

THE WINNERS

Julio Cortázar



Introduction by

ALASTAIR REID

Translated from the Spanish by

E LAINE KERRIGAN

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THE WINNERS

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In 1960, when Julio Cortázar's first novel, *The Winners*, was published in Buenos Aires, few readers throughout the world would have known more than a couple of names of writers from the South American continent. Even for Latin Americans, the idea of a literature common to all the countries of that disparate continent remained something of a visionary notion: tariff barriers kept books from freely circulating, and writers were read mostly within their own frontiers. Borges himself remained relatively unknown outside Argentina until 1961, when he shared the International Publishers' Prize with Samuel Beckett.

But by the end of the Sixties this state of affairs had changed radically. Extraordinary novels by younger Latin American writers cropped up throughout the decade—José Donoso's *Coronation*, Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Time of the Hero* and *The Green House*, Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers*—and this sudden flowering caught the immediate

attention of publishers in Europe and North America, so that the books appeared in other languages with little delay. Indeed two new novels were to prove influential far beyond Latin America: Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*.

The novelists of the Boom, as it came to be called, were deeply familiar with the experiments that had been done on the French and English novel earlier in the century, and yet for them this work did not offer a model so much as an opening: it gave them the freedom to reinvent themselves. Closer to hand lay the example of Borges. It was he who showed them that language, instead of simply reflecting reality, re-created it, like a magic wand—a lesson that all these writers took to heart, and none more than Cortázar. Besides that, the vast and vivid past of Latin America, as well as its troubled present, lay before them like an immense unwritten book, and they rose with zest to its dawning possibilities. In a many-layered language James Joyce had re-created his Dublin from the remove of exile. So Cabrera Infante, exiled in London, re-created his Havana, while Cortázar, in Paris, did the same for Buenos Aires.

Born in 1914, Cortázar was the elder brother of the novelists of the Boom. Endlessly curious, speculative, and inventive, he was extremely well read in the European languages, and he had a chameleonlike ability to move easily and suddenly between different literary modes—poems, fantasies, novels, anti-novels, stories, and written games, all kinds of adventures in language. He rejected the constraints of literary convention as instinctively as he did those of Perón's Argentina. He broke down walls. Cortázar believed that, given the elusive nature both of perception and of language, we inhabit a web of self-creation and self-deception, in a shifting dialogue with ourselves, with others, and with language itself. Consciousness is for him a state of constant becoming, "a sponge through which the fish of memory swim in and out."

When *The Winners* first came out, it was in the very van of the new Latin American writing. But for readers its life was somewhat curtailed by the appearance, three years later, of *Hopscotch*, a book that completely overturned the remaining conventions of the novel, and so came to overshadow its predecessor. *Hopscotch* and the series of brilliant texts that followed it made Cortázar an important influence on writers everywhere. And on readers—for *Hopscotch* made them participants in the book's becoming by inviting them to rearrange its sections in different sequences. Just as Borges's enclosed linguistic universes anticipated the Internet, *Hopscotch* foreshadowed the interactive novel of today.

Compared to *Hopscotch*, *The Winners* appears to be a conventional novel, and yet that appearance is deceptive. The book's working out is hardly conventional or calculable. The plot, it is true, is based on a well-worn fictional subgenre—the sea story, in which a range of very disparate people are brought together on a common journey—and the characters, who have won tickets in a lottery to go on a cruise and to take a companion with them, are initially presented as types, drawn from the many layers of a stratified Buenos Aires. But the book's deliberately problematic aspect is signaled on the first page, where Cortázar quotes Dostoevsky: "What is an author to do with ordinary people, absolutely ordinary, and how can he put them before his readers so as to make them at all interesting?" *The Winners* is Cortázar's answer to Dostoevsky's question—a chart of the ravelings and unravelings of human consciousness in its pervasive fiction-making.

The novel is full of allusions to the Buenos Aires of its day, but Cortázar always disclaimed having any overtly political, much less allegorical, intentions in it. For the passengers gathered in a café prior to departure at the start of the book, the voyage holds out a prospect of freedom from restraints and habits, the hope of surprise, of transformation; but then the

ship, its crew, and its destination are at that point all still unknowns. The passengers expect to find out more about them shortly, but no sooner have they boarded the *Malcolm* than it turns out that much of the ship, with its invisible authority and distantly formal crew, is forbidden to them. And as the voyage proceeds, things grow less rather than more clear; the proportion of the unknown to the known becomes ever vaster—for the reader as much as for those on board. Expectations crumble, plot founders, and the passengers reveal all the complexities and confusions of the real.

For Cortázar, consciousness is a recurring attempt to make order, to make a serviceable fiction out of our place in a shifting present. Self-awareness is a labyrinth. Cortázar's narrative moves episodically among the various passengers—maintaining, in effect, a log of their private voyages. It records their encounters and conversations, their impressions of each other, their mutual understandings and misunderstandings, their afterthoughts. They constantly misread one another, and constantly surprise one another, as people do. The most articulate of the passengers is certainly Persio. Living alone and working as a proofreader, he has acquired a mass of miscellaneous knowledge and a lively aesthetic eye. Each of the book's part concludes with one of his wondrous solitary meditations on deck under the stars, and in light of them the voyage of the *Malcolm* takes on a heroic cast. And yet Persio has escaped from reality into language, and his strange lucidity is no more to be taken for the truth—or as a reflection of the author—than his companions' confusions.

Readers who come to *The Winners* after *Hopscotch* will find many of that book's beginnings in the interactions of the passengers on the *Malcolm*, but it is much more than a precursor to the later novel. Returning to it now, I find I have remembered certain characters and details quite vividly—the stormy confusions of young Felipe Trejo, the cautious, wise, endearing

conversations of Medrano and Claudia as they slowly unveil one another and themselves, the blunt, good-hearted Pelusa, the ambiguities of Lopez and Raul, even Don Galo's unnamed chauffeur who never says a word. And then there are cigarettes, which have never figured more ubiquitously in a novel.

What Cortázar maps so dramatically in *The Winners* is the gulf between outer realities and the teeming character of inner lives. Outward reality, in his story, is imposed in the form of rules: it is the order that the passengers are told to accept and live by, however they may feel about it. But in the privacy of their imaginations they are free to question, to wonder, to imagine. As the voyage proceeds, this separation between inner and outer realities, between private and public worlds, leads to growing chaos, with consequences that are ultimately both absurd and disastrous. And at the end of the *Malcolm's* abortive voyage a stark official version is concocted to cover up what has happened; the voyage is made into a fiction. For the reader, however, the fiction becomes a voyage again, a crowded and absorbing voyage through the many vivid levels of Cortázar's writing.

—ALASTAIR REID