

know that the Cuban Missile Crisis arose from a certain degree of adventurism on both sides—Kennedy’s covert actions against Castro and Khrushchev’s secret missile deployment—and that it was resolved only because both men were willing to risk humiliation rather than Armageddon.

In one of the great counterfactuals of history, we might ask, What if Khrushchev had only held out another day or two for a public Turkey-Cuba trade? Without the “Russians blinked” version of history, might the American officials who planned the Vietnam War have had less faith in their calibrated brinkmanship? Might Khrushchev

have survived the October 1964 coup plot, in which his adventurism in Cuba was one of the indictments? President Kennedy later estimated the odds of nuclear war during the missile crisis as having been one in three. Bundy guessed lower, at one in 100. But as Bundy added, “In this apocalyptic matter the risk can be very small indeed and still much too large for comfort.”

> THOMAS BLANTON is the director of the National Security Archive at George Washington University, co-author of *The Chronology* (1987), on the Iran-contra affair, and editor of *White House E-Mail* (New Press, 1995).

## *The Other Borges*

BORGES

*A Life.*

By James Woodall. Basic Books. 333 pp. \$30

by Richard Barnes

When the great Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez was presented the Nobel Prize for literature in 1982, he graciously took the occasion to declare that the Argentine fabulist Jorge Luis Borges deserved the honor before him. If any writer was to be credited with bringing Latin American fiction out of its former provinciality into world prominence, it should have been Borges. Unfortunately, though, the prize never went the older writer’s way.

Like Falstaff, Borges (1899–1986) was not only witty himself but the cause that wit is in other men—and women. His view of the world was limited, distinct, yet inclusive, like the small, eponymous sphere in one of his most famous stories, “The Aleph,” in which everything is visible at once. The poignant yet hilarious

list of what is seen there—convex equatorial deserts and every grain of their sand, the survivors of a battle writing postcards, a sunset in Queretaro that reflects the color of a rose in Bengal, a ring of dried clay in a sidewalk where once there was a tree—



has been likened in its comprehensiveness to Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles.

Borges’s humor, like that of Cervantes,

is bookish, profound, very funny, and sad. Like Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, he saw the world from an odd angle, yet so vividly and truly that to know his work is to experience, at times, a dreamlike combination of the strange and the familiar, the ordinary and the impossible, and to recognize the experience as “Borgesian.”

Borges lived a long but in many ways restricted life. From his early twenties to his early sixties, he seldom left Buenos Aires. Except for his first, brief, fumbled marriage, which occurred when he was in his sixties, he lived with his parents; his mother died at 99, when he was 76. He did not get his first job until he was past 40, and that a humble one in a provincial branch library. The sum of his political activism consisted of one cause he considered lost, the effort by Radical Party leader Hipólito Yrigoyen to regain the presidency in 1928. When Yrigoyen won, Borges drifted away. Borges was attached sentimentally to many women, but it is unlikely that any of these relationships was ever consummated.

As Borges’s writing began to win fame, he lost his sight. Old and blind, he became the director of the National Library and a widely traveled celebrity, but the philosophical doubts he entertained toward his own existence were, while playful, not void of anxiety: “I who am made of time, and blood, and death throes.” He complained of “Borges,” an unwelcome companion whom he could not escape even by suicide, which he twice planned but never seriously attempted. Although he traveled the world, late in life Borges said often that he had never left his father’s library, any more than Alonso Quijano (Don Quixote) ever left his.

This uneventful life has already been the subject of a half-dozen biographies, with another dozen in the works. Promised and of great interest are those by Donald Yates, an early translator of Borges, and by Jean-Pierre Bernès, the French cultural attaché who became Borges’s editor (in French translation) and friend. The latter, which is being written with the cooperation of María Kodama, Borges’s heiress and widow (after an eight-week marriage just before

his death), will be the closest thing to an authorized biography.

Woodall’s book is advertised as the first biography in English since Borges died; it is the first by someone who never met him. An English journalist who writes on theater, music, literature, and flamenco, Woodall investigates diligently, writes lucidly, and has no particular ax to grind. “There are many people who today guard his reputation jealously, and who wish to promote ‘their Borges,’” he writes. “If this book succeeds in anything, it will I hope be in painting Borges as he was, offering a picture as frank as it is accurate.” Whether such an aim is achievable has become a vexed question of criticism. But here, at least, it is stated clearly and pursued energetically.

In his politics, the example of Borges would reverse the solemn maxim that the personal is political (meaning that nothing is really personal); for him, the political was merely personal. His paternal grandmother was English, and most of the books in his father’s extensive library were by English authors. During World War II, when many Argentines were Nazi sympathizers, Borges supported the Allies. Later he deplored the Argentine invasion of the Falklands Islands and popularized the phrase “two bald old men fighting over a comb.” His mother’s remote Portuguese ancestors were, he supposed, Jews. So he celebrated the victories of the new nation of Israel in poetry and, in the face of virulent anti-Semitism in Argentina, published a daring essay, “I, a Jew.”

Borges’s maternal Argentine forebears were military men and among the founders of the republic; his family was never wealthy, but it was patrician, and his best friends were of the upper crust. Because of all this, Borges was the natural enemy of the populist dictator Juan Perón, whose name he never uttered. And from time to time he voiced opinions that caused him to be heckled in public and attacked by the press and that probably cost him the Nobel Prize. His paternal grandfather was a colonel in the “Conquest of the Desert,” the campaign to rid Argentina of Indians; Borges considered this an historic achievement. He had lunch with the murderous generals who toppled

Perón's third wife, Isabela, in 1976; he said that they were gentlemen. He accepted a prize from Chile's dictator, General Augusto Pinochet. Later he apologized for his political naiveté: "I hate politics. I'm a mild, stay-at-home anarchist and pacifist, a harmless disciple of Herbert Spencer."

In later life, Borges's blindness obliged him to depend on others, while his eminence tempted some to take advantage of his vulnerability. The struggles between people accusing each other of trying to "colonize" Borges continue to this day, one result being that there is no comprehensive edition of his works either in Spanish or in English; the best edition is the French translation published by Pleide.

About these aspects of Borges's life and character, Woodall makes good on his promise to be accurate and fair. The main limitation of this serviceable biography is its failure to comprehend the value of Borges's mature poetry. Borges's writing life can be divided into three distinct periods punctuated by physical calamities. His earliest writings were coterie poetry, literary and historical essays, and Argentine local color. When he was nearly 40, he suffered a cut on the head that became infected and sent him into a fever, causing him such terrible hallucinations that he doubted his own sanity. A few days after he regained consciousness, his mother read to him, and he wept because he could understand. Still, he feared to write an essay because "if I cannot do it, then I'm finished, I don't exist anymore." So he wrote his first story. And it was the revolutionary short fictions of the 1940s—*El Jardín des Senderos que se Bifurcan* (The Garden of Forking Paths) (1941), *Ficciones* (Fictions, 1944), and *El Aleph* (1949)—that made him a world-class author.

In the following decade, as he gradually went blind, he resumed writing poetry. There had been poems in periodicals and new revised editions, but no new book of poetry between 1929 and 1960. One reason for his return to poetry was that he could hold it in his memory, not needing to see drafts. "Regular verse is, so to speak, portable," he wrote. Yet strict metrical form, which Woodall dismisses as "a physiological necessity," was for Borges a stim-

ulant and a mystery. The sonnet, for instance, "may seem arbitrary but throughout the centuries and across geography it has displayed a capacity for endless modulations." And like Thomas Hardy, Borges always thought of himself as a poet, though his prose had claimed the public's attention. "To the last," Woodall writes, "he wrote poetry, and obstinately considered himself a poet, when everyone who wasn't an aficionado of Argentine literature . . . thought of him as a great storyteller"—as if the gods were so evenhanded that to grant one gift would be to deny the other.

From *El Hacedor* (The Maker, 1960) forward, Borges's poetry is that of a learned, elderly man: clear, measured, and deliberate, with the earned simplicity of a master craftsman. It is awake to grief but indifferent to grievances. Looking back at his first book when he was 70, Borges remarked that while he had once found poetry in sunsets, shabby suburbs, and unhappiness, he now found it in mornings, downtown, and peace of mind. In Latin America, Spain, and France, he is coming to be recognized as one of the great poets of the century, as Hardy is in the English-speaking world.

Woodall's comprehension is limited also by his scant acquaintance with the literary traditions in which Borges wrote. One telling instance will suffice, a sonnet written during 1963–64 and titled (in English) "Adam Cast Forth":

Was there a Garden, or was it just a dream?  
Dull, in a flickering light, I've often  
wondered  
(And almost as if it were somehow a comfort)  
If the past, once Adam's kingdom, now his  
shame,  
Couldn't have been some trick, an illusion  
caused  
By a certain God I dreamt of. The memory  
Of his clear Paradise is now blurry,  
But I am sure it did exist, and does,  
Though not for me. This tedious long furrow  
Is my chastisement, and the incestuous war  
Of all the Cains and Abels and their fry.  
And still, it is a great thing to have loved,  
To have been blest or lucky, to have lived  
In the green Garden, if only for a day.

(tr. by reviewer)

Woodall interprets this poem to be about Borges's dashed hopes of marrying one of his young collaborators, María Esther Vázquez. Yet surely the title and theme of a paradise lost point to John Milton, who, like Borges, went blind with his greatest poetry yet to be written;

and it seems clear that the ill-remembered garden stands simply for having been able to see.

> RICHARD BARNES is Dole Professor of English at Pomona College, Claremont, Calif. He and Robert Mezey have done metrical translations of Borges's *Obra Poética*.

## Showing Off

### THE HANDICAP PRINCIPLE.

By Amotz Zahavi and Avishag Zahavi. Na'ama Ely, trans.

Oxford University Press. 320 pp. \$25

by Lionel Tiger

This richly persuasive book is the distillation of more than 20 years of argument about one central idea—namely, that much of what appears to be profligacy or excess in nature is really a form of economy. Among biologists, the standard explanation of such showy phenomena as the peacock's tail, the stag's antlers, or the tendency of the gazelle when threatened by a predator to leap straight into the air before fleeing is that they are adaptations run amok. They may be magnificent, biologists argue, but they serve no evolutionary purpose. The Zahavis, he a professor of zoology at Tel Aviv University and she a former professor of plant physiology at the Volcani Center for Agricultural Research, beg to differ. Applying Darwinian theory to their extensive study of animals in their native habitats, they contend that the reason why the males of many species evolve puzzlingly costly and often absurd characteristics and behaviors is precisely because these reveal, by their very burdensomeness, that the males are sufficiently strong and healthy to make formidable competitors and desirable mates. The users of this information are other males, who rank themselves according to certain recognizable clues, and females, who generally make the reproductive choices.

Implicit in the authors' "handicap principle" is the decisive role played by females in sexual, and hence natural, selection. This idea has been around since the mid-1970s, when the Zahavis published their first exploratory paper. (Around the same time, I was editing what was probably the first collection of scholarly pieces on female hierar-

chies.) The questions being asked then were intriguing: How do females organize their "pecking orders"? How is it decided which females get to mate with which males? What is the basis for the often turbulent negotiations surrounding sexual access? Biologists still know little about these questions, but with studies like this one the picture becomes clearer.

While developing their hypothesis, the Zahavis explore a variety of related biological issues. One is ritualization, or the process by which animals appear to coordinate their behavior in order to avoid fights, conduct courtship, and attract mates. Why do potential competitors observe what appear to be standardized rules? About ritual behavior such as *lek*, the stylized milling about of elk bucks and other male ungulates, the Zahavis claim that it "brings out crucial differences in performance, which in turn reflect accurately the different abilities and motivations of the competitors." In other words, evolutionary selection seeks a level breeding field. The obvious comparison is with the way human sports are organized by levels of skill to ensure real competition. Even the professionals tend to give inferior teams first pick of rookie players; sport, like biology, is most exciting when it is about exquisite differences. When the score is 58 to 3, the fans go home. When it's a cliff-hanger, they stay.

A closely related question concerns what appear to be wasteful responses to predators on the part of some animals. When a bird sees a cat, it issues a warning call. Why does it do that? Why not just scoot silently away?