

BOOKS

Inside the mind of a master

With a short but ambitious novel about Shostakovich, the Booker winner Julian Barnes has reinvented himself once again, says *Duncan White*

THE NOISE OF TIME
by Julian Barnes

JULIAN BARNES
THE NOISE OF TIME
192PP, JONATHAN CAPE,
£14.99, EBOOK £10.99

★★★★★

In the late Seventies a group of ambitious young writers assembled for boozey Friday lunches at Bursa, a Turkish-Cypriot kebab house on the fringes of Bloomsbury distinguished by its proximity to the offices of *The New Statesman*. The literary editor of that magazine, Martin Amis, was by all accounts the star of a show that included James Fenton, Christopher Hitchens, Clive James and Ian McEwan. Numerous memoirs attest to an intensity of raillery that was by turns intellectually pyrotechnical and frankly puerile. Amid such a crowd it is hard to imagine Julian Barnes getting a word in.

On arriving as Amis's deputy at *The New Statesman*, Barnes said he was so shy he was "paralysed into silence" by weekly editorial meetings. It took him the best part of a decade to write and publish his first novel, *Metroland* (1980), largely because he struggled to take seriously the idea of himself as a novelist. The company he kept every Friday cannot have made that easier; McEwan had made his name with *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) while Amis wrote the decade-defining *Money* (1984). There cannot have been many writers of such ambition who have found themselves the third-best novelist in a kebab house. When Salman Rushdie later joined the set (which had migrated to grander venues than Bursa), Barnes was faced with the absurd situation of looking around the table and wondering whether he'd even make the podium.

It turns out Barnes was merely pacing himself. It seems like the best work of Amis, McEwan and

Rushdie is behind them; Barnes, by contrast, still has plenty left in the tank. While his peers burned out with self-consciously big books, Barnes wrote more modestly and his talent aged well. As he was about to enter his sixties, he reached a large audience with the historical fiction of *Arthur and George* (2005) and followed it up with a small but intricate novel in *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), which won the Man Booker Prize. He has published collections of essays on France, cooking and art and has written two hybrids of essay and memoir, *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (2008) and *Levels of Life* (2013), both of which proved moving and unexpectedly funny.

He turns 70 this month and with *The Noise of Time* he has written a novel of deceptive slenderness: a short fictional account of the life of the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. In scale, it appears similar to *The Sense of an Ending*, but is without that book's taut, thriller-ish structure; less tidy but more ambitious. Those seduced into reading Barnes by his Booker Prize might well be disappointed. Longer-standing readers will recognise his commitment to reinventing himself: one of the things Barnes most admires in Flaubert is his never having written the same book twice.

The Noise of Time is a narrative in which nothing much happens: a man waits for a lift; a man sits on a plane; a man sits in a car. All the action takes place in Shostakovich's head; in each of these three sections we find him at a moment of reflection amid a larger crisis, the "skittering" of his mind represented by short bursts of text that flit between memories and the present.

Crisis Number One is the Great Terror. The story begins with Shostakovich on the landing of his apartment block in the middle of the night waiting for the lift that will bring the secret police. This is 1936 and Stalin's great purge is under way. Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* has met with Stalin's personal disfavour and the composer has been denounced in the press: a clear



RICHARD SAKER/REX FEATURES/SHUTTERSTOCK

sign that the cogs of murderous bureaucracy have been set to grind. It can only end one way: in an interrogation cell in which a "confession" awaits a signature, and a bullet the back of a neck.

As Shostakovich waits, he thinks of his childhood, of past lovers and, compulsively, of the train of circumstances that led to his fall. He remembers the disaster of the debut of his *First Symphony* at an open-air venue in Kharkov, when the music had set the local dogs barking. The louder they played, the more dogs barked. "Now his music has set bigger dogs barking," Barnes writes. "History was repeating itself: the first time as farce, the second time as tragedy."

This inversion of Marx's formula is typical of the black humour Barnes lends to Shostakovich. There is a manic vacillation to the composer's thoughts but beneath the discordance are subtle melodies. Certain repeated images resonate with each other throughout the novel; a list of memories at the novel's start – "Cut peat weighing down his hand. Swedish water birds

flickering above his head. Fields of sunflowers. The smell of carnation oil... Sweat oozing from a widow's peak. Faces, names" – return as an oblique coda.

Waiting for the lift, Shostakovich recalls being summoned to "the Big House" where he is interrogated by an agent called Zakrevsky. They want to know about his relationship with his patron Marshal Tukhachevsky, who stands accused of plotting to assassinate Stalin. Shostakovich realises that he is a dead man. But even during the Great Terror you can get lucky; Zakrevsky is himself purged, leaving Shostakovich relieved, for a while at least.

Shostakovich's next crisis – his second "conversation with Power" – occurs 12 years later, in 1948, when he is blackmailed into attending a Soviet-funded Peace Conference at the Waldorf Hotel in New York. As the star of the Russian delegation, he is a target for the anti-communist intellectuals who have infiltrated the conference, specifically Nicolas Nabokov (the novelist's cousin), an exiled Russian composer

who humiliates Shostakovich by asking questions that expose how obediently he is forced to follow the party line.

The third crisis occurs after a gap of another 12 years, in 1960, by which time things have loosened up a little under Khrushchev. Shostakovich no longer fears for his life but faces a new attack on his integrity. It has been decided that he must join the Communist Party as an endorsement of the new direction taken by the Soviet Union. He had avoided joining the party while Stalin was alive but now, try as he might, he cannot escape what has been ordained.

Inventing the mental processes of a celebrated Russian composer is obviously a risk for an English writer who grew up in Middlesex. Almost the worst kind of historical fiction flourishes its research before battering the reader into submission with period detail (the very the worst being the kind in which the author hasn't even bothered to do the research in the first place). Barnes, though, is far too technically adept to fall

into this trap. He avoids inserting great chunks of exposition into Shostakovich's thinking by telling the story in free indirect speech, giving himself the narratorial freedom to enter the workings of the composer's mind while also offering outside context for the reader. You expect nothing less from a writer soaked in Flaubert.

He also knows what he is talking about. While Barnes is known for his Francophilia, he also studied Russian at school and university. Soviet Communism was a subject of frequent debate among that Friday lunch club. How could it be otherwise with Hitchens, a recovering Trotskyite, and the famous Sovietologist Robert Conquest at the table? At the time, Amis was interested in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's revelations about the Gulag, a fascination that led to his controversial 2002 book about Stalin, *Koba the Dread*.

Barnes, for his part, had first-hand experience of what life was like in the Soviet Union, having taken a road trip through Eastern Europe to Leningrad in 1965. He continued to visit the Warsaw Pact states in the following decades and was in Bulgaria just before and then during the collapse of Todor Zhivkov's communist rule, events he fictionalised in his 1991 novel *The Porcupine*. Born in 1946, Barnes has previously described himself as a child of the Cold War and *The Noise of Time* reflects it. Since *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984),

Unlike Rushdie, Amis and McEwan, Barnes's talent has aged well

his books have been about the way we tell the stories of human lives, whether our own or other people's. *A Sense of an Ending*, for example, is about what happens when that story is suddenly exposed as false and has to be drastically revised. In *The Noise of Time*, Shostakovich is forced to reconcile his own fragmented memories of his life with the story the state wants to tell about him. He is forced to participate in the degradation of his public self, as his family and his music are held hostage, and is tormented by his own complicity and duplicity. He clings to his music, hoping it will drown out the noise around him.

Towards the end, Shostakovich realises "he had lived long enough to be dismayed by himself". It is a third act full of regret at the decline of his talent, rendered brilliantly by a writer clearly suffering no such malaise. "This was often the way with artists," Barnes writes, "either they succumbed to vanity, thinking themselves greater than they were, or else to disappointment... The self-doubt of the young is nothing compared to the self-doubt of the old."

If Barnes has doubts about his own talent, they are well concealed in his work. Back in 2000, he told an interviewer that it was important to know when to stop writing, citing EM Forster as an example. Since then he has produced arguably his best work. Fortunately, there is as yet no sense of an ending.



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90 degrees from the rest of society

Robert Hanks enjoys David Aaronovitch's gripping account of growing up in a communist household

PARTY ANIMALS: MY FAMILY AND OTHER COMMUNISTS

by David Aaronovitch



304PP, JONATHAN CAPE,
£17.99, EBOOK £9.99

★★★★★

David Aaronovitch takes as an epigraph to this memoir a remark of Leah Wesker to her son Arnold about his play *Chicken Soup with Barley*: "Who's going to be interested in any of it, silly boy? It's about us, it's between us. It won't mean a thing to anybody else."

You can see why he chose this quotation: the subject of this book, as of Wesker's play, is life in a Communist household – Aaronovitch's parents, Sam and Lavender, were devout members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and dedication to the party shaped Aaronovitch's childhood. It is true, too, that the CPGB has never commanded wide popular support – I remember reading that in the Thirties, amid the Depression and the rise of Fascism, the party still had fewer members than the Flat Earth Society. Still, the apologetic note is unnecessary. This is an uncommonly gripping book, not just as political or social history – though the party's influence on politics and the wider culture has been out of all proportion to its size, Aaronovitch's own impact as a contrarian newspaper columnist and broadcaster being an example – but as an account of the lies that families tell themselves to survive.

Aaronovitch divides the book into three sections. The first, and much the longest, is straightforwardly historical, though it slips back and forth in time and between the personal and the world historical. One chapter follows the history of the party from its foundation in 1920 to the Sixties, digressing to the author's memory of his first week at university in the mid-Seventies, being slapped in the face by an attractive woman and called a "Stalinist" – his first glimmering of the schisms and hatreds that divided the Left. (This anecdote has, of course, no contemporary resonances.) The following chapter goes back to 1919, when his father was born, to explain how a dirt-poor Jewish autodidact from Stepney ended up marrying the daughter of upper-middle-class

manufacturing families in the shires (his grandfather's younger brother was the last commanding officer of the RAF in India: Aaronovitch is amused by letters he receives from members of the public telling him that with his "foreign antecedents" he will never really understand the English).

Much of this section is taken up with describing life inside the CPGB. Sam Aaronovitch was for many years a full-time senior organiser for the party, at one point in charge of its cultural policy – Doris Lessing portrayed him, not altogether fairly, in *The Golden Notebook* – and the cause seems to have dominated most of his waking moments: going to meetings, writing articles and books, marching. Though Lavender was not on the payroll, her life, too, revolved around the party: her friends were other party wives, and she spent her spare time handing out leaflets or making toys for party jumble sales.

The party dominated life: you used a party builder, party babysitters, a party dentist. The young Aaronovitches were brought up to be contemptuous of mainstream media ("purveyors of lies and propaganda") and popular culture; they could not read *The Beano* or *The Dandy* because the publisher, DC Thomson of Dundee, did not recognise unions. Instead they went on demos, watched art house films, listened to folk and classical music. This life was insufferably narrow, or at any rate insufferably different; party children were born, as Aaronovitch puts it, "at a 90-degree angle to the rest of society".

But their north London world had a cosmopolitan side. They met comrades from around the world, particularly anti-apartheid activists from South Africa (on this issue, as on some others, the CPGB displayed more rectitude than the mainstream political parties). David recalls being sent on holiday, aged 12, to Bulgaria, where he



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shook hands with Todor Zhivkov, the leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party, watched England win the World Cup on television and listened to an older boy's accounts of sexual exploits with his film-star girlfriend.

He offers much fascinating detail. Sometimes it is not the differences that are striking but the tingles of familiarity: he mentions the party bookshop, Collet's on Charing Cross Road, where I remember browsing in my teens and getting a mild frisson from a sense of subdued alienness, a brush with something subversive.

The book's second section describes the family's gradual disillusionment with the party – Sam's realisation that he was not going to rise any further in the hierarchy (seen as "too ambitious", a friend let slip), then Czechoslovakia in 1968, and later David's own realisation that the party did not live up to the ideals it had instilled in him.

In the final section, though, he reveals another side to the story – this political unravelling happened alongside the unravelling of his parents' marriage; the last chapter reconstructs the "family therapy" they all underwent, supposedly to cope with the teenage David's anger. His bitterness at this scapegoating pervades these last pages, giving them an awkward,

They used a party builder, party babysitters, a party dentist

unresolved tone. This section is riveting, but also frustrating. Placed at the end, it forces the reader to distrust much of what has gone before. Was Lavender's ideological purity a way of placating Sam, or chastising him? Perhaps this story explains why the Aaronovitches remained in the party after '56, when the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian uprising forced so many out: if you are lying to yourself constantly about the people who matter most to you, lies about people in a far away country may become easier to swallow.

It is not clear whether Aaronovitch has really considered these questions. *Party Animals* is at times an awkward book, but if it has a moral it is the importance of learning to discard utopias and live with the mess.



Starter for 10: David Aaronovitch appeared on *University Challenge* in 1975