

**Barnes, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. 163 pp, E-book, \$11.99, eISBN: 978–0–307–95733–7.**

My ladies' book club has been together for twelve years and I believe we can probably count on one hand how many of those books we have *all* completed. Life is busy. Some of us have children, terminally ill parents, and demanding careers. And some months the pick is such a tedious read or the plot so circuitous that we can't properly follow it when we get those twenty minutes to read before bedtime, so we close the book.

Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* was the first book we all finished in a very long time. When we met to discuss the book we did not linger over the wine and cheese selection, filling the room with our usual (and oftentimes quite entertaining) "catch up" time. We grabbed a glass and a plate and made our way to our host's living room. Our talk began, naturally, with the ending. But that's never a good place to start a book review.

I once studied with an English professor who said one should NEVER pose the question: What is this book about? Her theory was that it diminished the work's complexity and multiple meanings; it was an insult to author and reader to reduce a work of art to a bullet list. The joy of Barnes' brief novel (163 pages – no doubt an incentive to finish; it's novella-like), if I might contradict my dear and wise former professor, is that one is urged to return to enduring universal themes of school days, family, the search for love, the sting of loss, the quest for answers, and the recognition that our memories are really fiction, no matter how hard we try to convince ourselves otherwise.

Tony Webster is our narrator, a likable and unreliable narrator, a British man who came of age in the 1960s, read History at Bristol, married, had a child, divorced, and now finds himself in his later years reflecting on where and who he has been. "Average, that's what I'd been, ever since I left school. Average at university and work; average in friendship, loyalty, love; average, no doubt at sex . . . Average at life; average at truth; morally average" (110). This late-in-life assessment has been prompted by an unexpected piece of mail from a former girlfriend's mother. The woman has left Tony with a check for five hundred pounds and the diary of an old school friend who committed suicide in his early 20s. But the diary promised from the solicitor's letter is not part of the package.

The novel is nearly evenly divided into Parts "One" and "Two." One might be tempted while reading to think "Then" and "Now" though Barnes' narrator is playing with memory, the way memory plays with us all. Tony is past middle age from the very first page, then young, then older, young again . . . the trick of memory and its fluidity. We are a sixty-five-year-old retiree at the shops getting butter and milk and then we are a young schoolboy scraping our knees from a fall on the way home from school, all in a blink. When reflecting on a letter sent as a youth to his ex-girlfriend's new suitor, Tony says, "I must stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time" (45). (Right. All clear.) Tony has told us that he sent the letter and kept no copy. This letter, of course, appears in full near the end of the novel and while I wouldn't say it sheds

extraordinary new insights into Tony's character, for a moment he might be considered a notch below his own "average" assessment. The new boyfriend of his old flame Veronica is none other than one of his best mates at school, Adrian. Adrian is the author of the diary that was promised to Tony from Veronica's mother in her will, but never arrived in the package along with the check for five hundred pounds. (Following?)

While I was intrigued by figuring out the twists and turns of this novel, I must say I kept underlining Barnes' wonderful and dear moments he gave his character Tony, who laments the dying art of letter writing as he types another email to Veronica in hopes to convince her to turn over Adrian's diary and is slightly pained when his one child, Susie, tells him it would be so much easier to communicate if he just learned how to text. Here is a man who misses conversation, even at its most banal. In a pub, with the bartender while ordering food:

"Do you think you could do me thin chips for a change?"

"How do you mean?"

"You know, like in France – the thin ones."

"No, we don't do them."

"But it says on the menu your chips are hand-cut."

"Yes."

"Well, can't you cut them thinner?"

"Hand-cut chips means fat chips."

"But if you hand cut chips, couldn't you cut them thinner?"

"We don't cut them. That's how they arrive."

"You don't cut them on the premises?"

"That's what I said." (158)

From the lost art of communication to the lost art of culinary care, our narrator longs for the past, but also quite clearly is wrestling with his own romanticized version of parts of that past.

Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* is a clear tip of the hat to Frank Kermode's 1966 literary theory text of the same name. While Kermode's work attempts a connection between fictions and a focus on apocalyptic thought, Barnes' novel is not concerned with the end of *all* time, but the end of Tony Webster's time and whether he will or won't get the diary to solve a life-long nagging concern (why did Adrian commit suicide?) and an ever-pressing current matter. (I won't give this part away, as it really is the "ah ha" of the ending.)

Tony's words resonate with any reader of a certain age. "I remember a period in late adolescence when my mind would make itself drunk with images of adventurousness. This is how it will be when I grow up. I shall go there, do this, discover that, love her, and then her and her and her. I shall live as people in novels live and have lived" (102). Life is always going to be grander than it actually is and we think of these things the same way Tony does while he takes out the recycling or mows the lawn.

I kept thinking of *The Education of Henry Adams* as I read *The Sense of an Ending*. I loathed the Adams text as an undergraduate and have remembered very little from it except that he skips the twenty years after his wife commits suicide. As a nineteen-year-old reader I was incredulous – *How does one erase such a chapter in life?* Tony Webster experiences his own memory erasures, most notably when courting his wife. (Veronica from his school days is conveniently left out of his narrative.) Barnes employs a time compression that also was reminiscent of *The Education of Henry Adams*. In the course of two pages, Tony reports he met and married Margaret, welcomed daughter Susie, bought a house, got a divorce, became a grandfather, and is now retired. He doesn't waste time on the traditional domestic concerns of his life because that's not what *this* story is about.

And this story is about solving a mystery and coming to terms with life's disappointments and unanswerable questions. Tony Webster is an early twenty-first century Everyman. He's average and law-abiding, just like most of his readers. Kermode reminded his readers, "We hunger for ends and for crises" (Kermode 2000, 55). By this novel's end the crises have indeed mounted, some of which are simply not surmountable.

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## Work Cited

1. Kermode, Frank. 2000. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.