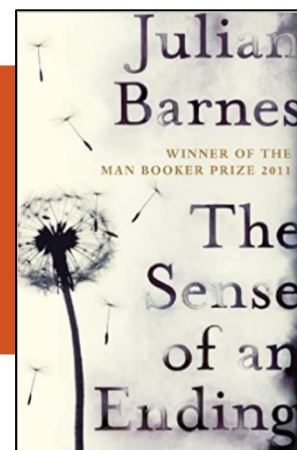




The Sense of an Ending

Julian Barnes



Author Background

Barnes was born in Leicester in 1946. Both his parents were French teachers. He was educated at the City of London School from 1957 to 1964. He then went on to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he studied Modern Languages. After graduation, he worked as a lexicographer for the Oxford English Dictionary supplement for three years. He then worked 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 won the Man Booker Prize for *The Sense of an Ending* in 2011, and three of his earlier books had been shortlisted for the Booker Prize: *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *England, England* (1998), and *Arthur & George* (2005).

Barnes is a patron of human rights organisation Freedom from Torture, for which he has sponsored several fundraising events, and Dignity in Dying, a campaign group for assisted dying.

Barnes married Pat Kavanagh, a literary agent, in 1979. After she died, Barnes wrote about his grief in an essay in his memoir, *Levels of Life* (2013).

Book Summary

Tony Webster and his clique first met Adrian Finn at school. Sex-hungry and book-hungry, they navigated the girl drought of gawky adolescence together, trading in affectations, in-jokes, rumour, and wit. Maybe Adrian was a little more serious than the others, certainly more intelligent, but they swore to stay friends forever. Until Adrian's life took a turn into tragedy, and all of them, especially Tony, moved on and did their best to forget.

Now Tony is in middle age. He's had a career and a marriage, a calm divorce. He gets along nicely, he thinks, with his one child, a daughter, and even with his ex-wife. He's certainly never tried to hurt anybody. Memory, though, is imperfect. It can always throw up surprises, as a lawyer's letter is about to prove. The unexpected bequest conveyed by that letter leads Tony on a dogged search through a past suddenly turned murky. And how do you carry on, contentedly, when events conspire to upset all your vaunted truths?

Discussion Questions

- ❖ What do you think the title means?
- ❖ The novel opens with a handful of water-related images. What is the significance of each? How does Barnes use water as a metaphor?
- ❖ Would you describe Tony Webster as an "unreliable yet sincere narrator"?
- ❖ The phrase 'Eros' and 'Thanatos', or sex and death, comes up repeatedly in the novel. What did you take it to mean?
- ❖ To what extent do you think Julian Barnes uses "peripeteia," the unexpected twist in plot, to encourage the reader to adjust their expectations?
- ❖ Discuss the character of Margaret. What role does she play in Tony's story?
- ❖ What is Tony's opinion of himself? Of Adrian? How do both opinions change by the end of the novel?
- ❖ *The Sense of an Ending* is a novel about the imperfections of memory. What insight does it give the reader into ageing and memory?
- ❖ Discuss the closing lines of the novel: "There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest."
- ❖ Is the ending unforeseen, does it leave you with a sense of unease?

References

- ❖ LitLovers: Sense of an Ending (Barnes) - <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/8626-sense-of-an-ending-barnes>
- ❖ Princeton Book Review: Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes - https://www.princetonbookreview.com/book_pages/discussion/sense-of-an-ending.php
- ❖ Wikipedia: Julian Barnes - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_Barnes