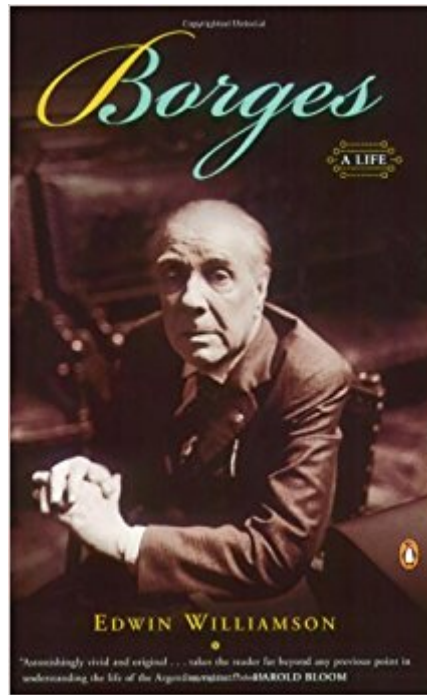


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Borges: A Life



Synopsis

A portrait of the Latin-American writer and poet draws on interviews and previously unavailable sources to cover such topics as Borges's ancestry in Argentina, the passions and challenges that marked his life, and the evolution of his political ideas. Reprint.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a fine biography of the great Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges. Williamson's primary goals are to provide a good description of Borges' life and to correlate events of his life with his written works. This good book is the product of both careful research on Borges' life and a sensitive reading of Borges' publications. This book is best appreciated by those with a good familiarity with Borges' fictions and poetry. Penguin has recently published excellent collections of Borges' fictions, poetry, and non-fiction writing. If you haven't read Borges for a while, reading Williamson's biography in tandem with parts of the Penguin collections is a good experience. Williamson does a particularly good job of pointing out the parallels between Borges' personal preoccupations, particularly his search for love, and changes in directions in his work. Borges was a sickly, bookish child who became one of those people who view the world through a highly intellectualized prism. For example, one of his enduring preoccupations was a search for love that would accomplish what Borges thought the love of Beatrice had done for Dante. Borges also had a complex relationship with his parents which also had significant intellectual dimensions and was entangled with his sense of identity as an Argentine. Like many very creative people, Borges was an odd and often unhappy individual who was able to turn some of his personal conflicts and agony into substantial work. Many

of the apparently metaphysical themes of his fictions were personal issues for Borges. Williamson does an excellent job of illuminating Borges' work. Williamson is also very good on Borges' somewhat convoluted relationship to his home country.

Jorge Luis Borges famously wrote that all literature is autobiographical, something so true in his own case that I had my doubts whether his any biography of him could tell us any more than his literature. After all, there isn't much compelling about Mr. Borges' life aside from his writing: he lived at home with his mother until she died when he was 75 years old, and he boasted about not venturing beyond his bedroom and his father's library for days at a time. Without a doubt, Mr. Borges' extremely original work is far more interesting than his seemingly unimaginative life. All that made for a challenging assignment for biographer Edwin Williamson, who pulled it off surprisingly well. Mr. Williamson certainly did his leg work: he apparently read everything Mr. Borges wrote short of his laundry lists, and he talked to scores of people who knew Mr. Borges when he was alive. But the most interesting parts of this book's 384 pages was still the examination of the literature, where Mr. Williamson convincingly reveals how much of the great writer's work was an elaborate code hiding his personal suffering coming from failed loves, and a feeling of inadequacy in regard to his mother, who all but worshipped the heroes of the Argentine independence movement in her family line. But that is about as close as Mr. Williamson comes to uncovering Mr. Borges' inner self. He could have come a bit closer had he not left out several important facts that must have been easy to come by: Mr. Borges' finally found love with former student María Kodama, who was many years younger than the writer. But Mr. Williamson doesn't tell us how much younger. Additionally, Mr.

It could be said that Jorge Luis Borges, one of the most important writers of the 20th Century, was also one of its most interesting individuals, a person who led an uneventful and yet strangely fascinating life. Anyone who has read his works has probably been charmed by this man who so kindly invites the reader into his own world of sparkling erudition and ceaseless invention. Little is there to wonder, then, that so many books have been written about him. *Borges: A Life*, manages to be both the most detailed and problematic of such books. JLB was characteristically insightful and concise when he wrote in his own biography of Evaristo Carriego: "That someone may want to awaken in someone else memories that only belonged to a third person, is an obvious paradox. To carry out that paradox with nonchalance, is the naïve purpose of every biography." Edwin Williamson, apparently unsatisfied with the difficulty posed by that paradox, has raised the challenge. With this book he has set out to show the world the secret impulses behind Borges's

works, to explain how even the slightest event in his life dictated everything he wrote down to the last comma, to discover things Borges would never have guessed. As one would expect, Williamson prefers psychology to logic, and non-sequiturs to arguments. First of all, there is Williamson's habit of inferring something that in little probability happened and for what there is little or no evidence, and then taking that assumption as a hard fact throughout book.

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