

Borges at Detective Fiction

1899	b. Buenos Aires (Spanish and English spoken at home)
1914	studies at Collège Calvin, Geneva (through 1918)
1925	translates the last page of Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i>
1931	<i>Sur</i> , ed. Victoria Ocampo, begins; regular contributions by JLB
1935	<i>Historia universal de la infamia</i> (Buenos Aires: Tor)
1937	trans. Woolf, <i>Orlando</i> (Buenos Aires: Sur)
1938	works as a librarian in Buenos Aires
1938	trans. Kafka, <i>La metamorfosis</i> (Buenos Aires: Losada)
1941	<i>El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan</i> (Buenos Aires: Sur)
1942	"La muerte y la brújula," <i>Sur</i> 92 (May)
1942	H. Bustos Domecq [JLB and Adolfo Bioy Casares], <i>Seis problemas para Don Isidro Parodi</i>
1943	Borges and Bioy Casares, eds. and trans., <i>Los mejores cuentos policiales</i> (Buenos Aires: Emecé), including Poe, Conan Doyle, "La muerte"
1944	<i>Ficciones</i> (Buenos Aires: Sur), including "La muerte"
1948	"The Garden of Forking Paths," trans. Anthony Boucher, in <i>Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine</i> ("All Nations" issue).
1949	<i>El aleph</i> (Buenos Aires: Losada)
1950	teaches English literature
1954	"Death and the Compass," <i>New Mexico Quarterly</i>
1962	<i>Ficciones</i> [in English], ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove)
1986	d.

Source: Timeline, Borges Center, www.borges.pitt.edu.

I had previously tried my hand at two detective stories, "The Garden of Branching Paths" (1941) and "Death and the Compass" (1942). The former won a second prize in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*; the latter was flatly rejected. My interest in detective fiction is rooted in my reading of Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Wrecker*, G.K. Chesterton, Eden Phillpotts, and, of course, Ellery Queen. In a world of shapeless psychological writing, I found in this particular form the classic virtues of a beginning, a middle, and an end—of something planned and executed. Bioy-Casares and I even went to the length of editing, in Buenos Aires, a successful collection of detective novels.

Borges, "Commentaries," in *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933–1969*, ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author (New York: Dutton, 1970), 273.

The naive fear of not being sufficiently *hardboiled*...is one of the most visible and least pleasing signs of North American literature today.

Borges, review of *Stories of the Old West* by Bret Harte, *Sur* 76 (January 1941): 121, [Biblioteca Nacional](#) (Argentina). "Hardboiled" is in English in the original.

The metaphysical detective story does not have the narcotizing effect of its progenitor; instead of familiarity, it gives strangeness, a strangeness which more often than not is the result of jumbling the well known patterns of classical detective stories. Instead of reassuring, they disturb. They are not an escape, but an attack. By exploiting the conventions of the detective story such men as Borges and Robbe-Grillet have fought against the Modernist attempt to fill the void of the world with rediscovered mythical symbols. Rather, they dramatize the void. If, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is *life* which must be solved.

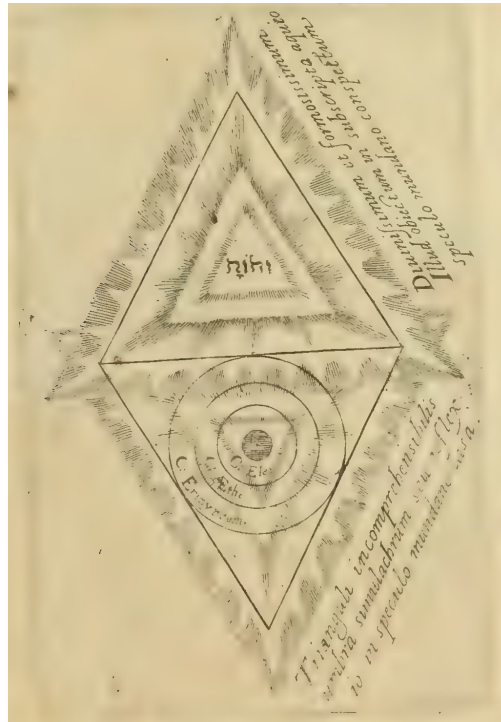
Michael Holquist, "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction," *New Literary History* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 155, [JSTOR](#).

A short story always tells two stories....The art of the short story writer consists in knowing how to encode Story Two in the interstices of Story One....

Near the beginning of Borges's 'Death and the Compass', a shopkeeper decides to publish a book. This book is there because it is indispensable to the framework of the secret story....

The basic variation that Borges introduced into the history of the short story consisted in making the coded construction of Story Two the theme of the tale. Borges recounts the manoeuvres of someone who is perversely building a secret plot with the materials of a visible story. In 'Death and the Compass', Story Two is a deliberate construction of Scharlach's.

Ricardo Piglia, "Theses on the Short Story," *New Left Review* 70 (July–August 2011): 63, 66, [newleftreview.org](#).



Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia* (Oppenheimii: aere Johan-Theodori de Bry, typis Hieronymi Galleri, 1617), 1.21, [Internet Archive](#). One of Yarmolinsky's books is "*An Examination of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd*" (252).

At the center of the upper triangle (whose angles represent the three persons of the Trinity) is the Tetragrammaton, and along one side a Latin legend reading "That most divine and beautiful counterpart visible below in the flowing image of the universe"...In the lower triangle are "the three regions of the universe—empyrean, ethereal, and elemental" which correspond to "the triangular form of the trinitarian deity," and along one side of this is the Latin legend: "A shadow, likeness, or reflection of the insubstantial triangle visible in the image of the universe," the lower triangle being "a projection of an idea" in the divine mind and thus a mirror image of the deity....It seems likely that the type of schema shown above was the model for Scharlach's labyrinth and that it is this cabalistic design which Lönnrot believes he is tracing on the landscape.

John T. Irwin, "Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story; Also Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson," *MLN* 101, no. 5 (December 1986): 1193–94, [JSTOR](#).

During all these years, we usually spent our summers out in Adrogué, some ten or fifteen miles to the south of Buenos Aires, where we had a place of our own—a large one-story house with grounds, two summerhouses, a windmill, and a shaggy brown sheepdog. Adrogué then was a lost and undisturbed maze of summer homes surrounded by iron fences with masonry planters on the gateposts, of parks, of streets that radiated out of the many plazas, and of the ubiquitous smell of eucalyptus trees.

Borges, “An Autobiographical Essay,” in *The Aleph*, 212. Full disclosure: qtd. in Wikipedia s.v. [Adrogué](#).