

FICTION BOOK REVIEW

The Sense of an Ending

Julian Barnes. London, UK: Jonathan Cape, 2011.
ISBN-13: 978-0-224-09415-3. Price: £12.99.
Pages: 160 (hardback)

Julian Barnes's latest book, winner of the Man Booker Prize 2011, is a novel so slim as to be almost a novella. Light in subject matter, however, it is not.

In Part One, protagonist Tony Webster recalls his admiring friendship with a school friend Adrian, his doomed relationship with sexually-withholding Veronica, his ambivalent reaction when Veronica and Adrian later become partners, and his shock when the latter kills himself. The descriptions of fumbled, teenage sexuality in those post-pill years are beautifully drawn, not only convincing but also humorous: "Wasn't this the Sixties? Yes, but only for some people and only in some parts of the country...".

Part Two brings us to the present day, when Tony – a pensioner now and divorced father – is forced to reassess

everything he remembers of those days, when Veronica's mother leaves a message for him in her will. Trying to both grasp the truth of the past and get the 'ending' of the title with regards to Veronica, he discovers with horror the extent to which his reaction to her relationship with Adrian triggered the events that led to the suicide. Not to spoil the story, the twist in the tale at the end is both unexpected and shocking.

There is much that is thought provoking for sexual health professionals in this novel; though again, to detail exactly what would be to ruin the final few pages. But perhaps the main message is that low insight and poor communication may not only be sad but in very real terms tragic. All the major protagonists of the book seem unable to talk directly and clearly about their sexuality, nor do so honestly or kindly, let alone with love.

All is silence around sex and its ramifications: sometimes through ignorance, sometimes through over-intellectualisation, often through joylessness, and all too often through malicious manipulation or

a simple need for revenge. The result for Tony Webster is a life that by the end of the novel has had to be totally reinterpreted – and for the worse.

All of which left this reviewer gripped by the plot of the book, impressed by its astute observation, awed by its language, but never moved by its characters. It was hard to have patience with the protagonists when what one wanted to do was pin each of them against the wall and shout: "For heaven's sake, talk about it!".

If one is not exposed on a daily basis to the vulnerabilities of those who make unwise sexual decisions this may be an interesting and riveting novel. If, however, one is all too used to those who cannot think clearly about or communicate effectively about sex, it may prove to be just too much of a 'busman's holiday'.

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J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care 2012;**38**:93.
doi:10.1136/jfprhc-2011-100262