



What would you do if you came face-to-face with your exact physical double?

Review of *The Double* by José Saramago · Published in BCN Week (June 2006)

You know those throwaway films you sometimes passively sit through and forget completely the morning after? Our central character, the awkwardly named Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, watches such a film and then goes to bed, unimpressed and completely unmoved. He then wakes up in the middle of the night, inexplicably drawn to the TV screen, and makes the uncanny realisation that one of the bit-part actors is his exact and unmistakable physical double. This strange and unsettling discovery slowly begins to infiltrate every aspect of his day-to-day life, forcing him to confront his increasingly existentialist existence.

Nobel Prize-winning author José Saramago chooses this double motif, a theme that has fascinated many great writers before him, to explore the nature of identity and study extreme behaviour in extreme situations. Just what would you do if you found that your physical double was alive and well and living in the same town? In the case of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, a mild mannered, middle-aged and divorced history teacher, currently suffering from depression and general lethargy, he begins to make some preliminary enquiries. Through this he makes contact with his doppelganger, opening an inevitable can of worms and drawing him gradually further into this dark enigma. He keeps it secret from his girlfriend, mother and the few other social contacts he maintains, and gradually begins to neglect his normal life in his mission to solve his strange predicament that results in a feverish battle of wits, power and presence.

Although written in the third person, Saramago provides us with lengthy personal dialogues in which our main man intricately questions his every step, aware that contact and association with his dead ringer will lead him further into the unknown, the bizarre and the unanswerable. The plot is fascinating, although the treatment is at times heavy going. This is in part due to Saramago's adversity to punctuation – there is a notably absence of speech marks, question marks and even full stops, leading to some spectacularly marathon sentences that you can get truly lost in. This is perhaps a device to emerge the reader in the confused mind of the novel's protagonist, although for many, this may prove excessive.

A powerful exploration of some essential questions and an interesting study into the nature of identity in our current age. The writing is at times fussy and something of a labyrinthine, but the unusual story draws you in and provokes enough curiosity to follow through the maze and see just where it comes out.