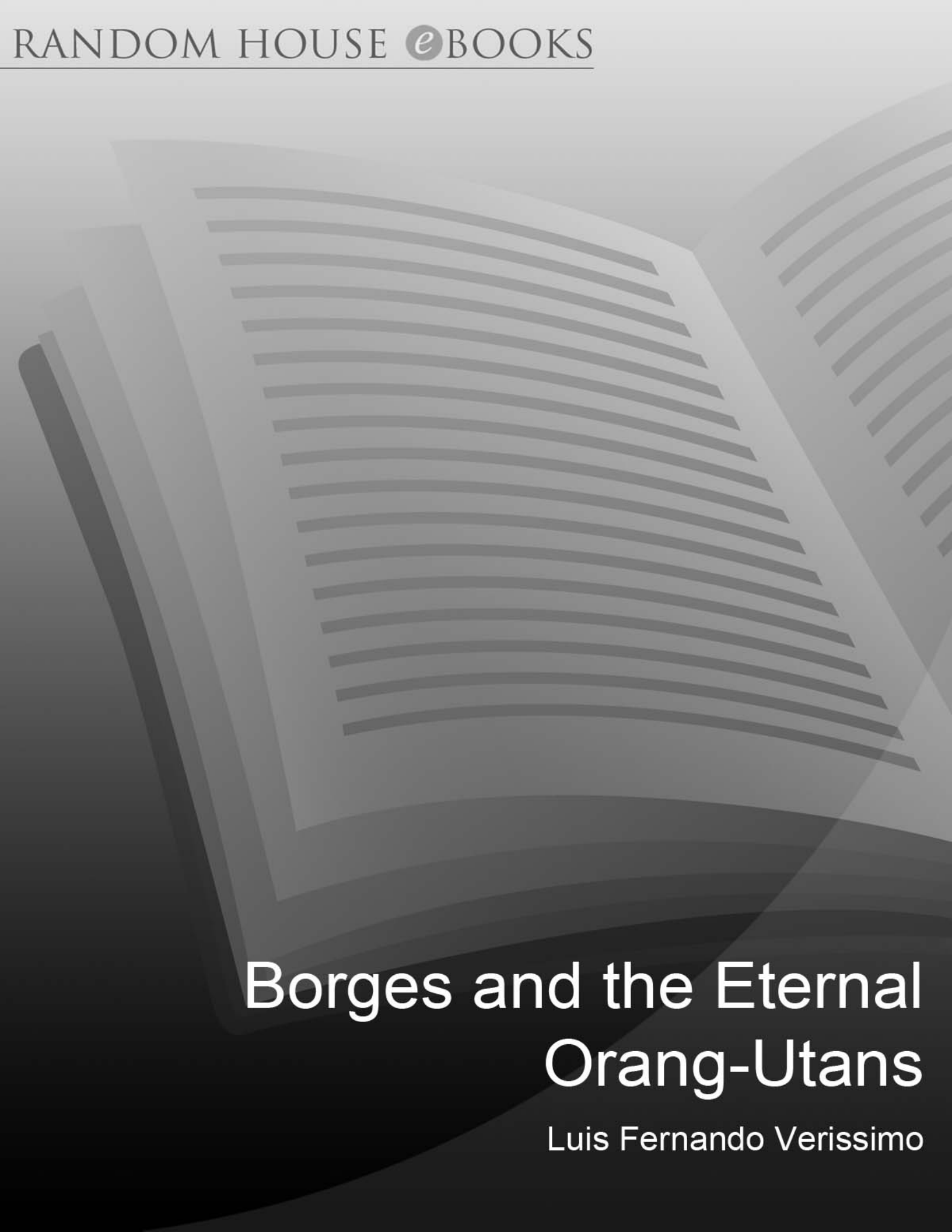


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



**Borges and the Eternal
Orang-Utans**

Luis Fernando Verissimo

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About the Book

Vogelstein is a loner who has always lived among books. Suddenly, fate grabs hold of his insignificant life and carries him off to Buenos Aires, to a conference on Edgar Allan Poe, the inventor of the modern detective story. There Vogelstein meets his idol, Jorge Luis Borges, and for reasons that a mere passion for literature cannot explain, he finds himself at the centre of a murder investigation that involves arcane demons, the mysteries of the Kabbala, the possible destruction of the world, and the Elizabethan magus John Dee's 'Eternal Orang-utan', which would end up by writing all the known books in the cosmos.

About the Author

Luis Fernando Verissimo is one of Brazil's most popular writers thanks to his satirical columns in the national weekly *Veja*. He is also a celebrated novelist and cartoonist, and he plays the saxophone in a jazz band. He is also the author of *The Club of Angels*.

Margaret Jull Costa has translated works by Eça de Queiroz, Fernando Pessoa and José Saramago, as well as by a number of leading Spanish writers. Her translation of Saramago's *All the Names* won the Weidenfeld Translation Prize.

ALSO BY LUIS FERNANDO VERISSIMO

The Club of Angels

Luis Fernando Verissimo

**BORGES AND
THE ETERNAL
ORANG-UTANS**

TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE BY
Margaret Jull Costa

V
V I N T A G E

Irritated, Unwin stopped him.

“Don’t multiply the mysteries,” he said. “Mysteries should be simple. Remember Poe’s stolen letter, remember Zangwill’s locked room.” “Or complex,” replied Dunraven. “Remember the Universe.”

Jorge Luis Borges, “Abenjacán el Bojari, dead in his labyrinth”

The Crime

I WILL TRY to be your eyes, Jorge, I am following the advice you gave me when we said goodbye: "Write, and you will remember." I will try to remember, with more exactitude this time, so that you can see what I saw, so that you can unveil the mystery and arrive at the truth. We always write in order to remember the truth. When we invent, it is only in order to remember the truth more exactly.

Geography is destiny. If Buenos Aires were not so close to Porto Alegre, none of this would have happened, but I did not see that I was being subtly summoned or that this story needed me in order to be written. I did not see that I was being plunged headfirst into the plot, like a pen into an inkwell.

The circumstances of my visit to Buenos Aires were, as I now know, planned with all the care of someone setting a trap for a particular animal. At the time, however, enthusiasm blinded me to this. I did not realise that I had been chosen as an accessory to a crime, as neutral and innocent as the mirrors in a room.

The 1985 Israfel Society Conference, the first meeting of Edgar Allan Poe specialists to be held outside the northern hemisphere, was to take place in Buenos Aires, less than a thousand kilometres from my apartment in Bonfim, and was, therefore, within the budget of a poor translator and teacher of English (which, as you know, is what I am). One of the invited speakers was to be Joachim Rotkopf, who was to lecture on the origins of European surrealism to be found in Poe's work, precisely the topic that had provoked the controversy with Professor Xavier Urquiza from Mendoza, and that had kept me so amused in the pages of *The Gold-*

Bug, the Society journal. All this seemed to me a mere accumulation of happy and irresistible coincidences. I decided not to resist. At least, I thought I decided.

I am fifty years old. I have led a cloistered life, “without adventures or surprises”, as you put it in your poem. Like you, master. A sheltered life spent among books, and into which only rarely did the unexpected enter like a tiger. Not that I am an innocent. I am a sceptic, books have trained me in every category of disbelief and caution when confronted by illogicality. I could never have believed that destiny was calling me by name, that everything had been decided for me and before me by some hidden Borges, that my role was waiting for me, just as Mallarmé’s *vide papier* was waiting for his poems.

The prospect of hearing the Argentinian’s comments on the lecture by the German with whom I had corresponded, but whom I did not know personally, was enough in itself to justify the price of the air fare to Buenos Aires (paid for on credit). The conference would take place in July, when my students of English would be taking refuge in their hyperactive hormones, so as to protect themselves from the cold, thus enabling me to have a holiday. No urgent translation required my attention, at least nothing that could not wait a week, the duration of the conference.

The final coincidence: one day after the arrival of the journal containing both the remarkable announcement that the 1985 Israfel Society Conference had been transferred from Baltimore to Buenos Aires and instructions on how interested parties should apply, my cat Aleph died. Not from any discernible cause, but merely out of consideration for the old bachelor who had taken him in. Aleph was the only obstacle to my making the trip, because, now that my Aunt Raquel had gone into a home, there was no-one I could