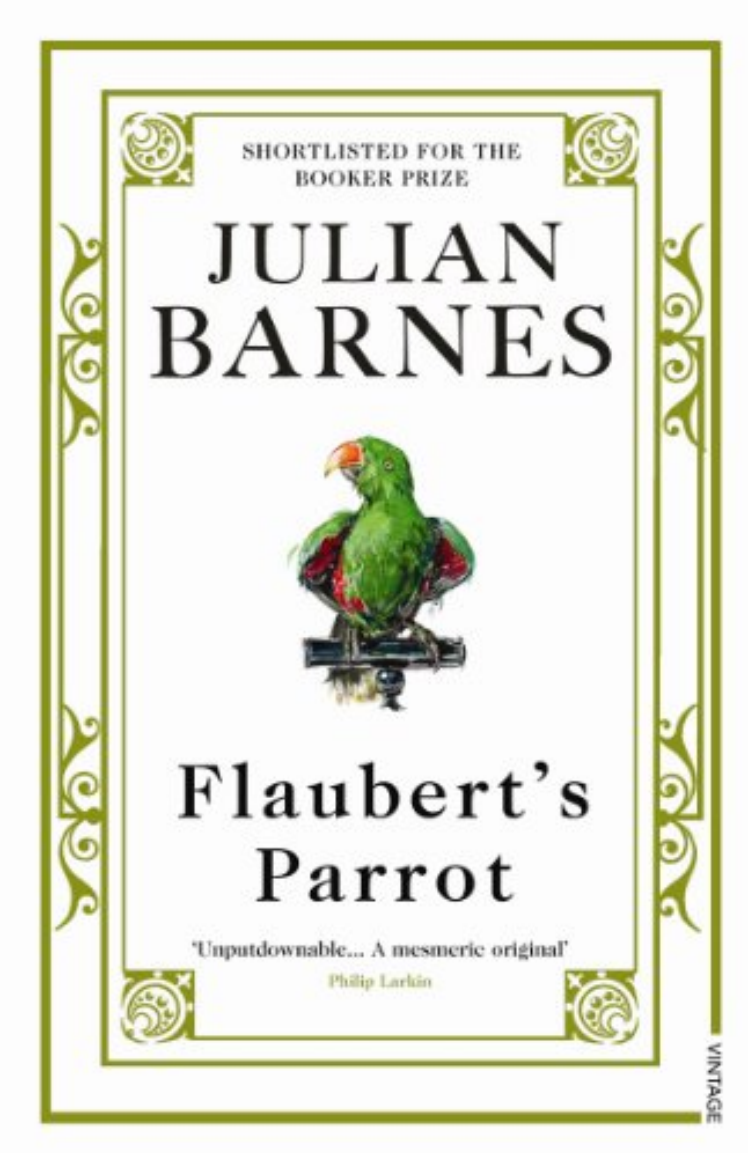
# Flaubert's Parrot






*Par Julian Barnes*
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**Par Julian Barnes : Flaubert's Parrot** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Flaubert's Parrot:

**Description :** Description du produitA kind of detective story, relating a cranky amateur scholar's search for the truth about Gustave Flaubert, and the obsession of this detective whose life seems to oddly mirror those of Flaubert's characters.

Prsentation de l'diteurWinner of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction 2011Flaubert's Parrot deals with Flaubert, parrots, bears and railways; with our sense of the past and our sense of abroad; with France and England, life and art, sex and death, George Sand and Louise Colet, aesthetics and redcurrant jam; and with its enigmatic narrator, a retired English doctor, whose life and secrets are slowly revealed.A compelling weave of fiction and imaginatively ordered fact, Flaubert's Parrot is by turns moving and entertaining, witty and scholarly, and a tour de force of seductive originality.comJust what sort of book is Flaubert's Parrot, anyway? A

literary biography of 19th-century French novelist, radical, and intellectual impresario Gustave Flaubert? A meditation on the uses and misuses of language? A novel of obsession, denial, irritation, and underhanded connivery? A thriller complete with disguises, sleuthing, mysterious meetings, and unknowing targets? An extended essay on the nature of fiction itself? On the surface, at first, Julian Barnes's book is the tale of an elderly English doctor's search for some intriguing details of Flaubert's life. Geoffrey Braithwaite seems to be involved in an attempt to establish whether a particularly fine, lovely, and ancient stuffed parrot is in fact one originally "borrowed by G. Flaubert from the Museum of Rouen and placed on his worktable during the writing of Un coeur simple, where it is called Loulou, the parrot of Felicit, the principal character of the tale." What begins as a droll and intriguing excursion into the minutiae of Flaubert's life and intellect, along with an attempt to solve the small puzzle of the parrot--or rather parrots, for there are two competing for the title of Gustave's avian confrere--soon devolves into something obscure and worrisome, the exploration of an arcane Braithwaite obsession that is perhaps even pathological. The first hint we have that all is not as it seems comes almost halfway into the book, when after a humorously cantankerous account of the inadequacies of literary critics, Braithwaite closes a chapter by saying, "Now do you understand why I hate critics? I could try and describe to you the expression in my eyes at this moment; but they are far too discoloured with rage." And from that point, things just get more and more curious, until they end in the most unexpected bang. One passage perhaps best describes the overall effect of this extraordinary story: "You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define the net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a collection of holes tied together with string." Julian Barnes demonstrates that it is possible to catch quite an interesting fish no matter how you define the net. --Andrew HimesExtraitExcerpted from the introduction Introduction Musing on the object of poetry, Pascal suggested in his Penses that As we speak of poetical beauty, so ought we to speak of mathematical beauty and medical beauty. But we do not do so; and the reason is that we know well what is the object of mathematics, and that it consists in proofs, and what is the object of medicine, and that it consists in healing. But we do not know in what grace consists, which is the object of poetry. If grace is the object of poetry, is truth the object of history and if it is, do we know in what truth consists? Or should history seek something less grandiose, more human and more marvellous than the truth? For more than thirty years, Julian Barnes has been asking these (and other) questions in beautiful novels that approach weighty matters with a light touch, novels that feature poetical grace, historical objects, resistance to proofs, searches for truth, a confirmed Francophilia, and even the occasional doctor. Barnes challenges received categorical distinctions and received ideas, while proving to us all that poetry, philosophy, biography, history and fiction need not indeed, should not be cleanly divided from each other. And he suggests that beauty can be found in the most unexpected places, if we have the wit to look for it. Mostly we dont, but evidently he has not yet despaired of us. It was clear from the start of Barness career that here was a writer of talent his first book, Metroland (1980), won the Somerset Maugham award for a first novel. But it was Barness third novel, Flauberts Parrot (1984), that established his reputation at home and abroad, and that for many readers remains his masterpiece. When he won the Man Booker prize in 2011 for The Sense of an Ending, Barnes was asked the inevitable question about his favourite of his books; he was quoted saying that he remains very attached to Flauberts Parrot. It seems an apt metaphor for a book about fixations. Early reviewers of Barnes were prone to comment on his disquieting tendency to write essays as much as novels, his persistent habit of jumping out of the boxes into which they were busily trying to shove him. (His first job was as a lexicographer, working for the Oxford English Dictionary, so Barnes would presumably have been unimpressed by efforts to draw rigid, or even useful, distinctions between a word meaning attempt and a word meaning new.) Their dogged efforts at categorizing a writer who was cheerfully demolishing their categories now seem rather touching: the word postmodern, in particular, was cited with fervent regularity, a totemic charm to ward off the gods of misrule. The truth, etymologically speaking, is that even the distinction between fact and fiction is nugatory: both terms originated in the Renaissance, when a fact meant a thing done or performed, and fiction meant the act of fashioning or imitating. Julian Barness novels do both, with panache; Flauberts Parrot is a fusion of fact and fiction, a novel and an essay, an unconventional biography, a fictional autobiography, an autobiographical fiction, a fiction about biography and a biography of fictions. One of the things that Flaubert teaches us, it suggests, is to dissect out the constituent parts of reality, and to observe that Nature is always a mixture of genres. Flauberts Parrot is also a mixture of genres and it is sui generis, which is to say it is in a class by itself. In my own literary history, I arrived at Flauberts

Parrot working backwards, so to speak, from Barness fifth novel, A History of the World in 1012 Chapters, published in 1989 when I was studying literature as an undergraduate. Someone gave me a copy, to whom I should be eternally grateful if only I could remember who it was. I had never read anything like it; A History transformed my ideas of what literature could do, of what fiction could be. For starters, it appeared that it could be non-fiction. And art history, geopolitical history, religious history, a meditation on love, faith, death and other catastrophes, including art and cannibalism. It could be funny, and dispense with unity of character, setting, or plot; it could have a full-colour fold-out of Gricaults The Raft of the Medusa stuck right in its middle; it could do anything it pleased. I was dazzled and delighted: the book coloured my mind, as Emily Bront once said, like wine colouring water. It is a novel that insists on the priority of ideas, even as it recognizes the world as a place with little time for and less interest in them. It is a series of interlocked essays, which understand that just because a writer is thinking hard doesnt mean he has permission to bore his reader to death; it uses fiction and imagination to explore ideas with drama and wit. I adored it. My voyage of discovery took me next to the inimitable, brilliant Flauberts Parrot, the book that taught me in no uncertain terms that critical writing could be creative and that creative writing could be critical, forever changing my approach to my own writing and thinking. Barnes is what they call a writers writer: his verbal finesse sometimes borders on legerdemain, it is so inventive, surprising, and playful. He opens up words, even as he opens our eyes and our minds. Its American publisher called Flauberts Parrot a novel in disguise. One of its disguises is the detective story; it is also literary criticism in camouflage. Virginia Woolf famously once told a roomful of undergraduates at Cambridge, Dont begin by being a critic; begin by being a writer. Geoffrey Braithwaite, the narrator of Flauberts Parrot, may remark that hes saving Virginia Woolf for when Im dead (he also announces, Let me tell you why I hate critics), but surely this is one statement of hers with which he would concur. Braithwaite objects to contemporary writers, each of whom, he says, seem to do one thing well enough, but fail to realise that literature depends on doing several things well at the same time. This can be no less true for the critic of literature than for its author: they all need to realize that literature must do several things well at once. At one point, Braithwaite shares some of the laws he would pass if he were a dictator of fiction, including a total ban on novels about other novels, on plots depending on incest or coincidence, and a partial ban on novels set on university campuses. If I were a dictator of literary criticism, I would force all aspiring critics to begin as writers, and then to read Flauberts Parrot repeatedly until they begin to appreciate its artfulness and dexterity, its intricate machinery; until it reminds them that they are supposed to begin, and end, with a love of words and some kind of lingering faith in their meaning. They must then find a way to reconcile this faith with a cold-eyed admission of the foolish inadequacy of language. Mystification is simple, Braithwaite rightly declares. Clarity is the hardest thing of all. Flauberts Parrot tells the story of an eccentric and erratic quest for a peculiar poetic object, one that essays in the etymological sense of putting to the proof, the testing of excellence. Geoffrey Braithwaite, retired doctor, widower, and amateur Flaubert enthusiast, stumbles across a parrot that purports to be the original stuffed parrot that inspired and irritated Flaubert as he composed Un coeur simple. But then Braithwaite finds another stuffed parrot that also claims to be Flauberts inspiration. The discovery triggers a series of ruminations on the search for origins and inspirations, and on the relationship between writers and words, between the literal and the figurative, between literature and life, between reader and writer. Who needs whom more? Braithwaite asks at the end of his Dictionary of Accepted Ideas, which offers an ironic version of Flauberts Dictionnaire des ides reues. Discuss without concluding. Most great books resist summary (if their ideas can be articulated so briefly, then those ideas probably do not require a book to elaborate them), but Flauberts Parrot is especially intransigent; indeed Braithwaite forestalls any attempt at summary by pointing out the inadequacy of prcis in cases such as personal advertisements, which arent lying indeed, theyre all trying to be utterly sincere but they arent telling the truth. Braithwaite is such a sprightly, amusing guide to the difficulty in accessing the truth that we may not realize for some time that the novel he inhabits has almost entirely dispensed with a plot. But if very little happens, in the traditional sense, that doesnt mean that nothing is going on; instead of action, we get ideas (received and original), variations, versions, claims and counter-claims, quotations, aperus and aphorisms. Barnes offers two chronologies of Flauberts life: both are true, and yet they seem mutually incompatible. Put crudely, one is the happy version of Flauberts life, the other the sad version; one focuses on success, the other on death and despair. We see Flauberts mistress, Louise Colet, long dismissed as little more than a pest, the whining distraction who kept intruding on the great mans art (tedious, importunate, promiscuous woman). And then in a virtuosic flourish, Barnes gives us Louise Colets perspective, the story as she might have seen it (brave, passionate, deeply misunderstood

woman), in which Flaubert becomes the parrot, rather than the wild beast he fancied himself. We get dictionary entries, quotations, taxonomies, chronologies, lists, catalogues, bestiaries: fragments to shore against the ruins of our certainty. Demand violently: how can we know anybody? Looked at from one angle, Flauberts Parrot is a novel about devotion, a celebration of literary obsession and a display of mastery. It catches the gaps in biography, showing the impossibility of ever reconstructing a life, especially the life of a great writer resistant to being written about. A refusal of the biographical enterprise and a recherch celebration of it, Flauberts Parrot is a treasure hunt, a scavenger hunt, and a confrontation, amused and melancholic, with the detritus of history. In fact, the novel elegantly laces together Pascals three beauties: the poetic, the mathematical and the medical. The poetic is embodied by the great bear, Gustave Flaubert, the subject and object of most of the novels ruminations (it is also embodied, more comically, in the decaying, multiplying parrot); the mathematical is implied by the books proliferation of enumerations and lists, its interest in figures and symbols (poetry is a subject as precise as geometry, Flaubert declares at one point); and the medical is the profession of both Geoffrey Braithwaite and Flauberts father. One of the books motifs is the rebuke it offers to the notion that the purpose of literature is spiritual uplift, or healing: Do you want art to be a healer? Braithwaite demands. Send for the AMBULANCE GEORGE SAND. Do you want art to tell the truth? Send for the AMBULANCE FLAUBERT: though dont be surprised, when it arrives, if it runs over your leg.