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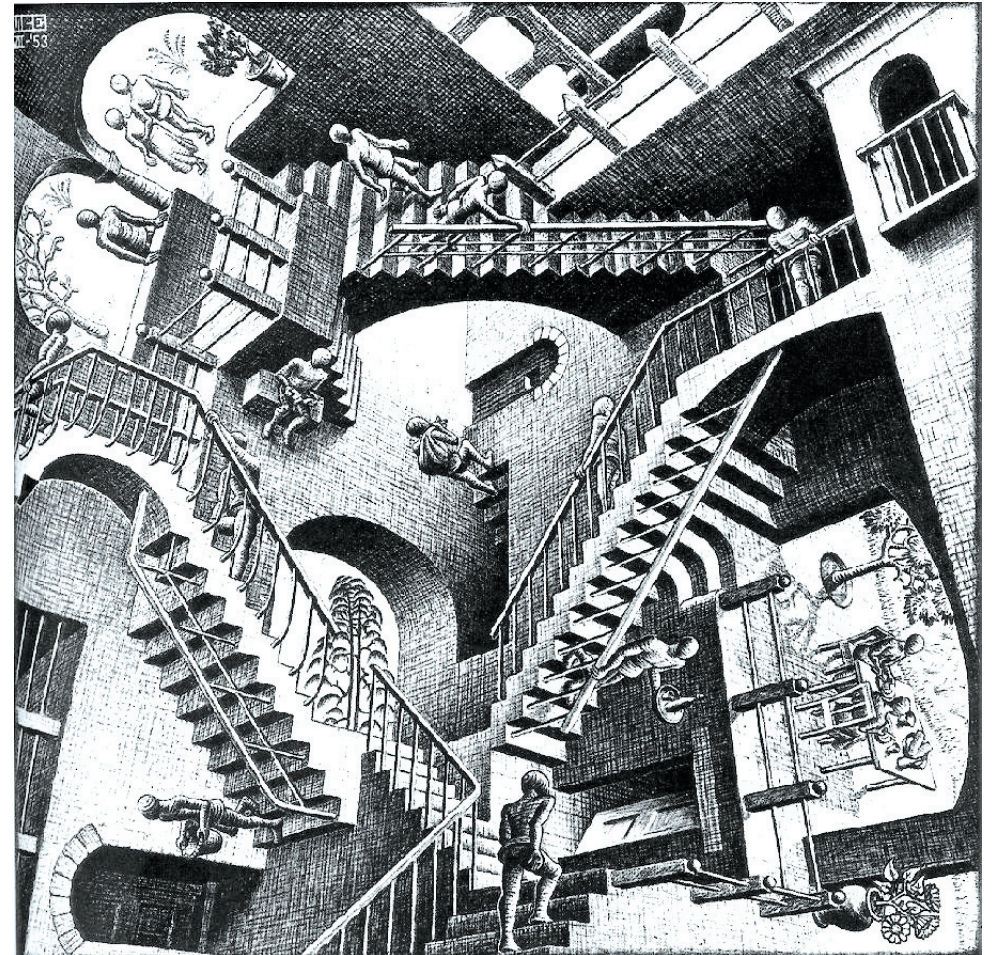
AN ENQUIRY INTO THE ABSURD

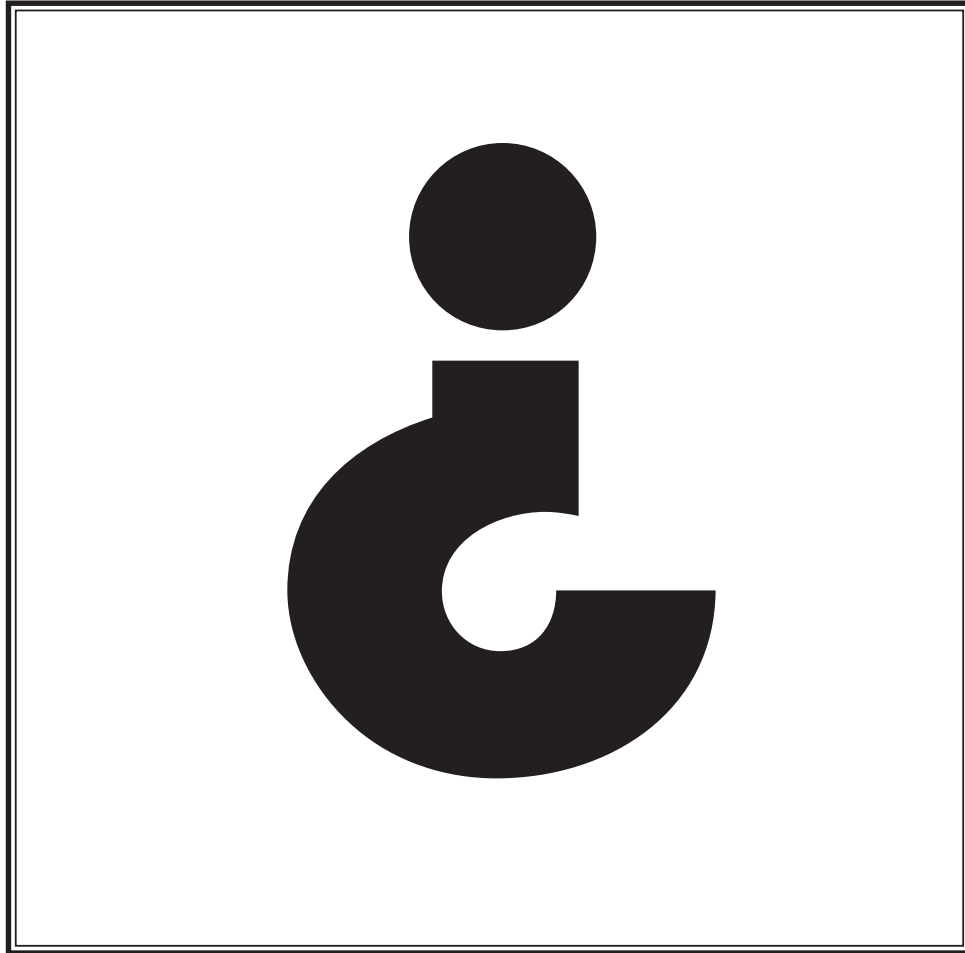
THE FICTIONS OF JORGE LUIS BORGES

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IDC 2007





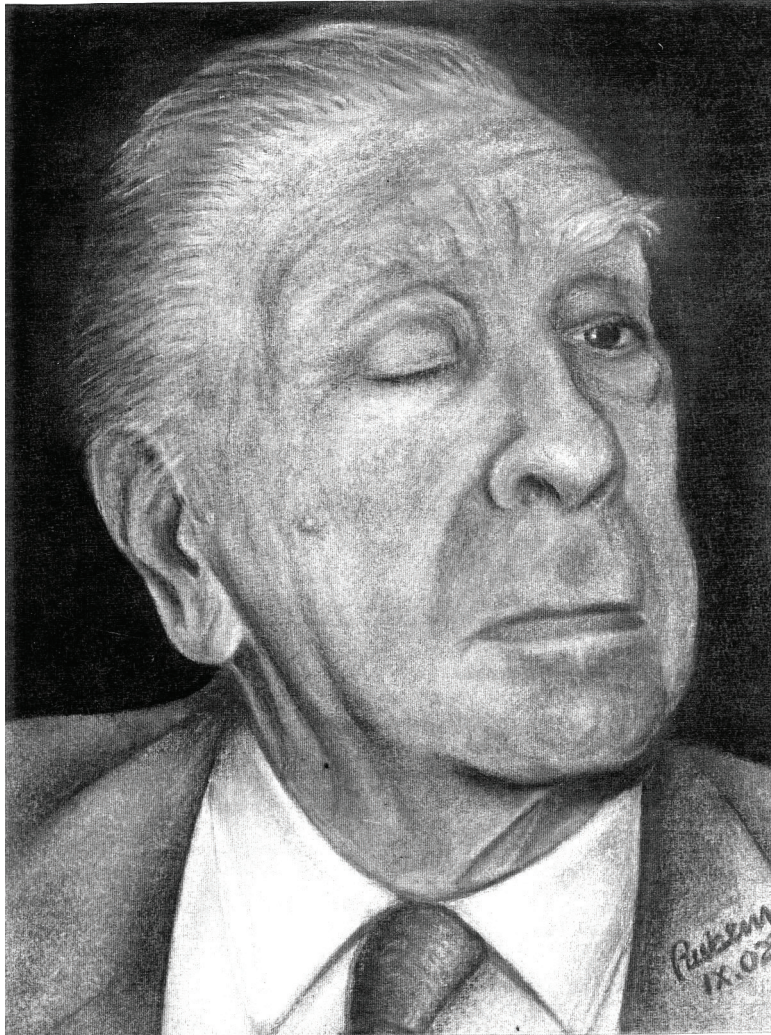
The absurd is the essential concept and the first truth.

-Albert Camus

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Introduction



Jorge Luis Borges
(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 learned French, initially with some difficulty and then German, by himself.

His friends found him a job at the Miguel Cané branch of the Buenos Aires Municipal Library as a first assistant in 1937. He would spend an hour cataloguing a hundred books everyday (he was forbidden from cataloguing any more than that number) and spend the rest of the time in the basement writing essays and short stories.

One of his earliest published compilations, *Historia universal de la infamia*, contained two types of stories, one set was an essay-like fictionalisation of true stories, whereas the other was a complete fabrication. The latter he initially passed off as translations of well known but usually unread works.

Borges' writings cover a plethora of topics and subjects. Some of his stories assume an almost essay-like quality that seems to be attempting to trick the reader into wondering whether what he is reading is fact or fiction. Libraries, labyrinths and mirrors seem to form recurring themes in the writings of Borges. His blindness, which crept onto him slowly over his adult years also seem to profoundly influence his work. Since his life spanned that era, his work seems rooted in the modernist period. The stories and essays are treatises to his erudition and are almost always concise. Her remarks, in the introduction to *The Garden of Forking Paths*:

"It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes. The better way to go about it is to pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them."

He also covers genres as diverse as science fiction, detective stories, history, South American folk tales and many others.

A number of his tales are set in fantastic settings or have characters with fantastic peculiarities (or even both). The stories are written unrestricted by geographical boundaries; many of which are based in Borges' native Argentina but sweep across Great Britain. *The Library of Babel* is a massive infinite library that houses every text ever written in 410 page volumes in a spherical library with hexagonal cells. *Funes* is a man who never forgets. He remembers each event and each object in his field of view in massive detail. Some stories, like *The Immortals* have appearances by historical figures like Homer, as a main character. *Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote* is the story of a Frenchman who wishes to write Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* verbatim. The sheer absurdity of these and many other stories form the base and generator of this essay on absurdity. Absurdism has its roots in Existentialism. Existentialism is essentially a philosophical movement that primarily deals with human freedom. It looks at human condition in a remarkably different point of view from the philosophies of its time. Since existentialism does not treat the individual as a concept, it primarily deals with questions regarding existence and subjective experience. In spite of the fact that there aren't many connections between Borges' writings and Existential philosophy, many of his stories clearly fall under the purview of the basic tenets of it, i.e. consciousness of death, feelings of alienation and loneliness and the concept of *Alltägliche selbstsein* or "Everyday-ness." (to a lesser



Søren Kierkegaard
(5 May 1813 – 11 November 1855)

degree) to name a few.

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. 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.

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.

Franz Kafka, one of the most prominent Absurdist writers of all time, was a prominent influence on the writing of Jorge Luis Borges. He was deeply fascinated by his unique style of writing. On further analysis though, he was able to read Kafka’s own influences, as is illustrated in the following extract from his essay *Kafka and His Precursors*:

“I once premeditated making a study of Kafka’s precursors. At first I had considered him to be as singular as the phoenix of rhetorical praise; after frequenting his pages a bit, I came to think I could recognize his voice, or his practices, in texts from diverse literatures and periods.”

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.

At this conjecture, it is important that we define, or rather differentiate between the absurd, the fantastic and the magical. The fantastic and magical take cues from existing mythology and fiction and tend to subscribe to preset conditions and rules. Elves and fairies fall within this description. Absurdity however, arises from situations and phenomena that are by no means anything like what might happen in real life and do not directly refer to already existing fictions. Things from the realm of magic do not shake us and leave us unsettled because somehow in our conditioning, through the course of our lives, we acquire a type of collective unconscious archive of archetypal images and symbols. Most images of the fantastic



Albert Camus
(November 7, 1913 – January 4, 1960)

and magical have been pulled from this archive. This is what allows for the universal recognition of symbols and characters like the unicorn and dragon.

Absurd situations however, tend to defy or contradict the general rules of nature or accepted human behavior. It would be wrong to brush these absurdities aside as wanton exaggerations or forced situations to generate interest in an otherwise boring scene. Many situation of oppression and hardship in everyday life do tend towards the absurd. In some cases, the idea behind stories with prominent absurdities is to portray human behavior in absurd situations.

In the following essay I hope to look at various approaches to the absurd in the fictions of Jorge Luis Borges. His writings provide a fertile ground of experiments in time, character descriptions, historical reconstructions and narrative construction. The aim of this project is to look at a few case studies from the various compilations of short stories and juxtapose the different methods used in the body of an essay.

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An essay on the Absurd

1.0 The absurd and the magical

I have already attempted to draw distinctions between the absurd, the fantastic and the magical in previous pages. It would probably be more apt to compare a few examples to draw these distinctions more clearly. Magic Realism, a Postmodern genre that borders on the absurd would probably be a good starting point to begin this comparison. It primarily consists fantastical elements that border on the believable, but are never explained to great detail. The characters in the story accept the magical elements without really questioning them. Time is also treated as though it were greatly malleable. Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi* (published by Penguin books India) describes an adventure on a lifeboat full of zoo animals. The protagonist, Pi Patel, is sixteen year old when his family, who own the Pondicherry Zoo, decide to move to Canada by ship. En route, he gets shipwrecked and he's stranded in a lifeboat with an odd group of animals from the zoo. The book goes on to describe his various interactions with the animals. Some of the animals fight between themselves and kill each other. Pi himself learns to establish his territory and defends himself against the animals. Beyond a point in the book (specifically after the shipwreck), the reader stops questioning the viability of such a scenario. The story goes on to describe a cannibalistic island, further encounters and standoffs between the tiger Richard Parker and the protagonist. The story borders on the absurd. The genre of magic realism could possibly be classified as a contemporary offshoot of absurdism.

Borges' œuvre covers a diverse and vast set of genres. His extensive set of references and sources give the reader a mind bogglingly vast group of stories to choose from. The following pages look at eight of his more absurd tales with the intention of covering a range of approaches, concepts and structures for stories of an absurd nature.

1.1 Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

This is a story of two friends who come across a strange addition to an encyclopædia they find in a bookshelf. It seems to have an entire section on the mysterious regions of the otherwise unknown and apparently rather esoteric and hidden lands of Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius.

The most absurd aspect of the story is the fact that it goes on to illustrate in great detail facts and figures about these mysterious lands. The protagonist of the story goes through great pains to unearth the mystery of these lands and makes many comparisons to other editions and volumes of the encyclopædia. The sensible diagnosis would be to label that particular copy of the encyclopædia as a spurious one, but Borges goes on to write that one day all reality might be replaced by the words in the encyclopædia and the worlds as we know it would be replaced by Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius.

“Numismatology, pharmacology and archeology have been reformed. I understand that biology and mathematics also await their avatars... A scattered dynasty of solitary men has changed the face of the world. Their task continues. If our forecasts are not in error, a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of the Second Encyclopedia of Tlön.

Then English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön. I pay no attention to all this and go on revising, in the still days at the Adroque hotel, an uncertain Quevedian translation (which I do not intend to publish) of Browne's Urn Burial”.

1.2 Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote

One of Borges' narrative modes is that of a literary review for imaginary writers and texts. This story is one such literary review of a french writer named Pierre Menard. Borges goes about outlining his corpus, in a way reenforcing his reputation as a credible and reputed author.

Menard wishes to re-write Don Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Oddly, the writer chooses not to copy or re-write the classic, but to literally *be* Cervantes and recreate the document verbatim. Borges plays with the reader by quoting the same line twice (once by each author) and reviews the two pieces as though they were different sentences from two varied contexts. This particular genre, of writing fictitious reviews for non-existent authors seems to be popular with Borges. He also rewrites existing stories with additions and twists in the narrative.

"It is a revelation to compare Menard's Don Quixote with Cervantes'. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "lay genius" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

History, the mother of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases-exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor --are brazenly pragmatic."

1.3 The Library of Babel

The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible.

There are five shelves for each of the hexagon's walls; each shelf contains thirty-five books of uniform format; each book is of four hundred and ten pages; each page, of forty lines, each line, of some eighty letters which are black in color. There are also letters on the spine of each book; these letters do not indicate or prefigure what the pages will say. I know that this incoherence at one time seemed mysterious.

This hypothetical library was inspired by Pascal's infinite sphere and contains every possible text ever conceived or will ever be conceived by virtue of the fact that every possible permutation and combination of the alphabet is present in the texts of the library. The story is in a way a strange librarian fantasy; Borges, as mentioned earlier, being a librarian himself.

Once he is done explaining the physical constraints of the library of Babel, he goes on to explain the life and death struggles occurring in the library itself, and the lack of hope with the people trapped inside it of ever getting out.

1.4 The Secret Miracle

“The squad formed and stood at attention. Hladik, standing against the barracks wall, waited for the volley. Someone pointed out that the wall was going to be stained with blood; the victim was ordered to step forward a few paces. Incongruously, this reminded Hladik of the fumbling preparations of photographers. A big drop of rain struck on of Hladik’s temples and rolled slowly down his cheek; the sergeant shouted the final order.

The physical universe came to a halt.

The guns converged on Hladik, but the men who were to kill him stood motionless. The sergeant’s arm eternized an unfinished gesture. On a paving stone of the courtyard, the bee cast an unchanging shadow. The wing had ceased, as in a picture. Hladik attempted to cry, a word, a movement of the hand. He realised that he was paralysed.”

The story of *The Secret Miracle* is mostly about the worries of Jaromir Hladik, a playwright to be executed by dawn. The initial part goes to outline his capture and suffering in captivity. He predictably prays to God, asking for more time to finish off his final masterpiece. He asks for a year, in which he expects to be able to do so. It is only towards the very end of the that the absurd kicks in. Here Borges toys with the concept of time. Just as Hladik is about to be executed, moments after the guns release their bullets towards him, time stands still. Time stands still for everything else in the universe, while Hladik gets a year to finish off his play in his head. The very second he finishes it, time resumes its normal course and the bullet completes its task.

1.5 Funes, His Memory

The story of Funes is almost a biographical narrative that begins in a small town that houses a strange character called Ireneo Funes. He introduces Funes as a child in the very beginning of the story. His cousin Bernardo Haedo calls out to him:

"What's the time, Ireneo?" Without looking up, without stopping, Ireneo replied: "In ten minutes it will be eight o'clock, child Bernardo Juan Francisco." The voice was sharp, mocking.

Later on in the story, Funes is crippled in an accident and retires to a secluded lifestyle in a house with his mother. Borges goes into great detail explaining how Funes perceives the world in a completely un-abstracted fashion. He explains how we perceive the world in abstraction. When we see a chair, we compare it to an archetypal image of a chair we have in our heads and thus make the identification. Funes, he says, does not have the luxury of abstraction and perceives the world in all its detail. In spite of this overloaded perception, he is supposed to remember everything.

It was very difficult for him to sleep. To sleep is to be abstracted from the world; Funes, on his back in his cot, in the shadows, imagined every crevice and every moulding of the various houses which surrounded him. (I repeat, the least important of his recollections was more minutely precise and more lively than our perception of a physical pleasure or a physical torment.) Toward the east, in a section which was not yet cut into blocks of homes, there were some new unknown houses. Funes imagined them black, compact, made of a single obscurity; he would turn his face in this direction in order to sleep. He would also imagine himself at the bottom of the river, being rocked and annihilated by the current.

Without effort, he had learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details.

1.6 The Immortal

“To be immortal is commonplace; except for man, all creatures are immortal, for they are ignorant of death; what is divine, terrible, incomprehensible, is to know that one is immortal.”

The story of the Immortal is about a search for eternal life. The protagonist of this story acquires immortality quite by chance and eventually finds himself weary of living an eternal life. He goes on to describe various slices of history he lives in and searches for a way to escape immortality. He also comes across a Troglodyte who lives in what he thinks is the city of the Immortals. He decides to call the troglodyte Homer and goes about teaching him about his (Homer's) writings. However, it eventually turns out that the troglodyte is indeed Homer himself, who is in fact one of the Immortals himself.

When the end draws near, there no longer remain any remembered images; only words remain. It is not strange that time should have confused the words that once represented me with those that were symbols of the fate of those who accompanied me for so many centuries. I have been Homer; shortly, I shall be No One, like Ulysses; shortly I shall be all men; I shall be dead.

1.7 The Book of Sand

In yet another story that stems from Borges' fascination with books, he describes to us a magical book with no beginning or end. The book is sold to him by a Bible salesman who claims that he procured the book somewhere in Rajasthan. The strange and absurd quality of the book is the fact that it does not seem to have a beginning or end. Never is a page ever visited twice. Both pages, the left and right, have random page numbers that appear once and will never appear again. The book drives its owner to the brink of insanity. Eventually, convinced that the book is a monster, he hides the book in one of the dusty basement shelves of a library.

I showed no one my treasure. To the luck of owning it was added the fear of having it stolen, and then the misgiving that it might not truly be infinite. These twin pre-occupations intensified my old misanthropy. I had only a few friends left; I now stopped seeing even them. A prisoner of the book, I almost never went out anymore...

Summer came and went, and I realized that the book was monstrous...

1.8 Shakespeare's Memory

The crux of this story rests in a memory transfer that is initiated in a strange ceremony between two friends. As per the conditions of the exchange, the two parties involved in the exchange must be consenting and must repeat a few lines like a mantra between each other. Very slowly, the protagonist begins to feel the memories of William Shakespeare overcoming him. He slowly feels memories of Anne Hathway and others in Shakespeare's life appearing with his own. At one point he literally feels himself splitting into two personalities.

At this point, things begin to get too much for him. He decides to pass on the "gift" to someone else. He goes about it this time by looking up a random number in the phone book and affecting the transfer over the phone. In a fate similar to the protagonist of *The Book of Sand*, where he is driven to the brink by the strange quality of the gift bestowed upon himself. In both these stories, the pivotal feature is the gift, with similar magical qualities.

I have forgotten the date on which I decided to free myself. I hit upon the easiest way: I dialled telephone numbers at random. The voice of a child or a woman would answer; I believed it was my duty to respect their vulnerable estates. At last a man's refined voice answered.

"Do you," I asked, "want Shakespeare's memory? Consider well: its a solemn thing I offer, as I can attest."

An incredulous voice replied:

"I will take that risk. I accept Shakespeare's memory."

I explained the conditions of the gift. Paradoxically, I felt both a nostalgia for the book I should have written, and now never would, and a fear that the guest, the specter, would never abandon me.

I hung up the receiver and repeated, like a wish, these resigned words:

Simply the thing I am shall make me live.

I had invented exercises to awaken the antique memory; I had to seek others now to erase it. One of the many was the study of the mythology of William Blake, that rebellious disciple of Swedenborg I found it to be less complex than merely complicated.

That and other parts were futile; all led me to Shakespeare.

I hit at last upon the only solution that gave hope courage: strict, vast music- Bach.

1.9 Conclusion

Stories with strange and absurd elements have existed from time immemorial. Here we need to draw distinctions between stories of magic, like the fairy tales, that were probably created with the understanding that the reader would transport himself into a magical world dissociated with reality. Absurd stories particularly insert strange and unbelievable incidents and elements into an otherwise believable reality.

Edgar Allan Poe himself plays with this sort of an insertion in his short story *Hans Pfall*, that describes the adventure of a Dane trying to escape debt by building himself a balloon with which he (supposedly) attempts a mission to the moon. When we look at Absurdism as a function of Existentialism, it is a little simpler to classify the writings of Borges as a precursor of Magic Realism. Like most stories in the genre the interpolation of the absurd into the mundane to emphasise the conditions of existence or to simply boggle the mind of the reader.

Borges's influences are varied and vast. It is widely known that he was a great admirer of Kafka. It would be easy to state that the root of the strange absurdities in his writing stem from this influence, but it would probably be truer to assume that his wide range of subjects and themes was purely influenced by a great love for the written word, as both a reader and writer.

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Appendix

In the pages that follow, I have tried to list a few examples of absurd literature to guide anyone interested in the subject. This is of course, not an exhaustive list and can possibly be considered a suggested reading list for anyone who requires an introduction to the genre. In addition to the stories that I have described at length in the previous essay, I have also listed other collections of his short stories that transcend the genre of Absurdism. I have tried to illustrate recurring themes and patterns in Borges' stories.

Also listed here are other a few works by Franz Kafka (from Germany), Douglas Adams (from the UK) and Haruki Murakami (from Japan). Kafka's stories have a perpetual theme of darkness and a certain emphasis on the human condition (making it a classic in the Existentialist genre) with a drastically absurd premise or event as a constant in it. Haruki Murakami, winner of the 2006 Franz Kafka Prize, is considered by some as the Kafka of the east. Murakami's stories deal with a certain degree of alienation with a lot of characters who don't conform to the conventional Japanese model of living (of studying, getting a job and getting domesticated) and are usually loners. Very similar to Kafka, his stories also contain a strange or fantastic elements. Finally, Douglas Adams, with his Hitchhiker's Guide series, revels in the absurd. Absurdities pop up in his stories in all possible guises. The following pages carry a brief outline of some of the bizarre themes in the series.



 Jorge Luis Borges Fictions

Fictions Jorge Luis Borges

This book was first published in 1944 by Editorial Sur as *Ficciones*. The book consisted of two parts, *The Garden of Forking Paths* and *Artifices*. This collection is widely considered as the finest collection of Borges' stories.

As in his other stories, Borges uses fiction as a vehicle to explore philosophical and literary issues. Consequently, the characters in his stories seem less developed. In *The Garden of Forking Paths*, he uses the genre of the detective story, a genre that requires clue-gathering and puzzle-solving in order to explore the way time branches into an infinite number of futures.

The Garden Of Forking Paths (1941)

Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius
The Approach to Al-Mútasim
Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote
The Circular Ruins
The Babylon Lottery
A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain
The Library of Babel
The Garden of Forking Paths

Artifices (1944)

Funes, his Memory
The Shape of the Sword
Theme of the Traitor and the Hero
Death and the Compass
The Secret Miracle
Three Versions of Judas
The End
The Cult of the Phoenix
The South



The Book of Sand and Shakespeare's Memory Jorge Luis Borges

This compilation of stories came after a long break from writing in Borges' life. The stories in this collection tend to be a lot more melancholy. Some stories, like *Ulrikke*, seem to be wishful memoirs of good times long gone. *The Disk* is a story of a magical disk that empowers its owner with kinship. The disc itself is an invisible object that can only be felt as a smooth surface. *The Other*, *The Disk*, *The Book of Sand*, *August 25, 1983*, *Blue Tigers*, *Shakespeare's Memory* and *The Rose of Paracelsus* are amongst the more magical and slightly absurd stories.

The Book of Sand (1975)

The Other

Ulrikke

The Congress

There Are More Things

The Sect of the Thirty

The Night of the Gifts

The Mirror and the Mask

"Undr"

A Weary Man's Utopia

The Bribe

Avelino Arredondo

The Disk

The Book of Sand

Afterword (by J. L. Borges, Buenos Aires, 3 February 1975)

Shakespeare's Memory (1983)

August 25, 1983

Blue Tigers

The Rose of Paracelsus

Shakespeare's Memory

A Note on the Translation

Notes to the Fictions



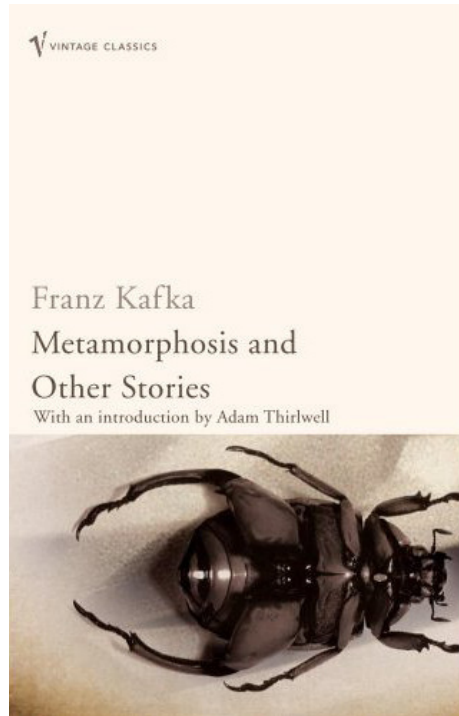
 Jorge Luis Borges The Aleph

The Aleph Jorge Luis Borges

In *El Aleph* (1949), the title work, called in English “The Aleph”, describes an artifact (el Aleph) that can reveal the entire universe at once. The work also presents the idea of infinite time.

The book itself comprises many short stories that tie to Borges’s leitmotif of the recapitulation of experience. Borges believed that there was nothing new, and that all present-day experiences are analogs of experiences already lived. Borges’s central premise was that while the details may differ, there will always be an essential thread tying any so-called discovery, revelation, et cetera, and one made hundreds or thousands of years before. The Aleph, taken from the Hebrew letter “א”, provided the ultimate example of this phenomenon. In Borges’s description, it was that point in the universe that contains everything in the universe in a single place. It summed up Borges’s belief that all human experiences were not only linked, but identical.

The Immortal
The Dead Man
The Theologians
Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden
A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)
Emma Zunz
The House of Asterion.
The Other Death.
Deutsches Requiem.
Averroës’ Search
The Zahir
The Writing of the God
Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth
The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths.
The Waiting.
The Man on the Threshold
The Aleph

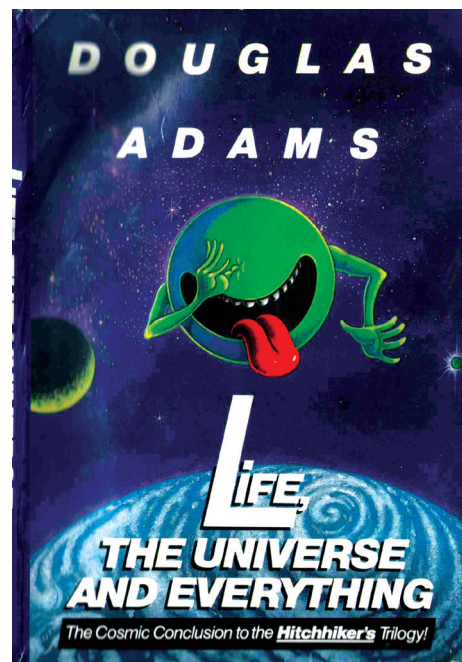
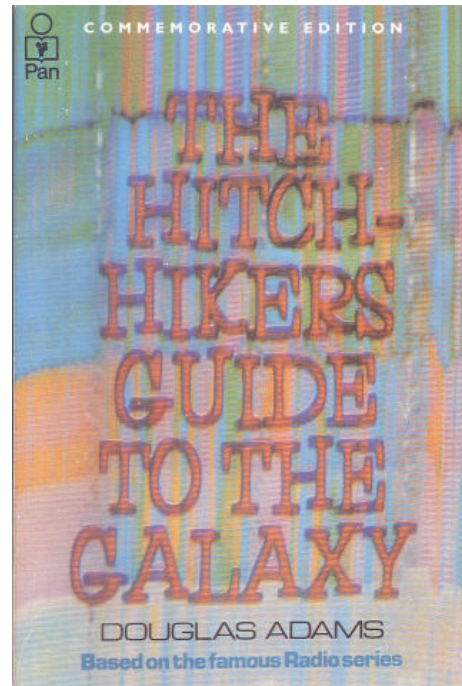
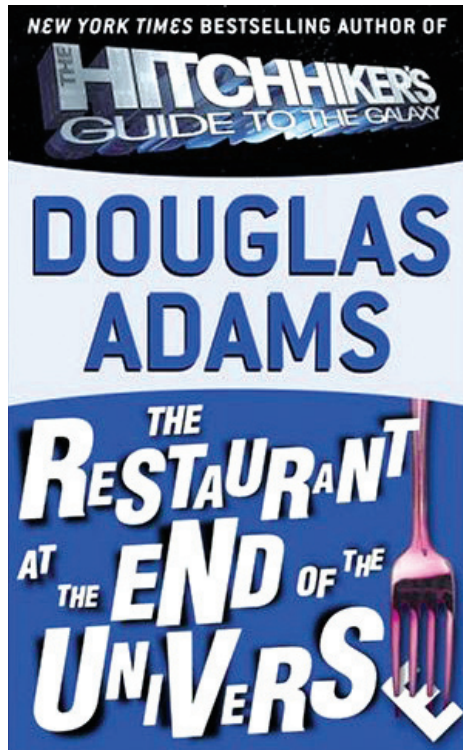


The Metamorphosis Franz Kafka

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect”.

The bizarre premise is set from the first line itself, where the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning transformed into an insect. The remaining part of the story describes how Gregor’s family come to terms with his metamorphosis and re-build their lives around it. The story runs in a melancholy vein, painting bleak images of a ritualistic and monotonous life full of difficulties. Gregor’s condition leads him on a downward spiral, slowly leading him to his eventual demise.

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 to the Galaxy Douglas Adams

*"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 lines like, "and then suddenly, nothing continued to happen".

The Restaurant at the End of the Universe Douglas Adams

The sequel to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the galaxy brings us to the Restaurant at the End of the Universe. The very concept of the restaurant itself is absurd. The show culminates with the total collapse of the universe.

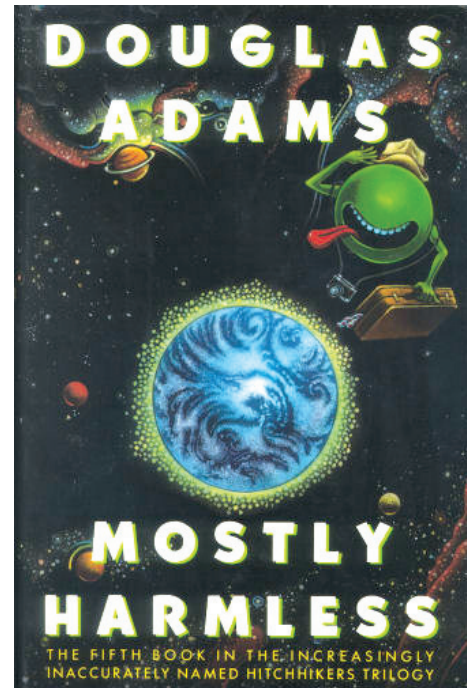
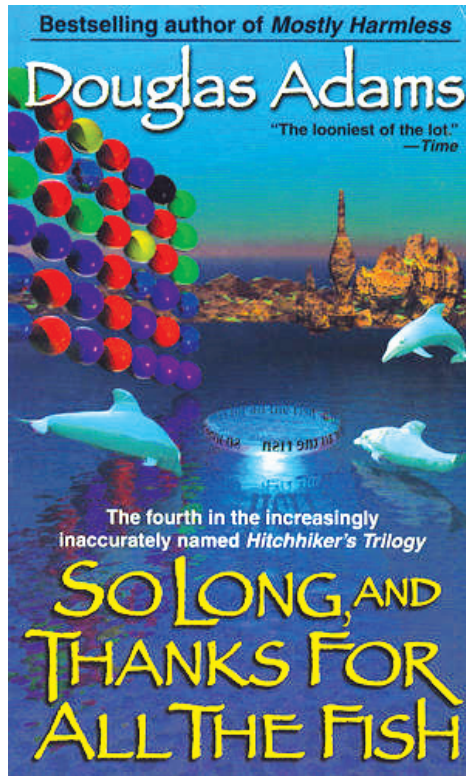
The story also contains strange and bizarre characters like the talking cow that advertises its body parts for dinner and the interplanetary rock band Disaster Area. Disaster Area is touted to be the loudest band in the universe. In fact it is so loud that the audience is expected to listen from thirty seven miles away behind a concrete bunker. The lead singer from the band, Hotblack Desiato, is supposedly spending a year dead, "for tax reasons".

Life, the Universe and Everything Douglas Adams

The game of cricket, according to the book, originates from cosmic collective unconscious memory of the Krikkit wars. Long ago, the inhabitants of Krikkit were a quaint, peaceful people. Their planet and sun had been encircled by an immense dust cloud as long as they could remember; since they couldn't see the stars, they had never considered the possibility of life outside their home. When a spaceship screamed through the dust cloud and crash-landed on Krikkit, the Krikkiters were traumatised beyond words. After confirming the existence of a universe outside of their dust cloud, the only course of action, they decided, was to build a fleet with which to destroy it. They launched a fleet of warships and robots to slaughter every other species; they were defeated after a long and bloody war and the people of Krikkit were sentenced by galactic judge Judiciary Pag to be sealed within a Slo-Time envelope until the rest of the universe died out naturally.

¹ Excerpt 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))



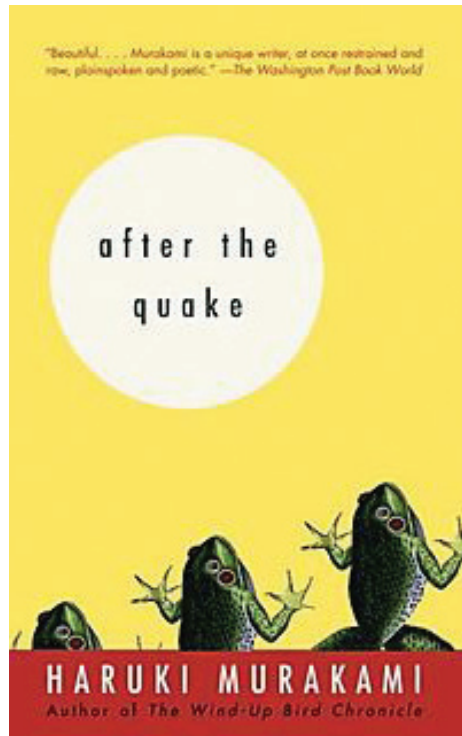
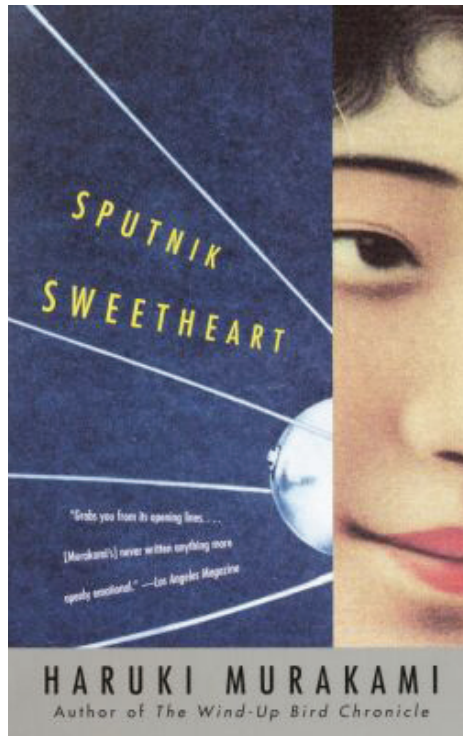
So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish
Douglas Adams

This book is in fact primarily a love story, between Arthur Dent and Fenchurch. Arthur finds himself back on Earth as though it never got destroyed in the first place.

"Arthur and Fenchurch fall hopelessly in love, and that's what this novel, for the most part, is: their love story. Adams, naturally, doesn't get all gooey and sappy about it. There's a wonderful sense of Adamasian whimsy all throughout the tale, which actually makes the romance genuinely heartwarming and utterly believable as these two (literally) starcrossed lovers try to make sense of their lives, and figure out what, if anything, may have happened to the Earth eight years ago. Was it indeed just some sort of mass hallucination, or is there some strange secret known only to a madman living on a California beach. (Adams' exposure to the U.S. following the success of this series informs a lot of his satire this time.) And where did all the dolphins go, by the way?"

Mostly Harmless
Douglas Adams

The final installment of the series takes its title from the entry in the Guide for the planet Earth. Arthur Dent finds it difficult to hide a certain feeling of insult when he sees that the only information against the entry for Earth is two words, "mostly harmless". The story concludes in the same way that it began, with the destruction of Earth, this time however, permanently. The book concludes by killing all its major characters and leaving Zaphod Beeblebrox lost in an unknown part of the galaxy.



Sputnik Sweetheart
After the Quake
Haruki Murakami

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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