

Book Review

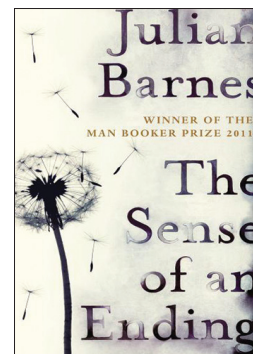
Book Review: The Sense of an Ending

The Sense of an Ending, by Julian Barnes.

Winner of the Man Booker of the Year, 2011.

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“History is the certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.”

Our memories remain incomplete, flawed, and disjointed. Questions remain unasked, and obviously unanswered; all our lives. We live our lives, and die, oblivious of the deficits. Seldom do we bother to look back and fill up or even recognize the gaps. At least not until some events or occurrences force us to; when we begin to search for an answer to the doubts and uncertainties, and for an opportunity to be at peace with our lives. However, rarely does a comfortable conclusion emerge and the answers we seek often continue to evade us.

The way we look at life changes, as we change ourselves. Passing through the doldrums of teen years, we arrive at adulthood. We mature, forget; and then at the end sit back, reconstruct, and contemplate. We look back through the glasses of our accumulated experiences and correct ourselves. Going through numerous corrections, what remains with us is what we want us to remember, the way we want things to be. This retrospection, rather introspection is the projection of “us” through ourselves! This reconstruction is inherently faulty. Hence, we are left with questions, all sorts of them. They plague us after we think we have cleared past such things, and it is then that we search for an ending. The facts we unearth, from under an accumulation of years of our lives, do not fit into our picture of the life we believe we have had. The memory, thus, appears to be too frail and impressionable. It

seems to be inherently unreliable, in being colored by our apperceptions rather than being an objective record of the events.

This notion of the unreliability of memory is the key theme in Julian Barnes’s “The sense of an ending.” It deals with the way we live lives; hiding hurt, pain, and guilt under the cloak of a false sense of complacency. The question that is posed in this book, is: How do we deal with ourselves when we find us to be the most unreliable narrator of our own life-someone who not only creates a false impression on the world but also deludes himself?

In the book, we are made to see the circumstances through the eyes of Anthony Webster (Tony), the protagonist. The book is about Tony’s narration of his life to himself. His life is colored by his relentless hatred for mediocrity, the fear of being one himself, and his desire for importance in life; in spite of knowing that he lacked the means. Trying to hide behind the veil of confirmation from others, he envies Adrian, his friend in school, whose life “contained things novel-worthy...” Insecurity remains the predominant tone of his character in high school, which persists in him even till much later. In college, he is reluctant to commit himself to Veronica, making himself believe that abstinence would spare him discomfort of “where the relationship was heading.” Denied of all the importance in life which he craved for, he sculpts his memory according to his convenience. Even his definition of history foretells how his own life had been: History (Adrian’s life) is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfection of (Tony’s) memory meets the inadequacies of documentation (Adrian’s diary). He says, “There was a moment in my late twenties when I admitted that my adventurousness had long since petered out. I would never do those things adolescence had dreamt about. Instead, I mowed my lawn, I took holidays, and I had my life.” He talks about what his life had been like and

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avoids discussing about what he wanted it to be, a probable unconscious effort to dodge the dissonance that would create. He pretends to be comfortable with a sense that his life has been uneventful, and with being a mediocre. Retired from a secure and “satisfying” job; he maintains a distant but friendly relationship with an ex-wife, whom he had divorced years ago, and an adult daughter and her family, whom he seldom sees. He seems to feel happy and content with the life he has had when he says, “And that’s a life, isn’t it. Some achievements and some disappointments. It’s been interesting to me though I wouldn’t complain or be amazed if others found it less so. Not that I would have missed my life for anything, you understand.”

However, decades later, he is forced to begin reevaluating his past. Veronica’s mother’s gift brings out Tony’s memories of his past, the ones he thought laid safely buried under his crafted “self” construct. The revelations bring up uneasy questions, which he must answer now. He is forced to open up his closet and bring out the skeletons. What he discovers in the course of this retrospective quest of self-examination refutes his comfortable self-image and reconfigures his whole life. “My younger self-had come back to shock my older self with what that self-had been or was sometimes capable of being,” says Tony, as he has difficulty in coming to terms with the past. “We thought we were being mature when we were only being safe. We imagined we were being responsible, but we were only being cowardly. What we called realism turned out to be a way of avoiding things rather than facing them,” he realizes.

Critique

The book has been written exceptionally well. At first, it appears to be simply a humdrum story of an ordinary man, who like anybody else, has fears, insecurities, rejections, and unfulfilled dreams; which set one’s defenses in action. Only at the end does it become apparent to the reader, the two distinct stories embedded; one the clear and other the clouded perception of this very same man. The author highlights, wittingly, and with irony that we seem contended with a self-acquired glory of wisdom we create by the memories of our experiences which we choose to keep. The mind paves way to unconsciously forgetting our fears, denying our diffidence, and realizing our dreams by confabulating and repressing parts of our memories. In other words, we create Erikson’s “the “I” in the totality of life”^[1] in order to strike a balance between identity and identity confusion. We construct both an external and a personal image; the former being the manner in which we wish to be remembered, and the latter merging the perception of who we had been with a dynamic impression of the one we may become.

Only in the later part of our lives do we get an opportunity to integrate “maturing forms of hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, and care into a comprehensive sense of wisdom”.^[1] It is the final and successful amendment of our earlier schisms of basic trust versus mistrust; autonomy versus shame and doubt; initiative versus guilt; industry versus inferiority; identity versus confusion; intimacy versus isolation; generativity versus self-absorption; and integrity versus despair; that determines retrospective feelings of contentment and self-satisfaction. At this stage in life, we conclusively let go of our desires to change the way important people in our lives had been,^[1] and become more objective in our approach to the lives we have had. Such detachment and objectivity lifts a self-woven veil; defenses, deception, despair, and facts all meticulously intertwined into a fabric of “self-narrative”; that has shrouded our perception for decades. Suppressed memories resurface, and we are provided with one final opportunity to reevaluate a lifetime of beliefs, reconcile with achievements, and lost opportunities, and then make one final attempt toward the fulfillment of unfinished dreams. When this attempt fails, it might leave us with a sense of despair, appalled, and scornful of the life we have had, fearing death.

Across cultures, the basic stages of human development^[1] are the same; with similar feelings and perceptions at life’s major junctures. These, in turn, determine who “we think” we are. Therefore, this novel posits an extremely meticulous account of what each one of us perceives and what color the lives we live. For students of mental health, this book summarizes and clarifies a variety of psychological constructs which otherwise remain shrouded in mysteries due to their overbearing theoretical encumbrances. The narrative encourages empathy and clearer understanding of client’s perspectives; as well as our own self. In this work, Barnes is not only satirical but also meticulous with his language. The novel is one of the finest attempts at understanding psychosocial dynamics underlying human relationships.

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