

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **Blindness**

### **By Jose Saramago**

#### **Introduction**

A city is hit by an epidemic of 'white blindness.' The blindness spreads, sparing no one. Authorities confine the blind to a vacant mental hospital secured by armed guards. Inside, the criminal element among the blind hold the rest captive: food rations are stolen, women are raped. There is one eyewitness to this nightmare who guides seven strangers through the barren streets. The developments within this oddly anonymous group -- the first blind man, the old man with the black eye patch, the girl with dark glasses, the boy with no mother, and the dog of tears -- are as uncanny as the surrounding chaos is harrowing. A parable of loss and disorientation, of man's worst appetites and hopeless weaknesses, *Blindness* is one of the most challenging, thought-provoking, and ultimately exhilarating novels published in any language in recent years.

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#### **About the Author**

José Saramago was born in 1922 in Azinhaga, Portugal, the son of rural laborers. He grew up in great poverty in Lisbon, and was forced to abandon school at the age of 12 in order to earn a living. Saramago was spent 2 years training as a technician, did a number of manual jobs before becoming a journalist, translator, and eventually a writer . In 1969 he joined the Communist Party of Portugal, which was forbidden during the military dictatorship, but he also criticized the party. In the 1970s Saramago supported himself mostly by translation works, and since 1979 he has devoted himself entirely to writing.

Following the publication of his most controversial book, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, he faced intense criticism from members of the country's Catholic community, and Portugal's conservative government would not allow Saramago's work to compete for the European Literary Prize, arguing that it offended Catholics. As a result, Saramago and his wife moved to Lanzarote, an island in the Canaries, where he lives today.

Saramago is now one of the most acclaimed writers in the world, having written plays, short stories, novels, poems, libretti, diaries, and travelogues. His books have been

translated into dozens of languages. He is also the author of numerous novels, including *All the Names*, *Blindness*, and *The Cave*. In 1998 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. ([www.bookbrowse.com](http://www.bookbrowse.com))

## Reviews

“Saramago's chilling thriller about an epidemic of “white blindness” that affects everyone in its path is a truly remarkable tale of loss and a metaphor for the horrors of humankind. With such a large and varying cast of characters including young children, a mother and an elderly man, narrator Jonathan Davis gives a truly rousing performance and displays his wide-ranging ability. Each character is original and believable in the face of this unbelievable epidemic. Davis's reading puts his audience in a bright white place, where little is visual save for the listeners' imaginations running wild. Davis's voice paints a vivid portrait.” – *Publisher's Weekly*

“To describe as allegory this story of unnamed characters in an unnamed city who are struggling with an undiagnosed epidemic of “white blindness” is both too simple and too complex. Beyond any emblematic purpose, the characters act out life with all its paradoxes and hidden truths. Ultimately, the greater meaning here is the simple story of human frailty and community in the modern world. In searing prose, both complex and minimal, all this and nothing more is revealed. No wonder Saramago won the Nobel prize this year.” –*Library Journal*

## Further Reading

*The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka

*Enchanted Night* by Steven Millhauser

*Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* by Mario Vargas Llosa

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. What is Saramago's purpose in presenting the doctor's wife as the only person not afflicted by the white blindness? In what ways, and in what stages, does she grow in terms of both political and moral authority? What roles does she assume? How may we explain, in particular, her assumption of responsibility as guide and protector? Why does she experience a feeling of intense, unbearable loneliness at just that moment when the others begin to regain their sight?
2. What is the purpose of Saramago's use of proverbs, folk sayings, and clichés throughout the novel? How does the characters' new reality affect their former habits of expression and create new habits of expression? What are the implications of the narrator's later comment that "if sayings are to retain any meaning and to continue to be used they have to adapt to the times"?
3. As the white blindness spreads, the Minister of Health decides on the necessity of quarantine "both from the point of view of the merely sanitary aspects of the case and from that of the social implications and their political consequences." What "social implications" and "political consequences" do you think the minister has in mind? What social and political consequences does the quarantine itself have?
4. Waking to her second day in the mental hospital, the doctor's wife thinks, "what fragile walls we'd make" against our enemies. What "fragile walls" are erected, demolished, or made useless by the blindness? What fragile walls in your life and community would be threatened by a catastrophe similar to the white blindness?
5. "The whole world is right here," the doctor's wife says to her husband on the morning of their fourth day in the hospital. In what ways does the mental hospital contain "the whole world"? To what extent may we read *Blindness* as a commentary on the excesses and horrors of the world of the twentieth century?
6. What meanings can we attribute to the white blindness? To what extent does it represent ignorance, political ineptitude, the absence of personal and social morality, and the failure of imagination? What other meanings can you suggest? How does the "harsh, cruel, implacable kingdom of the blind" differ, if at all, from our everyday world?

7. Why does Saramago provide no names for his characters and their city and country? What are the effects of this namelessness?
8. In what ways do the central characters' experiences lead them to a new kind of interdependence and, at the same time, a new awareness of the human potential for selfishness and cruelty? How do both contribute to the emergence or re-emergence of tenderness and love?
9. What pattern emerges in respect to the breakdown of order and of the various systems that we all take for granted -- civic, social, political, and so on? How do individuals, identifiable groups, and institutions of authority contribute to that breakdown? How does the structure of society itself alter to fit a world in which virtually everyone is blind?
10. How do the women in the novel differ from the men in their attitude toward the blindness and the resulting conditions of life? What moral, emotional, psychological, and imaginative capacities do the women possess that the men lack?

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