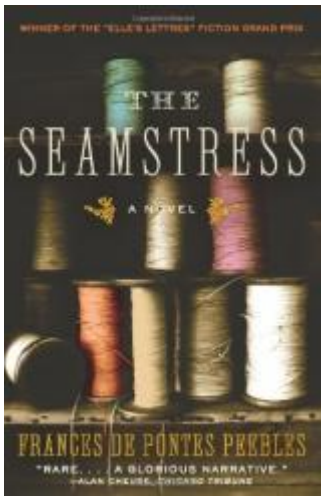
The Seamstress

by Frances de Pontes Peebles



About the Book

As seamstresses, the young sisters Emília and Luzia dos Santos know how to cut, how to mend, and how to conceal. These are useful skills in the lawless backcountry of Brazil, where ruthless land barons called “colonels” feud with bands of outlaw cangaceiros, trapping innocent residents in the cross fire. Emília, whose knowledge of the world comes from fashion magazines and romance novels, dreams of falling in love with a gentleman and escaping to a big city. Luzia also longs to escape their little town, where residents view her with suspicion and pity. Scarred by a childhood accident that left her with a deformed arm, the quick-tempered Luzia finds her escape in sewing and in secret prayers to the saints she believes once saved her life.

But when Luzia is abducted by a group of cangaceiros led by the infamous Hawk, the sisters’ quiet lives diverge in ways they never imagined. Emília stumbles into marriage with Degas Coelho, the son of a doctor whose wealth is rivaled only by his political power. She moves to the sprawling seaside of Recife, where the glamour of her new life is soon overshadowed by heartache and loneliness. Luzia, forced to trek through scrubland and endure a nomadic existence, proves her determination to survive and begins to see cangaceiros as comrades, not criminals.

In Recife, Emília must hide any connection to her increasingly notorious sister. As she learns to navigate the treacherous waters of Brazilian high society, Emília sees the country split apart after a bitter presidential election. Political feuds extend to the countryside, where Luzia and Hawk are forced to make unexpected alliances and endure betrayals that threaten to break the cangaceiros apart. But Luzia will overcome time and distance to entrust her sister with a great secret --- one Emília vows to keep. And when Luzia’s life is threatened, Emília will risk everything to save her.

Discussion Guide

1. How does their shared childhood as poor, religious, orphaned seamstresses shape Emília and Luzia’s unique perspectives on life?

2. How does access to water define political power in a country like Brazil in the 1920s and 1930s? How did the author’s descriptions of extreme drought affect your appreciation of modern conveniences?

3. How does the Hawk’s treatment of Luzia in the caatinga, or scrub, reveal Antônio’s true nature?

4. What does Emília's reception into Recife society indicate about the esteem in which the Coelho family is held? To what extent is her mother-in-law, Dona Dulce Coelho, overly concerned about others' perceptions of Emília?

5. To what extent are secrets responsible for the marriage between Degas and Emília and, much later, for its disintegration?

6. How does Luzia's behavior in the initial aftermath of Antônio's death explain her success in becoming the new captain of the cangaceiros? In what other ways does her behavior change once the Hawk is dead?

7. How do Dr. Duarte's interests in phrenology and politics and his import-export business connect him to the government's search for the Seamstress and the Hawk?

8. At various points in the novel, how does Dr. Eronildes Epifano represent both salvation and damnation to the cangaceiros? What role does Degas play in alerting Emília to Dr. Eronildes's duplicity?

9. Given the Seamstress's attacks on innocent people, to what extent are Emília's efforts to communicate information to Luzia through newspaper articles and photographs ethically defensible?

10. How does the book's final image connect with earlier images of bones in **The Seamstress**? Why do you think the author chose to close her book with this image?

Author Bio

Frances de Pontes de Peebles was born in Pernambuco, Brazil. A graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she has received several awards, including Brazil's Sacatar Artist's Fellowship and the Michener-Copernicus Society of America Award. Her short stories have appeared in *Zoetrope: All-Story*, the *Indiana Review*, the *Missouri Review*, and the *O. Henry Prize Story Collection 2005*.

Critical Praise

"**The Seamstress** is a gripping portrait of the lives of two sisters caught in the political unbalance of a country at a crossroads. Bittersweet, beautifully written, this sweeping saga is as impossible to put down as it is to forget."

The Seamstress
by Frances de Pontes Peebles

Publication Date: August 1, 2009
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 656 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 006073888X
ISBN-13: 9780060738884