

Juan José Arreola

Juan José Arreola was born in Ciudad Guzmán, Jalisco, in 1918, the fourth in a family of 14. He never finished primary school, but learned to read simply by listening, the same way he later learned French. At the age of 12, Arreola became a bookbinder's apprentice. Then he moved on to other jobs, becoming a street salesman in his native Ciudad Guzmán, and then in Guadalajara, Manzanillo and Mexico City. All this time he continued reading Charles Baudelaire, Walt Whitman, Giovanni Papini and Marcel Schwob (Arreola credited these last two with influencing his own style). In 1936, he entered the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA) where he studied theater under dramatist Rodolfo Usigli and the poet Xavier Villaurrutia.

Arreola's first writings appeared in *El Vigía*, a Ciudad Guzmán newspaper, in 1939. He met up with Juan Rulfo and philologist Antonio Alatorre, founding with the latter the magazine *Pan*. Publication of Arreola's short story "Hizo el bien mientras vivió" (He Did Good While He Lived) in the magazine *Eos* (1943) earned him the reputation of having been born an "adult" with regard to literature. In 1945 Arreola moved to Paris, where he studied elocution and acting under Jean Barrault, Pierre Renoir and Louis Jouvet, whom he had met in Guadalajara, and later worked in the *Comédie française* as an extra.

Arreola founded and directed the book collection "Los Presentes" (Those Present), editing up to its fiftieth issue. He also founded and directed the "Unicornio" book collection, and the magazine *Mester*, which came out of his famous literature workshop, the first of its kind. This workshop was the training ground for young writers with literary interests, from which Carlos Fuentes was later to emerge. Arreola made contributions to magazines such as *Letras de México* (Mexican Letters), *El Hijo Pródigo* (The Prodigal Son) and *Universidad de México* (University of Mexico), and to

the cultural supplements of the newspaper *Novedades* and the magazine *Siempre!* He also became a professor at UNAM's School of Philosophy and Letters.

Known as a great conversationalist, one of his most famous interviews was with fellow writer, Jorge Luis Borges, whom Arreola hardly allowed to get a word in. His role as a commentator during the U.S. 1994 World Cup stirred up enormous controversy as a result of Arreola's views on soccer as a party.

Arreola has been described as a nationalistic writer, something more evident in his way of handling anecdotes rather than in the stories themselves. His idea of recovering the oral tradition as a form of literature is expressed in the novel *La feria* (The Fair), a fragmented story narrated by several voices: those of the government, of landowners and the dispossessed, all set against each other, which allows the airing of different views regarding land ownership, a recurrent problem in the history of Mexico.

A master of prose, Arreola created a new type of short story or narrative genre called "varied invention" a collage of texts of different styles, mainly poetry or prose, coherently put together. The example par excellence is *Varia invención* (Other Inventions) (1949).

Although not vast (16 books published), Arreola's work has been translated into several languages including English and French. He has received numerous awards, among them Mexico's National Prize for Linguistics and Literature in 1976, the National Prize for Journalism and the National Prize for Television Cultural Programs, as well as a decoration from the French government as an Officer of French Arts and Literature.

In 1998, at the age of 80, we pay tribute to Juan José Arreola who has been responsible for turning words into an enjoyable profession and a memorable, lasting conversation.

Translated by Jennifer Turret