

# Book Reviews

**All the Names.** JOSÉ SARAMAGO (Margaret Jull Costa., trans.) New York: Harcourt Inc, 1997. 238 p. ISBN 0-15-601059-3.

Blending absurdist myth with the humdrum details of office politics, Nobel-prize winning author José Saramago's novel *All the Names* tells the heroic tale of a bureaucratic drone. Saramago creates a world rife with petty functionaries, arcane laws and suspicious neighbours, yet *All the Names* is ultimately an uplifting read.

The novel is set in the Central Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths in an unnamed country, presumably Saramago's native Portugal. The Registry is a forbidding place devoted entirely to managing the factual details of the citizenry's existence. Its holdings are divided between the archives, and card indexes of the dead and those of the living. When a citizen dies, his or her records are moved to the dead zone, which has been growing for centuries. Indeed, every few years the enormous rear wall of the Registry must be ripped down and rebuilt a few yards further back to accommodate the ever-increasing number of dead files. This pressing need for space, and the Registry's swift, if financially unsound solution to the problem, should resonate with many in the archival field. Not only are the holdings of the Central Registry vast and creeping ever outward, but they are woefully neglected and extremely disorganized. So confusing are the files that a genealogist loses his way in the "catacombs of the archives of the dead" and is given up for lost. He is found a week later, thirsty and delusional, having survived by eating the old documents that surround him (p. 5).

The space and organizational problems of the Registry are worsened by the rigid and implacable hierarchy that governs the institution. All power ultimately resides with the Registrar, an imposing figure who reigns over his poor clerks and deputies with a breathtaking superciliousness. His voice when giving out orders holds "authoritarian indifference, that is, a power so sure of itself that it not only completely ignored the person it was speaking

to, not even looking at him, but also made absolutely clear that it would not subsequently lower itself to ascertain that the order had been carried out” (p. 8).

The novel’s protagonist, Senhor José, is the lowest pawn in the Registry’s ruthless pecking order. He is a common file clerk doing his best to survive in his workplace’s poisonous atmosphere. Senhor José has no friends in the mistrustful world of the Central Registry. Indeed, he is consistently addressed in tones of “disdain, irony, irritation or condescension” (p. 8). When not oppressed by his co-workers or his job, Senhor José lives a quiet life without wife, friends, or family. His isolated existence ends one day when he accidentally brings the record of a thirty-six-year-old woman home with him. The inadvertent disruption of the rules of the Registry fires Senhor José’s imagination, and the novel’s plot, as he becomes obsessed with finding this “unknown woman.”

In many ways, Saramago’s depiction of the Registry fits into the pattern outlined by Arlene Schmuland’s 1999 study of the archival image in fiction, in which she examined the portrayal of archives or archivists in 124 novels. Distressingly, but perhaps predictably, Schmuland’s survey reveals that fictional archivists are generally depicted as “... middle-aged, visually impaired [people] in badly chosen clothing with almost no social life.”<sup>1</sup> Senhor José certainly fits this description; he is meek, drab, middle-aged, and unattractive. Senhor José’s personal grooming is beyond the pale, even by literary archivist standards. His one good set of clothes, “were transformed into pure filth, exuding a sour smell mingled with a whiff of mould, there was even mildew growing in the cuffs of his pants” (p. 121).

Not only are Senhor José’s sartorial blunders a result of his profession, but his loneliness stems partly from his job. Schmuland recognizes this isolation as another characteristic of archivists in fiction: “A sense of loss, an ivory-tower remoteness that prevents the person from experiencing life to the fullest.”<sup>2</sup> Senhor José’s absorption in the past has stopped him from functioning in the present. His entire identity is based on the work that he does, and because he toils in such an unhealthy atmosphere, he does not value himself.

Saramago cleaves to another literary pattern identified by Schmuland: he associates the Registry with death. Schmuland spotted this trend in other fiction as well, noting that: “authors frequently use burial-related phrases to describe archives and the use of archives. The popular perception of records as dirty and musty and archival repositories as being below ground may contribute to this image. The fact that archives frequently contain the records of people, companies and organizations long gone also provides some justification

1 Arlene Schmuland, “The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography,” *The American Archivist* 62 (Spring 1999), p. 36.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

for the use of death-related phrases and images.”<sup>3</sup> Saramago twins the building of the Central Registry with the main office of the city’s General Cemetery. Indeed, the General Cemetery has the same problems with the dead as the Central Registry: the dearly departed take up too much room, and they never stop coming. The General Cemetery has long since overflowed its walls, and is now eating into the land of the living that surrounds it. Senhor José goes to the General Cemetery during his quest to locate the unknown woman. Here he must contend with the same bureaucratic entanglements to which supplicants to the Central Registry are subject, only this time the proceedings are supervised by a Keeper, rather than a Registrar. Saramago draws a clear parallel between tracking vital statistics and interring the dead.

Saramago’s long, often tortuous, sentences demand a great deal of concentration from the reader. When one gives into the rhythm of the writing, without searching for that elusive paragraph break or dialogue demarcation, the novel’s sly sense of humour takes on a force of its own. This force propels the reader to a surprising conclusion. Despite Saramago’s fidelity to the patterns Schmuland identified in her survey, he breaks free of the negative portrayal of archivists and archives in some significant ways.

Many of the reviews of *All the Names* refer to its “Kafkaesque” qualities. The dark, arbitrary, and labyrinthine nature of the bureaucracy is reminiscent of Kafka’s *The Trial*, and yet this is a novel of hope and possibility. Senhor José’s obsession with the unknown woman connects him with other people, and gives him more agency than he realizes. Ultimately it does not really matter whether Senhor José’s quest is successful: the very act of looking for the woman alters his life forever.

At the end of the novel Senhor José continues to be a poorly dressed and poorly socialized man, but he is no longer terrified of life or isolated from the world. Indeed, in his determination to understand the unknown woman he has committed breathtaking acts of bravery and formed new, if eccentric, friendships. By questioning bureaucracy and pursuing relationships beyond the statistics he files every day, Senhor José discovers his own humanity. What’s more, he significantly alters the way the Registry is run and single-handedly undoes hundreds of years of stifling bureaucratic lethargy. He makes the imposing building more user-friendly and creates, in effect, an “accessible archives.” At the end of the novel the Central Registry is not a repository of death, but through a flagrant violation of the Registry’s rules, it becomes the site of rebirth and life. Thus Saramago has done what seems nearly impossible after reading Schmuland’s survey of the archival image in fiction: he has created an archivist hero.

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3 Ibid., p. 44.