into the life of the region and the nation. The father, Halim, is profoundly disappointed in the future represented by his children. The mother, Zana – a name that suggests an uneasy cross between the verbs “to heal” (*sanar*) and “to anger” (*zangar*) – displays a lopsided love that divides and eventually devours her sons. The twins' growing hatred of each other guarantees that they, like their younger sister, Rânia, will remain prisoners of unrealized desires. The Indian servant Domingas, who cannot forget the river where she spent her childhood, is another kind of prisoner, unable to escape her place at the bottom of an unjust social and economic hierarchy. Only her illegitimate son, Nael, who tries to piece together the identity of his father, gives any sign that he may break out of the confines of his life.

Beautifully drawn and often profoundly surprising, the characters are complex, often complicated, persons who are both particular physical beings and embodiments of something

larger than themselves. It is hard not to see the twins, Yaqub and Omar (a twisted spelling of "*amor*", as well as a sea – *o mar* – of contradictions) as the calculating head and the unthinking body of a fragmented, forever incomplete Brazil. It is also difficult not to see their sister Rânia as a living warning of what happens to those unable or unwilling to break out of the suffocating circle of the family.

Above all, it is impossible not to recognize the narrator – son of the Indian servant and one of the twins (but which one?!) as the embodiment of an Amazon that seeks to assert its independence. Although Nael ekes out a living in the back rooms of the family house, he becomes its true, if distinctly rueful, heir when he attempts to open the family's history to the world. It is also he who unites the head and the body – at least in theory – since the reader gets little sense of him as an actual corporal entity. While the reader can easily visualize Rânia's almond-shaped eyes, Zana's perennially smooth face, and Halim's muscular frame, the narrator – whose name is only spoken in the book's last pages – is far more amorphous than the personages whom the reader meets through him.

What one does get from Nael throughout the novel is a welter of sensations that recreate a city full of smells (diesel fuel, oxen entrails, stale bouquets and flowering jasmine), of sounds (the cries of vendors, the bleating of a soon-to-be-butchered sheep, the steady heartbeat of boat motors), and tastes (of ripe tropical fruit, of Arab sweets, of blood) as well as an array of sights. All of these bring to life a Manaus far more compelling than picture postcards of the Opera House which has become an all-too-familiar easy icon for its lost, if splendid past. The book delves into what appears to most present-day tourists as an off-putting tree-less collection of factories, hotels, and garish import shops to reveal the tangled mix of cultures that have thrived in its muddy back streets and broad high-ways of freshly poured concrete.

More than an alternative vision to that of the Amazon Rain Forest which has inspired a hundred Discovery Channel specials, *Dois irmãos* is an important affirmation of the long-standing interface between human beings and nature in Ama-

zonias. More openly political than Milton Hatoum's earlier *Relato de um certo Oriente*, *Dois irmãos* is a study in destruction that finds hope in the marginal and long marginalized.³ Less forgiving and less openly lyrical than its predecessor, this second novel draws its power from the recognition of a failure which demands acknowledgment and pardon. As such, it is the hard-eyed portrait not just of a family, but of a nation in which the Amazon has long remained a mute, if vast, appendage.

"All very interesting", the reader may say. "But where is the rain forest in this story of a city?"

The book is quick to answer.

"At the edge of the urban jungle." "In the tangled back yards." "In the memories of stevedores and shopkeepers and housemaids." "Beneath a dense canopy of silence through which poke the insistent tendrils and the pointed sticks of words."

Candace Slater

University of California, Berkeley

NOTES

¹ The novel in question is Machado's *Esau e Jacó*, first published in 1904. A more recent, critical edition is Machado de Assis, *Esau e Jacó*, ed. with notes by Adriano da Gama Kury, (Coleção dos autores célebres da Literatura Brasileira, 8) (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Garnier, 1988).

² Euclides da Cunha, *À margem da História*, ed. Rolando Morel Pinto (São Paulo: Cultrix, 1975).

³ *Relato de um certo Oriente* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989) appears in English translation as *The tree of the seventh Heaven*, trans. Ellen Watson (New York: Atheneum, 1994).