

JULIAN BARNES

Peter Childs

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(by Vanessa Guignery. Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon)

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Peter Childs's expertise in contemporary British and postcolonial literature is extensive and admirable, as demonstrated by the numerous books he has written or edited since 1996. He is the author of monographs on Paul Scott, Ian McEwan and E.M. Forster, and has written on modernism, contemporary British culture and literature, as well as postcolonial theory. His engaging and insightful book on *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction 1970-2003* (2004) explored the work of twelve major British writers, including Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, Graham Swift, Jeanette Winterson, and Julian Barnes. In 2009, he contributed to the special issue on Julian Barnes for the journal *American, British and Canadian Studies* with a paper on Barnes's complex relation to belief, mortality and religion. In 2011, Childs co-edited with Sebastian Groes a collection of essays entitled *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, and authored this monograph in the series on Contemporary British Novelists of Manchester University Press. In the acknowledgements, Childs kindly thanks previous critics of Barnes's work for pointing directions for discussions in his study, among whom Merritt Moseley, author of *Understanding Julian Barnes* (1997), Vanessa Guignery, author of *The Fiction of Julian Barnes* (2006) and co-editor with Ryan Roberts of *Conversations with Julian Barnes* (2009), as well as Mathew Pateman for his monograph entitled *Julian Barnes* (2002) and Frederick M. Holmes for his own *Julian Barnes* (2009).

Peter Childs starts his book by stating how difficult it is to make assessments of the oeuvre of a living writer who continues to produce new work. Published in 2011, Childs's book offers quotes from *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008), which no previous critic had been able to include in their earlier monographs, but quite naturally the study could not cover Barnes's most recent titles, such as his third collection of short stories *Pulse* (2011) and his Booker prize-winning novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). However, the echoes that Childs notices in his introduction between Barnes's translation of Alphonse Daudet's *In the Land of Pain* (2002), his collection of short stories *The Lemon Table* (2004) and his memoir *Nothing to be Frightened of*, can be extended to the writer's two latest publications, which are also partly concerned with ageing, looking back towards the past and the mechanisms of memory.

The book focuses on Barnes's works of fiction from 1980 to 2005 (comprising ten novels and two collections of short stories) but does not propose specific analysis of the collections of essays, of *Nothing to be Frightened of* nor of the detective novels published under the pseudonym of Dan Kavanagh. Peter Childs nevertheless alludes in his introduction to the great variety of subjects Barnes has approached in his articles, reviews, prefaces and introductions —though it should be noted that he is not the author of the introduction to Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics* (13), which was written by his brother, philosopher Jonathan Barnes. Childs deals with each text in turn, which he justifies by the fact that Julian Barnes views each work as a new departure with no continuities between them (15). However, the excellent introduction points to the recurrent thematic concerns such as “memory, history, representation, belief, truth, art, identity, [...] death [...] love and adultery” (15). After a brief biographical survey, Childs argues that even if Barnes is interested in capturing the melancholy, nostalgia and sense of loss in life, he is also for the most part “a comic novelist” and his fiction is marked by “a combination of social satire, Swiftian irony, and experimentation” (5). Childs identifies “ironic comedy and false memory” (6) as two of the poles around which Barnes's work revolves and which his monograph regularly comes back to. He also points out that Barnes's approach to fiction is marked by “generic fabulation” (6) and draws from Robert Scholes's examination of the concept in his 1967 study *The Fabulators* and his 1979 book *Fabulation and Metafiction*, to analyse the ways in which Barnes's work combines realism, experimentation and self-reflexivity in a variety of forms and genres. Barnes has often been deemed a postmodernist writer for his incredulity towards metanarratives, his scepticism of any truth claims and large political schemes, as well as his generic polyphony, but there is also in his novels a significant moral element which, according to Childs, “places Barnes more in a humanist than a postmodernist writing tradition” (15).

Individual chapters provide fresh perspectives on the work of Julian Barnes and, while offering a precise analysis of each work, also manage to weave threads between the various books. For instance, the adolescents' preoccupation with the purpose of art in *Metroland*, supposed to make people “better — kinder, wiser, nicer, more peaceful, more active, more sensitive” (24), is contrasted with Barnes's provocative suggestion in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* that the purpose of catastrophe is to produce art (9, 79) and therefore “art commemorates if not ameliorates catastrophe” (24), while in *Nothing to be Frightened of*, art is said to convey truths, which religion is unable to provide. In the chapter on *Flaubert's Parrot*, Childs argues that Barnes “approaches fundamental questions about the role of the novel in personal and social life” and offers as a possible answer “art as religion” (58). The relationship between art and life, as well as between truth and imagination, is a recurrent concern in Barnes's work. In *Before She Met Me*, Graham, a historian, has such a vivid imagination that he mistakes fiction for reality and fathoms truths out of fictional situations (38); in *Arthur & George*, Arthur Conan Doyle's overactive imagination contrasts with George Edjali's underactive one and strict adherence to facts (38, 144).

Peter Childs also subtly brings together his chapter on *Metroland* entitled “About to be less deceived”, an allusion to Philip Larkin's collection *The Less Deceived* (21), and his chapter on *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* which he describes as “a subjective view of history, within which love is inserted as the only hope of survival, free will figures as an escape from determinism, and ‘objective truth’ avoids the descent into relativism”. Childs adds: “These are the beliefs of the less-deceived, Barnes might argue” (81). On the other hand, a continuing concern in Barnes's books is with truth and self-deception. His novels, Childs notes, are “littered with self-deceivers from Graham Hendrick in *Before She Met Me* to Arthur Conan Doyle in *Arthur & George*” (106). Another recurrent theme in Barnes's work and in Childs's analysis is the treatment of memory (89, 95, 109); it appears in almost all of Barnes's books in relation to issues of reliability and truth. Stuart's “I remember everything” at the beginning of *Talking it Over* is contrasted with Barnes's definition of memories as “workings of the imagination” in *Nothing to be Frightened of* (89), and as “just another artifice” in *Love, etc* (95). Both *England, England* and *Arthur & George*, novels that deal with memory, identity and self-construction, open with discussions of first memories and how they are often simulacra (109). The theme is also central in Barnes's most recent novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, which he wanted as “a book with meditative passages on time and memory” as he told Hermione Lee in a public interview in December 2011. The first words of the novel are “I remember” (3) and the narrator notes from the start: “what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed” (3). In each of Barnes's books, the discussions on individual memory

can apply to collective memories, and vice versa. The chapter on *England, England* thus proposes a detailed discussion of the contemporary development of heritage culture and actual “manufacturing” of the past and memories (116). While in other chapters Childs offers very precise analyses of the novels and short stories, in this one, the critic takes some distance from the text in order to situate Barnes’s novel in the context of the obsession with heritage in British contemporary culture and literature.

Peter Childs is very good at spotting intertexts or suggesting literary echoes that had not been picked up by previous critics. While most critics have insisted on Barnes’s connections with French literature, mainly of the nineteenth century, Childs refers not only to those but also, more originally, to some modernist writers —the comparison between the narrator of *Flaubert’s Parrot* and that of Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (56) comes as a complement to previous studies such as Brooks’s. Allusions to E.M. Forster, on whose work Childs is an expert, thus appear several times in the book. For instance, Childs compares Barnes’s reference to the cerebral and the animalistic parts of our brain in *Before She Met Me* to Forster’s theme of “the beast and the monk”, or “the prose and the passion” in *Howards End* (40). In *Before She Met Me*, the horse brain is associated with passion, “sexual arousal, memory, and addiction” (36) and thus to Graham’s jealousy which leads to the killings at the end. Childs also reminds the reader of D.H. Lawrence’s deployment of the horse metaphor in *Women in Love* and in his non-fiction, which, for him, symbolises “a destructive sensuality” which combines “terror and beauty” (40).

116

In the chapter on Barnes’s debut novel *Metroland*, Childs suggests that it was “written self-consciously in the shadow of numerous ‘first novels’, *Bildungsromans*, and French cultural touchstones [such as] Alain-Fournier’s 1913 novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*” (19). In the *Guardian* and on a BBC radio programme in April 2012, Julian Barnes paid tribute to Alain-Fournier’s book and mentioned that he read *Le Grand Meaulnes* only in his late 30s when he had to review it for the *Guardian* in 1986, therefore after he wrote *Metroland* (published in 1980 when he was 34). Though *Metroland* (set in London suburbia and Paris in the 1960s and 1970s) and *Le Grand Meaulnes* (set in the 1890s in rural France) differ quite significantly in theme, mood and context, both are enticing portrayals of adolescence.

For this monograph, Peter Childs has put to good use the research he conducted into the Julian Barnes archives at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin. A comparison of the different manuscript drafts to spot Barnes’s revisions and an analysis of the writer’s papers produce illuminating remarks about the creative process and the genesis of the work. For instance, Childs points to the way the third section of *Metroland* (a novel which took Barnes eight years to

complete) was revised so as “to make the parallels to Part One in Part Three less relentless”, with Chris “less becoming a smug bourgeois” and giving his wife “more of a presence and sharpness, reinforcing her anti-romanticism and self-assurance” (29). Childs also gives the list of rejected early titles for *Before She Met Me*, thus showing how Barnes evolved from a focus on reason and sensibility (“A sensible man”, “A reasonable man”, “Within reason”...) to a concern with time and the relation to the past (35). In his chapter on *Flaubert’s Parrot*, the novel which has received the most attention by critics, Childs offers new information by quoting from Barnes’s papers where the writer points to the purpose of the narrator’s presence: “1) Allow more points of access, and a greater range of response, to Flaubert [...]. 2) Tie the stories together” (49). Childs also quotes from Barnes’s notes for *Talking it Over*, which offer thumbnail sketches for the characterisation of the three main characters (90), and from a letter to his publishers in which he delineates his scheme for *England England* (121). All this information provides a unique perspective on Barnes’s creative process.

The monograph concludes with a bibliography compiled by Claire Smith, which is limited to Barnes’s works, the seven books devoted to the writer and twenty-five references to articles and essays. The latter may seem relatively short compared to the now extensive criticism that exists on Julian Barnes’s work. However, this can be explained by the fact that Peter Childs’s study is a fairly personal (and therefore often original) reading, which seems to have deliberately chosen not to rely too much on previous critical analysis. This choice probably justifies the absence of any reference to books on literary theory or contemporary fiction in the end bibliography, though several useful references appear in the endnotes to each chapter. This new monograph therefore proves a most valuable contribution to Julian Barnes studies, which both draws discreetly on previous criticism and discussion of the work and offers new illuminating interpretations.

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