

Syllabus: The Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges Fall 2021

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The letters *pdf* below indicate that the work in question is available in pdf format on request from the course coordinator, Bob Martin. Feel free to ask at any time. The materials listed under “Further Reading” are more numerous than what you will probably want to read, but reading a fair number of them will greatly increase your understanding and appreciation of Borges.

Tip: don’t fail to check the translator’s notes which appear beginning on page 525 of *Collected Fiction*. These comments are short but extremely helpful.

Class 1 Who was Borges?

September 24

Essential Reading:

FIRST HOUR:

Introductions

Presentations

Borges and I

from: *Collected Fictions*, page 324

Borges Biographical Sketch 4 pp pdf

<http://shipwrecklibrary.com/borges/biography/>

SECOND HOUR:

The Book of Sand

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 480-483

Podcasts (Optional):

Writer Jorge Luis Borges: Mixing the magical with the mundane

BBC Podcast 44 minutes

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3cszjw0>

A good introduction to Borges’s life and work.

Mohsin Hamid Reads Jorge Luis Borges 48 minutes

<https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/fiction/mohsin-hamid-reads-jorge-luis-borges>

Author Mohsin Hamid joins Deborah Treisman to read and discuss “The Book of Sand”

Essential Reading:

FIRST HOUR:

Funes His Memory

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 131-137

SECOND HOUR:

The House of Asterion

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 220-222

Further Reading (Optional):

On Borges, Particles and the Paradox of the Perceived pdf 4 pp

By William Egginton

<https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/borges-and-the-paradox-of-the-seenk/>

How the ability to forget determines or results from our personality and identity and shapes what we perceive as reality

The House of Asterion pdf 4 pp

By Maurice J. Bennett

<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/Bennett%20Borges%27s%20The%20House.pdf>

An interesting analysis of the story

Essential Reading:

FIRST HOUR:

The Lottery in Babylon

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 101-106

SECOND HOUR:

The Library of Babel

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 112-118

Further Reading (Optional):

Borges: *The Total Library*

3 pp pdf

from: *Selected Non-Fictions*, by Jorge Luis Borges

<https://matiane.wordpress.com/2020/08/27/total-library-by-jorge-luis-borges/>

This essay by Borges gives insight into the enormous amount of erudition and deep reading that lies behind so many of Borges's stories.

Infinity according to Jorge Luis Borges 4:42 (minutes)

by Ilan Stavans

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJeLGd3JV2I>

A helpful discussion of Borges's thinking about labyrinths, infinity and time

Class 4 Gods

October 15

Essential Reading:

FIRST HOUR:

The Approach to Al-Mutasim

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 82-87

SECOND HOUR:

The Gospel according to St Mark

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 397-401

Further Reading (Optional):

The Oldest Trick in the Book: Borges and the "Rhetoric of Immediacy" 25 pp pdf

By James Winchell

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271109099_The_Oldest_Trick_in_the_Book_Borges_and_the_Rhetoric_of_Immediacy

If you would like to dip into what modern theorists of writing have to say about Borges, this analysis of *The Approach to Al-Mutasim* is for you. But be warned that this article is at least as labyrinthine as any of the writing of Borges himself. Not for the casual reader!

Class 5 Detectives I

October 29

Borges was fascinated by the detective story genre, and with the work of other detective writers, especially Edgar Allan Poe. He edited a magazine devoted to them and he wrote a number of detective stories of his own, typically laced with other themes such as labyrinths, infinity, and time.

Essential Reading:

TWO HOURS:

The Garden of Forking Paths

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 119-128

Further Reading (Optional):

Jorge Luis Borges and Nancy Meyers Pitch a Movie (Because, Admit It, You've Watched Everything Else) 2 pp pdf

By Nina Sharma

<https://www.newyorker.com/humor/daily-shouts/jorge-luis-borges-and-nancy-meyers-pitch-a-movie-because-admit-it-youve-watched-everything-else>

A short but very funny New Yorker satire -- fictional imitation of a typical Borges story.

A Labyrinth Of Symbols: Exploring 'The Garden Of Forking Paths' pdf 28 pp

by Ethan Weed

<https://www.borges.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/1808.pdf>

Unlike the James Winchell essay cited above, this is a long but very readable analysis of the Borgesian labyrinths we encounter in *The Garden Of Forking Paths*. Very worthwhile.

What Borges Learned from Whitman: The Open Road and Its Forking Paths 9 pp pdf

By Joseph J. Benevento

<https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1089&context=wwqr>

This essay explores the many similarities between Borges' style in fiction and Whitman's in poetry, especially the creation of a narrator who is nominally the writer but really the voice of a universal man,

Class 6 Detectives II

November 5

Essential Reading:

FIRST HOUR:

Death and the Compass

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 147-156

SECOND HOUR:

Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 255-263

The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 263-264

Further Reading (Optional – but really worth reading!):

The Detective Fiction of Poe and Borges pdf 13 pp

By Maurice J. Bennett

<https://www.borges.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/Bennett%20The%20Detective.pdf>

Class 7 Fate and Courage I

November 12

Themes of fate, free will, courage and destiny recur again and again in Borges stories, which often refer back to each other directly or indirectly, whether with characters related or not. These are often stories involving duels.

Essential Reading:

FIRST HOUR:

The South

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 174-180

SECOND HOUR:

The Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 208-211

Further Reading (Optional but really worthwhile):

Borges: a Writer on the Edge, Ch. 3 11 pp pdf

By Beatriz Sarlo

<https://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsi3.php>

A brilliant essay linking the themes of *The South*, *The Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden*, and *The End*.

Borges, Courage and Will pdf 5 pp

By Carter Wheelock

<https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/13125/1420>

Class 8 Fate and Courage II

November 19

Essential Reading:

FIRST HOUR:

Martín Fierro

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 312-313

The End

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 168-170

Wikipedia: Martin Fierro 5 pp

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mart%C3%ADn_Fierro

A plot summary and history of *The Gaucho Martin Fierro*, the Argentinian epic poem.

Wikipedia: Borges on Martín Fierro 2 pp

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borges_on_Mart%C3%ADn_Fierro

Borges greatly admired *The Gaucho Martin Fierro*, by Jose Hernandez, and wrote a book of essays on the subject. but did not particularly admire its protagonist. In El "Martín Fierro", he dissents from the nationalist cult of the epic, but professes to admire it as a verse novel, full of morally complex characters.

SECOND HOUR:

The Duel

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 381-385

The Other Duel

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 386-389

Further Reading (Optional):

The Journey to the South: Poe, Borges, and Faulkner 12 pp pdf

By John T. Irwin

<https://www.vqronline.org/essay/journey-south-poe-borges-and-faulkner>

The Gaucho Martin Fierro

By Jose Hernandez

Translated by Walter Owen, 1935

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/58/The_Gauche_Martin_Fierro_-_Jose_Hernandez.pdf

This is the English version of the epic poem beloved by Argentinians. Download for free.

Class 9 Borges and Judaism

December 3

Essential Reading:

FIRST HOUR:

Emma Zunz

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 215-219

SECOND HOUR:

The Secret Miracle

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 157-162

Further Reading (Optional):

Borges, the Jew

pdf 5 pp

By Ilan Stavans

<https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/82/borges-the-jew/>

While analyzing *The Secret Miracle* and *Emma Zunz*, the writer also explores and discusses the extensive presence of Jewish thinkers and ideas in the work of Borges, who was not a Jew.

What's In A Name? Nomenclature And The Case Of Borges' "Emma Zunz" 7 pp pdf

Linda S. Maier

<https://www.borges.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/1405.pdf>

An interesting discussion of Borges's intense focus on individual letters and words in his fiction, as well the thought that goes into his choice of names for his characters.

In the Mirror of the Dream: Borges and the Poetics of Kabbalah

18 pp

pdf

By Elliot R. Wolfson

Deep discussion of Borges's use of Kabbalistic ideas/

Class 10 Last Words

December 10

Essential Reading:

FIRST HOUR:

Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

from: *Collected Fictions*, pp 68-81

SECOND HOUR:

More Tlön – and Last Words

Further Reading (Optional):

Through the dark labyrinth: Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

4 pp

pdf

by Paul Kincaid

<https://ttdlabyrinth.wordpress.com/2018/01/17/reprint-tlon-uqbar-orbis-tertius/>

A helpful analysis of the story.

Useful Reference Works

A Dictionary Of Borges

pdf

by Evelyn Fishburn & Psiche Hughes

Forewords by Mario Vargas Llosa & Anthony Burgess

<https://pre.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/pdf/fishburn.pdf>

An excellent 226-pp companion to the stories, this is an alphabetical encyclopedia of all the obscure and real or imagined people, places, ideas, religions, books, and terminology that can bewilder you as you puzzle over a Borges story. Available as a free download.

Jorge Luis Borges

pdf

By George R. McMurray

<https://archive.org/details/jorgeluisborges00mcmu>

You might call this “*the complete guide to Borges stories.*” This series of very short essays provides both a plot summary and an interpretation for each Borges story. Available as a free download.

Fantastic Fiction Bibliography of Borges

<https://www.fantasticfiction.com/b/jorge-luis-borges/>

This is just what it says: a complete guide to all of Borges’ published works.

Other Resources

Garden of Forking Paths

<http://shipwrecklibrary.com/borges/>

The Web’s oldest site devoted to Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine writer, poet and philosopher. Hosted on Shipwreck Library

The Borges Center

<https://www.borges.pitt.edu/about>

The Borges Center is an academic center sponsored by the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures and the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences of the University of Pittsburgh.

Ficciones | Study Guide

<https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Ficciones/>

Excellent series of video lectures about the plots or content of stories in *Ficciones*

Borges: A Writer on the Edge

By Beatriz Sarlo

<https://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsii.php>

This book grew out of four lectures that Beatriz Sarlo gave at the University of Cambridge in February 1992 as the Simón Bolívar Professor of Latin American Studies.

The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story

by Prof John T. Irwin

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=The+Mystery+to+a+Solution%3A+Poe%2C+Borges%2C+and+the+Analytic+Detective+Story&ref=nb_sb_noss

In The Mystery to a Solution, John Irwin examines the deeper significance of the analytical detective genre which Poe created and the meaning of Borges' efforts to "double" the genre's origins one hundred years later. Combining history, literary history, and practical and speculative criticism, Irwin pursues the issues underlying the detective story into areas as various as the history of mathematics, classical mythology, the double-mirror structure of self-consciousness, the anthropology of Evans and Frazer, the structure of chess, the mind-body problem, the etymology of the word *labyrinth*, and dozens of other topics.

Borges: Selected Non-Fictions

by Jorge Luis Borges

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Borges%3A+Selected+Non-Fictions&ref=nb_sb_noss

The greater part of Jorge Luis Borges's extraordinary writing was not in the genres of fiction or poetry, but in the various forms of non-fiction prose. His thousands of pages of essays, reviews, prologues, lectures, and notes on politics and culture—though revered in Latin America and Europe as among his finest work—have scarcely been translated into English.