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Chapter 3

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: JORGE LUIS BORGES AND GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ— THE GLOBAL INFLUENCE OF LATIN-AMERICAN FICTION TODAY

Keywords: Borges, *Collected Fictions*, doubling, magical realism, Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

MFS: First of all, a backdrop: What’s important about these two Latin-American writers? In short, why should we care?

DS: Contemporary literary fiction has, for all intents and purposes, abandoned the realistic novel, which we associate with the 19th century, in favor of the novel of consciousness and fabulist fiction that engages in the fantastic while turning its back upon the real (Sheets, 2007a; Sheets, 2008a; Sheets, 2008b; Sheets, 2008c). In the wake of Proust, Joyce, Kafka, and Woolf, and nearly contemporaneous with Faulkner, Latin-American fiction in the 20th century created a distinctive style of fiction in which the boundaries between realism and magic were blurred. Today, we tend to group all the variants of this fabulist fiction into the catch-all category of “magical realism”. Nevertheless, it is most closely associated with Gabriel García Márquez, who remains the most celebrated of the Latin American Boom writers of the 1960s and 1970s. However, one writer and his fiction doesn’t do justice to the variety and complexity of Latin-American literature since some of the greatest 20th century novels to be found anywhere were written by authors south of our border in the period leading up to and including the Latin American Boom.

Lovers of Latin-American fiction, I would argue, are either Borgesian or Márquezian. That is, either they embrace the cerebral, analytic, and concise short stories of Jorge Luis Borges or the exuberant, expansive, panoramic novels of Gabriel García Márquez. As readers we tend to gravitate toward one or the other. Borges’s fictional stories read as if they’re creative nonfictional essays of alternative universes embedded with labyrinths and mirrors.

Both writers have fundamentally transformed how fiction engages with the world and how it shapes our imagination. Borges encourages us to rethink our conception of the known and unknown and the means by which they interact in the cosmos. His literary style and the conciseness of his language is more English than Hispanic, crisply encyclopedic rather than expansively plot-driven, analytic rather than emotive, focused on metaphysics and the cosmos rather than concerned with the psychology that drives actions or motivations of characters. To read Borges's *Collected Fictions*, exquisitely translated by Andrew Hurley (Borges, 1999), is to enter a parallel universe, a place comprised of labyrinths and mazes framed by mirrors, a state of mind in which consciousness bleeds into solipsism, and a domain where the books and the ideas contained within become oracles transmitting coded messages from the celestial gods, who may or may not answer our questions or prayers.

Just how important is Borges? "Of all Latin American authors" in the 20th century, literary critic Harold Bloom has suggested, Borges "is the most universal". For as Bloom has noted, "If you read Borges frequently and closely, you become something of a Borgesian, because to read him is to achieve an awareness of literature in which he has gone further than anyone else". Borges should be read, as literary writer John Updike has written, because he "has lifted fiction away from the flat earth where most of our novels and short stories still take place" (back cover blurb citations in Williamson, 2004).

My passion lies with the exquisitely crafted short stories written by Borges, whose style of storytelling can only be categorized as *sui generis*. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that it is the fiction of Márquez that has captured the public's emotional imagination and none more so than *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), which as of 2004 was "estimated to have sold more than 30 million copies in 37 languages" (Warnes, 2009, p. 75). Today, Márquez is regarded as "the most influential writer in China" (Echevarría, 2012, p. 1).

One Hundred Years of Solitude, as Gerald Martin noted, gave Márquez "fame, wealth and even glory unparalleled in the history of Latin American literature, and is coincidentally the novel which, more than any other, is seen as the most important metaphor for the continent's history and identity (Martin, 2010, p. 95). Thus, Roberto González Echevarría suggested that while the historical circumstances that shape Macondo, notably, "civil wars, exploitation by the United Fruit Company, the massacre of banana workers who go on strike" are clearly associated with Columbian history, nevertheless, "the town's history is like a syntheses of all Latin American history, from the discovery and conquest by the Spanish until the early twentieth century" (Echevarría, 2012, pp. 105-106). Not surprisingly, as Steven Boldy notes, this "is the one novel where Latin Americans recognize themselves instantly: their own social, cultural reality, their families, and the history of their countries" (Boldy, 2007, p. 95).

MFS: How were the stories written by Borges and Márquez shaped by historical circumstances?

DS: Latin American literature was shaped by history. The colonial empires of Spain and Portugal dominated Latin America beginning in the 15th century. It was not until the Latin American wars of independence in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that distinct nation states were formed. For our purposes Portuguese-speaking Brazil has been excluded from consideration due to its distinctive language and culture. Although Latin American literature has national characteristics, it is a continent-wide development, which includes all Spanish-

speaking countries from the southern tip of North America (Mexico) through Central America, portions of the Caribbean, and the entire continent of South America. Latin American literature, because of its extended colonial heritage, was shaped by Spain and, by extension, Europe. Paris became the cultural nexus for Latin Americans residing in Europe beginning in the mid-19th century.

Neoclassical poetry dominated the cultural landscape in Latin America in the 19th century. What prose there was, as Echevarría noted, “during the enlightenment and through the nineteenth century . . . was that of descriptive and analytic prose, even when it took the form of fiction as short stories or novels” (Echevarría, 2012, p. 31). This is important because Borges’s initial literary efforts were in poetry, which he continued to write throughout his life. But if we wish to understand why he wrote his distinctive brand of creative “nonfictional-style” fiction, it’s clear that it grew out of the emergent forms of exposition that developed in Latin America. Nevertheless, even during the early 20th century, as Echevarría points out, “prose fiction, except for the short story, fell behind poetry in the evolution of Latin American arts toward Modernism” and “modern Latin American literature was thought to be then preeminently a literature of poets” (Echevarría, 2012, p. 83). Why was the fiction so challenged? Echevarría explains.

The Latin American novel . . . was straitjacketed by the constraints of nineteenth-century realism: a third-person, omniscient narrator who views reality from the perspective of bourgeois common sense, a prose that tries not to be dissonant or call attention to itself; a plot that follows consecutively without interruptions toward an end that is consistent with the preceding action. The way out of this discursive prison was to allow the voices of the strange folk depicted to resonate, to invade the text with their quirks, discord, and noise. (Echevarría, 2012, p. 90)

Three major writers, in addition to Borges, were influential in the years preceding the Latin American Boom and helped change the fictional landscape of Latin American prose: Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899-1974), a Guatemalan who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1967, Alejo Carpentier, a Cuban (1904-80), and Juan Rulfo, a Mexican (1917-1986). Asturias’s *Legends of Guatemala* (1930) is a collection of mythical stories that highlights indigenous folklore and national identity. The prologue for the book was written by the illustrious French poet and essayist Paul Valéry. As Gerald Martin noted, *Legends of Guatemala* represents “the first major anthropological contribution to Spanish American literature” (Martin, 1989, p. 146). Alejo Carpentier developed the concept of “the marvelous real” through his writings about the history and geography of Latin America. He examined this curious *mélange* of realism and magic in the region that fostered the development of bizarre and fantastic events that defied rational expectations but were, nevertheless, real. This led him to suggest that “the history of all [Latin] America is but a chronicle of marvelous realism” (Martin, 1995, p. 119). Finally, Juan Rulfo’s novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) presents the story of a man’s journey back to his childhood town only to discover it is inhabited by ghosts. Both Carpentier’s novel *Explosion in a Cathedral* (1962) and Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* would influence Márquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

MFS: How does Borges anticipate magical realism?

DS: Let's use the definition of magical realism provided by Christopher Warnes: "A mode of narration that naturalizes or normalizes the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence". Warnes adds, "On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality" (Warnes, 2009, p. 3). What should be evident by this definition? First, the equivalency of realism and magic is nonjudgmentally relativistic, that is, it imposes no hierarchical standards on the claims of truth vis-à-vis diametrically oppositional beliefs. If Catholicism refers to miracles and saints and holy water, the Enlightenment counters with the claims of science and rationality. What distinguishes 20th century Latin American fiction evoking magical realism from its European-American fabulist counterpart is its embrace of these inherently oppositional perspectives in a state of equivalency. By contrast, if we consider, by way of example, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, there is no implicitly spiritual or magical undercurrent driving the bizarre events that cause Gregor Samsa to be transformed into a giant insect. That's because magical realism, by contrast with fabulism, is generally a phenomenon of the developing world in which primal spiritual myths and beliefs still hold sway. For this reason Erik Camayd-Freixas interprets magical realism, suggests Warnes, as "a sophisticated aesthetic expression of primitivism that served the yearnings of Latin American writers for identity and cultural emancipation" (Warnes, 2009, p. 5).

Borges's perception of the role of magic and fiction was first expressed in 1926 in a review of Turkestan folk tales. What caught his attention was the embedding of "the marvelous and the everyday" so that "they are neither distanced nor classified by any hierarchy". He continued, "There are angels the same as there are trees: one more reality in the world. Magic is a causal episode, an example of causality like so many others". For Borges, the natural laws "are no more than convenient fictions we invent for the world. Primitive man neither believes in those prefabricated laws nor in the miracle of their beneficent infraction. . . . He instinctively believes in causality and does not catalog it as magical or common" (Borges, 2010, pp. 139-140).

Borges elaborated in his essay "The Art of Narrative and Magic" (1932). His argument, suggested his biographer Edwin Williamson, was that fiction "did not depend on the illusion of reality" (Williamson, 2004, p. 177). For Borges the difficulty of the realist novel is its emphasis on causality embedded in "the slow-moving novel of character" that lays claim to "motives purporting to be no different from that which exists in the real world" (citing Borges, Williamson, 2004, p. 177). As he noted in his earlier review of Turkestan folk tales, these are but "convenient fictions" (Borges, 2010, p. 139). Far preferable to the dreary novel of realism, he contends in "The Art of Narrative and Magic", are adventure novels, as well as "the infinite, spectacular novel which is Hollywood" where "the primitive clarity of magic" reigns. Thus, for Borges fiction is not meant to mirror reality, which itself is a fabrication. Instead, its purpose is to create "an autonomous sphere of corroborations, omens and monuments" emblematic, he suggests, of the "predestined *Ulysses* of Joyce" (citing Borges, Williamson, 2004, p. 177).

In his first published collection of stories, *A Universal History of Iniquity* (1935), Borges featured creative nonfictional renderings of nominally real-life criminal stories. His style was cerebral, historical, literary, and mythically inventive. In these tales the fantastic and the reputedly historical cohabitated with the strange. These stories were, in fact, literary fables

conceived by Borges. *A Universal History of Iniquity* was the realization of Borges's manifesto as espoused in "The Art of Narrative and Magic", namely, that the real and the imagined are magically conjoined.

MFS: What about the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez?

DS: To understand how Márquez develops and utilizes magical realism in his fiction, I think it helps to discuss his most famous novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This book became the most celebrated novel published by the Boom writers, the most prominent of whom, after Márquez, were Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa. While Márquez and Vargas Llosa received Nobel Prizes, the success of these writers was enhanced by the literary contributions of previous Latin American writers—Rulfo, Carpentier, Asturias, and, particularly, Borges—whose work, as Bell-Villada noted, was "comparable technically and stylistically to the Euro-American modernist classics, and that moreover possessed acknowledged staying power" (Bell-Villada, 2010, p. 14).

The literary success of the Boom, particularly Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, demonstrated, as Bell-Villada suggested, "that it was possible to tell of Latin America, its ordinary concerns and tragic struggles, via means other than those of straight, nineteenth-century realism and naturalism" (Bell-Villada, 2010, p. 15). This allowed the freedom of dispensing with a rigidly linear plot narrative, a conventional timeline, and pervasive realism.

The complexity of this novel, its inherent circularity, its seemingly infinite digressions, and its refusal to adhere to a simple linear narrative makes it difficult to summarize. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* gives us a panoramic Latin American narrative about seven generations of the Buendía family headed by patriarch José Arcadio Buendía. He and his wife, Úrsula Iguarán, who is his first cousin, leave Riohacha, Columbia after José Arcadio murders a man in a duel. He establishes the town of Macondo in the remote jungles of Columbia. It is a mirrored city of his dreams, one intended to reflect and magnify the world, although it is isolated from civilization and appears set apart from the chronological march of time. Whether the couple are cast out of "Eden" because of their violation of the incest taboo or take flight because of the murder, the outcome is harshly biblical.

A curse inflicts misfortune upon generation upon generation of the Buendías. Destiny prevails rather than free will. Privation seems only alleviated by magic. Western imperialism is luridly manifest in the form of the banana company—a proxy for the United Fruit Company—that comes to Macondo and imposes brutal working conditions. When the workers strike, some 3,000 die. The only witnesses are a man and a child whose stories are rejected by the community save for one solitary believer. The traumatic event is essentially erased from communal memory. Macondo, an allegorical representative for Latin America, is beset by plagues, curses, and wars. The town, isolated and seemingly adrift in time, declines and falters.

Only with love, love between Aureliano Babilonia (the sixth generation of the Buendía family) and Amaranta Úrsula does it seem that hope can be restored. Their joyous union brings generosity to the community—a symbol for redemptive socialism. Nevertheless, the love of Aureliano Babilonia and Amaranta Úrsula, unbeknownst to them, is incestuous. Their son, in fulfillment of an ill-fated omen, is born with a pig's tail. Amaranta Úrsula dies giving birth to Aureliano III. Aureliano Babilonia, overcome with grief over the loss of his love, neglects his son, who is eaten by ants. A hurricane hits Macondo killing Aureliano Babilonia,

the last of the Buendías, as well as the town's entire inhabitants. Thus, only with this community's apocalypse can solitude and ahistorical time finally be overcome.

This is a novel about memory and forgetting, about history and nostalgia steeped in melancholy, about solitude and isolation, about dreams and magic in the face of crushing reality. It is a story within a story with a gypsy named Melquíades in possession of a manuscript, written in Sanskrit, that prophesizes the family's history and its tragic outcome. Indeed, the manuscript closely mirrors or perhaps duplicates the actual events unfolding in the novel. By the book's conclusion Aureliano Babilonia, the sixth generation of Buendías and the last survivor, has deciphered the manuscript. He then reads of his entire family history and learns of his own imminent death. Or perhaps the deciphering by Aureliano Babilonia is embedded into the manuscript itself and the two stories are actually one.

The characters in the novel are rebels and misfits. The inhabitants of Macondo endure biblical hardships: droughts, floods, plagues, and seemingly endless civil wars. Religion verges on madness. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* encapsulates a mélange of Western and Latin American literature including *Don Quixote*, *In Search of Lost Time*, *Ulysses*, *The Metamorphosis*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, as well as the fiction of Rulfo, Carpentier, Asturias, and Borges. As Echevarría suggests, what distinguishes *One Years of Solitude* is Márquez's ability to present "these vast, legend-like, and potentially allegorical or mythical tales with the minute, particular passing of time and the unfolding of daily life in the home of the Buendías and the ordinary activities of Macondo" (Echevarría, 2012, p. 106).

In reviewing *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for *The New York Times* in 1970, Robert Kiely notes that in Macondo a torrential rain storm lasts "not weeks, but four years, eleven months and two days". A plague "is no ordinary killer but an 'insomnia plague', which gradually causes people to forget everything including the names and uses of the most commonplace objects" (Kiely, 1970). Only when the gypsy Melquíades returns with an antidote to the plague, is memory restored.

One of the most poignant moments of magical realism in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* occurs when Remedios the Beauty ascends to heaven. Matter-of-fact details are interwoven with the miracle, irony overlain by spiritual myth. The scene is cinematic. We visualize Remedios the Beauty's ascension. We see her wave good-bye. We feel the wind, watch the flapping sheets enveloping her, and note the precise time in the midst of this "miracle". We witness as Fernanda prays to God, not for God to return Remedios the Beauty, but for him to send her back her sheets.

Fernanda felt a delicate wind of light pull the sheets out of her hands and open them up wide. Amaranta felt a mysterious trembling in the lace on her petticoats and she tried to grasp the sheet so that she would not fall down at the instant in which Remedios the Beauty began to rise. Úrsula, almost blind at the time, was the only person who was sufficiently calm to identify the nature of that determined wind and she left the sheets to the mercy of the light as she watched Remedios the Beauty waving good-bye in the midst of the flapping sheets that rose up with her, abandoning with her the environment of beetles and dahlias and passing through the air with her as four o'clock in the afternoon came to an end, and they were lost forever with her in the upper atmosphere where not even the highest-flying birds of memory could reach her.

The outsiders, of course, thought that Remedios the Beauty had finally succumbed to her irrevocable fate of a queen bee and that her family was trying to save her honor with that tale of levitation. Fernanda, burning with envy, finally accepted the miracle, and for a

long time she kept on praying to God to send her back her sheets. Most people believed in the miracle and they even lighted candles and celebrated novenas. (Márquez, 2006, p. 236)

In Márquez's Nobel Lecture, "The Solitude of Latin America" (Márquez, 1982), he invokes the spirit of Alejo Carpentier's "the marvelous real". Thus, Antonio Pigafetta, a Florentine who travelled with Magellan in his first voyage around the world, according to Márquez, suggested "that he had seen hogs with navels on their haunches, clawless birds whose hens laid eggs on the backs of their mates, and others still, resembling tongueless pelicans, with beaks like spoons". Nor are these observations to be wantonly dismissed in a land where, as Márquez noted, General Antonio López de Santa Anna, a three time dictator of Mexico, "held a magnificent funeral for the right leg he had lost in the so-called Pastry War" and the corpse of General Gabriel García Moreno, who ruled Ecuador some sixteen years, was ceremoniously seated at his wake "on the presidential chair, decked out in full-dress uniform and a protective layer of medals". For Márquez magical realism is the cruel destiny that is the story of Latin America.

Indeed, the magical realism invoked by Márquez is brilliantly parodied by the British literary writer Julian Barnes in his novel *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984).

A quota system is to be introduced on fiction set in South America. The intention is to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony. Ah, the propinquity of cheap life and expensive principles, of religion and banditry, or surprising honour and random cruelty. Ah, the daiquiri bird which incubates its eggs on the wing; ah, the fredonna tree whose roots grow at the tips of its branches, and whose fibers assist the hunchback to impregnate by telepathy the haughty wife of the hacienda owner; ah, the opera house now overgrown by jungle. (Barnes, 1984, p. 104)

MFS: Both Márquez and Borges had different backgrounds. Márquez had a grandmother who "treated the extraordinary as something perfectly natural" whereas Márquez became a supporter of communism. Borges was reputedly asexual, lived with his mother for years, eventually went blind, and politically embraced conservatism. Can you talk about these factors and how they may have influenced their fiction?

DS: Márquez (1927-2014) spent his early formative years living with his maternal grandparents in Aracataca, Columbia. This experience shaped not only *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but also all his other fiction. He adored his grandfather, the Colonel, who had fought in The War of a Thousand Days and whom many considered a liberal hero, despite the defeat of Liberals by the Conservatives. The Colonel told his grandson "Gabito" of the banana massacres caused by the American company the United Fruit Company. The grandfather was both a man of action and a storyteller. He introduced to his grandson the invaluable resource of a dictionary and the implicit value of words. But it was his grandmother, as Márquez noted, who shaped the daily fabric of those early years.

If you make an analysis of how things were, the real head of the household was my grandmother, and not only her but these fantastic forces with which she was in permanent communication and which determined what could and could not be done that day because she would interpret her dreams and organize the house according to what could and could

not be eaten; it was like the Roman Empire, governed by birds, and thunderclaps and other atmospheric signals which explained any change of the weather, change of humour; really we were manipulated by invisible Gods, even though they were all supposedly very Catholic people". (Márquez cited in Martin, 2009, pp. 35-36)

Márquez's childhood in Columbia was framed by rural Latin American values that were intrinsically emblematic of South America's Hispanic culture. Over the years his parents had twelve children. By contrast, Borges was an Argentinian writer whose fiction was nurtured by three major influences: English language and its culture, European civilization and its fiction, and the distinctively Argentinian distillation of Latin-American ideas shaped by the cosmopolitan city of Buenos Aires. Unlike Márquez's parents, Borges's mother and father had only two children, a boy and a girl.

Borges (1899-1986) came from a bourgeois, cosmopolitan family of relative means. Argentina is, suggested Gene H. Bell-Villada, "the only Latin country into which Britain's Empire, under the encouragement of liberal, Anglophile politicians like Sarmiento, managed to penetrate politically and culturally" (Bell-Villada, 1999, p. 8). Buenos Aires was also Latin America's most cosmopolitan city. It was teeming with immigrants from Italy, Eastern Europe, and, in smaller numbers, Britain. Of all the cities in South America, it is more closely linked to New York and Paris and remarkably different from the Argentinian provinces, "which had far more in common, socially and culturally, with the rest of Hispanic America" (Bell-Villada, 1999, p. 8). The result was that "though Argentina may belong, politically and economically, to the Third World, the cultural resources, appearances, and flavor of its capital city are strongly—some would say deceptively—European" (Bell-Villada, 1999, p. 8).

Borges's father's side of the family was Italian, Jewish, and English while his mother was of Argentinian and Uruguayan descent (Gargan, 1986). Grandmother Fanny Haslam—on his father's side—was English. She lived next door for many years and then, beginning in Geneva, with Borges's family for the remainder of her life. Fanny spent a great deal of time reading with and speaking to her grandson in English throughout his childhood, thereby ensuring his bilingual facility and his "enduring love of English prose" (Williamson, 2004, p. 34). During those early years he was educated at home and taught by an English tutor, as well as having unrestricted use of the father's extensive library, which contained in excess of 1,000 books, most of which were in English and French. As Borges later noted in his "Autobiographical Essay", "If I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father's library" (citing Borges, Williamson, 2004, p. 41). Finally, at age 11, he entered elementary school, which was emotionally difficult for him, as was secondary education in Buenos Aires. In 1914, as a result of his family's move to Switzerland, he entered a French college preparatory school in Geneva, Switzerland where he struggled to master French even as he developed an interest in German. The result was a shy young man who sought refuge in books. Nevertheless, the European experience (1914-1921), accentuated by the family's English heritage, as well as the distinctive characteristics of Buenos Aires fundamentally shaped his "mentality", which, in turn, shaped his fiction. While he was exposed to leftist, avant-garde art and ideas, as he matured he embraced traditional 19th century liberalism that favored limited government and was opposed to political excesses of the left (socialist/Marxism) and right (totalitarian dictatorships), which all too frequently shaped the countries and governments of 20th century Latin America.

Years later in an interview with *El Hogar* (1956), Borges made his case for limited government clear.

Many people are in favor of dictatorships because they allow them to avoid thinking for themselves. Everything is presented to them ready-made. There are even agencies of the state that supply them with opinions, passwords, slogans and even idols to exalt or cast down according to the prevailing wind or in keeping with the directives of the thinking heads of the single party. (cited in Williamson, 2004, pp. 334-335)

Thus, the early formative experiences of Borges and Márquez were worlds apart. Márquez leaned left as a result of his grandfather's influence and life experiences. He later became a Marxist/socialist and was an avid supporter of Fidel Castro and his Cuban Revolution. Márquez maintained that loyalty to Castro for the remainder of his life, although many left-leaning writers in Latin America would later distance themselves from the Cuban dictator. By contrast, Borges "hated Perón, he opposed the Cuban Revolution, he spoke out in favour of the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion, he supported the Argentine Conservative party, he accepted a medal of honour from Chilean dictator Pinochet within months of the bloody coup in Chile" (citing John King, Warnes, 2009, p. 92). After his ill-fated support for Pinochet in 1976, he turned away from supporting military governments and voiced dissent from Argentina's nationalistic stance toward Chile. He was initially silent on Argentina's "Dirty War" and its death squads, about which he claimed to know little due to his blindness. Discouraged about the fate of Argentina, when he learned he was dying, he moved to Switzerland and was buried there.

The differences between the writers was pronounced. Márquez's fiction was exuberant and heterosexual, embracing the machismo values of Latin American culture. His stories were the very embodiment of the "passionate, bloody, spontaneous world of Macondo" (Warnes, 2009, p. 92). Little wonder then that Márquez, a womanizer, slept with the wife of fellow writer and (then) friend Mario Vargas Llosa in 1976. In a fit of jealousy upon learning Márquez's betrayal, Vargas Llosa punched Márquez in the face while at a theater.

By contrast, Borges, Mario Vargas Llosa suggested, seemed to be almost entirely cerebral, a writer whose craft was shaped by "supreme intelligence and absolute asexuality" (citing Vargas Llosa, Warnes, 2009, p. 92). Borges's fiction was analytic and abstract, worlds apart from that of Márquez's stories. His sexual difficulties were attributed to his father's efforts around the time of his 19th birthday, to procure a prostitute for him in Switzerland. The experience proved traumatic. For the rest of Borges's his life he would have difficulty in his sexual relations with women. It's questionable whether he ever consummated his relationships, despite several infatuations and two marriages. In terms of personal experience and temperament, it would be hard to find two more different individuals than Borges and Márquez.

MFS: One was a foreign correspondent à la Hemingway. The other traveled in Europe extensively. What is it about the European experience that shapes and forges the world-renown writer?

DS: Márquez developed his skills in writing as a journalist and worked for newspapers in Columbia, briefly serving as a foreign correspondent in Europe, and later working for

newspapers in Caracas, Venezuela. These journalistic skills honed his writing. It gave him an appreciation for realistic detail. After the publication and phenomenal success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he and his family lived in Spain for seven years. Borges lived for many years in Europe and, as I said earlier, was buried there.

Echevarría has pointed out that many important South American writers have felt compelled at some point not just to visit Europe, but to live there. Historically, they have chosen Paris, France because of its cosmopolitan culture, rather than a city in Spain. South American writers have an exceptionally rich cultural background. They have the indigenous Indian culture and their colonial heritage, which shapes their appreciation for European culture and “the mother continent”, in addition to African and Asian influences. The shared colonial (Spanish) experience gives Latin American countries (excepting Brazil, which speaks Portuguese) not only national characteristics, but also pan-continental influences. This accentuates not only their appreciation for European history and literature, but also their interest in literary writers throughout Latin America. They are also acquainted with American literature north of the border. Faulkner was a great influence on Márquez and, indeed, for many South American writers. Thus, an argument could be made that rather than the colonial experience limiting Latin America’s literary horizons, it seems to have shaped and expanded the cultural worldview. On the other hand, post-colonial critics might emphasize the deleterious effects of the wide disparities in wealth and social class in Latin America and its potential to encourage authoritarian regimes—both left and right—at the expense of democratic governments. Finally, it should be noted that South American literary fiction remains primarily a masculine enterprise written mostly by men. This is in stark contrast to fiction in the United States and, to a lesser degree Europe, which is increasingly feminized whether written by women or men (Sheets, 2007b).

MFS: They were the recipients of major awards—the Prix International in 1961 (Borges) and the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature (Márquez). What is it about their work that warrants such acclamation? How does the concept of doubling shape our appreciation of their work?

DS: Success for Jorge Luis Borges came relatively late in his life. As Bell-Villada has noted, “Borges’s poetry from the 1920s is, in retrospect, surprisingly direct, romantic in feeling, and, though obviously highly crafted and polished, nonetheless quite unallusive and unliturgical, its apparent spontaneity a far cry from the self-consciousness of his later prose” (Bell-Villada, 1999, p. 20). I concur. Borges’s poetry neither then nor later in life can compare with the exquisite craftsmanship of his short stories, particularly those published before 1950. His essays are useful primarily as a means of analyzing what shaped his development as a writer. Borges was blind by the time he was 55 years old. His loss of eyesight greatly impacted the quality of his stories written in his later years. Increasingly he turned to writing poetry, which is more easily committed to memory. Although Borges was later dismissive of *A Universal History of Iniquity* (1935), I find it a fascinating introduction to his stories, even if his best fiction is generally to be found in the collections *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), *Artifices* (1944), and *The Aleph* (1949). I highly recommend Borges’s *Collected Fictions* translated by Andrew Hurley, which contains his entire collection of stories (Borges, 1999).

For years Borges’s fiction was overlooked. The reasons are complex. In general, novels, not short stories, win prizes and national and international acclaim. Borges’s fiction—

analytic, dispassionate, and highly cerebral—frequently imagines the universe as a thought experiment or a puzzle or a maze to be assembled or disassembled by the author or reader through any number of means. This is an approach that discouraged all but the most ardent aficionados from reading his stories. Borges's willingness to dispense with the conventions of plot, character, and progressive scene-by-scene storytelling challenged his potential audience. His emphasis on gauchos, criminals, and misfits in many of his stories enabled some critics and readers to marginalize and misinterpret his work. Borges's politics—conservative, individualistic, and some might say elitist—also led to unfair censure of his fiction. One of the greatest travesties of the 20th and 21st centuries, I believe, is this effort to subject every writer and his or her fiction to a politically correct litmus test. It drastically erodes our ability to appreciate or discover extraordinary voices, and what we're left with today is mediocre conformity in the literary world that is the death knell of fiction (Sheets, 2007c).

The late 1930s and 1940s were difficult years for Borges. His literary fiction had peaked, yet national and international recognition was largely withheld. When *The Garden of Forking Paths* was published in 1941, it did not receive Argentina's prestigious National Literary Prize. Instead, the recipients were incidental authors. The insult was so egregious that *Sur*, an eminent literary magazine in Buenos Aires, published an entire issue devoted to "In Defense of Borges" in 1942. Many of Argentina's most prominent intellectuals were contributors (Bell-Villada, 1999, p. 23). It wasn't until 1955 that Borges's literary talents were suitably recognized, and he was appointed the director of the National Library. Receiving the Prix International in 1961, along with Samuel Beckett, was a great honor. It gave Borges worldwide recognition and encouraged the translation of his stories into English and other languages. Borges's growing recognition in the 1960s was fostered by his international lecture tours. The result was that he became a global celebrity, "the grand old man, perhaps, of international letters" (Bell-Villada, 1999, p. 24). Nevertheless, the fact remained that he never received the Nobel Prize, which caused him a great deal of bitterness. In my estimation Borges is one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, and the Committee's failure to award him the Nobel Prize for Literature was a grave omission.

The Committee's decision to award Gabriel García Márquez the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, on the other hand, was both well-deserved and, at the same time, predictable. By then Márquez was the representative par excellence for magical realism. His fiction emotionally connected with readers in Latin America and around the world. Márquez gave voice to the lives and dreams and dashed hopes of many Latin Americans. Márquez's rejection of simplistic linear plots and his jettisoning of Western enlightenment rationalism in favor of magic and ghostly spirits, all accentuated the shift in literature away from modernism toward postmodern cultural relativism with its celebration of marginalized voices, its affirmation of identity politics, and its increasingly global perspective. The result was a devaluation of Western civilization's greatest cultural accomplishments.

When we consider Borges and Márquez from the perspective of doubling, as I've noted before, they are a study in contrasts—the short story versus the novel, an analytic versus an emotional perspective, a metafictional bent versus an embrace of magical realism, to cite just a few. But even if Borges's fiction almost reads at times as if it is neoclassical European literature because of its style and clarity, it too jettisons conventional realism, although in favor of a fabulist metauniverse rather than the neo-spiritual domain of magical realism. For this reason, the fiction of Borges and Márquez sit uneasily adjacent to one another, rather than occupying different dimensions in literary space-time.

Indeed, Borges's contributions were significant in fostering the magical realism of the Boom generation of writers. As much as Márquez may have wanted to dismiss Borges's stories, he couldn't, as his comment to Mario Vargas Llosa makes clear.

With Borges something happens to me: Borges is one of the authors that I have read most and perhaps the one I like least. I read Borges for his extraordinary capacity for verbal artifice; he's a man who teaches one how to write. . . . I believe that Borges works with mental realities; it's pure evasion. . . . This literature does not interest me personally. I believe that all great literature must be founded on concrete reality". (cited by Varas Llosa, Warnes, 2009, p. 92)

MFS: When we think of the major themes of death, solitude, power we think of Márquez. Borges conjures a metauniverse filled with a maze of labyrinths, mirrors, libraries, and books. These are dark and difficult topics to discuss. . . . Were the politics of Latin America an incubator for these themes?

DS: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* explores the themes of death, solitude, and power. How does Márquez accomplish this? The town of Macondo is a remote jungle outpost bordering the rainforest. As with many colonial outposts, it is isolated from the others. These towns seem solitary and removed from contemporary Western civilization's historical timeline. Márquez illustrates this by means of one family's history over the course of seven generations and one hundred years. The Bendías clan (symbolically representing an entire community) becomes selfish: Its members live entirely for personal gain. The men crave solitude while the family as a whole becomes a symbolic representative of the power and greed of landowners. Life is hard in Macondo. Death is a daily part of life. Thus, Aureliano resigns himself to solitude after the death of Remedios, and Amaranta prepares her own burial shroud in anticipation of her own demise. Even the love of Aureliano Babilonia and Amaranta Úrsula (the Bendías family names are repetitive over the course of the generations as indeed are their failings) at the conclusion of the novel ends, as I mentioned earlier in this Q&A, cataclysmically.

Through love the couple overcomes solipsism and decadence. They give generously to their community (actions that symbolize socialism). Little do they realize that their love is incestuous. Fulfilling an omen, their child, Aureliano (III), the last generation of the Buendías, is born with a pig's tail. The mother, Amaranta Úrsula, dies giving birth to him. The father, Aureliano Babilonia, is despondent and pays no attention to Aureliano (III), who is neglected and eaten by ants. Macondo and its inhabitants are destroyed by a hurricane. Only then can history and time begin again and with these changes, conceivably, comes the dissolution of solitude.

"The Library of Babel" (1941) is a good introduction to Borges's stories since it explores the concept of the infinite library (itself a labyrinth) as the embodiment of "the universe". It draws upon the theme of his 1939 essay "The Total Library", which borrows from Kurd Lasswitz's story "The Universal Library" (1902). In 1975 Borges would revisit the idea in his story "The Book of Sand" (1975), although in this instance an infinite book substitutes for the infinite library. Of course, "The Library of Babel" reimagines the ancient Library of Alexandria (300 BC-30 BC in Egypt), as well as anticipating the seemingly infinite knowledge universe and, simultaneously, its corollary, the anti-knowledge domain, consisting

of unbounded trivia or filth that erodes and ultimately destroys our ability to achieve wisdom. Both, of course, are represented today in the Internet.

What is the narrative? The quasi-omniscient narrator—a librarian or curator within “The Library of Babel”—explains the concept behind this infinite universe with its hexagonal rooms, each adjacent to the next, all containing the facilities to meet “one’s physical necessities” (Borges, 1999, p. 112). Four walls of each hexagon are lined with books. Each hexagon has a vestibule that contains a mirror and each vestibule opens to another hexagonal gallery. The order and contents of books are randomly determined. The format of the books is identical. Each contains 25 symbols—22 letters, as well as the comma, the period, and the space. The library contains all books in the universe (past, present, and future). Initially, the reaction was “unbounded joy” since it was felt that “there was no personal problem, no world problem, whose eloquent solution did not exist—somewhere in some hexagon” (Borges, 1999, p. 115). Through this chain of reasoning not only could all problems be solved, but also all claims vindicated through the retrieval of “The Vindications—books of *apologiae* and prophecies that would vindicate for all time the actions of every person in the universe” (Borges, 1999, p. 115).

The narrator insists that the Vindications do exist since he has seen two of them. Nevertheless, hope turns to despair since the boundless collection in the Library of Babel (itself a reference to the biblical Tower of Babel) includes every book that has been or might be written. Consequently, it is very difficult to locate important works, as well as neigh impossible to find the precise books that might vindicate or prophesize one’s future. Not only is originality eviscerated, since nothing new can be created given that all books are already contained in the library, but much of the vast collection of the repository consists of tomes of logorrhea saturated with bunkum and balderdash.

Optimists felt that somewhere within the library was the perfect cipher to decode the universe and a “Book-Man”, some librarian, akin to a god, who has examined it. Nevertheless, with the overwhelming glut of information, much of it seemingly useless, infidels spoke of “the feverish Library, whose random volumes constantly threatened to transmogrify into others, so that they affirm all things, deny all things, and confound and confuse all things, like some mad and hallucinating deity” (Borges, 1999, p. 117). While the future of humanity seems perilously in doubt with suicides rising every year and global civilization posed for extinction, the narrator assumes that “the Library—enlightened, solitary, infinite, perfectly unmoving, armed with precious volumes, pointless, incorruptible, and secret—will endure” (Borges, 1999, p. 118).

Certainly, as I have indicated above, the history, politics, and culture of Latin America drives and shapes both authors’ stories. I hope the contrast in the fiction written by Márquez and Borges illuminates some of their differences.

MFS: Let’s talk about some of Borges’s other stories. Why are they important?

DS: I’ll mention three that are all included in Borges’s *Collected Fictions*: “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940), “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941), “Funes, His Memory” (1942), also rendered in other translations as “Funes the Memorios”.

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” is speculative fiction (what we used to call science fiction). The story is a thought experiment pertaining to George Berkeley’s notion of *subjective idealism* (only the mind and the ideas contained therein actually exist). The narrator relaying

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” is Borges (a fictive version of the author). He discovers an entry in an encyclopedia article of an unknown country (Uqbar) where intellectuals create a world (Tlön) by means of their imagination. This world has its own unique physical laws and cultural legends. The short story becomes a bibliographical labyrinth to determine the existence or illusion of Uqbar. In so doing the entire culture is reconstructed. Actual artifacts of Tlön begin appearing on Earth. By the conclusion it appears that Earth is metamorphosing into Tlön.

Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths” is an intricate detective story about a Chinese professor, Dr. Yu Tsun, who is living in Britain and spying for the Germans in World War I, although not for greed, but instead for intellectual validation and vindication. He remembers his ancestor, Ts’ui Pên, who conceived of an intricate novel and a labyrinth. While Dr. Tsun thought both projects remained unfinished, a prominent British sinologist Dr. Albert demonstrates to him the brilliant solution conceived by his ancestor. That “unfinished” novel is actually the labyrinth and the forks are in time, not space. These divergent paths are, in fact, choices that represent infinite outcomes simultaneously. Occasionally diverging paths converge resulting in changes that alter destiny. Thus notes the sinologist, in one version Dr. Tsun is his friend, in another, he is an enemy. Tsun declares that he’s a friend, but murders the sinologist and is subsequently tried and convicted for the crime. Nevertheless, the publicity surrounding Dr. Albert’s sensational murder, unbeknownst to the British at the time, transmits to the Germans the necessary code word, which is “Albert”, the site where a strategic artillery park is located. During the trial, the Germans begin bombing the park. Dr. Tsun thus succeeds, although he is convicted and will be hanged for espionage. “The Garden of Forking Paths” anticipates complex hypertext narratives developed for the Internet, as well as the multiverse cosmology.

“Funes, His Memory”, another speculative fiction of sorts, is a story about a teenager in Uruguay, Ireneo Funes, who has a prodigious memory and is possibly an autistic savant. As a result of a fall from a horse, instead of developing amnesia, he begins to recall every event that occurs in his life in agonizing detail. Remembering these occurrences in “real time” takes as long as the events themselves. Not surprisingly, Ireneo Funes has difficulty sleeping and ages considerably. Not long after, he dies of pulmonary congestion. Thus, what most of us initially might suppose to be an extraordinary facility—remembering everything—is revealed to be tragically incapacitating. The glut of information that deluges us, it turns out, makes it necessary to consolidate memory, that is, to decide what is important and what is not. This enables us to live our lives and function in the world. This story pairs beautifully with a recent cult thriller *Memento* (2000) written and directed by Christopher Nolan, a film that imagines a protagonist with retrograde amnesia (the inability to form new memories) uncovering events associated with the murder of his wife. The film presents two renderings of events, each with its own distinct timeline. But whereas the color narrative sequences backward through time, the black and white account progresses chronologically. Both accounts must be “spliced” together in order to unravel what actually happened.

Borges’s short stories are complex thought experiments about alternative realities. They cause us to reevaluate our preconceptions about the world.

MFS: How should readers who are unfamiliar with Borges and Márquez begin to approach their work? What other Latin American authors should our readers consider?

DS: Read Borges's *Collected Fictions* translated by Andrew Hurley. If you want an intellectual analysis of his work, read Gene H. Bell-Villada's *Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art*. Edwin Williamson's biography *Borges: A Life* explores the writer's life and how it shaped his fiction.

As for Gabriel García Márquez, I recommend reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. No single work of fiction better illuminates not only his writing, but also the entire subgenre we now refer to as magical realism, as well as the cultural mentality in which it was inculcated. Readers should also consider *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), a love story by Márquez in which the hero and heroine defy the obstacles separating them and reunite to rekindle their passion late in life. Think of it as a *Romeo and Juliet* story with a distinctively Latin American twist. Gerald Martin's biography *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life* explores the author's life and how it shaped his work.

Readers should look at *Modern Latin American Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, a marvelous book written by Robert Gonzalez Echevarría, which beautifully summarizes the contributions of the greatest Latin American writers in modern times. It's easy to read and fascinating.

I also highly recommend Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar, who was associated with the Boom. Begin with his novel *Hopscotch* (1963), an "antinovel" that presents itself as a conceptual puzzle and includes a "Table of Instructions" to help readers determine how they wish to navigate that story.

Of the pre-Boom writers, consider Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Men of Maize* (1949), his masterpiece, which explores the indigenous Indian culture and the impact of European imperialism. It's challenging, so make sure to read the critical edition translated by Gerald Martin. Want more suggestions? Take a look at Alejo Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral* (1962). This historical novel considers how the French Revolution influenced the Caribbean and was reputed to have caused Márquez to discard the first draft of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and begin afresh. Finally, don't forget to read Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) about a ghost town and its spectral inhabitants that not only influenced Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but also is regarded by many critics as the best Latin American novel ever written.

In a later essay, we'll discuss Roberto Bolaño's fiction—today's most famous Post-Boom Latin American author—as well as the notable American (and Dominican) writer Junot Díaz.

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