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The Sense of an Ending, by Julian Barnes, Borzoi, 2011

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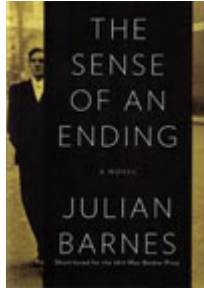
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Recommended Readings



The Sense of an Ending

by Julian Barnes, Borzoi, 2011

Reviewed by William Watts

Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* is the winner of this year's Man Booker Prize. It is a compact novel told entirely through the voice of the first-person narrator, Tony. When Tony receives a surprising and unexplained bequest of 500 pounds from the mother of a woman he dated forty years earlier, he is launched into an extended examination of his own past.

The plot of Barnes's novel is slight, but the range of its introspection is both broad and deep. In the course of reexamining his past, Tony discovers a letter he wrote in his early twenties to his former girlfriend and his close friend, who had become lovers. The letter is spiteful and full of angry curses he hurls against his one-time friends. Some of these curses seem to have come true, and have become intertwined in the hardships suffered by the friend and girlfriend. Thus, Tony must come to grips with the fact that he may have been-and may still be-a cad who has brought real harm to others. In this way, Barnes's novel is an extended meditation on memory and responsibility.

The Sense of an Ending contains a somewhat bizarre twist at the end, which makes for an unsettling ending. This may, however, be part of the point of the novel: we can never be fully in command of the past, or of how the past shapes us into the people we become.

- William Watts is Associate Professor of English at Butler University.