

# Ambushed by memory

DEPARTURE(S)

By Julian Barnes

Jonathan Cape, ₹999

"Life and memory can be so... quixotic, don't you find?" A man at the beginning of *Departure(s)*, following a stroke, cannot stop remembering every pie he had ever tasted "in proper chronology... like a cascade". The image may remind one of Marcel Proust's protagonist, for whom involuntary memory is desirable, a door flung open onto lost time, except that this man finds only an endless corridor.

At eighty, Julian Barnes, simultaneously looking back at a life and a career, understands the difference between the memory you choose and the memory that chooses you. What Proust called resurrection, Barnes calls ambush. "Wouldn't it make you want to kill yourself?" he asks of that torturous influx of memories. Forgetting, he suggests, may not be failure. Forgetting may be the only mercy we have.

And yet, even the memories we do keep are not quite ours. "[W]hat we conventionally think of as a memory is something which has been remembered, frequently or infrequently, over the course of our lives, mutating a little with each retelling until it congeals finally into

a version which we convince ourselves is the truth." Memory, then, is less of an archive and more of a fiction, a story we've told ourselves so many times we've forgotten it was our invention.

It follows, naturally, that a novel about memory must move the way memory moves. Barnes's writing reflects memory's ingenuity. Describing a friend, he writes, "Stephen was — is — was — tall and gangling." After all, within memory, people aren't fixed or reliable. Within memory, they're perpetually conjugating. "We all know that memory is identity: take away memory and what do we have? Merely some kind of animal existence in the moment."

The book, like memory itself, is recursive, digressive, circling the same people and the same loss from various angles. *Departure(s)* is Barnes's fifteenth and self-declared final novel — part autofiction, part memoir, part meditation, part essay, part elegy — investigating those immortal questions of mortality, memory, desire, love.

Before writing the book, Barnes swore on a Bible that he would never write about Stephen and Jean, the novel's central characters. But the novelist and the moralist have always made poor companions. "I am now in my mid-seventies, and like most older people am sometimes bored by myself — by which I mean



my repetitious remembering of thoughts and deeds and, especially, opinions." The writer admits that the self, endlessly revisited, eventually becomes its own cliché. But Barnes's boredom with himself doesn't stop him. He returns, once again, to the lives of people who asked him not to. The book you are holding is his answer to that promise.

Death, in his words (and words on death there are many), is neither enemy nor teacher. It is simply the universe doing its stuff. "I've never believed in the serenity of the old — it has always seemed like a fable designed to make them more admirable and us more complacent."

His cancer diagnosis, incurable but "manageable", is the book's north star, a condition that will accompany him until it doesn't, like memory, like a book he can't stop writing. "All deaths inflict collateral damage," he writes. "The dying person will soon feel nothing, while the griefstruck will be irradiated for years to come." The dead are the lucky ones; it's the living who must shoulder the burden of grief.

But the elegist and the ironist in him keep interrupting each other. Death, in his words, is also a broken travel itinerary, that one journey with no return leg. "Departure habitually leads to arrival... We go, we arrive, we set off in return, and

reach home again: we live with this momentum... In our lives, arrival comes first, and departure comes at the end — except a departure without subsequent arrival." Writing his last book, he chooses his own silence, denies death agency by departing on his own terms.

He pictures himself at a cafe table, you, the reader, across from him, and then, silently, he is gone. That empty chair is, in the end, every chair. "After all, we the living are in an extreme minority compared to those who are dead, plus those who are yet to be born. Which makes life feel like the flimsy moment it is." And isn't life but a process of coming to terms with your own finiteness?

In the *Mahabharata*, when Yama, the lord of death and *dharma*, asks Yudhishthira what the most astonishing thing in the world was, he replies: "Every day, in front of our eyes, innumerable beings die. Despite seeing all this, a man dreams of immortality. That is the great astonishment." Barnes, at eighty, writing his last book, is Yudhishthira's astonishment in literary form, a man who looks at death steadily, or tries to, and chooses, one final time, to write.

That, finally, is what *Departure(s)* is. Not a farewell to life but proof that the writing was the living.

Amrith Mukherjee