

The books that devoured my father The strange and magical story of Vivaldo Bonfim Afonso Cruz



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Afonso Cruz

(Figueira da Foz, 1971)

In addition to book illustrations, Afonso Cruz has made animated films of his own and for the advertising industry as well as composing and performing in the blues/roots band The Soaked Lamb.

He is the author of a satirical thriller, *A carne de Deus* [The Flesh of God], 2008; a fictional encyclopedia, *Enciclopédia da estória universal* [Encyclopedia of World History], 2009; and *Os livros que devoraram o meu pai*, 2010 (Maria Rosa Colaço Literary Prize).

In June 1971, in Figueira da Foz, he was completely reborn. In subsequent years he attended the António Arroio School, the Institute of Belas Artes in Lisbon, and the Instituto Superior de Artes Plásticas in Madeira. In recent years, he has become increasingly well-known as an illustrator of children's books.

He has traveled to over fifty countries. He lives in the country and has two children.

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Os livros que devoraram o meu pai – A estranha e mágica história de Vivaldo Bonfim
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From 12 years on

Awarded the Maria Rosa Colaço Prize for Literature

Vivaldo Bonfim is a bored civil servant who takes novels and stories with him to the revenue office where he works. One day, while pretending to be working, he gets lost in his reading and disappears from the world.

This is his true story, told in the first person by his son, Elias Bonfim, who sets off in search of his father, making his way through literary classics populated by murderers, devastated lovers, wild animals and other dangers composed of the letters of the alphabet.

‘A moving and cultured journey through literature and through adolescence as well’.
Rita Pimenta in *Público*

‘The elegant, fluid writing, with its great ability to conjure images (without which the author would not have been a successful illustrator), the obvious transversality of its audience proves that «a good book should have more than one layer, it should be a building several stories high. The ground floor is no good for literature».

Carla Maia de Almeida in *Notícias Sábado*

THE BOOKS THAT DEVoured MY FATHER THE STRANGE AND MAGICAL STORY OF VIVALDO BONFIM

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Chapter 1

Books and More Books!

«Vivaldo! Vivaldo! Vivaldo! Vivaldo!» The department head was shouting at him, but he heard the voice far in the distance, receding around a corner.

This was how my grandmother began the story of Vivaldo Bonfim, my father. He used to work in the Seventh Fiscal District, an obnoxious, dull, tedious, and boring world awash in paperwork, files, and other bureaucratic materials made from the wood of trees. It was a world utterly lacking in literature. My mother was pregnant with me: at this fateful time I was floating in her uterus, flopping around like clothes in a washing machine. My father thought only of books (books and more books!), but life didn't agree with this, his life had other things in mind, it was unheeding, and he had to have a job. Often life has no regard for the things we like the best. Despite it all, my father took books with him to the office (books and more books!) and read in secret as much as he could. It's not the recommended thing, but it was stronger than he was. My father loved literature more than anything. He always had a book under a pile of Sample Forms B or notifications of change in status or other important-sounding documents. He read discreetly, pretending to do his work. It wasn't the proper attitude, but father only thought about books. This is what my grandmother told me, her thoughts marked by the furrows of her brow.

I never knew my father. When I was born he was no longer of this world.

Chapter 2

Stairs and Stairway

What is a euphemism? It's when we want to say something that could be hurtful and we use less pointed words to avoid the hurt. For example, I could say that my father is no longer of this world instead of saying that he died of a heart attack. It appears to be a euphemism: «no longer of this world» instead of «died». But it isn't. As you will see, it is the objective truth. Nothing figurative about it.

One afternoon, an afternoon like any other, my father was reading a book hidden beneath an IRS form so his boss wouldn't notice he wasn't

working. That very afternoon he was so involved in reading, so concentrated on it, that he entered into the book. He got lost in reading. When the office manager came over to my father's desk, he wasn't there any more. On the desktop there were some IRS forms and a copy of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* opened to the closing pages. Júlio – this was the name of my dad's boss – called out to him: Vivaldo! Vivaldo! But there was no trace of my father. He was stuck in the midst of his reading: he was living that novel.

My grandmother says that this can happen when we are really focused on what we're reading. We can enter right into the book, the way it happened to my father. It's as easy as leaning on a porch rail but much less dangerous, even though we're several floors above the ground. It's true: reading about things can add up to quite a few floors. I learned from my grandmother that there was a fellow named Origen, for example, who said that there was a first, superficial reading, and other deeper, allegorical ones. I'm not going to address this topic, it's enough to know that a good book should be more than skin-deep: it should be a building several stories high. The ground floor is useless to literature. It's fine in a public building, a convenience for those who don't like to climb stairs and useful for those who can't climb stairs. But in literature there must be several floors stacked on top of each other. Stairs and stairways, letters below and letters above.

Chapter 3

Sometimes Her Voice is a Little Strained

Yesterday I turned twelve. This is the reason the whole adventure started. It was a regular party, like so many others I've had. The whole family came: cousins, aunts, uncles, and a few friends and neighbors. There was a cake, and they sang happy birthday. Perfectly normal. The burning candles dripped wax on the cake, everybody shouted happy birthday at me off key, they clapped and laughed, they were so happy. I blew twelve-year old breath on the candles and the weight of the air snuffed them out. The cake was mercilessly cut into slices. When evening finally came and everybody went home, my grandmother, her eyes lost to memory, told me to come to her house the following day. I got presents

from everybody that day except my grandmother. I found this strange, because it had never happened before: even when they're losing their memory, grandparents never forget to bring presents.

So the next day after school I went to meet my grandmother. She asked me to sit down, waving a shrivelled hand in the direction of the striped sofa. I sit on those stripes every time I visit. Then she sat down in her flowery dress, with that slowness of hers. She smoothed her hair and adjusted her voice and her glasses. Sometimes her voice gets a little strained, like when she sits down or has just done something strenuous. While I ate a piece of cake she explained that I was a young man now, and had responsibilities. It was time I learned the truth. Her words were covered in white hair, you could feel all the life they had lived. It was a serious conversation, so I paid attention. She spoke to me about my father. She told me how that afternoon in the district office he had entered a book and we never heard from him again (up to that point I had thought the tragedy of me being fatherless was the fault of heart disease. «He had a heart attack»: that's what I had always heard about my father).

It seems that my father had foreseen something like this. He had already imagined that he might fall into that abyss of letters, so he locked his books in the attic of my grandmother's house. For twelve years my father's library had been waiting for me, all those books in place on the bookshelves. He had given the key to his literary stronghold to my grandmother. «Give it to him when you think he's ready to read my attic full of books», my father had said a few weeks prior to departing for those worlds of letters.

My grandmother handed me the key with great solemnity. In that attic I would find all of my father's books, including *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, which was the book he had used to gain entrance to the world of literature. I was very nervous when I received that gift. I would finally get to know my father, I would follow in his footsteps, roam among all the words where he had roamed. I would find him behind a sentence, among the characters of some novel. At least that's what I thought.

Chapter 4

There Were Letters Everyplace

At a sign from my grandmother I went up the narrow stairs to the attic and opened the door. My hands were shaking. I knew that inside, in that attic, there were letters everyplace pretend-

ing to be dead – but I know very well that all we have to do is run our eyes over them and they will jump up full of life. I entered hesitantly and opened the window. The attic smelled like an attic that has been closed a long time. Everything was covered with dust. When the light poured in, it filled the library with little white specks. It was dust that was already building up in my adolescence, a twelve year-old dust: it was the same age as me.

The books were impeccably arranged on the shelves. Unmoving, they followed me with the gaze of their spines. I stared back at them with half-closed eyes, refusing to be ambushed by any of those titles. There was a big armchair next to the window where my father used to sit, and there was a book on the seat. My throat went dry and my heart started to pound. There in front of me was *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. I picked it up as if it were a sacred object, sat down in the armchair and prepared to leaf through it. Would I succeed in doing what my father had done and enter the world of books?

Chapter 5

I Read Book After Book

I leafed through *The Island of Dr. Moreau* but soon put it down without reading a single paragraph. I was so nervous I decided to put it off. I wouldn't begin my reading with this book of Wells. I understood that I should begin slowly, with other books instead of that fateful one, the book that devoured my father. So throughout the first semester of that academic year I read book after book, learning how to lose myself in reading. They were very agitated months; there were some problems at home. I was routinely late for dinner, and this made my mother angry at me.

School awaited me every day. I showed up in high spirits, buckled down to all those boring subjects, and took proper notes. The dedication I devoted to my studies was not entirely altruistic. I had always valued knowledge, that's obvious, but I valued Beatriz even more. She was the most unpredictable subject at school, more than any kind of math, or analyzing subordinate clauses. She was the most surprising geography, and my best visual education. Her black hair flowed over her shoulders the way the aroma of coffee flows out of the cup. Her lips were parted, and her skin was tenaciously white. Her eyes were dark brown, even when they were closed.

Every day without exception I walked to school with Bombo. Bombo wasn't his real name, but that what we called him, thanks to the fact that he wasn't what you would call thin. He was so overweight, it was as if all the volumes of Marcel Proust's novel (which I had only glanced at) had joined together in a single teenager. What made his appearance even worse was that he was short and had very greasy hair. As if all of this weren't enough, he had a strange smell. I don't know how to describe it: it might have been the smell of old furniture, or of loneliness (they are smells that are often mistaken).

When he spoke he always placed one foot perpendicular to the other, the way girls sometimes do, and told Chinese fairy tales. When he did this his cheeks acquired a rosy hue which took over his yellowish face. People reacted to his presence in two ways:

The first way: they shunned him.

The second way: they made fun of him and sometimes resorted to violence and insults.

He seemed perfectly capable of adjusting to both disdain and violence with indifference. Yet more than once I saw him alone in the bathroom, crying. I would ask him if he was all right and he would say that he was. He would smooth his greasy hair and smile.

But it was a sad smile.

Chapter 6 What We Are Really Made Of

A library is a labyrinth. This isn't the first time I've gotten lost in one. My father and I have this in common. I think this is what happened to him: he got lost among the letters and titles, lost among all the stories that lived in his head. Because we are made of stories, not DNA and genetic codes, not even flesh and muscle and skin and brains. We're made of stories. My father—of this I am sure—got lost in

that world, and now no one can interrupt his reading.

One of the afternoons I spent in the attic I read a story by the Argentine writer Borges about a labyrinth that was a desert. There are countless places where a person can get lost, but none of them is as complex as a library. A single book is itself a place that can lead us astray, make us lose our way. This is what I used to think about when I sat among all those books in the attic.

Chapter 7 Finally I Read It

Time went by, paragraph by paragraph, and one day I took another look at *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. And I read it.

I'm going to give a summary of the story.

After the sinking of the ship he was traveling on – it was called *Lady Vain* – Edward Prendick ended up on an island where a scientist, a certain Dr. Moreau, experimented on animals. He tried to make them human, that is, he tried to make their bodies more like ours. By hypnotic suggestion, he also tried to make them act like humans. Obviously none of this worked out. Animals may lack reason, but they aren't stupid, and being human doesn't agree with them. Besides, the only inhuman living things are human beings. Consequence: the humanized animals tended to revert to their original state, that of being animals.

When he returned from Dr. Moreau's island, Edward Prendick lived in isolation; he couldn't get along with human beings. He started to spend a great deal of time reading; surrounded by books, he also studied chemistry and astronomy. He found comfort in the stars: they were the couch of his soul. H. G. Wells' book ends with Edward Prendick reporting that he consulted an expert in mental illness, an acquaintance of Dr. Moreau who listened to what he said and helped him. (...)