

Jorge Luis Borges, “The Secret Miracle”

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers’ Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/jorge-luis-borges-secret-miracle>.

Introduction

Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) is the best-known Argentine writer of the twentieth century. Borges wasn’t Jewish, but he wrote essays, poems, and stories dealing with many aspects of Jewish history and culture. His relationship to Jewish culture was—like many aspects of his work—contradictory. His interest in Jewishness was encyclopedic and dilettantish, cursory and profound. He was capable of deep dives into Talmud and kabbalah but also loved free association, false encyclopedia entries and coincidence.

“The Secret Miracle” was first published in *Sur* (1943), and then included in his collection of short stories, *Ficciones* (1944), at the height of the Second World War. Argentina was neutral for most of the war, and would only join the Allies in March 1945, in a largely symbolic (some would say hollow) gesture. Argentina had a strong history of Germanophilia, and Argentines were deeply divided on Hitler and Nazism.

“The Secret Miracle” tells the story of a fictional Czech scholar, Jaromir Hladik, matrilineally Jewish, who is persecuted by the Nazis for attributing aspects of Lutheran theology to Jewish sources. The story ironizes the Nazi myth of blood purity and the Nazis’ revisionist history of civilization.

This kit offers resources to (a) provide background on some of the intertextual references embedded in the story, (b) help students understand how irony works in the story, and (c) spark questions and discussion about how intertextuality and irony work together to create the highly ambiguous ending, the meaning of which will hinge on how we choose to interpret the meaning of eternity.

Cover image: Book cover of Jorge Luis Borges’s *El Aleph*, 1949.

Subjects

Fiction, Holocaust, Kabbalah, Latin America, Metaphysics

Reading and Background:

- “The Secret Miracle” is available in English translation in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, trans. Harriet de Onís (New Directions, 1962). It’s available in Spanish [here](#). Throughout the guide, I refer to the English translation by Andrew Hurley in *Collected Fictions* (Penguin, 1999).
- For an introduction to the situation of Jews in Latin America, see Ranaan Rein and Jeffrey Lesser, “Introduction” in *Rethinking Jewish Latin Americans* (University of New Mexico Press, 2008).
- For more information on Borges’s use of Jewish themes in English, see Evelyn Fishburn, “Borges, Cabbala, and Creative Misreading” (available online [here](#)), “Reflections on the Jewish Imaginary in the Fictions of Borges” (*Variaciones Borges* 5:1998, 145–156, available online [here](#)), and Elliot R. Wolfson, “In the Mirror of the Dream: Borges and the Poetics of Kabbalah” (*The Jewish Quarterly Review* 104:3 (2014): 362–379), available online [here](#).
- Before engaging with the resources in this kit, have students read Jorge Luis Borges’s short essay, “Yo, judío” (“I, a Jew”). Borges published this essay in 1934 in response to being “smeared” as a Jew in a pro-Nazi Argentinian newspaper. Although he was not Jewish, Borges supposes as a rhetorical stance that he was Jewish, and traces this lineage back through a chosen genealogy from Manuel Gleizer (Borges’s Argentine Jewish publisher) to Charlie Chaplin (not actually



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Jewish) to Heinrich Heine (a German-Jewish lyric poet who converted to Christianity in 1825 because Jews weren't allowed to be professors; Nazis burned his books in 1933) to the table of the breads in Leviticus 24:6 to the ten Sefirot in the kabbalah. This mishmash of Jewish and non-Jewish references, secular and sacred, is typical of Borges's eclectic and intertextual approach to identity, and his rejection of not just National Socialism (Nazism) but all modes of totalitarianism. The essay can be found in Eliot Weinberger, ed. and trans., Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 110–111.

Resources

1: Text excerpt, Ilan Stavans's "Borges, the Jew," 2016.

In this book, Professor Ilan Stavans focuses on Jorge Luis Borges's fascination with Jewish culture. In these introductory pages, Stavans contextualizes the appearance of "Yo, judío" in 1934 and considers Borges's "philo-Semitism"—his love of Jewishness—as both a response to anti-Semitism and a quest for his own identity. (Have students read "Yo, judío" ("I, a Jew") before engaging with this resource. See the "Reading and Background" section for links and more information).

Suggested Activity: Ilan Stavans has often written about the intersection of the personal and the scholarly in his own life. After students read the excerpt, have them choose a concept, phrase, intertextual reference or scene from "The Secret Miracle" and write a first-person essay about how it has impacted them, and/or how they imagine it can serve as a lesson or metaphor in their life going forward.

Source: Ilan Stavans, "Yo, Judío" in *Borges, the Jew* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), 1–6. Available online at <https://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/63116.pdf>.

2: Text excerpt, Benjamin Harshav's "The Meaning of Yiddish," 2000.

"The Secret Miracle" abounds with intertextual references and associative thinking.

Suggested Activity: Have students read scholar Benjamin Harshav's characterization of Yiddish storytelling and consider the ways in which Borges's style echoes Harshav's ideas about Yiddish storytelling. Using this framework, have students conduct a scavenger hunt for intertextual references in "The Secret Miracle." When do they confuse or sidetrack the reader? Which ones are secular/sacred, literary/historical, fictional/nonfictional? What does the use of these references imply about the story's readership—and particularly about its homogeneity or heterogeneity? Have students discuss how the same reference may both slow down and belabor the plot and enrich and deepen the philosophical meaning of the story. Have students consider in what ways "The Secret Miracle" is—using Harshav's language—situated both in the "messy Jewish reality" of its day and the "library of texts" that have come before it.

If there isn't time for students to look up the references themselves, you can give them a list with definitions, for example:

- "Anschluss," the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany (1938)
- "Ibn Ezra" (1089–1164), Spanish Jewish medieval biblical commentator
- "Jakob Boehme," Lutheran theologian
- "Towards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once," paraphrase from William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act II, scene ii
- Epigraph from the Qur'an 2:261
- Robert Fludd, sixteenth century scientist and kabbalist
- *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Book of Creation* in kabbalah

Source: Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), 100–101.

3: Text excerpt, "Sefer Yetzirah," undated, and lyrics and music video, Victoria Hanna, 2015.

Throughout his life, Borges was fascinated by Jewish mysticism and *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Book of Creation*, in particular. He discusses kabbalistic concepts—particularly of infinity and eternity—in many of his best-known stories. Yet it's important to note, in the words of scholar Elliot R. Wolfson, that "Any discussion of Borges and the Kabbalah must begin with the obvious fact that

he was not equipped to deal with this material historically or philologically, a point that he often emphasized on his own." ("Since I don't know Hebrew," Borges said, "I wonder if I have any right to study the Kabbalah.") Borges scholar Evelyn Fishburn called Borges's use of kabbalistic concepts "creative misreading."

In contrast to Borges's lack of knowledge and cultural exposure to kabbalah, musician Victoria Hanna grew up in a religiously observant Jewish household. Hanna uses the text of the *Sefer Yetzirah* and other kabbalistic writings as lyrics, interpreting them as modern musical compositions.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the excerpt from *Sefer Yetzirah* and consider how Borges might have been inspired to "creatively misread" it in "The Secret Miracle." Then have students reread "The Secret Miracle" from page 161 to the end: the depiction of "eternity" when "the physical universe stopped." Consider how Borges attempts to test a metaphysical paradox—a definition of time that defies physical reality—within the textual laboratory of a short story. In what ways does Borges succeed and fail in conveying eternity within a short story? What does this story about eternity end up teaching us about history?

Now have students read the lyrics (in translation) and watch the music video of Victoria Hanna's "22 Letters," a visual and musical interpretation of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. In what ways does Hanna embody the text? Does hearing the text of the *Sefer Yetzirah* sung aloud change your understanding of or relationship to the text?

Borges and Hanna have created two interpretations of the same work. In what ways do their interpretations differ? How are they similar? How might "The Secret Miracle" and Hanna's "22 Letters" be in conversation with each other?

Sources: *Sefer Yetzirah* [excerpt]. Source sheet compiled by Sadie Gold-Shapiro using sefaria.org, 2020.

"Twenty-two letters," song lyrics, adapted from *Sefer Yetzirah* and translated by Victoria Hanna, accessed <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/22-letters-22-letters.html>.

Victoria Hanna, "22 חנה ויקטוריה חנה Twenty two (22) letters-Victoria Hanna," September 8, 2018, accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcnxRi0s_DM.

4: Text excerpt, Jorge Luis Borges's "The Secret Miracle," 1943.

In "The Secret Miracle" there are not only intertextual references but metatextual references: texts within the main text. The protagonist, Jaromir Hladik, is an author intent on finishing his magnum opus play in the eternal instant between when the Nazi bullet is fired and when it kills him.

Suggested Activity: Have students reread pages 161–162 yet again, this time focusing on Hladik's act of creation. Notice how Borges conceives of eternity here (as in other texts) as a "flow state" of creative production. What is the function of the story within the story? Can the two pieces of the story be read separately? What happens to the narrative when the nested story is removed?

Sources: Jorge Luis Borges, "The Secret Miracle," translated by Andrew Hurley, *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 161–162. The Secret Miracle, copyright © 1998 by Maria Kodama; translation copyright © 1998 by Penguin Random House LLC; from COLLECTED FICTIONS: VOLUME 3 by Jorge Luis Borges, translated by Andrew Hurley. Used by permission of Viking Books, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Jorge Luis Borges, "El Milagro Secreto," *Obras completas 1923-1972* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), 513–513. "El milagro secreto" by Jorge Luis Borges, currently collected in FICCIONES. Copyright © 1995 by Maria Kodama, used by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.

5: Text, Jorge Luis Borges's "Borges y yo" ("Borges and I"), 1957, and audio recording of Borges reading the text, 1967.

One of the best known (and briefest) texts in which Borges explored the unresolvable paradoxes of identity was "Borges y yo," translated as "Borges and I." Students with some Spanish ability can compare the original with the translation, while listening to Borges read his own words aloud.

Suggested Activity: Have students write their own version of the text, an homage to “Borges and I” using their own names and biographical details. Have students share their own versions and highlight the ambiguity in the meaning of Borges’s text. Then, discuss how the irreducible ambiguity of identity in “Borges and I” relates to the ambiguity about time and identity in “The Secret Miracle.” At the instant of the protagonist’s death, who is telling the story? What is the author’s relationship to the protagonist? What is the reader’s relationship to the author?

Sources: “Borges and I,” trans. Ilan Stavans, in *FSG Book of Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), available online [here](#).

“Borges y yo,” *Obras Completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974), 808, available online [here](#). “Borges y yo” by Jorge Luis Borges, currently collected in EL HACEDOR. Copyright © 1995 by Maria Kodama, used by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.

Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges por el mismo: Sus poemas y su voz*. Buenos Aires: AMB Discográfica, 1967, available online [here](#).