

*Nothing to be Frightened of* by Julian Barnes (Jonathan Cape) R287

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In his terrific collection of short stories, *The Lemon Table*, Julian Barnes rang the changes on the subject of ageing and its inevitable conclusion -- the lemon being, as he tells us, a Chinese symbol of death. Indeed, he now informs us that the lemon table that gave its name to the earlier book was an actual table in a restaurant in Helsinki frequented by Sibelius and fellow-mortals where the diners were "required to talk about death."

Barnes would, on this showing, make an excellent companion at the lemon table. He here faces the subject head-on, in a non-fictional reflection on a subject he claims has preoccupied him since his fourteenth or fifteenth year. And if the title sounds bravely intrepid, look again: as he points out, with a different stress it means that the thing to be frightened of is the great NOTHING that is death.

For to Barnes there is no question that there could be an afterlife: how could there be, since there is no God? And even if there were a God, how could He possibly coordinate and reconcile the contending claims of millions of souls seeking resurrection on their own terms? The book's first sentence sums up Barnes's dilemma: "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him."

Not believing, Barnes says, places him in the least enviable of four possible categories: those who believe and therefore do not fear death; those who do not believe but bravely do not fear death; those who believe but fear death; and then "up shit creek, those of us who fear death and have no faith": "We do not believe ... but we do not like what we see ahead of us, and our resources for dealing with it are not as good as they might be."

Barnes is a widely-read, not to say pedantic man, and he draws on such resources as his authors provide; as he says, quoting one of his favourite authors, Jules Renard, "It is when faced with death that we turn most bookish."

Another recurring reference is to Flaubert (the subject of Barnes's wonderful novel *Flaubert's Parrot*), whose stoicism Barnes does his best to emulate: "By dint of saying 'That is so! That is so!'", Flaubert said, "and of gazing into the black pit at one's feet, one remains calm."

In his debate with himself and his predecessors, Barnes, a self-confessed pit-gazer, constantly compares notes with his brother, the philosopher Jonathan Barnes. The elder Barnes, it seems, is an atheist where Julian is an agnostic; being, moreover, utterly consistent in his rejection of religion and all it entails, he feels no particular fear in the face of death. His is the rationalist position that Julian clearly envies but finds impossible to adopt; he wryly tries to ascribe the differences between them to the fact that he was breast-fed whereas his brother was bottle-fed -- only to discover that they were in fact both bottle-fed.

The book also offers, as if in passing, a devastating picture of the marriage of the Barnes parents -- not exactly an unhappy union, just a profoundly uncommunicative, very British one. His mother, "lucid, opinionated, explicitly impatient of opposing views", took all the decisions in the family, his father being unwilling or unable to assert himself in the face of her certainties. Barnes makes no secret of the fact that he actively disliked his mother and felt a strong though unexpressed affection for his father. It is part of the bleak egalitarianism of aging and dying, though, that for all their differences, wife and husband are extinguished in the same merciless way, memory and personality slowly disintegrating.

One of the hypotheses that Barnes entertains in his intensely argumentative book is that God may be an ironist, delighting exactly in such conundrums: “The game thought up by God the ironist is this: to plant immortal longings in an undeserving creature and then observe the consequences.” In other words, if God did exist, He would be such an unpleasant piece of work that we are perhaps better off without Him – except that here, too, Barnes refuses to find false comfort: “We may allow Death, like God, to be an occasional ironist, but shouldn’t nevertheless confuse them. The essential difference remains: God might be dead. But Death is well alive.”

This conviction, that Death is alive, is one of the few certainties offered by this troubled, contentious, contrary, unclassifiable book. But for all its relentless gloom in the face of its chosen subject, *Nothing to be Frightened of* is also unflaggingly entertaining: writing with his customary wit, precision and unstuffy articulateness, ranging effortlessly over vast tracts of literature and philosophy, bandying about Ultimate Questions as if they were football scores, Barnes, albeit unintentionally, demonstrates the joyful other face of his pessimistic belief that “death is the one appalling fact which defines life; unless you are constantly aware of it, you cannot begin to understand what life is about.” Chronically aware of death, Barnes evinces a deep understanding of what life is about: shit scared, as he says, of its extinction, he appreciates its every manifestation. It is because he savours life that he fears death – which is, after all, preferable to welcoming death because life has become intolerable. Though that, too, will come.