



**Audio essayist: Susan Jill Levine**

**Title: Giving Borges his due**

**Duration: 7 minutes, 2 seconds**

### **Introduction**

In *On Writing*, Jorge Luis Borges writes, "I do know that literature is an art that can foresee the time when it will be silenced, an art that can become inflamed with its own virtue, fall in love with its own decline, and court its own demise."

Borges was talking about Spanish literature, but he could also have been talking about serious writing in the age of the Internet.

In this Skype-recorded episode of Bookpod, translator Suzanne Jill Levine talks about Borges and his five volumes of nonfiction and poetry published by Penguin Classics for which she was the general editor.

### **Presentation**

Just to quote Vargas Llosa, the recent Nobel Prize winner, he said, "Who among Borges' contemporaries handled with equal ease Scandinavian myths, Anglo-Saxon poetry, German



philosophy, Spain's Golden Age of literature, the English poets, Dante, Homer, and the myths and legends of the Far and Middle East that Europe translated and gave to the world?"

It's true. I mean, he's an utter guru of all knowledge. He's one of those figures who has a sort of encyclopedic knowledge. And actually, the funniest thing is that he did read the *Encyclopedia Britannica* from beginning to end.

Borges once said that he grew up in his father's library, and he doesn't think he ever left it. His father was part English, which was very normal. Argentines come from all over the place. And the father was a lawyer, but he was also a kind of philosopher and kind of an anarchistic thinker, did not believe in public education. So he educated the Little "Georgie," as he was called, at home, and taught him, for example, the Paradox of Zeno by playing a game of chess with him. And this library, which also contained the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia*, obviously this was the source of Borges' enormous erudition.

#

The world contained or ending up in a book was an idea that



Mallarmé spoke of, and of course he loved Mallarmé and Valéry. He was intrigued by some of their ideas, as he was by the English modernists, Eliot and others.

But this idea of the world ending up in a book certainly has a biblical feeling about it. I think what he was trying to tell us is that everything is a text, including us. There's a level at which we are mediated by our brain. Everything we do and think are fictions. We see reality through the screen of our emotions and our minds. So we're fiction-makers. And I think that in that sense we are in a way caught in a book. That concept, which just seems perhaps very modern, also ties up with ancient ideas and the concept of how the Bible sums up all of reality for the Judeo-Christian tradition, right? And of course, first there was the word then there was reality.

So, he takes that idea, but he makes it into a very modern concept. And that's what he's always doing. He says there are no new ideas, but the readers are new. So we make them new. [LAUGH] Even though it's the same ideas, you see.

#

Teaching Borges is the best way to bring students back to



the cannon, which of course has been completely undermined. So few students are aware of the great writers of history. And many of them were quite obscure.

And what's interesting about Borges is that his tastes range from Whitman who, in a sense, he wanted to be, the great Walt Whitman of who you assume everybody still knows, or Faulkner, to somebody like Marcel Schwab, whom nobody thinks about. Nobody except a few intellectuals think about Mallarmé or Valéry who had very important ideas.

So, Borges is countering the cultural amnesia, which is taking over so terribly. I mean, aesthetics are important to him, but also ethics are. The kind of statements he makes at any one point about a writer has both an aesthetic and an ethical range. For example, when he says about Melville, that we as readers can now see "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a forerunner of Kafka's infinite bureaucratic nightmare, something that is unexplainable and never ends. When he speaks of "Bartleby," he says it's enough for one man to be crazy for the whole world to be insane as well.

Obviously he's making an allusion to Hitler. 'Cause you have to remember he's writing in the 1930s and 'forties to



what's going on in Europe and to all these authoritarian fascist movements and totalitarian movements that are occurring. And so there's always a political side to everything he says, which is something that many readers are not aware of.

#

When he started writing, there was a belief that Argentine literature and Latin American literature had to be very realistic, kind of pertain to social realism. And therefore, the kind of works that he was writing, these fantastic pieces, was totally against the grain. So he was concerned about the kind of marketplace or ideological pressures that might suppress literature, might suppress the imagination.

And so I think that that's partly what he's talking about here, and I think he's right. If you think about the times that we're living in, we're living in a time where education is being downgraded, where people are being encouraged not to think, where the imagination, in truth, is being suppressed because we're being bombarded with images and messages that tell us what to see and what to



think and what to imagine.

#

He started, of course, in the context of the avant-garde and he, himself was part of a particular avant-garde movement, which was called *Ultraismo*, or Ultraism, which is basically a movement that wanted to take all the flowery and heavy-handedness and lengthiness out of Spanish prose and poetry, and just get to the essence of things by use of very paradoxical and shocking metaphors or condensations, bringing all of thought together in one sentence, in one word practically. *Ultraismo* definitely penetrates into all his writing. And "The Aleph" is a wonderful example – that story that basically describes all of the universe in one page.

So, he really was such a forerunner. He changed our way of thinking.

### **Valedictory**

For more information about Suzanne Jill Levine's translations of Borges' works, visit [3quarksdaily.com](http://3quarksdaily.com).



Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

See you again on Bookpod, home to writers of lasting value.

### **Related links**

The Borges behind the fiction: Colin Marshall talks to Latin American fiction translator Suzanne Jill Levine  
<http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2010/07/the-borges-behind-the-fiction-colin-marshall-talks-to-latin-american-fiction-translator-suzanne-jill.html>

From The Subversive Scribe by Suzanne Jill Levine  
<http://quarterlyconversation.com/from-the-subversive-scribe-by-suzanne-jill-levine>

The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction  
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1564785637?ie=UTF8&tag=asi-tha-20&linkCode=xm2&camp=1789&creativeASIN=1564785637>