

# A Pandemic Novel for Now and Forever: José Saramago's *Blindness*

REVIEWED BY FAKRUL ALAM

Translated by Giovanni Pontiero. ISBN: 9780099573586. Vintage Publishers, 1997 (translation), originally published in 1995

Looking for exceptional reading a month after the coronavirus pandemic set in, I took up the Portuguese writer José Saramago's 1995 novel *Blindness*, reckoning that a Nobel Prize winner's work would be well worth spending time on in these quarantine days. Giovanni Pontiero's superb translation of this brilliantly plotted and paced narrative about a pandemic blinding people rapidly in a modern city gripped me instantly.

The opening paragraphs of *Blindness* are innocuous enough. We are at an intersection where as a traffic light switches from amber to green, a car driver finds himself unable to move. He (all characters in the novel are unnamed) explains frantically to the irate drivers who berate him, "I am blind!" Soon he is weeping and crying out loud, "I see everything white." A man, apparently a good Samaritan, volunteers to drive him home. They reach his flat, where his wife takes charge and decides to consult an eye specialist. But the good Samaritan turns out to be a car thief; the car keys are nowhere to be found; the car is not where it is supposed to be. The blind husband and his caring wife thus must go to their ophthalmologist in her car. As soon as the eye specialist examines the man, he concludes that this kind of blindness "defies explanation." He tells his patient to go home, assuring him that he will be contacted as soon as he finds a remedy as well as an explanation for the disease. By the next chapter, the car thief, the other patients in the surgery, and the ophthalmologist have all been infected by the white blindness!

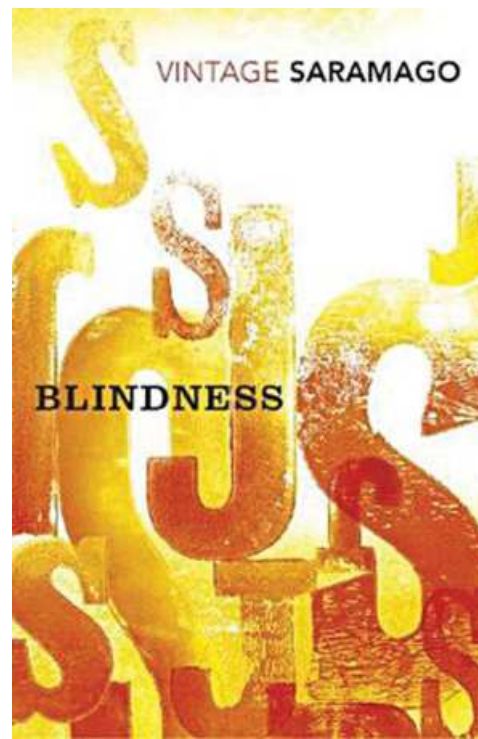
In succeeding chapters, readers find out that the blindness is viral. Totally uncontrollable, it disrupts everyone's life. But because there never has been an epidemic of the kind anywhere, there is no treatment for it. By the next chapter (the chapters are not numbered in a narrative that is strangely familiar and yet like no other novel I have come across), we realize that the contagion is archetypal, the novel allegorical, and Saramago a writer with an uncanny ability to evoke a world that is timeless in its dimensions. Reading *Blindness* in these

pandemic days, I kept marveling continually—how could Saramago come up with a book so unreal and yet so capable of evoking feelings and depicting situations that are not unlike the ones we are experiencing now?

The white blindness pandemic, for instance, is "highly contagious" and threatens to become a "national catastrophe." Patients infected, including the doctor himself, find out that people in charge of public health treat them and other patients initially with "half indifference and half malice," suspecting them of exaggerating and even feigning symptoms. Eventually, the Minister of Health himself addresses them and assures them of "prompt action"; of course, nothing of that sort will be the case.

Indeed, only tentative and not well thought out steps are taken to deal with the emergency. People exhibiting symptoms of white blindness are "rounded up" and "isolated"; they are then put in "quarantine" for the time being. The narrator explains that the procedure being followed is from "an ancient practice...inherited from the time of cholera and yellow fever." A part of what is a mental hospital is hurriedly set aside for the purpose. The doctor and his wife (who declares that she too is blind though she isn't), the first man stricken, the blind thief and the patients in the surgery are all taken in. Quickly, all the spaces set aside are occupied by others. Rules are promulgated for the patients in bureaucratized form and diction. The government keeps issuing such rules and rethinking its strategies, urging social distancing and voluntary confinement while increasing the number of places and spaces where the infected could be contained.

But despite the Minister's assurance and the show of efficiency, the conditions of the inmates continue to be totally miserable. Not only is there a crook amidst them in the car thief, there are thugs and even rapists at loose among the new blind arrivals who start abusing the first group of blind internees. Food supplies prove to be a major problem as well as defecating, cleaning up excreta and dealing with obnoxious smells. The inmates,



all products of a culture nurtured by the enlightenment, initially believe the blindness as "so abnormal, so alien to scientific knowledge that it cannot last forever." Unfortunately, science fails to come up with solutions to the collective predicament and things get from bad to worse.

The inmates eventually realize they face an existential threat—at the rate things are going and in unending quarantine, they are bound to lose their grip on reality. They realize too that they are being policed brutally and seem destined to be miserable as well as hungry. The medical assistance promised does not materialize; cries of agony fill the complex's spaces. The blind thief becomes a fatality; the other inmates manage to bury him with great difficulty. There are more and more deaths. Burial is a problem because of lack of volunteers to deal with the infected bodies. Fear, terror and anxiety grip all minds. Was "the white blindness...some spiritual

malaise"? But no explanations suffice and theology is soon cast aside. The doctor's wife explains what theology stereotypes: "we are all guilty and innocent!"

Inexplicably, the doctor's wife is the only one in quarantine not infected. That doesn't prevent her from being gang raped. Nevertheless, because of her eyesight she manages to shepherd the rest of her group and helps everyone to cope somehow with fast deteriorating conditions. She is, indeed, exemplary in the way she works selflessly and leads from the front. Compassion propels her even though she also proves capable of murdering her abusive blind rapist to break free of him forever. She is joined by a few others in getting rid of the thugs after some time. She realizes that "the blind are always at war." However, she also knows people of "good faith...are always to be found." Her husband has his moments of weakness, but he also utters an essential dictum for survival, "we must be logical." A few others in their group display love and help each other cope.

Eventually, the doctor's wife leads her group out of confinement, discovering that the soldiers guarding them have disappeared. By this time, "everyone is blind, the whole city, the entire country." A little later, we realize that "the epidemic of blindness has spared no one." In streets, things are utterly chaotic; fires rage and dead bodies are strewn everywhere. What she sees makes the doctor's wife wonder at "how fragile life is when it is abandoned." At one point, she weeps for all humanity. Heroically, she finds food for her group in the basement of a supermarket. She then leads the others to their apartment complex, their savior in every sense. The ragtag group members now have the opportunity to bathe and cleanse themselves—bodily and no doubt spiritually as well. And in the end, as mysteriously as it came, the blindness pandemic disappears from their world.

What makes the doctor's wife so special in the novel and why is she spared from blindness? In this parable of a novel, she evidently exists to lead the others to survival

but also to make us understand what true saviors are like. They emerge at moments of crises, Saramago suggests, because they have eyes their contemporaries "no longer possess." Or as she explains her role elsewhere as well, "I am simply the one who was born to see this horror, you can feel it, I both feel and see it."

José Saramago's superb novel impressed me infinitely also because of its insights, humane elements and relevance. The name of his next novel, I gather, is *Seeing* (2004). But *Blindness* alone tells me what a great writer he is. I am reminded by it of Frantz Kafka's allegorical fiction and of William Golding's novels. The novelist also reminds me of what Joseph Conrad identified as the task(s) of the truly great novelist: "by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, above all, to make you see.... If I succeed, you shall find there... encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand; and perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."

I must get hold of a copy of *Seeing* as soon as I can, but let me end this piece by making two other points. First, the translator, Giovanni Pontiero is marvelous—how did he succeed in making Saramago's labyrinthine sentences so readable? Second, Saramago's book bristles with ideas about the human condition. Don't get the impression from the following quotations that Saramago is anywhere didactic and intent on writing wise-seeming sentences merely to dazzle us, but here are a few examples of how we can think of our current predicament and ways out of all such crises in the light of his novel: "blindness is... to live in a world where all hope is gone"; "if we stay together we might manage to survive, if we separate we shall be swallowed up"; "If I ever regain my sight, I shall look carefully at the eyes of others, as if I were looking into their souls." Finally, from the penultimate paragraph: "I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see."

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## Long books to lose oneself in during lockdown: Margaret Forster's *Daphne du Maurier*

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On offer is a remarkably candid biography of Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989), the powerful story-teller of the twentieth century; highlighted by her singly recognised classic novel, *Rebecca* (1938). At the time, Daphne herself had her doubts about the book's success and wrote to her publisher Gollancz: "I've tried to get an atmosphere of suspense...the ending is a bit brief and a bit grim...It was certainly too grim to be a winner." Forster declares: "Daphne had been wrong; she, and Gollancz, had their winner." Alfred Hitchcock directed both film adaptations of *Jamaica Inn* in 1939 and *Rebecca* in 1940. *The Scapegoat* was

Memorably, Mary Willson replied: "that on the first day at 10 Downing Street she had felt like the second Mrs. de Winter in *Rebecca*." The epic masterpiece continues to resonate.

A Cornwall resident to the core, her long-rented home "Menabilly" was the inspiration for the house "Manderley" in her "Gothic romance" genre novel *Rebecca*. Decades of efforts to purchase Menabilly from the family owners, the Rashleigh never materialised. Rosalind Ashe in her delightfully imaginative book *Literary Houses: Ten Famous Houses in Fiction* (1982) elaborates: "The houses in these novels are more than mere stage sets: they are almost 'characters.' They linger in your mind long after the book is closed. They have become real." Manderley remains one formidable character in the history of literature. Forster writes: "Menabilly" was always more than a house to Daphne du Maurier. Its chief attraction for her was its secrecy, not its size or beauty or history." At Menabilly, Daphne redefined her sense of belonging. This is where her creativity peaked; in a self-created imaginary world of her own choosing. The swashbuckling star of the Hollywood silent screen, Douglas Fairbanks (1883-1939) raised a vital question: "When someone is writing, where do they live: in the real world or in a self-created elsewhere? Not bound by walls." Menabilly, her retreat and refuge, provided Daphne du Maurier her required sanctuary and succour for multiple "mid-life crises" that impacted her throughout her life.

Meticulously researched with ample access to private letters, papers and interviews, Forster discovers heretofore unknown layers of the dark-edged depths of her subject's personality. Open cooperation with immediate family members - particularly Daphne's two daughters, Tessa and Flavia and her son Kits; her extended family, close friends, her publishers Victor Gollancz Ltd, housekeeping staff and their respective descendants reveal insights into storms brewing under the popular writer's calm surface. Sensitively reading between the lines of information gleaned, Forster has successfully worked the state of inner conflict and intimate negotiations which Daphne tackled all her life - a complex inner labyrinth of sexual identity crisis. Her deft amalgam of a broad blend of sources makes for an immersive literary experience.

Her father, Gerald du Maurier a successful theatre producer in London, regarded Daphne as the son

he never had. He wrote a poem to her:

....  
My tender one -  
Who seems to live in Kingdoms all her own  
In realms of joy  
Where heroes young and old  
In climates hot and cold  
Do deeds of daring and much fame  
And she knows she could do the same  
If only she'd been born a boy.  
And sometimes in the silence of the night  
I wake and think perhaps my darling's right  
And that she should have been,  
And, if I'd had my way  
She would have been, a boy.

....  
And sometimes in the turmoil of the day  
I pause, and think my darling may  
Be one of those who will  
For good or ill  
Remain a girl for ever and be still  
A Girl.

Surely "It was a confused message for a girl to interpret" notes Forster. However, "In her own mind Daphne had no doubts: everything about being a boy appealed to her more...nobody realized quite how much Daphne genuinely hated being a girl." The middle sibling of three daughters, Daphne always wished she had been born a boy. She had a "Venetian" (du Maurier family code for lesbian) friendship with Ferdy, her teacher at her boarding school outside Paris. "The boy was out of the box and in love and, though she kept this hidden from all but Ferdy herself, she felt the greatest sense of relief imaginable" is the assessment of Forster. An adulthood friendship with Ellen Doubleday, the wife of her American publisher remained constant as two close friends. Only because of no reciprocity by Ellen - it remained a fantasy. A deep friendship evolved into a satisfying relationship with Gertrude Lawrence, the London stage actress who had been one of the young members of her late father's actress "stable" of lovers. Daphne maintained long commitments to all her friends; even when the "out of the box" aspect was over. Yet, there was never any "coming out of the closet."

In a fresh perspective, Forster weaves together a familial context whereby Daphne in her childhood exhibits little appreciation of her mother's obstacles yet admires her charming and flawed father.

Her relationship with her mother turns more harmonious following her marriage to Frederick "Boy" Browning in 1932. A World War II hero with a long-distinguished career in the British Army, he was in later years appointed Treasurer to the Duke of Edinburgh. They received the Duke of Edinburgh and the Queen at "Menabilly." Browning and Daphne had a troubled marriage; yet each in his and her own manner remained devoted to one another. She disliked living in Egypt on his army posting. She ventured eastwards only up to Greece on holiday. Westwards, USA was more acceptable; it was also related to her literary career. She loved her house and home but was not into domesticity.

Her two daughters were brought up to be "little seen and not much heard." Again, relationships eased with their growing up. The birth of her son Kits exulted Daphne to proclaim: "I have done it at last...a son!...For seven years I've waited to see "Mrs. Browning, a son" in *The Times*." Poignant and revealing are the following lines in the "Afterword" by Forster: "To her children she was a mother who seemed happy and content. The revelation that she was so tortured for much of her life has been a shock...Daphne du Maurier's children warned me, when I began this biography, that I would find their mother 'a chameleon... It may have tortured her to feel she was two distinct people but it also fuelled her creative powers: without 'No. 2', that boy in the box, there would have been nothing." Sometimes the dividing line between fantasy and reality remains dangerously thin. For Daphne du Maurier, "fear of reality" led her to retreat to "Menabilly," her venue for imaginative escape. Forster in her probing panoramic study of her celebrated subject, peels layers of personality traits and thus successfully releases Daphne du Maurier's emotional burden - "that boy in the box."

Significantly, Daphne du Maurier herself expressed her thoughts on biographies in a letter to her American friend Ellen Doubleday as early as in 1949. Daphne passed away forty years later in 1989. Daphne wrote: "What she detested were biographies that were 'stereo-typed, dull-as-ditchwater, over very fulsome praising.'" She realized the truth was often "hard for the family to take," but saw no point in biography otherwise. This sensitive and sympathetic biography by Margaret Forster would have been found acceptable if not welcomed by Daphne du Maurier.

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filmed in 1959 with Alec Guinness in the lead and Bette Davis in a supporting role. She had a long illustrious and prolific literary career resulting in 37 books; fiction, non-fiction, biographies and autobiographical writings, e.g. *Growing Pains: The Shaping of a Writer* (1977) and *The Rebecca Notebook and Other Memories* (1981). In 1969, she was bestowed the honour of Dame of the British Empire. Daphne du Maurier had great admiration for Harold Wilson. He was her "pin-up boy." Upon assuming the post of Prime Minister, she congratulated him and wrote to Mary Willson.