



The Only Story

Julian Barnes

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Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less? That is, I think, finally, the only real question.

First love has lifelong consequences, but Paul doesn't know anything about that at nineteen. At nineteen, he's proud of the fact his relationship flies in the face of social convention.

As he grows older, the demands placed on Paul by love become far greater than he could possibly have foreseen.

Tender and profound, *The Only Story* is an achingly beautiful novel by one of fiction's greatest mappers of the human heart.

The Only Story Details

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From Reader Review The Only Story for online ebook

Trudie says

(2.5 probably but I feel guilting into a 3)

So.... it pains me a little to write this review because I really don't like to be so far outside of popular opinion on a book. It is perhaps a shame this is my first Julian Barnes novel as I know he is a much beloved author and his *The Sense of an Ending* is a popular Booker winner. There is no doubt you are in capable writerly hands when picking up this novel. My reactions to this are not indictments about the writing itself, which is mostly magnificent.

Ultimately I really disliked this. Since this is so blatantly wrong the fault must be entirely mine. I just could not overcome my absolute indifference to this love affair. I have no notion of the attraction between the two people central to this narrative. What I do know is he liked her tennis outfit with the green piping, he was oddly fascinated by her rabbit teeth and she like to call him her "dirty stop-out" . That really is the sum total of my understanding of what drew these two people together and it was just not enough to hang an entire life story on no matter how touching the mediations on love and it's life-long ramifications.

Plus I have questions. Why did Mr Mcleod seem so unperturbed by his wife bringing a 19 year lover home from tennis, he barely looks up from the gardening ? also her daughters reactions are largely left undocumented. What *was* Susans attraction to this seemingly self-absorbed young man, it appears to have nothing to do with sex as she announces herself frigid by why of introduction quite early on, and he doesn't sound particularly skilled in this area (I mean the teeth were my first clue here). Ultimately what Mrs Mcleod was thinking is frustratingly unknowable. We just know she is profoundly troubled and I would have liked a better handle on why.

Obviously, warmer hearts and more generous (or adept) readers than I will fill in the gaps required and will inevitably be much more open to this story, but as presented I was profoundly depressed by it and willed it all to be over.

(Sorry Neale !)

Wen says

A maverick 19-year-old Paul falls head over heels for a 48-year-old Susan who he sees as an age-agnostic free-spirit, and who's non-assuming manner always elevates his confidence. .

The story drags on from here, even after the woman turns out as an impostor. Regardless of that, we can all imagine that the initial luster fades over time as the boy grows up. The romantic love, "absolute" as in theory, is called upon to cement the decade-long responsibility....

I'd better reserve my judgement; after all the story was set in the mid-20th century.

My second Julian Barnes after the booker-winning *The Sense of An Ending*. Once again it felt much longer than the real length. I didn't quite get the purpose of changing point of views between parts. while reading, was later enlightened by GR friends' reviews. Yet I still think the story would have been more compelling had it been all in the first-person narrative.

There were numerous brilliant recollections on love . But for a love story it's just too emotionally austere to me.

Elyse says

I recently read a sentence in another book that stayed with me.

“There comes a time in every man’s life when he looks back more than forward”. (fitting in Julian Barnes “The Only Story”)

This book is as much - about a man’s memories - fading memories as well-than it is about love.

“He sometimes asked himself a question about life. Which were truer, the happy memories, or unhappy ones? He decided, eventually, that the question was unanswerable “.

“He remembered his own early attempts to define love, back in the village, alone in his bed. Love, he had ventured was like a vast and sudden increasing of a lifelong frown”.

Wow... bleak experience.

.....love is an increasing blessed smile for me ...

I found the beginning intriguing...part two the least interesting...and the last part the best (sad)....but at least the narrator expressed his feelings more. He was more detached from his memories - yet most raw and vulnerable.

It’s debatable to me however that most of us have only one story worth telling that matters.

Adina says

.“Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less? That is, I think, finally, the only real question. You may point out –correctly –that it isn’t a real question. Because we don’t have the choice. If we had the choice, then there would be a question. But we don’t, so there isn’t. Who can control how much they love? If you can control it, then it isn’t love. I don’t know what you call it instead, but it isn’t love.”.

Thus begins the latest novel by one of my favorite authors, Julian Barnes. I immediately knew, just by reading those words that I will be witness to a beautiful and heartbreaking love story which will leave me, after the last page, fulfilled by the exquisite writing but also spent from suffering along with the characters. I was entirely right.

.“Most of us have only one story (...) that matters, only one finally worth telling. This is mine.”.

The Author tells the story of Paul, a young man of 19 and his first love, Susan, a middle age married woman of 48. They meet in 1963 on the tennis court, where fate brought them together for a double match. They begin to spend more and more time together until they fall irremediably in love.

The novel is divided in three parts, the first chapter is written in first person and relates the beginning of the love story. The second part is a mixture of 1st and 2nd person and deals with the inevitable degradation and end love while the 3rd part, where we showed Paul’s remaining life, is written mostly in a detached 3rd person.

The authors explain his choices to use these narration techniques better than I could. . *“And first love always happens in the overwhelming first person. How can it not? Also, in the overwhelming present tense. It takes us time to realize that there are other persons, and other tenses. ”*

“But nowadays, the raucousness of the first person within him was stilled. It was as if he viewed, and lived, his life in the third person. Which allowed him to assess it more accurately, he believed. “

I thought that the change between 1st, 2nd and 3rd person narration to be of powerful effect and it worked very well to confer the intended atmosphere and tension. It was particularly compelling in the 2nd chapter which started in 1st person and moved to 2nd person when the relationship started to face problems and Susan changed. 2nd person is somewhat in between the personal 1st person and the 3rd, which suggests an intermediary state, where Paul’s efforts/failure to save Susan and their love transitions from the intense love and suffering to a more detached form.

If you read *The Sense of An Ending*, you get to immediately see the similarity between *The Only Story* and the 2011 Booker winner. They both deal with an older man looking back at his life and the unreliability of memory. If in *The Sense of An Ending* the theme is subtly introduced and we are left to discover it ourselves while reading, here it is expressed, out in the open through narrator’s words.

“But here’s the first problem. If this is your only story, then it’s the one you have most often told and retold, even if—as is the case here—mainly to yourself. The question then is: do all these retellings bring you closer to the truth of what happened, or move you further away?”

“He sometimes asked himself a question about life. Which are truer, the happy memories, or the unhappy ones? He decided, eventually, that the question was unanswerable.”

“So, that familiar question of memory. He recognized that memory was unreliable and biased, but in which direction? Towards optimism? That made initial sense. You remembered your past in cheerful terms because this validated your existence. You didn’t have to see your life as any kind of triumph—his own had hardly been that—but you did need to tell yourself that it had been interesting, enjoyable, purposeful. Purposeful? That would be pitching it a bit high. Still, an optimistic memory might make it easier to part from life, might soften the pain of extinction. But you could equally argue the opposite. If memory is biased towards pessimism, if, retrospectively, all appears blacker and bleaker than it actually was, then this might make life easier to leave behind.”

I don’t know if the similarities were intentional or if there was laziness in finding new ideas. However, both novels are amazing and in the same time similar and different, both worth reading and living.

The Only Story is a story about and powerful love sorted to fail, about hope, social conventions, shame, unspoken guilt and loss. It is a beautifully written novel, as everything Barnes writes and I consider myself lucky to have been able to read this novel before it was published.

I want to thank to Julian Barnes, Random House UK/Vintage, and Netgalley for this copy in exchange for an honest review. I read and ARC and the quotes may change in the final version of the book.

Roula says

Αλλο ενα υπεροχα μελαγχολικο βιβλιο απο τον πολυαγαπημενο μου Τζουλιαν Μπαρνς.εδω λοιπον λεει πολλες,μεγαλες και σκληρες αληθειες -για αλλη μια φορα- σχετικα με τον ερωτα και τις σχεσεις.ο πρωταγωνιστης στα 19 του χρονια καλειται να ενηλικιωθει γνωριζοντας το μεγαλο του ερωτα ,μια γυναικα που τον περνα σχεδον 30 χρονια!!ομως αυτο καθολου δεν τον πτοει καθως ακομη περισσοτερο και απο τον ερωτα θελει να ζησει την ενηλικιωση.να κοντραριστει με την

κοινωνια, με τους γονεις του και να κανει αυτο που θελει.και ενω ισως καποιος αλλος συγγραφεας θα εξερευνουσε ολες αυτες τις ρομαντικες πτυχες μιας τετοιας σχεσης, ο Μπαρνς, οπως ειναι πλεον αναμενομενο για εμας που λατρευουμε τη γραφη του, εστιαζει στις σκοτεινες πλευρες , στο ρεαλισμο και στα προβληματα που προκυπτουν μεσα σε μια τετοια σχεση.

Το βιβλιο ειναι τρυφερο, απο την αλλη ομως ειναι συγκινητικο,μελαγχολικο και περα για περα ρεαλιστικο.αυτο ακριβως λατρευω στον Μπαρνς, τιποτα δεν ειναι πασπαλισμενο με χρυσοσκονη στα μυθιστορηματα του.αλλωστε ουτε και η ζωη ειναι ετσι.ουτε ο ερωτας.ουτε οι σχεσεις.και αυτο ειναι οκ, κυριως οταν την (μοναδικη) αυτη ιστορια της ζωης του αναλαμβανει να τη διηγηθει καποιος που ξερει πολυ καλα τον τροπο, οπως ο Μπαρνς..

Dianne says

"In love. everything is both true and false; it's the one subject on which it's impossible to say anything absurd."

This is a lusciously written meditation on love by the incomparable Julian Barnes. The story is a simple one; an older man ruminates on his first love and the consequences rendered upon his life - but this telling is all about the journey, the truths being discovered and pondered, the gentle unraveling of a life and love gone by.

I loved this, but it does meander a bit in the end. Maybe meander isn't the right word; it gets more introspective with less "action" by the main characters - and some reviewers have found this "boring." I guess it depends on your preference for story over writing. I am a sucker for writing and I could eat Julian Barnes' writing with a spoon. He is precisely my cup of tea.

Recommended to fans of Barnes and Ian McEwan. Perhaps not at the level of "The Sense of an Ending," but lovely nonetheless.

Diane S ? says

Leaving this unrated. I've made it to 30% and this is an author I usually adore. His writing is wonderful as always but the plot just doesn't appeal. Quite frankly, I'm bored and just can't continue reading this. When a book is a chore to read the best thing to do is move on. It is what I have decided to do with sincere apologies to the author.

Paromjit says

This is Julian Barnes's latest offering, an author I absolutely adore. It is a profound and moving love story, and the complexities, intense suffering and heartbreak that accompanies it. It has Paul looking back on his only story, the love of his life, and his shifting perspectives as time passes. Barnes can be relied on for his well crafted beautiful prose and imagery, underscored by a musicality that beguiles and delights. The novel is split into three parts, and relates the story of 19 year old Paul, a Sussex University student who in 1963 meets and falls in love with 48 year old married Susan, who has children older than him and carries heavy emotional baggage from her personal history. What follows is a detailed examination of the repercussions on the people in their lives of their love affair amidst the middle class suburban attitudes, social norms and

expectations of the period that the lovers are subject to.

Barnes uses the classic device of moving from first person narrative, to the second person and finally the third person to highlight the increasing distance that Paul injects into his love story, moving from the intense passion at the beginning to a more dispassionate approach. He is aware that his memories are unreliable and his thinking tainted by self delusion. What Barnes gives is his insights into the human condition, a subtle reflection and observations on the nature of love and the trajectory it follows for Paul, infused with an air of melancholia set in a specific time and place. Whilst there are echoes of Barnes previous novels, I found this a brilliant and thought provoking read that I recommend highly. Many thanks to Random House Vintage for an ARC.

James says

‘The Only Story’ (2018) by Julian Barnes tells the story of one man – Paul and the one love, the only story, the single relationship that defines him, that determines his path in life.

There are echoes here of Barnes’ brilliant ‘Sense of an Ending’ – to which ‘Only Story’ is most definitely a worthy successor, but the two are both very different books, different stories to be told. In ‘Only Story’ Barnes is mapping the human heart and plotting the anatomy of a one-time functional, erstwhile highly dysfunctional and crumbling relationship – which is all-encompassing, life-determining – and Barnes writes here with such precision, such tenderness, such intensity and an almost forensic analysis of the dynamics, history and impact of such a relationship.

Barnes writes this story from the single but multiple perspectives of Paul – as a young (some might say) naïve and inexperienced 19 year old, embarking on a first meaningful relationship; from Paul living and breathing that relationship; from Paul as an older man – looking back at his life and recounting the relationship that came to determine him.

‘The Only Story’ is a very authentic, truthful and intense story and there is little or no romanticism here, Paul is certainly an anti-heroic central protagonist in this story. There is much here also to consider about memory and truth and the deeply flawed nature of nostalgia.

‘The Only Story’ is a very dark story, or at least a story that takes many dark turns – it is written so very well, with such clarity, depth of feeling, authenticity and sense of purpose. Whilst Barnes latest novel may not be quite up there with ‘Sense of an Ending’ – it is certainly extremely close. Highly recommended and not to be missed.

foteini_dl says

[2.5-3*, δεν ?χω καταλ?ξει ακ?μα.]

?μως, αυτ? ε?ναι η φ?ση των σχ?σεων, ?λων των σχ?σεων: π?ντοτε φα?νεται να υπ?ρχει κ?ποια ανισορροπ?α, του εν?ς ? του ?λλου ε?δους.

Αυτή η φράση ταιριάζει για να περιγράψει και τη σχέση μου με το τελευταίο πνιγμα του Barnes. Δυστυχώς, το αποτέλεσμα είναι ανισόρροπο.

Στο πρώτο κεφάλαιο, όπου βλέπουμε πώς αναπτύσσεται η σχέση ανάμεσα στον 19χρονο Paul και τη 48χρονη Susan σ' ένα προάστιο του Λονδίνου της δεκαετίας του '60, φτάσα οριακά στο σημείο να παρατήσω το βιβλίο. Στο επόμενο κεφάλαιο βλέπουμε τη ρωγμή στη σχέση εξαιτίας του αλκοολισμού της Susan και στο τελευταίο, ο Paul, 50 χρόνια μετά τη γνωριμία με τη Susan, κ'ναι μια ενδοσκοπήση και προσπαθεί να καταλάβει τι δεν πήγε καλά.

Διαβάζοντας το πρώτο κεφάλαιο, φτάσα οριακά στο σημείο να παρατήσω το βιβλίο. Πολύ ρομαντικό, σχεδόν μελ, για τα γούστα μου και κοινότοπο. Στα επόμενα δύο, ευτυχώς, ε'δα να εμφανίζεται το δυνατό στοιχείο του Barnes: ο κυνισμός. Ήμω, δε θα το κρύψω, βαρήθηκα αρκετά. Ε'δα μια επανέληψη: το βιβλίο κινείται ανάμεσα στο πρώτο του βιβλίο, το "Metroland" και το "A Sense of an Ending", και κυρώως προσεγγίζει το πρώτο. Για πολλούς αυτή είναι καλή, αλλά για μένα δε'χνει μια ήλωση φρεσκ'δας και επανάληψιμ'τητα. Επ'σης, δε μοι'ζει να 'χει ο'τε τη δυναμικ' των δύο προαναφερθέντων βιβλίων. Το "Metroland", στο οπο'ο είναι πιο κοντά, 'ταν να δυνατ' ντεμπο'το και 'κρυβε και μια κριτικ' απ'ναντι στη μεσα'α αστικ' τ'ξη, η οπο'α εδ' ναι μεν υπ'ρχει, αλλά πολ' επιφανειακ'. Το "A Sense of an Ending" επ'σης μου δημιο'ργησε 'ντονα συναισθ'ματα, εν' αυτή 'χι.

Β'βαια, 'σον αφορ' τη γραφ' αυτή καθαυτ', 'χει πολ' ενδιαφέρον η εναλλαγ' του αφηγηματικο' προσ'που που επ'λεξε ο συγγραφέας σαν μ'σο για να δε'ξει την πορε'α της σχέσης: πρώτο πρ'σωπο 'ταν ο πρωταγωνιστ'ς είναι ερωτευμ'νος, δε'τερο 'ταν απομακρ'νεται και η σχέση διαλ'εται σιγ'-σιγ' και τρ'το 'ταν είναι στο τ'λος 'νας ακ'μα πιο δυστυχισμ'νος 'νθρωπος, που το μ'νο που κ'νει είναι να προσπαθεί να βρει τρ'πους να δε'ξει τη δυστυχ'α του και τις τ'ψεις του.

Σε γενικ'ς γραμμ'ς, το βιβλίο διαβ'ζεται ε'κολα, μιας και η αφ'γηση ρ'ει, και βλέπουμε πολλ' θετικ' στοιχεία της εργογραφ'ας του Barnes. Αλλά και μια επανέληψη (δυστυχ'ς). 'χω την α'σθηση 'τι σε λ'γους μ'νες δε θα θυμ'μαι πολλ' πρ'γματα.

Nancy says

"Don't expect too much of me."
from The Only Story

My mother warned me. She was thirty-eight and I was nineteen when she warned that it happens to all lovers. My aunt once pondered, "What happened to us?" while reflecting on her first love and failed marriage.

We see it all the time, famous couples in the news, the couple next door. We expect everything, throw ourselves into young love trusting that the connection shared is timeless and everlasting.

It is our 'only story' of love, that first love when we are young and hopeful. We think we are different from the others.

"Somehow eternity seems possible as you embrace." *

I was excited to finally read Julian Barnes after hearing so much about his books. I was not disappointed. I do love a quiet, introspective novel with beautiful writing and a deep understanding of the human condition. The main character, Paul, tells us his 'only story' from the vantage of fifty years, recalling his first love in all its happiness, and later pain.

Paul is nineteen when he meets Susan, almost thirty years his senior. They play tennis at the local club during his first summer home from university. In a fluid, organic way, without pathos or introspection, their relationship becomes intimate.

Paul becomes a fixture in Susan's life, even coming into the home she shares with her alienated husband. When Paul turned twenty-one he took her away.

After recalling his early innocent and idealized love, we learn that Susan was a victim of spouse abuse. Paul recalls Susan's slipping from him into alcoholism, and lastly considers all the implications of cause and effect, culpability, and his inability to move past Susan.

The novel left me heartsore. For days.

I have a cousin who in her fifties slipped into early dementia from alcohol abuse. Her husband, her first love when they were teenagers, installed her in her own home, unwilling to watch her destroy herself. Of course, I thought of her.

Our only story, the one great love of our life, may end when one beloved partner dies first, or it may end in disaster, heartbreak, a crippling of the emotions. We may be left to relive happy memories or to wonder how it all went wrong. Paul agonizes: did he let go of Susan, let her fall, or did she pull him down with him?

Regardless, Paul is left damaged by his only story. And as a reader, I mourned with him.

I received a free ebook from First to Read in exchange for a fair and unbiased review.

*from Second Elegy, Duino Elegies by Ranier Maria Rilke, trans. David Young

Sweet Jane says

Ο Μπαρνς που ξέρουμε και αγαπήσαμε απ' το να κάποιο τέλος είναι και π'λι εδ?

κριτικ? και αποσπ?σματα εδ?!

Mary says

I'd forgotten how contemplative and funny Julian Barnes is. The mood of this novel is nostalgic and retrospective – but not saccharine. That a book so touching and tragic could be so ironic and amusing, and helplessly sad, and then end on a cold, blunt note struck me as realistic and sort of wonderful. I really admired the final pages. I don't think it should have ended any other way. Our lives are often disastrous and heart-breaking, our minds flit back and forth, and sometimes we are cold and cruel, and sometimes we just

appear that way, and sometimes we are so young, and almost always we get broken, and this looking-back and picking-apart by Barnes's narrator, this drowning in what happened, and what was, and how it ended, was right up my alley. I enjoy it more now that it's over, oddly. Perhaps it was triggering for me.

I didn't realize that there was panic inside her. How could I have guessed? I thought it was just inside me. Now, I realize, rather late in the day, that it is in everyone. It's a condition of our mortality. We have codes of manners to allay and minimise it, jokes and routines, and so many forms of diversion and distraction. But there is panic and pandemonium waiting to break out inside all of us, of this I am convinced. I've seen it roar out among the dying, as a last protest against the human condition and its chronic sadness. But it is there in the most balanced and rational of us. You just need the right circumstances, and it will surely appear. And then you are at its mercy. The panic takes some to God, others to despair, some to charitable works, others to drink, some to emotional oblivion, others to a life where they hope nothing serious will ever trouble them again.

And when I see pairs of young lovers, vertically entwined on street corners, or horizontally entwined on a blanket in the park, the main feeling it arouses in me is a kind of protectiveness. No, not pity: protectiveness. Not that they would want my protection. And yet – and this is curious – the more bravado they show in their behavior, the stronger my response. I want to protect them from what the world is probably going to do to them, and from what they will probably do to each other.

And by that time he had made the most terrifying discovery of his life, one which probably cast a shadow over all his subsequent relationships: the realization that love, even the most ardent and the most sincere, can, given the correct assault, curdle into a mixture of pity and anger. His love had gone, had been driven out, month by month, year by year. But what shocked him was that the emotions which replaced it were just as violent as the love which had previously stood in his heart. And so his life and his heart were just as agitated as before, except that she was no longer able to assuage his heart. And that, finally, was when he had to give her back.

Michael says

From some late state in mature life, Paul finds he still believes that “love is the only story” and feels compelled to tell the story of how in his youth at 19 years he took up fulfilling that mission with gusto in his love for one Susan McLeod. That she was nearly 30 years older than him made for some interesting challenges to his ideals. Though we've seen age disparities in books and movies before, I'll admit it was a challenge for me to suspend my disbelief with that many decades of difference. But the inevitable conditioning to more easily accept an older man and younger woman pairing and my desire not to be ageist in matters of love spurred me on to submerge myself in this rendition.

It all starts with Paul learning to play tennis at his parents' country club in their suburban upscale community outside of London. He has a great time partnering with Susan in doubles and appreciates her feistiness, her self-deprecating humor, and her wit at the expense of aristocratic pretensions.

She laughs at life, this is part of her essence. And no one else in her played-out generation does the same. She laughs at what I laugh at. She also laughs at hitting me on the head with a tennis ball; at the idea of having a sherry party with my parents; she laughs at her husband, just as she does when crashing the gears of the Austin shooting brake. Naturally, I assume she laughs at life because she has seen a great deal of it, and understands it.

Her husband seems an alcoholic buffoon and takes little notice how much time he and Susan spend together as companions. That her husband turns out to be periodically abusive to Susan and even to Paul helps convince Paul of the rightness of crossing the line to a secret love relationship with Susan. Because of her many years of a sexless marriage, she is in many ways a novice at love as much as Paul. Of course, the delicious blossoming doesn't stay secret for long, and some hard rain falls from the community, Paul's family, and Susan's grown daughters, who are close to Paul's age (tagged as Miss G. and Miss N.S. for "Miss Grumpy" and Miss Not So (Grumpy). Damn those torpedoes!

Like Paul, we the reader have a vested interest in seeing their relationship work, even though we can see likely tragedies lurking down the line. Paul makes a respectable story for himself and struggles to bend his sacrifices into fitting with that story. I joined with him as an "everyman" narrator as he nobly tries to pin down the core lessons and truths gained from attempting to live for love. All the aphorisms and famous quotes from literature are weighed from his experience. I felt keenly the thin ice he encounters when the accumulated evidence of fallibility of his memory emerges. Are his castles made of sand, his jousting against windmills? Does his ultimate ambivalence makes his *raison d'etre* a fool's playbook?

I felt Barnes nursed out a lot of lasting truths about love, which is hard to accomplish these days given the vast river of literature delving into the subject. I felt some of the same pleasure from Krauss' "The History of Love", though that one was more playful and fanciful. Paul here defends the wisdom of going with loves flow at first without analysis:

The lover, in rapture, doesn't want to "understand" love, but to experience it, to feel the intensity, the coming-into-focus of things, the acceleration of life, the entirely justifiable egotism, the lustful cockiness, the joyful rant, the calm seriousness, the hot yearning, the certainty, the complexity, the truth, the truth, the truth of love.

Truth and love, that was my credo. I love her, and I see the truth. It must be that simple.

Here we get some of his insights about the fear of love ending always seeming to intrude and take over the story any couple tries to build:

I didn't realize that there was panic inside her. How could I have guessed? I thought it was just inside me. Now, I realize, rather late in the day, that it is in everyone. It's a condition of our mortality. We have codes of manners to allay and minimize it, jokes and routines, and so many forms of diversion and distraction. But there is panic and pandemonium waiting to break out inside all of us, of this I am convinced. ...The panic takes some to God, others to despair, some to charitable works, others to drink, some to emotional oblivion, others to a life where they hope that nothing serious will ever trouble them again.

The business of judging one's life in retrospect has a lot in common with the two other books by Barnes that I've read. In "The Sense of an Ending", a middle aged man puts out a lot of nostalgia over his life's course and reveals his account of bad behavior in the past to be unreliable from biased memory. In the "Noise of Time", an account of the interior life of the Russian musician Shostakovich also shows a man struggling to contrive justifications for the sacrifices and compromises he made to succeed in the Soviet system, to the detriment of integrity and fairness to his family. Paul is definitely more charming, fundamentally good, and lovable compared to these other two lead characters. The undertow he comes up against is specific to his trajectory, but it felt universal as well.

This book was provided for review through the "First to Read" program of Penguin Random House.

Neil says

"Most of us have only one story to tell. I don't mean that only one thing happens to us in our lives: there are countless events, which we turn into countless stories. But there's only one that matters, only one finally worth telling. This is mine."

In *The Only Story*, Barnes revisits a subject he explored in *The Sense of an Ending*: the unreliable narrator, an older man looking back on his youth and trying to make sense of it. In the former book, we as readers worked out the inconsistency in the narration. Here, Paul, our narrator, is clear from the beginning that he cannot claim to be accurate:

"I'm not necessarily putting it down in the order that it happened. I think there's a different authenticity to memory, and not an inferior one. Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer. Do we have access to the algorithm of its priorities? Probably not. But I would guess that memory prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going."

What we are presented with, then, is Paul's attempt to collect his thoughts and feelings about events from 50-or-so years ago when, as a 19-year-old, he was involved in an affair with a much older woman. The events he is remembering, for the main part of the book, took place in England in the 1960s and social commentary plays an important part in the story alongside the events Paul is recollecting:

"...what might the neighbours think, and who might subsequently refuse to come for sherry?"

And

"The fact that it would never come to court, that middle-class England had a thousand ways of avoiding the truth, that respectability was no more shed in public than clothes..."

But, primarily, related in the first person, we read of Paul's meeting with and then affair with Susan. Then, related in the second person, we read about it starting to fall apart. Then related in the third person, we read about Paul's life afterwards. That's a simplification, and there is actually a mixture of first, second and third person narration at times, but it gives you an idea. There is perhaps a clue about this in the following:

"Sex involved two people. Two persons, first person and second person: you and I, you and me. But nowadays, the raucousness of the first person within him was stilled. It was as if he viewed, and lived, his life in the third person. Which allowed him to assess it more accurately, he believed."

It is as if Barnes is seeing youth as a time of self-centredness, all about me, with middle-age then bringing a sense of reflection and older-age leading to the third person, more detached assessment mentioned in the quote.

The three ages of man: me, you and he.

It would not be right to discuss the events of the book as that would spoil it. But Barnes is writing from his position as a man in his 70s who has observed life and has a gift to be able to write things down in a way that makes them sound obvious even if you haven't especially thought them through. He writes a lot about love and a lot about the ageing process (there are many similarities with *The Sense of an Ending*, I think).

On love, he borrows a quote from elsewhere more than once:

"In love, everything is both true and false; it's the one subject on which it's impossible to say anything

absurd."

On ageing, he makes comments such as:

"Strange how, when you are young, you owe no duty to the future; but when you are old, you owe a duty to the past. To the one thing you can't change."

And

"Back then, it had sounded like a counsel of despair; now, it struck him as normal, and emotionally practical."

This is a book filled with observations that could only really come from an older person. Sadly, I am getting to the age where I can relate to far too many of them (although I am about 10-12 years younger than Paul in the book). A sad story of love that goes wrong and the impact of that on the people involved. It is beautifully written - it is not often I sit and read over 200 pages with barely even a comfort break.

My thanks to Penguin Random House UK for a free ARC via NetGalley.

Gumble's Yard says

Most of us have only one story to tell. I don't mean that only one thing happens to us in our lives: there are countless events, which we turn into countless stories. But there's only one that matters, only one finally worth telling. This is mine.

Everyone has their love story. Everyone. It may have been a fiasco, it may have fizzled out, it may never even have got going, it may have been all in the mind, that doesn't make it any less real. Sometimes, it makes it more real. Sometimes, you see a couple, and they seem bored witless with one another, and you can't imagine them having anything in common, or why they're still living together. But it's not just habit or complacency or convention or anything like that. It's because once, they had their love story. Everyone does. It's the only story

The book is narrated by Paul some 50 years after, as a 19 year old, he commenced an affair with a much older, woman Susan, after the two are picked as mixed doubles partners (*chosen by lot* as the two remark at intervals later) and consists of her memories of their lengthy relationship.

But here's the first problem. If this is your only story, then it's the one you have most often told and retold, even if—as is the case here—mainly to yourself. The question then is: do all these retellings bring you closer to the truth of what happened, or move you further away?

You understand, I hope, that I'm telling you everything as I remember it I think there's a different authenticity to memory, and not an inferior one. Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer

Immediately then we recognise that Julian Barnes is returning to some of the same themes and ideas as in his novel *The Sense of an Ending* - which of course, won the Booker prize, against an infamous longlist picked by Stella Rimington and her fellow jurors to be “readable”. Perhaps ironically, *Sense of An Ending* failed to win the Costa Prize in the same year (the prize explicitly designed to reward books which make reading enjoyable) despite being shortlisted.

That book featured a narrator with unreliable memory and self-delusion, and an apparent resolution of a mystery at the end of the novel (albeit with the reader believing the actual truth may still differ). This novel is very different – the narrator is well aware of the subjectivity of his own memories and the ways in which he lied to himself over time, the only real mystery here is in the narrator trying to understand his true views on his experiences, and there is no resolution to be had there by narrator or reader.

The initial affair commences in a village in respectable, middle class, suburban Surrey, in the early 1960s (Paul one of the first intakes to Sussex University).

At first Paul comments

The time, the place, the social milieu? I'm not sure how important they are in stories about love. Perhaps in the old days, in the classics, where there are battles between love and duty, love and religion, love and family, love and the state. This isn't one of those stories. But still, if you insist. The time: more than fifty years ago. The place: about fifteen miles south of London.

But the reader realises that the social conventions of the time are key to the novel – in particular a certain type of English resolution to avoid addressing difficult situations, and later Paul reflects

Another thing he had come to understand. He had imagined that, in the modern world, time and place were no longer relevant to stories of love. Looking back, he saw that they had played a greater part in his story than he ever realized. He had given in to the old, continuing, ineradicable delusion: that lovers somehow stand outside of time.

And in those two paragraphs something else changes – the first is in the second person, the second in the third person, and this is another important and distinctive aspect to the novel – as Paul looks back on his only story, the story of his first love, his tale changes over time in person – broadly starting in the first person (in the flush of the lengthy initial affair – carried out with Susan’s husband’s clear knowledge but also disgust), moving to the second person (as the relationship matures and Susan leaves her husband and becomes more difficult as Susan begins to drink) and then to the third person (as Susan lapse into complete alcoholism can no longer be denied or ignored), before poignantly returning to the first person. This progression is not entirely smooth and is mixed up with a much more irregular variation in tense between present and past.

Two crucial passages address this directly:

And first love always happens in the overwhelming first person. How can it not? Also, in the overwhelming present tense. It takes us time to realize that there are other persons, and other tenses.

And

For instance, he thought he probably wouldn't have sex again before he died. Probably. Possibly. Unless. But on balance, he thought not. Sex involved two people. Two persons, first person and second person: you and I, you and me. But nowadays, the raucousness of the first person within him was stilled. It was as if he viewed, and lived, his life in the third person. Which allowed him to assess it more accurately, he believed.

Many themes, phrases (a washed out generation, Susan's husband hitting a ball as though he hates it) and ideas which Paul remembers (or in some cases imagines/dreams) recur throughout the book - for example an indelible image which had pursued him down his life: of being at an upstairs window, holding on to Susan by the wrists.

Paul also collects in a notebook famous sayings on love, deleting or adding them as his ideas on love change – over time he realises that many concepts about love, and their exact opposites, apparently are equally true, and perhaps, and one of his favourite phrases is:

In love, everything is both true and false; it's the one subject on which it's impossible to say anything absurd

And ultimately, reflecting on his life-defining, joyous but impossibly difficult relationship with Susan, he reflects on the profound lines from Tennyson, which are so well known as to be almost banal, but which nevertheless get at the heart of the great unresolvable in Paul's story:

One entry in his notebook was, of course: 'It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' That was there for a few years; then he crossed it out. Then he wrote it in again; then he crossed it out again. Now he had both entries side by side, one clear and true, the other crossed out and false.

I did find a small number of false notes – which seemed out of place in what is otherwise a meticulously crafted novel (just as we would expect from Barnes) - a football terrace chant and most oddly of all (if acknowledged as such by Paul) a crassly obscene suggestion to Susan involving root vegetables. Other odd notes seem to have been randomly lifted from other writers. For example there is a passage on an interesting but rather detailed list of reasons on why people do crosswords (with various sub-bullets added) – which almost reminds me of Simon Okotie; a concept taken from a Formula One race commentary which stands out for its specificity (with the location of the race and the driver and commentator involved) in a book of generalizations, and perhaps reminds me more of Ian McEwan; and an obsession with Susan's precious ears with their elegant helices which can only have been lifted straight from some working notes on a translation of Haruki Murakami.

But much of the imagery is very memorable – I particularly enjoyed

To remember her back to what he still thought of as her innocence: an innocence of soul.

Before such innocence became defaced. Yes, that was the word for it: a scribbling-over with the wild graffiti of booze.

And the book contains much wisdom on love in particular, my favourite and one I have sadly learned myself over the years

Nowadays, at the other end of life, I have a rule of thumb about whether or not two people are having an affair: if you think they might be, then they definitely are.

Overall an excellent book – and one which poses already a quandry for this year’s Booker committee. Do they short/longlist it and get accused of conventionality (Barnes has been shortlisted for the Booker three times before winning it) or do they omit and thus ignore what is already I think likely to be one of the deservedly widest read literary books of 2018.

My thanks to Penguin Random House UK for an ARC via NetGalley.

Ellie says

Paul meets Susan in a suburb in England in the 1960s. It's love. Only problem: he's 19 and she's 48.

Thus begins a decades long love affair that is destroyed not by the age difference (although maybe indirectly so: Susan's much longer life experience has left her, in fact, more vulnerable than Paul). There are the gifts of love--and the sacrifices.

I finished this yesterday and waited until today to write this review, to see if I still felt the same about the book. I do. Brilliantly written (as always), Barnes explores the way memory works as well as "the only story" everyone has: their love story. Whether it is reciprocated, unrequited, real, or imaginary, Barnes' says that this is the story that ultimately defines us.

I've been ranting about how I'm now bored by the stories of old (or young) white men. Well, here's an exception. I was deeply touched by both Susan and Paul: their struggles (individually and together) and fascinated by Barnes' writing.

Barnes' wrote one of my favorite books of all time, Flaubert's Parrot. I find his portrayal of characters, a somewhat distanced view, even when the book is written in the first person, always intriguing. I was pulled in by the writing to this story that is, in the end, an old story of love, its triumphs and its failures. Although little that was written was new, the way of writing was. I was especially interested in the pronoun switching that contributed to the instability of the novel, that in turn exemplified its portrayal of the shifting nature of relationships, the impossibility, ultimately, of pinning it down precisely and accurately.

I found this book impossible to put down. It was one of those books I'm always searching for and rarely find: exciting and stimulating. I cared about the characters but, even more, I found the writing satisfying emotionally and intellectually.

Seemita says

*"Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less?
That is, I think, finally, the only real question."*

This sentence, which introduced this most recent book of Julian Barnes to his potential readers, was pretty much my Achilles heel from Page 1. I don't quite understand how you can adjust the levels of love, like making marks on a burette and letting the content drip as per your desire of colour and consistency of the final emotion. Quantifying love is beyond my comprehension.

And yet, there is a certain granular tenderness in this story of a young man and his (almost) thirty years senior lover that prevents this love story from turning into a chore.

Seen in the rearview mirror during his twilight years, Paul reminisces the first time his 19-years old self fell for the 48-years old married Susan at a Tennis Court when the two were brought, fortuitously, together to team up for a mixed doubles match, and that his feelings were near immediately reciprocated. Ignited by this act that was both adventurous and liberating, Paul and Susan built walls around them, barricading their respective families with a dangerous, and often confounding, indifference and pushing this affair out of their current state, both literally and geographically. But at their new abode, that stripped them off their familial clutches, love gets suddenly exposed to the calamities of habituation, expectations and ageing. As a result, a whole new world sprouts between the two – one where they commence playing from different sides.

Barnes' signature prodding into the delicate gossamer of human dilemmas and questionable foibles is much on display here although the narrative veered to the unpleasant edge of excess a good many times. Of the three sections the novel is divided into, the first was a watertight bag that didn't allow for any of my emotions to blossom. The characters appeared like a bunch left unanchored on a theatre stage, waiting for the director to give them a cue. But beyond those 80 odd pages, Barnes plays his magic trick and all of a sudden, the palette of love bursts open and renders an immersive experience. The turning points when love turns into duty, the duty into a burden, the burden into a gash and the gash into a permanent scar, are the crevices where Barnes resonated the most with me.

"Love was by its very nature disruptive, cataclysmic; and if it was not, then it was not love."

There, he did speak my mind.

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Also on my blog

Larry H says

"First love fixes a life forever: this much I have discovered over the years. It may not outrank subsequent loves, but they will always be affected by its existence. It may serve as model, or as counterexample. It may overshadow subsequent loves; on the other hand, it can make them easier, better. Though sometimes, first love cauterises the heart, and all any searcher will find thereafter is scar tissue."

When Paul was 19 years old and visiting his family in a stifling London suburb while on summer break from university, his mother encouraged him to visit the local tennis club. While silently mocking the self-

important people who took their tennis seriously and themselves even more so, he is randomly partnered in a tournament with Susan Macleod. Despite the obvious differences between them—Susan is in her late 40s, married, mother to two adult daughters, the two develop a strong bond.

Susan likes to tease Paul for his youthful braggadocio, his lack of real knowledge of the world around him and relationships, and his playful nature. Paul is utterly fascinated by Susan's sense of humor, her candidness about her unsatisfying marriage and her less-than-appealing husband, and the sense that she's not concerned or shocked by anything. After a long period of flirtation, the two become lovers.

Despite disapproval from his parents and some in the community around them, Susan and Paul carry out their relationship hidden in nearly plain sight. He spends a great deal of time at her house, being routinely welcomed and abused by her husband and daughters, and Paul wonders if everyone knows the truth and chooses not to delve too deeply, or if they're fooling everyone. An idealistic young man, he dreams of running away with her one day, rescuing her from the life she seems unhappily chained to.

"One of the things I thought about Susan and me—at the time, and now, again, all these years later—is that there often didn't seem *words* for our relationship; at least, none that fitted. But perhaps this is an illusion all lovers have about themselves: that they escape both category and description."

When the couple finally does flee to London and move in together, at first it seems like the realization of their (mostly Paul's) dreams. He has escaped his parents' disappointment and helped free Susan from a loveless and occasionally abusive marriage. But little by little, the cracks in their relationship begin to show themselves, the differences between them magnify, and Paul realizes that there is deeper unhappiness in Susan than he ever could imagine.

In *The Only Story*, Julian Barnes provides a meditation on first love, on the most impactful relationship in our lives, and how it shapes our later views on love, relationships, happiness, and trust. It's a longing, nostalgic look at what seemed like simpler times, before we realized what a hold the world had on us, and how factors beyond our feelings for one another can affect our relationships. It's also an insightful commentary on obligation, desire, commitment, and emotion.

Barnes is really a magnificent writer. I absolutely loved his book *The Sense of an Ending* (see my review), which I read seven years ago. But while I marveled at Barnes' use of language, emotion, and imagery, I didn't find this book particularly captivating. I was drawn in by the subject matter, but it moved very slowly, and meandered quite a bit. Paul also had a way of being coy with his narration, which frustrated me.

May-December romances are familiar literary fodder, and today, we're just as apt to read stories about younger men and older women, with the man being more affected than the woman. While Barnes definitely brings a few new twists to this age-old trope, I wish that *The Only Story* had a little more spark for me, so I could remember more than just how beautifully told the story was.

See all of my reviews at itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com, or check out my list of the best books I read in 2017 at <https://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com/2018/01/the-best-books-i-read-in-2017.html>.

Bianca says

2.5 stars rounded up

I declared 2017 *the Julian Barnes year* on account of reading and loving seven of his books.

The Sense of An Ending, while it is one of his most popular books, was my least favourite novel of his. *The Only Story* is somewhat similar to that one, as it has an older narrator, Paul, reminiscing about his nineteen-year-old self in the 1960s and his first love and relationship with Susan, a woman twenty-nine years his senior. You read that right. Honestly, I didn't have any qualms about that, I read books about younger men being seduced by older women before.

I would rather be outraged than bored. And oh my, it pains me to say this, but *The Only Story* was tedious, repetitive and I had to force myself to get back to reading it.

I don't know about you, but when I read about something taboo, forbidden, especially a risky love affair, I expect passion, animal attraction, a sense of inevitability and urgency. Even in the beginning of the relationship, there wasn't much fire. It was all so dry and passionless. It was all very *proper* without actually being proper. Why was Paul so taken with Susan? I couldn't tell you.

While the relationship lasts much longer than expected, unfortunately, it takes a very sad turn, as Susan becomes an alcoholic. That was painful to read about. At least, I felt something. I was even more annoyed with Paul and heartbroken for Susan.

As for the writing, there were a few paragraphs worth highlighting, especially in the beginning, but it became repetitive and drawn out. The shifts from the first-person narration, to second and then to third and again back to first were jarring.

Ultimately, I just didn't feel much about the characters and the writing wasn't outstanding to make up for the lack of a gripping story.

I've received this novel via NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review. Many thanks to Random House UK, Vintage Publishing for allowing me to read this novel.
