

Lusophone Writers

Henrique de Senna Fernandes (1923 – 2010)

Henrique de Senna Fernandes was a famous macanese writer and lawyer.

He was born on 15 October 1923, in one of the oldest macanese families, of portuguese, goan and chinese ancestry. The traditional portuguese education he received at home gave him a sense of pride in his ancestry. He was raised in a reading atmosphere and was influenced in his youth by writers Aquilino Ribeiro, Eça de Queirós, Jorge Amado and Camilo Castelo Branco, which helped grow in him a passion for writing.

He studied Law at Coimbra University in Portugal. He practised law in Macao, although his true passions were teaching and writing. He was a teacher and principal at Pedro Nolasco Commercial School and he still remembered today with tenderness by his former students. He was president of the Association of Educational Promotion of Macao, when the Macao Portuguese School was created, and also director of the Macao National Library and, as a lawyer, president of the Macao Lawyers Association from 1991 to 1995.

He was elected Portuguese Corresponding Member of the Sciences Academy of Lisbon in 2003 and received honorary doctorates in Literature from the Macao Inter-University Institute (currently University of Saint Joseph) in 2006 and from the University of Macau in 2008. He was awarded the title of Commander of the Order of Prince Henry the Navigator in 1986, the Medal of Cultural Merit and the Medal of Valor by the Macao Government in 1989 and 1995 respectively, and the title of Grand Officer of the Order of Saint James of the Sword in 1998. In 2001, he was also awarded the Medal Cultural Merit by the Macao SAR Government, but the award he was most fond of was that of Citizen Emeritus awarded by the Leal Senado in 1999.

He has four published books – “Nam Van – Stories of Macau”, “Love and Tiny Toes”, “The Bewitching Braid” and “Mong-Ha” – including him in an eventual lusophone literary canon and left three unfinished works – “The Night Born in December”, “The Father of Orchids” and “The Sorrows”. Part of his work has been translated to chinese by Yu Hui Juan and to english by David Brookshaw. Novels “Love and Tiny Toes” and “The Bewitching Braid” have been adapted to cinema. The former by portuguese director Luís Filipe Rocha and the latter by the chinese producers and directors Kai Brothers.

His work evokes the atmosphere of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s in Macao, when the “christian city” and the “chinese bazaar” followed parallel paths, each set with its own destiny, and is a unique testimony to a bygone way of being and living. He had a deep knowledge of Macao and in his work he registered the identity of a community, a faithful portrait of the Macao of that era, so as to, in his own words, leave a heritage to coming generations of life in his time. In addition to “his” Macao, Senna Fernandes’ literary work adopts love and women as principal themes. Women and love, often including a chinese woman and a macanese man, going against the traditional conventions of the time. The women he met helped him build his female characters, giving autobiographic traits to his short stories and novels. He used love stories to paint the social differences and society’s prejudices that were characteristic in Macao then.

He assumed himself as a “writer of Macao”, of portuguese ancestry, and had the sole purpose of telling a good story, regardless of style or literary movements.

Henrique de Senna Fernandes was above all a full-blooded Macao Citizen, observing, participating and ever present and he used to say that “Portugal is my fatherland and Macao is my motherland”.

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