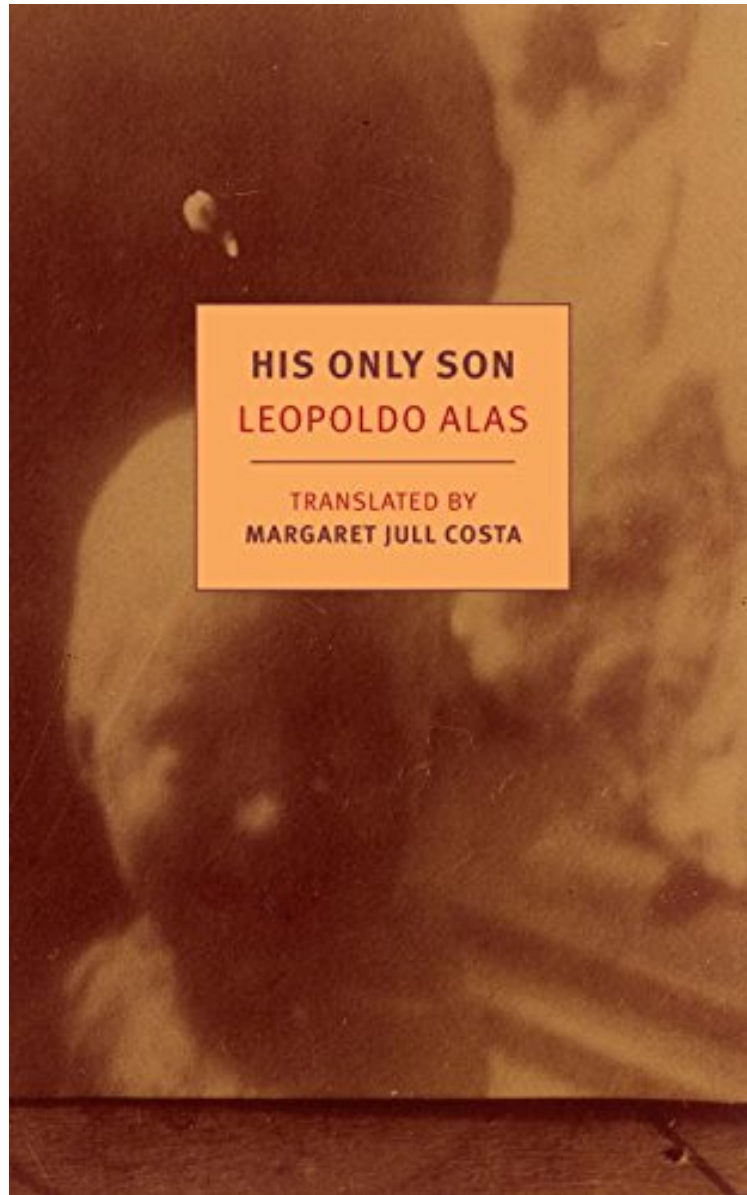


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Leopoldo Alas

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Leopoldo Alas : His Only Son: with Dona Berta (New York Review Books Classics) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised His Only Son: with Dona Berta (New York Review Books Classics):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. a dirt poor, incompetent clerkBy Glenn RussellHas anybody heard of the Spanish novelist Leopoldo Alas or his two most famous novels, The Regent's Wife and His Only Son? I suspect

not, or very few readers, even avid readers. Thank you New York Review Books (NYRB) for making this forgotten classic available along with Margaret Jull Costa's informative Introduction providing context for Leopoldo Alas' life and writing. Initially I planned reading *His Only Son* over the course of a week but once I finished the opening chapters I was hooked – as if listening to rousing flamenco guitar music with castanets, the story and its characters click with such color and excitement, I couldn't put the book down. To share a taste of the novel's spicy Spanish flair, I've listed a number of highlights below.

Olé! Tyrannical Wife and Nincompoop Husband The story revolves around wife Emma Valcárcel, sole daughter of her now deceased father, a rich prosperous lawyer and her husband Bonifacio Reyes, a dirt poor, incompetent clerk. I mention Emma first since she has inherited the entire Valcárcel family fortune and rules over her household as the one squarely in charge; Bonifacio, labelled a useless nobody by both Emma and the entire Valcárcel clan, plays his flute and is relegated to the status of mere window dressing for his rich wife. And following her tragic miscarriage, marital tensions are exacerbated tenfold, Emma transforms into a cruel, fire-breathing dragon and poor Bonifacio drops to the status of Emma's humble servant and, even more humiliating, her personal whipping boy. Not exactly a happy, harmonious couple.

The Power of Family The spirit of the entire Valcárcel family, both living and dead, pervades the house like a fine golden mist. Shortly after their marriage, beholding a restored portrait of one of her long lost ancestors, founder of the Valcárcel family, Don Antonio Diego Valcárcel y Merás, Emma secretly falls hopelessly in love with this illustrious warrior and eminent gentleman who symbolizes for her a desire to live on a level above ordinary people, a desire noted by the narrator as “the pedantic vanity of a woman lead astray by reading fanciful novels.” Oh, my, those romantic novels filling the heads of men and women with such nonsense! Meanwhile her Uncle Don Juan Nepomuceno manages the family finances and Cousin Sebastián deals with various members of the Valcárcel clan- uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces – both men taking up residence in Emma's grand mansion. And where does all this leave lowly Bonifacio? Ah, the poor flute player finally evokes the power of his own Reyes family tree but only when triggered by a dramatic event toward the end of the novel – the birth of his only son. Incidentally, if one wonders about the roots of the glorious multigenerational storytelling tradition of Latin American literature with such giants as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, one Spanish author we can look to is Leopoldo Alas.

Romantic Hearts Encountering the Cold, Cruel World In her Introduction Margaret Jull Costa alludes to the clash between romanticism and realism as an abiding theme. I found this to be one of the most charming aspects of the novel. The hard edges of physical existence are very hard indeed, but Alas' men and women harbor in their hearts the dreams of a romantic. Bonifacio not only dedicates himself heart and soul to his great love – music, but also is a hopelessly sentimental dreamer, continually comparing his actions against the highly noble and overwhelmingly passionate actions and thoughts of heroes he has read about in novels. Emma wonders what it would be like to be inspired by a great passion; a young German woman is a “bacchante in thought” having read wildly romantic books that opened her up to images of literary lust and flexible morals.

The Opera Company When an opera company comes to town, headed by Mochi, the manager, Serafina, the beautiful soprano and Minghetti, a dashing handsome baritone, the unfolding drama within the Valcárcel household is ratcheted up several notches. It all starts with Bonifacio paying visits the company's rehearsals and then starting an affair with Serafina. What?! How in the world can a faceless nincompoop like Bonifacio ever become involved with a gorgeous star like Serafina? And how will his involvement eventually lead to Emma likewise becoming entangled with members of the company, music and the arts? I wouldn't want to spoil a reader's discoveries but I will say Bonifacio undergoes a series of transformations, some welcome, some not so welcome, ultimately reaching a point where he can publicly proclaim the truth of his heart. Quite a feat considering what he must overcome.

Inner Thoughts Leopoldo Alas generously incorporates the new literary innovation of interior monologue to share what his characters are thinking. Here's a snatch of Bonifacio's silent reflections as he listens to the voice of Serafina during a concert. This quote also underscores the author's smooth, accessible style; a pleasure to read: “The peace of the soul also has its poetry. If only I had that peace, ah, yes, if only. For such peace was like that song: sweet, calm, serious, and strong in its own way, but also measured and gentle, a friend to the contended conscience, in love with love but safely within the orderly limits of life; just as the seasons follow, unprotesting, one on the other, the way night follows day, the way everything in the world obeys that law, without ever losing its charm or vigor; to love and love always, while God invisible smiles down on us from above the canopy of the heavens, from among the shifting clouds and twinkling stars.”

Sting of Satire From the time of its first publication in 1890, *His Only Son* has been frequently referred to as a comic novel. And for good reason. It certainly is loaded with ample helpings of well-honed satire which makes for lively reading. Be prepared to laugh on nearly every page. Here's a description of a German engineer who has moved to a mountain village on the outskirts of town: “Körner wanted to excel among those rude mountain folk, and since they remained unimpressed by his skills as a dilettante in various arts and as a reader of sentimental novels, he had to resort to other qualities more appreciated in that land, such as, for example, the strength and capacity of his stomach.” Another description, this time when Bonifacio reflects on being put in the position of Emma's nurse: “He was constantly having to anoint and rub the skinny, fragile, complaining, exhausted body of his better or, as he privately called her, worse half. For unlike his wife's medicines, Bonifacio's unburdenings were for “internal use” only.”

Novella as Bonus This New York Review Books (NYRB) edition also includes Doña Berra, a novella about a lady and her aristocratic family caught in the social

upheaval and conflicting interests of old money versus new money, rich versus poor. Read in concert with *His Only Son*, a great introduction to Leopoldo Alas, an author deserving a wider English audience. Highly recommended." In short, then, Alas conceived of the novel as a vital and meaningful expression of the manners and problems of contemporary life; at the same time, he saw it as a work of art, the esthetic qualities of which transcended the historical element to give it a universality and lasting value in the realm of literary creation." -- Quote from scholar Albert Brent's book, *Leopoldo Alas and La Regenta: A Study in Nineteenth Century Spanish Prose Fiction*

The unlikely hero of *His Only Son*, Bonifacio Reyes, is a romantic and a flautist by vocation—and a failed clerk and kept husband by necessity—who dreams of a novelesque life. Tied to his shrill and sickly wife by her purse strings, he enters timidly into a love affair with Serafina, a seductive second-rate opera singer, encouraged by her manager who mistakes Bonifacio for a potential patron. Meanwhile, Bonifacio's wife experiences a parallel awakening and in the midst of a long-barren marriage, surprises them both with a son—but is it Bonifacio's? In the accompanying novella, *Doña Berta*, the heroine of the title, an aged, poor, but well-born woman, forfeits her beloved estate in search of a portrait that may be all that remains of the secret love of her life. While largely unknown outside of Spain, Leopoldo Alas was one of the most celebrated writers of criticism in nineteenth-century Spain and employed his satirical talents to powerful and humorous effect in fiction. *His Only Son* was Alas's second and final novel, full of characteristic humor, naturalistic detail, descriptive beauty, and moral complexity. His frail and pitiful characters—irrational, emotional actors drawn inexorably toward their foolish fates—are yet multidimensional individuals, often conscious of their own weaknesses and stymied by their very yearnings to be more than the parts they find themselves playing.

"*His Only Son* is the most intense, the most refined, the most intellectual, and the most sensual novel that nineteenth-century Spanish literature has produced." —Azorín "When I read *His Only Son* and *Doña Berta*, I was bowled over by the audacity of the plots, by the diverse cast of characters, and by Alas's ability to be entirely engaged by his characters." —Margaret Jull Costa, from the introduction "A delight to read." —A Common Reader blog "A Flaubert-type novel [that] displays the author's power of psychological analysis." —Harvey L. Johnson, *The South Central Bulletin* About the Author Leopoldo Alas (1852–1901) was the son of a government official, born in Zamora, Spain. He attended the University of Oviedo and the University of Madrid, receiving a doctorate in law. A novelist and writer of short stories who adopted the pseudonym Clarín (Bugle), Alas was one of Spain's most influential literary critics. He became a professor of law at the University of Oviedo in 1883 and published his first and best-known novel, *La Regenta*, in 1884; his second novel, *Su único hijo* (*His Only Son*), was published in 1890. He died in Oviedo at the age of forty-nine. Margaret Jull Costa has been a literary translator for nearly thirty years and has translated works by novelists such as Eça de Queirós, José Saramago, Javier Marías, and Fernando Pessoa, as well as poets such as Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen and Ana Luísa Amaral. She has won various prizes, most recently the 2015 Marsh Award for Children's Fiction in Translation for Bernardo Atxaga's *The Adventures of Shola*. In 2013 she was invited to become a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and in 2014 was awarded an Order of the British Empire for services to literature. In 2015 she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Leeds.