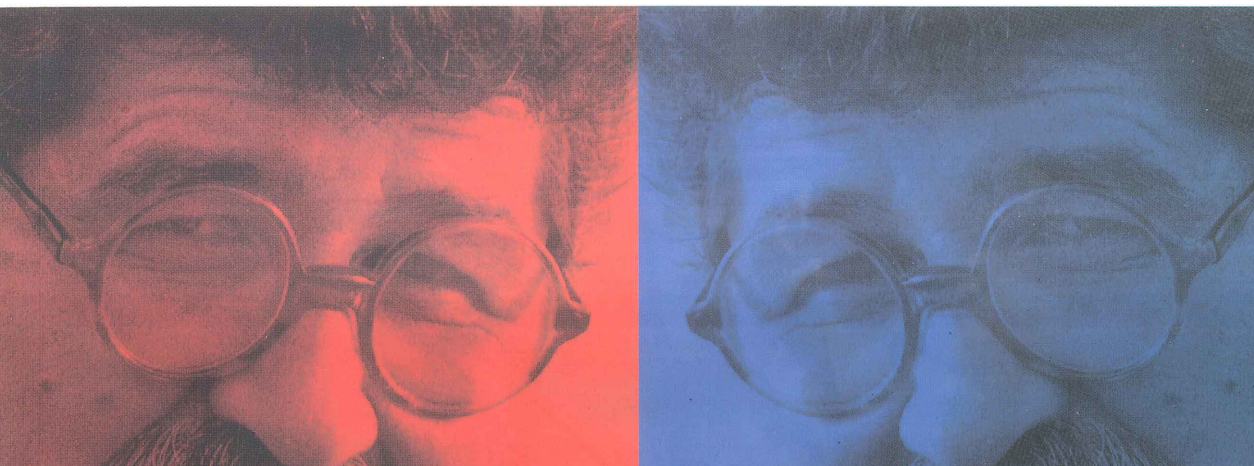


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Editores



## Capítulo 19

# LOS MUNDOS DE ALFREDO BRYCE ECHENIQUE

Nuevos textos críticos



PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DEL PERÚ / FONDO EDITORIAL 2004

*Los mundos de Alfredo Bryce Echenique (nuevos textos críticos)*

Primera edición: setiembre 1994

Segunda edición: enero 2004

Tiraje: 500 ejemplares

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ISBN: 9972-42-579-7  
Hecho el Depósito Legal N° 1501052003-3008

Impreso en el Perú - Printed in Peru

# What he Learned from the Servants

Robert Houston

Twenty-three years after its publication in Spanish, this masterpiece of Latin American fiction, which has been translated into many other languages, is finally available in English. It is *A World for Julius*, and its author, Alfredo Bryce Echenique, who has lived in Europe for many years has been called «the best writer in Peru» by the noted translator Gregory Rabassa (Make room, Mario Vargas Llosa). The novel is well worth the wait.

The reasons it has taken so long for Mr. Bryce Echenique's work to be translated are perhaps understandable: *A World for Julius* is not magic realism; it takes place not in the jungles or the mean streets or the fortresses of dictators but in the palaces of Lima's superrich. We first encounter Julius when he's barely 2 years old, just after his father has died. He's the youngest of four children and lives in a cavernous mansion with his mother, the always lovely, English-educated Susan; Julius's mother is addicted to long afternoon naps and is so devoid of self that she discovers one day that her signature changes every time she writes it.

The time is the late 1940's and the 1950's, when American investment dollars (and Americans) are pouring into Peru and the old aristocratic families are becoming international jet-setters. Jug-eared, skinny, fascinated by the off-limits servants' quarters, puzzled by almost everything, sentimental and achingly lonely, Julius spends his afternoons in the crumbling carriage that once belonged to his great-grandfather, the President of the Republic, playing cowboys and Indians with the servants, whose job it is to fall down whenever Julius wants them to.

Julius's world is already Americanized, and getting more so. He's educated by American nuns, who teach only in English. He's chauff-

feured to school in a huge Mercury station wagon. His mother's always handsome new husband, «Uncle» Juan Lucas, drives a Jaguar, lives for golf, drinks Scotch, has fresh orchids flown in directly from his plantations and is best friends with his business partner, Lester Lang 3d, of Boston and New York. While Juan Lucas and Susan live as if they were characters in an American film—flying off to London, New York or Madrid, making endless rounds of elegant nightspots and dinner parties—their youngest child is left to the *mestizo* and black servants.

It is through them that Julius learns what he knows of his other world, the only one in which he's central to anyone. Susan, whom he adores, floats in and out of his life in perfumed mist of loveliness. His oldest brother, Santiago, goes off to the United States to school; his sister, Cinthia, his one real emotional anchor, disappears there for medical treatment, never to return; his other brother, Bobby, spoiled and disaffected, is virtually a sociopath. Only the servants care for him, but as Juan Lucas embarks on an elaborate building project for a new mansion in the suburbs, these humble people, the ones Julius is closest to, are discarded as casually as the old furniture. He is left more alone than ever, powerless in the midst of immense power.

Like the best of Dickens's novels, *A World for Julius* is a great, fat book that completely engages a reader with its characters and places—so completely that one reads with that often forgotten childhood pleasure of entering an all-encompassing, almost fairy-tale country of the imagination. One reads slowly, hoping the story will never end. Yet the novel is as complex as it is broad. In its disregard of the «proper» role of an author and of the «rules» of point of view, in its use of stream-of-consciousness narration, it is unabashedly and successfully post-modern. But Mr. Bryce Echenique understands that the techniques he has employed are merely tools, that a novelist's first and last task is to move and delight.

In his preface, the book's translator, Dick Gerdes (who has provided a clear but sometimes clunky rendition of Mr. Bryce Echenique's dauntingly slangy, free-flowing Spanish), points out that the novel brings together «elements of the drama of lost innocence, black comedy of manners, playful parody and social satire». So it does—and wonderfully. But its portrait of an amoral, insulated upper class also sends a deadly warning. Listen, Mr. Bryce Echenique is saying, prophetically: Outside the serene gardens and

thick walls of the wealthy, hear the hushed footsteps of all those invisible people. They are out there, on their Shining Paths, still gathering speed.

[*The New York Times Book Review*, January 24, 1993:9]