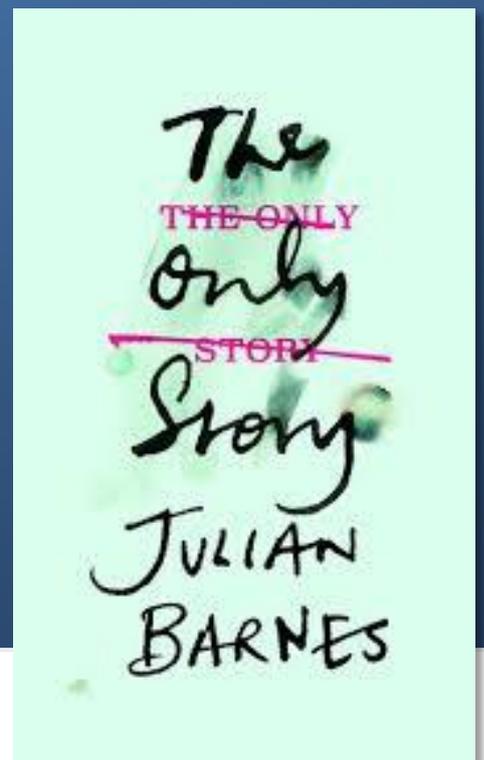




Reader's guide

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The Only Story

Julian Barnes

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A Reader's guide to

The Only Story – Julian Barnes

Part One

SUMMARY

Paul Roberts considers his life story and wonders, "Would you rather love the more, suffer the more or love the less and suffer the less?" Paul is home from his first year of university for the three-month summer holiday and is visibly bored. His home is in a zone of genteel English, socially middle-class, stockbroker-belt suburban sprawl called the Village, situated some fifteen miles south of London. Paul's mother suggests a temporary membership of the tennis club for the summer and will even pay for it, no doubt in the hope that Paul will meet a nice conservative girl. At a Lucky Dip Mixed Doubles tournament, he is paired together with Mrs. Susan Macleod, a woman in her late forties. She is around the same 5'9" height as Paul and attractive. They play doubles, win and then lose to county players. Paul finds himself to be a technically naïve player so Susan decides to call him Casey as he is a "case". He feels a complicity with Susan although nothing happens for a good while but he does begin to fall in love. Susan is not only considerably older than Paul who is nineteen at the time but also married. After a time, they begin a relationship.

The first time Paul visits the Macleod household he passes a dishevelled old gardener who turns out to be Susan's husband Gordon. Gordon has the nickname Mr. E.P. for elephant pants, indicating Gordon's size. Susan and her husband have two daughters Martha and Clara whom Paul nicknames Miss Grumpy and Miss Not So Grumpy. Paul becomes a regular visitor at the house.

Susan was engaged to Gerald when she was young but was not in love with him. Gerald died of leukemia so Gordon stepped in to take his place. By the time she meets Paul, she has been married for a long time but no longer has sexual relations with Gordon who declares her frigid. She and Paul first kissed and then there was a long gap until they made love for the first time interspersed with a visit to London to get contraception for Susan who at forty-eight was still having periods. Susan and Paul manage a brief holiday away together somewhere near the South Coast. Until this point the only people who know about Paul and Susan's relationship are Joan, a friend of Susan's and Paul's friends from university. When they return from their holiday they both receive separate letters from the tennis club terminating their membership with immediate effect. Gordon seems oblivious to what's going on. They expect a scandal to ensue but it fails to break. Paul's parents never mention the matter although they disapprove of the relationship. Paul visits Joan on his own to ask her whether she thinks Susan will leave Gordon and Joan brings Paul down to earth by asking him what they would do for money.

All these events happened over a two-year period between the ages of nineteen and twenty-one for Paul. Susan would visit Paul in Sussex and Paul would spend time at the Macleod's a six-minute drive from his parents' place without telling them. Susan also got to know Paul's circle

<p>Part Two</p>	<p>of friends who supported their relationship. They were always hungry and Susan cooked for them. Mr. Macleod called them “the fancy boys”. “We’re leaving”, Paul told Joan on one of his solo visits. Paul left a note for his parents that he is moving up to London and will be living with Mrs. Macleod.</p> <p>Susan and Paul buy a small house in Henry Road SE15 with Susan’s “running-away fund”. They do up the place mostly themselves. Paul starts to think about Joan’s advice about money and decides to become a solicitor. Paul’s parents did not reply to his change of address nor were they invited to Henry Road. Martha descends on them after a bit and suggests they let out the top two rooms to lodgers, which they subsequently do.</p> <p>Scenes are recalled from the Macleod household where Gordon drinks too much and domestic violence towards Susan is obvious from the bruises on her arms. Also, an incident where Joan phones to say that Paul needs to go immediately to take Susan to London. Paul thinks Susan is pregnant and wants to get rid of the child but it turns out that her front “rabbit” teeth that Paul finds so endearing, have been knocked out and she needs a dentist. Paul himself had also been on the receiving end of Gordon’s temper and abuse, having been pushed down the stairs once by Gordon.</p> <p>Paul presses Susan to see a solicitor who tells Susan to write down her story as she has difficulty in speaking about it. After months Paul understands that Susan is not going to take any steps or give evidence against her husband. Susan visits the Village regularly saying she visits Joan. Paul smells sherry on her breath masked with mints after these visits and asks her about it. It turns out she has been seeing Gordon. The fancy boys visit Henry Road regularly, sometimes bringing their girlfriends and Paul could sense their covert disapproval. One of the lodgers moves out and Eric, one of the fancy boys, moves in. After living there for a while, Eric tells Paul that Susan is nicking his whisky. Paul begins to notice that Susan is sometimes a bit squiffy and Susan says it is due to some “cheering-up” pills she has from the doctor. Paul visits Joan and talks about Susan’s drinking and anti-depressants. Joan does not do advice she says.</p> <p>Susan’s drinking is a problem that can no longer be ignored. Susan falls and hurts herself and the doctor says if it happens again they will need to investigate. Paul tells the doctor and the outside world in general that he is Susan’s godson. As far as Paul knows, Susan only drank occasionally with Macleod. Now living together with Paul, she has become an alcoholic.</p> <p>Paul is in his last year of law studies, twenty-five years old. “Casey Paul”, says Susan, “I think there’s something seriously wrong.” Paul feels alone and not equipped to deal with a middle-aged female alcoholic lover. They still share a house but have not made love in a long time. By months of manoeuvring, Paul gets Susan to a GP and then to a psychiatrist.</p> <p>To try and stop the drinking, Paul tries tough love, pouring away bottles and getting Susan banned from buying alcohol locally. He tells her that her behaviour is destroying his love for her. She is admitted to hospital and put to sleep for a few days to flush out the alcohol. One of the doctors tells Paul that upon waking, Susan attacked the nurses and if</p>
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<p>Part Three</p>	<p>this continues, Susan will need to be sectioned. Paul realises that what he thought would be a place of safety for Susan is not. It has taken Paul years to see that underneath Susan's apparent free spirit, there is panic and pandemonium. Paul's attempts to rescue Susan fail and he moves out to a one-room flat a few streets away. Susan does not want him to take anything so he sneaks back to get a book or a change of clothes. They still have breakfast and supper together.</p> <p>Paul is working for a South London practice specialising in Legal Aid. He has found himself a girlfriend Anna, also a lawyer, who is understanding about Susan for a time but her patience runs out and the relationship does not last. Martha invites Susan to visit her and her boyfriend in Brussels and wants to get Susan back together with Gordon.</p> <p>A few weeks after his relationship with Anna finished Paul moves back in with Susan. The office manager at his practice is expecting a baby and Paul takes over the duties as well as continuing to handle a few legal aid cases. This provides him with the means to escape.</p> <p>Paul couldn't save Susan so he saved himself. His love had gone. He wrote a joint letter to Clara and Martha explaining he is obliged to travel on business and would not be able to take care of Susan. There were a number of countries Paul worked in through his thirties and forties. He had a number of relationships with women who didn't get too hurt when he moved on and who wouldn't inflict too much pain when they were the first to jump. He kept up with men friends when on leave. Eric was the only one of the fancy boys who stayed in his life.</p> <p>Paul comes to understand that time and place play a greater part in his story than he had ever realised. He had somehow thought that lovers stand outside time. He asks himself which memories are truer, the happy memories or the unhappy ones? This is unanswerable. First love fixes a life for ever Paul had discovered over time. He believes that when two lovers meet, there is already so much pre-history that only certain outcomes are possible. Lovers imagine that the world is being re-set and that possibilities are both new and infinite.</p> <p>Paul buys a half-share in the Fragworth Valley Artisanal Cheese company and imagines himself as a kind of co-manager but his skills are needed selling cheeses, which he enjoys. He visits Susan who lives with and is being looked after by Martha and asks himself if handing back Susan was an act of cowardice or self-protection. Paul didn't think he had been suffering from a rescue fantasy but a rescue reality. He had believed he could save her.</p> <p>As he grew older Paul's life turned into an agreeable routine. He never regretted his love for Susan. Gordon Macleod nagged at him more than Susan. Once upon a time he had wanted to kill the man. Paul had retained a disgust for angry men from his experiences with Gordon. Occasionally he is asked why he never married. He had asked Susan to marry him once and later on Kimberley from Nashville, who had rebuffed him.</p> <p>Paul went to see Susan just before she died. He had hoped she might recognise him. He says her name but she doesn't react. Should he kiss her goodbye? His mind wanders back to routine things he needs to get done. He looks at Susan and leaves.</p>
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CHARACTERS	
Paul Roberts	A young man of nineteen, not overly ambitious, impressionable, awkward with girls and complacent about his middle-class life. His path through life leads him from the young eager lover to the disillusioned rescuer and finally the solitary old man. After the first love finishes he moves through life trying to avoid intimate attachments but enjoying female company and living a generally undemanding life.
Paul's parents	Conservative, middle-class with an inability to talk about the repressed feelings they have. Paul's mother polices him and his father is milder in his judgements. Paul's father knows of a Macleod at the golf club and describes Gordon as a short fat guy who hits the ball as if he hates it.
Susan Macleod	A middle-aged mother of two, married to Gordon. Her mother died when she was eleven. Her father was a Christian Science practitioner who was always surrounded by female acolytes. She was engaged to Gerald, who died of leukemia and Gordon stepped in to take his place.
Gerald	Joan's brother and Susan's fiancé.
Gordon Macleod	Susan's husband. A civil servant in his mid-fifties who plays golf once a week, has a temper and is physically abusive to his wife. He drinks heavily and dies of the complications from a stroke.
Jack	Gordon's father who died of cancer a couple of years into Gordon and Susan's marriage. He was a doctor and had high hopes for Gordon as an artist. Susan liked him very much.
Martha and Clara	Gordon and Susan's two daughters. Martha is around the same age as Paul. She looks like her mother, tall and pretty. Clara is the younger sister and has been named after Clara Schumann.
Joan	Susan's friend and later Paul's. Joan lost her mother early and when Gerald died she went off the rails somewhat and led a wild life. She ends up on her own with dogs and cheats at crossword puzzles.
The Fancy Boys: Eric, Barney, Ian and Sam	Friends of Paul's from student days. They often come to the Macleod house and then Henry Road. It is Gordon who nicknames them 'the fancy boys'.
Girlfriends Anna, Maria and Kimberly	When Paul moves out of Henry Road he starts a relationship with Anna, who is also a lawyer. After he leaves the United Kingdom he has a few relationships with women: Maria, a Spanish woman who suddenly began making suicide threats and Kimberly, with whom he nearly fell in love and wanted to marry to get her to stay.
Uncle Humphrey	named Humph for short. When Susan used to stay with her aunt and Humph during the holidays until she was sixteen, Humph would visit her at night in bed reeking of cigars and drink, and give her a party kiss, ramming his tongue down her throat.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NOVEL	
Point of view	The first part of the novel is narrated in the first person, the second part mainly in the second person but switches from time to time to the first person and the third part is in the third person. In the first part, the narrator also addresses the reader, actively inviting responses.
Time and setting	Paul narrates the story of his life from a young man of nineteen to retirement. The story is told in flashbacks and flashforwards. The novel takes place in the period from the late 1960's onwards with the first situated in a suburb of London, the second part in London itself and in the third part, Paul works and lives in Africa, North and South America and then comes back to Britain.
Structure	The novel is in three parts, a common recurrence in Barnes' work. Barnes takes us through the novel from the personal to the impersonal, in many ways reflecting the process of the intense self-absorption of youth, then moving into adulthood and the awareness of others and finally getting old with the ability to look back at life with more understanding and detachment.
Language and style	Barnes writing is elegant, perceptive and witty with vivid descriptions of English stuffiness and middle-class adult entitlement. "What did I dislike and distrust about adulthood? Well, to put it briefly: the sense of entitlement, the sense of superiority, the assumption of knowing it better if not best, the vast banality of adult opinions, the way women took out their compacts and powdered their noses, the way men sat in armchairs with their legs apart and their privates heavily outlined against their trousers, the way they talked about gardens and gardening, the spectacles they wore and the spectacles they made of themselves, the drinking and the smoking, the terrible phlegmy racket they made when they coughed..." p.69
Title	The explanation for the title " <i>The Only Story</i> " is to be found on page 3 where Barnes writes, "Most of us have only one story to tell. I don't mean that only one thing happens to us in our lives: there are countless events, which we turn into countless stories. But there's only one that matters, only one finally worth telling. This is mine." The motto at the beginning of the novel is a definition of a novel by Samuel Johnson from <i>A Dictionary of The English Language</i> (1755), "Novel: A small tale, generally of love."
Symbols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The tennis club with the Hugos and Carolines and the place where Paul meets Susan embodying middle-class, well-off conservatives. - Susan's rabbit teeth, the endearing features. - Joan's crossword puzzles, cheating because nothing matters anymore. - The "running away" funds. Susan's running-away fund provides the means to set up a life together with Paul. - Gordon's flagons of wine and spring onions. His staid life, oblivious to goings on.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paul's job as an office manager, accepting work beneath his qualifications. -The Village. The feeding-ground for middle-class complacency, judgement and ease of life. - Henry Road. The reality of the relationship and living together. <p>Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Love and truth. Whether telling one's life story brings you nearer or further away from the truth. - Domestic violence, sexual abuse and alcoholism - Courage and cowardice - The influence of a first love on the rest of your life and subsequent relationships. - Time and place – your pre-history. - Memory and looking back. <p>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</p> <p>Life and work</p> <p>Julian Barnes was born in Leicester on 19 January 1946. Both his parents were French teachers. In 1956 the family moved to Northwood, Middlesex, the 'Metroland' of his first novel. He was educated at the City of London School (1957-1964) then Magdalen College, Oxford, graduating in modern languages in 1968. He is a keen Francophile. After working as a lexicographer on the Oxford English Dictionary, he became a journalist for the <i>Times Literary Supplement</i> and contributing editor for the <i>New Review</i> in 1977. Through the years from 1977 to 1995, he was assistant literary editor and television critic for the <i>New Statesman</i> magazine (1977-81), deputy literary editor for the <i>Sunday Times</i> (1980-82), television critic of <i>The Observer</i> (1982-86) and London correspondent for the <i>New Yorker</i> magazine (1990-95).</p> <p>He wrote his first novel <i>Metroland</i> in 1980 and has published thirteen novels to date. Barnes also published the first of four crime novels in 1980 under the pseudonym of Dan Kavanaugh. He has written short stories and essays as well as translating a book by Alphonse Daudet and a collection of German cartoons by Volker Kriegel. There is a list of Barnes' novels and writings at the beginning of <i>The Only Story</i>. Barnes has received numerous international honours and awards for his writing. He was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize three times (<i>Flaubert's Parrot</i> 1984, <i>England, England</i> 1998, and <i>Arthur and George</i> 2005) and won the award in 2011 for <i>The Sense of an Ending</i>. In January 2017 the French President appointed Barnes to the rank of</p>
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<p>Situating the book within the author's work</p>	<p>Officier in the Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur, the fourth French honour to be given to Barnes since 1988. Barnes lives in London. He is an agnostic and a patron of human rights organization Freedom from Torture and Dignity in Dying.</p> <p><i>The Only Story</i> (2018) continues with themes where <i>The Sense of an Ending</i> (2011) left off. <i>The Sense of an Ending</i> tells the story of a group of friends at school who navigate adolescence together until a tragedy occurs and all of them move on and try to forget. The main character Tony Webster, now middle-aged finds his life turned upside down by a lawyer's letter with a bequest that leads Tony on a search through a past suddenly turned murky. He discovers how imperfect memory is. The themes of ageing, memory and regret continue in <i>The Only Story</i> as well as love, truth and courage.</p> <p><i>The Noise of Time</i> (2016) is a historical fiction novel about Dmitri Shostakovich, the Russian composer. Barnes has always been fascinated by Shostakovich and his life since he was a schoolboy. In particular the collision between power and art.</p> <p><i>Arthur and George</i> (2005) explores what we think, what we believe and what we know. This novel brought international acclaim to Barnes. In <i>Love, etc.</i> (2000), a tragicomedy of human frailties and needs where the recurring number of three comes in the form of the three characters who have been introduced in <i>Talking It Over</i> (1991).</p> <p><i>England, England</i> (1998) is a satire about England where all the pubs are quaint, the Royals behave themselves (more or less) and national treasures are grouped together on the Isle of Wight.</p> <p><i>Flaubert's Parrot</i> (1984) is a novel about an English doctor's obsession with Gustave Flaubert and tries to make sense of his own life through Flaubert's writings. The novel deals with the themes of obsession and betrayal and the way art mirrors life.</p> <p><i>Before She Met Me</i> (1982) describes the themes of love and jealousy. An art historian has left his wife Barbara and found Ann. He is pleased with his new life until he discovers Ann's past as a mediocre film actress and obsessively wants to find out everything about her past life.</p> <p><i>Metroland</i> (1980) is again written in three parts and focuses on childhood friendship with a contempt for the bourgeois establishment, then a period in Paris and the sexual revolution, then life back in the London suburbs. It deals with the loss of childhood philosophy and the dilemma of how to live your life according to your beliefs.</p> <p>Julian Barnes' is a writer who has a genuine interest in people and their lives and loves and an ability to write about it all in a perceptive, poignant and witty way.</p> <p>REVIEWS</p> <p>The praise for Julian Barnes novel <i>The Only Story</i> from the press has been widespread and universal in the opinion that this book is a masterpiece. Some readers questioned the credibility of a story where a nineteen-year old boy falls in love with a woman of forty-eight years old.</p> <p>"The prose, though often playful and always elegant, propels us forward, first into joy, and then into despair, and there is no escape from the central story as it becomes bleaker. This intense, taut, sad and</p>
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often beautiful tale may well be Barnes's best novel for some years." (*The Spectator* 27 January 2018)

"The only story, then, is what we suspect: not the only story there is, not even the only story worth telling, but the only story available to the teller. Here, it also appears to operate as a form of rebuke to those who see Barnes' work a flippancy and surface cleverness that somehow deflect from the authenticity of "real" emotion. There is absolute devastation in this latest dispatch from Barnesland, and it is not something anyone facing up to it could take lightly." (*New Statesman* January 28 2018)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does Barnes give the reader a clear picture of Paul and does he come to life as a character in the story in his role as narrator?
2. Why do you think Susan would not give evidence against her husband concerning domestic violence?
3. How did the style of narration (first, second and third person) influence your reading and enjoyment of the book?
4. Paul describes his dislike and distrust of adulthood on p69 of the novel: "What did I dislike and distrust about adulthood? Well to put it briefly: the sense of entitlement, the sense of superiority, the assumption of knowing better if not best, the vast banality of adult opinions". What effect does this "brief" description have on the reader?
5. How do you think youths of today would describe present-day adulthood and how it has changed since the sixties?
6. Why do you think Barnes introduced Joan into the story and what did her character add to the story?
7. Do you agree with the premise in the book that when two people fall in love they imagine that their love creates the world anew, that time and place is not important although they always have a pre-history that to a large extent determines the outcome and success of the relationship?
8. Do you think the difference in age and/or the fact Susan was married largely determined the outcome of the relationship?
9. Paul says on p142 that you do not think of alcoholism as a physical disease. You can't help thinking of it as a moral disease. Do you agree with this and is there a distinction between a disease with a physical cause and a disease with a moral cause?
10. What was meant with Susan's comment (p27), "The thing you have to understand, Paul, is that we're a played-out generation."?

	<p>11. Do you consider Paul courageous, cowardly or neither in the way he handled his relationship with Susan?</p> <p>12. Why do you think Gordon Macleod put up with Paul and his friends being round at the house? Was he oblivious to what was really going on?</p> <p>13. Looking back on Paul's life and his first love, how would you describe the way this shaped his life and ability to love?</p> <p>14. Was the end of Barnes novel an anti-climax?</p> <p>15. Does telling and re-telling one's life story bring one closer to the truth?</p> <p>RECOMMENDED READING</p> <p><i>The Course of Love</i> by Alain de Botton (Penguin Books 2017). A meditation on modern relationships and a window into essential truths about the nature of love.</p> <p><i>The Sense of an Ending</i> by Julian Barnes (Jonathan Cape 2011).</p> <p>SOURCES</p> <p>Reviews Review in <i>The Spectator</i> January 27 2018 by Laura Feigel Review in <i>the New Statesman</i> January 28 2018 by Alex Clark</p> <p>Newspaper Articles, Interviews and other sources Books interview Julian Barnes by Rachel Cooke in <i>The Guardian</i> January 29 2018 Julian Barnes, <i>The Art of Fiction</i> No.165 by Sasha Guppy in <i>the Paris Review</i> winter 2000 Barnes: 'Novels tell truth about life', by Will Gompertz BBC November 2012 Julian Barnes on his latest novel, <i>The Only Story</i> and matters of love by Mariella Frostrup February 11 2018 Julian Barnes own website Wikipedia</p> <p>GLOSSARY</p> <p>The Sharpeville Massacre The Sharpeville Massacre (p56) took place on March 21 1960 at the police station in the South African township of Transvaal. A demonstration against the pass laws (a form of internal passport system to segregate the population) where a crowd of 5'000-7'000 protesters went to the police station and the South African police opened fire killing 69 people.</p> <p>The Sexual Revolution The Sexual Revolution was a social movement dating from the 1960s to the 1980s. It refers to the sexual liberation including acceptance of sex outside accepted heterosexual, monogamous relationships and the normalisation of contraception and the legalisation of abortion.</p>
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