

Julian Barnes

BY REBECCA FOSTER

“Writers should have the highest ambition: not just for themselves, but for the form they work in,” Julian Barnes told the British Council in 2011. “I believe that the best art tells the most truth about life.” Over the past 35 years, Barnes, with his trademark gentle charm, has strived to understand history and identity through the prism of art. His 21 books—including novels, short story collections, a memoir, and essay collections—incorporate a wide variety of subjects and techniques. Yet each work also asks fundamental questions about the relationship between truth and fiction, art and life. But no matter the subject, Barnes told the *Paris Review*, the novelist’s job is to “pay the closest attention you can[:] you look, you listen, you ask, you imagine” (No. 157, Winter 2000). Whether he writes about cooking, academia, Flaubert, hot-air ballooning, Englishness, death, or Bible stories, Barnes never writes the same book twice.

His highly intellectual work, often written in a shifting style and form, also frequently revolves around themes of history, reality, truth, memory, love, loss, jealousy, death, and subjectivity. Always versatile, he seeks out a different perspective or an unusual angle; he is not known for taking the easy way out. By reexamining narratives from different perspectives (as he does with the three narrators of *Talking It Over* [1991]), Barnes reveals the subjective nature of truth and memory. A number of his books have three-part, linked structures, with the last section returning full circle to the beginning. Some critics have even compared Barnes to Vladimir Nabokov and Italo Calvino for his experimental styles.

Born in Leicester in 1946 and raised in London, Barnes studied modern languages at Oxford. He came to writing literature relatively late, after he had worked as a lexicographer, reviewer, literary editor, and television critic. His first book, *Metroland* (1980), a novel that won the Somerset Maugham Award, is somewhat autobiographical in its story

about a young man from London who travels to Paris to study.

Indeed, French culture is never far from Barnes’s heart. Both of his parents were French teachers, so it is little surprise that he has been an inveterate Francophile, starting with his first visit to the country as a teenager. Again and again, his books return to French settings and topics; for instance, French writer Gustave Flaubert is the subject of his breakthrough novel, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), as well as of a number of his essays, and many of the short stories in *Cross Channel* (1996) take place in France. Barnes is as beloved in France as in his native Britain, so much so that he is sometimes considered a European author rather than specifically British. The French Ministry of Culture honored him three times for contributions to the arts, culminating with their highest distinction, *Commandeur de L’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, in 2004; Barnes has received honors from other European countries as well.

Despite such acclaim, for almost 25 years, Barnes was a “Booker bridesmaid”; he was nominated three times for the Man Booker Prize without ever winning it. Over the years he had been publicly dismissive of the prize, remarking that “novelists had better conclude that the only sensible attitude to the Booker is to treat it as posh bingo” (*London Review of Books*, 11/12/87). In 2011, however, he finally won the £50,000 prize for *The Sense of an Ending* (2011).

Much of Barnes’s work is unapologetically highbrow. However, under the alias Dan Kavanagh he also wrote, between 1980 and 1987, four detective mysteries starring Duffy, a bisexual ex-cop in London. The pseudonym came from his wife, literary agent Pat Kavanagh, to whom he was married for nearly 30 years. Her death in 2008, following a fast-acting brain tumor, helps to account for the ascendance of grief and death as topics in Barnes’s more recent work.

Below we sample some of Barnes’s most successful and representative works.



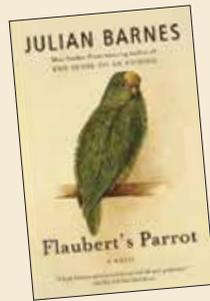
THE NOVELS

Flaubert's Parrot (1984)

- ◆ GEOFFREY FABER MEMORIAL PRIZE
- ◆ BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST

English doctor Geoffrey Braithwaite is an expert on Gustave Flaubert. Poring over the 19th-century French novelist and intellectual's correspondence and biography, Braithwaite becomes obsessed with seemingly minute details. Why did Emma Bovary's eye color change in subsequent editions of *Madame Bovary*? Which parrot inspired "A Simple Heart"—the one Flaubert borrowed from Rouen Museum to keep on his desk during the story's composition, or another one? This dazzling metafictional mystery (or literary biography or meditation on fiction, since the novel is many things at once) engages with literary criticism at the same time that it turns it on its head. Barnes's third novel and his first work nominated for the Booker Prize, *Flaubert's Parrot* is also his most experimental work to date, with a fragmentary, nonlinear structure.

"[Barnes's] novel is rich in parody and parrotry, using Flaubert's words and free associations from them to write biography in subversive form. ... His book is a great success, humane and generous, full of insight and wit, rich and even prodigal in its verbal inventiveness: a book Flaubert would have scorned to write, a book well worth writing." PETER BROOKS, NEW YORK TIMES, 3/10/1985



"Readers of this novel will feel awed, I'm sure, by the range of its concerns, the thoroughness of its research, and the agility with which it covers its ground. But when there are such big themes at stake, the reader can get tired of being teased, however ever waggishly." JONATHAN COE, GUARDIAN (UK), 6/23/1989

England, England (1998)

- ◆ BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST

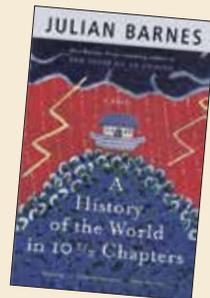
Barnes's eighth novel is a satirical, postmodern novel of ideas, a work that questions the creation and "authenticity" of history and national identity. When entrepreneur Sir Jack Pitman decides to replicate all of England's most iconic tourist attractions—Big Ben, Harrods, Beefeaters, Princess Diana's grave, Stonehenge, Jane Austen's house, and much more—in reduced form on the Isle of Wight, off the country's south coast, he fashions a kind of fantasy re-creation of Englishness. He hires Martha Cochrane to make his project, called England, England, a reality, but she and her colleague and lover, Paul Harrison, have to employ devious methods to keep Sir Jack in line. As England, England takes off, it comes to rival the original country in its power and wealth. Which is the "real" country?

"There are ... two novels in Barnes' book *England, England*. The first is a wickedly funny satire that sends up greedy developers, pompous intellectuals and conniving business tycoons; the second is a wistful, philosophical portrait of a woman trying to make sense of her life. The two novels are intercut clumsily with each other to examine familiar themes concerning the unreliability of memory and the elusiveness of the past." MICHIKO KAKUTANI, NEW YORK TIMES, 5/11/1999



A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters (1989)

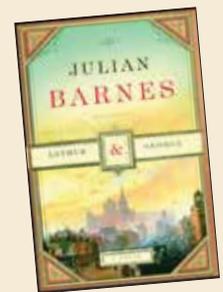
This set of linked, revisionist stories—Barnes's fifth novel—begins with the tale of a stowaway woodworm on Noah's Ark. Through very personal, marginally related tales that reflect the discord of history, the novel proceeds through the ages, all the way to the afterlife. In between, there is a hijacking on a cruise ship, a woman on a raft trying to escape radioactive fallout, the discovery of the Ark on Mount Arafat, woodworms on trial for blasphemy in 16th-century France, and much more. Lying somewhere between history and myth, this genre-bending novel built on the work of Italo Calvino and paved the way for contemporary classics like David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. Perhaps history is not a set of patterns, Barnes suggests, but simply a series of random connections.



Arthur & George (2005)

- ◆ BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST

George Edalji is an ardent advocate of English law in the late Victorian British countryside. So when he is jailed for the mutilation of farm animals in Staffordshire, it is more than an injustice—it is a test of faith. He refuses to believe his imprisonment could have anything to do with his Indian surname. By post he entreats Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, to help him prove his innocence. Doyle, mourning the death of his wife, finds the case a welcome distraction. Much more than a simple mystery, *Arthur & George*, Barnes's 10th novel, reaches into to its characters' childhoods to create a layered tale steeped



in injustice, friendship, and belief. (★★★★ **SELECTION** Mar/Apr 2006)

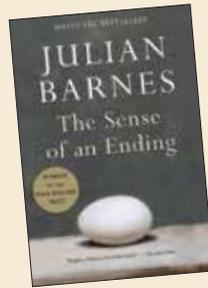
“Julian Barnes has written a deeply English novel, in the grand manner, about the sorts of existential questions the English on the whole prefer to leave to the French. *Arthur & George* conceals its contemplation of the imponderables slyly, discreetly hiding it behind the curtains while scenes of Dickensian force and color play out in firelit rooms.” TERRENCE RAFFERTY, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW,

1/15/2006

The Sense of an Ending (2011)

◆ BOOKER PRIZE

In Barnes’s acclaimed 11th novel, Tony Webster, a dull but contented retiree and divorcé, lives on the outskirts of London. He is shocked to learn that a woman he met only once, the mother of a long-ago college girlfriend, has bequeathed him a small sum of money. Stranger still is a diary that belonged to his gifted secondary school friend, Adrian Finn, who committed suicide shortly after the boys went their separate ways. Tony’s former girlfriend Veronica, however, refuses to hand over the book. Instead, she shares fragments that disconcertingly fail to correspond with Tony’s memories. As inconsistencies accumulate, Tony, looking back 40 years, resolves to understand what really happened to Adrian. (★★★★ **SELECTION** Jan/Feb 2012)

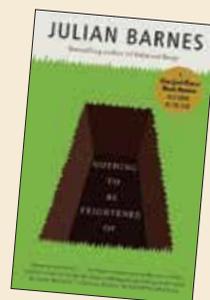


“The story’s surface is simple, polished almost to dullness and dependent on the revelation of a great secret that comes in the final pages. But what is hidden between the lines and perceived only through cracks of the controlled façade is far more chaotic—and likely to leave the reader unsettled for days after finishing this brief book.” SAM SACKS, WALL STREET JOURNAL, 10/17/2011

THE MEMOIR

Nothing to Be Frightened Of (2008)

“I don’t believe in God, but I miss him.” So opens Barnes’s memoir about his fear of death. Not only does he fret about what will happen after his demise; he also struggles with nightly dreams over the gruesome ways it could happen. Drawing on memories of his family (including



the philosopher-professor brother who calls his questions about death “soppy”) and the ideas of the (mostly French) writers he admires, Barnes attempts to come to terms with death without a deity. (He is famously an atheist.) The book has novelistic ambiguity; one can enjoy life as a story even if Barnes himself does not know how it will end. *Levels of Life* (2013), a second memoir, expresses his grief over the death of his wife through such disparate subjects as ballooning and aerial photography, to name a few. (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2009)

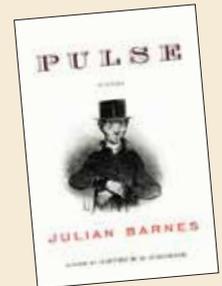
“How can you be frightened of Nothing? On this simple question Barnes has hung an elegant memoir and meditation, a deep seismic tremor of a book that keeps rumbling and grumbling in the mind for weeks thereafter.” GARRISON KEILLOR, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 10/3/2008

A STORY COLLECTION

Pulse

Stories (2011)

This collection of 14 stories, Barnes’s third, dwells chiefly on marriage and grief. Staid British relationships contrast with the fiery passion of continental lovers. “We have no equivalent for ‘coup de foudre’, the lightning strike and thunderclap of love,” writes Barnes. Yet there is a defiant belief that love is real and that the death of love, through drifting apart or the end of life itself, is a wrenching pain. “Marriage Lines” is the most clearly autobiographical story in this volume, with its main character revisiting the Outer Hebrides isle beloved to him and his wife after her cruelly speedy illness and death. Two historical tales and one almost entirely composed of dialogue reflect Barnes’s vast stylistic range.



“There is a slight doggedness to Barnes’s interest in middle-class concerns and modes of being, as though he expects to be called an apologist for them; and in these stories he makes himself somewhat vulnerable by straying into territories, of memoir and autobiography, in which that interest becomes a concrete fact . . . As for Barnes the personality, the friend and husband, the raconteur . . . exposure of these selves feels like the momentary exposure of his own roots, his workings, all somewhat raw.” RACHEL

CUSK, GUARDIAN (UK), 1/8/2011 ■