

GENE BÉL-VILLADA "Borges, Jorge Luis"

Reference Guide to  
x

# SHORT FICTION

EDITOR  
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and so natural that we are carried along the course of the narrative.

The themes of Bond's stories can be categorised quite distinctly. They are mostly set in India, some revolving around his days of lost youth and romance, some presenting cameos of people commonly met on Indian roads. Several stories recall the halcyon days of childhood, while others are stories of adventure, set amidst the Himalayan foothills, with its exotic fauna. His style is conversational as he draws the reader in to share his experiences. Often there is an uneasy sense that Bond lives in, and writes of the past, basking in the afterglow of days that are no more ("The Last Tonga Ride," "Coming Home to Dehra," "The Story of Madhu").

The sweet-sour recollections of his childhood days are invested with a touch of fantasy characteristic of Bond. Memories of his own childhood spent in the boarding school at Shimla, of his beloved father whom he lost early in life ("Escape from Java"), and the simple joys of a youngster ("All Creatures Great and Small," "The Photograph") are recorded in his stories.

His remarkable short stories about people he met and remembered in the course of his life reveal his tolerant attitude and warm sympathy for human foibles ("The Thief Death of a Familiar"). It is Bond's uniqueness as a writer that he sees something of interest in the most common characters ("The Immortal Sardar," "The Guardian Angel"); he excels at intimately entering the course of their humdrum lives.

The people of the Himalayan foothills and the local flora and fauna find their way into his stories. Tales of animals and adventure, such as "Panther's Moon," "The Leopard," "Mountain Leopard," and "The Maneater of Manjari," rival some tales by Kipling or Jim Korbett, and they make exciting reading for both children and adults. Bond's passionate involvement with nature and his sorrow at human's willful destruction of its resources is almost palpable ("Death of the Trees"). Nature's resurrective power are evoked in stories like "My Father's Trees at Dehra" and "The Cherry Tree."

Hints of a romance—short, sweet, and unfinished—characterize many of Bond's best creations. There is a yearning nostalgia for lost youth, but little regret for "remembered passion." The passing of time is the theme that strings these stories along a similar emotional plane (*The Night Train at Deol*, "The Coral Tree," "The Story of Madhu," and "Binya Passes by"). These stories have a fey element, something wild and sweet, as though experienced in a dream. The girls seem to be symbols of an intense passion, and invariably appear with red ribbons in their black hair, always partnered with a struggling, recluse-like writer. Melancholy seeps in between the lines, there is plaintive cry for lost love for the years passing by. The same theme recurs in the enchanting novelette *Love Is a Sad Song*. A deep knowledge of Indian society and its tenderness, heartbreak, and loss is woven into the fabric of this exquisite piece of fiction. In his immitigably clear and lucid style, Bond depicts the intricacies of relationships and the nuances of people of different cultures against the backdrop of his country.

—Soma Banerjee

1967 (divorced 1970); 2) María Kodama in 1986. Lived in Europe with his family, 1914–21; co-founding editor, *Proa*, 1924–26, and *Sur*, 1931; also associated with *Prisma*; columnist, *El Hogar* weekly, Buenos Aires, 1936–39; literary adviser, Emecé Editores, Buenos Aires; municipal librarian, Buenos Aires, 1939–43; poultry inspector, 1944–54; became blind, 1955; director, National Library, 1955–73; professor of English literature, University of Buenos Aires, 1955–70; Norton Professor of poetry, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; visiting lecturer, University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1969. President, Argentine Writers Society, 1950–53. Recipient: Buenos Aires Municipal prize, 1928; Argentine Writers Society prize, 1945; National Prize for Literature, 1957; Ingram Merrill award, 1966; Bional Foundation Inter-American prize, 1970; Jerusalem prize, 1971; Alfonso Reyes prize, 1973; Cervantes prize, 1980; Yoliztli prize, 1981. Honorary D.Litt.: University of Cuyo, Argentina, 1956; Oxford University, 1971; Columbia University, New York, 1971; University of Michigan, East Lansing, 1972; University of Chile, 1976; University of Cincinnati, 1976. Member, Argentine National Academy; Uruguayan Academy of Letters. Honorary Fellow, Modern Language Association (U.S.), 1961. Member, Legion of Honor. Order of Merit (Italy), 1968. Order of Merit (German Federal Republic), 1979. Icelandic Falcon Cross, 1979. Honorary K.B.E. (Knight Commander, Order of the British Empire). *Died 14 June 1986.*

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*El libro de arena.* 1975; as *The Book of Sand*, 1977; with *The Gold of the Tigers* (verse), 1979.  
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##### Novel

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**BORGES, Jorge Luis.** Argentine. Born in Buenos Aires, 24 August 1899. Educated at Collège de Genève, Switzerland; Cambridge University. Married 1) Elsa Astete Millán in

## Play

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## Verse

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*Cuaderno San Martín*. 1929.  
*Poemas 1922-1943*. 1943.  
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*El hacedor*. 1960; as *Dreamtigers*, 1963.  
*Obra poética 1923-1964*. 1964.  
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In the Spanish-speaking world, Jorge Luis Borges is almost as well known for his highly evocative verse and essays as he is for his fantastical short stories. Indeed, he began as a poet in the 1920's, when he set out to be the Walt Whitman of Buenos Aires. The rise of local fascists during the 1930's, however, soured him on nationalism of any stripe. He thereafter assumed a cosmopolitan stance, and turned to writing narratives instead. It is these brief

fictions that eventually gained Borges his international reputation. Verbally dense and often bookish, his stories can put off a casual browser, though their erudite, other-worldly atmosphere is often commingled with touches of nostalgic warmth and a wry, subtle humor.

Borges's three-dozen best stories all date from the period 1939 to 1955, a time of personal and political torment for the author. They first appeared in the relatively slim volumes, *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*. And yet the artistic power, originality, and influence of these two books vastly exceeds their physical meagerness. Their terse, restrained prose style constitutes a distinct break from three centuries of Hispanic rhetoric and bombast. More important for writers of fiction the world over, the stories present alternatives both to traditional realism and to Modernist psychologism and "inwardness." What Borges does, in brief, is to emphasize the fantastical and imaginary, to foreground unreality itself as the essential stuff of storytelling, thereby making these traits prime movers of plot and character. The intrusion of the unreal into our everyday existence is precisely what Borges's fiction is about.

Hence, in several Borges stories, dreams and visions can occupy center stage. To the writer-protagonist of "The Secret Miracle," time seems to have stopped for exactly a year, though it may well be a vivid last-minute hallucination occurring within his head. Similarly, the jailed Mayan priest in "The God's Script" believes he has unlocked the divine secret of the universe; yet he could also be experiencing a classically religious-mystical seizure. By contrast, in "The Other Death" a one-time military coward's deathbed fantasies of battlefield courage somehow succeed in altering the historical record; and in "The Aleph" the narrator descends into a seedy basement, where he really does contemplate a wondrous one-inch square containing everything on planet Earth.

In the same way that it finds its way into daily life, the fantastical in Borges can intrude upon and affect our very sense of self, our personal identity. His protagonists are frequently depicted as finding out that they are actually somebody else ("The Theologians"). Or conversely, two seemingly separate life-stories become fused and, through Borgesian artifice, are shown to be just one, as in "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" and "Story of the Warrior and the Captive," titles whose dual referents are then psychologically subverted in the ensuing narrative.

Another special side of Borges is his detective stories and crime fiction, a genre he raised to the level of a high art. "The Dead Man," "The Waiting," and "Emma Zunz" are hauntingly beautiful narratives of crime, in which the author brings into play his suggestive, fanciful notions concerning the role of mind and the nature of truth. On the other hand, "Death and the Compass"—one of Borges's greatest single pieces—is itself a dazzling spoof of the detective-story formula, a world in which everything is upside-down: the criminal captures the detective and preempts the latter's final role, and a bureaucratic "dumb cop" is proved right every time while a bookish, would-be Sherlock is proved sadly wrong.

Borges also can be credited with having invented an entire new genre: what we might call "essay-fiction," combining aspects of both. Many of Borges's best stories look like and have the feel of essays—yet are complete fictions. The narrator of "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" actually refers to its text as an "article," and its mixture of "hard" fact with unsettling fantasy serves to reinforce the essayistic impression. "Three Versions of Judas" presents itself as a learned article on theological disputes, with footnotes and all. Similarly, "The Sect of the Phoenix"

seems to be an ethnographic account of an elusive tribe; it turns out to be a cosmic riddle and an elaborate sex joke.

Many of Borges's inventions have become standard items in our cultural lexicon. "Funes the Memorious" is now an obligatory reference in any psychological disquisition on the problem of absolute memory. The vast and bewildering information systems of our time are often likened to "The Library of Babel," and the notion of identical texts somehow possessing different meanings inevitably conjures up "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." Borges's influence has also been felt in the arts worldwide. Bernardo Bertolucci and Nicholas Roeg both have feature films based on his stories, and Jean-Luc Godard in his more visionary movies quotes lines from Borges essays. Short novels like John Gardner's *Grendel* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* take their cues directly from the Argentine master, and the works of Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover are in part the U.S. literary offspring of Borges's high artifice.

Borges in the 1960's became a world-renowned public figure, giving lectures and receiving accolades across the globe. One unfortunate result was that he lost much of his critical edge and started to repeat himself. Hence the narratives in the subsequent *El informe de Brodie* (*Doctor Brodie's Report*) and *El libro de arena* (*The Book of Sand*) are mostly pale imitations of the great writings from his middle period. So long as readers of short stories exist, however, the tales from *Ficciones*, *El Aleph*, and the English-language anthology *Labyrinths* will remain part of our literary repertoire.

—Gene H. Bell-Villada

See the essays on "The Circular Ruins," "The Garden of Forking Paths," "The Library of Babel," and "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*."

**BOROWSKI, Tadeusz.** Polish. Born in Żytomierz, Ukraine, 12 November 1922. Studied Polish literature at underground Warsaw University, 1940. Interned in concentration camps, Auschwitz and Dachau, 1943–45; political journalist and publicist, Munich, Germany, from 1948. *Died (suicide) 3 July 1951.*

#### PUBLICATIONS

##### Collections

*Utwory zebrane* [Collected Works]. 5 vols., 1954.

##### Short Stories

*Pożegnanie z Marią* [Farewell to Maria]. 1948.  
*Kamienny świat* [The World of Stone]. 1948.  
*Wybór opowiadań* (selection). 1959.  
*This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Other Stories*. 1967.  
*Dzień na Harmenzach*. 1978.

##### Verse

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Tadeusz Borowski was an outstanding Polish writer in the years after World War II. Although he made his debut in German-occupied Warsaw with a clandestine collection of poems, his prose-writing talents blossomed soon after his liberation from the Dachau concentration camp in 1945. Previously Borowski was held in the mass-extinction camp of Oświęcim (Auschwitz) and, indeed, his very first piece of prose (published in a volume with works by K. Olszewski and J.N. Siedlecki) *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* (We were in Auschwitz), related his experiences from this camp where thousands of Poles died. Stories from Auschwitz form the nucleus of Borowski's book of short stories *Pożegnanie z Marią* (Farewell to Maria), which first established him as an important writer.

Few writers managed to capture the atmosphere of the Nazi concentration camps as faithfully as Borowski in stories like "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" (the title story of a collection of his work in English) and "A Day at Harmenz." In the first of these stories a day is described in the life of the "labour Kommando" who help to unload the incoming transports of deported Jews destined for the gas chambers. It is a horrifying, almost maddening experience in human terms, but because members of the labour gang (which includes the narrator Tadek) can have some surplus food afterwards, it also enhances their chance to survive. And in Auschwitz—if one survived the first "selection"—survival takes precedence over all other human values. "A Day at Harmenz" is less intense in its depiction of "Auschwitz reality"—it relates episodes from camp life, including the theft of a goose, regular beatings of camp inmates who don't work hard enough, and a discussion of whistled tunes with a German *Kapo* (overseer) that could, but luckily will not, have dangerous consequences for the narrator. The day ends in anticipation of a new selection, when weak and ill labourers are chosen and sent to the gas chambers. In these stories Borowski stresses the banality of evil. His SS-men are not demonic, they are not even particularly sadistic; their main characteristic is cool indifference, although some of them show interest in the efficient realization of their "job." But they are all nameless: the murderer is anonymous. Auschwitz is a reified world, where the process of turning people into things reaches its apogee (even human corpses are used for the production of soap and bone products).

Borowski's second collection of stories *Kamienny świat* (The World of Stone) moved away from the technique of