The Sense of An Ending

A Novel
By Julian Barnes

Alfred A. Knopf. 163 pp. $23.95

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

The Sense of An Ending, Julian Barnes’ 14th novel, begins innocently enough.

Anthony Webster, the narrator, recounts a few incidents from his school days, which were marked by his relationship with three chums and a girlfriend named Veronica Mary Elizabeth Ford.

Skipping past career, marriage, fatherhood, and divorce, Anthony reveals that he had settled, fairly comfortably, into his “more emptied” retired life in London, never indulging what-ifs, when he was confronted by his past, in the form of a bequest of 500 pounds - an apology of sorts - and two documents, left to him by Veronica’s mother, Susan, whom he had met once, at a weekend in Chislehurst. What begins as a determination to recover property that now belongs to him soon morphs into something much larger.

Exquisitely crafted, sophisticated, suspenseful, and achingly painful, The Sense of An Ending is a meditation on history, memory, and individual responsibility. Anthony will learn, perhaps too late, that his brilliant young friend, Adrian Finn, was right when he defined history as “that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.” But he will also solve the enigmatic equation Adrian has devised to capture the accumulation of human relationships that surrounded him. And, when he does, Anthony will come to understand that he was, though he may no longer be, “a man against whom backs should be turned.”

The Sense of An Ending abounds in provocative (and often profound) propositions. Young people, Anthony observes, have a strong sense of what life is and might become, even when they are uncertain about their own aims and purposes. They can remember all their experiences in their entirety. Later, the memory “becomes a thing of shreds and patches,” operating like the “black box” recorder in an airplane. If you crash, there is a record of what happened: “if you don’t, then the log of your journey is much less clear.”

Taking a hard look in the mirror, Anthony sees an ordinary man, an Everyman, “who avoided being hurt and called it a capacity for survival. Who paid his bills, stayed on good terms with everyone as far as possible, for whom ecstasy and despair soon became just words once read in novels.” And who, nonetheless, stood guilty as charged of consciously inflicting pain on those he had cared about the most.
The chief characteristic of remorse, he had always thought, was that it could not be acted upon because the time had passed for apologies and restitution. But, he begins to wonder, could remorse flow backward, "be transmuted into simple guilt, then apologized for, then forgiven?"

In several gripping scenes, we learn that it can and it can't. Anthony has been given a gift: the time to ask the question "What else have I done wrong?"- and do something about it.

As he ponders what he could not know or understand then and now, and "all that couldn't ever be known or understood," Anthony remembers Adrian's definition of history and its corollary, that accounts of the past contain the self-delusions of the defeated as well as the lies of the victors.

He sees a man burying his face into a shelf of quilted toilet tissues to avoid looking at him - and a woman, seemingly carefree, frying some eggs for breakfast, and then, later, making a secret, horizontal, portentous gesture at him "beneath a sunlit wisteria."

And Anthony knows that in life there is accumulation and responsibility, and beyond them "there is unrest. There is great unrest."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

**Find this article at:**

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.