

The Reader

By ReadWorks

It was a stormy Thursday evening, much like any other, when Jorge hung the “Do Not Disturb” sign outside his bedroom door. The sign was part of an agreement he had with his parents. Jorge’s parents were big believers in personal privacy and would do their best not to bother him when that sign was on his door. In return, Jorge never put the sign on the door unless all of his chores were completed and he had finished his homework.

Closing the door behind him, Jorge turned back into his bedroom. The navy blue walls glowed in the lamplight as his feet padded across soft carpet to the tall steel bookshelves that lined the side of the room. Jorge ran his finger across the spines of the books neatly lined up like soldiers at attention. What did he want to read this evening? Jorge loved this moment of anticipation, when he hadn’t yet decided what he wanted to read and the evening held unforeseen adventures. It was almost better than the actual moment when he sank into his armchair and disappeared into the foreign, exciting world of a new book. Almost.

Some people read books to glean information. Others read books to improve themselves. Finally, there are those people who read books to escape. Jorge was part of this third group of readers. It wasn’t that Jorge’s life was especially horrible. He had friends whom he played basketball with every week, and he liked his classmates at school. But Jorge felt like his life was lived in shades of gray, while the books he read were in bright, vivid Technicolor. There just wasn’t much happening in his small, Midwestern town. There were thirty-nine kids in his ninth-grade class; they were the same thirty-nine kids who had been in his kindergarten class. They would probably be the same thirty-nine people in his senior class. Jorge loved his parents, but they were both accountants and had been doing the same job every day of his entire life. They weren’t exactly the stuff of intrigue and adventure.

Jorge’s favorite books were about spies. Reading about counter-terrorism units and political assassins made his heart race, in a good way. But on this particular Thursday, Jorge wasn’t in the mood for spy novels. He let his hand drift past them and skipped over the science fiction. None of his usual favorites appealed to him today.

Jorge was about to turn away from the bookshelf in surrender when he glimpsed a battered leather book on one of the bottom shelves. The book was so old that the gilded title on the spine had worn off. Jorge gently pulled the book out and opened it. He slowly flipped through the delicate, yellowed pages to the title page. “The Armchair Traveler,” by Herman Castillo, Jorge read. He didn’t recognize the title or the author. His grandfather had sent a box of old books to Jorge last month, and this book must have been in that pile. Perhaps his mother or father had placed it on the shelf.

“Well,” Jorge thought to himself, “this is definitely better than going downstairs to help wash the dishes.” He went to his armchair and settled into a comfortable position against the

smooth, caramel leather. He pulled the lamp closer to light the pages. Then, comfortably situated and ready to begin, Jorge opened the book.

The first page after the title only had a single word on it: “Beware.” The writing was bold and black, a warning. Goosebumps rose on Jorge’s arms, but he turned the page, eager to read on. Two sentences, in italics, sat in the middle of the second page: *“Those who travel from the safety of an armchair like to think they are safe. They are wrong.”*

Jorge smiled in satisfaction. He wasn’t quite sure what those sentences meant, but they sounded promisingly threatening. “Now this is more like it,” he thought. “This is the kind of beginning a mysterious thriller should have.”

Jorge flipped the page again to the beginning of Chapter 1.

Outside rain poured and thunder boomed but inside the house it was warm and dry. Suddenly, there was a knock at the window—

Jorge jumped as he heard a loud noise outside. He looked up at the window, but it was just the wind knocking a tree branch against the windowpane. Jorge turned his attention back to the page.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the window. George knew better than to open the window on a dark and stormy night, however. Strange things had been happening in town recently. People had been disappearing, some of them from the safety of their own homes. No one ever saw anyone leave, but every morning more and more houses were empty. It was enough to make a man refuse to answer a knock on the window on a stormy night.

BANG! Jorge jumped as the tree branch hit his window again. He began to wish he had chosen another book to read, but somehow he just couldn’t bring himself to put this one down. He continued down the page.

The knocking stopped and George hoped that whoever it had been would move along to the next house. He turned back to the bookshelves that lined his room, neatly lined with his favorite novels. He selected one and was about to begin reading when he heard a long, groaning creak. It seemed to come from behind the bookshelves, but that was impossible. The wall behind the bookshelves was solid stone. Still George reached out and pushed, tentatively, on the bookshelf. It swung open to reveal a secret passage. George knew the passage hadn’t been there that morning.

Jorge sighed happily. He loved stories that began with secret passages, and this one looked like it would be good. Before he could continue reading, however, he heard a noise. Not just any noise, but a long, groaning creak. Jorge lifted his eyes to the bookshelves on the other side of the room. He could have sworn that the sound came from the bookshelf. He got up, slowly, and approached. This was crazy; he knew there was nothing behind the bookshelf. He had bought the shelf with his father and put it against the solid plaster wall of his bedroom. But still, Jorge reached out to push the bookshelf. He watched as, slowly but surely, the bookshelf swung open. Behind it was a long, dark passage.

A blast of cold air rushed up from the passage and hit Jorge in the face. He looked down at the book in his hand. He looked at the dark tunnel. He could see a gleam of light somewhere farther down the tunnel. Jorge took a deep breath and stepped hesitatingly into the passage. The bookshelf suddenly slammed shut behind him, cutting him off from his bedroom. He rushed to push it open, but the bookshelf wouldn't budge. Jorge held the book tightly and steeled his nerves. If he couldn't go back, he could only go forward. Jorge began walking away from his bedroom, away from his armchair and the comfort of his home. Each step took him farther into the dark and mysterious tunnel.