Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)

Fabulist, poet, essayist and translator, whose works became a classic of modern letters, Borges shaped modern literary perception. His influential concept of writing as rewriting and his view that each word or group of words has a determinant impact on the efficiency of literature exemplify a modern approach to literary theory.

Borges, whose ancestors were among the first Europeans to arrive to America, was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, a lawyer and psychology teacher of anarchist views, taught Jorge Luis philosophy. His mother, Leonor Acevedo de Borges, a proud descendant of a long line of soldiers and freedom fighters, was a dedicated companion to her son, until her death at the age of 99. Her help was indispensable, especially when Jorge Luis’s blindness made it very difficult for him to read and write. Two years later, his sister Norah, his closest childhood friend and his first illustrator, was born. Both English and Spanish were used in Borges’s house, and he learned to read English before he could read Spanish. This knowledge played a key role in his work as a translator. He introduced the work of James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Wolf and William Faulkner to the Spanish-speaking world.

Before the onset of the First World War, Borges’s family moved to Geneva, Switzerland, where Jorge Luis learned French and German, and discovered philosophers and writers who would be influential throughout his life, including Thomas Carlyle, Arthur Schopenhauer, Walt Whitman, G. K. Chesterton, Franz Kafka and Gustav Flaubert. He also encountered Jewish culture, which would inspire many of his future literary works. When the war was over, the family travelled around Spain, where Borges met a group of Spanish poets, *ultraístas*, who were in the process of discovering the European avant-garde. One of the leaders of this group was Rafael Cansinos de Asséns, who had a major influence on the young Borges.

This influence became evident upon Borges’s return to Buenos Aires, where he became an active contributor to the literary magazine *Martin Fierro*, and among the founders of *ultraista* mural magazine *Prisma*, the publication of which in 1921 marks the birth of the Argentine avant-garde. Borges’s first book of poetry, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), has the poet looking for reconciliation with his native city after a four years' absence, is among the best examples of Argentine ultraism. However, Borges became increasingly disappointed with Spanish and Argentine avant-garde because of its obsession with metaphor, especially after his reading of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which he reviewed in the journal *Proa* in 1925.

In the 1930s Borges began contributing to Victoria Ocampo’s journal *Sur*, which for the next three decades would become the most influential literary publication in Latin America. Some of Borges’s most famous stories, “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*” and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” were published there*.*

Borges considered the beginning of his career as a story writer to be the publication of *La historia universal de la infamia* ( *A Universal History of Infamy)* in 1935, when he took characters and ideas from other published works and “re-invented” them. The same year he wrote a fictional book review “The Approach to al-Mu’tasim,” which was supposed to be published in a compilation of essays. The deception worked, and it fooled even Borges’s close friend, the writer Adolfo Bioy Casares, with whom he later collaborated in *Seis problemas para don Isidoro Parodi* (*Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi) (1942),* under the joint pen-name of “Bustos Domecq.” Most importantly, with this story Borges launched the original format for his future fiction, which insists on its self-conscious status as an artifact. This fiction is included in *Ficciones* (1944), arguably the most important book written in Spanish in the twentieth century. At the time, Borges defended a fiction that followed the order and logic of magic, a view which became very influential among Latin American magical realists, many of whom would cite Borges as their primary inspiration.

In addition to his new stories, which mixed philosophy, fact, fantasy and mystery, Borges also began to write political articles in the 1930s. Published in *El Hogar,* these articles criticized many of the general trends of the time including anti-semitism, nazism, and the increasing decline of Argentina into fascism.

With the release of *The Aleph* in 1949 and *Otras Inquisiciones* (*Other Inquisitions*) in 1952, Borges began to be acknowledged as Argentina’s most distinguished writer and the best prose writer in the Spanish language. After the publication of *El hacedor* (*Dreamtigers)* in 1960, Borges was awarded jointly with Samuel Beckett the first Formentor Prize, marking the beginning of his international fame. From then on, Borges was acknowledged as a modern master.

Borges’s works inspired such important thinkers as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette. Though he died in 1986 in Geneva from liver cancer, the ongoing discussions that his works provoke prove that his spirit is still very much alive among his readers.

**Selected Works**

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**References and Further Readings**

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Images (my suggestions)

1. <http://www.google.com/imgres?q=Borges&num=10&hl=en&biw=1536&bih=693&tbm=isch&tbnid=Wef22PNUUPMNmM:&imgrefurl=http://www.idelberavelar.com/archives/2007/10/emma_zunz_de_borges.php&docid=ROm2xvHcK_QpBM&imgurl=http://www.idelberavelar.com/borges2.jpg&w=400&h=334&ei=9soWUMixBomX6AHMzYHIDQ&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=745&vpy=376&dur=3132&hovh=205&hovw=246&tx=103&ty=134&sig=103556095005664642885&page=1&tbnh=142&tbnw=160&start=0&ndsp=30&ved=1t:429,r:24,s:0,i:202>
2. http://www.google.com/imgres?q=ficciones&hl=en&biw=1536&bih=693&tbm=isch&tbnid=7I-ihVZfSGxROM:&imgrefurl=http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficciones&docid=WvCaUk60CyOENM&imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/de/Ficciones\_(1944).jpg/220px-Ficciones\_(1944).jpg&w=220&h=338&ei=9csWUJ6HMeWL6gGs5YCwBQ&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=1317&vpy=130&dur=852&hovh=270&hovw=176&tx=44&ty=70&sig=103556095005664642885&page=1&tbnh=176&tbnw=125&start=0&ndsp=25&ved=1t:429,r:8,s:0,i:96