

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?

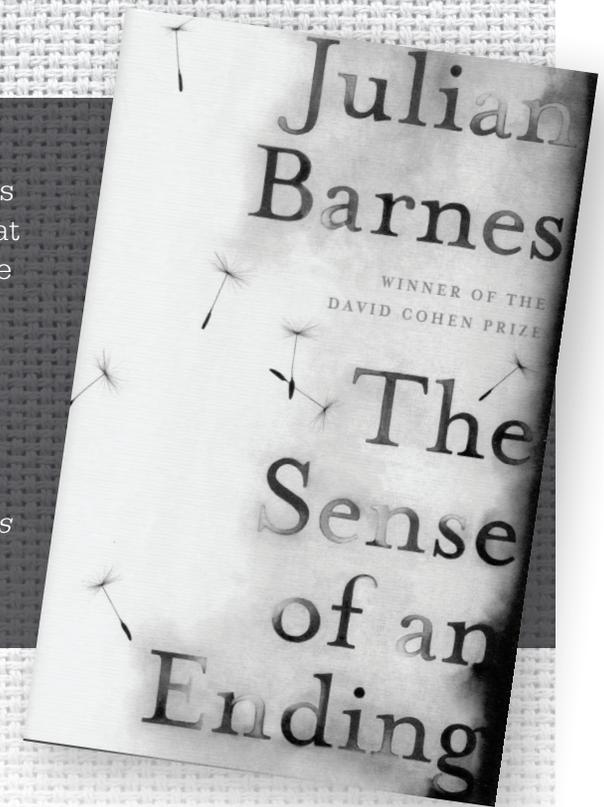
17. Discuss the closing lines of the novel: "There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest" (p. 163).

Discussion Questions

"Julian Barnes reveals crystalline truths that have taken a lifetime to harden. He has honed their edges, and polished them to a high gleam"

— Liesl Schillinger,
The New York Times

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Julian Patrick Barnes is a contemporary English writer, and winner of the 2011 Man Booker Prize, for his book *The Sense of an Ending*. Three of his earlier books had been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize: *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *England, England* (1998), and *Arthur & George* (2005).

Barnes has written crime fiction under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh. Barnes is one of the best-loved English writers in France, where he has won several literary prizes, including the Prix Médicis for *Flaubert's Parrot* and the Prix Femina for *Talking It Over*. He is an officer of

L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Education and early career

Barnes attended Magdalen College, Oxford, where he studied Modern Languages. After graduation, he worked as a lexicographer for the Oxford English Dictionary supplement for three years. He then worked as a reviewer and literary editor for the *New Statesman* and the *New Review*. During his time at the *New Statesman*, Barnes suffered from debilitating shyness, saying: "When there were weekly meetings I would be paralysed into silence, and was thought of as the mute member of staff." From 1979 to 1986 he worked as a television critic, first for the *New Statesman* and then for *The Observer*.

Books

His first novel, *Metroland* (1980), is a short, semi-autobiographical story of Christopher, a young man from the London suburbs who travels to Paris as a student, finally returning to London. It deals with themes of idealism, sexual fidelity and has the three-part structure that is a common theme in Barnes' work. After reading the novel, Barnes' mother complained about the book's "bombardment" of filth. In 1983, his second novel *Before She Met Me* features a darker narrative, a story of revenge by a jealous historian who becomes obsessed by his second wife's past.

Book Summary

Winner, 2011 Man Booker Prize

The story of a man coming to terms with the mutable past, Julian Barnes's new novel is laced with his trademark precision, dexterity and insight. It is the work of one of the world's most distinguished writers.

Tony Webster and his clique first met Adrian Finn at school. Sex-hungry and book-hungry, they navigated the girl drought of gawky adolescence together, trading in affectations, in-jokes, rumour and wit. Maybe Adrian was a little more serious than the others, certainly more intelligent, but they swore to stay friends forever. Until Adrian's life took a turn into tragedy, and all of them, especially Tony, moved on and did their best to forget.

Now Tony is in middle age. He's had a career and a marriage, a calm divorce. He gets along nicely, he thinks, with his one child, a daughter, and even with his ex-wife. He's certainly never tried to hurt anybody. Memory, though, is imperfect. It can always throw up surprises, as a lawyer's letter is about to prove. The unexpected bequest conveyed by that letter leads Tony on a dogged search through a past suddenly turned murky. And how do you carry on, contentedly, when events conspire to upset all your vaunted truths? (From the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

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?
