

## **Jorge Luis Borges: The Blind Librarian with Extraordinary Vision**

The internationally admired Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) was also a librarian and a staunch defender of intellectual freedom. Born in Argentina in 1899, the young Borges was educated mainly at home, in both Spanish and English. From the age of 15 to 22, he lived in Europe, where his formal and independent studies gave him a mastery of several European languages, and where he began his first literary experiments, inspired by his friends in the Spanish avant-garde.<sup>1</sup> By the time of his death, in 1986, Borges had gained a broad-ranging reputation as an important contributor to late modern literature, primarily due to his unique short fiction that draws on a kaleidoscope of literary traditions and genres, and his playful philosophical explorations of issues like authorial and cultural identity. To Borges's readers across the globe, it is well known that he was the head of his country's National Library for many years and a municipal library worker before that, but outside of Argentina, little attention is paid to assessing his actual work as a librarian. Borges was also a significant figure within Argentina because of his brave public opposition to fascism, racism, and Peronism. However, my survey of the current LIS literature on Borges shows that within this field it is neither his work as a librarian nor his defense of intellectual freedom that is most attended to. Contemporary information professionals seem to value Borges mainly for writing two stories that imaginatively evoke some of the most perplexing questions facing our field today.

### **Borges and Libraries in Argentina**

Up until the age of 38, Borges worked intermittently at various writing and editing jobs, but in 1937, a severe decline in his father's health propelled him to seek a regular income, so he used his personal connections to secure his "first regular full-time job," at the Miguel Cané branch of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," in *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969*, trans. and ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1970), 208-223.

Municipal Library in Buenos Aires.<sup>2</sup> He worked initially as a First Assistant, was later promoted to Third Official, and was assigned primarily to cataloging duties. In his 1970 "Autobiographical Essay," Borges described his time at this library as "nine years of solid unhappiness." He found his co-workers uncouth and callous, and his cataloging work seemed "menial" and perhaps unnecessary. "The collection," Borges explained, "was so small that we knew where to find the books without the system, so the system, though laboriously carried out, was never needed or used." Borges claimed that his tasks were so undervalued that he was admonished by his co-workers for cataloging items too quickly and diligently. Hence, Borges said, he adapted to these conditions by finishing his library work in the first hour and spending the remaining five hours of his work day in the basement, reading and writing on his own.<sup>3</sup> It was during these nine years "of solid unhappiness" that Borges wrote most of the short stories that are the main basis for his literary reputation today, and it was through this production that he became, on the side, a leading figure in Argentine letters. His publications during this period included many that showed strong opposition to the rising *nacionalista* movement led by Juan Domingo Perón. So, when the Peronists gained control of Argentina in 1946, Borges was "promoted" to a new position as an agricultural inspector. He declined to accept this new post and worked instead as a lecturer and teacher of English and American literature, until Perón's government was removed by coup d'état in 1955.<sup>4</sup>

In this year of regime change, Borges was named Director of Argentina's National Library, and he retained this title until 1973. In Borges's version of the events leading up to his appointment, he claimed that his friends in various intellectual and academic organizations "dreamed up" the idea of petitioning the government to grant him the directorship,<sup>5</sup> and throughout his life he consistently assumed a humble posture when speaking of his acquisition of this post. For instance, in his 1977

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<sup>2</sup> Edwin Williamson, *Borges: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2004), 230.

<sup>3</sup> Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," 240-242.

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, 292-95.

<sup>5</sup> Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," 249.

public lecture on "Blindness," he stated, "In my life I have received many unmerited honors, but there is one that has made me happier than all others: the directorship of the National Library. For reasons more political than literary, I was appointed by the Aramburu government."<sup>6</sup> In his prose and verse accounts, Borges also emphasized the irony of receiving this honor in the same year that his doctor informed him that he would remain too blind to ever read or write on his own again, most likely due to a combination of cataracts and a series of failed surgical procedures.<sup>7</sup> The most poignant of these accounts is found in his "Poem of the Gifts," which insists that he does not reproach God, "who with such splendid irony/granted me books and blindness at one touch."<sup>8</sup>

Borges version of these events has been challenged, in a mild way, by some who claim he actively pursued the post.<sup>9</sup> A stronger challenge has been posed by Argentinian academic Josefa Sabor, who asserts that a group of intellectuals were aware of and opposed to Borges's designs on the directorship, and that this group petitioned the acting head of state, General Eduardo Lonardi, to deny the request of Borges and his influential friends. According to Sabor, General Lonardi agreed with this group's assertion that Borges did not have the qualifications necessary to lead the nation's premier library. She reports that Lonardi tried offering Borges other important posts, was rebuffed, and ultimately agreed to name Borges the Library's director only on the condition that a career librarian would be appointed as subdirector. While not denying the value of Borges's intellectual contributions, Sabor asserts that Borges's 18-year directorship had unfortunate results for the National Library and Argentinian librarianship in general: She believes "it impeded the conversion of the institution into a leading light, one that could have been the lead and impetus for the great transformation of

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<sup>6</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Blindness," in *Seven Nights*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1984), 109-10.

<sup>7</sup> Ricardo Rodriguez Pereyra, "La Biblioteca Nacional Argentina, 1901-1903" (posgrado thesis, posgrado de capacitacion en Historia Política y Social, Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1994), 62, in E-LIS, <http://eprints.rclis.org/archive/00010817/> (accessed September 27, 2008); James Woodall, *Borges: A Life* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 176-77.

<sup>8</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman (New York: Viking, 1999), 94-97.

<sup>9</sup> Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, 328-29.

librarianship that the country needed."<sup>10</sup>

With Borges's appointment, what the country got was a "poet-librarian" occupying the main office of the National Library. Borges's Director title was seen as "a nominal one, an honour," and subdirector José Edmundo Clemente carried out most of the duties of the main administrator and head librarian. When he was not traveling and lecturing abroad, Borges did routinely come to work at the National Library, but he used his office mainly for writing poems and translations, enlisting library staff members as his amanuenses.<sup>11</sup> Biographer Edwin Williamson gave an illustrative description of Borges's common Buenos Aires routine, in 1969: "In the mornings he would dictate new poems in Spanish to a secretary in the National Library,....Then, in the afternoons, [Norman Thomas] di Giovanni would pick him up at his apartment at four o'clock and take him back to the National Library, where they would collaborate on the translations of his work into English for the American publishers."<sup>12</sup> According to Borges himself, he did use his library post for literary purposes but was still engaged in the Library's affairs, as he explained in a 1976 interview for a Buenos Aires periodical: "All of my literary production from '55 on, I carried out here [in the National Library], assisted by my secretaries and my dictaphone...but do not think that I came to this place only to write. I was always concerned with its problems, especially the meager salaries of the employees."<sup>13</sup>

To the credit of both Borges and subdirector Clemente, the institution that they were given charge of in 1955 was in near-disastrous condition. The library was located in a late-nineteen-century building constructed originally to house the national lottery. This facility was badly in need of repairs and had been declared inadequate for the size of the collection by librarians and patrons for well over a decade. The library had also suffered from decades of understaffing, and an ever-mounting backlog of uncataloged books remained piled on the floor, crowding passages and entryways. The ongoing pattern

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<sup>10</sup> Rodríguez Pereyra, 65-66. [Translation is my own.]

<sup>11</sup> Woodall, 181-95.

<sup>12</sup> Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, 385.

<sup>13</sup> Rodríguez Pereyra, 62. [Translation is my own.]

of government neglect that hampered the advancement of this national library was arguably insurmountable, regardless of the professional qualifications of its directors. And most of the economic, political, and bureaucratic barriers to the library's modern development remained in place into the last decade of the twentieth century, well after the ultimate resignations of Borges and Clemente, in 1973 and 1979, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

The most significant successes achieved under the leadership of Borges and Clemente included the 1956 founding of Argentina's national school of library studies, the *Escuela Nacional de Bibliotecarios*, which Clemente directed for over three decades. And in 1961, the government agreed to support a new building for the National Library, in response to a campaign led tenaciously by Clemente. However, this building was still in its early stages of construction in 1976, when Clemente assumed full Directorship, and in 1979 he resigned permanently from the institution, as his final protest against the unbearably slow pace of the construction project. Borges's main achievements as Director were a number of measures that succeeded in connecting the National Library more with its community. These included changing public hours to accommodate more readers, reviving the Library's journal for a few years (*La Biblioteca*, 1957-1960), and launching a series of lectures on intellectual freedom, many of which were broadcast through state radio. Additionally, because of Borges's reputation as a writer and defender of cultural values against Peronist and fascist ideologies, the National Library received noticeably more attention from the press during his directorship than in earlier eras.<sup>15</sup>

## **Borges and Intellectual Freedom**

From the point of view of many Argentinians in 1955, it may be that Borges was most valuable to the National Library because he was the political antithesis of his predecessor, Gustavo Martínez Zuviría, the lawyer and university professor who served as Director from 1931 to 1955. Martínez

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<sup>14</sup> Rodríguez Pereyra, 17, 72-85.

<sup>15</sup> Rodríguez Pereyra, 69-75; Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, 330.

Zuviría was also a writer and fascist sympathizer who achieved notoriety in the mid-1930's for his series of anti-Semitic novels, which called for the mass conversion or eradication of all Jews.<sup>16</sup>

Borges's public reputation prior to his appointment stands in stark contrast to that of Martínez Zuviría and the Peronist regime that made his defamatory books required reading in national schools. In the 1930's, as the political establishment in Argentina showed its support for European fascist movements, Borges and his friends organized conferences, lectures, and committees to counteract this trend, including the *Comité contra el Racismo y el Antisemitismo en la Argentina*. Borges's regular columns and articles published throughout the thirties and forties expressed, first, outrage at the racism and the censorship of German culture that he saw in Nazi publications, and then later, disgust at the "incoherence" and immorality of the Nazi sympathizers in his own country. In some instances, Borges went head-to-head in printed combat with some of the most vehement writers of the far right, insisting that "to talk about the *Jewish problem* is to predict (and to recommend) persecution, plunder, shooting, throat-slitting, rape..." The most famous of Borges's retorts was "I, a Jew," a short piece in which he astutely embraced as a compliment the printed accusation that he was hiding Jewish ancestry. His writing during this period also included translations of anti-Nazi German literature, introductions to literary publications by Judeo-Argentine writers, and provocative literary works that featured Jewish protagonists, Nazi death camps, and motifs from Judaic culture such as the Golem. And in 1943-45, in response to the anti-Semitic actions of the Peronist *Alianza Libertadora Nacionalista*, Borges made a series of public declarations against "the outsize wave of hatred" he saw threatening the country.<sup>17</sup>

When the Peronists removed Borges from his Municipal Library post in 1946, the Argentine Society of Writers (SADE) held an event to draw attention to the new regime's punishment of this

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<sup>16</sup> Rodriguez Pereyra, 53-54; Ilan Stavans, "A Comment on Borges's Response to Hitler," *Modern Judaism* 23, no. 1 (2003): 2-3, in Historical Abstracts, <http://micro189.lib3.hawaii.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hia&AN=H001665164.01&site=ehost-live> (accessed September 26, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Stavans, 1-9; Edna Aizenberg, *Books and Bombs in Buenos Aires: Borges, Gerchunoff, and Argentine-Jewish Writing* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 128-131.

leading writer through his insulting "promotion" to Inspector of Poultry. Borges wrote a speech for this occasion, attacking the regime as a dictatorship that fostered not only "cruelty" but also "idiocy," and declaring it one of the greatest duties of a writer to "fight these sad monotones."<sup>18</sup> This speech was reprinted in two national magazines, and both Borges's "promotion" and his words of resistance became well known as emblems of the Peronists' crimes against individual and intellectual liberties. In 1950, Borges was elected President of the SADE, which was, in Borges's words, "one of the few strongholds against the dictatorship" at that time, but this group was ultimately suppressed by government forces in 1952. Nonetheless, throughout the early 1950's Borges continued to take a clear stand against the regime in his lectures and publications.<sup>19</sup>

Reading about Borges's political activities prior to 1955 has led me to believe that his appointment as Director of the National Library may have had much more political significance than most accounts indicate (including Borges's own). It has also led me to think that his service to Argentina's libraries was primarily symbolic but not unsubstantial. Given the extreme threats to intellectual freedom that Argentina faced before Borges came to the Library, and considering the volatile and increasingly violent politics of his country in the 1960's and 1970's, it may be that the institution and its public stood to benefit from the continuing presence of a symbolic leader who strongly represented independent thought, speech, and literature. And while the political aspects of Borges's library positions are not given much attention in LIS publications, I think the example of his decades-long defense of intellectual freedom has useful significance for librarians in this politically anxious beginning of the 21st century.

## **Borges's Fiction and Today's LIS Professionals**

The figure of Borges does appear periodically in contemporary Anglo-American LIS literature, mainly because a few of his fictional creations tend to inspire exploration of complex issues that are

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<sup>18</sup> Edwin Williamson, "Borges against Perón: A Contextual Approach to 'El Fin,'" *Romanic Review* 98, no. 2/3 (March 2007): 279, in Academic Search Premier, <http://micro189.lib3.hawaii.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=27981556&site=ehost-live> (accessed September 26, 2008). [Translation is my own.]

<sup>19</sup> Williamson, "Borges against Perón," 279-288.

relevant to the overall direction of our profession, including the limits and possibilities of both information systems and the human mind. "The Library of Babel" (1941) is the Borges story that is most frequently cited. Its librarian narrator describes the "unlimited and cyclical" Library he serves, which is believed to contain all possible books, including "a book which is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest," as well as countless books that are intelligible but somehow false. All of its librarians spend much of their lives searching endless galleries, hoping to find the book that is "perhaps the catalogue of catalogues" or to find the one man who has read this book. However, none have succeeded and most wander in despair, lost for years, while the Library endures. A few LIS writers also find fruitful metaphors in Borges's "The Aleph" (1945), in which two competing writers encounter a tiny, mystical sphere that contains all points in space and allows them all to be seen simultaneously, "actual and undiminished," "without confusion or blending." Importantly, both of these stories are narrated by scholarly men who acknowledge that they are presenting limited images of an infinite entity, and asking us to accept incomplete versions of completeness.

A number of LIS articles use Borges's "Library of Babel" as a springboard to explore broad philosophical and social questions important to the development of libraries and archives. Librarian Paul Piper, for instance, finds that the exhaustion and despair that Borges's librarians suffer in their interminable searches reflect how real libraries can be seen not only as a "mechanism for acquiring knowledge" but also as an "obstacle to acquiring knowledge," because of the way they force users to grapple with multiple truths instead of easily offering up "one grand Truth." In the fictional librarians' labors to find the code by which all books can be understood, Piper sees an imaginative parallel for the difficulties that indexers and catalogers encounter as they try to make a few terms accurately represent complex items, as well as a reminder that our indexing problems are ultimately connected to the larger

question of whether language can possibly represent the "real world" or the mind.<sup>20</sup> Andrew Abbott and Mike Featherstone are both sociologists who are interested in cultural aspects of librarianship, and they both find in Borges's "Library of Babel" an apt illustration of the problem of "data overload" in Western societies. Both note that new information technologies are improving the storage of data at a much faster rate than we are improving our ability to index, summarize, and retrieve information. Abbott calls this Borges story "a parable that serves well as a text of librarianship today" because it illustrates how, as storage ability is perfected, information becomes so complete that it becomes disinformation, and a true catalog becomes a myth or impossible ideal.<sup>21</sup> Featherstone suggests that the librarians lost in Borges's labyrinthine Library of Babel can be seen to represent the people throughout the ages who have tried to create adequate catalogs and systems of classifications "but have been defeated by the sheer scope of the problem." He also points out that Borges's vision is compatible with that of social theorist Georg Simmel, who argues that "the production and circulation of objective culture" is now surpassing our "subjective capacity to assimilate and order." Additionally, Featherstone sees useful implications in Borges's image of the Aleph, noting that the object represents our desire for effortless access to all data and that Borges's bewildered characters show that in acquiring complete knowledge we relinquish control of our knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

Other LIS writers find that these two stories from the 1940's are particularly relevant to our present-day Internet-dominated environment. These writers include Dr. Pita Enriquez Harris, the co-

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<sup>20</sup> Paul S. Piper, "For Jorge Luis Borges, Paradise Was Not a Garden but a Library," *American Libraries* 32, no. 7 (August 2001): 57-58, in Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, <http://micro189.lib3.hawaii.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lxh&AN=4960634&site=ehost-live> (accessed September 25, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Abbott, "Professionalism and the Future of Librarianship," *Library Trends* 46, no. 3 (Winter 1998), in LISTA, <http://micro189.lib3.hawaii.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lxh&AN=752329&site=ehost-live> (accessed September 27, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Mike Featherstone, "Archiving Cultures," *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 1 (January/March 2000): 161-65, in Academic Search Premier, <http://zu7lq2cc9q.search.serialssolutions.com.eres.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/?sid=36520&genre=article&issn=00071315&title=British+Journal+of+Sociology&atitle=Archiving+cultures.&author=Featherstone%2c+Mike&authors=Featherstone%2c+Mike&date=20000101&volume=51&issue=1&page=161> (accessed September 27, 2008).

founder of a company that helps organizations manage information overload. She asserts that "The Library of Babel" "ought to be required reading for all information professionals" because of its "eerie, almost prescient vision of the World Wide Web." In Borges's library she sees accurate representations of common problems of the web, including its disorganized, "seductively distracting" structure that searchers can easily lose themselves in. But in this story she also finds reflections of the web's more promising aspects. For instance, like some of Borges's librarians, today's web developers maintain hope in the possibility of finding "the perfect tools to navigate this library, tools with the power to interpret the secrets of every fragment of written human knowledge."<sup>23</sup> Cultural critic and historian Jon Thiem also locates in Borges's fiction some powerful symbols of the possible pathologies and promising goals of the Internet. For him, Borges's "Library of Babel" is a "pessimistic fable" that suggests that "every project of all-inclusiveness [like the internet] harbors within it the virus of chaos, or irretrievability," and the Aleph represents the positive ideal that our searching and abstracting tools are reaching toward, "counteracting the tendency to intellectual chaos."<sup>24</sup> Research librarian Iva Seto sees in the "Library of Babel" a reflection of the many hoaxes, fallacies, and imperfect facsimiles the web contains. But she also notes that the fictional library's architecture, "a honeycomb of infinite hexagons," anticipated the "rhizomatic structure of the Internet." She explains that in "rhizomatic" structuring, each item (e.g., web page) is a node, is equal in value to all other nodes, and "has the potential to be linked to infinite numbers of other nodes." She posits that the semantic web is leading information organization away from hierarchical classification toward this more holistic and inclusive type of structuring, and she asserts that Borges's Universe-Library prefigured the possibilities of hyperspace with remarkable accuracy.

Twenty-five years after writing "The Aleph," Borges referred to it as a fantastic tale that was

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<sup>23</sup> Pita Enriquez Harris, "In Search of the Rosetta Stone," *Online & CD-ROM Review* 23, no. 4 (1999), 235-36.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Thiem, "Myths of the Universal Library: From Alexandria to the Postmodern Age," *Serials Librarian* 26, no. 1 (1995), 65-67.

perhaps too ambitious, and he explained that readers' enthusiastic interpretations of it over the years have caused him to question "our modern worship of complexity."<sup>25</sup> Of "The Library of Babel" Borges's has asserted that it "was meant as a nightmare version or magnification" of the municipal library he worked in up until 1946.<sup>26</sup> However, his magic sphere of knowledge and his "nightmare" library have taken on far broader significance than even Borges could have imagined, to librarians and others who are inclined to imaginatively question the implications of our pursuit of information and our desire to master it.

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<sup>25</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Commentaries," in *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969*, trans. and ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1970), 263-64.

<sup>26</sup> Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," 243.

## Appendix A: Evaluation of Secondary Sources

Of the five categories of sources that I consulted (see Appendix B), the Historical Studies and items of Literary Biography and Criticism helped me gain the most insight into Borges's actual work in libraries and his significance to librarianship in his own country. Ricardo Rodriguez Pereyra's "La Biblioteca Nacional Argentina, 1901-1903" provided a detailed understanding of the evolution of the library that Borges directed, and as my only source from Argentina it supplied a very valuable perspective of Borges from a national point of view. The two articles by American academics on Borges's opposition to fascism and Peronism, Ilan Stavans's "A Comment on Borges's Response to Hitler" and Edwin Williamson's "Borges against Perón," both gave very revealing accounts of the social and political conditions against which Borges created his intellectual identity in the years preceding his appointment to the National Library. The LIS articles I read did not contain any original research on Borges as a librarian; instead, in order to describe his work in libraries, they relied heavily upon a few of Borges's autobiographical essays. And it was interesting to discover that writers in the LIS field currently tend to focus on the symbolism in his fiction, even more than many literary critics do.

## Appendix B: Sources Listed by Category

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