

Brazil

A nation of non-readers

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A strange and costly disregard for books

MANY Brazilians cannot read. In 2000, a quarter of those aged 15 and older were functionally illiterate. Many simply do not want to. Only one literate adult in three reads books. The average Brazilian reads 1.8 non-academic books a year—less than half the figure in Europe and the United States. In a recent survey of reading habits, Brazilians came 27th out of 30 countries, spending 5.2 hours a week with a book. Argentines, their neighbours, ranked 18th.

In rare accord, government, businesses and NGOs are all striving in different ways to change this. On March 13th the government launched a National Plan for Books and Reading. This seeks to boost reading, by founding libraries and financing publishers among other things. The Brazil Reader Institute, an NGO, brings books to people: it has installed lending libraries in two São Paulo metro stations, and is planning one in a Carnival samba school. It is starting to be common to see characters in television soap operas shown reading. Cynics note that Globo, the biggest broadcaster, is also a big publisher of books, newspapers and magazines.

One discouragement to reading is that books are expensive. At São Paulo's book fair this week, "O Código Da Vinci" was on sale for 32 reais—more than a tenth of the official minimum monthly wage. Most other books have small print-runs, pushing up their price.

But Brazilians' indifference to books has deeper roots. Centuries of slavery meant the country's leaders long neglected education. Primary schooling became universal only in the 1990s. Radio was ubiquitous by the 1930s; libraries and bookshops have still not caught up. "The electronic experience came before the written experience," says Marino Lobello, of the Brazilian Chamber of Books, an industry body.

All this means that Brazil's book market has the biggest growth potential in the western world, reckons Mr Lobello. That notion has attracted foreign publishers, such as Spain's Prisa-Santillana, which bought a local house last year. American evangelical publishers are eyeing the market for religious books, which outsell fiction in Brazil.

But reading is a difficult habit to form. Brazilians bought fewer books in 2004—289m, including textbooks distributed by the government—than they did in 1991.

Last year the director of Brazil's national library quit after a controversial tenure. He complained that he had half the librarians he needed and termites had eaten much of the collection. Along with crime and high interest rates, that ought to be a cause for national shame.