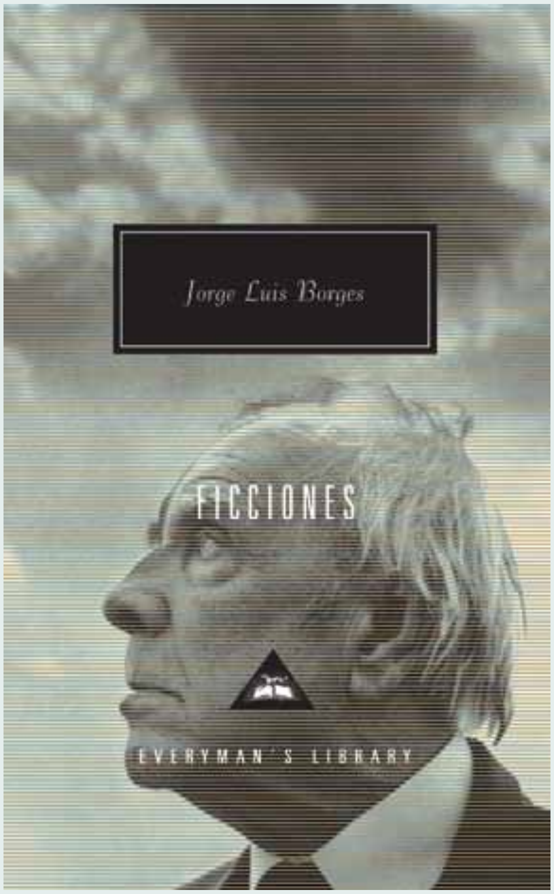
Jorge Luis Borges

BY ANDREW BENEDICT-NELSON



Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) is the master of the postmodern short story. Consequently perhaps, he is not as widely read as he should be. In order to appreciate Borges, all but the most intrepid literary reader must overcome two basic prejudices: that short stories offer less pleasure than novels and that postmodern literature alienates all but the most highbrow of readers. But if you don't read short stories, you miss the medium in which postmodernism is often most powerful. The techniques of the style—layers of texts within texts; doubts about the nature of fiction, authorship, and the reliability of the narrator; existential questions; metafiction; a mix of the real and the fantastic; and themes of time, labyrinths, reality, philosophy, and identity—often wear thin over the long course of a novel. Postmodernism's focus on ideas and style over plot can be tiresome (with some exceptions) at 500 pages; on the other hand, its literary style provides a powerful intellectual kick at 20 pages. So it is with the work of Borges: there is no padding, just concepts as compelling as those in any novel—powerfully communicated and exquisitely packaged.

Borges's work is not entirely postmodern, and he was a precursor for much more to come within that movement. At the heart of all of his work is the sanctity of the idea and the beauty of brevity. His early stories possess plenty of vice and crowd-pleasing violence: those who love mystery novels and detective stories will delight in the way he plays with the genre. On a broader scale, Borges, who is also well regarded for his poetry and criticism, is essential to understanding modern Spanish-language literature; Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, José Donoso, and Mario Vargas Llosa all acknowledged his influence on their own writing. But there is also something exotic about Borges—not just his milieu, but his mind itself—that will draw readers who never thought that a new favorite author would be an introverted librarian from Argentina.

To the World and Back Again

Borges was born in Buenos Aires, the city with which he became inextricably linked. His childhood led him through several different cultures and nations. Because his father was half British, the Borges home was bilingual, and the author grew up reading Shakespeare as well as Argentinean writers. When he was a teenager, the family moved to Switzerland, where Borges learned more languages. After finishing school, he and his family lived in Spain before returning to Argentina in 1921. Reflecting on these disparate cultural influences, Christopher Hitchens wrote in *Love, Poverty, and War* that Borges could only become "someone to whom the Babel of discrepant languages and cultures was not a chaos but, rather the design for an eventually imposing but also microscopically intricate tower." This love of language is evident in Borges's short stories, including "Library of Babel."

Borges started publishing poems and stories shortly after his family's return to Argentina. Highly involved in the city's literary scene, he founded multiple journals and wrote for several publications. At the time, Borges was primarily associated with surrealism and *criollismo*. Surrealism, a cultural art and literary movement that began in the early 1920s, focused on non sequiturs and surprise elements; *criollismo* examined local culture, conventions, and character types (such as the *gaucho*, or "cowboys," of the South

American pampas). These literary movements informed Borges's first books of poetry, as well as the stories that would become *A Universal History of Iniquity* (1935).

In 1938, two tragic events precipitated a major change in Borges's literary style. The first was the death of his father, with whom he had enjoyed a close personal and intellectual relationship. The second was an injury: a head wound Borges suffered at home became infected, and he developed septicemia in the hospital. After a difficult month in which he did not know if he would live, Borges feared that he had lost his creative powers. Instead, he started to experiment with the short story form. He published *The Garden of Forking Paths*, which contains several of his most famous stories, in Spanish in 1941. (The book is better known as the first half of the translated anthology *Ficciones*).

Borges's life during these years provides some insight into his early stories. Just like the rest of the world, Argentina was in the grip of economic stagnation. Although it remained neutral until the end of World War II, a 1943 military coup backed by Colonel Juan Perón removed the civilian government from power; his "election" as president in 1946 marked the rise of a dangerous fascist ideology. During this time, Borges found a job in a Buenos Aires library, where, though hired to catalogue the collection, he spent much of the day reading and writing in the basement. It is perhaps no surprise that there he wrote one of his quintessential stories about the nightmarish "Library of Babel," where the sheer quantity of books has deprived them of all meaning. While working in the library, he also produced the first Spanish translations of the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner and wrote "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," which chronicles a modern man's attempt to "translate" Cervantes's major work. This story, because of its play on literary conventions and the nature of authorship, is considered one of Borges's finest.

Borges's literary circle anticipated that the stories in *Ficciones* would bring the author immediate prominence, but, in fact, he remained largely unknown outside Argentina through the 1950s. His fame later in life resulted from winning (along with Samuel Beckett) the International Publishers' Prize in 1961. Despite his worldwide acclaim and recognition as one of the era's most important writers, Borges never won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Some critics today believe that his conservative politics—in particular his criticism of Perón—may have played a part in this omission. Though he had never been a particularly strident activist, several petitions Borges had signed put him on the wrong side of the Perón government. He even lost his job at the library; the Peronists "promoted" him to the job of Buenos Aires poultry inspector (he immediately resigned). But in 1955, when an anti-Peronist military government took over and Perón went into exile, Borges was appointed to his dream job as head of the Argentine National Library. (He resigned when Perón returned to power in 1973.) This was just one of several academic and cultural positions Borges held during the postwar period, in which he increasingly became to be seen as Argentina's leading public intellectual.

In his late 1950s, Borges's writing significantly changed again, not because of his new responsibilities but because he went blind from an inherited cataract condition. As a result, he returned to his first love, poetry, which was easier to read and compose without sight. He also invented a distinct form of extemporaneous public speaking, which further increased the demand for him in lecture circuits around the world. He spent much of his final years touring the world, delivering talks; he died in 1986.

Where to Start

The traditional place to start with Borges has long been *Labyrinths*, a 1964 collection of some of his best stories and essays that was reissued in 2007. There is also the 1967 collection *Personal Anthology*, Borges's own selection of his pieces for a single volume. But readers who are interested in seeing how Borges's fiction was arranged in the original Spanish editions should turn to Penguin's single volume, *Borges: Collected Fictions*, edited and translated by Andrew Hurley. Richard Bernstein of the *New York Times* called this collection "a cause for celebration," and many others hailed it as an essential collection. This book includes all of the stories from the following books: *A Universal History of Iniquity*, *Ficciones*, *The Aleph*, *Doctor Brodie's Report*, and *The Book of Sand*, plus a few others. However, most of these books are also available in standalone editions published by Penguin.

Jorge Luis
BORGES
COLLECTED FICTIONS

The Short Stories

A Universal History of Iniquity

(Penguin, translated by Andrew Hurley)

These short stories appeared in the Argentine newspaper *Crítica* in the 1930s. All of them are based on actual stories of evil and infamy, but they are a far cry from the "true crime" genre, since Borges added his own fantastic twists. The stories contain some of the young Borges's favorite themes: knife fights, foreign lands, betrayal. While they notably differ from later stories, they still provide insight into the author's world. In fact, some of Borges's early fiction is considered to be an important influence on the best-known contribution of Latin America to world literature, magical realism.

Ficciones

(Grove, edited by Anthony Kerrigan and translated by Anthony Bonner)

Perhaps the quintessential Borges collection, this postmodern book contains two sections: "The Garden of Forking Paths" and "Artifices." Highlights include the following.

"Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*"

Some of Borges's best-known stories are reviews of imaginary books: this one may be the most famous. In the "review," Borges writes of a French author whose ambition was to create a version of *Don Quixote* for modern times. Realizing that a mere translation would be inadequate, Menard aims to rebuild Cervantes's masterpiece from his own experience. At first, he immerses himself in the world of 16th-century Spain, but eventually, he decides that it would be more impressive to create a *Quixote* from the events of his own day. The fictional reviewer (himself a parody of certain conservative critics) lauds the new work as superior to the original. Cervantes wrote rather prosaically about his own world, he claims, but Menard's work is replete with metaphor and allusion. The joke is that the fragments of the "new" book that appear in the review are exact copies of original sections of *Don Quixote*. The story is often cited by those writing literary translations to express the frustration of their work.

"The South"

Borges's own life clearly inspired the event that opens this story. We meet Juan Dahlmann, the secretary of a Buenos Aires library. Dahlmann's family originally hailed from Germany, but he is a thoroughly acculturated Argentine who takes pride in his long tradition of patriotism. He also owns a ranch in the South, the region most associated with Argentina's *gaucho* past, though he has never visited it. But after he suffers a head wound and a disease he picks up in the hospital, Dahlmann decides to visit the ranch. He boards a train to the South with a copy of *1001 Arabian Nights*. At some point, the train mysteriously stops, and Dahlmann disembarks in a strange town. He sits down in the town's only restaurant and begins to read *Nights*. Events spiral out from there, but critics have suggested that Dahlmann never, in fact, left the hospital, and the subsequent events are his way of imagining an honorable death worthy of his ancestors. Borges is said to have considered "The South" his best story.

"The Library of Babel"

This is perhaps the ultimate Borges story, since it describes a library that includes every Borges story ever written—and not written. The narrator and his fellow librarians live in an imaginary universe that consists of a series of hexagonal rooms. Each room is stocked with 410-page books, each of which contains one of the many possible combinations of letters, spaces, and punctuation marks that fill such a volume. Most of the books appear to be gibberish, but the librarians know that their world includes the contents of not just every book ever written but every possible variation of them, including translations into all languages. Because the number of volumes is so large and the contents are disorganized, the library is practically useless and its inhabitants depressed. Nevertheless, the narrator claims that some of his fellows speak of a legendary "Crimson Hexagon," which includes a description of the library's books and instructions for how to navigate the library. He implies that the librarian who inhabits the "Crimson Hexagon" is, effectively, the world's God.

The Aleph and Other Stories

(Penguin)

The stories in *The Aleph* are generally considered to be stylistically consistent with those of *Ficciones*. Notable stories from this book include the following.

"The Aleph"

The titular story concerns a narrator who, like Dahlmann from the story "The South," shares many features with Borges. But this tale also contains a foil in the character of a minor Argentine poet who has stumbled upon a major aid to his work. The poet has discovered that his basement contains an "aleph"—a point in the universe that contains and unites all other points. As a result, someone can peer into the aleph and see every place in the universe from every possible angle. The poet attempts to write an epic poem on the basis of things he has seen through this magical window. He pleads with the narrator to intervene with a local business that is attempting to tear his house down, thus cutting him off from the aleph. But the enmity the narrator has developed toward the poet leads to revenge.

"The Zahir"

While receiving his change after buying a drink, another Borges-like main character finds an unpleasant surprise: it's the zahir, an object that gradually becomes the obsession of any person who comes into contact with it. The current form of the zahir is an Argentine coin, but in the past, it took the form of a tiger and a column of marble. Even after he intentionally loses the coin, the storyteller's obsession with it continues, and he wonders: What if everyone became fixated on the coin? Which would be more real, the earth or the zahir?

The Poetry

Selected Poetry

(Penguin, edited by Alexander Coleman)

Many in the English-speaking world do not think of Borges as a poet, but he was as accomplished a poet as he was a short story writer. While a new reader may wish to start with Penguin's volume of collected fiction, this poetry collection shows his evolution over time. *Selected Poetry* provides an advantage over the other volumes released by Penguin: it is bilingual, so those hoping to study the problems of translation that so intrigued the author can compare these poems to the originals. Also, many of the translations were written by leading lights of English-language literature, including Robert Fitzgerald, W. S. Merwin, and John Updike.

The Nonfiction

Selected Non-Fictions

(Penguin, edited by Eliot Weinberger)

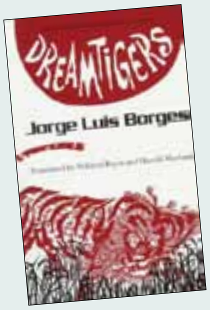
While many of Borges's short stories might be considered philosophical arguments or literary criticism by other means, Borges was also a prolific essayist and critic. Some of these essays explore themes found in his fiction, but there is also much of the unexpected. Those who see Borges as an inspiration for the many forms of the postmodern literary world might look here to see what Borges thought of the authors and genres of his own day. He offers his takes on William Faulkner and Ellery Queen, H. G. Wells and James Joyce. He wrote introductions to Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*. He even reviewed movies, including *King Kong* and *Citizen Kane*.

The essays also reveal the political Borges, including his commentaries on anti-Semitism and Fascism in the years leading up to World War II, which show that he did occasionally look out from the library basement. If there is little on Latin American politics, Borges's position in the continent's culture shines through in several pieces in this book. A few essays have "local color," such as his history of the tango, but perhaps more important is the lecture in which Borges expressed his skepticism toward such devices. In "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," Borges considers the problem many authors in his country face: Are they supposed to turn to the legends of *gauchos* and distinctively Argentine themes for inspiration? Or should they emulate the "modern" writers of Europe? (He wryly points out that one of the ways we know that the Koran is an authentically Arab work is its *absence* of camels). Instead, he writes, Argentine authors should be free to create a new national tradition however they wish, fully confident that they (like authors in all other nations) have inherited a rich tradition of literature from the whole world.

Borges's Books That Defy Description

Dreamtigers

(University of Texas Press, translated by Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland)



Known in Spanish as *El Hacedor*, which means "The Maker" or "The Doer," *Dreamtigers* may be Borges's most personal work. It includes both poetry and prose, and while some of the entries in the latter category are stories that could have appeared in earlier volumes, others are more like short essays and reflections. Many reflect on the life of the author and the nature of the self, especially the piece "Borges and I". So short that it is tempting to simply reprint it, yet worthy of hours of contemplation, the essay features Borges reflecting on his relationship with the person he projects in his work. "I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor," he writes. "Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. … I do not know which of us has written this page."

The Book of Imaginary Beings

(Penguin, translated by Andrew Hurley)

Over the course of his life, Borges gathered descriptions of fantastic creatures. Some of them are beings from sacred texts and classical mythology; others are inventions of other authors like C. S. Lewis or Lewis Carroll. A few are his own creation, and others are made his own with a perfect phrase (he designates the dragon "a necessary monster"). Like most of his work available in English, this one has been translated twice, but the *Washington Post*'s Michael Dirda wrote that because of the lively translations of Andrew Hurley and the "elegant yet childlike" illustrations by Peter Sís in the Penguin volume, the newer version is the one to own. ■