



The Sight Sickness

Christine Faltz Grassman

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Blind people are stereotyped and treated like second-class citizens by uninformed and misguided sighted people. Herein lies the message to be found in *The Sight Sickness*, by Christine Faltz Grassman. In her preface, the author writes: "This work is a novel, a polemic, a parody." In fact, the book parodies José Saramago's powerful allegorical work, *Blindness*, which Grassman harshly condemns for mischaracterizing blind people as inferior. Nonetheless, Saramago's work was lauded as a masterpiece by most leading newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

Furthermore, the bestseller went on to earn Saramago the Nobel Prize for Literature, his work billed as a profound parable about the fragility of human civilization. The book also was made into a multi-million dollar Hollywood film. In Saramago's surreal, Hobbesean tale, a city is hit by a plague that spares few from blindness. Authorities confine the victims to an abandoned mental asylum where law and order disintegrates and barbarism takes over. If Saramago's *Blindness* was intended to provide a window on a society, its people and its culture—in this case a civilization reduced to barbarism—then it is indeed telling, Grassman illuminates, that his portrayal of visually impaired people in society was so terribly removed from reality (as metaphorically conveyed in Plato's cave analogy). Grassman, though born blind, overcame her disability to become an attorney, English teacher, and crusading advocate for the blind.

In *The Sight Sickness*, Grassman is out to right a wrong and she succeeds with biting satire. In what is presumably an anti-sequel to *Blindness*, authorities responsible for the injustices are tried but acquitted. However, a vigilante group of blind activists, the Cellmates, seek real justice by kidnapping the leaders. The hostages are confined to a pitch-dark room where they must learn to survive in a sightless world. Naturally, the experience of blindness is terrifying for the prisoners. But the kidnappers do give the hostages a way out: each can choose to live but only if it is as a blind person. The characters portraying the authorities view blind people typically as do many sighted people — as limited and second-class.

In the end, each hostage struggles with the fear of blindness, their values, and their conscience. The parable is meant to encourage readers to examine their own views about the treatment of minorities in society. In reality, the majority of blind and visually impaired persons are competent, educated, and capable of gainful employment with the proper training and opportunity. Grassman has exposed a curious oversight: rather than seek the help of blind organizations to train the blind victims on how to use a cane to safely move around, read Braille, and adapt to their sightless conditions, the authorities confine them in detention camps where they are left to suffer and die in fear. Whether Saramago deserves Grassman's piercing condemnation is irrelevant. The real point is that readers of *The Sight Sickness* will now open their eyes with a greater awareness of the blind.

GARY KLINGA (October 21, 2010)

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