

DENNIS VANNATTA: "The Library of Babel"

Reference Guide to  
x

# SHORT FICTION

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ST. JAMES PRESS

Detroit London Washington D.C., 1994

the doctor he once was. Although the content of "The Letter" is melodramatic—as a play it was highly sensational—its luridness is contained by Maugham's deliberately matter-of-fact style. He often used a professional man as the medium for telling a story, thus adding to the authority and credibility of the narrative. After all, you do not lightly challenge the opinions of your lawyer or your medical adviser.

—James Harding

**A LETTER ABOUT EMILIA (Carta sobre Emilia)**  
by Adolfo Bioy Casares, 1962

The complexity of love is a predominant theme in much of Adolfo Bioy Casares's work. Such titles as *Guirnalda con amores* (1959, Garland with Love) and *Historias de amor* (1972, Love Stories) indicate the prevalence of the love theme. The story "A Letter about Emilia" ("Carta sobre Emilia") originally from the collection *El lado de la sombra* (1962, The Shady Side), opens with the epigraph "crazy love." The love relationship between Emilia and the narrator reveals itself to be complex role play in which each character assumes the identity of another in a reversal of male and female roles. Thus Bioy Casares plays with double realities.

The first-person narration from the artist seems reliable and is the only source of descriptions of his love for Emilia. The artist details this love relationship in a letter to Mr. Grinberg, the artists' father figure. Grinberg warns him against losing his identity by working with many different women instead of concentrating on finding the one universal image of woman.

When the artist sees Emilia being photographed by Mr. Braulio he remembers Grinberg's advice and becomes inspired. He requests Braulio to ask the girl to model for him. Emilia reluctantly appears at the artist's stately home and says that she will work for him although she has limited experience. At the moment she enters the house, the narrator believes that he falls in love with her.

The artist begins a very rigid daily routine. After completing his chores, he draws from memory until early evening when Emilia arrives to sit for him. After the sitting, she leaves and goes to a club. She first asks the artist to accompany her, but to prove his superiority, he refuses. The ambiguous relationship between Emilia and the narrator has sexual overtones. They have discussed marriage, an idea to which, supposedly, both partners show disdain. They are both set in their own ways, and, as later discovered, Emilia has another lover.

Emilia relates all of her experiences from the club to the narrator, including advances made by other men. The narrator, concerned about her promiscuous behavior at the club, asks her to be careful. She remonstrates him for worrying about advances that she considers inconsequential. Emilia claims that she will reform her behavior since she is now a "different" woman with stronger and renewed feeling for the narrator. After listing the names of other men with whom Emilia has had romantic encounters, the narrator states that she has finally reformed. He uses as proof the fact that she stops relating stories of new adventures to him.

Emilia proposes a change in their daily schedule. Throwing caution to the wind, she spends the night with the artist. The following morning they walk back to her house as the sun is coming up. The narrator experiences a momentary feeling of invincibility. After this emotional high he begins to suspect that their love affair is not a normal one. His fears are confirmed the night of their anniversary celebration, when Emilia, contrary to her normal behavior, orders him to close the window he left open for her. The role reversal deepens when the narrator notices that Emilia is imitating his walk and acting more masculine. Believing that her change in mannerisms indicates her growing impatience to leave, the artist suggests that they go out. The woman opposes leaving and addresses the narrator as Emilia, arrogantly demanding that he be quiet. The misidentification of the male protagonist—Emilia assigning her role to the narrator—at first is interpreted by the narrator as an affirmation of their love for one another. He believes Emilia is the perfect lover since she is losing her individual identity. Upon further thought, however, he decides that his lover's behavior is the result of another man's influence. The artist reasons that Emilia is in love with another man and that she fantasizes about being with the other man when she is with him. She assumes the persona of the other male and therefore places the artist in the role of Emilia.

The narrator accepts this situation, stating that all love is absurd, and that, since communication is illusory, no one can really know what others are thinking and feeling. He resolves to remain in his relationship even if it is determined by another man's actions. As long as Emilia and the other lover do not interact differently, the relationship of the narrator and Emilia also remains constant. If the actions of the other man change dramatically, then the narrator would see the effects in Emilia's actions towards him.

The existence of double roles emphasizes the importance of the search for reality and identity within the text. The change of identities confuses the narrator's perceived reality. Love impairs the judgement of the narrator to the extent that living a double identity is preferable to his own identity. The artist's conviction, stated early in the story, that nothing is so bitter as to lead a double life, is forgotten. He accepts his role play and allows himself to be manipulated by Emilia, therefore appearing as many of Bioy Casares's characters in a game of multiple identities and realities.

—Joan E. Clifford

**THE LIBRARY OF BABEL (La biblioteca de Babel)**  
by Jorge Luis Borges, 1944

Jorge Luis Borges's standing as one of the greatest and most influential writers in the history of the short story seems assured. At least a half a dozen of his stories are widely and frequently anthologized and appear destined to survive the test of time. Perhaps the most famous of these is "La biblioteca de Babel" ("The Library of Babel"), collected in *Ficciones* (1944).

"The Library of Babel" is characteristic of Borges's short fiction in any number of ways. It is stylistically adventurous, provocatively witty, and profoundly philosophical. It

is also deceptively personal—“deceptively” because it is not always easy to find Borges the man behind the coolly ironic facades employed by his narrators.

Perhaps the facet of Borges's short fiction that the reader will be drawn to first is his style. In the early part of the 20th century, writers began rejecting the label “tales” in favor of “short stories,” implying a movement away from the romantic, supernatural, and melodramatic and toward the sort of realism that we now associate with James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Sherwood Anderson, and others. Borges signaled another sea-change in the short story a half-century later by adopting the label “fiction” in place of “story.” “The Library of Babel” shows why the fiction label is more appropriate. “Story” implies certain givens: a few richly drawn characters with whom we are concerned, a conflict, action rising toward a climax, and some sort of resolution of conflict. But where is the action in “The Library of Babel,” rising or otherwise? What, exactly, is the conflict? One could not spend more than a short paragraph discussing any or all of the “characters” in the fiction. Rather than reading “The Library of Babel” as a story, the reader will more profitably view it as a fictional essay, with an introduction of subject matter (thesis), an exposition of ideas, and a conclusion—and it comes complete with footnotes!

Not all of Borges's fictions follow an essay format, but “The Library of Babel” and similar works show his willingness to forego any of the traditional assumptions about what makes a story a story in favor of whatever suits his purposes. It is this breaking the stranglehold of the realistic short story that makes Borges such an important and influential figure.

The revolution was not just stylistic, of course. The vast majority of writers before Borges (and his mentor, Kafka) had striven to capture in their fictions a mundane, quotidian reality. Borges showed that one could write about anything, real or imagined. Again, “The Library of Babel” is a marvelously entertaining example. The setting is no less than the universe, which here is made up of an infinite number of hexagonal galleries containing shelves of books and populated, of course, by librarians. The galleries are connected by narrow hallways, down which the librarians roam in their quixotic and almost always failed quests to find certain bits of information or, more generally, the ultimate truths of the library-universe. The term that best describes Borges in this and other fictions is “witty,” but witty in the 18th century sense of intellectually fanciful, ingenious.

Borges is rarely merely witty, however, certainly not in “The Library of Babel.” He, his narrator, and the librarians who haunt their carrels are concerned with the most fundamental questions: Where are we? Why are we here? What is *here*? How do we know what we know? As is always the case with Borges, by the end we are no more—indeed, far less—certain than we were at the beginning. The reason for the uncertainty is the nature of the library (universe). The vast majority of the books contain what appears to be gibberish, or at least languages unknown to the librarians. The occasional recognizable phrases—“*Oh time thy pyramids*” (translated by James E. Irby)—are generally as inigmatic as life. The only thing certain about the exceedingly rare books (frequently fragments) written in a recognizable tongue is that somewhere in the universal library is another that contains the first's refutation. Where, then, is truth, certainty? Nowhere in the Library of Babel.

Borges's stories are so fanciful and his narrators so coolly and distantly analytical that it is sometimes difficult to sense Borges the man. But he is there, a profoundly

affecting presence for those who read sensitively. Perhaps the fact that he worked as a minor functionary in a library while writing the story (and later was director of the Argentine national library) helps the reader to locate him. It is also interesting that Borges once observed that the most important event of his youth was his father's library. One might expect that an occurrence, a happening, would be that most important event—not a static *thing*. But the paradox is an important and painful irony for Borges. Throughout his writing is opposed the man of action and the man of contemplation—rarely to the latter's advantage and, hence, rarely to Borges's. Throughout “The Library of Babel” one senses more than anything else the total futility of the librarians' pursuits. Their world is the world of the intellect, of language, of literature; and it is ultimately a loveless, meaningless chaos.

Near the end the narrator notes that suicide among the librarians has grown more frequent over the years. The reader finds little solace in the narrator's prediction that although “the human species—the unique species—is about to be extinguished . . . the library will endure.” And probably Borges didn't either.

—Dennis Vannatta

#### THE LIBRARY WINDOW by Margaret Oliphant, 1879

Of the 36 or so short stories, some almost novellas, written by Margaret Oliphant, twelve deal with the supernatural. All but two of them—“A Christmas Tale” (1857) and “The Secret Chamber” (1876)—date from the last 17 years of her long working life. It was a life of ceaseless literary industry, a wider range of travel experience than fell to the lot of most Victorian women writers, a less than happy marriage, and the burden in widowhood of having to support a tribe of hard-up and generally unsuccessful relations; hers was a life of human loss and disappointment, since most of those on whose behalf she had laboured were invalids or failures who predeceased her.

Her attitude to the supernatural was, of course, related to her views on religion. Brought up in the Free Church of Scotland, which she rejected because of its narrow views, she viewed the High and Low harsh rivalries of Victorian England, in which she spent her mature years, with a greater degree of detachment than Trollope. Unlike previous writers on the supernatural, from Defoe to Poe and Radcliffe, Oliphant was not so much concerned with creating horrorful suspense as using the device, in Margaret K. Gray's words, to “create in the reader feelings of sympathy and understanding for the beings who came back into the world of the living.” In other words, to make us reexamine our own sense of human values.

“The Library Window,” published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in January 1896, and collected in *A Beleaguered City* (1879), became the most popular and frequently reprinted of all Oliphant's stories. It differs from her other supernatural stories in that its central spirit is earthbound, and that a kind of secular consolation supplants any religious overtones.

The narrator, a young girl, dreaming and much given to poetry, has gone to stay with her aunt, Mistress Mary Balcarres, in a house in “the broad High Street of St.