Imaginary Links

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Panel: Most Important Book on my Bookshelf
On one long bookshelf in my library back home I keep books written by writers that are very important to me: Georges Perec, José Saramago, Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino, Milorad Pavic, and others. All of them, I believe, owe a great debt to a blind librarian from Buenos Aires. I am speaking, of course, of one of the greatest Latin American fiction writers, Jorge Luis Borges. It would be safe to say that many of you are familiar with his stories, and perhaps with his poems and essays, as well. But here, with your permission, I intend to speak about a story which may be a bit less well-known. It is a story Borges wrote in 1975, when he was already a widely acclaimed writer: "The Book of Sand."

To summarize the plot in a few words: someone knocks on the door of the narrator, who lives in Buenos Aires in an apartment filled with books. The stranger presents himself as a Bible salesman. But the book he shows to the narrator is a different one: the stranger asked me to find the first page. I laid my left hand on the cover and, trying to put my thumb on the flyleaf, I opened the book. It was useless. Every time I tried, a number of pages came between the cover and my thumb. It was as if they kept growing from the book. "Now find the last page." Again I failed. In a voice that was not mine, I barely managed to stammer, "This can't be."

This book also cannot be paged back. It has no beginning, no end, only page after page, each of which seems to disappear the moment you turn to the next. The narrator buys the book but before long he cannot live with this miraculous (but at this same time monstrous) book. Or in his own words: "an obscene thing that affronted and tainted reality itself." The best place to hide a leaf is in a forest, says Borges, taking the book and hiding it on a bookshelf in the National Library in Buenos Aires. I said Borges and not the narrator, but it was not a slip of tongue:

As it is so often in his stories, Borges is the narrator, or a shadow of the narrator, or somenightmarish representation of the narrator. Actually, in this story, which is, as I mentioned, one of his later tales, the reader knows right away that it is Borges who opens the door for the book salesman; Borges knows that the reader knows that he is Borges; and the reader, in turn, knows that he, Borges, knows that the reader knows. The labyrinth of such reflections and illusions is, of course, one of Borges’ most recognizable signs. In this case, I like to think of it as a secret tattoo that each of Borges’ readers recognizes immediately, because he or she, after reading many of Borges’ story, is marked by it too. A few days ago I discovered that one of my fellow writers in the International Writers’ Program, Elena Bossi from Argentina, deals with these same issues in one of her essays. With her permission I will quote a few lines from her work, which, in my opinion, presents a different but very interesting view of the game played between Borges the writer and Borges the narrator:

Probably, characters in Borges’ tales speak as the narrator so that we might understand that the spoken language does not correspond to its reflection in writing, that writing is a
deforming mirror that affects voice and modifies it—the language we learn as children is not the same as what we write and read.

These days, the first thing that comes to mind when you try to imagine such a book, a book that has no beginning and no end, a book that is always changing, is probably the world wide web, the internet. A space that can be described as a gigantic dictionary or an ever-expanding encyclopedia, an infinity of all kinds of information, images and words. You can find many similarities between the internet and the structures and spaces that Borges invents and creates in his work, though of course the internet had not yet been invented in Borges’ time (think about stories like "The Library of Babel", or "Aleph" or even "The Zahir," a story that deals with the infinity described in the book of sand in a very similar manner). I am not, however, implying that “The Book of Sand” is a metaphor for the internet. But because of the nature of his work, and because of the many internal links that exist between his ideas and his stories—the hidden hypertextuality of his ideas themselves—it is not surprising that Borges’ writing is living and present not only in libraries or in bookstores or in readers' memory, but also on the internet.

Let's take a quick look at two examples of the implementation of the story "The Book of Sand" on the internet.

The first is a very beautiful site that allows you to read to story as if it were a part of the book of sand, in a non linear order, and also presents the reader with a puzzle related to the story.

The second one is a small Java application which, in a very interesting way, manages to induce the same frustration one feels while reading the book described in "The Book of Sand."

The third site I would like to show is not directly linked to the book of sand. I do admit, though, that this story and other stories by Borges had a great influence on it. It is a short novella I wrote 6 years ago, and is also the only book that I published only in a digital medium.

The title itself is Borgesian: "An Imaginary Library." It is a story that can only be read in a non-linear fashion. It describes a very small library with five bookshelves, each of them containing seven books, which are all imaginary, books that I had "invented." The books on each bookshelf are described in several ways: sometimes only the back cover text, sometimes there are quotes from the books. Other times there might also be descriptions of objects that are hidden in the books, like letters, photographs, leaves (like the leaf that can best be hidden in a forest). One of the books contains a story that connects the entire library. It is a mystery story about a detective trying to locate a missing woman by examining only the contents of her library. Some pages of this book were torn out and hidden in other books in the library. Because I suspect that most of you do not read Hebrew, I will reveal that, after reading the entire "library," the reader may discover that the detective is not really a detective at all. He is only a man trying to find the woman that left him. So, like fifty percent of the books we write, it is no more than a love story.

In this novella I tried to explore some of the complexities surrounding the digital format for books; I did so by utilizing this digital media while still taking as my topic that same mythical and magical object, the book.
And now for the obvious question: what will books and bookshelves be like in the future? Is there a chance that the paper will retreat and be replaced by digital formats? My guess is as good as anyone else's. But if 30 or 40 years from now the title of one of the panels of the International Writing Program here in Iowa City Public Library is "What is the most important book on your ipod/ipone/ibook?" the answer for many of us will still be a book written by Jorge Luis Borges.

References
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