

Review of *How to Clean a Fish and Other Adventures in Portugal*

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Cabral, Esmeralda. (2023). *How to Clean a Fish and Other Adventures in Portugal*. University of Alberta Press, 301 pp. ISBN 9781772126556.

As the title suggests, *How to Clean a Fish and Other Adventures in Portugal* by Esmeralda Cabral is, at its simplest level, a sort of travelogue about the author's experiences in Portugal with a focus on cooking seafood. A resident of Canada but also an emigrant from the island of São Miguel in the Azores, she lived with her husband and daughter in Costa Caparica, a coastal town just south of Lisbon, from January through the beginning of the summer in 2014.

Unlike many Portuguese emigrants, she spent time as a child in both continental Portugal as well as the Azores, giving her a sense of identity as "Portuguese" rather than as being specifically from Lisboa or from her home island of São Miguel. This perspective serves her well in a place that feels both very familiar to her, but where she is merely a "bystander and observer." The dichotomy of being both Canadian as well as Portuguese is a constant source of reflection about her identity and the nature of emigration. However, given her holistic perspective of being "Portuguese," we miss out on the perspective of living in Lisboa as an islander. Ultimately, despite the book's easy-going title, we are asked to consider the more somber theme of the loss experienced by emigrants and particularly the loss of those dearest to us.

As part of her experiences in Portugal, the author takes us through the main neighborhoods of Lisboa as well as on a side trip to the ruins at Conimbriga and Portugal's northern Douro region. When eating out, the family soon discovers that everything begins late in Portugal. Fortunately, there is no shortage of *pasteis de nata* and espresso to satisfy their appetite. And, the family's struggles dealing with government bureaucracy and the indifference to customer service will be all-too-familiar to travelers. But this book is not a travel guide. Among other topics, we sense the weight of the author's responsibility to serve as translator for her English-speaking husband and daughter as well as their initial social isolation in a Portuguese-speaking world. We also become aware of the importance of skin color and the seeming cultural preference for whiteness.

The author's goal of learning to clean fish might initially strike us as relatively mundane and unworthy of the book's subtitle. But fish are without a doubt an integral part of Portuguese life and, here, provide the author with an important framework for the book's narrative. Accustomed to buying filets of fish in hygienically sealed containers, the author is initially uncomfortable with the variety of fresh fish staring at her as she strolls through the commotion of the market. She is further intimidated by the prospect of cleaning the fish and properly cooking it. We then learn that cleaning fish is a skill that the author never learned from her mother despite having watched her do it on a regular basis. As the author has matured, she recognizes the gradual process of becoming more and more like her

mother. Perhaps cleaning fish, beyond its practical benefits, is a way to accept and embrace this evolution.

As such, it seems only natural that the book begins with a discussion about the Portuguese word *saudade*. For the uninitiated, this is a word that is essential to the Portuguese language and cultural tradition. It expresses a great melancholy and conveys a particular sadness, feeling of solitude and fatalism. As early as the 1500s, Gaspar Frutuoso penned the first major chronicles of the Azores and entitled them “Saudades da Terra.” Like countless others before her, Esmeralda Cabral recognizes that there is no single English word that can successfully capture its meaning. Instead, she attempts to describe its essence and contours. It seems clear that *saudade* is both powerful and utilitarian – the word has a wide range of nuances from the relatively mundane sensation of missing sardines to the profound feeling of grief for the loss of loved ones. And, when sensing that her family would soon be ending their stay in Portugal, the author even gives the word an added dimension – “anticipatory *saudade*... nostalgia even before absence, sadness even before loss.” Nevertheless, it is *saudades* of the past that fill the book’s narrative.

Coupled with *saudades* is the *fado* – the “bluesy tunes sung by solo singers accompanied by the Portuguese guitar.” Believed to have been started in the mid-19th century in Lisbon, these haunting songs were popularized in the 20th century by the Queen of Fado - Amalia Rodrigues. *Fado* is derived from the Latin *fatum* (“fate”, “death”) and songs are typically about love, loss and fate. For emigrants, these songs of anguish encapsulate the heartache of *saudades* for loved ones who have died as well for family left behind.

The author’s departure from São Miguel when she was 7 years old left powerful memories of arriving in Canada, seeing snow for the first time and suffering through cold weather. Learning a new language and attempting to fit into the Canadian culture are the stuff of the prototypical immigrant who came to the U.S. or Canada at a young age. So were her struggles to find an identity. Even though her parents always talked about going back to São Miguel, she considered herself Canadian and had no desire to return to Portugal, even for just a visit. Later she would feel like the “hyphen between Portuguese and Canadian” - when in Canada, she felt Portuguese and when in Portugal, she felt Canadian. The author justifiably wonders if her personal sense of attachment and loss are directly linked to her family’s experiences as emigrants.

She ultimately concludes that the identities of young emigrants are tied to where they were born and the care-free environments where they were raised before they were required to assume adult responsibilities such as translating for their parents in their adopted countries. Now traveling in Portugal, the smells and tastes trigger a “whirl of memories and a depth of *saudades*.” Hearing her first language all around her fills her heart and reinforces her sense of identity. She is clearly from this place. It is probably not giving too much away by revealing that the author eventually succeeds in learning to clean fish and becomes proficient at cooking it. A short group of recipes is even included at the end of the book for those inclined to try them. But one need not be interested in cooking to appreciate this immensely readable book. Anyone who has spent an extended period of time in Portugal will surely relate to the author’s experiences, both positive and negative. And, for those of us who have a similar background as young emigrants to the U.S. or Canada, this book is a virtual gem. Not only do we appreciate the author’s struggles to establish an identity, we share in her sense of *saudades* for those aspects of our lives that are lost and permanently closed to us.