



Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech

Julian Barnes ©

All memories of childhood – of one's own – are, of course, untrustworthy. They are typically an amalgam of misremembering, of appropriating things told to you by others, and of the corruptions which come when you recount your own favourite stories again and again down the decades. Still, here is my current version of How Things Were. I grew up in the outer suburbs of London, and at the age of 11 started commuting with my brother into the centre of the city to my school, which stood directly on the banks of the Thames. My brother and I were dutiful and obedient boys. We were, as I think, normally anxious without being traumatised; normally content, without ever being ecstatic. We generally told the truth, except after discovering the sexual instinct and its local consequences.

Who and what were our authorities? Our parents, our schoolteachers, newspapers, the radio (television arrived late into our house), the church, politicians, and perhaps sports stars. Some of these authorities were more theoretical than practical: for instance, my parents were agnostic, and I have never been to a regular church service in my life; like many others in my country, I do christenings, weddings and funerals only. I was taught scripture at school, but found it no more applicable to my life than trigonometry, which I also studied. And the process of adolescence slowly undermined each of these authorities. I would like to say that I developed a healthy scepticism, but in fact it was probably an easy cynicism. Schoolmasters appeared humanly out of touch, politicians venal and hypocritical, newspapers controlled by a hidden agenda. This all took place in the 1960s, when the rise of satire confirmed the instinct that those placed above us – even, perhaps especially our parents – were only ever telling us a version of the truth, and one which fitted them, not us.

At school we were obliged to take part in the Combined Cadet Force, which meant that once a week I had to travel to school dressed in khaki, with highly-polished boots

and a neatly aligned beret. I was taught drill, and how to shoot a rifle. Once or twice a year we went on field days, when we marched, and sometimes crawled on hands and knees, through scrubby undergrowth with the purported intention of capturing some small hill supposedly defended by others like us. I was occasionally scared, but more consistently bored. At lunchtime we stopped and ate our sandwiches. And then an event took place which certainly happened in one way or another, but grew over the years into a key piece of self-mythology. My army pack contained not just food but also a copy of the Penguin edition of *Crime and Punishment*. I had already started it, but the circumstances in which I continued reading gave it sharper edge and consequence. I was being told the story of the axe murders of an elderly female pawnbroker and her half-sister by an impoverished and enraged ex-student in 19th-century St Petersburg. And I began to realize that, compared the the absurdities of playing at soldiers, and the bland comforts of home, Dostoevsky's creation was not just far, far more interesting, but his view of the world was far, far more true.

There had been earlier intimations of this: at eleven I had been given my first Shakespeare play to read – *Julius Caesar* – and despite initial forebodings found that I could understand not just the language and plot but also the human and political realities it described. Of course, not all books worked like this: some provided aversion therapy. I was given Conrad's novella *The Secret Sharer* at far too young an age, and it put me off Conrad for decades. But then reading involves trial and error (or trial and success) whenever we open a book. And that moment in prickly scrubland when I took up *Crime and Punishment* has remained iconic in my reading and writing life - whatever the facts in the case.

And so it has gone on, undiminished, from there. I believe that fiction, more than any other written form, best explains and expands life. Biology, of course, also explains life; so do biography and biochemistry and biophysics and biomechanics and biopsychology. But all the biosciences yield to biofiction. Novels tell us the most truth about life: what it is, how we live it, what it might be for, how we enjoy and value it, how it goes wrong, and how we lose it. Novels speak to and from the mind, the heart, the eye, the genitals, the skin; the conscious and the subconscious. What it is



to be an individual, what it means to be part of society. What it means to be alone. Alone, and yet in company: that is the paradoxical position of the reader. Alone in the company of a writer who speaks to the silence of your mind. And it makes no difference whether that writer is alive or dead. Fiction makes characters who have never existed as real as your friends; makes dead writers appear before us as contemporary as TV news readers – only much more reliable.

There is a regrettable tendency in Britain and other countries, especially the United States, to wish to protect younger readers and students from being shocked, hurt, or even merely embarrassed by imaginative literature. There must be 'trigger warnings' given to the reader in advance. But the phrase gives itself away. It is as if I were again dressed in that old khaki uniform I used to put on once a week, and was engaged in a real war, and expected an enemy sniper to send me a text message reading 'By the way, I'm afraid your head is in my gunsights and you might choose to duck down before I kill you.' War isn't like that, life isn't like that, and nor is literature. If I were a book editor and instructed that trigger warnings were now corporate policy, I should put exactly the same message on every book, from Shakespeare and Cervantes and Dostoevsky to Svetlana Alexievich and Ismael Kadare: 'Trigger warning: this book contains truth.'

Thank you.