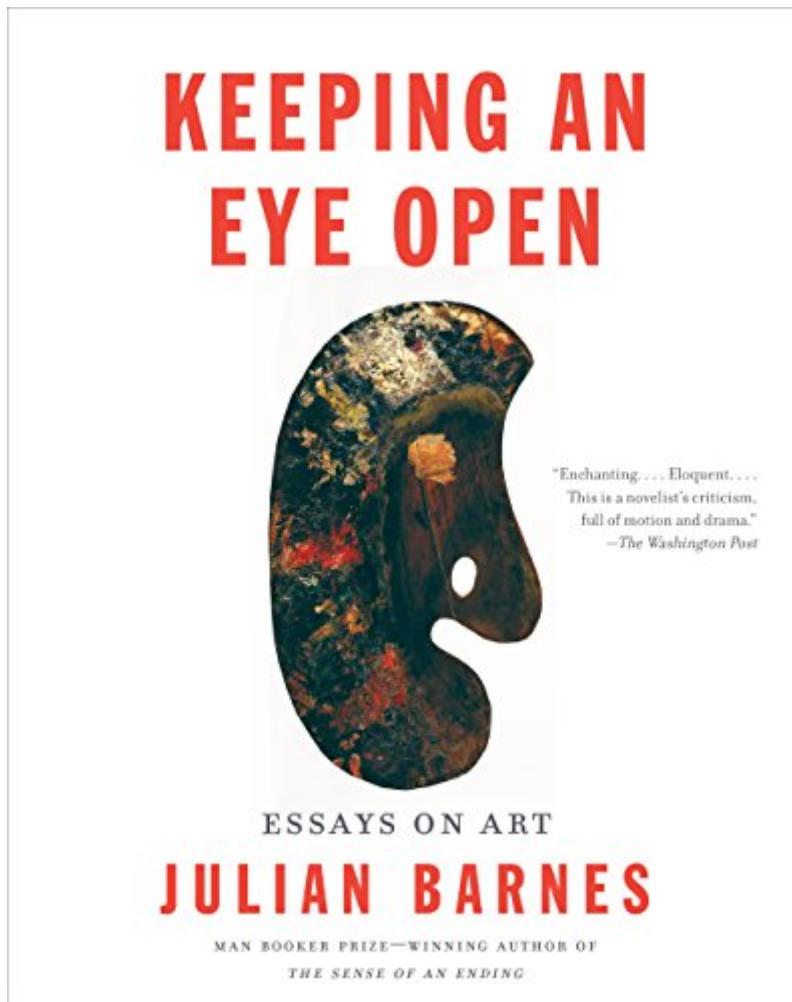


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Keeping An Eye Open: Essays On Art



Synopsis

An extraordinary collection—“hawk-eyed and understanding”—from the Man Booker Prize-winning, best-selling author of *The Sense of an Ending* and *Levels of Life*. As Julian Barnes notes: “Flaubert believed that it was impossible to explain one art form in terms of another, and that great paintings required no words of explanation. Braque thought the ideal state would be reached when we said nothing at all in front of a painting . . . But it is a rare picture that stuns, or argues, us into silence. And if one does, it is only a short time before we want to explain and understand the very silence into which we have been plunged.” This is the exact dynamic that informs his new book. In his 1989 novel *A History of the World in 10 Chapters*, Barnes had a chapter on Gustave Courbet’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, and since then he has written about many great masters of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, including Delacroix, Manet, Fantin-Latour, Cézanne, Degas, Redon, Bonnard, Vuillard, Vallotton, Braque, Magritte, Oldenburg, Lucian Freud and Howard Hodgkin. The seventeen essays gathered here help trace the arc from Romanticism to Realism and into Modernism; they are adroit, insightful and, above all, a true pleasure to read. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Those who have read the stories of Julian Barnes will know how often he builds them around real figures in the arts: THE LEMON TABLE contains stories about Turgenev and Sibelius; Sarah Bernhart and the photographer Nadar play major roles in LEVELS OF LIFE; Flaubert gets a whole novel to himself (almost) in FLAUBERT'S PARROT; and a meticulous analysis of Géricault's painting "The Raft of the Medusa" forms the centerpiece of his HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10 CHAPTERS. That essay is reprinted here, slightly expanded. It forms the beginning of a sequence of pieces on French-speaking artists of the 19th and 20th centuries -- Géricault, Delacroix, Courbet, Manet, Fantin-Latour, Cézanne, Degas, Redon, Bonnard, Vuillard, Valloton, Braque, and Magritte -- followed by a few moderns: Claes Oldenburg, Lucian Freud, and Howard Hodgkin. I am finding it utterly addictive. As a novelist, Barnes has an eye for the telling personal detail: Delacroix in a daze walking home to a house he had moved out of two years earlier; Courbet drinking himself into obesity and death; Cézanne losing his temper with a fidgety sitter. He compares Courbet to Fantin-Latour in terms of their portrayals of the community of artists, and Degas to Bonnard in terms of their attitudes to women; his entry into the proto-Surrealist work of Redon is the question of whether it matters if an artist is married. Little *critiqueur* that he is, Barnes also has an ear for what other writers have said about these artists: Maxime Du Camp describing Delacroix sorting skeins of wool; Baudelaire telling Manet "you are only the first in the degeneration of your art

Julian Barnes really does keep an eye open on art, and he is a pleasure to read. And a relief too: he doesn't shower you with explanations and theories as so many art critics do, he tells it how he sees it, not mincing his words. He reminds us that Flaubert thought that "it was impossible to explain one art form in terms of another" and that "great paintings required no words of explanation". True, but there is still work to do for a writer and art lover like Barnes. He gives us a sense of the evolution of art, his essays are pinpointing markers if you will, to help determine "good" art (likely to be meaningful to future generations) from "bad art" (momentarily popular, soon to be forgotten). What I find particularly intriguing is his personal list of artists that will endure the challenge of time, marking their century: "When the future looks back at the second half of the twentieth century in Britain, it will surely see it as a period dominated by painters: Bacon, Freud, Hockney, Hodgkin, Riley (and Caulfield, Auerbach, Hitchens, Aitchinson, Uglow). My only regret is that Barnes did not spread his

net wider, to include, say, American or German painters of the same period. But at least his position vis a vis contemporary art is both coherent and sensible...

I've been a Barnes fan since Flaubert's Parrot" came out. If I really like an author I send copies to friends. Barnes is my top gift author. His literary depth is brilliant with any genera or style he tackles. He weaves his considerable artful style into all his work. These essays should encourage everyone to pay attention to pictures. As a devoted Kindle reader, I enjoy reading Barnes more now because his generosity with language is immediately and thoroughly accessible. I usually got peeved at authors who tossed "foreign," obscure and classical language around like peanuts to squirrels.

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