

# RTC LIBRARY E-NEWSLETTER

JUNE 2020

Welcome to the June 2020 issue of *RTC LIBRARY E-NEWSLETTER*

**In this issue: Recommended Reads:**

## Recommended Reads from the RTC community

### [The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes](#)

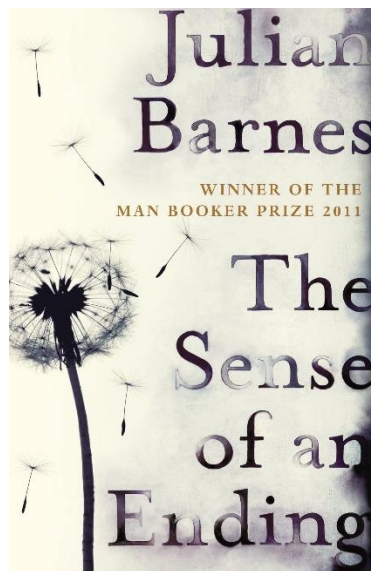
*The Sense of an Ending*, by British author Julian Barnes, won—and rightly so, in my opinion—the 2011 Man Booker Prize. In this short, 150-page book, Barnes writes from the (flawed, as we shall learn) perspective of an Englishman named Anthony “Tony” Weber. Amicably divorced and retired, Tony’s quiet life is suddenly disturbed when he learns, to his shock and curiosity, that he has been remembered in the will of the mother of his college girlfriend. The deceased woman’s letter leads him on a journey through his adolescent past, as he attempts to make sense both of his past and of his connection to that girlfriend and her mother.

While the mystery behind Tony’s inheritance compelled me to devour the novel as quickly as possible, Barnes offers so much more than a page-turning suspense. (Nor should the novel be classified so rigidly as a work of suspense!) *The Sense of an Ending* delves deeply into the concepts of time, history, and memory, as Barnes raises myriad questions and doubts, without ever attempting to offer answers. The lack of answers are, perhaps, the most valuable gift this author provides his readers since the questions he raises are, as he knows, ultimately unanswerable to both the writer and the historian. I very much enjoyed how *The Sense of an Ending* left me uncertain of my own memories in ways that are troubling and illuminating. As a historian, I loved how Barnes engaged in questions that are fundamental to my professional craft but did so in an engaging manner for a general audience. (I should note, too, that it was a fellow history tutor at RTC, Ms. Umang Sinha, who recommended this book to me, and perhaps it speaks to our chosen discipline that we both were so affected by the book!)

As to the mysteries of Tony's life specifically, Barnes offers a few answers by the novel's end, but he also leaves much ambiguity for his readers, leading to many theories about the novel. The novel clung to my bones, encouraging me to watch the film adaption within days of completing the novel. This 2017 film of the same name (which I personally enjoyed but probably would not recommend to those who have not read the book) made alterations to the novel that suggest a particular interpretation of Tony's relationship to his ex-girlfriend's mother, even as the film maintained many of the novel's ambiguities. Watching the film then forced me to reread the novel, the following day, to see what I might have missed in my race to the conclusion. Even now, I continue to ponder Barnes' beautifully crafted novel.

I encourage all to read this powerful, rather intense novel, and I am considering assigning it in some future history classes as a means of grappling with essential questions about remembering the past.

**Thank You**  
**Dana M. Polanichka,**  
**Ph.D. Social Sciences**  
**Professor (Part-time)**



## Mouthful of Birds by Samantha Schweblin (translated by Megan McDowell)

Samantha Schweblin's odd and darkly unsettling short story collection "Mouthful of Birds" is the perfect thing to read during these strange times. This is magic realism with a kind of slant, the story telling is matter-of-fact and the peculiar people (a girl who eats live birds, a woman in love with a merman, a man who appears to be interviewing for a job as a hit man) often feel rather familiar and ordinary, but there is always something nonchalantly otherworldly and menacing underneath the stories that manages to worm its way to the surface by the time each story closes. None of the stories end the way you'd expect, yet none of the odd twists feel gratuitous or forced. Schweblin also repeatedly avoids exposition and detailed back stories which serves to make the stories more strange and haunting, as the sense of disquiet lingers like an aftertaste. I can't think of a book's whose tone and mood better fits our current moment.

*"I'm going to stay here," I say, "with the merman."*

*He stands looking at me for a second. I turn back towards the ocean. He, beautiful and silver on the pier, raises an arm and waves at us. And even so, Daniel gets into the car and opens the door to my side. Then I don't know what to do, and when I don't know what to do, the world seems like a terrible place for someone like me, and I feel very sad. That's why I think, He's just a merman, he's just a merman, as I get into the car and try to calm down. He could be there tomorrow, waiting for me.*

**Thank You**  
**Dr. Dolma Choden Roder**  
**Associate Professor**  
**Social Sciences**

## The Curse of the Self: Self-Awareness, Egotism, and the Quality of Human Life

by Mark R. Leary

Determining what, if anything, uniquely separates humans from other animals has been a perennial topic of philosophy and, in more recent centuries, has been explored by other disciplines too. Psychology professor Mark Leary shares a view with some other psychologists that humans' abilities to think about their own thoughts, and also to think about the future (which often involves worrying about it) are unique markers of the human condition.<sup>1</sup> To give an example, he states that "Nonhuman animals experience fear in the presence of real threats or stimuli that have become associated with aversive events, but one does not get the impression that they worry about events that might happen to them tomorrow or next week." (p. 81). Leary spends the first chapter of the book carefully making his case,<sup>2</sup> and returns to it in subsequent chapters as well.

Generally, Leary is a methodical writer, skilled at proceeding from simple to complex points, or navigating back and forth when the need arises. When he makes statements like the following, he is saying something that readers will already recognize, at least at some level:

As you are reading this page, you will focus on my words (external), but you may be distracted about something you need to do later today (internal). Your attention shifts to the clock to check the time (external), then to the thought of what you will eat later (internal). You wonder if this book is going to be interesting (internal), then look around the room (external), suddenly realizing that your attention is shifting around in just the way I'm describing (internal). And so it goes; all day every day, our attention seldom rests on one thing for very long.<sup>3</sup> (p. 28)

These examples drawn from everyday life help readers to relate to their own experiences, before proceeding to more debatable and/or abstract points, such as the results of controlled

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<sup>1</sup> A broader point is that he believes humans are the only animals to possess a sense of self, which furthermore is not present from the time of birth, but develops over time. I have left this out of the main text of the book review due to the complexities involved. Still, it may be useful here to point out some stages in the process; one of these is when "children acquire the ability to think about what other people are thinking and, specifically, to think about what other people might be thinking about them." (p. 93)

<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is rarely possible to be equally rigorous about all points. When he raises the question about whether some of his observations about egotism are true across cultures, I felt that he dismissed this important matter too simply and casually (p. 73).

<sup>3</sup> This type of description of the mind's restlessness will probably seem more familiar to people who have read Buddhist and/or yoga literature than those who have not. This raises some interesting points, which unfortunately would be outside the scope of a short book review.

experiments conducted by psychologists.

Some of the above-mentioned experiments are quite interesting. A memorable one concerns college students who were asked to rate five different brands of strawberry jam. These jams had previously been rated by experts who had extensive training in taste testing. Returning to the college students in the experiment, they were divided into two groups. One of these groups was asked to think as much as possible about their reasons for the ratings and to analyze their reasons, while the second group was simply told to rate the jams, with no further instructions (presumably, they relied more on basic taste perceptions rather than complicating the process with internal dialogue). The second group's ratings matched closely with the experts' ratings, while the first group did not (p. 38-39). In other words, thinking too much interfered with the process.<sup>4</sup>

This brings us to broader point of the book, which is that humans' abilities to reflect, rather than only reacting to the here and now, provides many advantages, but can also be the source of many difficulties. Of course, we do not just reflect upon on strawberry jam, but many other things as well. To give an example, while imagination is the source behind all creativity, our ability to imagine things can cause problems too. For instance, Leary states that "Because their selves can always imagine better circumstances than the ones they're actually in, people often suspect that they're not getting the most out of life and thus live with simmering discontent" (p. 87).

In addition, when planning for the future, imagining how one would respond to various negative scenarios can play a very helpful role. Unfortunately, it may be quite easy to cross the line between 'useful planning' and 'unnecessary worrying'. To this end, Leary notes that "people often become quite emotional simply from imagining themselves in various situations and may even work themselves into an emotional frenzy by doing do. Many emotional experiences occur not because anything good or bad is happening, but only because the person imagines it". (p. 81). This same basic sentiment is captured much more concisely and humorously in a quote by Mark Twain that begins this particular chapter: "My life has been filled with many tragedies, most of which never occurred" (p. 79).

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<sup>4</sup> While I am not sure of, or can't remember, the details, I believe similar experiments are discussed in popular books about behavioral economics, such as [Freakonomics](#), [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#), and [Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking](#).

Space prevents me from going into other main points of the book, including the ‘egotism’ of the subtitle.<sup>5</sup> However, this book seems timely in the days of COVID-19: since so many people in the world are currently under lockdown or with restricted movement, there are simply more opportunities for people to ruminate on their thoughts. While there is no simple or easy way to solve the problems that this may cause, insights into how the mind works can be of great help.

More broadly, the book provides fascinating insights into experiences that probably most people have at some point in their lives. For instance, if you have ever practiced a skill to perfection on your own, and then suddenly found yourself performing poorly for an audience, this book gives insights into why and how this happens. Or, if you ever felt so nervous when giving a personal introduction on the first day of class that you didn’t hear your classmates’ introductions well, that process is explained here too.

**Brent Bianchi**

**Librarian**

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<sup>5</sup> One example may suffice: when responding to surveys, impossibly large numbers of people regard themselves as being above average in skills such as driving a car, work ability, and so forth. Of course, it is impossible for more than half of a given population to be above average, but in some of the more famous studies, the number of people who regard themselves as ‘above average’ ranges from 75 up to 85 percent.

### **Wanted! Book reviews from Faculty, Staff, and Students**

If you have read a good book and would like to contribute a review to the Library Newsletter, we would love to receive one from you. Tell us a little about the book and why you liked it in 250-500 words. If interested, send your review to [gyanupradhan@rtc.bt](mailto:gyanupradhan@rtc.bt) or come by the library and see the library staff.

Thanks!!

**YOU MUST TELL YOURSELF, "NO MATTER HOW HARD IT IS, OR HOW HARD IT GETS, I AM GOING TO MAKE IT..."-Les Brown.**