



From literature to medicine

Seeing COVID-19 through José Saramago's *Blindness*

Some 6 months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the emotional devastation, socioeconomic impacts, and pressures on front-line health-care workers continue to shape our world. While words cannot always do justice to the extent of individual suffering from this disease, fiction can sometimes offer a way to process the present moment, and this feels particularly true of Portuguese writer José Saramago's *Blindness* (1995).

The novel chronicles an unprecedented epidemic of blindness that sweeps across an unnamed country. It opens with one man at a traffic stop, his world suddenly enveloped in a milky whiteness. He is taken to an ophthalmologist's office where, after walking through a busy waiting room, he leaves the whole clinic, including the doctor, infected. The group is quarantined in an old asylum by the ministry of health. The doctor and his wife, who miraculously maintains her sight, are sequestered there as well.

Inside the asylum, panic spreads "faster than the legs that carry it". The doctor's wife quickly learns how fear and the feeling of being unseen—and therefore unjudged for your actions—can lead to moral depravity as she and others are subjected to rape, extortion, and murder by fellow wardmates.

Finally, when the entire city turns blind and the quarantined group emerges, they find their city in ruins. Wandering the abandoned streets, they find themselves in a church where holy statues have their eyes covered in white cloth and paintings have their eyes obscured by white paint. This is a world that appears forever changed. In that world, even the saints did not deserve to see amid the suffering of the blind.

Then, as quickly as it came, the blindness recedes. The world buzzes with optimism, as if awakened

from a nightmare. But the doctor's wife—who saw the realities inside the asylum walls—fears that the suffering will have been in vain. The people of her city, she knows, will soon forget, even as she cannot. That is her sacrifice: to witness the horrors others could ignore and to serve as the historical record for what really happened behind the asylum walls.

She learns the paradox of this epidemic of blindness is that it illuminated more than it obscured. As the doctor's wife reflects: "I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see." The citizens of the city chose to not see the cruelty hiding under the surface in themselves and in others. It took an epidemic to shed a blinding light on the darkness that was always beneath.

The same is true of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed many entrenched injustices and inequalities. Pushing health-care systems and resources to their limits in many countries, this global pandemic has brought prescient issues such as systemic racism, the state of social safety nets, and variations in access to health care into focus. And for a brief time, we have lost our ability to look away, as death counts and videos of the critically ill in hospital wards invade our consciousness.

And yet, many appear to be refusing to look or are already forgetting. It is a story of two worlds. In some countries, disinformation about COVID-19 has led to protests demanding the lifting of quarantine outside the hospital walls; meanwhile, inside, fatigued health-care workers in intensive care units provide dedicated care and support for countless patients who are scared, severely ill, and alone. More than ever, the contemporary records of health-care professionals' and their

patients' experiences are needed to counterbalance the emerging narratives from some quarters that downplay the extent of the pandemic.

One day, COVID-19, too, shall pass. What will remain? Many will remember the solitude of the quarantine and suffer from the financial recession that is sure to follow; others will remember the loss of a loved one. But the memories of suffering and sacrifice will inevitably fade. Health-care workers' and patients' writings, social media posts, podcasts, and photographs, testifying to what they have seen inside the hospital walls, will help those on the outside see in and resist our desire to forget. Because forgetting this moment is something we cannot afford.

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