



Borges on Writing

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In 1971, Jorge Luis Borges was invited to preside over a series of seminars on his writing at Columbia University. This book is a record of those seminars, which took the form of informal discussions between Borges, Norman Thomas di Giovanni--his editor and translator, Frank MacShane--then head of the writing program at Columbia, and the students. Borges's prose, poetry, and translations are handled separately and the book is divided accordingly.

The prose seminar is based on a line-by-line discussion of one of Borges's most distinctive stories, "The End of the Duel." Borges explains how he wrote the story, his use of local knowledge, and his characteristic method of relating violent events in a precise and ironic way. This close analysis of his methods produces some illuminating observations on the role of the writer and the function of literature.

The poetry section begins with some general remarks by Borges on the need for form and structure and moves into a revealing analysis of four of his poems. The final section, on translation, is an exciting discussion of how the art and culture of one country can be "translated" into the language of another.

This book is a tribute to the brilliant craftsmanship of one of South America's--indeed, the world's--most distinguished writers and provides valuable insight into his inspiration and his method.

Borges on Writing Details

Date : Published July 1st 1994 by Ecco/WW Norton (first published 1973)

ISBN : 9780880013680

Author : Jorge Luis Borges , Daniel Halpern (Editor) , Frank MacShane (Editor) , Norman Thomas di Giovanni (Editor)

Format : Paperback 176 pages

Genre : Language, Writing, Nonfiction, Literature, Criticism, Literary Criticism, Essays

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Stela says

Some 40 years ago, an almost informal encounter took place in an auditorium of Columbia University. A small group of students enrolled in some writing program met Borges with various questions about inspiration, subject, motivation, beliefs etc., keen to discover some of the authorship secrets.

It was not the usual academic approach. Borges' blindness meant that his friend Di Giovanni would read some text he would interrupt from time to time to explain some obscure meaning, to remember some circumstance that conducted to a phrasing or a rephrasing, to evoke some autobiographical or historical event that inspired one scene or another.

A gold mine for a biographer or a literary historian or even a mere reader curious about the creative process. Were they – are they equally useful for an aspiring writer? I'd say they are in the same way the famous Philosophy of Composition is. Like Poe does with his Raven, Borges explains his short story The End of the Duel (and later one or two poems) paragraph by paragraph to prove, apparently, that there is nothing arbitrary in the creation of a work of art. We learn about the source of inspiration (an anecdote told by a friend), the stylistic of the names ("Carmen is a woman's name, but it's fairly common for gauchos to have a woman's name if it doesn't end with an a. So a gaucho might be called Carmen Silveira"), the historical background ("The battle of Manantiales stands for the revolution in Uruguay called 'La Guerra de Aparicio.'"), the message ("...it's meant to be horrifying or what we used to call hard-boiled, and in order to make it horrifying I left the horror to the reader's imagination") and so on.

All this tremendously interesting, but where lies the magic recipe for creation? Can you, carefully respecting the recommendations, write something as beautiful as The Raven or The End of the Duel? To rephrase, can the ineffable be explained? One cannot even hope to catch all meanings of the exemplified texts, but how beautifully both authors fool us!

What one can discover, however, is some artistic beliefs. For example, Borges' mistrust in Sartre's concept of "littérature engagée" because it would limit the imagination since the stories own the writer rather than the other way around:

I don't choose my own subjects, they choose me. I do my best to oppose them, but they keep on worrying me and nagging me, and so I finally have to sit down and write them and then publish them to get rid of them.

Or his opinion that a poet's duty is to master the forms before writing free verse, (this sounds like Queneau a little whom I don't know whether he had read) since "... in the long run, to break the rules, you must know about the rules."

Or his pride in the mark his English heritage left on his style (and on Spanish language, I'd add), revealed in the passionate quest for the right word while collaborating at the translation of his own works from Spanish.

During this short revelatory journey into a moment of Borges' past, we are mesmerized by the quiet beauty of the man behind the creator. And we keep envying all reading long those lucky enough to have been in Columbia University auditorium 40 years ago...

Ben says

Provides great insight into the working mind and working relationships of a renowned and world class writer. Especially insightful for those interested in the process of literary prose and poetry translation.

Al Maki says

I would recommend it firstly because Borges is able to articulate his extraordinarily precise comprehension of words and how they work together and from it I'm able to get an inkling into how to read more closely. He makes the point in one of the essays on translation that a translator reads more closely and accurately than anyone else. Nothing tests my grasp of a passage more than trying to put it into another language. Something else I found interesting is that his perspective as a thoughtful reader to whom the nature of the twentieth century was not a given (he was born in 1899) gave him some distance from the developments of the twentieth century. For example, he saw the rise of the detective novel and science fiction as the birth of forms that were dominated by the intellect rather than the spirit.

I found his thinking fascinating. I'll try to demonstrate it with a quote from a review a book of fairy tales from Turkestan.

“Shakespeare – according to his own metaphor – enclosed the events of many years in the turning of a water clock. Joyce, with a mollifying gesture, defers the flight of time and unfolds over seven hundred long-winded pages the day in the life of a man. The time that governs these stories is neither the rushing time of Shakespeare nor the maniacally dragged-out time of Joyce: it is time undefined, light, not weighing upon the events, and we do not know whether we should measure it by years or by days, by calendars, or sunsets.”

For a modern to be able to conceive of time as "undefined, light" is unusual. It reminds me of the ending of an old Slavic poem/letter that strikes me as surprising (and delightful) whenever I read it:

"Now we'll conclude, for we don't know the date and don't own a calendar; the moon's in the sky, the year in the book, the day's the same over here as it is over there..."

August says

Borges is an author that you grow with and constantly surpasses any previous expectations. No?

Arif Abdurahman says

Transkripsi seminar Borges bersama penerjemahnya di Universitas Columbia yang dibagi dalam tiga bab: penulisan cerpen, puisi, dan penerjemahan, kemudian diakhiri dengan semacam wejangan untuk penulis muda. Mengenyangkan!

Harold says

The GR Blurb for this seems to describe another book. The edition pictured here is a collection of essays, book reviews, articles etc - much like the *Selected Non-Fiction*. I enjoy Borges's non fiction as much as his fiction. It's just a great mind at work and his thoughts on *anything* are worth my reading. As with anything by JLB, once you've finished it you can pick it up and reread sections or even random pages. Borges is a lifetime study.

Morgane says

This was alright. However, this is an excellent quote:

"To mock excessive forethought is not difficult; it is important to remember, however, that it has produced French literature, perhaps the finest in the world."

Damn right.

L says

What can I say! Borges never disappoints! He's informative, wise, funny ("my mother is just ninety- four") and modest.

The structure of this book, or should I say, this series of seminars that took place some forty years ago at the Columbia University, is very interesting - Borges' faithful translator and friend Norman Thomas di Giovanni, reads Borges' prose works and poetry, paragraph by paragraph while Borges comments upon every paragraph that needs a comment (an excellent method - it puts the whole story under a microscope and discovers details one would otherwise be ignorant of, at least in the first and second reading). And this brings me to the minor (tee-wee) flaw of the structure of the lectures - most of comments in the beginning of the book are mostly cultural references (gauchos, history of South America), and it can kinda tone down the reader's enthusiasm and expectation of the real stuff - the mysterious act of writing- but still, as I said, it's a tinyyyy flaw, because it actually depends on the reader (it didn't bother me much).

This is actually one of the best books there is on the craft of writing, not only because it includes Borges, but because of its flexible structure that is to the reader's advantage, and because of the friendly, informal atmosphere. The questions from the students are very interesting - you could see the clash between Borges' and their view of literature (the part on poetry especially), and that's what gives a refreshing zest to the book.

In the end, after all that line-by-line analysis, what can we conclude?

"Literature

*is not a mere juggling of words; what matters is what is left unsaid,
or what may be read between the lines."*

Diptarup Ghosh Dastidar says

This book is a wonderful insight into the life and philosophy of Argentinian Author Jorge Luis Borges, who changed the way in which Spanish is written. The sittings with the students and teachers of Columbia University and his official translator Norman di Giovanni are extremely revealing about the way a fiction is created, the ways to read and understand poetry, and the tricks and treats of translation. A must read for all Borges fans and literature freaks!

Pablo says

Borges' insights on writing prose, poetry, and translation are a study in brilliance and how absolute passion for craft combined with a lack of ego can be freeing.

Shane says

I picked up this book looking for an introduction to Borges and instead I received an assortment of his short essays with no central theme other than to convey what a brilliant and well read man he was.

Borges traverses a wide canvas in this book: the exploration of words, metaphors, translation, narrative, reading, critical reviewing and a section for his favourite genre, the detective story. His sources are wide and varied; from Whitman to Woolf, James (Henry) to Joyce (James), Kafka to Melville, Flaubert to Wells, Poe to Conan Doyle, he plucks examples with confidence, losing us in his complex sentences and thought patterns.

I picked up a few of his insights which I thought might be useful to mention:

1. "Art happens, it cannot be crafted" (this was a quote from Walt Whitman – one of Borges's brilliant pluckings).
2. All meaningful metaphors have already been created.
3. Economy of words is better than lavishness.
4. All poetry is confession.
5. Immortality is sometimes achieved by association of place (e.g. Burns of Scotland).
6. The domain of passion is still open to claim. No single poet can lay claim to it.
7. A writer creates his precursors because his latest work dates what has come before
8. Conan Doyle cheated on the detective story by not concealing who-done-it.
9. The integrity of the novel lies in prophecy, in magic, not in cause and effect.
10. Kafka's writing is like a moving body that never reaches its destination, an expedition to the North Pole.

I found Borges's handful of short reviews that were included in this book to place more emphasis on the writer than on the work. And here too Borges draws from a wide selection of sources outside the writer and his work to make his points.

A whole section is dedicated to the detective story, from its origins with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" to its evolution since. Borges posits six principles for the crafting of the perfect detective

story and elevates the genre to high art, an intellectual exercise for the reader. He observes that England still promotes the intellectual detective novel while in America the genre has drifted towards sex and violence.

This is a book that will send you on a goose hunt for other books mentioned within. Borges generates curiosity in the reader with his astute observations. He is a writer who makes you think, and work, and think again, as you read. Suffice to say that I went out and bought the collected works of Jorge Luis Borges which I will look forward to reading in the days ahead.

Justin Evans says

Transcripts from university seminars, and that's how it reads: shallow but occasionally fascinating, but mostly soothing.

Nice to know Borges, like me, isn't so keen on literature that's visual. No coincidence that he was blind, and I'm really short sighted, but still: "I think if you are too vivid you're really creating unreality, because the fact of seeing things in that way blurs them."

Elena says

Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that dreaming and wakefulness are the pages of single book, and that to read them in order is to live, and to leaf through them at random, to dream. Paintings within paintings and books that branch into other books help us sense this oneness. Borges quotes Schopenhauer to end this masterful collection of essays *On Writing*, as to remind the reader his primary influence in creating labyrinthian stories.

In essence Borges masterfully exemplifies a writer. A writer who knows their craft. He understands and has studied other writers in order to build for his own a small place in the massive world of literature.

I took great reprieve in reading these essays because although most works were a summary and a criticism of other works, he does so with great precision and poignant opinions. I say reprieve because I was reading Freeman Dyson's *The Scientist as Rebel* and in reading that work and Borges' work I clearly saw the difference between what a writer can do versus someone who does not practice the craft. Dyson's summaries were pedantic and was just an awful waste of my time while this will be a book that continuously inspire me over the years.

Oh to be back at Tlon, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius.

If there was one minor criticism it would be Borges' expounding on the adventure novel, a genre I never care for, but seemingly something he is fully interested and immerses himself into throughout the years. I didn't care so much for these essays but it did pique my interest in reading Poe again.

Jim says

I am continuing my reading of the five collections of Borges' stories, essays, and poems published by Penguin in 2010 under the editorship of Suzanne Jill Levine. The reason I am doing this is twofold: First of all, going all the way back to the 1960s, I have thought that the Argentinean author walks on water -- and, in fact, he has influenced me powerfully in my adventures as a voyager in world literature. Secondly, I am expecting to visit Argentina later this year and want to pay homage to one of the most important influences of my life. (I plan to stay in the northwest Buenos Aires neighborhood -- Palermo -- in which he lived much of his life.)

What I find interesting about the Levine Penguin series is that we see not only the old Borges, the blind Tiresias who delighted in uttering oracular statements, but also the young man who was not overly afraid of making a fool of himself. Witness the opening essay in this collection, "Ultra Manifesto" (1921), in which Borges sounds like any other collegian trying on the latest "-ism" as if it were a new pair of shoes. This is a very ungodlike Borges, indeed, and sometimes a callow one.

Although Borges has directed so much of my reading, I was somewhat surprised to see him panning two great writers I discovered on my own. In a 1940 review of his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares's **The Invention of Morel**, he disses Marcel Proust on one page -- "There are pages, there are chapters in Marcel Proust that are unacceptable as inventions, and we unwittingly resign ourselves to them as we resign ourselves to the insipidity and emptiness of each day" -- and in the next paragraph slams into Honoré de Balzac -- "Ortega y Gasset was right when he said that Balzac's 'psychology' does not satisfy us; the same thing could be said of his plots." Sigh! I guess in literary criticism there are no perfect fits: One takes the good with the bad.

Borges's reputation over the last 40-50 years rests primarily on two collections of short stories he wrote in the 1940s, **Ficciones** and **The Aleph**, whereas he thought of himself more as a literary critic and a poet. With me, also, these two early collections were the high-water mark of his career; but I am not averse from reading as much of his work as I can -- regardless what I discover in the process.

Sarah says

This was a birthday present from me to me. Feels as though he's whispering in your ear, "I'm discussing hardcore literature in the most sophisticated terms but you get it, don't you?"
