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The 'Library of Forking Paths':
Jorge Luis Borges, His Literary Antecedents & His Descendants

To the casual eye, my book collection appears eclectic, a polyglot hodgepodge of fiction and nonfiction. Closer scrutiny reveals that Jorge Luis Borges – his works, his ideas, and his literary family tree – comprise the unifying thread that ties together these seemingly disparate books.

In true Borgesian fashion, I owe my discovery of Jorge Luis Borges to the conjunction of a mirror and a perspicacious high school Spanish teacher. This teacher saw one of Borges' short story collections reflected on the glass of a bookshelf one afternoon and recommended that I peruse some of Borges' works, starting with his short stories in *Ficciones*, and particularly "The Garden of Forking Paths." Immediately I found in Borges a kindred spirit; like the man who proclaimed that he imagined "paradise to be a kind of library" I had found the public library in my tiny hometown – and libraries since – to be edenic.

Using money from odd jobs and summer jobs, I purchased my first book in this Borgesian collection. In the decade since, this collection has grown. A fortuitous long layover in Buenos Aires during senior thesis research allowed me to spend some precious hours roving the streets that Borges did, visiting some of his favorite coffee shops and literary haunts, and most importantly, growing my collection thanks to several voluminous second-hand book shops.

In addition to reading every story of Borges that I could find, I also began a quest to situate Borges within the arc of literary history. This quest began by seeking the source of Borges' inspiration, which has provided motivation and justification for a number of volumes in my collection. I began by tracking down the allusions in early Borges short stories which led me to Edgar Allen Poe and Miguel Cervantes and the *One Thousand and One Nights*, among others.

Some claim – including Williamson, a recent biographer of Borges – that Borges had no children. I would contend that Borges has produced an impressive and vast group of literary descendants. Part of the quest of my reading life is to use Borges' work, style, and ideas as a passport to explore authors from the far corners of world literature. This quest has led to the works of Garcia Marquez, Saramago, Sebald, Calvino, and Eco – among many many others (and many others yet to discover) populating my shelves.

Further reflections or holding a mirror to my collection (read: applying Borgesian technique) allows the family tree to become manifest that is rooted and branches on my bookshelf. Like Borges himself, I wonder if this is perhaps an infinite library and whether I will ever truly find the end of Borges' antecedents and descendants. What I do know is that for me, like Borges, "paradise is a kind of library."

Bibliography

Borges' Literary Antecedents

In addition to being a prolific writer, Borges was perhaps first and foremost a voracious reader (and in his later years, a well respected librarian in Buenos Aires). His writing draws from a diverse array of influences, and tracking down Borges' influences led to the expansion of my book collection—and literary horizons.

Anonymous. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Translated by Seamus Heaney. Norton, 2000.

Beowulf, an Old English poem, details the exploits of Beowulf, an ancient Scandinavian hero, who slays the monster Grendel (and Grendel's mother). Borges frequently translated from Old English and Old Norse. Some scholars call Borges an "unacknowledged medievalist" (see the scholarship of e.g. M. Toswell).

Calderón de la Barca, Pedro. *Toda la vida es sueño*. Planeta, 1998.

Calderon de la Barca is considered by many to be the "Spanish Shakespeare." His work – *All life is a dream* – is based on the Platonic concept of the cave and explores the fundamental question: how do we know? Borges developed these ideas – such as the nature of reality and dreams and whether all of life was but a dream – in a number of his stories. While a decided lover of Shakespeare and Anglophile, Borges also recognized the influence of Barca and appreciated classic Spanish literature.

Cervantes, Miguel. *Don Quixote*. Trans. Edith Grossman. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

Borges had a profound love of *Don Quixote*. One of his most imaginative stories envisions a 19th century writer Pierre Menard trying to recreate this novel by imagining himself as Miguel Cervantes ("Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*"). Borges also enjoyed playing with the concept of authorship in his stories – like Cervantes before him challenging readers with his introduction of Cide Hamete Benengeli (is this a translator? Another one of Cervantes' versions of himself? A rival? – the reader is left to ponder). Borges challenged the boundaries of authorship in other stories such as "Borges and I." Late in his career he revisited Cervantes in a story called "Parable of Cervantes and the *Quixote*."

Dante. *Inferno*. Bantam Classics, 1982.

Dante. *Purgatorio*. Bantam Classics, 1982.

Dante. *Paradiso*. Bantam Classics, 1982.

Borges' "Paradiso, XXXI, 108" references Dante's opus in its title and then more obliquely alludes to one of the most poignant scenes of *Paradiso* in which Dante contemplates the face of God. In true Borgesian fashion, Borges wonders whether such a face had been etched then erased from mirrors in order that the face of God be the face of any individual.

This also typifies Borges' love of discussing and commenting on theology in his works, not unlike Dante's meditation on the nature of God and the afterlife.

William Shakespeare. Hamlet. Thompson, Ann, and Neil Taylor, ed.
London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006.

Borges' lifelong fascination with Shakespeare took many forms. This fascination crystallized in a story called "Shakespeare's Memory" in which Borges tried to extrapolate some of the scant details of Shakespeare's life.

_____. One Thousand and One Nights. Trans. Husain Haddawy. W.W. Norton & Co.: 2008.

This series of stories is a structure that Borges marveled at. He often reflected on the ability of storytelling to divert and distract. A bit of a Shehezerade himself, Borges loved to tell nested stories within stories. Borges' "Garden of Forking Paths" provides a paradigm of this structure and reveals one of the many instances that Borges hearkened back to the tradition of the One Thousand and One Nights.

Borgesiana

Borges himself wrote quite voluminously though preferred the genre of the short story. I have sought to collect as many of his short stories – as well as some works of other genres – by Borges in my collection.

Borges, Jorge Luis. Collected Fictions. translated by Andrew Hurley. Penguin, 1998.

This book is the ur-book in my collection. This much dog-eared volume purchased back in high school (2003) forms the entrance of my labyrinthine Borges and Borgesiana library. From this ur-book sprang the rest of the collection! I return to it often and keep this copy on my nightstand ready for regular reference and re-re-reading.

Borges, Jorge Luis. Selected Non-Fictions translated by Elliot Weinberger. Penguin, 1999.

This book collects many of Borges' nonfiction writing from his early career to the end of his career. It reveals many of the authors that Borges read as well as his preoccupations with many subjects such as mirrors, encyclopedias, and labrinyths.

Borges, Jorge Luis. Ficciones. Alianza Editorial, 2004.

This was the first Borges volume that I read in the original Spanish. I purchased it secondhand at Spanish language bookshop in New York. Struggling through Borges' prose in Spanish gave me a greater appreciation of the art of the translator – and a new understanding of Borges' thematic fixation on translation.

Borges, Jorge Luis. Historia universal de la infamia. Alianza Editorial, 2002.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Discusión*. Alianza Emecé, 1995.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Otras inquisiciones*. Alianza Editorial, 2007.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *La memoria de Shakespeare*. Alianza Emecé, 2004.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Historia de la eternidad*. Alianza Emecé, 2005.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *El oro de los tigres*. Alianza Emecé, 2005.

These short story collections represent second hand books that I acquired on a layover in Buenos Aires back in 2008. They were quite inexpensive – but at the same time invaluable to enriching my understanding of Borges and my collection of his works in the original. Though Borges himself was bilingual in Spanish and English fully, I am still working on both of these languages. Reading Borges – master of diction – has aided in this endeavor.

Borges' Literary Descendants

Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Harcourt Brace, 1978.

Calvino, Italo. *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Harcourt Brace, 1982.

Italo Calvino is perhaps Borges' most direct literary descendent (he could be Borges' son, though Borges produced no biological children). *Invisible Cities* reflects and develops many Borgesian short stories that are travel narratives and journeys. It also possesses a classic Borges trope: the journey that is not a physical journey but a journey of self-discovery. *If on a winter's night a traveler*, on the other hand, develops the Borgesian notion of nested stories, itself a borrowing from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Carpentier, Alejo. *Guerra del Tiempo and other stories*. Continental, 1988.

Cortazar, Julio. *Hopscotch*. Alianza Editorial, 2005.

Cortazar, Julio. *Histories of cronopios and famas*. Alianza Editorial, 2006.

Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Riverhead, 2008.

The profound intertextuality of this novel is a treasure trove. Diaz himself articulates his influences through the website Rap Genius where he has annotated parts of his novel. For example, when discussing his technique of incorporating footnotes as a literary device, Diaz reveals the influence of Borges on this work (one of many times Borges' name and oeuvre are evoked), Diaz posits that Jorge Luis Borges inspired much of this work.

García Márquez, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.

This epic – and indeed much of Garcia Marquez’s work – owes much to Borges. Garcia Marquez was an avid reader of *Borgesiana* and further developed Borges’ ideas of magical realism into a high art.

Eco, Umberto. *Name of the Rose*. Mariner, 2014.

Like Borges, Eco is a medievalist and medieval enthusiast through and through. He combines the Borgesian love of detective fiction with Borges’ preoccupation with labyrinths, mirrors, and theological controversy. Eco may be, after Calvino, Borges’ most direct literary descendent.

Gonzalez Echevarria, Roberto (ed.). *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories*. Oxford University Press: 1997.

This collection of short stories collects a variety of Borges’ stories as well as authors that influenced him or that he influenced. It provides a useful cross-section of Latin American literature as well as an overview of the arc of the development of the short story in a Latin American context.

Saramago, Jose. *History of the Siege of Lisbon*. Mariner, 1998.

Sebald, William. *The Rings of Saturn*. New Directions, 1998.

Sebald’s free-ranging masterpiece dialogues with – and reveals the profound influence of Borges, particularly his story “Tlon, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius.” Like Borges, Sebald was fascinated by encyclopedias and this love of encyclopedias pervades his work (beginning indeed with the epigraph itself!).

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. Penguin, 2016.

Secondary Sources

Williamson, Edwin. *Borges: A Life*. Viking, 2004.

Williamson provides the most comprehensive and detailed biography of Borges to date. A whopping 952 pages, this biography traces the arc of Borges’ life from Argentina to Europe and back and from student to writer to librarian to cultural icon. Williamson provides a helpful key to understanding many of Borges’ influences and how his education and semi-English upbringing shaped his literary style and output.

Wishlist

Saramago, Jose. *A Year in the Life of Ricardo Reis*.

I have read that Saramago has his protagonist in this novel contemplate the novel, *The God of the Labyrinth* by Herbert Quain. This novel – and its author, Quain – are themselves fictive creations of Jorge Luis Borges. Saramago was deeply influenced by Borges and I'd love continue to trace out the extent of this influence by adding *A Year in the Life of Ricardo Reis* to my collection.

Borges: *Selected Poems* ed. Alexander Coleman.

One area where I have not explored Borges' work as fully is his poetry. This volume contains a curated but thoughtful cross-section of Borges' poetry, which would complement my existing collection of Borges' short stories and non-fiction writings.

The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges (Cambridge Companions to Literature) ed. Edwin Williamson.

Much of my collection is primary sources but I would appreciate the opportunity to deepen my understanding of Borges by reading more literary criticism and other secondary sources. This companion seems like a decent springboard for which to continue that journey of understanding Borges.