

COUNTLESS LIVES INHABIT US: PESSOA MEETS ZOMBIES

Review by Ana Rita Martins and José Duarte

André Morgado and Alexandre Leoni. *A Vida Oculta de Fernando Pessoa (The Hidden Life of Fernando Pessoa)*. Bicho Carpinteiro, 2016. Comic Book.

Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) was one of the most prolific and influential Portuguese authors of the twentieth century. He was responsible for several important works, not only signed with his own name, but also via heteronyms – imaginary literary pen names. Besides poetry, Pessoa wrote fiction, including novels, stories, and essays, and he also translated the works of other authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, who would be a major influence on some of Pessoa's writings, namely his Detective novels. Much like the American author, Pessoa was fascinated by the occult and the supernatural. As Steffen Dix explains, from very early in his life Pessoa "show[ed] a marked inclination for the occult" (1), a theme that would be prevalent in a number of his writings and one he would continue to develop during his career. It was this interest that sparked Morgado's and Leoni's idea for the comic book where they delve into an alternate world in which zombies have infiltrated the conventions of the detective genre.

In the 2016 comics entitled *A Vida Oculta de Fernando Pessoa [The Hidden Life of Fernando Pessoa]*, André F. Morgado (a Portuguese author) and Alexandre Leoni (a Brazilian illustrator) create a fiction with the figure of Pessoa at its centre. The authors attempt to explain how and why Pessoa created his alter egos, focusing particularly on Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, and Ricardo Reis (his chief heteronyms). *The Hidden Life of Fernando Pessoa* can be read as a contemporary pop culture work influenced by other creations that try to rewrite or reinterpret well-known stories or figures, as is the case of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Seth Grahame-Smith, 2009) and, more recently, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2012). Yet how compelling is Morgado's and Leoni's text in its attempts to re-imagine the life and work of Pessoa?

The narrative begins by trying to justify Pessoa's attraction to the occult and the written word which he is driven to master from a young age. This was due to a letter left by his father whose early (unnatural) death triggers the boy's imagination. While the deaths of both his father and younger brother initially seem to be a result of tuberculosis, it is implied they suffer from an Evil greater than a mere illness. In fact, the father's letter and last will directs his son Fernando to take his place in the Secret Society for the Annihilation of Evil ("Sociedade Secreta do Extermínio do Mal"). Training under Commander João Miguel Rosa, Fernando Pessoa accepts his fate as a zombie hunter working for the Secret Society, who provide him with the names of those infected by the "Devil's plight" ("maleita do Diabo").

It is interesting to note that the strange disease that turns men and women into blue-coloured, blood-thirsty monsters seems to be spread through bites, as if it were a form of biological virus, much like in the graphic novel series *The Walking Dead* (2003-present). However, there are also a number of religious allusions, namely in the references made to the virus itself, which is identified as an "Evil" that is quickly infecting Lisbon's population, and to the fact that God the Father is with Pessoa, implying that he is doing God's work.

Yet, Morgado and Leoni do not offer any explanation as to what the mysterious disease is, what its origins are, or how it arrived in Lisbon. The Secret Society for the Annihilation of Evil also remains in the shadows: who are its members? How was it created? How do they know who has been infected? All these questions are unanswered, which is one of the comic book's shortcomings, as a clearer explanation of what causes this infection and who are the men fighting it would help clarify the authors' intentions, and contribute to a greater narrative cohesion.

After years fighting to end the zombie threat, Pessoa is given a final list with the names of three men: Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, and Ricardo Reis – his most famous literary personas. In *The Hidden Life of Fernando Pessoa* the writer's heteronyms are real men whose lives are cut short by the zombie virus, except for Álvaro de Campos, who is aware there is no escaping the disease and chooses to commit suicide. Pessoa shoots Alberto Caeiro and Ricardo Reis before their transformation is complete. Nonetheless, their lives inspire Fernando Pessoa to write on their behalf and, thus, somehow atone for their deaths. As their voices become his voice, Pessoa feels he is living the lives of others ("Sinto-me viver vidas alheias"), which is certainly a creative way of justifying the writer's numerous heteronyms.

Visually, Alexandre Leoni's drawings complement the details of Morgado's writing nicely, providing the reader with an intriguing use of image and colour. One of the aspects criticised elsewhere (Moura, "A Vida Oculta de Fernando Pessoa. André F. Morgado e Alexandre Leoni (Bicho Carpinteiro)") is that the colouring of the book is too dark and relies on a rather simplistic colour pallet. However, the darkness of the hues (mostly black, dark brown, blue) establishes the relationship between image and text by complementing the Zombie/Detective/Horror story atmosphere intended by the authors and expected by the readers.

In sum, despite *The Hidden Life of Fernando Pessoa* not being the first comic book or work of fiction exploring the life and image of Fernando Pessoa, it is a good addition to the many creations involving the author and, potentially, an alternative way to lure young readers to Pessoa. It should also be noted that most of the text is taken from Pessoa's own work, so although the idea is original, there is little novelty in the writing itself. Furthermore, because the authors decided to use Fernando Pessoa's words, the narrative is at times dense and puzzling, and the dialogues do not always make sense within the storyline.

The ending itself seems somewhat baffling, as there is no explanation as to the identity of the female zombie Pessoa visits. The readers are only given a name, Ophelia, and nothing

more, which might be incomprehensible for those who are not familiar with Pessoa's personal life. Simultaneously, this comic book is also proof that, despite being dead for eighty-two years, Fernando Pessoa is still very much alive and is continuously being reread, reinterpreted and used for new creations. In this sense, Morgado's and Leoni's work proves that Pessoa lived many lives in the twentieth century and is living new ones in the twenty-first.

NOTES

1. Ofélia Maria Queirós Soares (1900-1991) was the name of Fernando Pessoa's only known girlfriend.

WORKS CITED

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BIONOTES

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