

The Story Behind

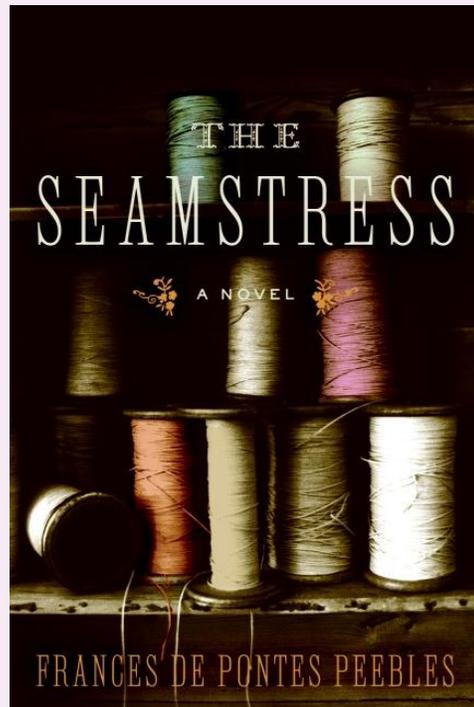
The Seamstress

By Frances de Pontes Peebles

Good fiction, as John Gardener said, is a “vivid and continuous dream,” born in a writer’s imagination and made relevant to others. By way of fiction, reader and writer are joined in the same dream.

In 2001, I dreamt of cangaceiros. The bandits weren’t new to me. As a child, an uncle gave me a cangaceiro rag doll complete with leather holster and cloth gun. Cangaceiros were part of an earlier era; they don’t exist in modern-day Brazil. By the mid-1940’s, most cangaceiros had been killed or captured. A small number had surrendered to police. Today, most ex-cangaceiros, their victims, and the police that chased them are dead. Most living Brazilians-young and old-can’t name the once famous police officers that captured the last of the scrubland bandits. But nearly all Brazilians can recall the names of at least one cangaceiro. They have become popular folk heroes, especially in Northeastern Brazil. Older people believe the cangaceiros were vicious killers; younger ones see them as Robin Hood figures, and even revolutionaries. From the 1960’s until the present day, the men of the cangaço (or bandit culture) were the subjects of biographies, films, and popular folk ballads. At craft fairs in the Northeast, tourists can buy colorful clay figurines of Lampião and Maria Bonita, the most famous cangaceiro couple. At a local restaurant in my hometown of Recife, waiters wear bandit uniforms-half-moon hats, fake cartridge belts, leather sandals called alpercatas. Cangaceiros have become kitsch.

So I wasn’t surprised when, after a visit to this Recife restaurant in 2001, I dreamt of cangaceiros. In my dream, I’d woken up in my family’s modern, fourth floor apartment, and found a group of cangaceiros standing around my bed. They weren’t the cheerful, harmless waiters I’d encountered earlier in the day. The men in my dream were the real things. Their clothes were faded and stained. They carried knives tucked into their belts. They gave off a terrible smell. My dream cangaceiros didn’t speak; they stared down at me in bed and waited, as if I owed them something. When I woke up, I walked around my room, opened my closet, peeked inside my bathroom. What was I looking for? I wasn’t sure, and felt stupid for searching. It was early morning and the soldiers in the military base next door to our building were beginning their daily exercises. There was a whistle and shouts of “Yes, Sir!” I heard boots hitting concrete. I couldn’t go back to sleep.



I was born in Northeastern Brazil. All of my ancestors on my mother's side are from Pernambuco and Paraíba, from the coast and the countryside. In the early 1980's, when I was a toddler, my nuclear family left Brazil. I grew up in Miami but kept close ties to Pernambuco. My family still owned a small farm in Taquaritinga do Norte, and my sister and I returned to Brazil during summer vacations. We stayed in my grandmother Emília's house. There, I spent a lot of time with my great-aunts Maria Augusta and Luzia. They were both born around 1911 and had grown up in rural Brazil. In their youth they'd been seamstresses, until they'd moved to the coast. As a girl, my grandmother Emília had married my grandfather-a wealthy man named Edgar-who took her to Recife. She'd insisted on bringing her sisters with her. I am very close to my great-aunts. As a child, I loved their stories of growing up in rural Brazil. As an adult, I understand the hopeless situation of older, unmarried girls in the countryside and wondered what would have happened to my great-aunts if they hadn't moved to the city.

In 1998, while I was a student at the University of Texas at Austin, I received funding to return to Brazil for two summers to complete an Honors Thesis. This project became a photo-documentary about rural Brazil. I returned to my family's farm in Taquaritinga do Norte and photographed the town's residents. An old man named Dr. Gilberto-a retired physician turned goat breeder-told me stories about Antônio Silvino, an infamous cangaceiro from the early 1900's. Antônio Silvino survived in the scrubland around Taquaritinga for twenty years, robbing and killing those he disliked and helping those he respected. When he was in his forties, he sustained a bullet wound in his shoulder and police captured him. He remained in a Recife prison until he was an old man. When he was set free, he renounced the cangaço.

I asked other elderly Taquaritinga residents about the cangaceiro Antônio Silvino. Some said he was a light-skinned giant: blonde, green-eyed, and very tall. Others said he was short and dark like a Cariri Indian. I heard exaggerated tales about Antônio Silvino: once he made a disrespectful old woman hug a cactus, another time he gave a box of gold coins to a starving child. I began to read about other, even more famous cangaceiros that came after Antônio Silvino. I also learned how the last cangaceiros were exterminated in the 1940's. Brazil's revolutionary president, Getúlio Vargas, considered cangaceiros to be small but powerful obstructions to his plans for modernization.

I wanted to know more about the female bandits in the cangaço, but information was hard to find. Only one woman-the famous bandit-bride named Maria Bonita (Mary the Beautiful)-was truly studied. This lack of information made me think of my grandmother Emília and my great-aunts Maria Augusta and Luzia. They'd lived in the countryside when cangaceiros were prevalent. They were the kind of girls that could have been kidnapped and forced to join the cangaço. They'd escaped this fate, but what if they hadn't?

That question was a source of inspiration for my novel.