

A consummate man of letters

Barnes's new book collects his work on other writers

Through the Window: Seventeen Essays and a Short Story, by Julian Barnes

(Vintage Canada, 272 pages, \$19.95)

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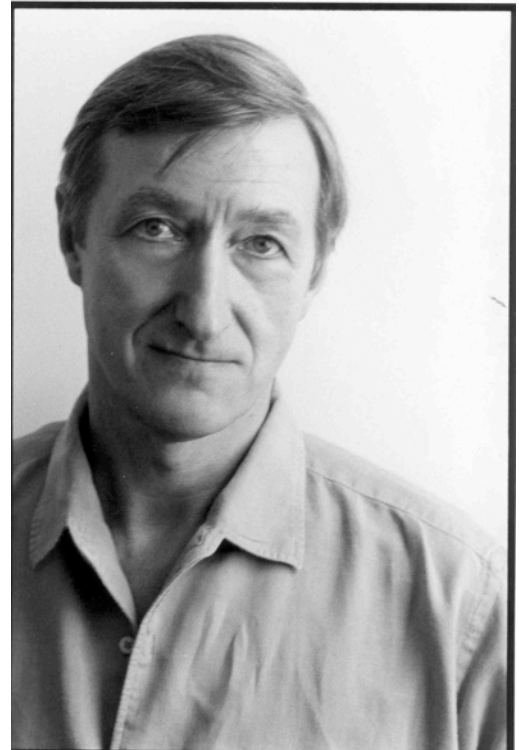
"I have lived in books, for books, by and with books; in recent years, I have been fortunate enough to be able to live from books."

So says acclaimed British writer Julian Barnes, opening the preface to *Through the Window*, a new collection of his newspaper and magazine essays (plus a book introduction and a short story) published between 1997 and 2012. "And it was through books," he continues, "that I first realized there were other worlds beyond my own; first imagined what it might be like to be another person; first encountered that deeply intimate bond made when a writer's voice gets inside a reader's head."

Barnes, the novelist, has been inside our heads for years. He debuted in 1980 with *Metroland*, followed up in 1982 with *Before She Met Me* and had his critical breakthrough in 1984 with *Flaubert's Parrot*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Son of schoolteachers, Oxford-educated, initially a book reviewer, literary editor and TV critic, Barnes became an author in his mid30s and has 11 novels to his name; three got Booker nods (*Flaubert's Parrot*; *England, England*; *Arthur & George*) and his latest, 2011's *The Sense of an Ending*, won it.

He has written under a pseudonym, too: Dan Kavanagh, the family name of his late wife and literary agent, Pat; his four crime novels in the 1980s featured a bisexual private eye named Duffy. Barnes has also published two books of journalism (*Letters from London*, written for *The New Yorker*, in 1995; and one on cooking), three collections of short stories (*Cross Channel*, *The Lemon Table*, *Pulse*), a memoir (*Nothing To Be Afraid Of*), and two books of essays: *Something to Declare*, in 2002, and now, a decade later, *Through the Window*.

So this man of books knows his subject well. All the material in his new collection has appeared in print before, mostly in the *Guardian* and the *New York Review of*



Books, but the revisit is a pleasure. He writes appreciations of other writers (especially Ford Madox Ford, to whom Barnes devotes three chapters, and John Updike, who gets a double-barrelled one). There are pieces on writers he thinks have been misunderstood (the novelist Penelope Fitzgerald, the poet Arthur Hugh Clough), and big-name "national treasures" he feels obliged to take down a peg or two (George Orwell).

A bilingual francophile - like many of his readers here in Quebec - Barnes devotes the second half of the book to things French. He explores Rudyard Kipling's love for (and surprising popularity in) France; lauds 18th-century aphorist Chamfort for his free spirit; reminds us that mid-19th century author Mérimée saved much of France's artistic and architectural patrimony as the nation's chief inspector of monuments; and has high praise for late 19th-century writer Félix Fénéon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes*. In each essay, Barnes conveys his erudition clearly, conversationally, memorably.

In one, he recalls the controversy in 1998 over the awarding of the prestigious Prix Novembre (on whose jury he sat) to Michel Houellebecq for his second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires* - "very French in its mixture of intellectuality and eroticism." In another, he compares six English translations of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, from the first (by Eleanor Marx-Aveling, Karl Marx's daughter, in 1886) to the most recent (U.S. writer Lydia Davis, in 2010); to his practiced ear (he has translated two books himself), the latter sounds too French and not English enough.

In the one piece of fiction in the collection – *Homage to Hemingway: A Short Story* – Barnes imagines a rather bored, middle-aged Brit who holds seminars on novel-writing in three wildly different locales: the rainy British countryside, the Alps in summertime and a college campus in the American Midwest. In each, the subject is Ernest Hemingway and the question is whether the great American's work still has anything to say to modern readers. (Answer: Yes, but Papa Hemingway is a hard sell.)

The preface is the most easily approachable piece in the collection. *A Life with Books* was first published as a pamphlet last June for Independent Booksellers Week in Britain, with proceeds to Freedom from Torture, a medical foundation for victims.

In its 11 pages, Barnes delivers a delightful mini-memoir detailing his lifelong obsession with books, starting with his first dips into the family library, many trips to the local bookshop and the school prize he won in 1963 (he chose a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses*, a "notoriously filthy novel").

A lifelong collector, by the late 1970s Barnes was spending half his income on books – books by favourite authors, rare first editions and obscure tomes by writers better known for other things. "I was, in the jargon of the trade, a completist," he says, recalling how in those pre-Internet days he'd roam the country unearthing books from "backrooms and locked warehouses and storerooms whenever I could."

And adds: "I became a bit less of a book-collector (or, perhaps, book-fetishist) after I published my first novel.

"Perhaps, at some subconscious level, I decided that since I was now producing my own first editions, I needed other people's less."

Three decades on, here's one more to add to the shelf.

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