

quiet personality.

Saramago had planned to leave Germany today for his home in the Canary Islands. But as he waited in the airport, his publisher told him to go back to the fair, where a cheering rose-bearing crowd awaited him.

He told them he felt a special responsibility being the first winner from Portugal. ``Therefore it's a patriotic reason as well,' ' he said through a translator, adding he hoped ``more people will read Portuguese' ' now.

Asked why his works are important, he said: ``That's not for me to decide. That's for my readers.' '

Saramago's regular newspaper and radio commentaries reflect views that are always inspired by his deep concern for his fellow man.

``Blindness,' ' his most recent book to be translated into English, is an unsettling allegory about the social meltdown as an inexplicable blindness sweeps through society.

``This blindness isn't a real blindness, it's a blindness of rationality,' ' he said at the time. ``We're rational beings but we don't behave rationally. If we did, there'd be no starvation in the world.' '

Born Nov. 16, 1922, in the town of Azinhaga near Lisbon, Saramago was raised in the capital. From a poor family, he never finished university but continued to study part-time while supporting himself as a metalworker.

His first novel published in 1947 -- ``Terra do Pecado,' ' or ``Country of Sin' ' -- was a tale of peasants in moral crisis. It sold badly, but won Saramago enough recognition to allow him jump from the welder's shop to a job on a literary magazine.

Yet for the next 18 years Saramago, then a committed communist who opposed the 41-year rightist dictatorship of Antonio Salazar, published only a few travel and poetry books while he worked as a journalist.

He returned to fiction only after Salazar's regime was toppled by a military uprising in 1974.

In ``The History of the Siege of Lisbon,' ' from 1989, a Lisbon proofreader mischievously inserts the word ``not' ' into a text on the 12th century capture of the Portuguese capital from the Moors, thereby fictionally altering the course of European history with a stroke of his pen.

Such historical and literary mischief are Saramago trademarks.

He is most frequently compared with Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez and his writing is often described as realism tinged with Latin-American mysticism.

The literature prize is one of five established by Alfred Nobel, the Swedish industrialist and inventor of dynamite. The prizes have been awarded since 1901; a sixth prize, in economics, was started in 1969.

The Nobel Prize over the years has been given to writers with worldviews stretching from the bleak futility of Samuel Beckett's works to the vivid epics of Iceland's Halldor Laxness.

The prize even has gone occasionally to writers who did not work in fiction or poetry, notably Winston Churchill and Bertrand Russell.

Last year's prize went to Dario Fo, the Italian playwright whose work combines gut-busting comedy with acid social and political commentary. The 1996 winner was the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska, as shy and delicate and Fo is