

BY JAMES GARDNER

Buenos Aires by the Book

Forty years after Jorge Luis Borges's death, the author remains the guiding light of his hometown's literary scene



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LEFT: The Miguel Cané Municipal Library in Buenos Aires, where Borges worked cataloguing books from 1937 to to mid-1940s, maintains the small office where he wrote. **RIGHT:** Murals abound on the walls of Buenos Aires, including those celebrating the city's love of books. **OPPOSITE:** The interior of El Ateneo Grand Splendid, a bookshop in a former theater.

Not for nothing do the Argentines see Jorge Luis Borges as the indispensable voice of their nation, the embodiment of their collective spirit and, not least, the supreme example of that bibliolatriy that is so much a part of their culture. It is hard to think of another country whose national hero, rather than being some general or statesman, is a blind, octogenarian poet who served for many years as the director of the national library. Exactly forty years after his death, his fictional accounts of the Library of Babel and his Kabbalistic forays into the mysteries of letters attest to the exalted status that words and the printed book play in the shared

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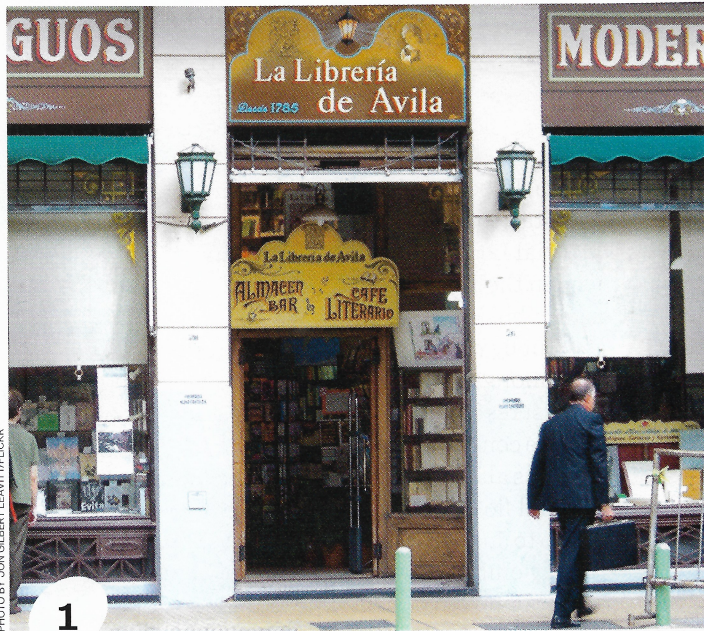


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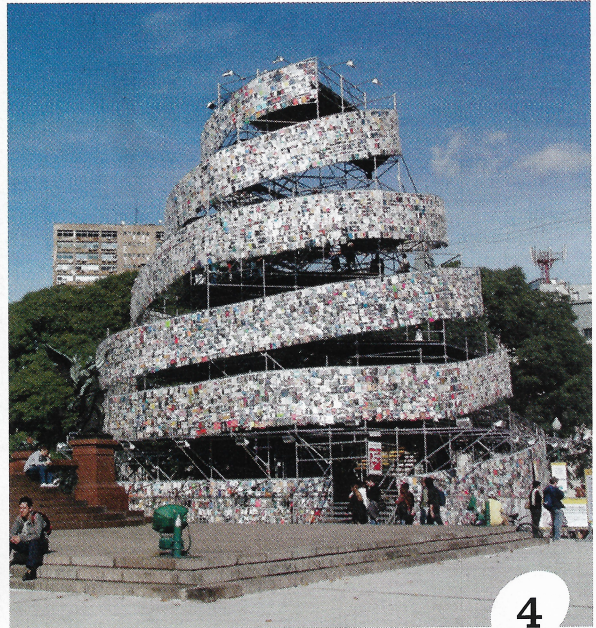


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imagination of the Argentine people. Though most other cultures would relegate a figure like Borges to relative anonymity, the Argentines are puffed with pride at the thought that one of their own can contend on the world stage with the greatest writers of the past. The marketing of his aura has taken on an industrial scale that is apparent on the very streets of Buenos Aires: entire walls of bookstores offer all the latest editions of his collected works, while statuettes and even bobble heads of the great man, wearing a three-piece suit and sporting a cane, are omnipresent in souvenir shops and newsstands, together with coffee mugs and keychains that bear his likeness. A life-sized, hyper-realistic sculpture of the seated Borges—together with his friend, the author Adolfo Bioy Casares—greet you at the door of La Biela, one of the city's oldest and most famous cafes. Despite the diversity of political and cultural convictions in Argentina, it is hard to find a single citizen for whom the greatness of Jorge Luis Borges is anything less than an article of faith.

Given this reverence, one is not surprised to learn that, among the porteños, as the inhabitants of Buenos Aires are known, it is a point of honor that their capital has the highest number of bookstores per capita of any city in the world. According to the Argentine journalist Uki Goñi, writing in the *Guardian* in 2019, Buenos Aires, with a population of 2.8 million, has 734 bookstores in all, or twenty-five for every 100,000 inhabitants. This compares with twenty-two per 100,000 in Hong Kong, sixteen in Madrid, and ten in London. One of the high points of the city's cultural year is the FERIA del Libro. Held on a thirty-acre, century-old fairground in the barrio of Palermo, the book expo recently held its fiftieth edition (with a special tribute to Borges). Each year, upward of a million porteños visit to see the displays and buy the latest books.

The fair recalls a time, now unfortunately past, when Buenos Aires was the center of the South American book trade. One tends to forget that many of the foremost classics of twentieth-century Latin American literature, including *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez and the work of the

Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, were first published in the Argentine capital. Two of the most prominent of these houses, Editorial Losada and Editorial Sudamericana, both founded in the 1930s, are still going strong today. In addition to publishing Latin American authors, they were the conduit by which some of the most prominent modernists, among them William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, first reached a Spanish-speaking audience.

This intimate connection between Buenos Aires and the book business also finds expression in the immense quantity of local fiction and poetry, from Borges and Ernesto Sabato to Julio Cortázar and Roberto Arlt, that is as intimately embedded in the urban landscape of the Argentine capital as the works of Baudelaire are in the boulevards of Paris or those of Dostoyevsky in the squares of Saint Petersburg.

Having made Buenos Aires my home for several months of each year over more than a quarter of a century, I can attest to this vigorous book culture and to the surfeit of shops selling new, used, and rare books. My apartment lies in a centrally located, thoroughly bourgeois neighborhood that is home to professionals, children in school uniforms, and seniors assisted by their Venezuelan caregivers; in other words, it hardly qualifies as a university center or an artistic bohemia. And yet, even here, six large bookstores stand within two blocks, or a three-minute walk, of my apartment. On Avenida Santa Fe, one of the city's main retail stretches, you find them cheek by jowl with a Zara store, bakeries, and an Apple outlet. It is by no means unusual in Buenos Aires to find two or more bookshops on a single block, sometimes even side by side. There was a time when Manhattan's Upper West Side, where I grew up and now spend most of the year, was similarly supplied with bookstores. Over the course of time, however, those shops have been replaced by upscale boutiques and restaurants. To find anything comparable to the Upper West Side of my childhood, I must go to Buenos Aires.

One of the bookstores near my apartment, the Ateneo Grand Splendid, routinely appears in lists of the top ten, even the top five, most beautiful bookshops in the world: the *Guardian* awarded it second place in the running, while *National Geographic* declared it to be nothing less than the "world's most beautiful bookstore." Having opened in 2000, it occupies an enormous theater built in 1919; its orchestra section and three levels of stalls once accommodated more than a thousand spectators. Now it is filled to the gills with books, even as the new occupants have lovingly preserved and restored each detail of the old theater, from its neo-Rococo stucco swags and caryatids to its ceiling murals of Grecian gods, painted by Nazzareno Orlandi.

This store is part of a chain, El Ateneo, which occupies in Argentina a position similar to that of Barnes &

1. Librería de Ávila, one of the oldest bookstores in Buenos Aires, has origins in the late eighteenth century.

2. Librería Rodríguez in Villa Crespo specializes in literature and independent publishers.

3. Argentine publisher Editorial Losada has a bookstore on the main thoroughfare of Avenida Corrientes.

4. The 2011 "Tower of Babel" by artist Marta Minujín was made of 30,000 books in languages from across the world.

5. Signs for "libros"—books—frequent the city storefronts.

6. The Feria Internacional del Libro de Buenos Aires is a major annual event, with thousands attending the book fair.

Noble in the American market. Inspired by this American counterpart, the Ateneo Grand Splendid has outfitted itself with a café in what was formerly the theater's proscenium. And just as Barnes & Noble, a phenomenon of the 1980s, essentially grew out of a single, much older shop once located on Fifth Avenue and 18th Street, so the origin of the Ateneo chain is a bookstore that still stands on the capital's main shopping street, Calle Florida, in the Microcentro, the central business district. Founded in 1917 and in its present location since 1938, this store is not only the chain's flagship but almost a symbol of the Argentine book business. Whereas the other shops in the chain, for all their worthiness, have a whiff of marketing and big business (the same can be said of Cúspide, El Ateneo's main rival among chain booksellers), this original shop preserves its century-old gravitas. The employees exhibit an almost professorial knowledge of their extensive collections, and their customers are as loyal to them as a certain kind of Londoner is to Hatchards on Piccadilly, a bookshop founded in 1797.

Despite the ubiquity of these two main chains, many independent booksellers have lately appeared in Buenos Aires precisely to challenge that corporate culture. The selection in these stores is more idiosyncratic, more obviously "curated." Among them are Eterna Cadencia and Libros del Pasaje, with their oak-paneled walls and bookshelves, offering little-known poetry and fiction, together with readings and discussion groups. These stores are located, respectively, in the barrios of Pal-

ermo Soho and Palermo Hollywood, which, unlike my neighborhood, certainly qualify as bohemian. Other stores specialize in French or German books, or, like the magnificent Librería Guadalquivir on Avenida Calao, in philosophy and academic publishers. At the same time, entire neighborhoods, such as the area surrounding the Facultad de Medicina, the nation's foremost medical school, and Tribunales, home of the nation's Supreme Court, have scores of bookshops specializing in medicine and law.

Although Argentina has fallen on hard times in recent years, the fact that it was once among the wealthiest countries in the world is reflected in the rich substrate of rare and valuable books, bound in rich leathers and adorned with gilt lettering. Among antiquarian sellers are Victor Aizenman and Helena de Buenos Aires, as well as El Incunable, with its superb collection of rare books and memorabilia related to Argentine history. It is presided over by Rodolfo Bunge, who can be found at his desk smoking his pipe and seemingly indifferent to whether anyone chooses to enter his shop or not.

As though occupying a parallel universe, secondhand bookstores—selling used books, rather than rare books—appear in some of the most out-of-the-way corners of the capital. Two of the best are the fairly diminutive Librería Legenda on Charcas and the vast and cavernous Librería Huelmul on Avenida Santa Fe, whose fourteen rows of shelves, extending almost the length of a city block, recall Borges's descriptions of the Library

El Ateneo
Grand Splendid.



of Babel. For the past century or so, however, the densest concentration of these secondhand bookstores has been found on Avenida Corrientes, which is also the hub of Buenos Aires's live theater scene, its Great White Way, and the center of its giddy nightlife. Its twenty-five bookstores offer everything from leather-bound editions of Cervantes and Lope de Vega to girlie magazines from the 1950s. Formerly open around the clock, they have only recently consented to close at midnight.

For anyone inclined to despair about the future of the printed book, there is no more resounding retort than the annual event known as the Noche de las Librerías, the Night of the Bookstores, when much of Avenida Corrientes is converted into an open-air festival devoted to books, their authors, and the teeming flâneurs who show up, in their hundreds of thousands, to hear the authors read and allow themselves to be interviewed. It takes place in late November, a time of year that, in Argentina, coincides more or less with the start of summer.

At the eastern end of the Noche de las Librerías festivities stands the Obelisco, the obelisk, which is surely the best-known symbol of the Argentine capital. It is located on Avenida 9 de Julio, which the locals proudly and plausibly claim to be the broadest boulevard in the world. This avenue was the site of one of the boldest acts of bibliolatriy ever seen in Buenos Aires, or anywhere else for that matter, in a work by the local artist Marta Minujín. Inspired in equal measure by Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp, her art has long been associated with the printed word: when Buenos Aires was selected as World Book Capital of 2011, she constructed a great metal scaffold called the "Tower of Babel"—yet another nod to Borges—on which were engrafted 30,000 books in a hundred languages. But that work was itself a reenactment of another from nearly thirty years earlier, when Minujín constructed her so-called "Parthenon of Books" on Avenida 9 de Julio. A massive metal scaffolding that bore the rough shape and dimensions of the Athenian Parthenon, this work appeared seemingly overnight in 1983, following the collapse of the last and most brutal of the dictatorships that scarred Argentina for much of the twentieth century. During that time, books had been routinely banned, and Minujín's makeshift Parthenon was covered over in nearly one hundred thousand books that had been outlawed by the former regime. (When the structure was pulled down after three weeks, the public was encouraged to take the books home with them.) Whatever the ultimate aesthetic value of Minujín's Parthenon, it is an eloquent expression of joy at the return of democracy and of that freedom to read, buy, and sell the printed book that is so deeply rooted in Buenos Aires and in the identity of its citizens. 📖

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PHOTO BY JAMES GARDNER

Stacks of books in Librería Legenda.



PHOTO BY FELIPE CORREA/FLICKR

It's not unusual to have multiple bookstores on a single block for perusing in Buenos Aires.