

Appendix B: Reading Assignments

Who Owns the Novel?

Jorge Luis Borges

The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in the vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him, though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things. Spinoza knew that all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I do not know which of us has written this page.

“Borges and I.” *A Personal Anthology*, p. 200

What’s the Story?

E. M. Forster

We shall all agree that the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect, but we shall voice our assent in different tones, and it is on the precise tone of voice we employ now that our subsequent conclusions will depend.

Let us listen to three voices. If you ask one type of man, “What does a novel do?” he will reply placidly: “Well—I don’t know—it seems a funny sort of question to ask—a novel’s a novel—well, I don’t know—I suppose it kind of tells a story, so to speak.” He is quite good-tempered and vague, and probably driving a motor-bus at the same time and paying no more attention to literature than it merits. Another man, whom I visualize as on a golf-course, will be aggressive and brisk. He will reply: “What does a novel do? Why, tell a story of course, and I’ve no use for it if it didn’t. I like a story. Very bad taste on my part, no doubt, but I like a story. You can take your art, you can take your literature, you can take your music, but give me a good story. And I like a story to be a story, mind, and my wife’s the same.” And a third man he says in a sort of drooping regretful voice, “Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story.” I respect and admire the first speaker. I

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detest and fear the second. And the third is myself. Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist. That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form.

Aspects of the Novel, pp. 25-6

Amy Tan

Reading for me was a refuge. I could escape from everything that was miserable in my life and I could be anyone I wanted to be in a story, through a character. It was almost sinful how much I liked it. That's how I felt about it. If my parents knew how much I loved it, I thought they would take it away from me. I think I was also blessed with a very wild imagination because I can remember, when I was at an age before I could read, that I could imagine things that weren't real and whatever my imagination saw is what I actually saw. Some people would say that was psychosis but I prefer to say it was the beginning of a writer's imagination. If I believed that insects had eyes and mouths and noses and could talk, that's what they did.

Online interview (www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/tan0int-1)

Where Do Novels Come From?

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

[As a result of a challenge from Lord Byron that “we will each write a ghost story,”] I busied myself to think of a story—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. Have you thought of a story? I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative...

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener... They talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin ... who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motions. Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth.

Night waned upon this talk, and even the witching hour had gone by, before we retired to rest. When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with

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a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine; show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion.

Frankenstein, p. 9

E. M. Forster

The historian deals with actions, and with the characters of men only so far as he can deduce them from their actions. He is quite as much concerned with character as the novelist, but he can only know of its existence when it shows on the surface. If Queen Victoria had not said, “We are not amused,” her neighbours at table would not have known she was not amused, and her ennui could never have been announced to the public. She might have frowned, so that they would have deduced her state from that—looks and gestures are also historical evidence. But if she remained impassive—what would anyone know? The hidden life is, by definition, hidden. The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of action. And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source: to tell us more about Queen Victoria than could be known, and thus to produce a character who is not the Queen Victoria of history.

Aspects of the Novel, p. 45

