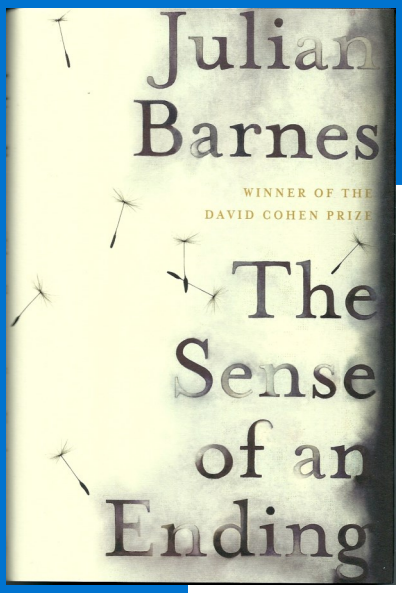


The Sense of an Ending
Julian Barnes

Author Background

- Aka—Dan Kavanaugh
- Birth—January 19, 1946
- Where—Leicester, England, UK
- Education—B.A., Oxford Uiversity
- Awards—Man Booker Prize; Gutenberg prize; E.M. Forster Award; Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize; Prix Medicis; Prix Femina.
- Currently—lives in London, England

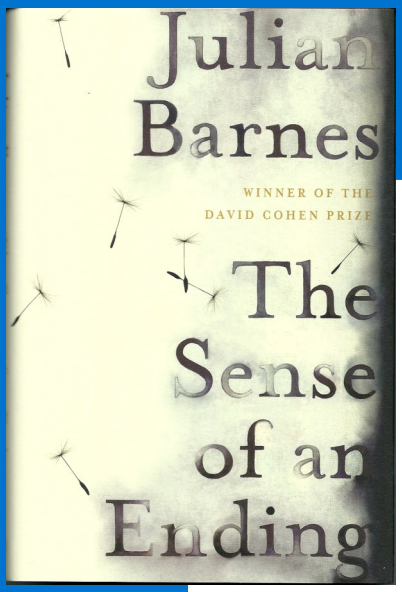
Julian Patrick Barnes is a contemporary English writer, and winner of the 2011 Man Booker Prize, for his book *The Sense of an Ending*. Three of his earlier books had been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize: *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *England, England* (1998), and *Arthur & George* (2005).

Barnes has written crime fiction under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh. Barnes is one of the best-loved English writers in France, where he has won several literary prizes, including the Prix Médicis for *Flaubert's Parrot* and the Prix Femina for *Talking It Over*. He is an officer of L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Although Barnes was born in Leicester, his family moved to the outer suburbs of London six weeks later. Both of his parents were teachers of French. He has said that his support for Leicester City Football Club was, aged four or five, "a sentimental way of hanging on" to his home city. He was educated at the City of London School from 1957 to 1964. At the age of 10, Barnes was told by his mother that he had "too much imagination." As an adolescent he lived in Northwood, Middlesex, the "Metroland" of which he named his first novel.

Barnes attended 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*. During his time at the *New Statesman*, Barnes suffered from debilitating shyness, saying: "When there were weekly meetings I would be paralysed into silence, and was thought of as the mute member of staff." From 1979 to 1986 he worked as a television critic, first for the *New Statesman* and then for *The Observer*.

His wife, literary agent Pat Kavanagh, died of a brain tumour on 20 October 2008. He lives in London. His brother, Jonathan Barnes, is a philosopher specialised in Ancient Philosophy. He is the patron of human rights organisation Freedom from Torture. (*Adapted from Wikipedia*.)



The Sense of an Ending
Julian Barnes

Book Summary

The Sense of an Ending
Julian Barnes, 2011
Knopf Doubleday
176 pp.
ISBN-13: 9780307957122

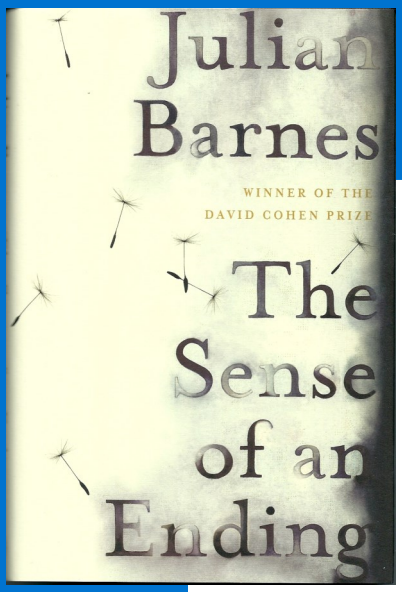
Winner, 2011 Man Booker Prize

The story of a man coming to terms with the mutable past, Julian Barnes's new novel is laced with his trademark precision, dexterity and insight. It is the work of one of the world's most distinguished writers.

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?

(*From the publisher*.)



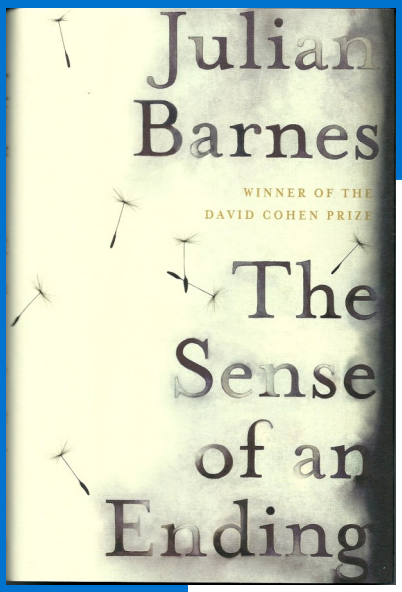
The Sense of an Ending
Julian Barnes

Book Groups @ Blue Mountains Library

Discussion Questions

1. What does the title mean?
2. The novel opens with a handful of water-related images. What is the significance of each? How does Barnes use water as a metaphor?
3. The phrase "Eros and Thanatos," or sex and death, comes up repeatedly in the novel. What did you take it to mean?
4. At school, Adrian says, "we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us" (p. 13). How does this apply to Tony's narration?
5. Did Tony love Veronica? How did his weekend with her family change their relationship?
6. When Mrs. Ford told Tony, "Don't let Veronica get away with too much" (p. 31), what did she mean? Why was this one sentence so important?
7. Veronica accuses Tony of being cowardly, while Tony considers himself peaceable. Whose assessment is more accurate?
8. What is the metaphor of the Severn Bore? Why does Tony's recollection of Veronica's presence change?
9. Why did Tony warn Adrian that Veronica "had suffered damage a long way back?" (p. 46). What made him suspect such a thing? Do you think he truly believed it?
10. In addition to Adrian's earlier statement about history, Barnes offers other theories: Adrian also says, "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (p. 18), and Tony says, "History isn't the lies of the victors . . .It's more the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated" (p. 61). Which of these competing notions do you think is most accurate? Which did Tony come to believe?
11. Discuss the character Margaret. What role does she play in Tony's story?
12. Why does Mrs. Ford make her bequest to Tony, after so many years? And why does Veronica characterize the £500 as "blood money"?
13. After rereading the letter he sent to Adrian and Veronica, Tony claims to feel remorse. Do you believe him? What do his subsequent actions tell us?
14. When Veronica refuses to turn over the diary to Tony, why doesn't he give up? Why does he continue to needle her for it?
15. What is Tony's opinion of himself? Of Adrian? How do both opinions change by the end of the novel?
16. How does the revelation in the final pages change your understanding of Veronica's actions?
17. Discuss the closing lines of the novel: "There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest" (p. 163).

(Princeton Book reviews)



The Sense of an Ending
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Reviews

The Sense of an Ending...is dense with philosophical ideas.... Still, it manages to create genuine suspense as a sort of psychological detective story. We not only want to find out how Mr. Barnes's narrator, Tony Webster, has rewritten his own history—and discover what actually happened some 40 years ago—but also understand why he has needed to do so.... Mr. Barnes does an agile job...of unpeeling the onion layers of his hero's life while showing how Tony has sliced and diced his past in order to create a self he can live with. In doing so Mr. Barnes underscores the ways people try to erase or edit their youthful follies and disappointments, converting actual events into anecdotes, and those anecdotes into a narrative.
New York Times

In Barnes's (*Flaubert's Parrot*) latest, winner of the 2011 Man-Booker Prize, protagonist Tony Webster has lived an average life with an unremarkable career, a quiet divorce, and a calm middle age. Now in his mid-60s, his retirement is thrown into confusion when he's bequeathed a journal that belonged to his brilliant school-friend, Adrian, who committed suicide 40 years earlier at age 22. Though he thought he understood the events of his youth, he's forced to radically revise what he thought he knew about Adrian, his bitter parting with his mysterious first lover Veronica, and reflect on how he let life pass him by safely and predictably. Barnes's spare and luminous prose splendidly evokes the sense of a life whose meaning (or meaninglessness) is inevitably defined by "the sense of an ending" which only death provides. Despite its focus on the blindness of youth and the passage of time, Barnes's book is entirely unpretentious. From the haunting images of its first pages to the surprising and wrenching finale, the novel carries readers with sensitivity and wisdom through the agony of lost time.
Publishers Weekly

Life has been good to Tony Webster, who's both contentedly retired and contentedly divorced. Then friends reappear from a childhood long left behind and presumably shelved, and as the past suddenly looms large, Tony must rethink everything that has been his life. In the hands of multi-award winner Barnes, this should be masterly—and, with the book under 200 pages, there's a gorgeous simplicity at work.
Library Journal

A man's closest-held beliefs about a friend, former lover and himself are undone in a subtly devastating novella from Barnes.... [S]peaks to Barnes' skill at balancing emotional tensions and philosophical quandaries. A knockout. What at first seems like a polite meditation on childhood and memory leaves the reader asking difficult questions about how often we strive to paint ourselves in the best possible light.
Kirkus Reviews