

The blind accountant in *Blindness* by José Saramago and accountant stereotypes

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to encourage the extension of the literature on accountant stereotypes beyond primarily Anglo-American contexts based on reflections formed on reading the novel, *Blindness*, by José Saramago.

Design/methodology/approach – A mindful insight into how an accountant, blind since birth, is portrayed in the novel *Blindness* by acclaimed Portuguese author Saramago, a Nobel Prize for Literature recipient.

Findings – The study reveals characters under extreme circumstances when a city is plunged into a blindness epidemic, or distinctive “white blindness”, and failings in human behaviour, particularly by hoodlums and their leaders, including the blind accountant.

Research implications – By reflecting on what we take for granted in the accountant stereotypes literature, this paper illuminates how we can all contribute new understandings of accounting and accountants more specifically in all contexts in which the discipline and its practitioners operate, including non-Anglo-American contexts.

Originality/value – The paper presents the insights of a member of the historical and interdisciplinary accounting research community with experience in research and publication on accountant stereotypes.

Keywords Accountant stereotypes, Anglo-American contexts, Portrayal of accountants, The blind accountant, Villains

Paper type Viewpoint

The novel *Blindness*, by Portuguese author José Saramago (1922–2010), “is a shattering book by a literary master . . . A book of real stature” *Boston Globe* [1]. First published in the Portuguese language in 1995 as *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, meaning “essay on blindness”, Saramago was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998, with *Blindness* being noted by the committee on announcing the award [2]. The book was adapted into a full-length, English language thriller movie, also called *Blindness*, primarily set in São Paulo, Brazil – the largest Portuguese-speaking city in the world – and Guelph in Canada and was produced in 2008 [3]. In short, the story is a dramatic portrayal of a society that suffers a blindness epidemic, or distinctive “white blindness”, and features “the blind accountant” – a male – who unlike the other characters in the book, had been blind since birth and is proficient in braille, both reading and writing. A trait of Saramago was not to refer to his characters by name but by descriptive appellations, as occurred in *Blindness* [4]. This contribution outlines the implications of Saramago’s depiction of the blind accountant to help provide a more finessed understanding and appreciation of accountant stereotypes on a global basis.

Being interested in the topic of accountant stereotypes for some time (see, for example, Carnegie and Napier, 2010, 2013; Leão *et al.*, 2019), the writer’s main reason for reading this



book was to explore how the blind accountant is portrayed [5]. What is the setting of the book? In short, the reader is not informed. In one key commentary on *Blindness*, the Project Gutenberg contributor(s) stated “The city afflicted by the blindness is never named, nor the country specified. Few definite identifiers of culture are given, which contributes an element of timelessness and universality to the novel. Some signs hint that the country is Saramago’s homeland of Portugal” [6]. Having regularly visited Portugal during the past 18 years or so and having supervised PhD students there, the writer can only agree that the few hints provided suggest that the country is Saramago’s homeland.

Blindness is almost certainly not set in an Anglo-American country or community. The stereotypes of accountants, however, as portrayed in the literature “have essentially been analysed in Anglo-American contexts” (Leão *et al.*, 2019, p. 659), meaning the findings are not universal to all countries. An exception is Leão *et al.* (2019), set in Portugal, who called for comparative international research on accountant stereotypes, such as in Europe and beyond, to provide “a broader understanding of the cultural influence on the emergence of the occupation of accountant” (2019, p. 677) and to cushion the dominance of the accountant stereotype literature set exclusively in Anglo-American settings (see, for other exceptions, Maltby, 1997; Carollo, 2020 [7] pertaining respectively to Germany and Italy).

The blind accountant is not afflicted by the pandemic or the “white evil”. Blind since birth, he is familiar with life as a blind person, giving him an edge in power relations over all the other people who become blind during the epidemic. Hence, the disability of this accountant is to his advantage. The book’s most sinister character, “the man with the gun”, is portrayed as a mean and ugly character, who took control over food supplies in a former asylum which is treated as a form of hospital for people infected by white blindness. This dreaded gun-carrying villain developed a pool of supporters who took control of food supplies for all interns. The blind accountant initially provided a “fraternal gesture” or an “altruistic impulse” but then decided “however much the injustices of those hoodlums stirred up in him feelings of honest indignation, he would not go hungry” (Saramago, 2017, p. 155). The morality of people can ultimately turn out to be a secondary consideration, even to Saramago’s blind accountant, when human survival is at stake.

The blind accountant is sufficiently cunning to become second-in-charge to the man with the gun as the leader of the hoodlums. Later, the gun wielding villain is murdered, and the blind accountant takes control of the hoodlums, the gun and the flow of food supplies for the interns. The blind accountant, however, did not develop people’s respect. Saramago (2017, p. 199) wrote: “Just as the habit does not make the monk, the sceptre does not make the King”. While the deceased lead hoodlum ruled because of a gun, a LitCharts commentator observes, “it becomes clear that he also managed to win everybody else’s confidence (perhaps through charisma)” [8], which the blind accountant failed to leverage.

Saramago’s *Blindness* portrays the individual and collective reactions of people in the face of great adversary. Reading the novel will provide an appreciation of the key characters, including the blind accountant, and of the events depicted. It can provide important lessons in community today (Chesney, 2020). For those interested in the stereotypes of accountants, Saramago (2017) provides another lens for examining how accountants are portrayed in the non-Anglo-American contexts. While Saramago does not focus on depicting the key characteristics of this sole accountant character for the purpose of creating or proposing an accountant stereotype, the author depicts how “things may be different” in other contexts; under extreme circumstances, his accountant was depicted as calculating and evil in the circumstances, and as a villain. Why Saramago, who led a life of resistance [9], portrays the blind accountant as he did in *Blindness* is a matter for investigation. Importantly, this contribution calls for the horizons of researchers on accountant stereotypes to be broadened beyond the realm of the Anglo-American contexts.

Notes

1. As stated on the back cover of Vintage Classics paperback edition of *Blindness*, published 2017, and first published in English in 1997 by The Harvill Press.
2. In all, eight of his novels were noted in the press release of The Swedish Academy dated 8 October 1998, available at: [The Nobel Prize in Literature 1995 - Press release – NobelPrize.org](#) (last accessed 24 January 2021).
3. See [Blindness \(2008 film\) - Wikipedia](#) (last accessed 17 January 2021).
4. The key characters in the book are the doctor's wife, the doctor, the girl with the dark glasses, the old man with the black eye patch, the boy with the squint, the car thief, the first blind man, the first blind man's wife' the man with the gun, and the blind accountant.
5. Appreciation is expressed to Fernanda Leão for drawing this book to attention in a personal communication with the writer of 6 June 2020.
6. Refer to Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing Press, Article Id: WHEBN0000901697, under the sub-heading "Style", where some signs are articulated, available at: [Blindness \(novel\) | Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing - eBooks | Read eBooks online](#) (last accessed 24 January 2021).
7. For background on the fictional accountant character, Ugo Fantozzi, refer to [Merenghetti \(2011\)](#).
8. See <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/blindness/chapter-12#summary-194658> (last accessed 17 January 2021).
9. For example, see José Saramago: A Life of Resistance by Julian Evans, available at: [Jose Saramago, a life of resistance – YouTube](#) (last accessed 24 January 2021).

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