

The Only Story

Julian Barnes

“Much of the pleasure in *The Only Story* comes from the wit and verbal precision that Barnes allows his narrator. . . . Barnes’s switch from voice to voice is at once understated and dazzling.”

—*The New York Review of Books*

“The prose master paints a lovely, elegiac portrait of a young man’s disruptive love affair . . . forgoing the easy literary clichés of May-December romance for something much sadder, deeper, and more resonant.”

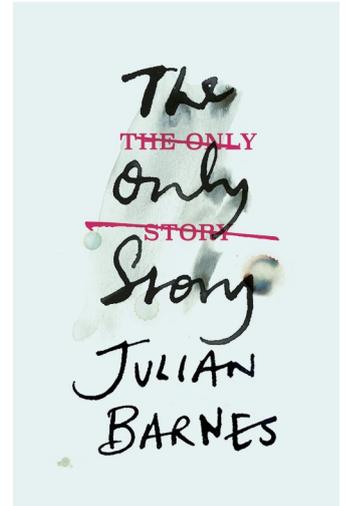
—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Beautiful. . . . Profoundly enjoyable. . . . Through his precise attention to the marvels of love and his perfect stylistic accompaniments to each state—Barnes has once again shown himself capable of transforming the mundane and ephemeral into the lyrical and lasting.”

—*Los Angeles Review of Books*

“A thought-provoking meditation on memory and the seemingly endless complexities of love. . . . Barnes’ prose is quietly elegant and adroit. . . . [*The Only Story*] has strong, memorably drawn characters and a keen sense of time and place.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*



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Brief Author Biography



Julian Barnes was born in Leicester, England on January 19, 1946. He was educated at the City of London School from 1957 to 1964 and at Magdalen College, Oxford, from which he graduated in modern languages (with honours) in 1968.

After graduation, he worked as a lexicographer for the *Oxford English Dictionary* supplement for three years. In 1977, Barnes began working as a reviewer and literary editor for the *New Statesman* and the *New Review*. From 1979 to 1986 he worked as a television critic, first for the *New Statesman* and then for the *Observer*.

Barnes has received several awards and honours for his writing, including the 2011 Man Booker Prize for *The Sense of an Ending*. Three additional novels were shortlisted for the Man

Booker Prize (*Flaubert's Parrot* 1984, *England, England* 1998, and *Arthur & George* 2005). Barnes's other awards include the Somerset Maugham Award (*Metroland* 1981), Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize (*Flaubert's Parrot* 1985); Prix Médicis (*Flaubert's Parrot* 1986); E. M. Forster Award (American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1986); Gutenberg Prize (1987); Grinzane Cavour Prize (Italy, 1988); and the Prix Femina (*Talking It Over* 1992). Barnes was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1988, Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1995 and Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2004. In 1993 he was awarded the Shakespeare Prize by the FVS Foundation and in 2004 won the Austrian State Prize for European Literature. In 2011 he was awarded the David Cohen Prize for Literature. Awarded biennially, the prize honours a lifetime's achievement in literature for a writer in the English language who is a citizen of the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. He received the Sunday Times Award for Literary Excellence in 2013 and the 2015 Zinklar Award at the first annual Blixen Ceremony in Copenhagen. In 2016, the American Academy of Arts & Letters elected Barnes as an honorary foreign member. Also in 2016, Barnes was selected as the second recipient of the Siegfried Lenz Prize for his

outstanding contributions as a European narrator and essayist. On 25 January 2017, the French President appointed Julian Barnes to the rank of Officier in the Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur. The citation from the French Ambassador in London, Sylvie Bermann, reads: 'Through this award, France wants to recognize your immense talent and your contribution to raising the profile of French culture abroad, as well as your love of France.'

Julian Barnes has written numerous novels, short stories, and essays. He has also translated a book by French author Alphonse Daudet and a collection of German cartoons by Volker Kriegel. His writing has earned him considerable respect as an author who deals with the themes of history, reality, truth and love.

Barnes lives in London.

[<http://julianbarnes.com/bio/index.html>]

Julian Barnes on suburbia

Writers are traditionally supposed to have a sense of place, aren't they? Visit Hardy's Dorset, Austen's Bath, Brontëland; take the Charles Dickens Big Red Bus Tour, and so on. This territoriality wasn't a literary impediment; rather, it concentrated their focus. As Flaubert put it, to be local is to be universal. Nowadays, with increasing global migration, the norm has changed: many novelists work from a sense of displacement, of dislocation, their protagonists spiritually split between their birthworld and subsequent destination. Instead of the writer fiercely attached to a piece of ground, we have the transglobal writer as fertile, absorbent victim (and beneficiary) of a collision of cultures, religions, languages.

I fall between these two poles. I spent my first 10 years in an inner west London suburb, my next 10 in an outer north-west suburb. I have lived abroad a little, travelled a fair amount, but essentially spent my last 45 years in and around the same tube station. Yet I certainly don't feel the genius loci of Tufnell Park very strongly. It is a congenially anonymous place to live. I enjoy its location, shops, weekly farmers' market, its access to parks, comparative quiet, and lack of knife crime; others might prioritise schools, hospitals and parking. But these are characteristics common to many inner suburbs. There is a sentimental fantasy that London consists of a spread of

interlinked "villages", each retaining its original specificity. I don't think there's much truth in this: everywhere, you see the same food chains and cafes, charity shops and bus termini; also, an astonishing number of estate agents. A Martian might conclude that these "villagers" spend their entire time drinking coffee and selling one another their flats and houses. And as a consequence, I have no sense of the great Tufnell Park novel fermenting away inside me.

On the other hand, Northwood, Middlesex, where I spent the second decade of my life and came to sentience, does seem to have affected my writing. The title of my first novel, *Metroland*, appears to invoke and celebrate the sense of place. However, despite its cosy Betjemanic associations, the point about *Metroland* – and its writerly attraction – is that from the beginning it was a kind of fake place. The name, an act of branding, was thought up by property developers and railway companies as the underground network expanded. The line wasn't built to serve existing areas; the place was invented to serve the railway. So it was a non-place full of non-traditions, where – appropriately enough – the predominant architectural style was mock Tudor. The Northwood police station, a few hundred yards from where I lived, had a birdhouse on a pole in its front garden. Even this birdhouse was mock Tudor.

Most of the breadwinners who lived there spent five days in seven getting out of the place. Work was in London. So too, for me, was school: an hour or so's journey on three different tube lines to Blackfriars. This pallid nomadism gave me a fairly strong sense of non-place. To adapt Larkin: something, like nothing, happens anywhere. Or, to adapt the prime minister, to be a citizen of nowhere much is to be a citizen of the world. Which is what a writer, consciously or unconsciously, seeks to be.

I returned to leafy, neutral, unaggressive outer suburbia – Surrey, this time – as the starting point of my latest novel, *The Only Story*. Its 20ish protagonist itches to escape from what he judges a place of spiritual torpor. But it is also a place, as he discovers, where something as well as nothing may happen. A big something, which turns out to command and oversee his entire life. I like this idea of a pale background wash, against which the rich colours of emotional action can show up more dramatically. Somewhat ruefully, I have to admit that – for me as a writer – suburbia is my kind of place.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/03/julian-barnes-on-suburbia-to-be-a-citizen-of-nowhere-much-is-to-be-a-citizen-of-the-world->]

An exquisite look at love

Like his Man Booker-winning 2011 novel *The Sense of an Ending*, and indeed his 2008 memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Julian Barnes's latest novel is narrated by an older man puzzling over the meaning of existence. All three speakers share a 1950s childhood in the "Metroland" of Barnes's debut novel, and a promising, if anxious, academic 60s youth that took them away from their suburban families. Each also has a similarly melancholy, intimate tone, a fine line in rhythmic, elegant, understated prose, and plenty to say about time, love and the slippery nature of memory.

Our new hero, Paul, places himself nearer the truth-telling memoirist Barnes than his fictional predecessor, the fascinatingly unreliable Tony Webster in *The Sense of an Ending*. Paul begins, as if in essay form, with a wide, philosophical question: "Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more, or love the less, and suffer the less?" He constantly keeps one eye on historical context, and is especially astute on architectural detail and the way money is spent; and he is always intent on making himself ordinary, a mere example of humanity. As such, he is anxiously alert not only to the problems of self-heroising, but its opposite: "There is the danger of being retrospectively anti-heroic: making yourself out to have behaved worse than you actually did can be a form of self-praise."

Tony started his story at school,

where pretentious young men jostled to score points over the history master. Paul, by contrast, opens his narrative at leisure. He is 19, down from university, and bored and aimless as he drives himself around country lanes in a Morris Minor – bought, such were the times, with his student grant. Like Tony, he has several male friends, but he is not absorbed, in the traditional Barnes fashion, in rivalries with them, nor is he desperately preoccupied with his resentment of his parents, or even, apparently, with sex. When his mother suggests he join the tennis club he assents amiably, contenting himself with just a few sour snorts about the "Hugos" and "Carolines" with whom he plays. But when, like Tony, he encounters an attractive, knowing, ironical older woman, Susan Macleod – "She is wearing her usual tennis dress, and I find myself wondering if its green buttons undo ... I have never met anyone like her before" – he does not, as Tony did, run away abashed, but partners her in the mixed doubles, drives her home, and embarks on a daring, decades-long love affair: his "only story" and the defining event of his life.

Not that the older Paul allows us to exult in his bravery or the romance. He is dry about everything: his revolutionary impulses, his rebellion against his parents, his expulsion from the tennis club, even the sex. "I can't remember when or where we

first kissed, who made the first move, or whether it was both at the same time. And whether perhaps it was not so much a move as a drift." Lovely romantic images – "love feels like the vast and sudden easing of a lifelong frown ... as if the lungs of my soul have been inflated with pure oxygen" – are tucked into asides, carefully distant from any actual encounter, and are deprecated almost at once: "I only thought like this when alone, of course."

The Sense of an Ending slides rapidly by, powered by its slippery narrator and a tight plot where every detail proves important. Paul resists such artifice: he lopes, he repeats, he gives spoilers from the start, and he refuses to sort characters according to plot, giving for example extensive space to Susan's friend Joan, who is not a significant actor in the story, and very little to Susan's daughters, who are. Susan's husband, Gordon "Elephant Pants" Macleod (nicknamed for his vast bloomers), is a potentially splendid villain: an obese, violent, bigoted golfer who chews spring onions before meals. Paul's conflict with him is central, fascinating and lasts years: yet he insists on telling us about him sidewise, occasionally, without a single spotlight moment of conflict, so that even this struggle is distanced and diffused.

All this means that the exquisite moments – and there are many – in *The Only Story* come from its psychological acuity, especially

about how we remember. In Paul's narrative, experiences deconstruct themselves and personalities decay in a devastatingly convincing way. Susan is at first an alluring, rich, potent presence, full of ironic turns of speech from which we infer great intelligence; but she becomes reduced, by the middle of the book, to a series of repetitive tropes ("A played-out generation ... this has all been frightfully interesting"), while even her nicknames, a vital part of her charm, are reduced to verbal tics: "Mr EP" for the man who hits her, "Mr Badger" for Paul. She carries on asking desperate questions until we, not just Paul, wonder if we ever knew her at all.

There is a continual, delicate play with personal nouns: Paul is "I" only when he is with his love; elsewhere, he wears himself away to a generalised "you", and at the end, a conventionalised "he" who can only flick back to his "I" at moments of extreme pain. Writing itself becomes suspect: "With your inky pen to make you hate me", scribbles Susan in Paul's diary, and her pathetic note is turned over and over in Paul's mind, logically, philosophically, in all sorts of past and possible future contexts, until neither hate nor love is left. It all seems terribly sad, and horribly true: a definitive account of how romantic love becomes trapped in its own frame and empties itself of colour and meaning.

But it does not seem necessarily the "only story" about love.

Like *The Sense of an Ending*, a book where two men kill themselves rather than become fathers, or *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, where children are summarily dismissed as a defence against the fear of death, this is in many ways a story against parenthood. Paul "often forgets" that Susan has two children. In his mind, she is to be rescued from her mothering, which he sees as "rising social acceptance combined with slow emotional diminution".

One of his most fondly remembered interludes is sitting with Susan in a car in Harley Street holding a freshly boxed diaphragm; he dismisses his contemporaries with conventional families and life-trajectories as "furore-dwellers". But Barnes is too good a writer to be equally callow. Over Paul's shoulder, and especially in his anxiously recounted fantasies, we glimpse other kinds of love, less romantic, more commonplace, but also more generative: his friend Eric's kindness; his girlfriend Anna's hopeful positivity and firmness; above all, Susan's daughter Martha's shining patience with her ill mother, which does not speak of "emotional diminution", but of family love given, at least at some point, freely and generously.

Even the terrible Gordon has his epiphany, as Susan tells Paul.

"What I hate," she says, "is

when he gets down on his knees."

"He gets down on his knees?" In his elephant pants, I think.

"Yes, it's awful, it's embarrassing, it's undignified."

"And, what, begs you to stay with him?"

"Yes. You see why I don't tell you about it?"

And she doesn't, much, but that story is here too, all the same.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/26/the-only-story-julian-barnes-review>]

