

MARGUERITE ITAMAR HARRISON

Lisboa, Adriana, *Symphony in White*. Translated from the Portuguese by Sarah Green. (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2010). 208pp. ISBN 978-0-89672-671-0

A BUTTERFLY IN FLIGHT OVER A DANGEROUS ABYSS

Symphony in White is a poetic, painterly narrative of a turbulent family saga, sculpted out of childhood secrets and adult silences. This award-winning novel—originally published in 2001—by contemporary Brazilian writer Adriana Lisboa captures a story of family involvement and of survival for its two main characters: two sisters separated and brought together again during the span of thirty-five years. The novel boldly confronts tough issues like incest, suicide, and murder, without losing its lyrical tenderness. Its recurring image of a butterfly in flight over a dangerous abyss captures this brilliant juxtaposition.

Lisboa presents a complex narrative that is multifaceted and tight, rich with references to art and music, including the painting by Whistler which lends the novel its title. The narrative, built of non-chronological vignettes and piecemeal memories, recounts Clarice and Maria Inês' seemingly idyllic childhood on a plantation, their coming of age in the city, and their return to the family homestead to reckon with illness, death, and painful recollections. Despite the whiteness suggested by the title, Lisboa's elegant writing evokes the rural setting with vivid descriptions:

“She takes the path that circles the pool and goes by some chayote vines. Clarice has been planting chayote. And cherry tomatoes, which are eaten whole and explode

METAMORPHOSES

festively with each bite. She then sees some eucalyptus tress that sprouted two or three decades earlier. Bromeliads multiply. Small plants grow and adult plants die. At the top of a bare hill there is a blackened trunk stump where once grew an enormous *ipê*.” (190).

This pastoral imagery clashes with the inherent violence of an archaic way of life.

The novel’s stylistic structure draws from shifting timeframes in past and present, as it constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs the childhoods, youths and adult lives of fiery and rebellious Maria Inês and discreet and amenable Clarice, through alternating, and intersecting, viewpoints. The novel unveils personal quests for inner wholeness and disclosure—and ultimately, for survival and redemption beyond the indelible powers of memory—by carving fragmented lives and unspoken secrets out of a seemingly bucolic existence. In a restrained way that includes the artful withholding and measured release of information, the narrative fragments slowly gather momentum to expose startling revelations, hints of which have already become part of the reader’s consciousness. In this manner, *Symphony in White* displays a mastery of contemporary storytelling, based on shifting timeframes and points of view that both interrupt and complement each other throughout the novel, slowly building a portrait of a family before, during and after a crisis. These characteristics, in turn, like a musical score, steer the plot from a disciplined, composed tempo into a crescendo of emotion.

Musician and writer of fiction and children’s literature, Adriana Lisboa has been internationally recognized as one of Latin America’s top writers of her generation. In fact, her most recent novel, *Rakushisha*, was a finalist for the 2008

Jabuti Prize, Brazil's equivalent of the Pulitzer. *Symphony in White*, which has also been published in Portugal, Italy, Mexico and France, received the prestigious José Saramago Prize in Portugal in 2003. This novel represents Lisboa's first major work in English translation.

The fine translation into English by Sarah Green benefits from an atmospheric fluidity and skillful seamlessness. I especially appreciate the inclusion of Portuguese words and expressions (culinary examples such as *pé de moleque* or *casadinhos*, for instance), accompanied by their explanatory translations into English. Compared to the original Portuguese, the English version of Lisboa's narrative, edited by Irene Vilar, is markedly streamlined and taut. Vilar, who is responsible for Texas Tech Press's cross-cultural *The Americas* series, to which this novel fittingly belongs, has molded *Symphony in White* into an efficient text readily accessible to an English-speaking audience.