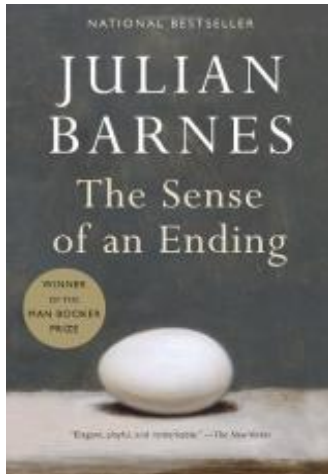


# The Sense of an Ending

by Julian Barnes

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## About the Book

A novel so compelling that it begs to be read in a single sitting, *The Sense of an Ending* has the psychological and emotional depth and sophistication of Henry James at his best, and is a stunning new chapter in Julian Barnes's oeuvre.

This intense novel follows Tony Webster, a middle-aged man, as he contends with a past he never thought much about?until his closest childhood friends return with a vengeance: one of them from the grave, another maddeningly present. Tony thought he left this all behind as he built a life for himself, and his career has provided him with a secure retirement and an amicable relationship with his ex-wife and daughter, who now has a family of her own. But when he is presented with a mysterious legacy, he is forced to revise his estimation of his own nature and place in the world.

## Discussion Guide

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).

## **Author Bio**

Julian Barnes is the author of 25 books, for which he has received the Man Booker Prize, the Somerset Maugham Award, the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Prix Médicis and Prix Femina in France, and the Jerusalem Prize. In 2017 he was awarded the Légion d'honneur. His work has been translated into more than 40 languages. He lives in London.

## Critical Praise

"Elegant, playful, and remarkable."

? *The New Yorker*

"A page turner, and when you finish you will return immediately to the beginning . . . Who are you? How can you be sure? What if you're not who you think you are? What if you never were? . . . At 163 pages, **The Sense of an Ending** is the longest book I have ever read, so prepare yourself for rereading. You won't regret it."

? *The San Francisco Chronicle*

"Dense with philosophical ideas . . . it manages to create genuine suspense as a sort of psychological detective story . . . Unpeeling the onion layers of the hero's life while showing how [he] has sliced and diced his past in order to create a self he can live with."

? Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"Ferocious. . . a book for the ages."

? *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"An elegantly composed, quietly devastating tale about memory, aging, time and remorse. . . . Offers somber insights into life's losses, mistakes and disappointments in a piercing, thought provoking narrative. Bleak as this may sound, the key word here—the note of encouragement—is ‘insights.’ And this beautiful book is full of them."

? *NPR*

"With his characteristic grace and skill, Barnes manages to turn this cat-and-mouse game into something genuinely suspenseful."

? *The Washington Post*

"[A] jewel of conciseness and precision. . . . **The Sense of an Ending** packs into so few pages so much that the reader finishes it with a sense of satisfaction more often derived from novels several times its length."

? *The Los Angeles Times*

"Elegiac yet potent, **The Sense of an Ending** probes the mysteries of how we remember and our impulse to redact, correct ? and sometimes entirely erase ? our pasts. . . . Barnes's highly wrought meditation on aging gives just as much resonance to what is unknown and unspoken as it does to the momentum of its own plot."

? *Vogue*

"Deliciously intriguing . . . with complex and subtle undertones [and] laced with Barnes' trademark wit and graceful writing."

? *The Washington Times*

"Ominous and disturbing. . . . This outwardly tidy and conventional story is one of Barnes's most indelible [and] looms oppressively in our minds."

? *The Wall Street Journal*

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## **The Sense of an Ending**

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