Jorge Luis Borges
1899–1986
Argentina

When he was six years old, Jorge Luis Borges (bór’hes) announced that he intended to become a writer. He began working at his chosen profession immediately. At the age of nine, he translated Oscar Wilde’s fairy tale “The Happy Prince” into Spanish. Later in his life, Borges credited his father with inspiring his writing career: He felt that his father had made him aware of poetry—of the idea that words could be powerful and symbolic, not just a means of everyday communication.

Borges learned English at an early age from his English-born grandmother, and he devoured his father’s extensive library. He loved the horror stories of Edgar Allan Poe, the adventures of Robert Louis Stevenson, and the exotic Arabic fairy tales in The Thousand and One Nights (see page 200). Ironically, Borges first read the great Spanish classics El Cid and Don Quixote (see page 627) in English translations. Later, when he read Don Quixote in its original Spanish, he said it sounded like a bad translation!

The Borges family was traveling in Europe when World War I broke out. They took refuge in neutral Switzerland, where Borges attended school and learned three more languages—French, Latin, and German. After the war the family moved first to Italy, then to Spain, and finally back to Argentina.

Borges began his career as a poet, and he always considered himself a poet first and foremost. In the 1940s, however, Borges turned to experimental prose, writing stories about transparent tigers, wizards who conjure up visions in a bowl of ink, and encyclopedias that do not record events but cause them. The stories in The Garden of the Forking Paths (1941) and El Aleph (1949) ignore plot and character and most of the usual elements of fiction. They instead blend fact and fantasy in a world of games and riddles, literary mystery, and philosophical inquiry.

It was also during the 1940s that Borges began using one of his most famous images—that of the labyrinth, or maze. Borges used the labyrinth as a metaphor for our journey through life, with all its surprising twists, turns, and dead ends.

For Independent Reading
You may enjoy the following stories by Borges:
• “Borges and Myself”
• “The Meeting”
• “A Soldier of Urbina”
The Book of Sand

Make the Connection
Quickwrite
We take for granted that reality is dependable—that gravity will continue to keep us from floating away, that time always moves forward, that an object can exist in only one place at a time. But what if one of our dependable realities suddenly changed? Jorge Luis Borges loved to play with puzzles and reality—and to overturn the so-called dependable realities. “The Book of Sand,” like so much of his work, invites you to join in his game.

Write down at least two dependable realities of daily life—things we take for granted, that we expect will never change. Circle one, and briefly describe what you imagine the world would be like if that reality shifted slightly—or simply no longer existed.

Literary Focus
Paradox
Paradoxes—statements or situations that contain two seemingly contradictory truths—challenge the limits of our intellects and push us to conceive of reality in new and different ways. Borges was a master of paradox, partly because he placed his outrageous happenings in the context of everyday settings. In the following story, Borges drops his central paradox into the lap of a harmless book lover—much like himself—who discovers that loving a book and hating a book can be infinitely the same thing.

A paradox is an apparent contradiction that is actually true.

For more on Paradox, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.

Reading Skills
Making Predictions
Part of the pleasure of reading comes from making predictions about what will happen next. A prediction is a type of inference, a guess based on evidence. In a story that presents a mystery or a puzzle, we read carefully, looking for clues. We base our predictions on the characters and their situations, as well as our own experiences and knowledge about life. Typically we make initial guesses early in a work, adjusting them as the story unfolds to fit new events and information. Sometimes, despite our careful reading, a story still surprises us. Those are often the stories we remember best.

As you read “The Book of Sand,” jot down any predictions you form as you read. Later, look back over your list, and identify which predictions were correct, which ones changed, and which ones were altogether inaccurate.

Vocabulary Development
pedantic (piˈdantık) adj.: showing an exaggerated concern for books, learning, and rules.
discomfiture (diˈkəmˈfırtər) n.: frustration; embarrassment.
caste (kast) n.: social class.
defiled (dēˈfild) v.: made unclean.
diabolic (diˈələbik) adj.: of or having to do with evil or the devil.
bibliophile (biˈlīəfîl) n.: one who loves books.
misanthropy (miˈsanθrəˈpē) n.: hatred for humankind.
artifice (ərtˈfıs) n.: trickery; deception.
The Book of Sand

Jorge Luis Borges translated by Andrew Hurley

...thy rope of sands...
—George Herbert (1593–1623)

The line consists of an infinite number of points; the plane, of an infinite number of lines; the volume, of an infinite number of planes; the hypervolume, of an infinite number of volumes... No—this, *more geometrica*,¹ is decidedly not the best way to begin my tale. To say that the story is true is by now a convention of every fantastic tale; mine, nevertheless, is true.

I live alone, in a fifth-floor apartment on Calle Belgrano.² One evening a few months ago, I heard a knock at my door. I opened it, and a stranger stepped in. He was a tall man, with blurred, vague features, or perhaps my nearsightedness made me see him that way. Everything about him spoke of honest poverty: he was dressed in gray, and carried a gray valise. I immediately sensed that he was a foreigner. At first I thought he was old; then I noticed that I had been misled by his sparse hair, which was blond, almost white, like the Scandinavians. In the course of our conversation, which I doubt lasted more than an hour, I learned that he hailed from the Orkneys.³

I pointed the man to a chair. He took some time to begin talking. He gave off an air of melancholy, as I myself do now.

"I sell Bibles," he said at last.

"In this house," I replied, not without a somewhat stiff, pedantic note, "there are several English Bibles, including the first one, Wyclif's.⁴ I also have Cipriano de Valera's,⁵ Luther's⁶ (which is, in literary terms, the worst of the lot), and a Latin copy of the Vulgate. As you see, it isn't exactly Bibles I might be needing."

After a brief silence he replied.

"It's not only Bibles I sell. I can show you a sacred book that might interest a man such as yourself. I came by it in northern India, in Bikaner."

He opened his valise and brought out the book. He laid it on the table. It was a cloth-bound octavo⁷ volume that had clearly passed through many hands. I examined it; the unusual heft⁸ of it surprised me. On the spine was printed *Holy Writ*, and then *Bombay.*

"Nineteenth century, I'd say," I observed.

"I don't know," was the reply. "Never did know."

I opened it at random. The characters were unfamiliar to me. The pages, which seemed worn and badly set, were printed in double columns, like a Bible. The text was cramped, and composed into verses.⁹ At the upper

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4. *Wyclif's Bible:* first English translation of the Bible. John Wycliff (c. 1330–1384) took charge of the project and perhaps did some translating.
5. *Cipriano de Valera:* Spanish translation of the Bible; Casiodoro de Reina (1520–1594) translated the Bible, and Cipriano de Valera (1531–1602) edited it.
6. *Luther:* German translation of the Bible. Martin Luther (1483–1546) was the German priest who set in motion the Protestant Reformation.
7. *octavo* n.: book, the pages of which have been made from sheets of paper that have been folded eight times.
8. *heft* adj.: heaviness.
9. *versicles* n. pl.: little verses.

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**Vocabulary**

pedantic (pi-'dan-tik) adj.: showing an exaggerated concern for books, learning, and rules.
corner of each page were Arabic numerals. I was struck by an odd fact: the even-numbered page would carry the number 40,514, let us say, while the odd-numbered page that followed it would be 999. I turned the page; the next page bore an eight-digit number. It also bore a small illustration, like those one sees in dictionaries: an anchor drawn in pen and ink, as though by the unskilled hand of a child.

It was at that point that the stranger spoke again.

“Look at it well. You will never see it again.”

There was a threat in the words, but not in the voice.

I took note of the page, and then closed the book. Immediately I opened it again. In vain I searched for the figure of the anchor, page after page. To hide my discomfiture, I tried another tack.

“This is a version of Scripture in some Hindu language, isn’t that right?”

“No,” he replied.

Then he lowered his voice, as though entrusting me with a secret.

“I came across this book in a village on the plain, and I traded a few rupees and a Bible for it. The man who owned it didn’t know how to read. I suspect he saw the Book of Books as an amulet. He was of the lowest caste; people could not so much as step on his shadow without being defiled. He told me his book was called the Book of Sand because neither sand nor this book has a beginning or an end.”

He suggested I try to find the first page.

I took the cover in my left hand and opened the book, my thumb and forefinger almost touching. It was impossible: several pages always lay between the cover and my hand. It was as though they grew from the very book.

“Now try to find the end.”

I failed there as well.

“This can’t be,” I stammered, my voice hardly recognizable as my own.

“It can’t be, yet it is,” the Bible peddler said, his voice little more than a whisper. “The number of pages in this book is literally infinite. No page is the first page; no page is the last. I don’t know why they’re numbered in this arbitrary way, but perhaps it’s to give one to understand that the terms of an infinite series can be numbered any way whatever.”

Then, as though thinking out loud, he went on.

“If space is infinite, we are anywhere, at any point in space. If time is infinite, we are at any point in time.”

His musings irritated me.

“You,” I said, “are a religious man, are you not?”

“Yes, I’m Presbyterian. My conscience is clear. I am certain I didn’t cheat that native when I gave him the Lord’s Word in exchange for his diabolic book.”

I assured him he had nothing to reproach himself for, and asked whether he was just passing through the country. He replied that he planned to return to his own country within a few days. It was then that I learned he was a Scot, and that his home was in the Orkneys. I told him I had great personal fondness for Scotland because of my love for Stevenson and Hume.

“And Robbie Burns,” he corrected.

12. reproach: v., criticize or censure.
13. Stevenson and Hume: Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894), Scottish author; David Hume (1711–1776), Scottish philosopher.

**Vocabulary**

- **discomfiture** ([dɪˈkʌmfiːtʃər]) n.: frustration; embarrassment.
- **rupees** n., pl.: basic monetary unit of many Asian countries, including India, Pakistan, and Nepal.
- **amulet** n.: ornament often inscribed with a magical incantation or symbol to protect the wearer from evil.
- **caste** (kast) n.: social class.
- **defiled** (dɪˈfild) v.: made unclean.
- **diabolic** ([dɪˈəʊbəlik]) adj.: of or having to do with evil or the devil.
Courtesy of Arthur Rogers Gallery, New Orleans.
As we talked I continued to explore the infinite book.

"Had you intended to offer this curious specimen to the British Museum, then?" I asked with feigned indifference.

"No," he replied, "I am offering it to you," and he mentioned a great sum of money.

I told him, with perfect honesty, that such an amount of money was not within my ability to pay. But my mind was working; in a few moments I had devised my plan.

"I propose a trade," I said, "You purchased the volume with a few rupees and the Holy Scripture; I will offer you the full sum of my pension, which I have just received, and Wyclif’s black-letter Bible. It was left to me by my parents."

"A black-letter Wyclif?" he murmured.

I went to my bedroom and brought back the money and the book. With a bibliophile’s zeal he turned the pages and studied the binding.

"Done," he said.

I was astonished that he did not haggle. Only later was I to realize that he had entered my house already determined to sell the book. He did not count the money, but merely put the bills into his pocket.

We chatted about India, the Orkneys, and the Norwegian jarls that had once ruled those islands. Night was falling when the man left. I have never seen him since, nor do I know his name.

I thought of putting the Book of Sand in the space left by the Wyclif, but I chose at last to hide it behind some imperfect volumes of the Thousand and One Nights.

I went to bed but could not sleep. At three or four in the morning I turned on the light. I took out the impossible book and turned its pages. On one, I saw an engraving of a mask. There was a number in the corner of the page—I don’t remember now what it was—raised to the ninth power.

I showed no one my treasure. To the joy of possession was added the fear that it would be stolen from me, and to that, the suspicion that it might not be truly infinite. Those two points of anxiety aggravated my already habitual misanthropy. I had but few friends left, and those, I stopped seeing. A prisoner of the Book, I hardly left my house. I examined the worn binding and the covers with a magnifying glass, and rejected the possibility of some artifice. I found that the small illustrations were spaced at two-thousan-
day-page intervals. I began noting them down in an alphabetized notebook, which was very soon filled. They never repeated themselves. At night, during the rare intervals spared me by insomnia, I dreamed of the book.

Summer was drawing to a close, and I realized that the book was monstrous. It was cold consolation to think that I, who looked upon it with my eyes and fondled it with my ten flesh-and-bone fingers, was no less monstrous than the book. I felt it was a nightmare thing, an obscene thing, and that it defiled and corrupted reality.

I considered fire, but I feared that the burning of an infinite book might be similarly infinite, and suffocate the planet in smoke.

I remembered reading once that the best place to hide a leaf is in the forest. Before my retirement I had worked in the National Library, which contained nine hundred thousand books; I knew that to the right of the lobby a curving staircase descended into the shadows of the basement, where the maps and periodicals are kept. I took advantage of the librarians’ distraction to hide the Book of Sand on one of the library’s damp shelves; I tried not to notice how high up, or how far from the door.

I now feel a little better, but I refuse even to walk down the street the library’s on.

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17. **insomnia** n.: inability to sleep.

**Vocabulary**

- **bibliophile** (bɪˈlɪf-ə-lɪ) n.: one who loves books.
- **misanthropy** (mi-sanˈθrə-pi) n.: hatred for humankind.
- **artifice** (ɑrtˈfɪs) n.: trickery; deception.
Response and Analysis

Reading Check
1. You are the narrator of “The Book of Sand.” Immediately after getting rid of the book, you run into an old friend. Tell him or her about your strange adventure, recounting all the main events of the story from beginning to end.

Thinking Critically
2. Why does the narrator come to feel that the book is “monstrous”?
3. Write two brief descriptions of the main character, one at the beginning of the story and the other at the end. What accounts for the differences in his outlook and personality? (Your response should go beyond “the book.”)
4. The main character is a self-declared bibliophile, or book lover. Does he read people as skillfully as he reads books? Use evidence from the story to support your opinion.
5. A paradox is a seeming contradiction that nevertheless holds true. For example, the illustrations in the Book of Sand are both there and not there. How would you explain this paradox? Identify and explain another paradox in the story. Explain how these paradoxes made you feel as you read the story.
6. What dependable realities does Borges question in this story? Did the story succeed in making you think about how you take realities for granted? Why or why not? Be sure to check your Quickwrite notes.
7. Why do you think Borges gave his story the same title as the book in the story? Was it simply a matter of telling what the story was about? Or do the two texts share some of the same qualities? (Consider Borges’ fascination with puzzles, paradoxes, and literary mystery before you respond.)

Extending and Evaluating
8. How satisfied are you with the resolution of the story? Why? Looking back at the predictions you made while reading may help you decide how you feel about the ending.

WRITING
A Never-Ending Story
Predict what happens next to the Book of Sand. Write a story about another adventure in the weird book’s history. (Imagine, for example, what would happen if someone really did try to burn it.) Introduce new characters, a new setting, and several new events.

Vocabulary Development
Substitute Sentences
pedantic  diabolic
discomfiture bibliophile
caste  misanthropy
defiled  artifice

Imagine that you have been assigned to read “The Book of Sand” to a group of twelve-year-olds. You’re worried that Borges’s vocabulary is too difficult for them, so you decide to retell the story in simpler language.

Find the sentences in the story in which the Vocabulary words listed above appear, and copy the sentences onto a sheet of paper. Then, rewrite each sentence to make it easier, substituting more commonly known words or phrases for the Vocabulary words. To locate synonyms—words with similar meanings—use a thesaurus or a synonym finder.

Literary Skills
Analyze paradox.

Reading Skills
Review predictions.

Writing Skills
Write a short story.

Vocabulary Skills
Identify synonyms.

Jorge Luis Borges  1231