

(Notes for) (My) Manifest Promise

Me, Julian Barnes
and *Metroland*¹

by *Rishi Dastidar*

***Epigram added, when read on the plane back from Hong Kong, where first draft of this piece was written, pulling together the Post-It™ notes on which I'd scribbled fragments in a midnight frenzy when visiting Stanmore**

“Still, Robert Towne had thought of *Chinatown* like a creator, or like a writer beginning to open up a private world, albeit one found in such public places that it had meaning for millions. And he could not get it out of his head. Those are conditions, or symptoms, of art or of the aspiration to make something we call art.”²

***Prologue, preamble &c**

Places and times of composition: Streatham Hill; on the 159 bus travelling up Brixton Hill; Stanmore; Hong Kong; Clapham; and Stanmore. Between November 2005 and April 2006; primarily 20-31 January 2006.

Here are some working titles† and first lines‡ you weren't meant to see:

‡Remember those letters you sent to me from Paris, nearly seven years ago now, when you were on the edge of the city? When life was happening elsewhere?

†Letters to the Viscountess Metroland

†Letters to Bunny

†Suburban knives harmless ribbon

‡Third we take Stanmore, Middlesex

‡Repine: to feel discontent, to fret, to yearn for something

†The Stanmore Syndrome.

***"On author" (or, critical need-to-know about Julian Barnes [JB]):³**

"He bathes mundane realities in a transfiguring light, recognising the extraordinary in the ordinary. He observes a boring landscape and endows it with fanciful, wishful patterns and symbols – to pedantic and poignant effect."⁴

***The bit about the book⁵**

Edition used in reading for, and writing of, piece: Picador: London, 1990. Front cover straplines: "Winner of the Somerset Maugham Prize", "Now a major film". Structure: part 1 – Chris and Toni growing up in Metroland; part 2 – Chris living and studying in Paris, having first romantic relationship, and meeting future wife, Marion; part 3 – Chris and Marion living in Metroland, Toni's re-entry into their lives.

Key relationship: between Chris and Toni, first as school friends, then adults. Chris is the "hero", and nominally straight man to Toni's more exotic and restless, rebellious intellectual.

Key term used: *épat* – demonstration of superiority of intellect in whimsical, absurd or farcical situations, to show up persons in/of authority.

***Notes and annotations made (on the back of an**

envelope) whilst re-reading *Metroland*

Orange on red: the colour of suburbia
Being as smug and bourgeois as the area that spawned them
Schooled – expensively no doubt – in town
Pt 1: it's 1963 – where are The Beatles?
Tripartite arc mirroring my own choices of places to live?
p 31: J'habite Metroland – wilfully clever, and yet author
gently deflates wherever possible
59: sense that best/promise is before them: does it materi-
alise? And immortality through art
65: ... for want of choice
67: waiting at Wembley Park⁶
80: Jubilee line: *grey*, not silver
81: escape – first flower
86: even in Paris May '68, life – as history remembers it – is
happening elsewhere. Growing up in suburbia does this
88: deferment of pleasure – still true
98: on writing
a tour of the places where the mind, interiority, is trapped –
and then liberated. Of course we go further than Paris now;
but somehow our liberation hasn't increased exponen-
tially
150: trading on resonances
Past I; Past II/Future I; Future II
184: geography I recognise.

*The bit about Betjeman

Poet laureate and architectural scholar described Metroland and environs in various poems and in fondly remembered eponymous TV series, fixing term (and becoming associated with it) in public consciousness. Mostly mourned yielding of rural "Bucks, Herts and Middlesex" to maw of Jazz Age and beyond.⁷

*The bit about geographical definitions

Strict geographical definition (i.e., those villages included in the Metroland guide to new developments, as quoted in *Metro-Land: British Empire Exhibition Number*): Amersham & Chesham Bois; Aylesbury; Chalfont & Latimer; Chesham; Chorley Wood & Chenies; Eastcote; Great Missenden; Harrow-on-the-Hill; Hillingdon; Ickenham; Moor Park & Sandy Lodge; Northwood; Northwick Park & Kenton; Pinner; Preston Road; Rickmansworth; Ruislip; Uxbridge; Wembley Park; Wendover.⁸

Concerns of residents of Metroland, if adverts in guide are anything to go by: golf links; season ticket prices; educational facilities; holiday tours; hotels; caterers; mortgages; estates; houses; land; labour savers; insurance.

Philip Davies: "These urban and suburban villages are a unique aspect of London's polynuclear development".⁹

Where we lived and now live: Kingsbury (further north, more salubrious than Wembley Park or Neasden), then more lengthily (and still) in Stanmore, close to Tube station and corner of Edgware branch of Roman road Watling Street, now the A5. Local history books show railway present in Stanmore before Tube, plus evidence seen that the 142 bus author travelled on when young was in existence c1918-20.^{10,11}

Stanmore's relationship to Metroland: Outlier of one of main tube lines through old Metroland country. Until recently, more affordable entry level living in Metroland a possibility. Recent house price boom now most likely excludes this for many families. Strong Jewish population over last twenty years in part displaced by sub-continental migration into area, of which we were one of first families in.

"'Metro-land' is a country with elastic borders which every visitor can draw for himself, as Stevenson drew his map of Treasure Island." JB, as quoted in *Metro-Land: British Empire Exhibition Number*.¹²

Stanmore's contribution to history (2): During World War II, RAF Bentley Priory was the HQ of Fighter Command. RAF Stanmore Park was the HQ of Balloon Command.¹³

The word “Metroland”: actually creation of unsung copy-writers of the Metropolitan Railway; looking for handy term to describe the new estates all the way up from Neasden out to deepest Buckinghamshire. Estates did not meet with universal approval. Waugh excoriated them in *Decline and Fall*: “Metroland” decidedly undesirable – the title that Margot’s inappropriate new husband takes upon his elevation to the House of Lords. Shorthand for vulgar, nouveau riche attitude.¹⁴

***The bit that perhaps reveals Barnes’ true feelings about the suburbs**

Barnes describes the defenestration of Mrs Thatcher in *Letters from London* as being “hustled into suburban exile”, managing to make it sound worse than being sent to Coventry.¹⁵

***The Big Themes, that *Metroland* Deals With, all of Which are So Weighty that it Feels Like This Subheading Should Mostly Be Capitalised**

Friendship – Art. Life. Truth – Precocity – Love and Betrayal – Ambition and Betrayal – Domesticity – Settling and Settling Down – Contentment.

***Questions inspired by artists Richard Wentworth and Francis Alÿs¹⁶**

If the city is theatre, what is suburbia?

The city is a set, thin and shallow; does this make the suburbs “thicker”?

***My Chris (or was I Chris, and he Toni?)**

Matt and I met first at primary school (briefly), then again at our Cub scouts pack (he played a flashy right winger to my solid right back). We became solid at secondary school. He was the first in what has proved to be a relatively short list of

creative others/collaborators.

***Where *Metroland* and my life diverge**

Education (1): Chris and Toni came into town for their education (National Gallery and expensive institution). I came into town for my education (Soho, and Berwick Street environs in particular) – in music and shopping.

A certain *coarseness*: My *Metroland*, while not rough, had a lack of smoothness, and serrated edges to it. When I go back, the area looks as genteel and protected as it did in the novel. I'm not close enough any more to look beneath its skirts, and check for fraying seams.

How violence comes between friends: When I was 17, I was racially attacked outside the (bottom) school gates. What sticks – the memory of the reaction when Matt and I staggered back into the common room: the instant split into those concerned, and having to be prevented from rounding up a posse to go and find the assailant; and those who looked at me, bleeding, in shock, mumbling and barely coherent, and said, "Well, it's not that bad".

Education (2): Girls were for us, as much as for Chris and Toni at the same stage of their scholastic careers, subjects for and of fear (rooination [possibly] by unrequited love was still to come, at university). Example: Mr Dawson, a brilliant teacher and an even better manipulator of young men's minds, had a particularly effective way of motivating Matt and me for third year¹⁷ English. He didn't make us sit on separate tables: instead he put us together with Karly, Emma and Laura T, three of the four most conventionally desirable/lusted after girls in our year. We survived this heaven/hell situation by smirking at our own private jokes, mumbling the lyrics to REM's "Moral Kiosk"¹⁸ and affecting a studied, "Naah, fancy *you*?" attitude. Try keeping *that* act up for a whole year.

***A memory, about escaping**

It was an afternoon soon after we'd got our A-level results

but before we'd left for good, and we were still drifting in and around the common room, drinking up the last moments of our childish institution before reality kicked in. I was back in having a quick confab with my economics teacher. As we were finishing up, Laura C----- (occasional classmate [A-level history?]) and cause of one moment of mutual embarrassment in lower sixth, when I ended up in a local restaurant where she was working one Saturday night) put her head round the door, and expressed surprise when she saw me there. "What are you doing back? I thought you'd be gone for good. If I was you, I would be. You've managed it. There's no need to hang around." I said I was just in to say my thanks and my good-byes.

"No real need for that", she countered. "You've pretty much done it yourself. Don't forget it."

It's taken me nearly ten years to remember. That the work and the effort and the solitude and the sacrifice were actually worth it.

***The answer to a Big Question, as influenced by the novel and my own digressions**

I wanted to achieve an elegant homage, or at least a smooth parody of Barnes' style. Instead all I've got is gobbets and fragments and shards and thoughts and Post-Its' and ramblings. And yet, I think I've got an answer.

But I've always wanted to live in somewhere else. I don't want to come back, like Chris, I don't need to come back, like Chris. I have something still to prove, but elsewhere. I don't have anything to prove here. I didn't fuck up here. I left here. That was the right thing to do.

Once a place to aspire to, now a place to escape from.

Trouble is I think I have to answer it again. And again. And again. And no one tells you that you have to keep answering it correctly.

***Some thoughts while drafting (4)**

I am at Heathrow, waiting to get on a plane to Hong Kong. I am listening to the Arctic Monkeys whose lyricist, Alex Turner, has done expertly, and first time out, the bastard, what I'm trying to do at the moment, what Barnes did first time out as well – finding some truth, humour, pathos, maybe even beauty in and about the surroundings where he has grown up.

And I keep fixating on the word “manifest” for some reason. The manifest, aka the passenger list that I need to be checked off against before I can board. Manifesto, and a call to arms, a statement of principle. Manifest destiny. As in the conquering of the West beyond the Mississippi.

But I'm about to go east.

Also as in ambition. Will I fulfil it? The promise of this piece? My promise? My manifest promise.

Ah, I think that's the title.

***Afterword**

Growing up in the suburbs now. As reported in *The Observer*:

“What we have to accept is that we might be seeing a new breed of adolescent, a totally different kind of teenage tribe. A tribe so different they probably should not be called teenagers any more – a better term might be Metrolescents, the defining characteristic of the Metrolescent being that, in the age of the internet and the all-powerful teen media, they are united, bonded, on the same page like never before. It used to be that kids in suburbia, or in villages or small towns, used to feel left out; you had to make an effort to be part of the action, to fight and scrabble your way in.”¹⁹

So: you don't *have* to escape any more.

Notes

- 1 (But mostly me.)
- 2 David Thomson, *The Whole Equation* (London: Abacus, 2005), p 11.
- 3 Term taken from introduction to *Letters from London*, which in turn is taken from *New Yorker* copy editors' marginalia for when writer will take responsibility/blame for a fact in a piece that cannot be corroborated.
- 4 Mira Stout, "Chameleon Novelist", *The New York Times*, 22 November 1992. Downloaded from <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/25/specials/barnes-chameleon.html> on 18 November 2005.
- 5 Hopefully, goes without saying that large chunks of book, esp Pt 1, broadly acknowledged to be autobiographical, as debut novels tend to be (Barnes grew up in Northwood, in heart of Metroland).
- 6 This is a reference to a joke I make to myself, and certain others, wherein I claim that the second chapter in any putative autobiography will be entitled "Waiting at Wembley Park", due to the amount of time that I have spent on the platforms of that station waiting for a Metropolitan line train to Baker Street.
- 7 John Betjeman, "Metro-land: A script for television, written and narrated by ...", in John Guest (ed), *The Best of Betjeman*, p 217; London: Penguin, 1978.
- 8 *Metro-land: British Empire Exhibition Number* (1924 edn), (London: Southbank Publishing, 2004), p 5.
- 9 Philip Davies in foreword to Andrew Saint (ed), *London Suburbs* (London: Merrell Holberton, in association with English Heritage, 1999), p 7.
- 10 Alfred E Porter, *Edgware & The Stanmores in Camera: A Nostalgic Record* (Farnborough, Hampshire: Saint Michael's Abbey Press, 1984), p 12.
- 11 Author did not travel on actual c1918-20 bus when journeying on 142 route.
- 12 *Metro-land: British Empire Exhibition Number*, op cit, p v.
- 13 John F Hamlin, *The History of Royal Air Force Bentley Priory and Stanmore Park* (Harrow, Middlesex: London Borough of Harrow, 1997), p 8.
- 14 Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*, (London: Penguin, 1938), pp 246, 254-5.
- 15 Julian Barnes, "Mrs Thatcher Discovers It's a Funny Old World", in *Letters from London: 1990-1995* (London: Picador, 1995), p 45.
- 16 Questions set while initial attempts to answer the brief were proving fruitless, and it was thought a diversion into visual/installation/modern art might prove fruitful, which in a way it did, but not necessarily useful to this enterprise.
- 17 Modern currency: year 9.

COMMON GROUND

- 18 Mumbled in part because lyrics almost indecipherable, mainly due to Michael Stipe's singing, and absence of lyric sheet on cassette. Lyrics can now be found at http://www.retroweb.com/rem/lyrics/song_MoralKiosk.html.
- 19 Barbara Ellen, "Meet the Metrolescents", *The Observer*, 6 November 2005. Downloaded from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/britain/article/0,,1635481,00.html> on 25 March 2006.