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Departure(s), by Julian Barnes, London, Jonathan Cape, 2026, pp. 176, £18,99 (hardback), ISBN: 9781787335721.

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On January 20, 2026, a day after he turned 80, Julian Barnes (1946–…) published what he calls his final novel, *Departure(s)*. It is a hybrid narrative that mixes memoir and fiction, and on its inside cover, Jonathan Cape advertises the novel as "a work of fiction—but that doesn't mean it's not true." The front cover features a painting titled *Evening* by Howard Hodgkin (1932–2017), who was a close friend of Barnes. *Departure(s)* explores certain Barnesian themes familiar to his readers: memory and its (un)reliability, love and loss, and life and death, all narrated in a form that is characteristically marked by irony. In the memoir part, Barnes also recounts how he was diagnosed with a rare type of blood cancer. Remaining true to his *oeuvre*, Barnes intertwines his insights on life and memory with a love story that is constructed around a hole in the middle. In this sense, with its structure, themes, and subject matter, *Departure(s)* is truly a Barnesian narrative, and a swan song, which bears a kinship to many of his early works.

Departure(s) has five chapters: the first chapter is titled "The Great I AM," in which Barnes represents his reflections on memory through a scientific phenomenon called Involuntary Autobiographical Memory, which is abbreviated as IAM. In the second chapter, "The Beginning of the Story," Barnes narrates the "fictive" part of the book, yet the narrator is still Julian Barnes, and the story he tells is about his friends from the university, Stephen and Jean, who are given fictional names because Barnes had promised not to write about them. The third chapter, "Manageable," is the sincere story of how Barnes was diagnosed with a rare type of blood cancer during the pandemic. The fourth chapter, "The End of the Story," is about how Stephen and Jean meet after forty years, and in this chapter Julian Barnes questioned about love and marriage by his characters, or his

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friends (depending on how much the reader believes him). In the last chapter, "Going Nowhere," he reflects on life and death, and offers his heartfelt farewell to his readers.

All chapters of the novel are narrated by Julian Barnes himself. After a prolific career of writing fiction through the voices of his narrators and characters, Barnes appears to confront the reader more directly in *Departure(s)*, setting aside his usual narrative mask in order to stare directly at his readers' faces. Even if he can still be considered as Julian Barnes the character, and partially not Julian Barnes the author, the book contains autobiographical details that the narrator dares readers to Google the given information if they doubt their accuracy. In fact, *Departure(s)* is the only work in which Barnes should be mentioned as Julian, as he makes himself a character in his narrative. Barnes openly shares how he fabulates a story not only in his fictional works but also in the narration of his own memories. Therefore, in his account of the story of his friends' departure and reunion, or in his story of diagnosis, it is as if Barnes unlocked his office for his readers, revealing the desk of the author and frankly showing how a writer selects events, details, and stories; how he shapes them, guides the reader towards the path he desires, removes what he wishes to hide, and surprises or shocks the reader with a detail that he has been hiding in the top drawer of his desk drawer from the very beginning.

Regarding the title, "Departure(s)" may both refer to multiple departures experienced and/or witnessed in the past, and one possible departure that is expected to take place in the future. On the fictional level, in "The Beginning of the Story" chapter, there is the meeting and the departure of Barnes's college friends, Stephen and Jean, who are reunited after forty years, yet they eventually depart again. On the personal level, there is Barnes's departure from the world of fiction to which he had prolifically contributed for over forty-five years. The title may also signify Barnes's awaited departure from life to nothingness, which he believes he is headed toward, with the company of a rare/personal sort of cancer that is "incurable yet manageable" (*Departure(s)* 63). Thus, the title refers to some departures with possible arrivals, and to some in which there is only 'the' departure "which will be followed by no Arrival" (*Departure(s)* 129).

The hybridity of the narrative rests on the thin line between memoir and fiction genres. However, *Departure(s)* can be considered less as a fictive work and more as a memoir, yet this does not make it utterly non-fictional. The novel's autobiographical elements are seamlessly combined with its fictional layers. Barnes states that his "account will have two different textures. For its first half, I am entirely reliant on memory. . . . By the time of the second half, I was a writer," which makes him rely on his notebooks and diaries (25). However, both textures are equally (un)reliable since "what I document is what I want to remember—so one sort of triage is taking place" (25). In his final book, Barnes uses his own voice to demonstrate that the novel he is narrating is formed of, and mixed with, his personal memories, but this does not diminish its fictive value. Instead, he emphasises that there is no clear distinction between novels and narrated memories,

which is an idea that has been frequently revisited in his earlier works. In this sense, his characters are would-be real people or would-be fictional figures, and the events might be equally fictional and non-fictional. The author seems to rely on some common themes in *Departure(s)*, and he utilises those themes through the narrative strategies of autofiction, which serves to establish the hybrid relation between fact and fiction. As a Barnesian trait, hybridity can be observed in his earlier works, such as *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), and *Elizabeth Finch* (2022). However, *Departure(s)* is the first (and the last) narrative in which Barnes's voice is directly heard in all parts of that hybridity, thereby constituting the novel itself. The narrative is so hybrid that it even includes a criticism made by Jean about Barnes's tendency to write hybrid novels, which remains a typical Barnesian touch: "This hybrid stuff you do—I think it's a mistake. You should do one thing or another" (*Departure(s)* 70). From the reader's perspective, the narrative seems more as an autobiography and less as fiction, since most of its parts can be read as memoir, essay collection and/or letters combined together in a swan song that gestures toward the author's previous works. With this aspect, the potential audience of *Departure(s)* is more likely to be his long-term readers.

Towards the end of the narrative, the narrator mentions how the elderly tend to remember forgotten childhood memories while losing their grasp of what happened in the recent past. Therefore, he argues that the elderly people have the long-gone past and their brief present in their memory, but with a huge hole in the middle because they lose what happened in-between. Barnes suggests that "[o]ur lives, in other words, would be reduced to a story with a large hole in the middle" (*Departure(s)* 130–131). It is observed that the structure of the love story between Stephen and Jean is also a story with a hole in the middle, which is the last story Barnes would like to tell. The analogy of life with a hole in the middle resonates with how Geoffrey Braithwaite of *Flaubert's Parrot* defines biography writing through the image of a net: "the trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch" (38). *Departure(s)* is a narrative in which the author clearly demonstrates the act of throwing the net, selecting, eliminating, storing, and selling one's own life writing, by reminding the readers that there will always be a hole in the middle.

In *Departure(s)*, Barnes suggests that he himself blurs the line between fiction and lived experience. The motif of self-realisation, which Barnes used to make his 'characters' experience, is now experienced by 'him' as the author/narrator. Getting back together after forty years, Stephen and Jean break up again out of an asymmetrical love: Stephen states that their problem is that "Jean thinks I love her too much" (97). Therefore, the situation of Stephen and Jean evokes an earlier question asked by Paul in *The Only Story* (2018): "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" (3). In his final piece of fiction, Barnes revisits the concept of asymmetrical love, returning to what he had defined as the only real question. Their final breakup is a turning point for Barnes himself. For the first

and last time, the readers witness Julian Barnes depict his realisation that his self-image as a wise author, whose advice was valued and therefore solicited, turns out to be an illusion. He feels guilt and failure as he announces that he "had treated Stephen and Jean as if they were characters in one of my novels, believing I could gently direct them towards the ends which I desired. I'd been confusing life with fiction" (*Departure(s)* 110). However, he plays a trick on his readers as he fabulates the story of Stephen and Jean in *Departure(s)*, turning them really into characters in one of his novels. Therefore, his confusion of 'life with fiction' is a confusion that is based on a deceptive, ever-present '*vice versa*,' which sustains the irony of the novel.

In *Departure(s)*, Barnes defines life as a "light comedy with a sad ending," and it is a formulation that may also be extended to his wider *oeuvre* (154). He states that only a few of his characters "have ever been granted a happy ending" in his novels, and that he usually portrays them "looking down a long road ahead, uncertain where it will lead, and allowing the reader to decide what they might find on their future travels" (*Departure(s)* 86). Barnes states that "Now I would be in the position of that reader, and those travellers," which is rendered possible by the autofictional elements that construct Julian Barnes as a character (86). The closure of the narrative is Barnes's sincere farewell to his readers in which he imagines that he is seated at a café with his reader, observing "many and varied expressions of life that pass in front of us" (157). Before he departs for the last time, Barnes pictures himself together with his reader, resting his hand on his reader's forearm, requesting him/her not to be distracted by his departure, and to keep his/her eyes open for the ongoing movements of the passers-by. Although Barnes appears to bring his career to a close with the image of him holding his reader's arm while he disappears, it is certain that his readers will always reciprocate this gesture by holding the arms of Graham Hendrick, Geoffrey Braithwaite, or Tony Webster, who are somewhat disguised as Julian Barnes himself.

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- The author of this review confirms that this research does not require a research ethics committee approval.
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