

# BRAZIL BRAZIL



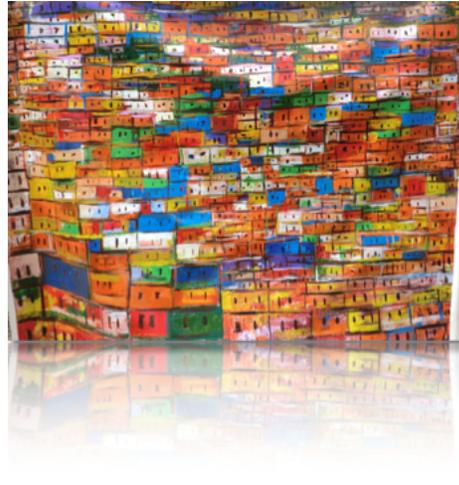
*Amazonas & Rio*

*John Alexander*

# BRAZIL

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Amazonas & Rio



John Alexander

# *Brazil, Brazil: Amazonas and Rio*

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*Also by John Alexander*

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# **PART THREE: THE BRAZILIAN WAY**



# 1. O Jeitinho Brasileiro

## “The Brazilian way...”

Brazil is an enormous country of over 300 million inhabitants, made up of 26 states – a star for each one on the national flag. Consequently, the essence of Brazilian-ness in Rio, say, is something quite different in Sao Paulo, and a lot different in the tropical north, the Amazon basin and the temperate south. Thus, *Jeitinho Brasileiro* acknowledges the diversity, while bringing together the more internationally recognised characteristics of Brazilian culture. For example, *Beleza! Fechado!* (Yeh! Great! Like that!) typifies the optimistic spirit that can be found in Rio de Janeiro, but less likely amongst the more cautious inhabitants of the capital, Brasilia. *Beleza! Fechado!* Might mean – Great! Done!, but more accurately translates as ‘now it’s time we got started.’ The international businessman may interpret *Beleza! Fechado!*, as ‘the deal is struck’, but for their Brazilian counterpart, it more likely means, ‘let’s start negotiating.’



Outside Brazil the Brazilian stereotype is carnivals and beaches and bathing beauties in bikinis, *samba*, *lambada*, *bossa nova*, *carimbo*, and the wild beat of conga drums. But Rio and Copacabana is a

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small part of a vast country; the pressured city dwellers of Sao Paulo, and the exclusively suburban (home by eight) crowd of Brasilia, may be hard pressed to live up to the image of carnival and 24 hour merriment.

So what is the '*Jeitinho Brasileiro*' – the Brazilian way? In football it is *jogo bonito* – football that is not just well played, but beautifully played. There should a sense of rhythm, of flow, from Pelé to Robinho, Ronaldhino and the World Cup winning teams of 1958, 1962, 1970, 1994 and 2002.



*Go with the flow - Ipanema Beach*

Socially '*Jeitinho Brasileiro*' is relaxed, easy, and like good football, in tune to a rhythm and a flow – *Quebra o gelo! Quebra o gelo!*

Means literally, breaking the ice; it involves making contact with people quickly and easily. It is up to the individual to 'go with the flow', adapt to the rhythm, whether in conversation, business talk, or a flirtation in a local café.

'*Jeitinho Brasileiro*' - the Brazilian way is the good life; everything is *tudo bem*; OK. For which ever of the 21 states the Brazilian native hails from, their view is the same - Brazil is a county blessed. The national motto reads: '*ordern e progresso*' – order and progress – which may seem far from the everyday reality of Brazilian chaos, but no-one seems to mind too much. *Jogo bonito* – go with the flow.

**Jogo bono** - 'play well' first became apparent in Manaus buying a pair of training shoes. The store people were dressed up in matching red T-shirts, like a in football team, coordinated, fast, focussed and 'in the flow.' Ten, twelve people on the shop floor — they move and interact like a football team as well. One serving, another running to get merchandise, someone else takes the bill to the cash desk, and someone else ringing up the sale — moving one to the other — it's 35° and they never stop.

One sales staff approaches a customer, passes them onto a training shoe specialist, who sends



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out for the right box — I'm not sure if the customers are the opposing team, or each customer is the ball. A score is a sale is a collective triumph, not an individual one. Each sale is passed on to the cash desk, whether its shoes, TV sets, dvds or t-shirts.

On the street as well people move like football players, moving constantly, weaving in and out and a minimum of body contact, and no bumping, or 'oops, terribly sorry' - English style; or a dismissive 'Oi!', Swedish style. Just the light brush of naked skin on skin in 35° heat and 95% humidity. An ongoing samba dance, a carnival, a football match - a blur of movement too fast for the cameras, and the mass of people; the colours, the noise, the smells of sweet Amazon fruit juice, perfumes, and bad drains, all mixed in together.



*All one rhythm - Ipanema*

## 2. O Melhor do Brasil

### The Best (and Worst) of Brazil

Friday night was the Christmas Parade in Manaus and the streets were filled to capacity with partying families. Saturday night was strangely quiet. 'Where is everyone?' I asked Carlos. 'Saturday night?' came the reply. '*O Melhores do Brazil!* is on TV!' And a look to ask if I was crazy.

Everyone watches Brazil's *O Melhor do Brazil* (*The Best of Brazil*). A nationwide entertainment show that begins around 8pm and keeps going until they run out of entertainers or energy (usually two to two and a half hours later; my experience is that concerning time-keeping Brazilian people favour flexibility over routine).



*Best of...*

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The studio is filled with guests, a live audience, dancing girls in bikinis (non-stop for two and a half hours), jugglers, performing dwarves, and dating set-ups where losers are thrown around then tossed into a pen filled with performers dressed as candy(!) In the background is the constant rhythm of samba music, and occasionally some close-ups of the lively band who perform it. The cameras of *O Melhor do Brasil* are moving non-stop, from presenter to dancing girls to the live audience (also dancing non-stop), to live acts of dwarves, impersonators or entertainers. It is loud, colourful and energetic.

The guys wear suits and ties and the dwarves are dressed as vegetables. The women on stage wear colourful bikinis, and the young women in the public gallery, are dressed up in revealing evening wear.



*Cultural contrast - Prime time TV: Sweden and Brazil*

Coming from a country where the most popular program is Friday night's On Track (*På Spåret*) consisting of three pairs in a TV studio, who don't move for an hour. Team one, team two, a presenter and adjudicator. They are seated in their respective booths and desks, asking and answering questions. Between discussions are some educational film clips plus two musical interludes. One hour of talking heads, no movement, a musical number and a lot of talking. In total contrast to the hedonistic chaos of *O Melhor do Brasil*...

A Saturday night live TV show that seems to go on forever, with dwarves impersonating top stars, and couples matched up and encouraged to make out; girls in bikinis and micro skirts, hip swaying non-stop presenters and co-hosts and a cavalcade of ridiculous sound affects. It takes political incorrectness to whole other level.



## Favelas and Parafitos

Today's front page of the leading newspaper O Globo: 'Fire at the Favelas.' At least three hundred houses burnt down, number of deaths, so far unknown. Some pictures of rows of burning shacks next to top modern sky scrapers in a favela in Sao Paulo.



*Rio's favela Providencia, 2008. Photographs of women cover the walls as a protest against the violation of women and the authorities failure to respond.*

The favelas. What have become the notorious slums of the cities throughout Brazil. Every large city has their favelas and no-one knows how many people live in these hill-side shanty towns.

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Communities of gangs and drug dealers, prostitutes, abandoned children and, yes, ordinary people with jobs.

Morro do Favela was founded a century ago, now an estimated 17% of Rio's population - about one million people - live in the favelas. The largest is Rocinha, about 150,000 people. Many of whom have now been relocated as the part of the 'Peace Corps' initiative and 'cleaning up' for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics.



*View from the rooftops of Ipaduar - Copacabana and Ipanema in front, and Rocinha at the back. The two worlds of Rio.*

Manaus is an exception. There are not favelas, but parafitos. Favelas are falling leaves of a particular Brazilian tree, and the story is a complicated one about late 19th army settlers of Rio and Sao Paulo promised housing for their military services, only to find they were given, not houses, but space. Local authorities pointed up to the hills and to a pile of cheap building materials. 'There is your housing - build your own!' Which they did in their own kind of primitive way. Nowadays favelas are associated with slums. But not

all favelas are slums, and in Rio especially there are places up there in Rocinha and beyond, with stunning views over the bay, and green rain forest at the back. This is the prime real estate the Rio Municipal Council is reclaiming as part of their 'Peace Project.'



*Fire in Sao Paolo - suspected arson as a 'gentrification process' - a cheap way to demolish the slums and reclaim the real estate.*

In Manaus a *parafito* is a house on poles, and Manaus being something of a boom town, local government is replacing a lot of the more derelict *parafitos* in the inner region with smart project estates. From the roadside, they are neat modest little coloured houses of orange and yellow, in green parks, with playgrounds for the kids.

Today standing outside the newspaper stand on Rua Copacabana. Front page of *O Globo* today – December 23<sup>rd</sup>, and a mind-boggling 39° celsius. Looking at the horrifying photograph of burning houses and buildings, with a 100 storey skyscraper pointing upwards, out of a thick cloud of black smoke. "300 dwellings destroyed in Sao Paolo favelas." Death toll rising. Will their names ever be listed? Doubtful.

### 3. Where the Sun Shines Brightest...

The bright gaudy glitzy colourful world of O Melhores do Brasil on the TV, the luxury shopping centers of Leblon and Ipanema, the bikini girls on Copacabana, and the muscle guys who take their pictures — the luxury apartments along the Avenidas. And a short bus ride away, the favelas, the slums, homeless kids, poverty. From Ipanema and Copacabana to the favelas and the drug wars and the military gangs. There's an old saying about where the sun shines brightest, the shadow falls darkest. In spite of recent political ransacking Brazil remains the country with the broadest economic disparity between 'the haves' and 'the have-nots.'

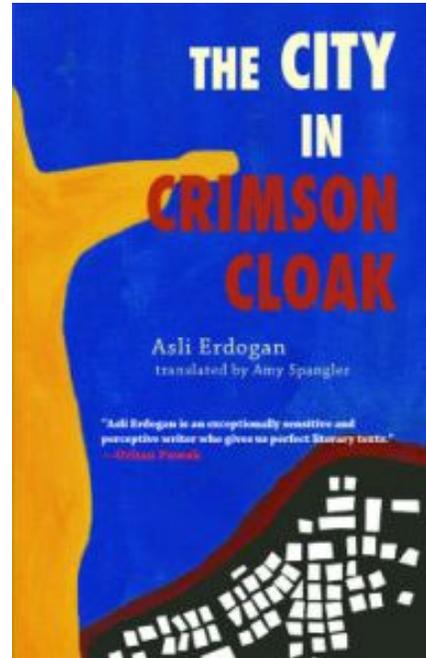


*From Ipanema Leblon Shopping to Rocinha and the two Brazils — moving up is moving down*

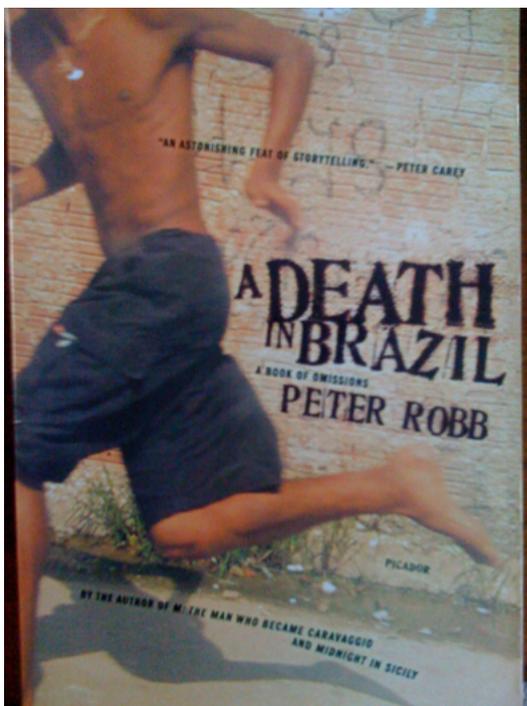
#### **The City in Crimson Cloak**

Asli Erdogan's novel, *City in Crimson Coat*, (first published (in Turkish, 1998) is the story of foreign student 'Özgür' and her downward spiral from life in the smart quarters of Rio – Ipanema, S:a Teresa, Leblon – to economic ruin, and life in the favelas. She discovers that here human life is a commodity at the lowest end of the scale. In this semi-autobiographical novel she describes how she

is consumed by the city that she claims to despise. Certainly she captures the contrast between these two worlds and it is a perspective far removed from the picture postcard image of Rio as a glamour city, or the fantasy portraits of the Hollywood movies listed earlier. She defines the contrast between two extremes of the social scale, but at the price of defending her own character. Özgür makes choices – she decides to move to Rio, and to drop out. She is drawn to the dark side of the city of her own volition, and aware always of her own (relatively) privileged position. So compelling as the description of the extremes of Rio society may be, it is difficult to sympathize with someone with all the advantages that the people of the favelas never had, never will have.



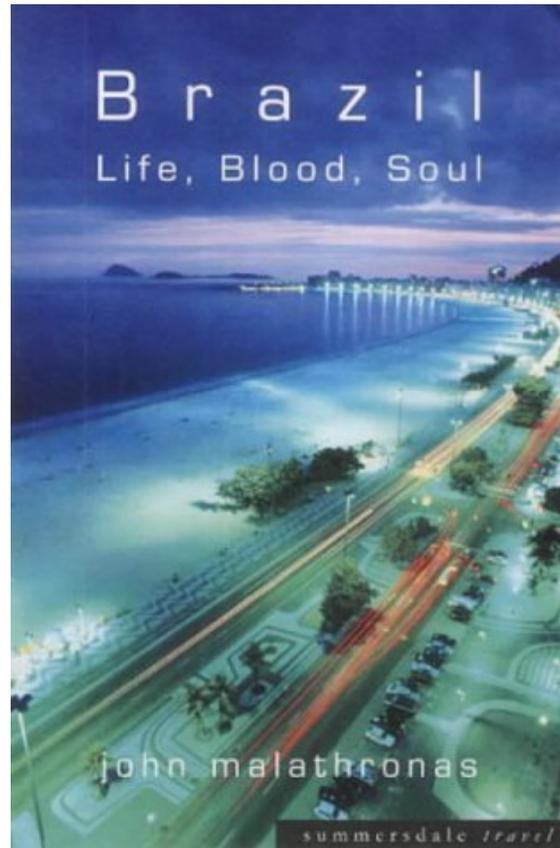
## A Death in Brazil: A Book of Omissions



Peter Robb's book is again an exploration of the paradox of Brazilian society. From carnivals to corruption - its social problems and the contrast to the optimism and spirit of the people and their culture. He points out that the culture of Brazil is a process - it is forming and transforming, that 'order and progress' can only be achieved through Brazil coming to terms with its tragic history.

## **Brazil – Life Blood Soul**

John Malathronas' hefty tome written with the fervour somewhere between a British gay rights activist and a Greek island hedonist, alternates between insightful observations of the characters that make up Brazilian history and culture, constantly interrupted by a long line of detailed and unlikely gay love affairs. (He can't make a buss trip without meeting some 'beautiful young man from Germany named .. whatever'). It is a book either in need of serious editing or two clearly labelled versions, with or without detailed descriptions of his love life, and taking a wild guess, I'm opting for the latter. The historical details however, and description of Brazil off the tourist trail are vivid and compelling. Interesting to note however how quickly the travelogue approach dates. Although published only a few years back, the references to corruption, the inflation, the chaotic infrastructure - certainly as far as Rio is concerned, now seem passé.

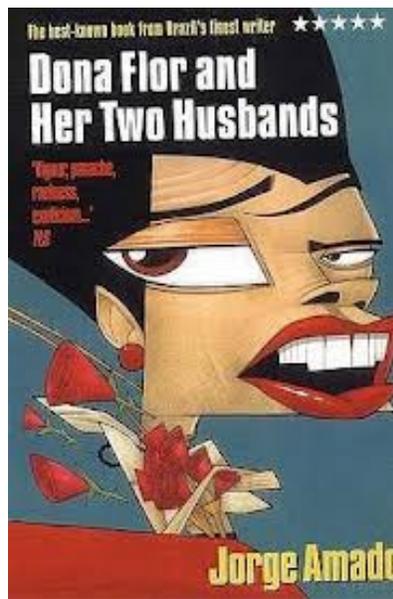
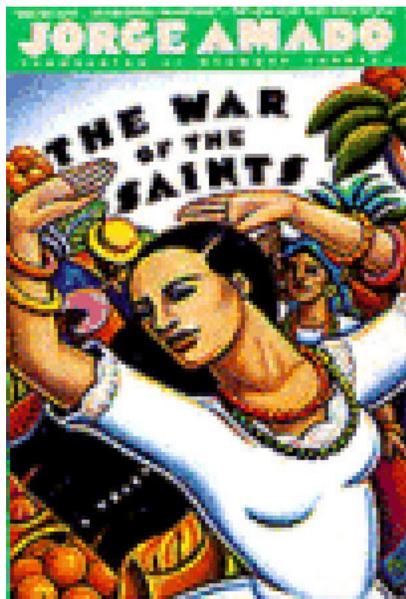


## **Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands**

If I were to choose one novel from Brazil (and I've not ready many) it would be Jorge Amado's *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* ("Dona Flor e seus dois maridos"). A novel (and later a film) that embraces many things Brazilian - set in Salvador da Bahia in the 1940s, with

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the Bahian Carnival in the background; samba and passion, society and morals, the church and candomblé with its dabbling into the spirit world. Dona Flor is married to an arrogant, unfaithful and abusive man, who has one saving grace - he knows how to please a woman. Then he dies. She remarries. Her new husband is a good man, a provider, and kind. But he is without passion. When the ghost of first husband returns to claim her once more in the hours of darkness, Dona Flor realizes she has the best of both worlds. Her two husbands are like the schizophrenia of Brazil - the corrupt and the well-intentioned; passion and the drive for order. Is there passion without corruption? Does order and decency suffocate the human spirit? This is the quest of Dona Flor. Maybe this is the quest for Brazilian people.



*Jorge Amado — The War of the Saints, Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands, and the film with Sonia Braga (1976)*

# Conclusion

## **Brazil: A Cure Against the 'Immunity to Pleasure'?**

'I am immune to pleasure', says Bette Davis in *Now Voyager*, and she says it from the deck of a luxury cruise ship, in full view of Copacabana Beach and the Dos Mais rising voluptuously from the sands of Leblon at the far end of Ipanema.

I was an anhedonist already in childhood. One time at school - I was six - and reading a history book while the other kids were playing some stupid game. Miss Johnson, the most generously endowed of our primary school teachers, approached cautiously and asked if anything was the matter. 'Why?' I asked. 'You look troubled,' she said. 'There's nothing wrong,' I said. 'I think I know your problem,' she replied. 'Your problem is that you think too much.'

How can anyone think too much? I've heard this many times since, but my concern is that we don't think enough – no-one thinks enough. The idle pursuit of pleasure is a blind alley and we should spend more time thinking and less time in the vain attempts of pursuing pleasure for pleasure's sake. Berating those who think too much (which in the smaller townships of Australia is a common malaise) is a severe misinterpretation of the quiet satisfaction by which the individual takes consolation in being separated from those who want to 'have fun.'

So I was little disappointed that by the third act of *Now Voyager* Bette Davis had found some purpose to life, even pleasure. Her answer lay in her selfless devotion to looking after a ten year old orphan girl. And when did this epiphany occur? In a little cabin

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somewhere on the Pico do Tijuca overlooking the very same beaches I am overlooking now — Ipanema, Copacabana, Ipaduar. All Bette Davis needed for this transformation was the experience of Rio de Janeiro and the passionate embrace of a caring man, hidden away as they were in the fetid rain forest of Tijuca National Park. For in this place nature reigns and the mind is obliterated. Bette connects with her sensuality and detaches herself from the anxieties of 'thinking too much.' I guess Brazil has this effect on people.

If not the beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema and simple pleasures of draining a coconut at a beach bar in sweltering 40° temperatures; if not walking the treacherous rain-drenched pathways leading to Pico do Tijuca; then certainly experiencing the tributaries of the Amazon in the twilight hours of dusk and dawn, and the sound of wildlife and the breathing of the forest – yes, these are the sensations that clear the head of pretty much everything.



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