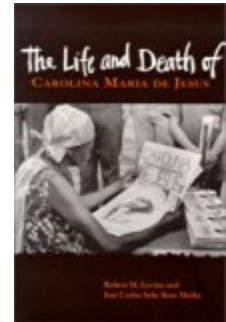


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert M. Levine, Jose Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy. *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. xiv + 162 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1647-9.

Reviewed by Craig Hendricks (Long Beach City College)  
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Carolina Maria de Jesus presents a paradox that even the most casual readers immediately fix upon. Students with only the barest knowledge of Brazilian society find it fascinating, inexplicable, and incredible that a poor, black, uneducated slum dweller who scavenged scrap metal and newspapers every day in a desperate attempt to feed her young family could sit in her miserable room at night and write in her diary, "The sky was the color of indigo, and I understood that I adore my Brazil. My glance went over to the trees ... the leaves moved by themselves. I thought: they are applauding my gesture of love for my country."

Untangling this paradox is the task that Robert M. Levine and Jose Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy set for themselves. Long-time friends and collaborators on several social history projects in Brazil, they discovered that they had divergent and contrasting views on the legacy and importance for Brazil of Carolina Maria's writing. She leapt to national and international fame with the publication of her first diary, *Quarto de Despejo* (translated as *Child of the Dark* in English) in 1960. It became the most successful book in Brazilian publishing history, was widely translated, and became a bestseller in Europe and North America. Many college students in the United States were first introduced to Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s through *Child of the Dark*.

But what of Carolina herself? What did the book do for her personally, for her children? On a larger level, what did this book and Carolina's subsequent (and largely unsuccessful) writing over the next decade mean for Brazil? Levine and Sebe thoroughly detail Carolina's harrowing early life in Minas Gerais, the birth of her children, and the events that led her to the *favela* in Sao

Paulo. The fascination grows as the journalist Audalio Dantas discovers her and her diaries, and publishes her writing, first in a daily newspaper and then as a book. Carolina traveled to Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile; foreign journalists and media people interviewed her; she chatted with mayors and governors, and was invited to the parties and social events of the rich and famous.

Carolina never changed. The outspokenness, the direct and confrontational style that served her so well in the *favela*, quickly alienated Brazilians who expected her to be polite, humble, and introspective. Most reviews of her book focused on her personality, her dress, her writing style, but almost nothing about the content of the book itself. The harsh reality that Carolina exposed, the racism, the sexism, the brutality of everyday life for *favelados*, all of this was dismissed as essentially local color, unimportant for Brazil.

The authors are most perceptive when they wrestle with this central fact. Each contributes an intriguingly personal introduction to the problems of Carolina's work and its reception in Brazil. Their views on the problems that the diary exposed help explain why the book had such a different trajectory outside of Brazil. Whereas the book (like Carolina herself) is largely forgotten in Brazil, it continues to sell in Europe and North America and often turns up on college reading lists. The authors demonstrate that it is regarded as ancient history in Brazil, a moment in time that has passed, with nothing to teach to the present.

When Carolina died in 1977, her obituaries were mostly unsympathetic, pointing out that she lived out the last decade of her life in a small house on a dusty roadway, all her money spent. The authors produce exten-

sive interviews with her children, friends, and those who were not especially fond of Carolina, and the picture that emerges is that of a remarkable woman, one who struggled with the hardships of a very difficult life, who managed to better herself and the lives of her children. She left a legacy of writing that asks important questions of a society that is often blind to its own shortcomings.

I used this book in conjunction with *Child of the Dark* in a summer teaching project for high school teachers

and found it to be a powerful combination that helped explain Brazilian reality with greater clarity. This may be the greatest contribution of *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus*, for which the authors can be justly proud.

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