

*The Lemon Table* by Julian Barnes (Jonathan Cape R230)

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Julian Barnes has written his share of novels (such as *Staring at the Sun*, *Talking it Over* and *England, England*), and, under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh, a series of crime novels, so he is perfectly adept at sustaining a long narrative. But he is drawn to the fragmented and multifarious: he has published two collections of essays and one previous collection of short stories; and still perhaps his most celebrated novel, *Flaubert's Parrot*, is an apparently random collection of biographical scraps, proverbs, and ruminations on the part of the narrator. More recently, *A History of the Word in 10½ Chapters*, the "chapters", though thematically linked, ranged widely and wildly in setting, plot and tone.

Barnes, in short, seems to like the challenge of the short piece that captures a mood, an impression or an aspect of a subject within a fairly loosely defined frame. *The Lemon Table* is a continuation of this, in an almost ostentatiously brilliant demonstration of the width, variety and endless inventiveness of his story-telling.

Though once again organised around a central concern, about which more later, these short stories range in setting from, apparently, eighteenth-century France ("Bark"), nineteenth-century Sweden (The Story of Mats Israelson") and Russia ("The Revival"), through early twentieth-century Finland ("The Silence") to present-day England and America.

The central characters are, amongst others, trendy young men turning into less trendy older men ("A Short History of Haircutting"), well-coiffed ladies-who-lunch discussing a choice of American retirement communities ("The Things You Know"), a witty and literate woman in an unwitty and not very literate, but very British, old-age home ("Knowing French"), a retired soldier off to London for his annual regimental dinner and afternoon with a retired prostitute ("Hygiene"), and an irascible concert-goer who takes to physically assaulting people who cough in concerts ("Vigilance").

In addition to these fictional creations, Barnes once again explores the concerns of the creative artist: in "The Revival" Turgenev recollects the actress who gave life to one of his characters and thereby also to him; in "The Silence" Sibelius irascibly wards off questions about his long-delayed (and never completed) eighth symphony.

As will appear from this list of characters, the connecting thread in this collection is old age and its inevitable end. The lemon table, we learn in the last story, is the community of mortality: "Among the Chinese, the lemon is the symbol of death."

This is not, on the face of it, a cheerful theme, and indeed, a certain melancholy does pervade all these stories. But Barnes is enough of a virtuoso to ring the changes on this theme with such vigour and inventiveness that the final effect is far from lugubrious. He knows that old age is, amongst other things, the last terrible joke played on unsuspecting human beings by a sardonic scheme of things.

The comic potential of this essentially tragic theme is perhaps most ingeniously exploited in "A Short History of Hairdressing", which is in fact a lightning survey of the aging of the protagonist in terms of the various hairdressers he visits: first as bullied little boy grudgingly submitting to the torture of the obligatory haircut, last as the middle-aged male conscious of the boredom of the bright young thing faking an interest in her client:

“By now she was on automatic, probably wondering if she had time to pop outside for a ciggie before the next damp head was guided to her.” His sole “timid victory” over time and the indifference of youth is to decline, with good grace but conscious superiority, the offered view of the back of his head: “Now, as she came towards him, her mind in Miami, the mirror dangling, he raised a hand, gave his regular indulgent smile, and said, ‘No.’”

The urge to say No, not to accept the version of ourselves offered by our circumstances or our neighbours, gives a fierce kind of energy to these stories. Few of the characters submit tamely to the indignities and deprivations of old age. The eighty-year old woman who prides herself on Knowing French decides to read her way alphabetically through the shelves of the public library. Starting with A, “I find I have read many entertaining descriptions of pubs, and much voyeurism on women’s breasts”: presumably Barnes’s joke at the expense of his erstwhile friend Martin Amis. Her letters to “Mr Barnes”, spaced out over the last three years of her life, offer a spry, shrewd, disillusioned reflection on the life she is about to depart: “So Mr Novelist Barnes, If I asked you ‘What is life?’, you would probably reply, in so many words, that it is all just a coincidence. So, the question remains, What sort of coincidence?”

What sort of coincidence? In Barnes’s version, mainly a comedy of errors and misunderstandings, issuing in the final No or provisional Yes, the denial or acceptance of the inevitable. In “Bark”, a self-willed and autocratic old man, after the death of his wife “began a study of the law ... He could cite the laws concerning the swarming of bees and the making of compost ...” By the story’s end, he accepts that “We make the laws but the bees swarm anyway, the rabbit seeks a different warren, the pigeon flies to another’s dovecote.”

And, in the last line of the last story of the book, the aged Sibelius, having at last seen the cranes, the birds of his youth, flying overhead, reports: “I walked slowly back to the house. I stood in the doorway, calling for a lemon.”

Anybody doubting the capacity of the short story to capture the width and depth of human experience should read this collection. It is a triumphant display of the writer’s craft; but, more than that, it is a profound lament for and joyful celebration of that mortality that is the one thing we all have in common.