

# Prosaic memories are ones to forget

**Julian Barnes** Endings have greatly preoccupied Julian Barnes recently. His 2008 essay, *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*, explored thoughts about death; his recent short-story collection, *Pulse*, was saturated with ideas of mortality; while mortality is very much to the fore in this Booker Prize-longlisted novella about a retired man recalling his life with remorse. There is another prosaic ending at play here too, for these 150 pages are built around a conclusion that

**FICTION OF THE WEEK**  
**The Sense Of An Ending**

By Julian Barnes (Jonathan Cape, £12.99) ★★☆☆☆

forces you to consider all that has gone before. Its narrator, Tony, a precocious adolescent who grows into 'peaceable' middle age, lost his first love, Veronica, to his school friend, Adrian, a philosophy student who committed suicide at university. Forty years later, Tony is forced to look back on those events when Veronica's mother leaves him Adrian's diary in her will. Why she

has is the key question driving the second half of the book.

Barnes combines commentary on free will and unintended consequences, although Tony is no great thinker. He is unreliable, as are all good narrators, and nothing special, which is his tragedy.

Yet Barnes's preoccupation with the fallibility of memory and the subjectivity of experience feels heavy-handed and at the service of an overly schematic narrative. He has certainly written better books than this artfully clever knot of a novel.

Claire Allfree



Novella approach: Julian Barnes's book explores mortality Picture: Alan Edwards

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CHARLES SPENCER · DAILY TELEGRAPH · 26 JULY 2011

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★★★★★ **'UTTERLY ABSORBING'**

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**Composition No.1**  
By Marc Saporta  
(Visual Editions, £25)  
★★★★☆

Go into any bookshop or library and you can be sure of three things about each volume there: the pages will be bound, numbered and follow a fixed order. Composition No.1 tears that apart: like BS Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, this is a book unbound. An elegantly designed box contains 150 loose sheets, unnumbered, with text on one side and, on the reverse, delicate, billowing designs that, on closer inspection, are clouds of floating letters. It is a novel that concerns a group of characters in Paris during the Nazi occupation, their stories told in single-page vignettes: a deathbed moment; a wedding; the intrusive presence of foreign soldiers. Originally published in 1962, French author Marc Saporta's recreated book is also available as an app. In paper form, it's certainly an elegant artefact and a thought-provoking challenge to conventional thinking about what books are and what readers do. One particular note of caution: beware of reading Composition No.1 outside on a windy day.

Ben Felsenburg

**Luther: The Calling**  
By Neil Cross (Simon & Schuster, £14.99)  
★★★★☆

It's a pleasingly contrary way to do things – publish a novel on the back of a TV series. At least viewers of *Luther*, starring Idris Elba, cannot complain that the writer has cast the wrong man in the lead role. John Luther, on the pages of this first in a promised series of prequels to the TV show, is clearly the man on screen – from his habit of dry washing his face when stressed (which is most of the time) to his rather-too-snug tweed coat and his disastrous relationships, all the signifiers are there. The story is pretty strong stuff too: a grisly tale of warped values and violence that would probably be too hard core for a mainstream TV audience. And in the tale's central psycho, Henry, a kind of far-right version of Hannibal Lecter who wants a different kind of family life, we have a demonstrably vile monster. Neil Cross, the creator of the series, is a seasoned novelist and it shows – the writing is economical, taut and evocative. This is, quite literally, bloody brilliant.

Paul Connolly

**Everything Beautiful Began After**  
By Simon Van Booy (Beautiful Books, £15.99) ★★☆☆☆

Award-winning short-story writer Simon Van Booy has penned a peculiar debut novel: simultaneously cloying and captivating, florid and terse, indulgent and evocative. Set in Athens (events would suggest it's 1999), it traces a love triangle between three expats with troubled pasts living in the city: Rebecca, a young Frenchwoman; Henry, a young Englishman; and George, a young American. The book's first half is rather like a superior Mills & Boon novel, as the trio brood on their childhoods and the men get drawn into Rebecca's fragment orbit. That's not really a recommendation, yet Van Booy's descriptions of a sultry Athens are vivid and meticulous, and the floweriness of his prose is skilfully balanced by his short, precise sentences. A seismic shift in events ushers in a radically different second half, accompanied by a more fractured, experimental writing style. Nonetheless, Van Booy's more left-field tendencies never feel comfortably squared with the innate tweeness of his characters. An intriguing voice but one not yet fully formed.

Andrzej Lukowski

**Picture This Our Choice Of The Latest Art And Photography Books**

Revered South African photographer Santu Mofokeng started his career as an apartheid-era photojournalist. But his interest in the power of spirituality, which infuses South African life, started long ago to take greater prominence in his work. **Chasing Shadows** (Prestel, £40) compiles examples of masterful images from more than 30 years and includes the Bloemhof Portfolio (*Pensioners en Route*, Bloemhof 1988, pictured), which depicted rural tenant farmers. Recently, his gaze has turned to how landscape can be invested with public memory – in South Africa, this is often 'shadowed' with negativity. And his growing concerns about environmental damage are eloquently captured in his most recent images of abandoned mining sites. *Siobhan Murphy*



If winning isn't everything then why do I check my e-mails more than I check the time! @Adamsmith999

