

THE WINNERS

Julio Cortazar

Overview Julio Cortazar was a prolific Argentinian writer, living much of his life in France, and skilled in the relations and game playings between Spanish and French. (He was for a long time a teacher of French, which assured a solid underpinning to his bilinguality.) He wrote a great variety of genres: short stories; novels, translations in abundance, from American, British, and English literature; and fantasy travel books. He was particularly known for his contributions to imaginative experiment in the novel. In *Hopscotch* (1963) the reader is invited to choose, at the end of the text, between a linear and a non-linear reading of the work. Cortazar moved daringly into the uses, for the novel, of 'stream of consciousness' prose, in the fashion of Joyce, into the associated techniques of interior monologue, and later into improvisatory techniques borrowed from jazz—with which Cortazar was deeply familiar from his time in Paris. He also played off against the mystifying trajectories of such French nouveau-roman authors as Robbe-Grillet. The novel of interest to us here is the first novel published by Cortazar, and does not therefore 'experiment' in the manner familiar from his later work. But *The Winners* startles us with another kind of daring, a sense of chance, fate, and the bewildering conditions that go to constructing daily life.

Story

The Winners was the first novel by Julio Cortazar, and the first to be published in the United States, in 1960. Readers of the author's daring fictional experiments such as the novel *Hopscotch* and the filmscript *Blow-Up* will find *The Winners* surprisingly conventional in structure; but the form will prove deceptive. Upon closer reading, *The Winners* will prove to be a masterly novel of ideas, sparkling with vivid satire on chance and destiny as constructors of human events. The initial proposition of the book sounds implausible, and it forces us to focus, from the start, on the question of chance. A group of lottery-prize winners is on a celebratory cruise that has been planned by the state. The passengers are an exuberant, diverse mixture, aglow in the excitement of unspecified but promised prizes, *premios*. The fact is, however, that no one aboard knows anyone else. It is as though a random assortment of characters is being taken on a mystery trip; there being an element of primal thrill.

But just before departure, as if to stress the unpredictable nature of the journey, the ship is changed from a luxury cruiser to the freighter *Malcolm*. From the beginning there seems to be 'something wrong' with the trip. No one on board will reveal the ship's destination; the stern is declared off limits. It is made clear—this is the only public announcement on the matter—that the stern is off limits for the passengers. An unspecifiable anxiety begins to spread among the passengers, and nothing is done to alleviate their worries. One thinks, across the centuries, back to the fifteenth century German allegorical writer, Sebastian Brand, whose *Ship of Fools* chaotically lacks a competent pilot, and whose thinking has its roots in Plato's *Republic*, where the folly of leaderlessness is bitterly excoriated.

Suspicion that the ship is contaminated with a plague induces divisions among the passengers. The suspicions are based on pure gossip. Some are ready to believe the worst, others are skeptical. The "war" party wants to challenge the crew and demand the truth, perhaps even a quarantine; the "peace" party is playing it cooler, waiting until more evidence is assembled.

Among the major characters—who become spokespeople for the narration, and whose attitudes firmly shape the way we respond to the allegorical tale-- is Persio, a proofreader and dreamer,

who encompasses the bewilderment of the entire passenger group, but who is driven by the course of circumstances to reflect with unique profundity, on the accidental characteristics of the human adventure. His passionate monologues often serve as narrative commentary on the events of the tale. Persio also becomes the vehicle for some of the most lyrical and powerful prose evocations that Cortazar has ever written.

The tension of the forbidden stern finally overcomes all sense of 'obedience' in the passengers, and they determine to find out what is concealed in the forbidden area. A confrontation ensues between the passengers and crew. Characterizations deepen into extravagant portraits of humanity; isolated and fearful individuals act as if unrelated to one another. Plans are made to break through to the stern of the *Malcolm* in defiance of the crew. In thinking through their drives, to reach the secret of the stern, the passengers find in the stern itself a vision of their past and a clue to their destination. In relationships born of desperation, the travelers achieve a special kind of communion with one another. The novel drives the reader to a point of living mystery and speculation, and leaves everything to chance.

The Winners is a powerful allegory, both comic and lyrical in the tradition of Latin American social realism. Characterizations are so numerous they are sometimes bewildering, but then character is less important here than fate.

As Cortazar once explained in an interview, *The Winners* is not (despite what it achieves) meant to be an allegory, but "an exercise in style." It is from the outset on a mission to unbalance the reader's sense of direction and purpose. The cosmic speculations of Persio, a modern day book keeper, but a speculator after the model of a mediaeval astronomer—Tycho Brahe?—carry the reader, and even Persio, beyond any place the narration designs for him.

Themes

One theme of the novel is that mankind remains open, for all its losses, to the hope for great prizes and mysterious rewards. From the outset of the novel, as we see the offering-prize winners assemble, we mutely accept our commonality with them. We too are lottery drawers, astrologers, mystics ready to sail out onto seas, on journeys parts of the meanings of which will clouded from us.

A second theme is that once our collective appetites are whetted, for discovering the meanings of a mystery that has caught us up, we allow tensions-to-know to build up inexorably inside us, until—if it plays this way—we feel ultimately driven to take dangerous actions, to satisfy our desires for the whole truth.

Characters

Persio Persio is a beacon in the often murky excitement of this book, which is itself full of uncertainty and longing. Persio is a loner, susceptible to the long dark nights at sea, given to dreams and visions about the long passage of humanity. He is short, quiet man, who constantly steers Cortazar's narrative in the direction of the book's central meanings.

Gabriel Gabriel Medrano is a dentist and womanizer, and a frequent critic of life on the *Malcolm*. He sides with those who do not accept the official explanation for why part of the ship is quarantined off—that there has been an outbreak of typhus. When a young boy on board comes down ill, Medrano decides that the unsatisfactory response of the ship's authorities requires an aggressive entry into the restricted areas of the ship. He breaks into the radio room and forces the operator to send a message to Buenos Aires about the young man's condition. The radio operator then kills Medrano, and the passengers are asked to sign a statement that Medrano died of typhus instead of gunshot wounds.

MAJOR CHARACTER

PERSIO introvert

Overview Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) was born in Brussels, child of Argentine diplomatic parents, and after the War, in 1919, returned to live in his native Argentina. His father left the family home when Julio was six, and he was raised by his mother in a suburb of Buenos Aires. (He says he spent most of his childhood time in bed, reading.) In his late teens he obtained a teaching certificate, and went on to teach French in Argentinian high schools, and to work both as a translator and for UNESCO in France. Three times involved in deep romantic relationships, he was a fervent supporter of Castro's Marxist Cuba. He died leaving behind a rich body of novels, stories and essays, and figures as one of the decisive creators of the Latin American literary Boom.

Character Eighteen residents of Buenos Aires win a lottery, which entitles them to a cruise vacation. (Destination unknown to the winners.) As the group assembles, at a restaurant in downtown Buenos Aires, we become conscious of one person who has not yet arrived—who went back to get things. It is Persio, questionably a relative of one of the winners, and a proof reader for a large company in the city. Persio is a kind of mystic and outsider, an explorer of remote possibilities, whose presence punctuates the novel, in the form of soliloquies or interjections, which carry the mundane conversations of the people—who are 'cross-section normal'—onto more evolved planes.

Parallels Persio is a down to earth proofreader, used to looking closely at details, and at the same time an on-the-margins figure with mysterious insights into reality. The formula is hard to replicate: in Homer one finds Circe, a magician who enchants Odysseus and his men, and in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (429 B.C.) Teiresias, who is a seer and prophet, his eyes fixed on the deeper reality in the daily; In Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1610) we meet Sycorax, a magic wielding female indigene, and Prospero, the Duke of Milan and a sorcerer, who holds airy control over the reality on his island. One cannot forget, in this list, a wizard like Harry Potter (star of a series of books, the first out in 1997), who lives both in our daily world and mysteriously beyond it.

Illustrative moments

Mysterious Persio is being awaited, as the small group of lottery winners assembles in the London café. His distant relative, Claudia, has an idea where he is: he has probably remembered some 'item he had forgotten to lock up in his mysterious room in Chacarita, where he accumulated books on occultism and manuscripts of his own which would probably never be published.' This 'nocturnal stroller along the waterfront and streets' of his quartier seems, according to Claudia, to be particularly in need of a rest. Suddenly, at the last minute, Persio arrives. What does he bring? 'News from the star.'

Mystical Persio shares an in-language—code, trendy, private—with Claudia's child, Jorge. 'I have news of the octopod,' says Persio, settling into private talk with Jorge. This mysterious octopod seems to 'live' in Persio's typewriter, and is complaining that Persio is going on a trip without him. Jorge asks what the octopod will eat, while Persio is away, and is told, by Persio: 'matches, lead from pencils, telegrams, and a can of sardines.' We need no more introduction to the kind of guy Persio is: private, witty, whimsical, addicted to mysteries. Reminded that he may want to look at the stars, from shipboard, Persio remarks that he has 'star telepathy.'

Speculative While the assembling company stands waiting, outside the London café in Buenos Aires, Persio observes them in all their randomness, and extrapolates views of the multiple meanings the upcoming voyage can have. 'He does not know any more about the rules of the game than they do, but he feels that they are in the process of being born from every one of the players, as on an infinite chessboard between mute opponents.' He observes this mixture, verging on the dreadful, and can still compare it to a 'comedy of squirrels.'

Speculative Both Claudia and Jorge press Persio to tell them what kind of constellation of forces he sees emerging from the random human collection assembling for the present cruise. He replies that he sees a harmony and rhythm forming from the group, and feels that the struggle to form, from within the group, will be as tearing as the struggle of the stars to form their own harmonies. 'On certain nights I've lived through the war of the stars, an unbearable game of tensions.' 'What games will we all play,' he wonders, as he casts ahead of him the joss sticks of possibility.

Imagining As the ship fills and the engine begins to awaken, Persio feels himself inside a giant beast. Not leaving his cabin, 'Persio already knows what the ship is like, that it is surrounded at this azimuthal moment by two stubborn, dirty tugboats which are going to lure the big mother, copper and iron...pulling her off away from the magnetism of the dock.' Not much later, Persio is (in mind) on the captain's bridge, peering from the commander's tiny window onto the harbor, the receding dock, the intersections of masts, in short onto a cubist painting which the captain himself is constructing by seeing it.

Discussion questions

Does Persio's profession, proof reader, seem to fit especially well with his speculative and prophetic insight into the world? What connection do you see between these two aspects of his life?

How do Persio's fellow travelers view him? Is he an inspiration to them, or simply an oddity?

Of what importance is it, to the meaning of this story, that it takes place on shipboard?