



A CRITICAL REVIEW OF JULIAN BARNES' *THE SENSE OF AN ENDING* AND HILARY MANTEL'S *BRING UP THE BODIES*

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ABSTRACT

The Man Booker winner British author Julian Barnes' novel The Sense of an Ending is an 11th endeavor. The novel appears to be full of mysteries, memories and self-deception. The story opens up with the human struggle and missed opportunities. The Ending seems to be an ambiguous semantic note. It is a pacy thriller and a bildungsroman. The next novel Bring Up the Bodies deals with medieval historical framework. It's a sequel to a 2009 Man Booker Prize winning novel Wolf Hall which later constitutes a trilogy and bags another Booker Prize. Mantel's re-telling makes the events terrifying even to its modern readers. The novel is full of ironies. It is termed as a darkly magnificent sequel.

Keywords: Meritocratic, anarchistic, ending, thriller, bildungsroman, self-deception; Henry III, Catharine of Argon, Anne Boleyn, Roman Church, authority of Pope, Tudor Age, Thomas Cromwell.

After being short-listed for three times, finally Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* brought the 2011 Man Booker Prize in his hands. The same following year also won David Cohen Prize for literature. His honors also include the Somerset Maugham Award, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, the Shakespeare Prize and E.M. Forster Award from the American Academy and Institute of Art.

The Sense of an Ending is Barnes' eleventh novel, released on August 4, 2011, a "beautifully written book" which "spoke to human kind in the 21st century"- according to the panel which decided the winner. The British author Julian Barnes' novel, *The Sense of an Ending* is narrated by a retired man named as Tony Webster, who recalls how he and his clique met Adrian Finn at school and vowed to remain friends forever.

The time past catches up with Tony, he reflects on the path he and his friends have taken. His friend Adrian Finn appears more serious and intelligent. Both swear to stay friends forever, but unexpectedly Adrian commits suicide, and the friends move on and try to forget him. Interestingly forty five years later, Tony, who has a career, a failed marriage and a daughter,

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receives a letter from a lawyer, which brings up some surprises. That is an unexpected bequest within the letter; it leads Tony on a search through the past that has suddenly turned precariously murky.

The novel has been divided into two parts; both parts are narrated by the main protagonist Tony Webster. The first part of the novel begins in the 1960^s with four intellectually arrogant friends. Tony is the main narrator; Adrian is the most precociously intelligent of the four. At the end of their school days, another student at the same school hangs himself apparently after getting a girl pregnant. Therefore all four friends discuss and pondered over the philosophical difficulties of knowing that what exactly happened. Adrian and Tony depart from each other by going Cambridge University and Bristol University. Tony at Bristol gets a girlfriend, named Veronica, and Tony at her home spends an awkward weekend. Suddenly their relationship fails in some acrimony, and Tony, in his last year of the university receives a letter from Adrian informing him that he is going out with Veronica.

Sometimes later Tony is told that Adrian has committed suicide and has left a note addressed to the corner and saying that the thinking person has a philosophical drift to examine the nature of their life, and they may then choose to renounce it, Tony admires the reasoning and briefly records the left uneventful forty years of his life until his sixties. This is the time that the narration of the second part of the novel begins with the arrival of the lawyer's letter informing him that veronica's mother has bequeathed him 500 and two documents which lead him to re-establish contact with Veronica.

The novel in size is very small book of just about 160 pages, a book about memories and perception. A sixty year old man who has led a preachable calm life, an average man of some achievements and some disappointments, suddenly and unexpectedly forced to confront some actions he encountered with as a young man in his 20^s. His memories do not appear to be trustworthy, therefore he has to go back and contact people from his past especially his ex-girlfriend.

The novel *The Sense of an Ending* appears to be a bundle of mysteries in itself, the novel is all about self-deception. Actually the while I read the novel I started thinking about the events of my past and started wondering that whether I can remember accurately enough or not, or I have modified my memory by which I could live without guilt and embarrassment.

The writing is beautiful and beyond words and the philosophy which is expressed well in the novel. It will sure make you think, if you read, over memory, aging and consequences. Stylistically the novel appears to be quite a mature text.

In the novel Barnes has engaged the untidy collisions of the human struggle more directly than ever made. This novel is a mystery of memory and missed opportunity, as Tony looks



getting back to certain unreserved mysterious questions. Had he loved Veronica? What happened to the energetic body who used to be “*book hungry, sex hungry, meritocratic, anarchistic*”, - who used to think himself as “*being kept in some kind of holding pen, waiting to be released*”, into an engaged adult life of “*passion and danger, ecstasy and despair*”?

In the novel Barnes’ unreliable narrator is a mystery to himself which makes the novel one unbroken sizzling and satisfying fuse. In the novel the puzzles of past have been decoded by a man who himself is a puzzle. Though, the novel is a short but not the slight one. The novel is so compelling that it begs to be read in a single sitting, with a stunning psychological and emotional depth and sophistication.

The novel, *The Sense of and Ending* is a title which begins to swim before the readers’ eyes. The narrator Tony is into the middle age, he is again thinking things over and over. There is a double ambiguity, the “Ending” can be taken to be death itself or the way various things turn out, because the sense of an ending is both, the premonition of death and of the fact that life is less and less, likely to change radically towards its end as one gets older and older.

The conclusion is somehow looks unsatisfactory and implausible, but it succeeds to be a deeply moral novel about the need to make sense of one’s action and the need to face up to the consequence of actions. The novel combines two genres, first the pacy thriller and the second the bildungsroman.

Bring Up the Bodies is entirely a historical novel. It is a sequel to a 2009 Man Booker Prize winning novel *Wolf Hall*. The novel is a partial projection of Thomas Cromwell Trilogy, which has further won the 2012 Man Booker Prize for Hilary Mary Mantel, the first English women novelist, short story writer, essayist and critic to receive the prestigious award twice in the same tradition of J.M. Coetzee, Peter Carey and J.G. Farrell.

The novel also won the 2012 Costa Book of the year. This long novel continues the narration of the first part *Wolf Hall*, which is about Henry VIII’s minister Thomas Cromwell. The novel begins where previous novel ended. The King and Master Secretary Thomas Cromwell are the quests of the Seymour family at Wolf Hall. The King shares private moments with Jane Seymour and begins to fall in love with her. As her present queen, Anne Boleyn failed to give him a male heir, therefore as a rumor of her infidelity is spread, the King seeks a way to get rid of her and later marry the new object of affection. Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell are their current high status to each other. Cromwell seeks to find a legitimate excuse to expel her from the King’s court. In the novel Cromwell is projected such as a master politician, who uses Anne’s fall from grace as a chance to settle scores with old enemies. The novel pathetically ends with the death of Anne. The ending of the novel is quite ironic. The wonder of Mantel’s re-telling is that she makes the event fresh and terrifying once again and continues the Tudor Tale.



The best of Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies* is that it does not end with Thomas Cromwell thick neck on the chopping block after he loses Henry VIII's favor. That is the reason that the end indicates, there will be a third novel. That is titled as *The Mirror and the Right* as Mantel has mentioned in is an interview. The novel is emotional by nature.

In the novel Cromwell rises to power and thinks three things. First, his extraordinary knowledge of how the world worked, which he gained as a mercenary in Europe. Second, an Einstein level IQ. Cromwell wooed aristocrats and mentored the young and ambitious as he appears ruthless. In the novel Cromwell's job description is simple, he keeps Henry happy. The plot of the novel revolves around Henry's disenchantment with the bold and aging Anne Boleyn.

Having broken with Catholic Church and much of Europe in order to put second wife on the throne and in his bed. Henry at that time finds himself drawn to the demure Jane Seymour.

The novel *Bring Up the Bodies* is unquestionably the bookies' and the book seller's favorite. Mantel's win must have given her trade a much needed moment of commercial relief, a recession beater. There is a stunning originality, an opposite of predictable novelist. She has taken one of the medieval England's greatest thrillers as the persecution, trial and death of Anne Boleyn; she gives it a clever contemporary spin. It's been mixed with sharp and modern dialogues, the narratives exploits the historic present tense to give an essentially hardcore historical novel with some extra literary ground.

Wendy Smith, in her review in The Washington Post, called the novel "*a darkly magnificent sequel*" as the story covers Cromwell's brutal efforts to engineer the beheading of Queen Anne and Henry's new marriage to Jane Seymour. Mantel has animated history with a political and psychological security which looks equal to that of Tolstoy's in *War and Peace*.

The middle part of the Mantel's trilogy *Bringing Up the Bodies* begins in September of 1535 and just covers a year. There Anne Boleyn has been married to King Henry VIII for just under three years. She has born him a daughter, named Elizabeth. She has not been able to manage to produce a male heir as she will rule one day, the daughter.

England has been shown in a state of turmoil due to Henry's drifting away from the Vatican and his controversial annulment to his beloved Katharine. Amidst all this Jane Seymour, the Queen's Lady catches the King's attention and then after everything looks a mess. Anne gets a miscarriage the same as Queen Katharine is buried. King Henry wants to remain out of the marriage which does not look good sign for Anne or her family which schemed and plotted to make the queen.

Mantel has done a fantastic work in historical fiction. The descriptions have come alive in the novel. One can feel that Mantel has successfully transported the reader into 16th century England along with its entire problem. The life of King Henry VIII has been projected with a unique fascination, though the book tells less about him and more about Cromwell and what he experienced at court. Thomas Cromwell's character has been sketched to a state of perfection.

He has been struggling throughout the novel to do what is right to the King and what he thinks is correct. This conflicting element has been brought with supremely crafted style. The narration of the novel is intricated which moves through Cromwell's consciousness from thought to thought as the drama of Anne Boleyn's life begins.

"Those who are made can be unmade" is one of the most fascinating and attracting lines of the novel. The reading experience is immersive, like a penurious art house film, seducing you with its beautiful faced and formed image. The novel has been concerned with some famous and fascinating historical events such as: First, Henry VIII's divorce from Catharine of Aragon. Second, his marriage to Anne Boleyn, third, her execution at the King's order. Forth, the English split from the Roman Church and the authority of Pope. These historical events make the story fragile again with everything at suspenseful risk.

The Costa Book Award, after unanimous votes, brought a middle brow triumph for Mantel's art of fiction. Thus *Bringing Up the Bodies* appears to be a novel which would keep engaged scholars and professors for a long-long period of time! In short, the novelist has looked maddeningly unreachable gift of being interesting!

Mantel's method is to follow affairs eagerly as Cromwell sees them. She has used the form, *"stream of consciousness"*. The traditional view of Thomas Cromwell indirectly relates the Oliver Cromwell via his, Thomas's sister, which has been routinely hostile. This was the man who organized the dissolution of the monasteries and dispersal of their lands and wealth to the Kings friends.

Mantel, however, by and large leaves his character open, asking us, as it were to judge him by his acts. When Cromwell is at home, he appears kindly and congenial, but when we listen to him trapping the courtiers who are to be accused of being Anne Boleyn's lovers the blood runs cold. The novel ends pathetically with Anne's execution as already five male courtiers have been beheaded on the suspicions of having been Anne's lovers. Historically, as Mantel has commented in an interview that, we know nothing for certain about Anne's guilt.

Thus the second volume of the projected trilogy has remarkable and unprecedented grand slam of awards. *Bring Up the Bodies* might be a fictional work, but it is more transparent than those high narrative histories. I would appreciate the real history Cromwell has helped to

make. The drama of this book is driven by the certainty that this calculating and manipulative man cannot be sure of all outcomes.

Mantel has encouraged us to be in two times at once. Her writing is appropriately sumptuous for the velvety splendor of the Tudor Age. The decaying and dying Katherine “turns the great pages of her volume of rage and puts her finger on just the right word.” She brings a flush to long-dead cheeks.

The philosopher Socrates, at the time of his trial, was reputed to have said that we are judged not on what we do but on what people say of what we do. The wonder of Ms. Mantel’s retelling is that she makes the events fresh and terrifying all over again.

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