

Doctor Brodie's Report Short Guide

Doctor Brodie's Report by Jorge Luis Borges

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Characters

Several of the figures that appear in these tales are innocents; of these some become victims, others victimizers. The Gutre family in "The Gospel According to Mark" are touched and moved by Christ's sacrifice to such an extent that they wish to ennoble the person who teaches them about it by crucifying him. In "The Intruder" two brothers, without premeditation, fall in love with the same woman. After little discussion, and less soul-searching, they kill her.

A social world is recreated in these tales, at least to a greater degree than in other Borgesian collections. On the whole, it is inhabited by fairly unimportant or even insignificant individuals: a young medical student, a pair of cattle drivers, a poor widow, a lower middle class Jewish youngster, an elderly lady. They are neither everyman nor archetypes; they are simply people whose experiences might enlighten readers.



Social Concerns

In the afterword of this work, written expressly for the English edition, Borges comments that this collection gathers the only stories he had written since 1953. He adds that three of the eleven narratives were taken from life, and that in two others he tried to be conventional by building the tale around a character or situation rather than around a plot. If the author is to be taken at his word, most of the stories in this book are his most straightforward, and their style realistic. They are set some distance in the past, around the turn of the century, in Argentina or other South American locales that are fairly recognizable. Some of the tales deal with issues of universal concern. In "The Gospel According to Mark" and in the title story, "Dr.

Brodie's Report," the impact of religion is noted. The consequences of jealousy and revenge are examined in "The Intruder" and "Juan Murana." Overall, in spite of the author's assertions, the stories are far from conventional; their endings might satisfy and enlighten the reader but they never preach or instruct, nor do they serve to reaffirm conventional morality. In "The Unworthy Friend" for example, the character Fischbein feels guilty over having betrayed his friend Ferrari. Yet Fischbein informed on him not in the expectation of any personal gain but because he felt unworthy of the friendship.



Techniques

Borges' narratives are short, succinct, and to the point. In Dr. Brodie's Report most of the stories are told following a clear chronological order. Several contain dialogue, while others depend on a first or third person narrator to inform the reader.

In the title story, the present-day narrator recounts the details of an incomplete manuscript found among the pages of the first volume of the Arabian Nights. It turns out to be Dr.

Brodie's report, which the narrator proceeds to transcribe without further comment. In "The Meeting," another first person narrator remembers a puzzling episode of his youth, a knife fight between two inexperienced men whose weapons perform marvelous feats of skill. He learns that the knives had belonged to two notorious individuals, potential rivals who had never managed to meet face to face.

Absent from this collection are obvious signs of Borges' erudition and esoteric knowledge, elaborate new languages, exotic figures, and metaphysical games. This may reflect an effort on the part of the author to return to more immediate and local themes, and to tap the rich tradition of Argentine folklore that had once inspired his early poetry.

Themes

This set of stories differs from earlier anthologies in its thematic focus. There is less emphasis on the abstract and metaphysical in favor of the ironic and the unexpected. "The Unworthy Friend" reworks a biblical episode from the perspective of a rather innocent betrayer whose experience appears small and insignificant. Unlike Judas who betrayed Jesus for money, Fischbein does it out of low self-esteem. In "The Meeting" and "Juan Murana" people are turned into weapons (knives) and weapons into people, a fancy that, Borges suggests, time may just be able to bring about. The outcome of a meeting between two unequal scholars in "Guayaquil" results in the victory of the less worthy because of his certainty.

"Dr. Brodie's Report," a story whose title was derived from Lemuel Gulliver's last voyage, chronicles the adventures of a Scottish missionary in the midst of a cruel and violent Brazilian tribe, the Yahoos. Their society is markedly different from modern civilization. The level-headed Dr. Brodie informs readers that they are not a primitive people, as one would have expected, but a society very much like his own that has allowed itself to become degenerate.

Literary Precedents

In the foreword of this book Borges states that two of his stories, "The Elder Lady" and "The Duel" were patterned after Henry James. The majority, however, seem fully Borgesian, the product of many years' reflection and hard work. Borges believed, and so stated in the foreword that by the time he wrote it, being over the age of seventy, he had found his own voice. He then added: "My now advanced age has taught me to resign myself to being Borges."

Related Titles

Since Borges became a popular author in the United States in the early 1960s, many of his individual works have been translated into English. *The Aleph and Other Stories* (1969) contains some of his most famous fictions, such as the title story; it also includes a long autobiographical essay and the author's useful commentary on the stories in the collection. *A Personal Anthology* (1967) is a rich source of Borgesian prose and poetry as is *In Praise of Darkness* (1974; *Elogio de la sombra*, 1969). *The Book of Sand* (1977; *El libro de arena*, 1975), his last, is comprised of thirteen stories written, the author stated, for himself and his friends, and "to ease the passing of time."



Copyright Information

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Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

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Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

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