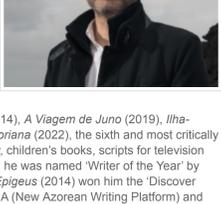


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Almeida Maia: One of the most compelling Azorean writers of his generation – Interview

Posted on 05 November 2022. By Carolina Matos, Editor



Novelist and poet, Pedro Filipe Almeida Maia was born in 1979, in Ponta Delgada, Azores, where he lives. A psychologist by training, he stepped into his literary career in 1996 as a lyricist, writing for local musicians. One of the most acclaimed, most prolific, and most awarded Azorean writers of his generation, he made his fiction writing debut with the novel Bom Tempo no Canal: A Conspiração da Energia (2012), which awarded him the 'Prémio Letras em Movimento', followed by Capítulo 41: A Redescoberta da Atlântida (2013), Nove Estações (2014), A Viagem de Juno (2019), Ilha-América (2020) and, in its second edition, Escrava Açoriana (2022), the sixth and most critically acclaimed of his novels. He has also published poetry, children's books, scripts for television series and contributed to various anthologies. In 2014, he was named 'Writer of the Year' by Correiho dos Açores newspaper. His poetry Vinhas e Epigeus (2014) won him the 'Discover Azores Award' of the year. A founding member of PENA (New Azorean Writing Platform) and the NAU (New United Authors), Almeida Maia holds a degree in Psychology from the University of the Azores and a Master's Degree in Human Resources Psychology. He completed postgraduate studies in the Universities of Coimbra and Barcelona (Spain). With a literary career spanning over 10 years, his highly acclaimed books, not yet translated into English, are available in Portuguese at Amazon.com.

In this interview with Carolina Matos, for the Portuguese American Journal, Almeida Maia speaks of how he found his literary voice(s), his fascination with sci-fi and time travel, sometimes towards the past, sometimes towards the future, in search of an Atlantic identity of universal dimension.

Q. What happened in your life that inspired you to become a writer?

A. Not a specific event. I would say. Mostly due to influences, such as admirable teachers along the path. I remember writing my first poems at age 13, right after getting a guitar from my mother. She would also bring home a considerable number of books—mostly comics, adventure and crime fiction—for me to read. Our house was just beside Manuel Ferreira's residence, the writer of the iconic Azorean novel O Barco e o Sonho, who's constant presence could have also played an inspiring role while I was growing up. Later I joined a band and dedicated about a decade of my life to music, but soon I started to shift away from it.

Q. When did you start to write and for whom do you write? Do you imagine an ideal reader for your books? What is literature for you?

A. In 2010 I began to take writing more seriously by entering—and winning—the Letras em Movimento literary prize. Two years later, my first book, a crime fiction novel titled Bom Tempo no Canal, was published and received numerous appraisals. In my mind there's no such thing as the ideal reader, only readers that I immensely respect. But I often imagine my daughters reading my books today or in the future. Regarding literature and its definition: for me it is the voice of the unheard. It allows a loud message to be sent silently.

Q. Literature can take many forms, poetry, prose, fiction, drama. What attracted you to fiction writing?

A. For me, one of the greatest pleasures is in the act of creation, whatever the form. Music allowed me to explore that possibility to a certain level. I mostly write with the intention to innovate somehow. I have also written, for example, movie scripts or even short stories for catalogs and museum exhibitions, another form of artistic intersection: it implies absorbing other points of view, other manifestations of art and thus producing some kind of disruption. Fiction is the broadest field for creation, where virtually anything can fit, where there are less barriers.

Q. About your literary affinities, is there any influence, any writer, writers, that you admire and have affected what you write?

A. In my youth, one of the authors I read the most was Rex Stout, later adding H.G. Wells and Hemingway. I must emphasize Manuel Ferreira and João de Melo, besides a considerable amount of Azorean literature. I also find inspiration in Hermann Hesse, Huxley, Fitzgerald, Sepúlveda and Mário de Carvalho, but I read a little bit of everything, including poetry and non-fiction—such as scientific journals.

Q. What was the book you read that made you think, "I've got to write something like this someday!"?

A. Probably H. G. Wells' The Time Machine. By the time I read it, though, I wasn't planning on writing books yet. Siddhartha, by Hermann Hesse, and Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea were other important books for me.

Q. Your prose integrates Spanish, English, French and vernacular appropriations, such as slang, neologisms, and Azorean idioms coined from American English. How would you describe your relationship to language?

A. I see myself as an enthusiast of language and its meanings. I would create a universal language, if only I had the time.

Q. How do you start writing a book? Do you have a process. How has your writing process changed since you started writing?

A. There is not a static method to writing a book: it's a dynamic process, with distinct phases in a certain sequence. I start by deciding the topic, which may surface without warning or from a list that I keep. During the investigation stage, I speak with experts, read books, newspapers, science papers, watch documentaries and movies. I build a temporary structure of the story, which will guide me, although changes to the plot are frequent. The end of the story can either be set early on or decided later (sometimes in the last moment), so I keep an open mind throughout the process. Then I adjust my schedule to ensure I have time for writing. I do try to stick to it, but it can become staggering sometimes, especially when you have a demanding job and a family.

Q. Your approach to writing is unapologetically pragmatic and irresistibly compelling. What has most inspired and influenced your writing style?

A. I write science-based fiction. Whenever possible, I verify the veracity of events or validate it with research. For example, in the science fiction A Viagem de Juno (2019), I claim that some animal species may be extinct in 2049, based on scientific articles. Another thing is my routine of scriptwriting, which can bring some cinematic qualities to my fiction novels.

Q. You draw your writing material from a broad range of styles and sources, resulting in an interesting blend of genres. Do you see yourself the author-as-entertainer?

A. I see myself the author-as-storyteller, someone with the desire to tell stories, who wishes to learn the craft of writing. Each new book is an opportunity to improve.

Q. Your writing uses very little material that readers can trace back to you and your personal life. Why?

A. Until now, I haven't felt that a specific aspect of my personal life is worth exploring in a book. Of course, there are always autobiographical elements in every writer's work—even if the author says otherwise—but I try to avoid writing the same story over and over again. This might change in the future, if I find it emotionally relevant to include.

Q. You have published six books in ten years. Aren't you at all bothered that you are too prolific and that your books are too eclectic and broad ranging?

A. There are way more prolific writers than myself. Anyway, it's not a race. And my goal is to tell unique stories, regardless of the subject. I don't want to write the same book all my life.

Q. Your books are greatly informed by journeys. Except for your first novel, Bom Tempo no Canal, a conspiracy detective thriller, and for Ilha-América, narrating a factual trip of epic proportions, your fictional storylines and characters travel through time past, as in Capítulo 41: A Redescoberta da Atlântida, or across the future as in A Viagem de Juno. Why that fascination with traveling across time?

A. Time traveling itself is a theme of my interest, but mostly I try to map the Azorean reality in different moments, telling relevant stories, as pictures taken throughout a timeline, and that includes the future.

Q. Your science fiction creation, A Viagem de Juno, placing the Azores in the center of the world, mimics how we could live in the future. It deals with environmental issues in a world that is constantly changing as a response to climate disruptions. Work with this orientation has been designated cli-fi as for "climate fiction." What do you make of this? Is it right to say that sci-fi can predict how human life will look like in the future?

A. In A Viagem de Juno, which has also been selected for the Azores Regional Reading Plan, I describe a possible future, in the year 2049, in which humankind continues to ignore climate change. This futuristic society communicates using transparent and wearable devices persistently. The book was written before the pandemic crisis, but it predicted that the world would, in the meantime, be "ravaged by several pandemics." All of this was based on what was already studied in 2018, so yes, I believe science can make accurate predictions. Unfortunately, we are continuously ignoring it, as a society.

Q. Your most recent book, the novel A Escrava Açoriana, depicts a mix of real facts, historical events and fiction, based on the life experiences of real people who emigrated as indentured servants from the Azores to Brazil in the 19th century. Why did you write this book?

A. I ran into stories of Azorean emigration to Brazil and I was impressed by the way women were treated then. It's a period of our history that we haven't been paying attention to, I think. I was compelled to tell this story, also because very few people knew about it. Rosário's life could be true: she represents many smaller stories from that time.

Q. In A Escrava Açoriana the protagonist is a young woman who, during her early formative years, experiences a profound loss of self-esteem and worth before she embarks on a journey of personal growth and redemption, towards maturity, self-fulfillment and liberation. Is she your favorite character amongst all the characters you have created?

A. Desirée from Nove Estações and Lucas from A Viagem de Juno are also complex characters that I'm very proud of, but Rosário has this tendency to experience loss and still surpass it so many times that we end up wishing the best outcome for her, even if she messes everything up repeatedly.

Q. Your two last books, Ilha-América and A Escrava Açoriana are socially engaged. They portray marginalized Azoreans, the hopeless lives of the very poor, the disenfranchised, people who would pay any price to escape their poverty-stricken existence. Following the 1974 April Revolution, the Azores became a self-governing region of Portugal. Emigration has since paused with the perception that poverty is subsiding, while quality of life is improving. What has changed and what has stayed the same?

A. A few things have changed for the better, but the core challenges remain: people continue to leave, poverty is still an issue, decently-paid jobs are scarce and education is not really a priority. Tourism won't solve every problem.

Q. Never before so many books have been published in the Azores, about the Azores by Azorean authors. Yet the concept of an actual existing body of "Literatura Açoriana" is still controversial. A literature that (just to name a few), reveals itself in Antero de Quental, Vitorino Nemésio, Natália Correia, Pedro da Silveira, João de Melo, Álamo Oliveira, and also the newer generations, yourself included, together with many talented women writers such as Malvina Sousa, Carolina Cordeiro, Ângela Almeida, Amélia Meireles, Leonor Sampaio da Silva, among others. Do you believe that, indeed, there is a distinctive Azorean Literature?

A. I believe that there is an Azorean literature, in the same way other literatures relate to their specific roots. This constant need for humans to label everything is all about self-knowledge: we need to know what we once were, but also what we want to be someday.

Q. What are you writing on right now?

A. I almost always keep two or more projects running simultaneously. When I finished the crime fiction novel Capítulo 41: A Redescoberta da Atlântida (2013), and while editing, I wrote Nove Estações (2014). I am currently returning to music, writing lyrics with some musical artists. I have been contributing to literary magazines—essay, chronicle and short stories—but my next novel will be the story of a young Azorean gangster that lived in the US during the Prohibition.

Q. Some characters in of your novels are interconnected with the United States. Have you ever visited the country?

A. I have family in the US, so it's always on my mind. I've visited the country years ago and now finally scheduled a new trip to Boston for next year. I need to hug and revisit everyone, but also to promote A Escrava Açoriana and to continue investigating for the next book.

Q. Are you familiar with the newest generation of English language Portuguese heritage writers?

A. Not as much as I should. I'm constantly discovering, reading, and looking out for new books and authors. I meet new people at literary events or during online conferences, but I feel I need to get in touch more often. Visiting the US could be helpful in that matter.

Q. Many Portuguese language writers, including Azorean writers, have been translated into English. Your books in translation would be of great interest for the Portuguese American audience. Would you like to comment?

A. As a first step to reach American readers, A Escrava Açoriana has already become available as an eBook, on Amazon, Apple Books and Kobo, for example. It's only the Portuguese version, for now, but recent conversations have convinced me that we may have English translations in the near future.

Q. You keep a day job to make a living. Have you considered writing as a full-time profession?

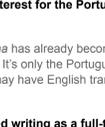
A. Publishing my sixth novel A Escrava Açoriana with a national editor already represents a new cycle: it makes it possible to grasp a greater number of readers and, somehow, to spread the message of the Azorean uniqueness with greater reach. Hopefully, it will also allow me to look at writing as a professional activity, along with psychology. Of course, it also brings new challenges, new working methods and new people to relate with, but there's also the possibility of continuing to evolve as a writer and as a person.

Q. Is there anything you would say to beginner writers?

A. I would say read a lot—immensely—and from different authors, to write with dedication, to be able to be afraid of being read (preferably by those who criticize honestly), but also not to publish in a hurry. The idea that a book comes out perfectly the first time is a misconception.

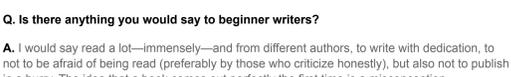
Available Online

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Carolina Matos is the founder and editor of the Portuguese Portuguese American Journal blog online. She was the Editor-in-Chief for The Portuguese American Journal, in print, from 1985 to 1995. From 1995 to 2010, she was a consultant for Lisbon based Lus-American Development Foundation (FLAD). She graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Liberal Arts and a Master's Degree in English and Education from Brown University and holds a Doctorate in Education from Lesley University. She is a former adjunct professor at Lesley University, where she taught undergraduate and graduate courses. In 2004, Carolina Matos was honored with the Comenda da Ordem do Infante D. Henrique presented by Jorge Sampaio, President of Portugal.



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