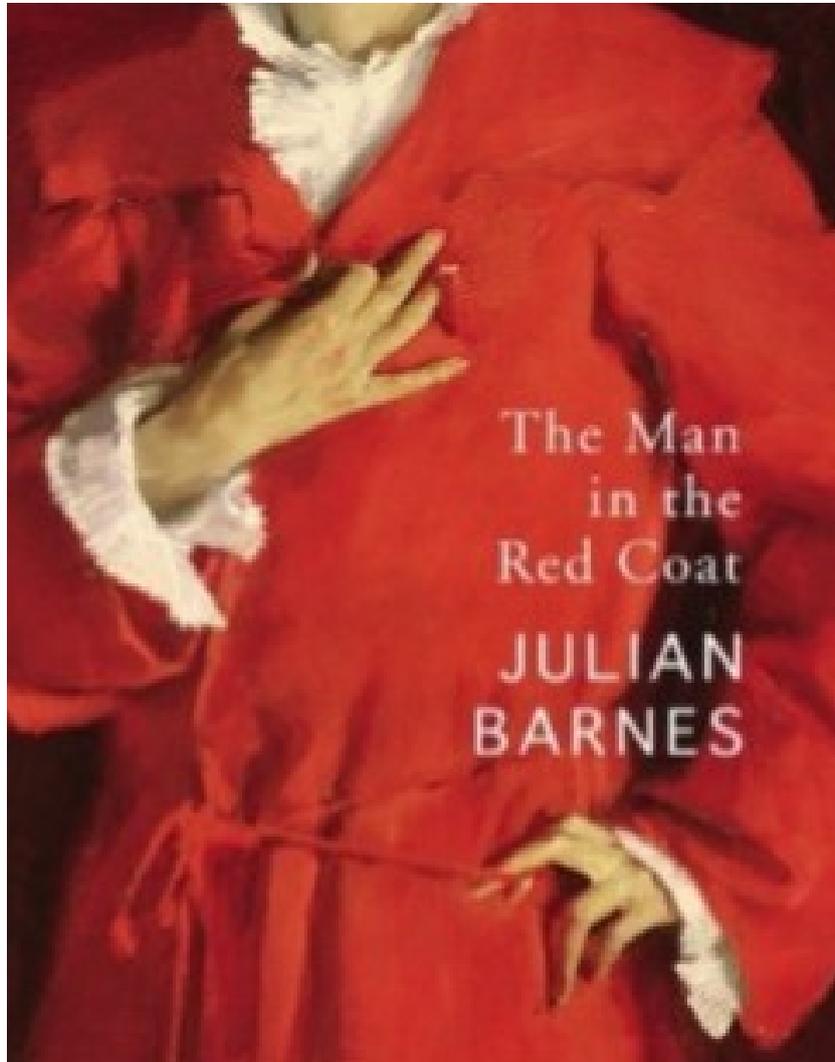


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**By:
Julian Barnes**

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What people Say:

Beata

Julian Barnes has done it ... He wrote a book that I read twice, which has not happened to me this year ...

The book, which has three central characters, two aristocrats and a commoner who became an aristocrat in his profession, is a biography of these three gentlemen, but in fact it is much, much more. Julian Barnes presents the period which is now called the Belle Epoque, talking masterfully about everyone who mattered then in any discipline, politics, literary world or in any other way, and

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The book starts with a detailed description of a painting and a bullet, and ends with four bullets. And there are more bullets. And there are duels. And love affairs. And

Julian Barnes wrote a book that I will certainly read for the third time very soon. I am in awe of Mr Barnes' eloquence and writing skills.

Meike

In this nonfictional account, Barnes paints a busy picture of Belle Epoque Paris and London, thus evoking a time of duels and dandyism, the rise of modernity with its faith in rationality, individualism and progress, but also illustrating the role of nationalism, classism, and sexism - and more than anything, this book is a celebration of the close connections and fruitful exchanges between England and the continent. The main hero of this historic tale is Dr. Samuel Pozzi, French descendent of

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, entitled

(1881).

Together with Pozzi, the commoner, his two friends Prince Edmond de Polignac and Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac play a vital role in structuring the text. Together, the three Frenchmen spent some time in London in 1885, but this is not the main focus of the text, it's more of a launching trajectory: Spreading from the narratives about the lives of these three men, Barnes embarks on a journey through Belle Epoque society, history, art, and culture. The sprawling narrative underlines the abundance of new thoughts and ideas, of fascinating events and extravagant characters populating the scenes, and his three leading men are excellently chosen. Only to give a few examples of Barnes' extrapolations: Pozzi's assistant was the father of one

, who later wrote about Montesquiou; Montesquiou is also the real-life person after whom modelled his protagonist in

; Polignac, a great music lover, composer and closeted homosexual, met Wagner and was a staple in the highest spheres of society.

Accordingly, Barnes takes up the opportunities and runs with them, digressing into interesting sub-narratives, anecdotes, touching upon letters, novels, paintings, biographies etc. - the research required to write a book with such a plethora of inter-connected details must have been immense. We meet Oscar Wilde and world-famous actress Sarah Bernhardt, we hear about the Dreyfus affair, we hang out with scandalous gossip Jean Lorrain (who called himself "The Ambassador from Sodom"), but we also learn about the achievements of Florence Nightingale and Nobel winner Alexis Carrel, who was a protégé of Pozzi, as well as the life-saving medical innovations brought about by Pozzi himself.

Another aspect that renders this book so intriguing is the meta-narrative Barnes inserts: Again and again, he makes personal statements and ponders the nature of historical writing, he muses about possible interpretation of his material and makes educated guesses about things we will never know for sure; regarding the disappearance of Sarah Bernhardt's amputated leg and the bullet that killed Pushkin as well as the questionable truth about Montesquiou's gilded live tortoise, Englishman Barnes notes with French nonchalance:

David Wineberg

I am not in the habit of picking up biographies of people I never heard of and have no idea why I should. But Julian Barnes proved me quite wrong. He did it in an unusual way, with a dramatic portrait by John Singer Sargent of Sargent's friend Dr. Samuel Pozzi when they were both young men. Entering that world, Barnes leads the reader on a branching journey of infinite connections to everyone who meant anything in the Belle Epoque in France (1870-1914). Barnes sets it up as a mystery, piecing

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It reads like a Six Degrees of Separation. Pozzi's connections alone were more than sufficient to tell the story, but Barnes connects to his connections' connections, their friends, lovers, haters, critics, customers, managers and acquaintances. And then their connections too. The connections circle back, and everyone seems to have been connected to everyone else. There are dozens of them profiled here. They range from Oscar Wilde to the Mayo Brothers to Dreyfus, Bernhardt, Degas and Rodin.

This sweeping expanse is doled out piecemeal, in anecdotes and threads that follow one of the personages through some stage or event. It also gives Barnes a platform to spout some of his own perspectives. Here's one on the ways the English and the French regard each other:

Charles de Gaulle's obstreperous and infuriating (translate into French as determined and patriotic) behavior during his London wartime exile, then later in his stubbornly vindictive (principled and statesmanlike) triple refusal to allow Britain to join

(~disrupt™) the European Common Market...•

Pozzi was handsome and talented. He spoke English and French. He travelled widely, gathering new medical techniques as he went. He was fast to innovate, devoted himself to otherwise neglected women's health and initiated new abdominal surgical procedures that saved numerous lives. He was charming, seductive, available and everywhere. He was there for the famous and nonfamous, there for the events, the history, and the parties. His own house held a popular salon where many of his connections reconnected and new connections made.

He led a wonderfully full life, outside his own family, where everything was tense and strained. His daughter in particular was a vicious piece of work, full of self hate, self pity and self destruction. Pozzi therefore dallied with mistresses, publicly, including with Sarah Bernhardt, the western world's sweetheart. She called him Docteur Dieu (Doctor God). They hung out for 20 years.

Meanwhile, Pozzi developed into a celebrity in his own right. He became a doctor, gynecologist, mayor, senator and surgeon. He reorganized and ran hospital wings and surgeries. He was recognized globally for his medical practices and papers. He learned the critical importance of cleanliness and antiseptics directly from Dr. Lister in Scotland, and brought those practices to France. Despite, or because of his open philandering, he was respected by men and desired by women.

His attitude to medical innovation was "Chauvinism is one of the forms of ignorance." That is, just because it wasn't invented here doesn't mean it's of no value. This openness was his way of life.

Barnes is deeply involved in the Belle Epoque. He was able to post individual photos of most of the people he writes about, which is enormously helpful. And most of the images come from his own collection. At the turn of the century a French chocolate-bar maker began a series of trading cards given away free in the wrapping of every bar. It extended to three series, with hundreds of personalities of the era captured in black and white. It seems that everyone Pozzi knew was famous in his or her own right, at least enough to merit a trading card (and therefore an image in this book).

Rebecca

I completely misjudged this one: I thought it would be historical fiction, but it's actually narrative nonfiction about an obscure historical figure. I found it dull and impenetrable and gave up after just nine pages.

Marcus Hobson

In 2013 Julian Barnes published a book called

, which as well as confronting the death of his wife, also told tales of early balloon flights over France, early photography and some of the loves of the actress Sarah Bernhardt. Some is fact and some is fiction. It is a great narrative of humour and minute observations. From the description of this new book, I thought that it might be similar. In some ways it was, only with a little less magic.

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It took me a little while to figure out who exactly is the central character of "The Man in the Red Coat". We dwell a good deal on the visit of three Frenchmen to London in the summer of 1885. Expecting a few days of shopping are a prince, a count and a doctor. We refer to them frequently throughout the narrative. The doctor was Samuel Pozzi, who was painted by John Singer Sargent in a work called

wearing the red coat of the title, although it could also be called a house coat or even a dressing gown. Pozzi was, among other things, a society doctor, pioneering gynaecologist and free-thinker. Sargent had provided the three men with a letter of introduction to the novelist Henry James. So begins a long list of famous folk who appear between the covers of this lavishly illustrated book.

While this tour of the Belle Epoque in Paris takes in many native celebrities of the time, it also throws in a number of travelers, such as Oscar Wilde. To this stage Barnes also brings his own commentary, reflecting his own Francophile preferences and a fine grasp of the history and scandals of the period. The small asides and fragmentary stories are enjoyable and excellent. For example, "The fact the France was generally a source of Filth was common English knowledge by the time of the Wilde trials." As the publisher of Zola's novel "The Earth" found when put on trial. That novel was declared to be "filthy from beginning to end" and while a "filthy" book might contain two or three passages of filth, this was said to contain twenty-one. At the trial the publisher's plea was changed to guilty to spare the jury from having to hear all twenty-one read out.

This gem of a story is one of the many I enjoyed. In 1896, during the Scramble for Africa, an expeditionary force of eight French and 120 Senegalese soldiers crossed the continent from west to east: their target was a ruined fort on the Sudanese Upper Nile. Frenchly, they set off with 1,300

litres of claret, fifty bottles of Pernod, and a mechanical piano. The journey took them two years! They raised the tricolore at the ruined fort of Fashoda, and seemed to have no more geopolitical purpose than to annoy the British. This they did, just a little! Got to love a bit of historical trivia.

Barnes notes the imbalance of fugitives and exiles between France and Britain. France exiled four heads of state, and among others Chateaubriand, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, Monet, Pissarro, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Zola. "The main reason Britons sought exile in France was to escape scandal (and be able to carry on their scandalous ways): it was the place to go for the upper-class bankrupt, bigamist, cardsharp and homosexual. They sent us their ousted leaders and dangerous revolutionaries; we sent them our posh riff-raff." It seems the French were appalled and depressed by London and one of them described it thus: he "conjured up a picture of London as an immense, sprawling, rain-drenched metropolis, stinking of soot and hot iron, and wrapped in a perpetual mantle of smoke and fog! Along every street, big or small, in an eternal twilight relieved only by the glaring infamies of modern advertising, there flowed an endless stream of traffic between two columns of earnest, silent Londoners, marching along with eyes fixed ahead and elbows glued to their sides."