

## Crooked Plow

**Itamar Vieira Junior**

**Johnny Lorenz, Translator**

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Itamar Vieira Junior's novel *Crooked Plow* is a work of magical realism in which sisters fight to survive and improve conditions on the land they love.

As children in Brazil, Bibiana and Belonísia discover their grandmother's knife, resulting in Belonísia cutting off her tongue and becoming mute. This accident deepens the sisters' lifelong bond: Bibiana becomes Belonísia's helper in communicating with others. Yet Belonísia's injury does not lessen her strength, and she eventually helps her family obtain a kind of justice.

Despite the fact that the girls' father is a respected healer with the ability to summon the spirits, his family is destitute. This reflects the nation's legacy of Portuguese colonialism: Black residents in Água Negra are "tenant farmers," forced to work for plantation owners without compensation and living in houses built of mud because they are forbidden to use bricks. At the same time, Bibiana and Belonísia feel inextricable ties to the land and their community. Bibiana marries a community activist who organizes the farmers to demand fairer working conditions. When these efforts lead to tragedy, Belonísia, aided by an *encantada* (sacred spirit), performs an act of redemptive violence for the wrongs done to her sister and her people.

Each of the novel's three parts has a different narrator, including Bibiana, Belonísia, and an *encantada*. These respective narrators lead to rich interiority; the characterizations are deep, and the novel is layered in its rendering of events. The sometimes nonchronological narration goes back in time to reveal people's secrets, building suspense as it moves toward its unsettling, fitting conclusion.

*Crooked Plow* is a powerful novel set among a Black Brazilian farming community living on the edge of existence, whose people are resilient against historical forces and the individuals who oppress them.

YELENA FURMAN (July / August 2023)

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