



## BIOGRAPHY

Born into a wealthy Buenos Aires family, Adolfo Bioy Casares (1914–1999) wrote his first story at age 11; published his first book, with his father’s support, at age 15; and published his masterpiece, *The Invention of Morel*, as his sixth book, at age 26. In 1932 he met his future wife, the painter and writer Silvina Ocampo, and also met Jorge Luis Borges, who would go on to be his lifelong friend, mentor, and collaborator. Bioy Casares was a prolific and widely honored writer throughout his life, whose works include the novels *A Plan for Escape*, *A Dream of Heroes*, and *Asleep in the Sun* and nearly a dozen books of stories. In collaboration with Borges, he wrote several screenplays, compiled an *Anthology of Fantastic Literature*, and produced a number of satirical pseudo-scholarly pieces under the name H. Bustos Domecq.

# THE INVENTION OF MOREL

by Adolfo Bioy Casares

Prologue by Jorge Luis Borges

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“A masterfully paced and intellectually daring plot.” —*The Times*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

*The Invention of Morel* has been called “a perfect novel,” and its fans include the likes of Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and Alberto Manguel. It combines a fiendish mystery story worthy of Edgar Allan Poe with an aching romantic love story, presenting a startling vision of the mystery of love.

An unnamed narrator has fled to a deserted island to escape the long arm of the law, only to discover that the island is not as deserted as he had supposed: he sees and hears what seems to be an elegant group of vacationers in a grand hotel. To avoid discovery, he hides out in the disease-ridden marshlands at the other end of the island. From there he spies on the hotel and falls head over heels in love with the beautiful but strangely unresponsive Faustine, while struggling to avoid discovery and to survive a fatal disease which seems to be plaguing the island. His adventures are at once disturbing and funny as he seeks to comprehend the bizarre goings-on at the hotel and the sudden appearance in the sky of a second sun and moon.

Halfway through the novel, the narrator discovers the truth about the island and the mad scientist, Morel, who made it what it is. Piece by piece everything that has happened on the island is explained. But the narrator is still left with his impossible love for Faustine, and in the end it leads him to an extraordinary, unprecedented, and yet strangely familiar decision.

A unique adventure and one of the great entertainments of twentieth-century literature, *The Invention of Morel* is a hall of mirrors that can be read in a single sitting but whose reflections seem to repeat themselves to infinity.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. Once the narrator discovers the nature of Morel’s invention, every mysterious occurrence on the island is explained. Do you like being given all the explanations, or did you prefer it when the events seemed miraculous and mysterious? Which do you like better, puzzles or solutions?
2. More than most books, *The Invention of Morel* is very different if you read it a second time. What details or seemingly unimportant moments in the book have a deeper significance once you know about Morel’s invention?
3. The narrator is rather paranoid, suspecting everyone and everything of being about to betray him to the police. Why do you think he is so “suspicious” [p. 29]? He describes his life before coming to the island as “unbearable;” what do you think made it so unbearable [p. 10]? Are there any clues in the book, or does Bioy Casares leave it vague?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*

Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*

René Daumal, *Mount Analogue*

Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*

Alberto Manguel, *The Year of Reading*

David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*

Haruki Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*

H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*

## OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

**Last Year at Marienbad**, directed by Alain Resnais; screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet (France, 1961)

## OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

**The Glass Bees**, Ernst Jünger (introduction by Bruce Sterling)

**Count d'Orgel's Ball**, Raymond Radiguet (introduction by Jean Cocteau)

**Asleep in the Sun**, Adolfo Bioy Casares (introduction by James Sallis)

**Fancies and Goodnights**, John Collier (introduction by Ray Bradbury)

4. Why doesn't the narrator ever seem to notice, or suspect, that the images can't see or hear him? He always has some other explanation for why Faustine or the other people don't respond to him. Does this seem reasonable or unreasonable to you?
5. There are a lot of strange descriptions of ordinary things in this book, for example describing a trial as the "ceremonies or conferences" necessary to send someone to jail [p. 11]. Do you have any favorite examples of descriptions in this book that make you see something in a new way?
6. Bioy Casares includes an "editor" in the book, who adds footnotes to the narrator's story. How do these notes change your response to the story? In his first note, the editor corrects the narrator; near the end, he corrects the narrator again but is obviously wrong [p. 12; p. 95]. Do you trust the editor or not? Do you trust the narrator? What would that mean in a book like this?
7. The book is constructed as a mirror, with things in the first half being duplicated in the second half: the narrator's researches [pp. 14, 82]; the Japanese cruiser Namura [pp. 10, 95]; even a duplicated paragraph, admitting that he has been accused of "duplicity" [pp. 12, 95]. What other doublings and repetitions do you notice? How do they reinforce the themes of the book?
8. Morel is in some ways a double of the narrator: both are in love with Faustine, both aim at immortality, both are capable of murder or suicide [pp. 99–100]. This suggests a parallel between Morel's invention and the book: as the narrator admits, "If one day the images should fail, it would be wrong to suppose that I have destroyed them. On the contrary, my aim is to save them by writing this diary" [p. 80]. How is *The Invention of Morel* like and unlike Morel's invention? Which works better?
9. "When I was a little boy," the narrator says, "I used to play a game with the pictures in my books: I looked at them for a long time and new objects would keep appearing in an endless succession" [p. 46]. Is that like what happens in this book? Is it more like the mysterious appearances and disappearances of the first half of the book, or more like the images and recordings as we understand them in the second half?
10. When the narrator breaks through to the blue-tiled, blue-aired room in the ceiling, he feels "ecstatic, prolonged amazement;" when he returns again, near the end of the book, he "bask[s] in that beauty" [p. 17; p. 87] but is almost unable to leave. The blue home of Morel's invention seems to be the book's image of Heaven. How is it like or unlike what you imagine as Heaven? How is the immortality granted by Morel's machine different from what it would mean to be in Heaven?
11. Near the end, the narrator imagines going in search of the real Faustine [pp. 85–86]. Is this like or unlike the narrator's earlier plans to meet Faustine while she watches the sunset? In both cases, Faustine is only an image. But does the narrator's description feel true to how it feels to try to approach someone you have fallen in love with? Are there times when other people really are like mere images?
12. At the very end, the narrator painstakingly studies the recordings of Faustine and scripts a part for himself, seeming to answer her questions and making comments she seems to reply to [p. 101]. He behaves like an actor: memorizing his lines, acting convincingly on camera. Do you think this works? Does he find immortality with Faustine? Rereading the book, what role would you script for yourself; what lines of dialogue would you insert?
13. *The Invention of Morel* is not only about the power of images; it was also inspired by the author's fascination with a movie star, Louise Brooks, and it went on to inspire the classic French movie *Last Year in Marienbad*. What does the book suggest about the nature of film or television? Are there technologies today that really are like Morel's invention?