

“The child portrayed in both the short stories and the children’s books seems closely associated with the child within Clarice Lispector herself”: A Conversation with Mell Brites



MELL BRITES

in a photograph by Renato Parada

MELL BRITES is the author of *As crianças de Clarice: Narrativas da infância e outras revelações* [The Children of Clarice: Narratives of Childhood and Other Revelations] (Editora da Unicamp, 2022). She is currently pursuing her PhD studies at the São Paulo State University and holds a master’s degree in Brazilian literature, focusing on “The Concept of Childhood in Clarice Lispector’s Children’s Books and Short Stories.” She teaches a course on the history of children’s literature at the Tomie Ohtake Institute and was a fellow at the International Youth Library (Munich, 2018). She also has a publishing career. She is the publisher of *Today’s* children’s book imprint and worked as the executive editor at Grupo Companhia das Letras for eleven years, where she was responsible for overseeing their children’s and educational list. She has won

the New Horizons Digital Prize (Bologna, Italy, 2012) and has been a finalist several times for the BOP Best Children’s Publisher of the Year (Bologna, Italy). She has published many essays and articles, including “Against the Wall: Humor and Censorship in Children’s Literature,” *The Lion and The Unicorn*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2022).

Weronika Kostecka: Clarice Lispector, an exceptionally talented Brazilian writer of Ukrainian-Jewish descent, is relatively poorly known in Poland. So far, in Poland, a translation of the novel *A hora da estrela* [*Hour of the Star*] (1977/1992) has been published under the title *Godzina gwiazdy* (1987) and a collection of her short stories under the title *Opowiadania wszystkie* [Collected Stories] (2016).

Earlier, some of these stories were occasionally published in the literary magazine *Literatura na Świecie* and in several anthologies. Moreover, in 2023, the Polish translation of the novel *Perto do coração selvagem* [*Near to the Wild Heart*] (1943/1990) was also released under the title *W pobliżu dzikiego serca*. Meanwhile, as Michał Lipszyc, a Polish expert and translator of some of her works, writes in his article “Clarice nad Wisłą” [Clarice on Vistula], “In the Portuguese-speaking world, and to some extent in the English-speaking world, Lispector today holds the status of a canonical writer and occupies a prominent place in popular culture, her likeness appears on Brazilian T-shirts and postage stamps, and thanks to the dark power of the internet, it is distributed quite freely through excerpts, catchy quotes, compilations of »thoughts and aphorisms«, and glamorous opinions about it, quoted with pleasure by critics and publishers” (Lipszyc, 2019, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/8593-clarice-nad-wisla.html>).¹ As the author of the monograph *As crianças de Clarice: Narrativas da infância e outras revelações* [The Children of Clarice: Narratives of Childhood and Other Revelations] (2022), what inspired you to explore this writer and her work?

Mell Brites: Clarice Lispector occupies a unique place in Brazilian literature. When she published her first book, *Perto do coração selvagem*, she was even compared to Virginia Woolf. She is one of the few Brazilian authors of her time who embraced an existentialist and introspective writing style. In her works, the landscape seen is that of the self, exploring the rugged reliefs of emotions, the vast and unpopulated plains of uncertainty, and the tortuous paths of reason. When her first novel came out, Antonio Candido, one of the greatest Brazilian literary critics, wrote in his 1970 essay “No raiar de Clarice Lispector” [At the Rise of Clarice Lispector]:

In fact, this novel is an impressive attempt to take our clumsy language into unexplored domains, forcing it to adapt itself to a thought full of mystery, for which we feel that fiction is not an exercise or an affective adventure, but a real instrument of the spirit, capable of making us penetrate some of the most twisted labyrinths of the mind (p. 127).²

Clarice used writing as a tool to investigate the self. Her work involves a non-conformist and tireless search for what constitutes the essence of being. This gaze, which investigates the interior and possibly is the author’s most significant mark, makes her a unique and unavoidable phenomenon in Brazilian

¹ Translated by the interviewer, Weronika Kostecka.

² All translations from Portuguese by the interviewee, Mell Brites.

literature. We do not encounter, before or after, anything that comes close to her work in terms of language and poetics; Clarice has no clear affiliation with-in the context of our literary history.

I got to know Clarice Lispector while still in school (like many Brazilians), and since then, I have never stopped reading her. My book and my research arose from the desire to study a little-discussed facet of the author: her vision of childhood, which is present in many of her writings.

What do you believe to be the underlying reason for Clarice Lispector's popularity, not only in Brazil and Portugal but also in the English-speaking world?

Besides what I mentioned above, which is strictly related to the originality of her work, I think it is worth noting that Clarice was also a figure that sparked curiosity. As an immigrant, she spoke Portuguese with an accent and spent many years living outside Brazil because she married a diplomat. She gave very few interviews and had very idiosyncratic habits. Clarice had no commitment to a standard of normality. Her trip to a witchcraft congress in Colombia, where she read *O ovo e a galinha* [*The Egg and the Chicken*] (1964/1986), one of her most famous texts, exemplifies her approach to life and was much publicised by critics and the press at the time. All this, as well as her striking appearance, created an enigmatic aura around the author, almost transforming her into a character herself. Today, Clarice is as much a canonical author, one of the most studied Brazilian writers in academia, as she is a popular figure who is somehow close to a universe associated with mystery and mysticism. It would not be an exaggeration to say that she functions as a kind of 'wise sorceress' in the online world. Also, contributing to her popularity, or to the transition between the canonical and the popular, is the fact that she published short texts in an important newspaper in Rio de Janeiro for many years. For Clarice, any subject is interesting and astonishing, from make-up tutorials to the limits of language. This brings her closer to a much wider audience.

In the 1960s, Lispector published two children's books – exceptions to her work: *O mistério do coelho pensante* [*The Mystery of the Thinking Rabbit*] (1967) and *A mulher que matou os peixes* [*The Woman Who Killed the Fish*] (1968/2022). Do you know what inspired her to make such an exception?

I would not claim that her children's books are an exception to her oeuvre. Clarice published five books aimed at a juvenile audience: *O mistério do coelho pensante*, *A mulher que matou os peixes*, *A vida íntima de Laura* [*Laura's Intimate Life*] (1974), *Quase de verdade* [*Almost True*] (1978), and *Como nasceram as estrelas* [*How the*

Stars Were Born] (1987). The theme of childhood has always been present in her writings, starting from her first novel, which opens with a scene featuring a child character. There are chronicles in which she relates dialogues she had with her children, short stories in which adult narrators recall their past as children or pre-adolescents, and texts in which the narrators seek to approach the experience of a baby, among others. Clarice consistently discusses childhood and the infantile in her works, either directly by featuring child characters/narrators or indirectly by exploring the infantile way of being. This approach is linked to the visceral, the non-reason, an understanding beyond rationality, a state of pure being that she often attempts to approach and thematise in her work. In her chronicle entitled *A descoberta do mundo* [Discovering the World] (1984), she writes, “I can do nothing: it seems that there is a childish side in me that never grows” (p. 459).

What are these stories about? Are they still being republished? Do children find them interesting nowadays?

Clarice’s children’s books continue to be published, just like the rest of her work, and have several editions circulating in the market. Judging by the number of reprints, they are popular among children and adults. *O mistério do coelho pensante*, *A vida íntima de Laura*, and *A mulher que matou os peixes* are all narrated in the first person by a woman narrator who refers to herself as “mother,” “writer,” and in one of the books, “Clarice.” *O mistério do coelho pensante* revolves around a rabbit and the mystery of its escape; *A mulher que matou os peixes* explores the narrator’s relationship with the animals she has encountered throughout her life and the two fish she has killed by accident; *A vida íntima de Laura* is about the (simple and boring) life of the hen Laura in her chicken coop. Each story serves as a backdrop for the narrators to discuss issues such as loss, longing, death, loneliness, and violence.

In these books, the reader is invited to share their anguishes and encouraged to arrive at their own conclusions and develop as a free individual. The narrators engage in a dual movement: acknowledging the inherent suffering in life, while also attempting to mitigate it in some way. This creates an opportunity for an exchange between the reader and the narrators, who strive to create a welcoming atmosphere. These three books build a clear closeness between child readers and the animal characters. Both seem to be closer to a realm where existence is governed more by instincts than reason. Animals and children, thus, seem to be closer to the ‘wild heart’ sought after by the author.

Quase de verdade and *Como nasceram as estrelas* were published posthumously and are, as narrative forms, far from the three books mentioned above.

Do the literary strategies and themes characteristic of this author's works for adults manifest themselves in her children's books?

Clarician themes par excellence are evident in her children's works. These books, like her writings for adults, do not have a traditional plot, bring up questions about existence, pose ethical dilemmas, and feature investigative narrators in the face of life's mysteries.

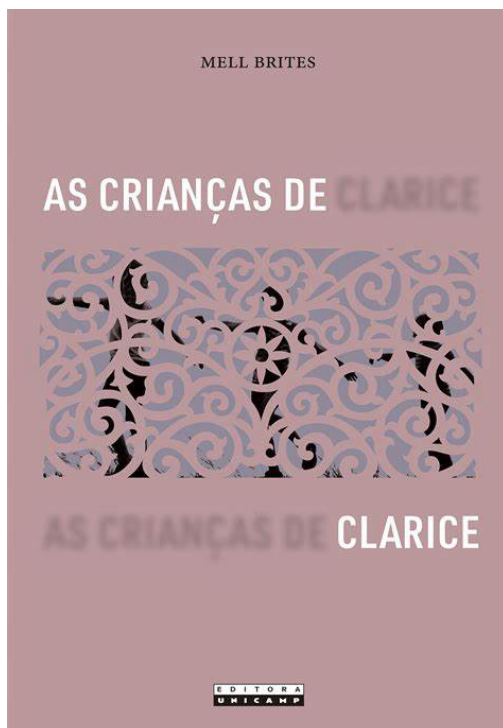


FIGURE 1. *As crianças de Clarice: Narrativas da infância e outras revelações* by Mell Brites (2022)

Returning to your monograph, which focuses primarily on childhood constructs in Lispector's works, could you tell what characterises them? Does this author offer a consistent vision of childhood in her works for adult readers and children?

In my book, I provide a brief comparison of two blocks of texts: on the one hand, there are the children's books already mentioned, and on the other, four short stories aimed at an adult audience in which adult narrators recall their childhood times. The texts were published during the last decade of the author's life, a period in which, as Benjamin Moser observes in *Why This World*:

“The child portrayed in both the short stories and the children’s books seems closely associated...”

A Biography of Clarice Lispector (2009), she showed a constant desire to rediscover her childhood: “Clarice had been withdrawing more and more from the adult world [...]. As she approached the end of her life, her memories of a happier time came back to her consciousness with increasing insistence” (p. 559). It is within this context, therefore, that the stories I analyse emerge, all of which bring this period of life to the forefront of the narrative, either through an exercise of evoking the past, reliving the child who no longer exists in the present of the text, or through the interaction with an implied child reader, who becomes an alterity to be explored.

The child portrayed in both the short stories and the children’s books seems closely associated with the child within Clarice Lispector herself, both the one the author once was and the one who continued to bear traces throughout her adult life. While the former left marks of helplessness stemming from her experience as a poor girl in Recife, despite the joys it provided, the latter emerged as a catalyst for her spontaneity, provoked her convictions, and guided her to explore the paths of non-reason.

Is there any writer, either in Brazil or abroad, comparable to Lispector when it comes to the literary images of childhood?

It is quite common for writers to literarily explore the foundational moment of childhood in their literary works. As critic Rosana Kohl Bines says in her “Criar com a infância” [Creating with Childhood] (2012), “childhood accompanies us throughout our lives and manifests itself every time we cannot find representation for what affects us” (p. 145).

In Brazil, Graciliano Ramos and Guimarães Rosa are two of the greatest Brazilian novelists who do this masterfully, each in their own way. While Graciliano, like Clarice, publishes books for children and also embarks on the labyrinths of the memoir, Guimarães Rosa works with the universe of children as an important and powerful creative force.

Thank you very much for the conversation!

We recommend our readers to watch an online lecture by Mell Brites, where she talks about the visions of childhood in Clarice Lispector’s works:

<https://site.claricelispector.ims.com.br/en/2023/01/23/clarices-childhood/>.