

JULIAN BARNES

FLAUBERT'S
PARROT



Music

Above: Planet Earth, Leda Luss Luyken. (Images/Wikimedia Commons)

Julian Barnes



- (1946-)
- English postmodern novelist
- Agnostic
- Guards privacy
- Writes *Flaubert's Parrot* in 1984
- Moves away from some postmodernist assumptions in later work

Premise

- Retired Dr. Geoffrey Braithwaite searches for a stuffed parrot that inspired a Flaubert short story



- “Six North Africans were playing *boules* beneath Flaubert’s statue. Clean cracks sounded over the grumble of jammed traffic. With a final, ironic caress from the fingertips, a brown hand dispatched a silver globe... Let me start with the statue.”

Why begin here?

Plot



- Dr. Braithwaite is an obsessive fan of Flaubert's work
- Uses Flaubert's insight to examine his own life while searching for the stuffed parrot that may have inspired "A Simple Heart"
- In multiple asides, the retired 60-year-old tries to construct a biography of Flaubert through his life and work
 - None seem to satisfy him

“Lou Lou was in fine condition, the feathers as crisp and the eye as irritating as the must have been one hundred years ago. I gazed at the bird, and to my surprise felt ardently in touch with the writer who disdainfully forbade posterity to take any personal interest in him.”

Gustav Flaubert

- (1821-1880)
- French novelist
- Realist
 - ▣ Precise, exacting style
 - ▣ Heavily influenced future authors
- Neither married nor had children
 - ▣ Found existence too meaningless to pass on
- *Memoirs of a Madman* (1838)
- *Madame Bovary* (1857)





A Simple Heart

1877

Background

- Published as one of *Three Tales* with "Saint Julian the Hospitalier" and "Hérodiades"
- Possibly written for George Sand (1804-76)
 - ▣ Pen name of early French novelist, feminist, socialist, Amantine Dupin
 - ▣ Flaubert's pen pal
 - Their letters are still in print



Portrait of George Sand. Auguste Charpentier, 1838.

Plot

- ❑ Félicité Barette, once wealthy, now a servant in the house of Madam Aubain for 50 years
- ❑ Experiences many tragedies, but is never beaten down
- ❑ Finally loses her pet parrot, Loulou
- ❑ Has it mounted
- ❑ On her death, parrot greets her in place of the Holy Spirit
- ❑ Satire? Backhanded Admiration?

On right: Icon of the Holy Spirit, 1200s.



“Books say: She did this because. Life says: She did this. Books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't. I'm not surprised some people prefer books.”

“I’d ban coincidences, if I were a dictator of fiction.”

... and what sort of bear is a Flau-bear anyway?
Why does it matter to Braithwaite?

Narrative

- Outgrowth of Modernism
- Difficult to define
- Characterized by extreme skepticism of every possible means of knowledge
- [Video](#)

On right: *Being*, 1897. n.d. Joseph Wassman



Takeaways



- Relativism
 - ▣ Deconstruction of the Western tradition (and anything else that makes a truth claim)
 - Gender roles
 - Cultural appropriation
 - Truth...
- Takes both religion and science down a notch
 - ▣ Both survive, but lose currency
- Mixing of highbrow and lowbrow
- Shock value
- Refers to classics, subverts their meaning

Video