

Memorial do Convento

by José Saramago · Language: EN

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Overview

Memorial do Convento, known in English as 'Baltasar and Blimunda,' is a historical novel by Nobel laureate José Saramago that intertwines the epic construction of the Mafra Convent in 18th-century Portugal with a fantastical love story and a pioneering attempt at flight. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of King João V's vow to build a magnificent convent if Queen Maria Ana of Austria bore him an heir. This royal decree sets in motion a monumental undertaking, demanding immense resources, labor, and human suffering from the Portuguese people, all meticulously documented by Saramago's critical eye.

Parallel to this grand historical project, Saramago introduces a more intimate, magical, and human story: the love between Baltasar Sete-Sóis, a one-handed soldier returning from war, and Blimunda Sete-Luas, a young woman with extraordinary clairvoyant abilities. They become collaborators with Father Bartolomeu Lourenço, a visionary priest obsessed with building a flying machine, the 'Passarola.' This contraption, powered by collected human wills, represents a counter-narrative of individual ingenuity and spiritual aspiration against the backdrop of institutional power and enforced labor. The novel is a profound meditation on power, faith, love, and the often-overlooked lives of ordinary people, critiquing the extravagance of monarchy and church while celebrating the resilience of the human spirit.

Key Takeaways

- Grand projects often come at an immense human cost, with the suffering of the common people frequently overlooked by those in power.
- Love and human connection can provide solace and meaning even amidst widespread hardship and oppression.
- The pursuit of knowledge and innovation, even when deemed heretical, can challenge established norms and inspire hope.
- Saramago's unique narrative voice, characterized by long sentences and a lack of traditional punctuation, encourages a more immersive and reflective reading experience.
- The novel serves as a powerful critique of absolute monarchy and the intertwined power of the church, exposing their extravagance and indifference to human suffering.
- Individual will and collective human spirit possess an unquantifiable power, capable of both monumental construction and fantastical flight.

- The story highlights the contrast between the visible, tangible achievements of power and the invisible, often forgotten sacrifices of the many.

Chapter Summaries

The Royal Vow and the First Encounters

King João V, desperate for an heir, vows to build a magnificent convent in Mafra if the Queen conceives. This sets the stage for a monumental undertaking. Meanwhile, Baltasar Sete-Sóis, a soldier who lost a hand in battle, returns to Lisbon. He meets Blimunda Sete-Luas, a woman with the mystical ability to see inside people's bodies, and Father Bartolomeu Lourenço, an eccentric priest obsessed with building a flying machine. Their paths converge, forming an unlikely trio united by destiny and ambition.

The Dream of Flight and the Collection of Wills

Father Bartolomeu Lourenço, known as the 'flying priest,' enlists Baltasar and Blimunda in his secret project: the construction of the Passarola, a fantastic flying machine. Blimunda's unique power is crucial, as she is tasked with collecting human 'wills' or 'volitions' – a mysterious, ethereal substance believed to be the fuel for the machine. Their clandestine work takes place while the initial preparations for the Mafra Convent begin, symbolizing a stark contrast between royal decree and individual aspiration.

The Passarola Takes Flight and Mafra's Foundations

After meticulous construction and several failed attempts, the Passarola achieves its first successful flight, carrying the trio into the sky. This miraculous event, witnessed by few, represents a triumph of human ingenuity and a challenge to the natural order. Concurrently, the massive construction of the Mafra Convent begins in earnest. Thousands of workers are conscripted, enduring harsh conditions and immense suffering to lay the foundations of the king's grand edifice, highlighting the human cost of royal ambition.

The Convent's Ascent and the Price of Ambition

As the Mafra Convent rises, its scale and demands grow exponentially, consuming vast resources and countless lives. The narrative vividly portrays the grueling labor, accidents, and sacrifices of the common people. Father Bartolomeu, increasingly paranoid and fearing persecution for his 'heretical' invention, eventually succumbs to madness and disappears. Baltasar and Blimunda continue their quiet life together, their love deepening amidst the surrounding chaos and the lingering memory of their shared dream of flight.

Blimunda's Quest and the Final Ascent

Years pass. The Mafra Convent is finally completed and inaugurated with immense pomp and ceremony, a symbol of royal power and religious devotion. Baltasar, who had been tending to

the Passarola in secret, accidentally takes flight alone and vanishes. Blimunda embarks on a long, arduous journey across Portugal, searching for her beloved. Her quest is a testament to enduring love and hope, culminating in a poignant reunion where she finds Baltasar's spirit ascending into the sun, a final, ethereal flight.

Themes

- Power and Oppression
- Love and Sacrifice
- Faith and Reason
- Human Suffering
- Individual Will
- Critique of Monarchy

Notable Quotes

- "What kind of world is this, where a man has to be a king to build a convent, and a woman has to be a queen to give birth to a child?" — A reflection on the arbitrary nature of power and destiny, questioning the societal structures that dictate human lives and ambitions.
- "The only possible meaning of life is to fight to give life a meaning." — A philosophical observation on the human condition, emphasizing the active role individuals must take in creating purpose and value in their existence.
- "It is not enough to look at the world, one must also see it." — A commentary on perception and understanding, suggesting that true insight goes beyond mere observation, requiring deeper engagement and empathy.
- "Man is the only animal that knows he will die, and that is why he invents God." — A provocative statement on the origins of faith and the human need for meaning and comfort in the face of mortality.
- "The history of humanity is the history of its dreams, and its dreams are the history of its nightmares." — A profound reflection on the duality of human aspiration and the often-dark realities that accompany grand visions and societal progress.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Memorial do Convento about?

Memorial do Convento, or 'Baltasar and Blimunda,' tells two interwoven stories: the grand, oppressive construction of the Mafra Convent by King João V in 18th-century Portugal, and the intimate, magical love story of Baltasar and Blimunda, who assist a visionary priest in building a fantastical flying machine. It's a critique of power and a celebration of human spirit.

Is Memorial do Convento worth reading?

Yes, it is highly worth reading for its unique narrative style, profound philosophical insights, and rich historical detail. Saramago's distinctive voice, long sentences, and lack of traditional punctuation offer a challenging yet deeply rewarding experience, making it a masterpiece of 20th-century literature and a powerful social commentary.

How does Memorial do Convento end?

Spoiler: The book ends with the completion of the Mafra Convent and the disappearance of Baltasar, who accidentally takes flight in the Passarola alone. Blimunda spends years searching for him. She finally finds him at the convent's inauguration, not physically, but as his spirit ascends into the sun, a final, ethereal 'will' collected by her, symbolizing their eternal connection and the ultimate freedom of the human spirit.

Who should read Memorial do Convento?

Readers who appreciate literary fiction, historical novels with a magical realist bent, and social commentary will enjoy this book. It's particularly suited for those interested in Portuguese history, the critique of power structures, and authors with a unique narrative voice like José Saramago, Umberto Eco, or Gabriel García Márquez.

How long does it take to read Memorial do Convento?

Given its length of approximately 350-400 pages and Saramago's dense, distinctive prose style, it would likely take an average reader around 10 to 14 hours to read 'Memorial do Convento' carefully. His unique punctuation and long sentences can slow down the reading pace.