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Our Lady of the Artichokes and Other Portuguese- American Stories

By Katherine Vaz

Winner of the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction
A Bison Original

October 2008

168 pages | 5 ½ x 8 ½

14 photographs, 7 drawings

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Book Synopsis:

A prize-winning book of short stories centered on American-Portuguese culture.



University of Nebraska Press

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Lincoln

Book Description

The stories in this prize-winning collection evoke a complete world, one so richly imagined and finely realized that the stories themselves are not so much read as experienced. The world of these stories is Portuguese-American, redolent of incense and spices, resonant with ritual and prayer, immersed in the California culture of freeway and commerce. Laced with lyrical prose and vivid detail, acclaimed writer Katherine Vaz conjures a captivating blend of Old World heritage and New World culture to explore the links between families, friends, strangers, and their world.

From the threat of a serial killer as the background for a young girl's first brush with death to the fallout of a modern-day visitation from the Virgin Mary; from an AIDS-stricken squatter refusing to vacate an empty Lisbon home to a mother's yearlong struggle with the death of her synesthetic daughter, these deft stories make their world ours.

Pre-Publication Praise for *Our Lady of the Artichokes*

"In Katherine Vaz's new volume of short fiction, she demonstrates brilliantly that rare quality of truly fine writing—a deeply profound knowingness about the human condition. *Our Lady of the Artichokes and Other Portuguese-American Stories* will even more widely prove what is already clear to many: Katherine Vaz is a master of the short story."—Robert Olen Butler, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

"Katherine Vaz is an old-fashioned storyteller in the best sense. Her work is sensual, rich in detail and layered history. Her stories overflow with incident and feeling. Other writers present fruit plates. Vaz serves cornucopias."—Allegra Goodman, author of *Intuition* and *Kaaterskill Falls*

"Katherine Vaz captures brilliantly the tragicomedy of people caught between ancient superstitions and modern values, people longing to cross over from one culture to another, from loneliness to love, from folly to grace. Her stories glow with a fairy-tale magic, yet they also feel uniquely and delightfully new."—Julia Glass, author of *Three Junes* and *The Whole World Over*

Post-Publication Praise

Please visit this book's [Web page](http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Our-Lady-of-the-Artichokes-and-Other-Portuguese-Am,673961.aspx) (<http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Our-Lady-of-the-Artichokes-and-Other-Portuguese-Am,673961.aspx>) for the most current post-publication praise.



Author's Previous Praise

Praise for *Saudade*:

"This wonderfully inventive novel, which contains elements of magic realism, is infused with a sense of *saudade*—a Portuguese word that, according to the author, can be understood as an extremely intense longing for a time, place, or people. . . . First novelist Vaz has written a challenging and rewarding work of fiction."—*Library Journal*

"Yearning and loss, absence felt so deeply that it becomes a kind of overriding presence, drive the plot of this remarkable first novel written by a remarkable talent. . . . No doubt in her travels she absorbed some of the myths and legends of the Azores—that culture informs the book, but the sensuous language, the flights into fantasy and magic, the use of metaphor and imagery to defy conventions of thought and behavior—all these should be credited to the free-ranging stretches of the author's imagination. She can be quite dazzling."—*Los Angeles Daily News*

"The characters in *Saudade*, Katherine Vaz's first novel—characters who love, lose and then eternally long for their beloveds—are trapped between heaven and hell. . . . *Saudade* is laden with fanciful devices as well as an abundance of supernatural occurrences. . . . Vaz is an extremely talented writer, and there's much to love in her book, especially for devotees of magical realism and anyone interested in the rich culture of the Portuguese."—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Magic abounds in the lives and minds of the characters of Vaz's haunting, lyrical debut set in the Portuguese Azores and the U.S. from the 1950s to 1998."—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

Praise for *Mariana*:

"*Mariana* glows with colour...in its lyrical description of ordinary lives transfigured and its account of spiritual and emotional struggles."—*The Times Literary Supplement* (London)

Praise for *Fado & Other Stories*:

"Vaz, the winner of this year's Drue Heinz Literature Prize, believes that 'stories keep us alive.' Perhaps that is what gives the 12 tales in this work such urgency. . . . Life's lessons are woven into many of these stories, but Vaz's touch is always light, suffused with reverence for whimsy and weird, serendipitous occurrences. Encounters with magic—sights, sensations, and sounds that cannot be rationally explained—give the book an unusual spark. Throughout, things of the spirit collide with material reality and tantalize those in their orbit, with satisfying results."—*Library Journal*

"Fierce desire—be it for revenge, love or quietude—impels Vaz's characters, all of whom share Portuguese ancestry. . . . Throughout the collection, Vaz succeeds in creating unusual protagonists. . . . *Fado and Other Stories*, which won this year's Drue Heinz Literature Prize, is a celebration of the drama of individual lives. With inventive lyricism, it explores the notion of a 'grand event allotted to each person—only one, with every other major event a consequence of that.'"—Janet Kaye, *New York Times Book Review*

"Vaz's tales rely often on the yeast of her songlike love for language, which can transform her prose, influenced by magic realism, into poetry. . . . [W]hen the theme of a story is in balance with its style, the result is elating."—*Kirkus Reviews*



Author Biography



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Katherine Vaz was born and raised in northern California. Her father, August M. Vaz, is an authority on Iberian and Portuguese-American (or Luso-American) culture and history, particularly regarding the large immigrant Azorean community that settled in the Bay Area. Formerly much in demand as a speaker, he also wrote *The Portuguese in California* and, with Katherine's mother, Elizabeth S. Vaz, compiled a Portuguese cookbook. Katherine grew up hearing stories both real and fantastic; the first story she placed in a literary magazine was based upon some strange family tales, and her first novel (*Saudade*, St. Martin's Press), sprang out of the curious moment when her father covered the numerals of her godmother's housekeeper's phone with different colors of paint and then "wrote" various telephone numbers in appropriate painted dabs on a placard because, he said, he believed she "thought in color."

Vaz attended the University of California at Santa Barbara and, over a decade later, received her MFA from the University of California at Irvine. Her thesis project sold as *Saudade*, the first novel from a major New York publisher (St. Martin's Press) about Portuguese-Americans. Selected by Barnes & Noble for their Discover Great New Writers Series and with film rights optioned by Marlee Matlin and Solo One Productions, the book garnered outstanding reviews, including *The San Francisco Chronicle's* comment: "Vaz is an extremely talented writer, and there's much to love in her book, especially for devotees of magical realism and anyone interested in the rich cultures of the Portuguese," and the starred review of *Publisher's Weekly* declared: "Magic abounds in the lives and minds of the characters of Vaz's haunting, lyrical debut... The audience that appreciated *Like Water for Chocolate* should find this novel equally appealing."

Her second novel, *Mariana*, has been printed in six languages, (English, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Italian, and Greek), with both an American and British edition. Based upon the true story of Sister Mariana Alcoforado, a romantic icon whose love letters have inspired interpretations by Matisse, Modigliani, Braque, Rilke, Rodin, Stendahl, and many others, the novel was selected by the Library of Congress as one of the Top Thirty International Books of 1998 and film rights were optioned by Anne Harrison, former Director of Development for Martin Scorsese. Rizzoli in Italy selected it as one of their top three books of the year, and the novel remained for years on the bestsellers list in Portugal, where it has gone through five printings and is now a mass-market pocketbook edition.



One review in Italy (*Il Giornale*) said: “Vaz has succeeded in the daunting task of blending an exquisitely beautiful love story with an insightful exploration of the sort of mysticism that springs from the combination of carnal experience and the forced absence of it within the walls of a cloister. To these elements is added a poetic and heartrending portrait of a woman. Seldom does one read pages of such intense beauty and intelligence about the female heart like those written by Vaz.” *The Times Literary Supplement* of London wrote: “(*Mariana*)...is most successful in its lyrical descriptions of ordinary lives transfigured, in its detailing of everyday routines and beliefs, and in its account of spiritual and emotional struggles.”

In addition to the 2007 Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction for *Our Lady of the Artichokes and Other Portuguese-American Stories*, her short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines, including *BOMB*, *Triquarterly*, *Tin House*, *Five Points*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Sun*, *Confrontation*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Other Voices*, and *Harvard Review*. She won the 1997 Drue Heinz Literature Prize for her first collection, *Fado & Other Stories*. *The New York Times* wrote: “Vaz succeeds in creating unusual protagonists... With inventive lyricism, (the book) explores the notion of a ‘grand event allotted to each person’...” *The Washington Post* wrote, “...Vaz creates life with words that can be fierce as a whip while remaining sensitive to her characters’ yearnings...” and *The Boston Globe*’s review concluded with, “...Like listening to a blues album by a splendid artist.”

Her non-fiction essays have appeared in *The Boston Globe* and her essay on baptism was included in *Signatures of Grace* (Dutton); her children’s stories have appeared in anthologies by Simon & Schuster and Viking.

Vaz is the first Portuguese-American to have her work recorded for the archives of the Hispanic Division at the U.S. Library of Congress, and she was selected for the six-person Presidential Delegation to represent America at the World Fair/Expo 98 in Lisbon. As a member of the International Society for the Study of the Short Story, she gave the welcoming address at the American Embassy in Lisbon in 2006. Other honors include 2002 Woman of the Year from the Portuguese-American Women’s Association, a Leadership Achievement Award in 1999 from the Portuguese-American Leadership Council of the United States, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship grant. A Fellow in Fiction at Harvard University, she was awarded a 2006-7 Fellowship to the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She has lectured, read her work, or been a guest writer at such places as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, the University of California at Berkeley, Notre Dame, the University of Illinois in Urbana, the University of the Azores, Georgetown University, the J.F.K. Library in Boston, Rutgers University, and the New School in New York City. Katherine Vaz currently lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Discussion Questions

1. The characters in *Our Lady of the Artichokes* often yearn for miracles. How many miracles—big, small, or in-between—occur throughout the book? How much of this is a simple inability on the part of the characters to recognize the beautiful or terrible nature of life as it unfolds...and when do uncanny, inexplicable incidents truly arrive?
2. How much regarding miracles is humorous? How much is prayer disguised as impatience? Why does Tia Connie “invent a virgin” as a means of saving her apartment in the title story? Does this have anything to do with the mysterious appearance of Frank?
3. It’s been suggested that so-called “magical realism” is nothing more than an acute awareness of the extraordinary things that are constantly observable in the ordinary world. When does magic enter into the stories, and when is it just “realism” looked at through the prism of expanded awareness?
4. The various dividing pages suggest an evolution from a condition of being “fatherless” to a sense that one must grow into or assume a parental role. How much do the stories suggest a restless search for one’s place or sense of authority in the world, and how much does the quest involve God-as-Father or spiritual pursuits?
5. Whether it’s Mary Smith in “Our Bones Here Are Waiting for Yours,” or Manny with his guilt over his crime in “The Man Who Was Made of Netting,” or the terrible incident under fascism of Cat’s father in “Lisbon Story,” many characters suffer with secrets. What liberates (or further imprisons) each of them?
6. What are some of the particular Portuguese details—whether funny or shocking—that haunt or inform the characters? How many of them have to do with fear of the unknown? How does the Old World clash with the New World?
7. Tónio’s past in “Lisbon Story” is suggested only briefly, during an aside when we’re told that “the war in Angola had left him an orphan adrift.” Given his own horrifying history and his haphazard search for a home, how does the central dramatic event involving Mateus save Tónio? What is it about this transcontinental drama that saves the distant father? And how does the unresolved outcome regarding the apartment serve the narrator Cat?
8. What gap about mystery and yearning is bridged in “All Riptides Roar with Sand from Opposing Shores,” and why does it take so long to arrive?
9. How much does the contemporary Californian landscape inform the imagery in the stories? Generally speaking, what images throughout the book add a note of color or affect the sensibility of the writing? Which are the most memorable?
10. The epigraph involves the poet Fernando Pessoa’s lines: “Until the dawning of that day/You know will dawn.” What day is this referring to? Why does the voice ask permission to become the child, and to receive stories?



Additional Information

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