



### **El Moto**

Written by Joaquín García Monge  
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A realistic fiction novel published originally in 1900 recounts pressing moral and social issues faced by the people in Costa Rica at the beginning of the 20th century. García Monge brings to the surface topics such as the marked differences among social classes, the injustices of the rich against the poor, and the customs and moral principles of the time. *El Moto* is considered by many as a forerunner of Costa Rican literature. It is required reading for upper elementary students in Costa Rica, which evokes feelings of a past with which most students can identify.

Jose Blas was given the nickname of “El Moto” during

his elementary school years. He is an orphan who lost both his mother and father by the age of six years old and is brought up by his godfather Don Sebastian Solano, a widower with no children and of good economic standing in the community. Don Soledad Guillen is the richest man in town. He has an only daughter, Secundila Guillen. Besides being beautiful and talented at the required female duties of the time, she is the most eligible bachelorette in Desamparados. This neighborhood is on the outskirts of San Jose, the capital city, a fertile and prosperous land for the gamonales—the landlords of the time.

*El Moto* falls in love with Secundila Guillen. Although the feeling is reciprocated, the customs of the time limit their interaction to a couple of religious celebrations a year and the occasional look and smile exchange. Yet, there is an understanding between them and some of their closest friends about the nature of their relationship. Don Soledad and Doña Micaela, Secundila’s parents, are unaware of their daughter’s feelings towards Jose Blas.

Without Jose Blas’s knowledge Don Sebastian, his godfather, places his eyes on Secundila. *El Moto*, who is around 21 years old, decides it is time to formalize the relationship and ask Secundila’s parents for her hand in matrimony. But how can he face Don Soledad? He decides to look for an ally in el padre Yanurio, the town’s priest, who agrees to help him and talks to Don Soledad. After his visit with the priest, Don Sebastian asks his godson to go look for one of his horses which hasn’t been ridden in a while. Early the next morning *El Moto* is on his way, still unaware of the intentions of his godfather toward his girlfriend. He is thinking of Secundila and planning a happy future with her. He finds the horse and tries to rope it but the animal goes wild. In an effort to dominate it, Jose wraps the rope around his waist. Unfortunately, the horse turns furious and drags him through rocks, trees, and thorn bushes leaving him severely injured and unconscious. While Jose recovers from his

injuries in the care of his best friend, Don Sebastian marries a distraught Secundila. Once recovered, Jose is informed about the misfortune by the priest and leaves, never to return.

Joaquin Garcia Monge was born in San Jose Costa Rica in 1881. He graduated high school from one of the most prestigious boys-only schools in the capital and traveled to Chile to obtain his college degree and became an educator. At the time Costa Rica was a relatively new country since it had only declared its independence from Spain in 1821. The society was still greatly influenced by the European and American families who had immigrated to the new lands during the colony years. Garcia Monge wrote *El Moto* when he was only 19 years old, inspired by what he had witnessed in his own neighborhood. This novel tells the story of the injustices and marginalization suffered by the poor in a place and time in which they had no voice, no rights, and no advocate.

Garcia Monge's formal education allowed him to play an important role in shaping the education system of Costa Rica. He is considered by many as the father of the Costa Rican costumbrismo (the telling of the customs). Following this literary genre he wrote other novels like *Hijas del Campo* [Daughters of the Field], and *Abnegacion* [Abnegation]. Besides pairing *El Moto* with other of Monge's works, readers might find useful the works of writers who continued this trend such as *Mamita Yunai* (1940) by Carlos Luis Fallas and *El Jaul* [The Chest] (1937) by Max Jimenez. Monge worked as a high school principal and served in public offices as the director of the National Library and as the Minister of Education. One of his most significant jobs was as the editor of the *Repertorio Americano* [American Repertoire] magazine which became the unifying communication medium for the Latin-American intellectuals of the early 1900's. Unfortunately, much of his work was not compiled after his death in 1958; yet, his influence is still felt in the Latin-American literature.

As born and raised in Costa Rica, I remember when my 4th grade teacher introduced us to *El Moto*, its complex characters, its setting, and tragic plot as well as its writer and his accomplishments in the history of our country. *El Moto* played an important role in helping us understand our cultural heritage. It showed us how much we had evolved as a society, the customs of the time, the use of the language, and how different life was for us at the other end of the century. This short novel is so rich in imagery and content that it is still required reading for students in Costa Rica today.

Vanessa Saladini, University of Texas Pan American, Edinburg, TX

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