



Special Project
An Enquiry into the Absurd
The Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges

Anand Prahlad

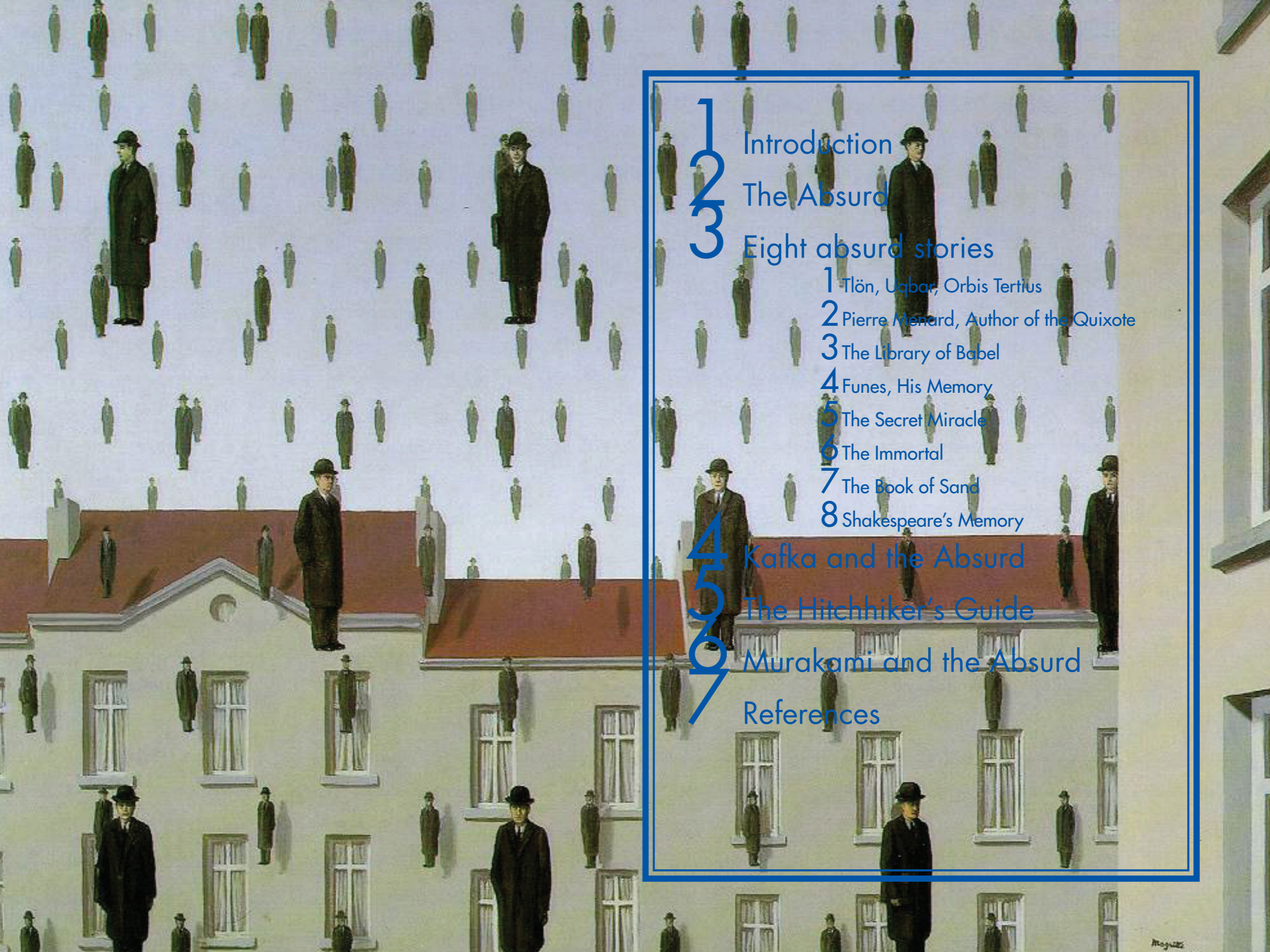
Guide:
Prof. Raja Mohanty
IDC-IITB 31st January 2007



*The absurd is
the essential
concept and
the first truth.*

-Albert Camus

Magritte



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Introduction

The Absurd

Eight absurd stories

- 1 Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius
- 2 Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote
- 3 The Library of Babel
- 4 Funes, His Memory
- 5 The Secret Miracle
- 6 The Immortal
- 7 The Book of Sand
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Kafka and the Absurd

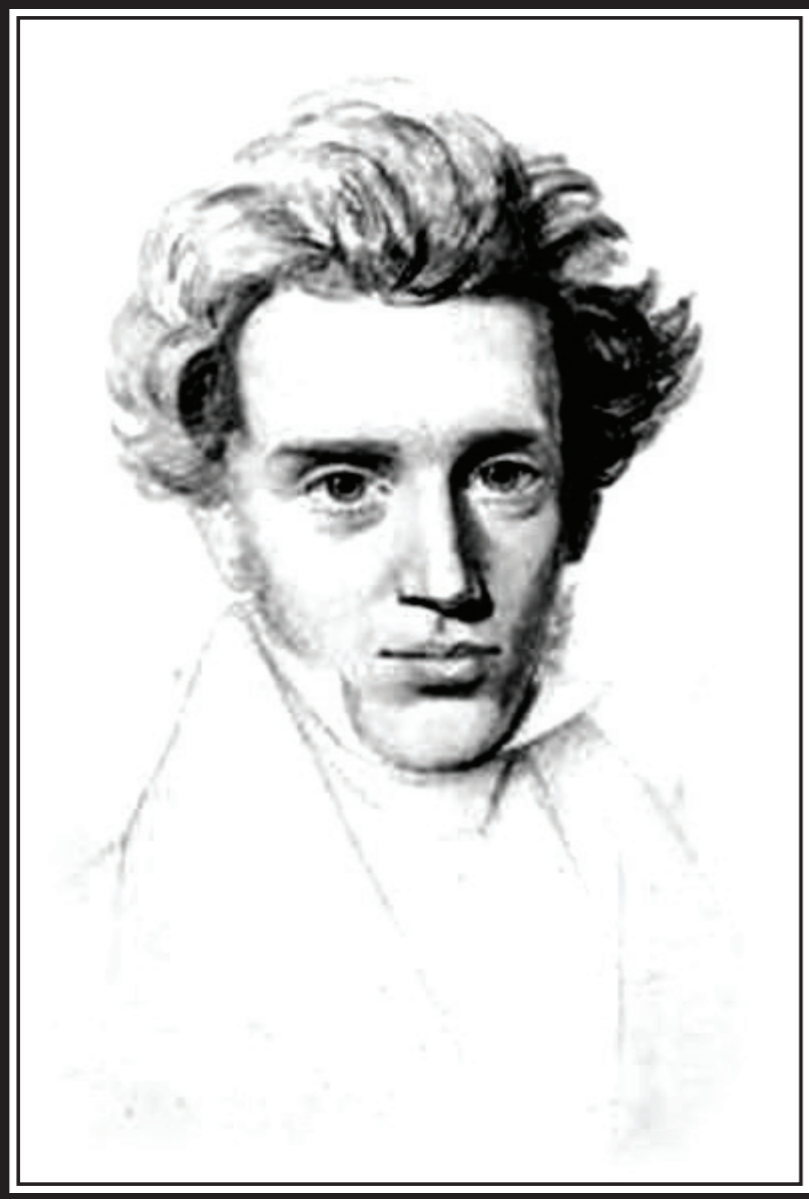
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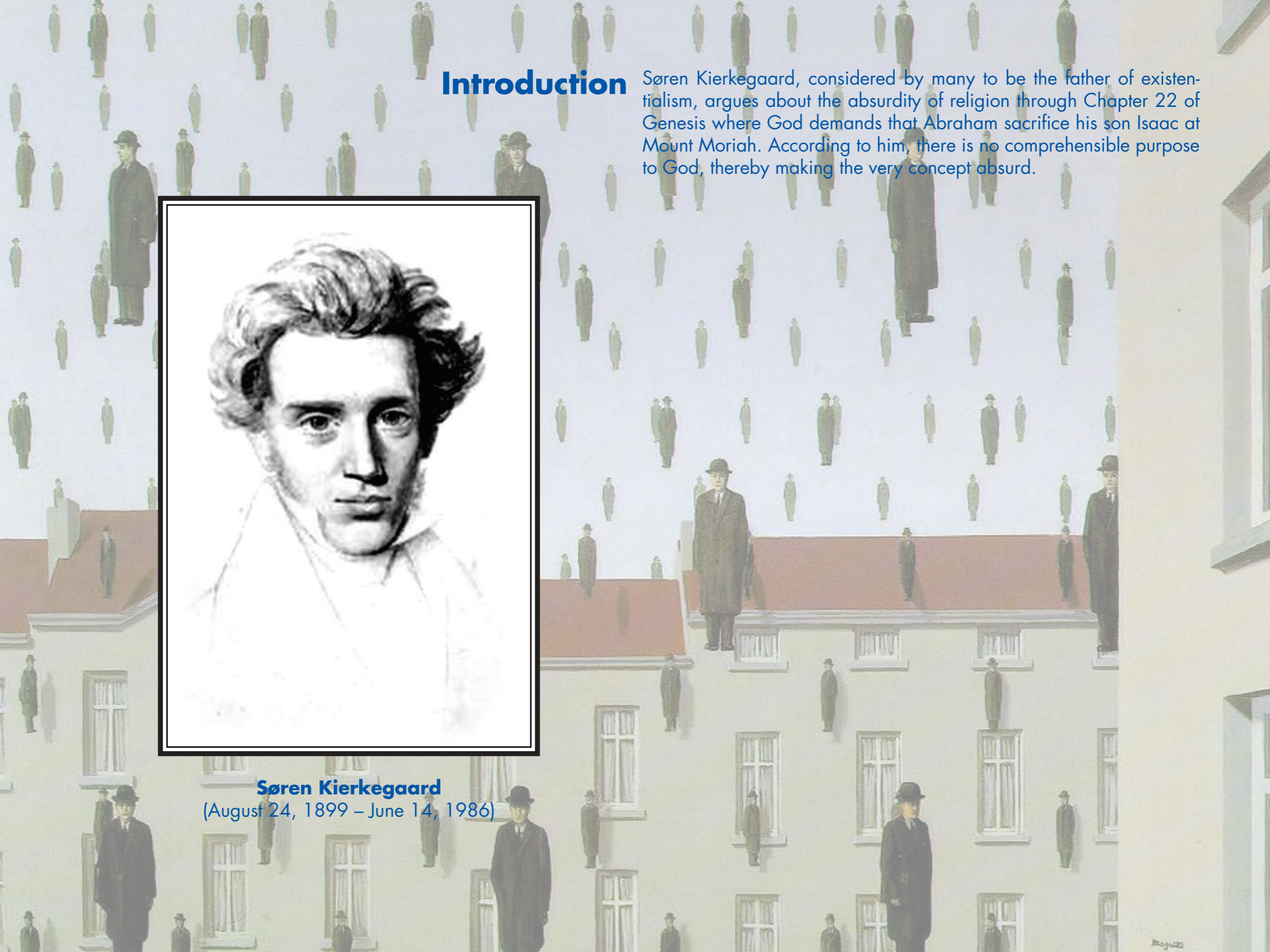
References

Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard, considered by many to be the father of existentialism, argues about the absurdity of religion through Chapter 22 of Genesis where God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac at Mount Moriah. According to him, there is no comprehensible purpose to God, thereby making the very concept absurd.

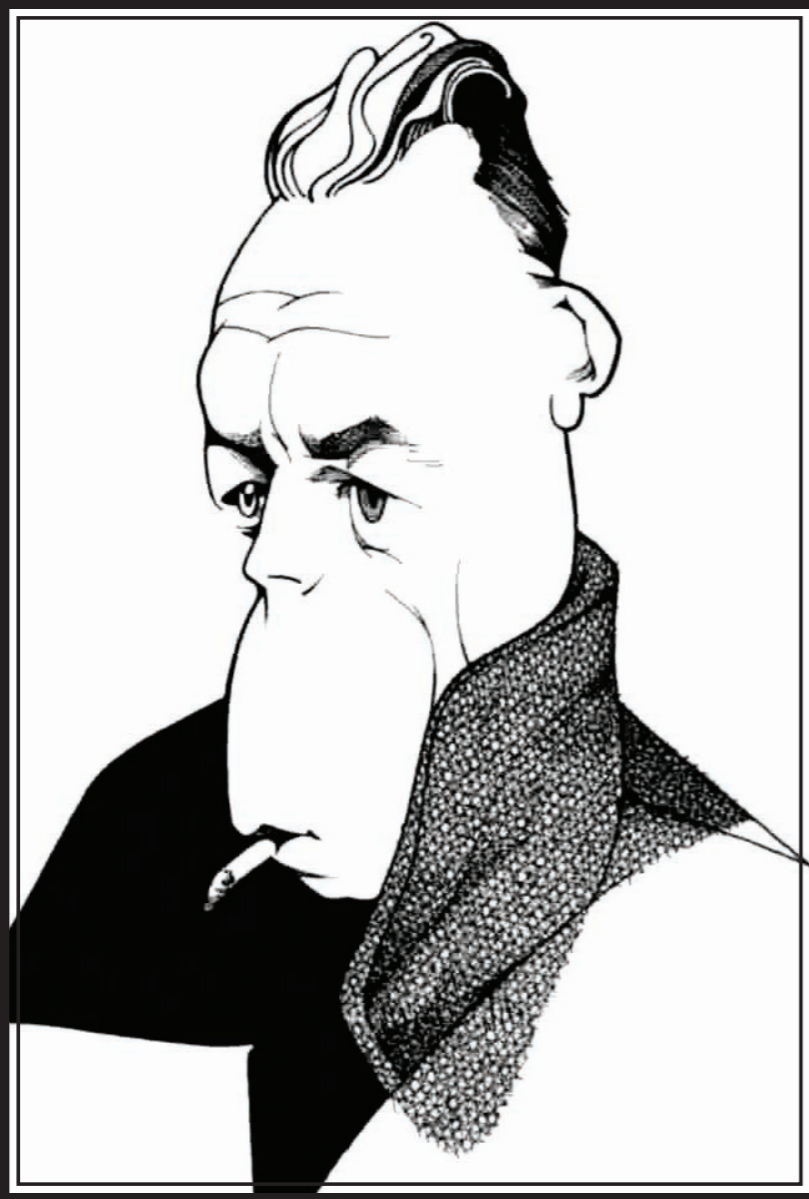


Søren Kierkegaard
(August 24, 1899 – June 14, 1986)



It was however Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, who defined Absurdism as an "ism".

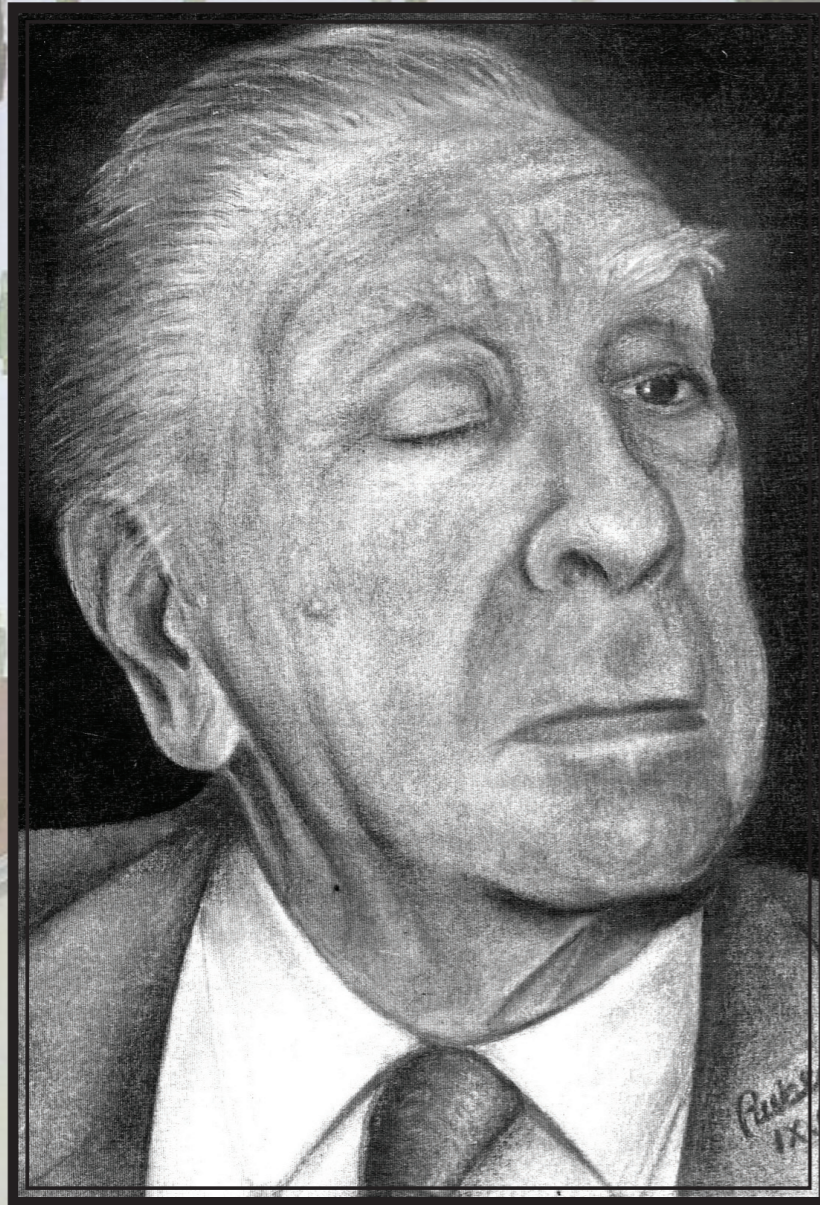
He states that life is an absurd concept in itself since the only possible purpose to life eventually seems to be death. Thus suicide, which is a solution to the futility of living a life without purpose, is a means to quicken the resolution of one's ultimate fate. Camus however claimed that suicide is not a worthwhile solution since life is absurd, and it is even more absurd to counteract it. Instead he says one should accept the fact that one lives in a world without purpose.



Albert Camus
(August 24, 1899 – June 14, 1986)



The year 2006 marks the twentieth anniversary of the death of Jorge Luis Borges. The Argentine writer is considered one of the most prolific figures in Hispanic literature and is well known for his short stories and essays. He was born Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges Acevedo in 1899 in Buenos Aires. He was brought up in a bilingual household, owing to the diverse origins of his parents (His father was part Spanish, part Portuguese, and half British; his mother was of Spanish and possibly Portuguese descent), and was reading Shakespeare at the age of twelve. His childhood was spent across Europe, where he learn French, initially with some difficulty and then German, by himself.

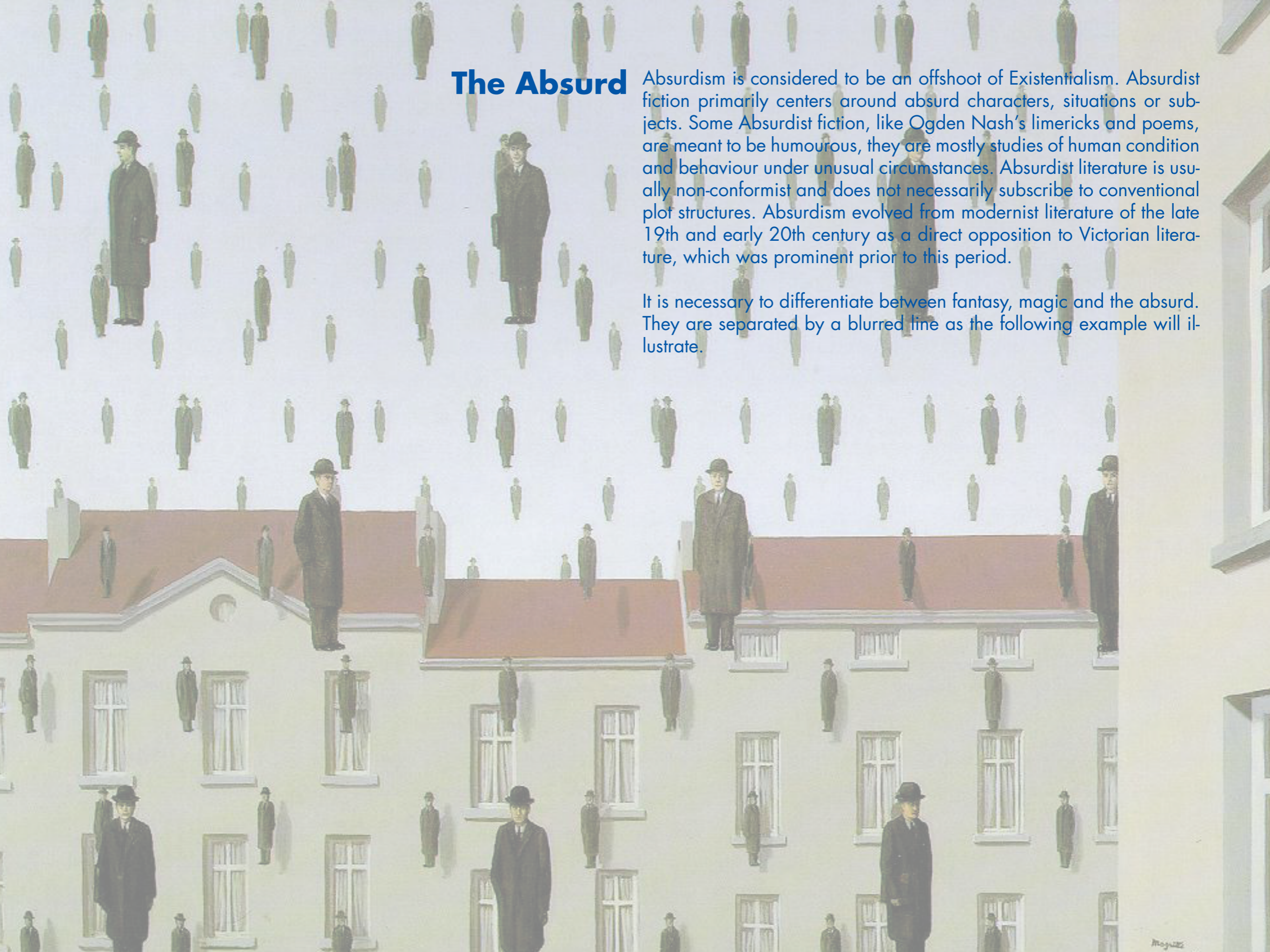


Jorge Luis Borges
(August 24, 1899 – June 14, 1986)

The Absurd

Absurdism is considered to be an offshoot of Existentialism. Absurdist fiction primarily centers around absurd characters, situations or subjects. Some Absurdist fiction, like Ogden Nash's limericks and poems, are meant to be humorous, they are mostly studies of human condition and behaviour under unusual circumstances. Absurdist literature is usually non-conformist and does not necessarily subscribe to conventional plot structures. Absurdism evolved from modernist literature of the late 19th and early 20th century as a direct opposition to Victorian literature, which was prominent prior to this period.

It is necessary to differentiate between fantasy, magic and the absurd. They are separated by a blurred line as the following example will illustrate.





Eight absurd stories

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- 2 Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*
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- 6 The Immortal
- 7 The Book of Sand
- 8 Shakespeare's Memory

» Published in *Fictions* (1944)

» The author and his friend Bioy Casares find a mention of a fictional land of Uqbar in Volume XLVI of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*.

» He describes in a great level of detail the culture and life within these fictional lands.

» A universal concept of books, where all books are written by the same author and the concept of plagiarism does not exist.

» The story proposes the absurd idea that the literature of an imaginary world might one day overwhelm the real world, and by that act, convert the real worlds to the imaginary worlds of Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

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» Published in *Fictions* (1944)

» Pierre Menard is a Frenchman who wishes to reproduce Don Cervantes' *Don Quixote* verbatim, by literally being Don Cervantes.

» The entire premise of this story is absurd, and Borges enforces the absurdities with comparisons of excerpts from both books which are essentially the same.





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» Published in *Fictions* (1944)

» The narrator describes how his universe consists of an endless expanse of interlocking hexagonal rooms, each of which contains the bare necessities for human survival—and four walls of bookshelves. Though the order and content of the books is random and apparently completely meaningless, the inhabitants believe that the books contain every possible ordering of just a few basic characters (letters, spaces and punctuation marks). Though the majority of the books in this universe are pure gibberish, the library also must contain, somewhere, every coherent book ever written, or that might ever be written, and every possible permutation or slightly erroneous version of every one of those books. The narrator notes that the library must contain all useful information, including predictions of the future, biographies of any person, and translations of every book in all languages. Conversely, for any given text some language could be devised that would make it readable with any of an infinite number of different contents



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» Published in *Artifices* (1944)

» Ireneo Funes is a man who remembers everything

» He passes his time by reconstructing full days from past memories.

» According to the narrator (Borges himself), he does not perceive the world in abstraction, but in full detail



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» Published in *Artifices* (1944)

» Jaromir Hladik is a playwright living in Prague, who has been sentenced to death by firing squad for being a Jew (the story is set in Nazi occupied Prague).

» He prays to God asking for a year in which he can finish his play, *The Enemies*.

» He dreams of a voice that says to him, "The time for your labor has been granted", and the next day when the firing squad fires at him, the bullet stops in mid air. Time freezes for a year, within which time he finishes the play in his head. Soon after the bullet continues on its fatal path and kills him.

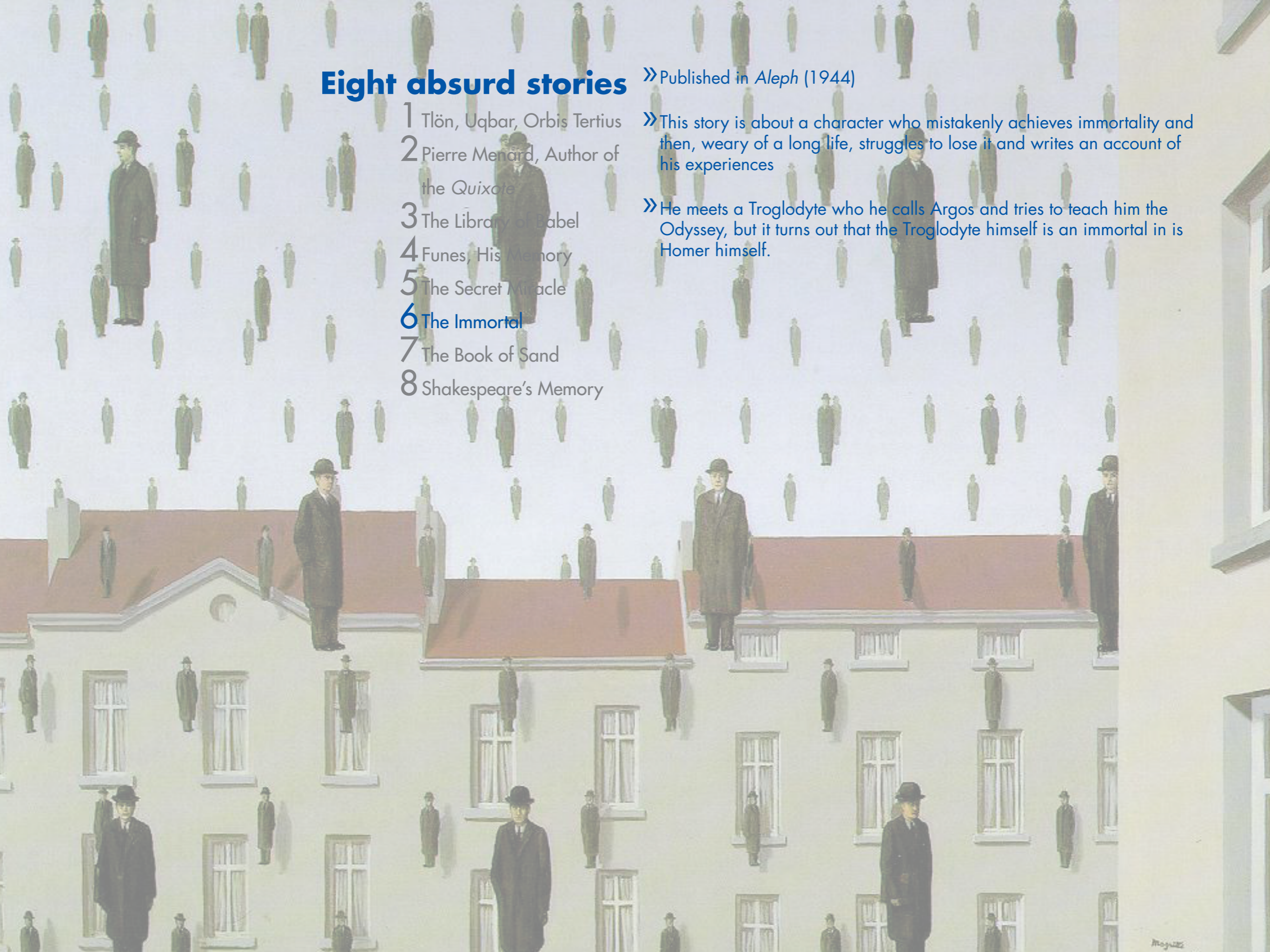
Eight absurd stories

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» Published in *Aleph* (1944)

» This story is about a character who mistakenly achieves immortality and then, weary of a long life, struggles to lose it and writes an account of his experiences

» He meets a Troglodyte who he calls Argos and tries to teach him the *Odyssey*, but it turns out that the Troglodyte himself is an immortal in is Homer himself.





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- 7 **The Book of Sand**
- 8 Shakespeare's Memory

» Published in *The Book of Sand* (1975)

» A Bible salesman sells Borges a book with the words "Holy Writ" and Bombay printed on the spine.

» The book is filled with gibberish. But every time anyone opens it, a different page comes up.

» Eventually the book nearly drives him mad and he ends up planting the book in some basement shelf of the Argentine National Library.



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- 8 **Shakespeare's Memory**

» Published in *Shakespeare's Memory* (1983)

» A friend of the writer offers him the opportunity to possess Shakespeare's memory.

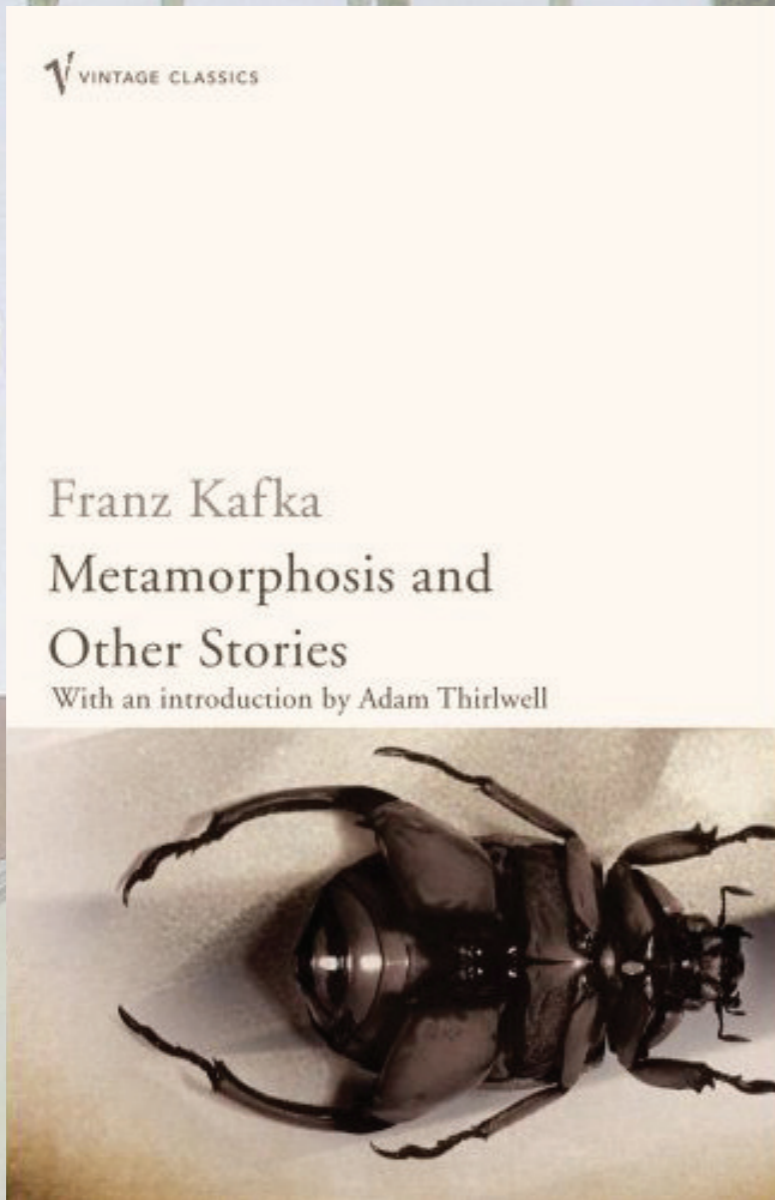
» The act must be carried out voluntarily and through a verbal dialogue between the two parties.

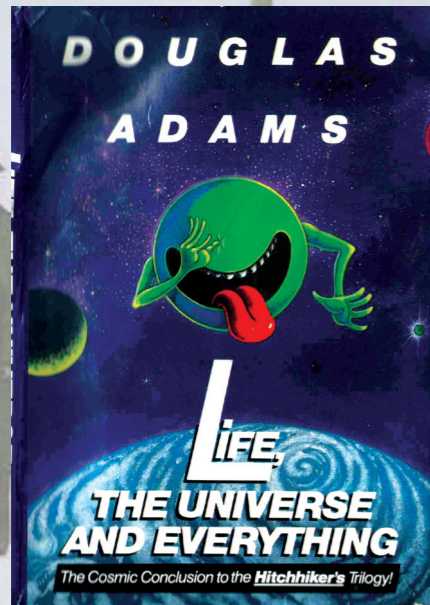
» The narrator finds himself split between two personalities, that of his own self and that of Shakespeare himself.

» He eventually gives up the gift by picking numbers out of a phone book and transferring it on the phone.

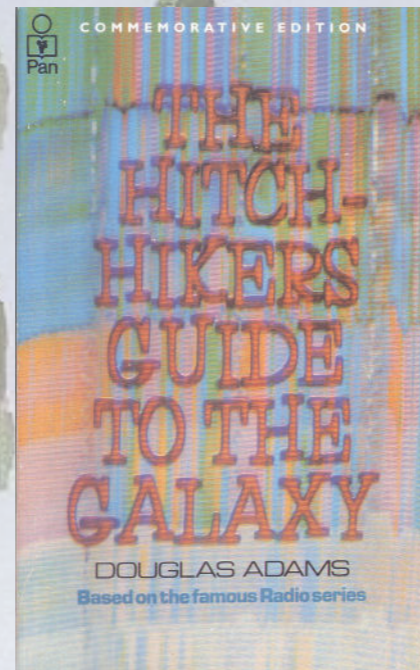
Kafka and the absurd

Absurdities in Franz Kafka's writings appear in all shapes and sizes. The *Metamorphosis* sets its absurd premise from the very first line itself. The latter part of this document contains a more detailed description of this story. To a certain degree, the absurdities in Kafka's texts tend more towards the bizarre than the fantastic. In the short story *In the Penal Colony*, Kafka describes to us a horrible and elaborate machine built specifically to inflict excruciating pain onto condemned prisoners. The device is divided into three parts, the Bed, the Designer and the Harrow. The prisoner is strapped into the bed while the Harrow, consisting of fine blades and needles carves the sentence ("Honour thy superior", for example) onto his body. The device rolls the prisoner around so that the sentence may be carved into the flesh of the prisoner, its depth increasing slowly with the passage of time.

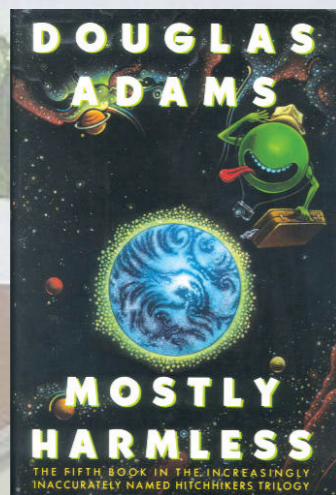




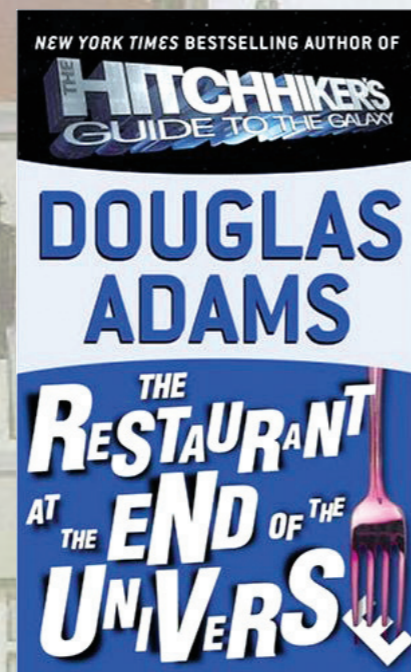
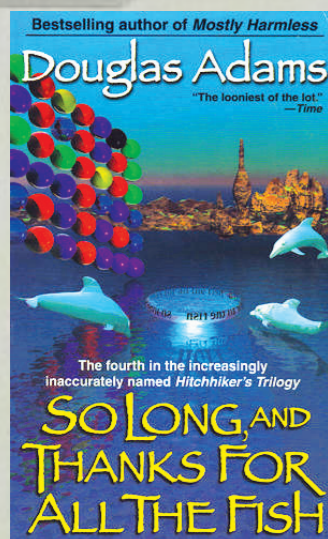
The Hitchhiker's Guide



*"The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is the most popular known reference work in the Milky Way, for two reasons: it is inexpensive, and it has the words Don't Panic written on it in large, friendly letters on its cover. It is a galactic best seller everywhere except on the backward planet Earth, where they still think digital watches are "a pretty neat idea." Ford Prefect is a field correspondent for the Guide stationed on Earth and fully aware that the Guide has forgotten about him. His best friend is the unassuming Earthling Arthur Dent. His boring life in the West Country is changed one morning when Ford alerts him that he's actually from somewhere near Betelgeuse and that they have to get off the planet before it's demolished. Indeed, an alien race of bureaucrats called Vogons intend to destroy Earth to make way for a 'hyperspace bypass'."*¹



The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is steeped in absurdity. From its basic premise, described above, to offbeat characters and incidents, the story revels in surprising the reader. The absurdity is also woven into the language, with sentences like, "and then suddenly, nothing continued to happen".



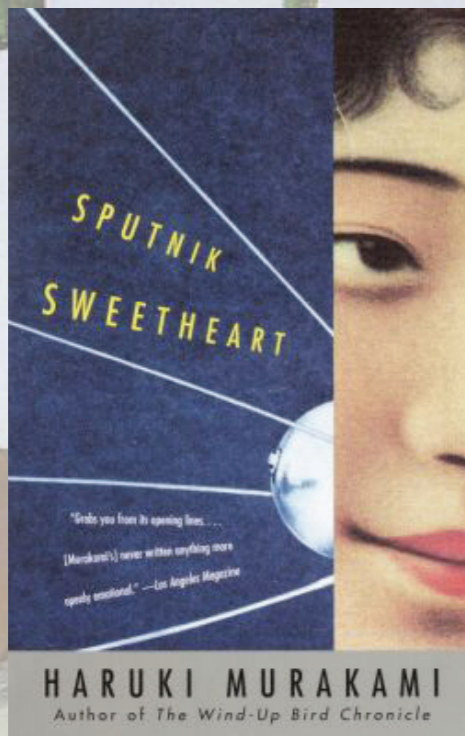
¹ From:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hitchhiker's_Guide_to_the_Galaxy_\(book\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hitchhiker's_Guide_to_the_Galaxy_(book))

Murakami and the Absurd

Murakami's stories deal with a recurring theme of alienation, isolation and loss. The characters are usually detached and aloof. Absurdities occur sporadically, without warning through his stories. For example, in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, Miu, one of the three primary characters, is trapped in a Giant Wheel in a fair she visits. She ends up spying on herself in her house in the hills and sees herself with a man in the house.

After the Quake is a collection of short stories based in Japan after the 1995 Kobe earthquakes. One of the more absurd stories from this collection is *Super Frog saves Tokyo*. The protagonist of this story, Mr. Katagiri is confronted by a standing, talking frog who insists on being referred to as "Frog" (not Mr. Frog). He tells him that he needs his assistance in fighting "Worm". A dangerous subterranean creature that will cause an earthquake in Tokyo. Katagiri eventually misses the meeting to go down and fight Worm, but is later met by a scarred and battered Frog, who tells him that the earthquake has been averted and that Katagiri had helped him in his dreams. The battle, he explains, occurred on the plane of imagination, so Katagiri could help Frog without physically being there.



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