

Phenotypes

Paulo Scott

Daniel Hahn, Translator

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A man grapples with his past and his racial identity in Paulo Scott's novel *Phenotypes*.

Federico and his brother Lourenço are both Black. But Federico, being light-skinned, escapes much of the prejudice that Lourenço faces. These differences follow Federico from his youth in a rough South Brazilian neighborhood to his professional efforts as a counselor and activist.

As an adult, Federico finds himself at several crossroads. He is invited to join a government commission devoted to developing software that will judge a person's ethnicity based on appearance. And when his niece is arrested for her role in a protest, Federico takes a more hands-on role in dealing with the fallout of his youthful impetuosity.

Federico grows up in the 1970s and 1980s. His hometown, Porto Alegre—its food, its popular spots—is rendered in bright, distinctive details, so that, despite the story's universal themes of race and acceptance, *Phenotypes* could not have taken place anywhere else. Nor would Federico and Lourenço be who they are, or experience what they do, without this specific background—emphasizing how personal an identity is.

Brazil's rigid hierarchy is based on color and colonialist remnants: those with light skin are white and superior, and those with dark skin are Black and inferior, regardless of a person's actual ethnicity. The consequences of this system, so entrenched as to be invisible to those who do not suffer under it, are laid bare throughout Federico's story. The army evaluation scene is especially horrific, but the most crushing demonstrations of racism are the quiet wounds that Federico himself accidentally inflicts. It is a stinging reminder that even the most well-meaning people must reckon with notions of race and prejudice.

Phenotypes is a complex, stream-of-consciousness novel about race, culture, and deciding for oneself where one belongs.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (January / February 2022)

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