

# Top 10 Latin American short stories

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Short stories: how not to despair with the unjust way they are treated in the world of British letters? From their frequent definition in terms of what they are not – *a novel* – to the reluctance of risk-averse publishers when it comes to releasing one of these not-novels into the world. The latter tendency is falling out of fashion, thank God (thanks in large part to indie presses). But the hapless short-story book is still generally referred to as a “collection” in English. Call me picky, but this has always been a problematic word for me, because it masks the fact that this kind of book – if any good – is still a coherent conceptual unit: stories don’t grow spontaneously, like weed, so that writers can simply *collect* them. What’s wrong with calling a book of short stories “a book of short stories”?

Coming both literally and literarily from Latin America, these idiosyncrasies have always puzzled me. It is in the short story that our authors excel, and this is a hill I am willing to die on. The form is valued by readers, publishers and critics alike, cherished for its close connection to storytelling as oral tradition, and second to none in the region’s canon. And if I had to choose which books to preserve on a bookshelf of posterity I would salvage this unassuming genre and toss many an oversize novel, especially those written by otherwise excellent short-story writers.

JOLTS, my latest book of short stories, is styled in the Latin American tradition but written in English, a borrowed language – in this way I have managed to straddle both and neither worlds. This is a discomfort I cherish. This feeling of sitting somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic, trying to force a dialogue between two totally different canons, and two different parts of myself, has been a constant source of inspiration. But there is always fear about what might get lost in translation. Although I have included many nods to my masters in the book, I suspect some of these could be hard to pin down for a British reader. So this is an attempt to pay explicit homage to some of the Latin American short story writers that influenced my own practice, together with others that have caught my attention in recent years. Hopefully this – incomplete – list might be a first step for any curious lover of short fiction.



### **1. Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius by Jorge Luis Borges**

Few stories better capture the power of writing than this one by Argentina's most famous literary export. Imaginary lands and imaginary planets, forged volumes of the British Encyclopaedia and forged quotes – a Borgesian favourite – come together in this tale where fiction writes itself into reality; in which one can't be told from the other.

### **2. The Llano in Flames by Juan Rulfo**

Rulfo achieved world fame with his novel Pedro Páramo but his short stories are equally worthy of attention. The Llano in Flames, from the homonymous book perfectly embodies his style: economy of prose, sensorial images that in their attention to nature greatly capture the essence of rural Mexico, characters who seem to exist beyond life and death. Rulfo only published two books in his lifetime but his influence can still be felt.

### **3. Absit by Angélica Gorodischer**

A disturbing tale of perversion and revenge in which a child narrowly escapes abuse by pushing her attacker into a construction site hole. It might sound like a spoiler but this act of karmic justice is just the beginning. That this story explores adults' capacity for wrong is clear from its opening paragraph. But are children also capable of evil? A dark but satisfying read by an Argentinian short story talent which deserves to be read more widely.

### **4. The Trail of Your Blood in the Snow by Gabriel García Márquez**

Better known for his immortal novel One Hundred Years of Solitude, the Colombian García Márquez was also the author of outstanding short stories. In this one, a wealthy couple on their honeymoon in Europe go through a dramatic, Kafkaesque ordeal, taking the reader on a suffocating journey. Legend has it Borges said that 50 years would have sufficed for One Hundred Years of Solitude, but not one word is a word too many in this magnificent story.

### **5. Perfumada Noche (Scented Night) by Haroldo Conti**

A beautiful ode to life, love, and death in a small town in the Province of Buenos Aires. Unlike his novel Southester but along with much of his work, this story remains untranslated into English. Conti was disappeared by the Argentinian military junta in 1976. Before this tragic end he gifted us in Perfumada Noche one of the most evocative opening sentences ever written: "The life of a man is a miserable draft, a handful of sorrows that fit in just a few lines."



▲ Miraculous ... Clarice Lispector in Rio de Janeiro, circa 1964. Photograph: Paulo Gurgel Valente

## 6. **The Fifth Story by Clarice Lispector**

It is nothing short of miraculous that all of Lispector's short fiction is available in English. Choosing a single story by one of Latin America's finest writers is a cruel exercise but a great entry point to her work is *The Fifth Story*, from her book *The Foreign Legion*. All her most interesting traits are there: a certain linguistic strangeness, the subversion of domestic space, the sadistic brutality of everyday life, and the metafictional bent that would explode in her later works.

## 7. **Letter to a Young Lady in Paris by Julio Cortázar**

Reading Cortázar's *Bestiario* as a teenager was my literary "listening to the Sex Pistols" moment. I devoured the book from cover to cover and ran to my mother's Olivetti to start churning out my own short stories. Some of these early attempts still exist in my box of memories but needless to say none of them is as good as *Letter to a Young Lady in Paris*, from this extraordinary book. A flat swap starts to go wrong when our hero, who writes the missive of the title, starts vomiting bunnies that proceed to destroy the flat. Sounds strange? Welcome to Cortázar's world.

## 8. **Las amapolas también tienen espinas (Poppies Also Have Thorns) by Pedro Lemebel**

Criminally underpublished in English, *Lemebel*, is one of Chile's most singular voices. Gay, mestizo, working class and communist, it would be hard to find a more unlikely survivor of the Pinochet years. His *crónicas* of the Santiago of the 70s, 80s, and 90s, are brutal yet endearing documents of lives lived in the margins. In this story from his *La esquina es mi corazón* (*The Corner is My Heart*) Lemebel tells a tale of desire, class and violent homophobia. And he does so endearingly, honestly, and with characteristic dark humour. Lemebel as a transvestite *flâneur* is an exceptional guide to the Latin American city.

## 9. **Sky and Poplars by Margarita García Robayo**

*Fish Soup* by the Colombian García Robayo is a remarkable recent genre-bending effort, that brings together short stories and two novellas. A deadpan beat runs through the whole book – at times you find yourself giggling at things, only to question yourself a second later whether you should really be laughing about that. *Sky and Poplars* is in my opinion where she best displays her craft. In it, romantic and familial unspoken tragedies meet gentrification, to portray a suffocating world of angst and alienation.

[Tessa Hadley's top 10 short stories](#)



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## **10. Towards Happy Civilisation by Samanta Schweblin**

In this story from the understated Mouthful of Birds we follow the misadventures of a city-dweller stuck in a provincial train station, trying to return to the capital. The apparently simple act of boarding a train is complicated here to an absurd degree. At times Beckettian riff, at times criticism of the state of the Argentinian railways post-neoliberalism, at times commentary on the civilisation v barbarism binary behind Argentinian identity, this is a story that will unsettle and amuse in equal measure.

JOLTS by Fernando Sdrigotti is published by Influx Press on 30 April.

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