

ESAU AND JACOB

By Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis.
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Rushing to meet the steamship carrying their beloved Flora, the twins Pedro and Paolo Santos are so eager to reach her that while boarding the ship they nearly fall into the sea. "Perhaps that would have been the best ending for this book," muses a diplomat named Aires, who is both the exquisitely unreliable narrator and a peripheral character in this penultimate novel by the renowned Brazilian author Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839-1908). "Even so," Aires continues, summing up the essence of the love triangle at the heart of the novel, "this chapter does not end badly, because the reason for the alacrity with which they jumped off the launch was their ambition to be the first to greet the young girl, a love bet which once again made them equal in her soul." Set in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1800's as Brazil is in the process of shifting from a monarchy to a republic, "Esau and Jacob" is indeed about dueling twin brothers but their antagonisms are far from portentous, never amounting to more than petty squabbles, superficial political differences and an insipid rivalry for the attentions of a girl. In a subtle parody of bourgeois life in Brazil at the time, the twins' trials are recorded by the distinguished Aires, who is unaware of the damning portrait he is painting of his country's culture, society and politics. Nevertheless — and herein lies the author's genius — Aires' story is riddled with the eloquent utterances of great truths. Elizabeth Lowe's elegant translation is accompanied by interesting and informative essays about the author and his work.

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