



## Os Cus de Judas

*António Lobo Antunes*

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Logo depois de voltar da guerra em Angola, António Lobo Antunes escreve *Os cus de Judas*, sobre suas experiências naquele país. O romance se tornou um enorme sucesso, vindo a ser o primeiro grande livro sobre o conflito e a independência angolanos e uma referência histórica obrigatória.

Numa narrativa não-linear e fragmentada, Lobo Antunes revela as inquietações existenciais de um ser humano, na indelével experiência de uma guerra, que se misturam às memórias de infância e juventude na Lisboa salazarista.

O autor utiliza-se, na maior parte do romance, do fluxo de consciência e da associação de idéias, para construir a história e o perfil de seu narrador-protagonista, um personagem que, a partir de "uma dolorosa aprendizagem da agonia", vê sua vida e seus valores estilizados pela melancolia. O que lhe resta são fragmentos de memória - a criança que visitava com os pais o jardim zoológico aos domingos, o jovem que assiste impassível a seu futuro sendo traçado pela autoridade inquestionável de uma família salazarista, o adulto apático e frustrado diante da violência que lhe retira as rédeas e o sentido da vida.

O leitor vai estar frente a frente com "decadência, putrefação, pestilência e morte. Adicionando canalhice, violência e insensatez". Para o jornalista português Nuno Barbosa, "Lobo Antunes, dando plena expressão a uma escrita impiedosa e grosseira consegue uma harmonia preciosa entre a violência do narrado e a rudez dos termos utilizados - as suas palavras ganham, portanto, uma credibilidade muito maior, criando um elo profundo com a realidade."

O livro, que recebeu o prêmio Franco-Português conferido pela Embaixada da França em Lisboa, está na 21.<sup>a</sup> edição em Portugal e já foi vendido para mais de dez países como Inglaterra, França, Itália, Alemanha e Suécia.

## Os Cus de Judas Details

Date : Published 2004 by Dom Quixote (first published 1979)

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Author : António Lobo Antunes

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## From Reader Review *Os Cus de Judas* for online ebook

### RK-isme says

I do believe that everyone should eventually read this book. Eventually, because they should be ready for it. It's not to be trifled with. That would be a waste. Thanks to Neal for bringing this to my attention.

My reviews do not tell the story. That can be found elsewhere ... the official blurb, other reviews. This is the story of a medical doctor who was drafted into Portugal's military to tend the wounded in the war against colonial Angola in the 1970s. We follow him into the military camps and villages of Angola and back to his new life in Lisbon. We hear only his voice as he drones on in horrific and painful detail, that reads like poetry.

It is a story of war and its horrors. It is a story of love and sex in the painful ambiguity that marks us all. It is a bizarre story of a man and a woman who have met in a bar and go home together for meaningless sex that he wants to give some sort of meaning to while recounting his story of war and what it has done to him.

And, yes, this is poetry. António Lobo Antunes, whose own story can likely be found here somewhere, is a poet. He unfolds his story in a sea of words using every literary device necessary to charm and hold the reader, while sparing none of the detail. I might add that, as usual, Margaret Jull Costa has performed her translation role like a master of skill by bringing another's words to life. For all of the pain and agony portrayed, for all of the despair and self hatred revealed, the language can be beautiful. As I read, I had to stop often to take in the images, both cruel and loving, to absorb the content in all of its lush humanity. I will let some of these words speak for themselves. I shall randomly chose sentences from different parts of the book. The sentences are often long, stream of consciousness sentences. Read them patiently, as you would poetry. Remember that this is a monologue, a man talking to a potential/actual sexual partner. Remember also that the author was a conscripted doctor serving in that war. Read them aloud if you can:

"At least doing his military service will make a man of him"

"This vigorous prophecy, muttered throughout my childhood and adolescence by false teeth of indisputable authority, continued to be delivered in strident tones at canasta tables, where the females of the clan provided a pagan counterweight to Sunday Mass at two centavos a point, a nominal sum that served as a way of venting, by playing the winning card, ancient enmities patiently secreted over the years.' p. 26

'Perhaps one day, if we get to know each other better, I'll show you the photo in my wallet of my green-eyed daughter whose eyes change when she cries and become the color of a wild equinoctial sea leaping the seawall in an angry crochet of foam, I'll show you her smile, her mouth, her fair hair, the daughter I dreamed about for nine months in the sweaty heat of Angola, because, as Laundino [an Angolan anti-colonialist writer] used to say, we are the only ones who truly exist, and all the rest is a lie, we are the only ones who truly exist, she and I and her long body, her hands so like mine, the indefatigable curiosity of her questions, her anxious questions if I'm silent or sad, we are the only ones who truly exist and all the rest is a lie ....' p 103

'... Doctor, you're needed, someone had stepped on an antipersonnel mine on the path, we drove three miles in the Mercedes truck as fast as we could and found the squad in a clearing with Corporal Paulo lying on the ground moaning with nothing below his knee but a mangled bloody pulp, nothing else mister president and messieurs eunuchs, nothing, imagine mister president what it would be like to suddenly lose a part of yourself, yes, the legitimate descendants of Cabral and Da Gama disappearing in fractions an ankle an arm a

length of intestine your balls your beloved balls blown away, he died in combat the newspaper says but this is what it really means to die you sons-of-bitches.' p. 122

'... I happened to walk into the sergeants' bathroom, into the eternally flooded, stinking pigsty known as the sergeants' bathroom, and saw the officer clutching the prisoner to him in a kind of epileptic frenzy, the shy, silent girl was leaning against the tiled wall, her eyes blank, and above their heads, through the window, the plain opened out in a majestic fan of subtle shades of green, where one could make out the slow, zigzagging, almost metallic sheen of the river and the great peace of Angola at five in the afternoon, refracted through successively contradictory layers of mist.' p. 197

This is the poetry of a man who hates war. He hates his country's fascist government. He hates the colonial inheritance he is there to defend. He hates the poverty and destruction he sees in Angola, which is someone else's home. Mostly, he hates what it has done to him. He hates his own cowardice in participating, in not speaking up against that is wrong. He hates that he has left part of his own humanity back in the jungle and cannot show his love to his now estranged wife, that he cannot provide a proper loving home to his daughter. António Lobo Antunes's poetry not only show's us all of this horror. By showing us what is lost, he is showing what he had and what Angola had or could have had were it not for the 'sons-of-bitches' and their colonial stupidity.

This is where I could go on a long rant on the damage done by colonial attitudes that continue to this day. I could rant about the imperial colonialism that continues to drop bombs on civilians in Syria and Iraq; about colonial attitudes that continue to push Palestinians onto smaller and smaller pieces of land; about colonial policies here in Canada that keep our First Nations people living in crumbling shacks without clean water, adequate food or decent education. Colonialism denies other people their humanity and eats away at our own in the process. We become inhuman idiots. Just look at the clown presidential candidates in the U.S. Like I said, I could go on a rant, but I won't. Get in touch with your humanity and read the book. It's beautiful.

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## **Neal Adolph says**

The struggle is real.

Is this a four-star or a five-star book? It borders so close to that upper-most standard of excellence, teases at it, steps across the line and then takes a step back. Ultimately, the struggle between stars doesn't matter I guess, though I labour over it a decent amount while reading a book. It is how you explain those stars that matter - and it is those words that I struggle to place into nearly sensible sentences over and over and over again as I finish a book. The struggle is real, right?

More and more this year I'm finding that four-star reads are being paired with words like "exceptional" and "fantastic". Perhaps this is because I expect more out of a four-star read than ever before, and because I'm giving fewer books a five-star rating. Who knows. Let me be clear though - this book is often beyond exceptional, often beyond fantastic. It may become a monument, a landmark. It is on par with Saramago, Nabokov, with Gordimer. In my short reading life it is unparalleled in its use of language and ideas and culture and context.

The unnamed narrator of this book is also its protagonist. We sit with him in a bar in Lisbon one night and, as the night extends itself into morning and the morning into sunrise, we listen to his life story. Of a young man who is unhappy, who is regarded by his family with a sense of disappointment, who is scooped into the

medical arm of the Portuguese colonial army in Angola, where he loses his affection for his wife and gains an affection for the idea of his estranged children, where he is tasked with repairing bodies broken in a war that nobody who fights it wants to fight, where he must watch as a secret police force break down human beings into small husks of themselves before forcing them to build their own graves, and from which he must return to Portugal and attempt to fit back in. He has failed in this task. He has seen too much.

For this we should be grateful. Much of this story mirrors Antunes' own experience in the war, and so one wonders if all of the wisdom that seeps out of this novel would be there if it weren't for the fact that Antunes has seen too much. And we surely are in need of ideas like those that Antunes promotes in this novel.

I would squarely place this book in the category of post-war literature. It is not about the war, even if the Angolan War for Independence is the center of much of the action. No, the central story is about the narrator's inability to make sense of a post-war world, the ways in which the war has crippled his ability to relate to anything in Lisbon environment, the barriers between him and other people and his pursuit of crippling joy which is hindered in every space by his memory of the war. The war, the war, the war. The battles, the violence, the trips, the women he made love to, the unending effort to escape.

Much of this is unique to the war, but some of it connects to the narrator's experience in Lisbon, and this is beautifully handled. It is in women that he finds some level of escapism from the war, and in women that he attempts to find some level of escapism from Lisbon and the drudgery of post-war society. This drudgery is also very important. You see, it doesn't come from a sense that the war contained the best 27 months of his life - there is no effort to glorify war here - it comes from a notion that life is a series of unpleasant events in the present weighed down by an unsatisfying past and a future which holds no breezy, dancing hope.

I've never been to a war, or even a warzone, or even a place that has been a warzone recently. My ability to comprehend the narrator's life experience is limited. But his wartime experience has given him the ability to criticize both the war and the society that continued to enjoy the sunny mornings of Lisbon while boys and men were having the life pool out of the damaged bodies in an African desert bush town. It is here, in his dissatisfaction with reality, that I see something - feel something that I can relate to and recognize. And Antunes handles it with such careful mastery.

I think that gender is immensely important here. I think it matters a great deal that the reader becomes a character, a female character, who is disappointed by sex, and who is disappointed by manliness. That matters. I think it also matters that we often gender countries as "women". Portugal is a she. Portugal is a she who is required to listen to the witnesses of its wars. Portugal must be fucked by this process. Portugal must be turned off, unimpressed. Portugal must be the woman who leaves in the early hours of a late night, and Portugal must be the woman who tries to forget the man and all of his baggage. The reader must be Portugal.

Beautiful, right? Maybe even brilliant.

And it is wrapped in language unlike any other than I have read - the sort of creative mastery of language manipulation which is reserved for only the best and the worst writers of our time. In this case, it is one of the best. Antunes has a clear concept of what he is saying and his language is a means to communicate that clarity - those sentences are long because the ideas are long, the relationships that allow those ideas to be shaped are voluminous. This is language as it was made to be used by a master - as though it is the only thing worth trying to use, the only tool in our vast body of tools that we can use to share something like this. This is Art on the level of Guernica or The Tree of Life, a painting and a movie which could not possibly have taken any other form. A Symphony of Sorrowful Songs which couldn't have even been a String Quartet of Sorrowful Songs. A Quartet for the End of Time which refuses to be reshaped into an epic poem.

It would be irresponsible of me to fail in noting that some of the ideas you encounter in some of these sentences come off as a bit cliché at times - but it is hard to blame Antunes for this. When he wrote this book in Portugal he wasn't intending it for somebody to read in 2015, in North America, in a nation filled with post-war literature, none of which is likely as good as this but plenty of which is plenty good and contains some similar ideas. So it felt at times familiar in concept, if nowhere near familiar in language. And in the implication of the reader and Portugal.

It would also be irresponsible of me to not read more books by Antunes. Go find a copy of this and read it. It is simply remarkable.

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### **Luís C. says**

Alcoholic soliloquist leaning against the zinc of a Lisbon bar to charm a woman with shapes blossoming through a glass of whiskey that empties. But is one really trying to seduce? No we do not delude more about feelings: we want his square of skin that we will be able to flourish to the rhythm of his own impulses. For our man has it in the bag, enough to make you drain the sewers of the Praça do Comércio of the filth of all kinds that strew his thoughts. Thoughts croupies in this dirty war in Angola, borborygms and flatulence of this ass of Judas, submission to the negligence of the generals and to a society subdued in an uchronic society where the brush disengages the grenade, and especially cum in a boiling boiling distilling solitude always harder to hide... What is true is palpable: the mossy sex from a woman but also her leg severed by a mine, hoses air...

Lobo Antunes, doctor lost in a dirty war, sick overripe fruit of this company benchmarks transcribe in a spoof of the holy sacraments, reminded me of some idiot who would strangely reappeared in the 70s in Salazar's Portugal...

Great moment of reading that I could not advise to all: the style is syncopated and you must know how to dive into a chapter without being able to catch its breath at the risk of being completely lost (in this ass of Judas ...)

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### **Jonathan says**

A tightly-packed bomb built of beautiful metaphors. Brutal at times, very sad at others. Highly recommended.

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### **Sonia Gomes says**

Antonio Lobo Antunes, just does not want to go to Angola to fight a war which has no meaning for him or for anyone else. What adds to his misery is that he has to leave his pregnant wife in Portugal to fight in a country he never even wished to see

This is a brutal book. You see the colonial war in Angola through the eyes of the doctor Antonio Lobo Antunes.

Every sordid detail is placed before you, the terrible, terrible loneliness, the lack of camaraderie between the soldiers, who just want to go home.

There is no escape, no hope, some commit suicide, some just long for the coffin. Everyone is a victim, the Angolans, barely know what is happening, torn between the Colonizers ( the Portuguese) and the forces

'helping' them to overthrow the regime.

There is nothing, no medicines, no food for anyone, the starving people sit on their haunches, old men, women who prostitute themselves for a scrap of food, children who stretch out their matchstick arms with rusty tins through the barbed wire of the Camp.

Patience, endless patience and hopelessness is seen in the eyes of people.

We are brought face to face with the fact that this war is such a colossal waste with such terrible consequences. How can anyone ever forget that the war for Independence in Angola as well as Mozambique, turned into a Civil war that stretched on for a long time, when Portugal turned into a Democracy overnight. As is expected, brother fought brother, of course they were backed by powerful 'Democratic countries', but who cares for the horrible consequences? Who cares for the thousands of land mines buried deep in the soil of these Countries? For honestly who cares for illiterate, black people who in the eyes of many amount to nothing.

When Lobo Antunes returns to Portugal, life is never the same for him, nobody in Portugal respects these soldiers, slowly he loses everything, his marriage just meanders and ends, he sees his daughters once a week, he takes up drinking so that 'it will never be morning again' and has encounters with strange women in bars, just a sad beaten man.

Although brutal there are those moments of utter sadness permeated by luminosity, that lift the book out of being just a book of utter brutality and make it a beautiful story.

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## Katie says

In her translator's introduction, Margaret Jull Costa notes that this work's original Portuguese title was *Os cus de Judas*, which, roughly translated, pretty much means Judas's Assholes. Costa didn't go with this translation - I can't imagine her publishers would have been thrilled with it - and I think that it's sort of a shame. *The Land at the End of the World* suggests something fantastical or whimsical. Lobo Antunes's book isn't either of these things. It's nasty and cruel, dirty and sexualized. *Judas's Assholes* would have been much more fitting.

I'm still bouncing back and forth on what rating I'd like to give this book. I am very glad I read it; I also have very ambivalent feelings about it. I thought I'd read it in a few days, but it took me weeks, largely thanks to the fact that it was immensely difficult for me to read more than a few pages in a sitting. There were parts that drew me in, and that were beautiful; others parts were upsetting and repulsive. There were parts I genuinely hated, but I think I was supposed to hate them. So it's hard for me to assign a rating. 3 stars, in a lot of ways, is a bit of a coward's choice on my part.

Let's start with the writing, and Antunes's style, since it encapsulates a lot about how I feel towards this work as a whole. It can be breathtaking and beautiful. There are similes and metaphors absolutely everywhere, all over the pages, like Antunes is frantically reaching around in a wild jazz solo or modern dance in order to desperately convey his point. It's busy and overwhelming at points, but it's fascinating: his writing is filled with "banana trees with large fringed leaves, like the wings of decaying archangels," bats "flying in stumbling spirals like torn umbrellas in the wind," and thunderstorms "advanced in dark billows towards the barracks, rolling in the enormous pianos of the clouds down the stairways of the air." It's beautiful and surprising, just like good writing, and good poetry should be. I read a review that described this as a prose poem, and I think that's apt.

For me, though, sometimes Antunes got a bit too self-indulgent with his metaphors - one that particularly stuck with me and made me roll my eyes was about "El Greco greynounds" that "joined in melancholy coitus



and fixed us with the painfully imploring eyes of dying nuns." For every metaphor that's surprising and beautiful, there is usually one that trends towards the over-the-top. Individual mileage on this may vary, of course. And while some of the language seemed overwrought to me, I still sort of admire it, to a certain extent. I feel like Antunes metaphor-izes with wild abandon throughout the whole book. Some of them land, and some of them don't, but there's something to be said for the style and bravery of just going for it.

I also really admired Antunes's depiction of his nameless narrator's experience in war. The novel is framed around the narrator monologuing to a woman in a bar, flashing back and forth between his childhood, his time as a medical in the Portuguese colonial war in Angola, and his time settling back in (or not) to society in Lisbon. The way the story flits around gives the narrative the ability to recreate a sense of instability, lack of purpose, and the scattershot quality of traumatic memories.

All that said, the main reason that I can't bring myself to give it more than 3 stars is that it's *really* hard to read this book as a woman. I think a lot of this is intentional. But it's still rather brutal. Every woman who appears is silent and ruthlessly sexualized. Women are either raped, objectified, or function solely as objects of sexual solace for the narrator. It's absolutely exhausting and upsetting. I think that Antunes was attempting to make a point here - that war is dehumanizing to those who participate in it, and that they then dehumanize in turn - but we are so inextricably trapped in the narrators head that it just plays like an emotional horror show. It made it a difficult work to emotionally navigate, and I found myself, despite all the horrors he'd faced, losing sympathy for the narrator. At one point, he (view spoiler) And again, I think the argument could be made that this was done purposefully. But given the nature of the book's viewpoint - since we never hear the voice of any of the women - the book often seems to relish in sexual objectification and sexual violence.

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## **Bert Hirsch says**

The Land at the End of The World by Antonio Lobo Antunes

The narrator, a middle-class Portuguese medical student is encouraged by his family to join the Army and go to Angola to fight the war that the Dictator Salazar was fighting to save Portugal's false glory and his own grip on power. Sadly...

"True to the family prophesy, I had become a man: a kind of sad, cynical greed made up of lascivious despair, egotism, and an eagerness to hide from myself had replaced forever the fragile pleasure of childish joy, of open, unreserved laughter, embalmed in purity, and which at night, when I'm walking home down a deserted street, I seem to hear, echoing at my back like a mocking cascade."

Antunes, a psychiatrist, who himself served as a doctor in Angola in the 1970s tells this tale of a medic whose experience in the war changes him forever.

Through an ample dose of magical metaphors and poetic phrasing Antunes' creative imagination can, at times, dazzle and overwhelm the effects of this war on both the African populace and the soldiers who are held in check by Salazar's secret police.

The narrator is doomed, witnessing what he does, he becomes a sad, depressed and disillusioned man, cut off from family he drinks, loses sleep and the ability to love another person. Back in Lisbon he tells his tale to an unnamed lover as he relates how the war changed him.

“deep down of course, it is our own death that we fear when we imagine someone else’s – and that is what makes cowards of us all”.

There is a fair amount of sexual description which relates how he was loved well by an Angolan native recounting their lovemaking like, “making love to one another, as furiously as rhinoceroses with toothaches”. Yet his sexuality fades as do most of his other desires.

In the end this is a daunting, poetic indictment of dictatorships, war and imperialism. Antunes in his writing is as persuasive as Clarence Darrow and creative as both Pablo Neruda and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

A classic literary work, a cautionary tale, considered one of the great books of modern day Portuguese literature.

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## jeremy says

with nearly two dozen books to his name, antónio lobo antunes is unquestionably portugal's greatest and most accomplished living novelist. there are many (myself not included) that believe the swedish academy awarded the 1998 nobel prize to the wrong portuguese writer, though rumors persist that lobo antunes is an annual contender for the much coveted literary prize. his dense and powerful works are often compared to those of joyce, faulkner, and céline, though he denies influence from either of the former.

*the land at the end of the world (os cus de judas)* is lobo antunes' second novel, originally published in 1979. the work has been published previously in english under the title *south of nowhere*, with a translation by elizabeth lowe (1983, random house). this new rendering by margaret jull costa bears the distinctive quality that one expects of her translations (saramago, marías, pessoa, & eça de queirós). a side-by-side reading of the two english editions shows clearly that the new translation is much richer and more fluid than its predecessor. margaret jull costa also translated *the fat man and infinity*, a fantastic collection of essays and short stories that demonstrates another side to lobo antunes' many literary talents.

margaret jull costa writes in the introduction, "the title of this novel in portuguese is *os cus de judas*, 'cu de judas' being a slang term for any very remote, desolate place- 'the back of beyond,' 'the middle of nowhere,' 'the boonies'- but literally it means 'judas's asshole.'" the book's original title (more so than *the land at the end of the world*) is both a literal and figurative allusion to the book's harrowing narrative. it aptly conveys the harsh desolation of both the setting and the main character's internal state.

the story relates the tale of a nameless narrator as he recounts his time serving as a medic in the angolan interior during the portuguese colonial war. *the land at the end of the world* may well be lobo antunes' most autobiographical work, as he, too, spent over two years during the war as a medic. nearly all of the book's action takes place in a bar as the narrator, while attempting to charm a woman he wishes to spend the night with, offers up the harsh details and inescapable memories of his time in the war zone. his long, dark and often resentful monologues illustrate the timeless horrors of armed conflict and the lasting repercussions on individual lives and the nation as a whole. the narrator also muses upon the repressive portuguese government and the factors that led up to the 1974 revolution.

*we weren't mad dogs when we arrived here, i said to the lieutenant, who was seething with anger and indignation, we weren't mad dogs before the censored letters, the attacks, the ambushes, the mines, the lack of food and tobacco and cold drinks and matches and water and*

*coffins, before we were told that a berliet truck was worth more than a man and before we found out that the death of a soldier merited just three lines in the newspaper, he died in combat in angola, we weren't mad dogs, it's simply that we meant nothing to the mealy-mouthed state, who shat on us and used us as laboratory rats and who now at least are afraid of us, so afraid of our presence, of our unpredictable reactions and the remorse we represent that they cross the road if they see us coming, they avoid us, they don't want to face a battalion destroyed in the name of a lot of cynical ideas no one believes in, a battalion destroyed merely to defend the wealth of the three or four families who shore up the regime, the giant lieutenant turned to me, touched my arm and begged in a voice that was suddenly a child's voice, doctor, fix me up with some illness before i explode right here in the street from all the shit inside me.*

antónio lobo antunes crafts remarkable prose full of vivid description and analogy. his writing is both visceral and cerebral, combining for an effect that is both haunting and breathtaking. despite the horrific subject matter, lobo antunes manages to infuse the narrator with a dark humor that enlivens his character. while decrying rampant atrocity and state-sponsored neglect (or, rather, indifference), lobo antunes is still able to breathe a beauty into the work that contrasts sharply with the emotions the story is intended to elicit. his literary dexterity allows both the story and the language to flourish, and the synergistic effect truly is bewildering.

*the land at the end of the world* has been hailed as lobo antunes' masterpiece, and it certainly is deserving of such praise. his other works, however, resonate with as fevered a pitch, and if this story offers something the others do not, it may simply be that it was informed by the young novelist's own experiences of the tragedy and absurdity that is modern warfare. with antónio lobo antunes' training as a psychiatrist, his insight into war's effects on the mind and spirit offer another dimension that lend this work its great richness and relevance. *the land at the end of the world* is an exceptional work of art, one that further demonstrates the potent talents of a masterful storyteller.

*no, seriously, happiness, that vague state resulting from an impossible convergence of parallel lines in the form of a good digestion and a smug egotism untouched by regrets, still seems to me- for i belong to the glum category of the sad and restless, eternally waiting for an explosion or a miracle- something as abstract and strange as innocence, justice, honor, those profound, grandiloquent, and ultimately empty concepts that the family, school, the catechism, and the state solemnly imposed upon me so as to tame me more easily, to nip in the bud, if i may put it like that, any stirrings of protest and rebellion. what others demand of us, you understand, is that we don't cause them to doubt, that we don't disturb their teeny-tiny lives, which they have carefully insulated against despair and hope, that we don't shatter their aquariums of deaf fish floating in the slimy water of the day-to-day, lit obliquely by the sleepy lamp of what we call virtue, which, when looked at closely, turns out to be merely the lukewarm absence of ambition.*

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**BlackOxford says**

**The Portuguese Vietnam**

While the USA was engaged during the 1960's and 70's in its insane war in Vietnam, Portugal was digging proportionately even deeper graves in its African colony of Angola (one and one half million men went to Africa, from a population of ten million; almost 80,000 died on all sides). Somewhat lower-tech than the American effort, the Portuguese troops went out not by jet plane but by ship, hardly a morale-building experience - they travelled in the same cargo holds that carried the coffins which would bring many of them home. Lobo Antunes was a doctor conscripted to help reduce the number of coffins needed.

Military discipline doesn't mitigate the emotional immaturity, frustration and fear of young soldiers, it condenses extreme emotions for periodic explosive release. The explosions, as we know, may continue for a life-time. Alcohol and prescription drug abuse seem to be popular longer-term dysfunctions; but the more immediate effect of putting lethal weapons in the hands of half-cooked, troubled adults is a casual, unpredictable inhumanity and the occasional massacre... and, of course, a chronic inability to talk coherently about the experience, even if that's all they do talk about. It's called post-traumatic stress disorder.

Lobo Antunes's voice (it can hardly be called a protagonist since it doesn't even have a name) has PTSD. He can't shut up about what he's gone through except to comment on what he's going through at the moment as a consequence. Guilt alternates with the effects of military irrationality, "...is it the guerrillas who are murdering us or is it Lisbon, or is it the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese, or the whole fucking lot of them determined to screw us good and proper in the name of certain interests that escape me now...? ...Is there anyone who can explain this absurdity?" He understandably avoids mention of the secret police, the PIDE, which had more power than the army, and was more dangerous than the enemy.

They return unfit for normal life, as they always do, because war makes everything - relationships, possessions, personal history - cheap, disposable, and temporary. The young soldiers, "shipwreck victims", are shunted into "islands of despair", military hospitals of a quality and capability of the 19th century. However, for the Portuguese returning from Angola, as undoubtedly for those Americans returning from Vietnam, those French from Algeria, those Dutch from Indonesia and those Russians from Afghanistan, among so many others, it is the malign indifference of one's fellow citizens that is the final crushing blow. The shock of loss is far more profound than the relief of safety:

*"We spent twenty-seven months together in the asshole of the world, twenty-seven months of anguish and death in the sands of Eastern Angola...we ate the same homesickness, the same shit, the same fear, and yet it took us just five minutes to say goodbye, a handshake, a pat on the back, a vague embrace, and then, bent under the weight of our baggage, we were gone, out through the main gate and off into the civilian whirlwind of the city."*

Would that young men realise that this is inevitable and refuse the commands of the old men who hide it from them. Only then might the old men stop.

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## **Marcella Rossi says**

Andare a morire in culo al mondo era l'espressione utilizzata dai giovani portoghesi quando ricevevano la cartolina di arruolamento per la guerra in Angola che il Portogallo di Salazar aveva condotto contro il movimento di liberazione angolano (l'Mpla). Quella che è stata l'ultima guerra coloniale europea, contro le ex-colonie africane, costituì per il Portogallo una sorta di Vietnam, una guerra assurda e non voluta dall'opinione pubblica, nonostante la propaganda fascista, un dramma nazionale che provocò oltre novemila morti, tutti tra i giovanissimi arruolati, e interrotto solo dalla sollevazione degli ufficiali il 25 aprile del 1974,

la cosiddetta “Rivoluzione dei garofani”.

Un lungo monologo, un racconto lungo una notte che il protagonista fa ad una donna bevendo assieme in un bar, ed ancora nella notte mentre si recano a casa di lui per consumare un rapporto. Racconto della guerra, ma soprattutto della solitudine, della quieta disperazione, di un sentimento di inadeguatezza e incapacità. Somiglia a Faulkner dicono, a me è venuto in mente Celine. Ci sono brani di incredibile scrittura, un incipit bellissimo, metafore e alchimie. Non è un libro facilissimo, di quelli che ti catturano dalle prime pagine, e non è che la voce narrante sia esattamente amabile, ma se si insiste nella lettura, nel vortice di parole che scorrono, si finisce catturati da questa scrittura vertiginosa e allucinata. Bello, complesso, difficile, ci sono brani da sottolineare e rileggere e gustare. Quattro stelle quasi cinque, ma solo perché sono incontentabile.

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## Christopher says

What I dislike most about this book is that I dislike it. I closed the cover with an alarmingly low empathy level, and for reasons that may appear petty and pedantic.

The vague, non-spoiler sketch: a semi-autobiographical young Portuguese doctor goes off to war in Angola and comes home to find that he cannot shrug off the horrors and simply continue prosaic modern life.

This is material that should move me. But it doesn't. And here's why: I couldn't stomach the non-stop, gratuitous, and sometimes totally inane similes and metaphors.

There are certain horrific descriptions of the war and of alienation that were potent. But then, a dogpile of metaphors would emerge, like a teeming mass of ants, like a mass avian migration whose flapping vitality would...and I would either start to fall asleep or look ahead for the chapter break.

I just couldn't get immersed. I'm sorry. This is supposed to be a masterpiece, but I don't see it. I admit that I haven't fought in a war. So maybe that's it. But I don't know because I've read other books about war that have torn me to shreds.

And I don't think it's the Englishing either because some of the figurative comparisons were quite good. But it was a veritable hot-dog-eating contest. And not in a good way.

I would support my claims, with some excerpts but I don't have the stomach for it.

2.5 stars, rounding up (so I don't get shanked).

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## Neva says

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## Cxr says

Con questo espediente e con una scrittura letteralmente saturata di aggettivi e di metafore divertenti e mai banali Antunes riesce a intrattenere senza pesantezza al punto che la ferocia di certi episodi accaduti in Angola colpisce a tradimento, del tutto inattesa nell'atmosfera quasi ironica di certe pagine. Si rimane senza fiato. Difficile dopo una simile lettura continuare pensare che una guerra di invasione possa avere un senso. Eppure Afghanistan e Iraq sembrano dimostrare che la letteratura europea non è mai troppo frequentata dagli americani, (pseudo) strateghi del mondo contemporaneo.

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## Steve says

Antonio Lobo Antunes' *The Land at the End of the World* may well be the best war novel written by a leftist psychiatrist of the Freudian school. I suppose that sounds a bit snarky, or narrow, but it's not meant to be a criticism but a snapshot of what to expect. The unnamed narrator (like Antunes) was a medic during Portugal's war in Angola. He is haunted by his experience, and his memories, nine years later, are constantly circling back to the war and its horrors.

The novel opens at (appropriately) a zoo. In such a setting there are of course multiple memory triggers to take him back to the jungles of Angola. One particularly nasty, but important image is that of the baboons' "anal conjunctivitis" which the narrator compares, while talking to his current lover, to "eyelids inflamed with combustible hemorrhoids." Ouch. But there's a point to such imagery, which is betrayed by the translator. The real title of the book is meant to be *Judas's Asshole*, which the translator, Margaret Jull Costa, in her introduction, deemed to be too "flip." Maybe that's what she saw, but since an earlier translation followed a similar tack when it came to the title, I tend to think the editors were worrying about selling a book with the word "Asshole" in its title (especially to libraries). I'm probably spending too much time on this, but this is meant to be an angry book. The whole A-hole thing is a deliberate thread throughout the book, and it's meant to be an indictment of Portuguese society, which was a fascist one at the time the narrator went to war (in the late 1960s).

But being a Freudian, Antunes spends a great deal of time pondering other things, other openings. By the end of the book this all gets wearying. The narrator loves his women, or wants to at least. And they all (wife, African lover, current lover) seem to meld together, as he keeps up a novel long conversation with them about how messed up he is by the war, while contemplating, graphically, all things sexual. Eventually the women get tagged as Sophia, which I found pretentious, but such a stick by this point is part of a large bundle. As a war novelist, Antunes is one of the most sensitive to ever set pen to paper, which can at times be quite beautiful, and at other times to be unnecessary cultural clutter for high end hipsters. The novel jumps from one modernist poet or artist to another, and then back again to Angola. The Angolan scenes, by



the way, are quite well done. There are comparisons, on the book jacket, to Faulkner and Conrad. I think there's some truth to that, in both character studies and settings. Still, I felt that the many interesting parts (and there are some stunning passages worth reading) didn't equal a satisfying whole.

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## **Ubik 2.0 says**

### **Leggo per diletto**

...non per dovere, per motivi di studio o impegno di lavoro.

Non capisco quindi perché dovrei continuare a cozzare contro le pagine di questo libro, che pure sono state tanto apprezzate da diversi miei amici, ma che a me producono solo fatica e incomprensione.

Dopo l'ennesimo tentativo mi arrendo e dovrei in teoria catalogare il libro fra gli "abbandonati", ma credo che gli abbandonati siano libri che potrebbero anche essere ripresi in futuro, mentre su questo non voglio più cimentarmi per il motivo che ho messo all'inizio di questa nota.

Respingo la tentazione di chiudere con facili ma volgari parafrasi del titolo e me ne vado.

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## **Nikos Tsentemeidis says**

«?να εικονοκλαστικ? μυθιστ?ρημα, μια «κλινικ?» περιγραφ? και μια σαρωτικ? σ?τιρα που εξηγε? γιατ? η επανασ?σταση των Γαριφ?λων ξεκ?νησε μ?σα απ? τη λ?σπη της Αγκ?λας.» - Liberation.

?να μυθιστ?ρημα με πολιτικ?ς προεκτ?σεις, καυστικ? προς την αποιοκρατ?α της Πορτογαλ?ας στην Αγκ?λα.

Ο τρ?πος γραφ?ς πολ? ασυν?θιστος για μ?να. Περιγραφ?ς που χ?νονται στο λαβ?ρινθο μιας επιτηδευμ?νης γλ?σσας, που τελικ? κουρ?ζουν και αποσυντον?ζουν τον αναγν?στη ως προς το κεντρικ? θ?μα.

Θεωρ? πως ε?χε τη δυνατ?τητα, να μην αδικ?σει τον εαυτ? του. Θα ?θελα να διαβ?σω και κ?τι ?λλο δικ? του για μια πιο ολοκληρωμ?νη ?ποψη. ?λλωστε αφορμ? στ?θηκε μια συν?ντευξη, αν δεν κ?νω λ?θος, του Harold Bloom, ?τι τον θεωρε? αν?τερο του Saramago στην Πορτογαλ?α.

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## **T for Tongue-tied says**

Dear senhor Antunes,

Your comforts are few, your humour dark but the words you say make my heart strip naked and dance in the sunlight of the fading day. You talk beyond exhaustion, stumbling through the depths of memory and drunkenness, through the abattoir of colonialist mayhem, of wasted villages and terrified soldiers who stare

out into the dark, yet you are still able to breathe beauty into words, so sharply contrasting with the emotions your story is intended to elicit... The endless visions of abstract ideas that give birth to the most curious amalgamations between the past and slowly decomposing present, like a strange cross-painting between Bosch and Chagall... - our innocence that we once knew and do not possess anymore has been long-lost, hasn't it, senhor? It haunts us like a faint, almost angry echo of our memories, bringing the most horrific sense of defeat that forever lingers in the depths of our souls... Life dissolves slowly and so do I, like the remnant of a sweet on the curled shell of your loquacious tongue...

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