

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Date: June 2, 2015

Hosts: Anne and Nicholas Ogan

Novel: *The Sense of an Ending*, by Julian Barnes

Papers:

Biographical: Siobhan Lukowsky

Critical: Leon Gabinet

Members and friends of The Novel Club met at the Ogan home on the pleasant spring evening of June 2, 2015. After the usual convivial gathering over a welcoming spread of refreshments, President Anne Ogan called the meeting to order at 8:15. Guests were introduced. Minutes of last month's meeting were accepted as presented via electronic circulation. Committee reports and club business were handled:

•Administration and Membership: Art Stupay raised the issue of emeritus members, suggesting that June Salm's request for emerita status (involving an exception to the regular bylaws) be accepted, and that further changes in emeritus requirements be discussed in October. Mary Douthit, who has recently moved to Judson, will also move to emerita status.

•Treasurer: Ham Emmons, new treasurer-elect, is collecting dues and will work with Mary Douthit on any other transfer of paperwork.

•Program Committee was not represented among those present, but the program for next year is set.

•Additional organizational question raised: will there be a gala for the club's upcoming 100th anniversary? Planning on this project has been postponed till next year.

•Catherine LaCroix will be gathering corrected information for next year's program booklet in the next few weeks—please help her by promptly supplying information as appropriate.

•Archiving and Records Committees requested copies of all papers for the records.

•Next evening meeting will be October 6 at Glazers', for *A Farewell to Arms*.

With reference to this evening's novel, Siobhan Lukowsky delivered the biographical paper on Julian Barnes, and Leon Gabinet delivered the critical paper on *The Sense of an Ending*. If all goes as planned, both papers will soon be posted for members' reference on the club website.

Discussion focused on questions provided by Leon:

- 1) **The author seems to disapprove of Tony Webster for having led an average, safe life, and because he “did not want life to bother [him] too much.” Do you agree with Barnes' dim view of Tony Webster? How many of us carry the ardor of our youth into our adult lives, and how many of us refuse to make life's necessary compromises? Is Tony any worse than the rest of us? If so, why?**

Responses to this question ranged from fairly sympathetic attitudes toward Tony (he **thinks** he is being a nice person, but doesn't allow himself to face the truth; the story is about the passion of youth returning to an older man who has led a bland life and now wishes to explore important questions about this serious link to his passionate past) to quite **unsympathetic** (Tony is a

repulsive and difficult person, difficult to read about, and leaving readers by the end with just a sense of sadness). Entwined with the discussion of readers' reactions to Tony were similarly mixed reactions to Veronica (she is harsh, to other characters and to readers; or, she deserves sympathy because of her difficult family experiences).

2) Who is responsible for the failure of Tony's love affair with Veronica? Which of the two bears the onus of guilt for the failure? Why?

Readers opined that both parties were "obviously" responsible for the failure of this relationship, although in this context Veronica is "a better person" than Tony. Tony was blamed for unwillingness to make a commitment, although this seems not deliberate but just "the kind of character he is," one who rather than making choices just lets things happen to him.

3) Do you agree that, without corroboration, memory cannot be trusted, as suggested by Adrian, or do we have no alternative but to act as though our memories are objectively correct and thus form a narrative of our youth that we carry into adulthood?

This question aroused extensive commentary, including one reader's observation that the novel is "really about" memory and documentation (and a later comment that focus on the fascinating subject of selective memory and its various consequences made the novel worthy of its Man Booker Prize). Consensus emerged that neither personal memory nor supposedly objective documentation can be trusted as "fact," and yet we must do our best to combine the two as basis for our actions going forward. Countless examples of mistakes (or at least differing versions) of historical episodes exist to illustrate this principle.

This conversation moved on to note that memory may be a better source of art (only accidentally factual) than of information. One reader noted that this view is strongly suggested by the Greek myths' identification of Mnemosyne, the personification of memory, as the mother (with Zeus as father) of the nine Muses. Interestingly, the nine Muses inspire not only forms of art (poetry, drama, music, dance) but also history (whose Muse is Clio).

This segment of discussion arrived at a view that Barnes does succeed here in showing how differences of memories are heavily influential in human relationships.

4) What do you make of Mrs. Ford, Veronica's mother? Do you find the legacy both plausible and meaningful, or is it simply a device to set off Tony's flow of memory?

Readers noted that Mrs. Ford apparently felt guilty over her affair with Adrian, and maybe also over her (failed) attempt to ignite an affair with Tony. Perhaps her legacy to Tony was somehow an attempt at payment for having destroyed Tony's friend Adrian? But a main point of the novel seems to be that we don't **know** her motive. Interesting in this context is the Latin meaning of the name Veronica, which translates as "true image."

5) Can you make any sense of the ending of the book? What is it all about?

Responses to this question ran the entire gamut from finding the ending “the best part, especially the formula part,” through “clever to try, though not quite successful,” to “a terrific device, very unusual format.”

One reader noted “there wasn’t really an ending...just sort of ‘a sense of an ending,’” appropriate to the title—whereupon another reader suggested “Loose Ends” would be a more appropriate title, in contrast to the more “wrapped-up” approach taken in great nineteenth-century novels. Closing comments about *The Sense of an Ending* touched on varying degrees of satisfaction with this novel’s ending, and on the importance of novels in general (and changes in the form) over time.

Conclusion of the 2014-15 season:

President Ogan conducted the traditional poll of those present as to which novels from this season’s list were the favorite and least favorite selections. By informal show of hands, the favorite of those present was *Austerlitz*, by a comfortable margin; and least favorite was *Let the Great World Spin*.

Vice President Jay Siegel suggested that the club ask critical-paper presenters to distribute discussion questions in advance of each meeting, to give readers more time to contemplate them. Several responders suggested that writers typically do not have such materials prepared far enough in advance to make this practicable. Also suggested was allowing members to propose additional discussion questions from the floor—on which consensus was that this opportunity is informally inherent in meeting format, and members do not hesitate to act on the possibility.

Discussion closed with the usual return to informal conversation and return to the refreshment tables. And so ended the 2014-15 season of The Novel Cleveland.