



# Turning for Home

*Barney Norris*

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## Turning for Home Barney Norris

'Wasn't the life of any person made up out of the telling of two tales, after all? People lived in the space between the realities of their lives and the hopes they had for them. Everyone needed their stories, the other side of the ribbon of their lives, the real life and the dream, the statement and the meaning, all of them a tape's breadth apart from each other, impossibly divided, indivisibly close.'

Every year, Robert's family come together at a rambling old house to celebrate his birthday. Aunts, uncles, distant cousins - it has been a milestone in their lives for decades. But this year Robert doesn't want to be reminded of what has happened since they last met - and neither, for quite different reasons, does his granddaughter Kate. Neither of them is sure they can face the party. But for both Robert and Kate, it may become the most important gathering of all.

As lyrical and true to life as Norris's critically acclaimed debut *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain*, which won a Betty Trask Award and was shortlisted for the Ondaatje Prize and Debut of the Year at the British Book Awards, this is a compelling, emotional story of family, human frailty, and the marks that love leaves on us.

## Turning for Home Details

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Author : Barney Norris

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# From Reader Review Turning for Home for online ebook

## Leilah Skelton says

His birthday has always been the event that draws his extended family together. In his 80th year, the first since the loss of his wife, Robert sees that faces are beginning to ebb away. Granddaughter Kate, adrift on a different sea of sadness and struggle, has returned to pick at the frayed ends of her own family ties. They aim to hold each other up, (and in a small way, this book feels like a place for its reader to rest their weight, too).

Through alternating narratives, Norris reveals the finer details of their lives, their secrets, their motivations, their hidden griefs, hopes and regrets. His perceptiveness for the human condition is astonishing. How he takes those marble-mouthed feelings and articulates them with exquisite clarity makes me ache with recognition.

It is with respect and delicacy, too that Norris weaves into this novel The Troubles in Northern Ireland, and a battle with an often-fatal illness. Robert's careful diplomacy – whether between IRA go-betweens or in reuniting his daughter with her own child – made me think that the flipside to contentedness is utter catastrophe, and each exist only a hair's breadth from the other.

Though this felt to me a slightly chewier read than his debut *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain*, what it illuminates is Barney Norris' talent for digging into the subsoil of humanity and turning us over so that we might see ourselves more clearly. A phenomenal talent.

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## Emily Fordham says

Barney Norris has hit the jackpot again with *Turning for Home*. I am constantly in awe of the way he creates totally believable characters and how he uses language to convey deep meaning in a way that doesn't feel like hard work when you are reading. So many passages in this book were incredibly profound and literally made me say 'wow'. It's like Barney gets right into your head and articulates thoughts you've had in the past for you... only in a much more eloquent way! One passage towards the end even brought a tear or two to my eye (and you should know by now if you have read any of my previous reviews that I love a good cry!).

In *Turning for Home*, Norris slowly unravels the life stories of Robert, an 80 year old man whose 90th birthday party is the setting for the majority of the book, and his granddaughter Kate. Both voices are distinctive and likeable. There's a particular part in the book where we find out more about Kate's backstory (I won't give too much away on here) and Norris' attention to detail/understanding of the character's situation just shows how talented he is.

Norris' first book (*Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain*) was a brilliant read but as it was set in Salisbury, my hometown, I wondered if that was why I liked it so much. Now reading *Turning for Home* I can see it's Barney's pure talent for writing that's the main denominator- he really is a gifted story teller; writing in a way that I think is quite hard to rival and I wish more people celebrated just how fantastic his writing is!

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## Anni says

A large family get-together is always a good set piece for exposing dysfunctional family dynamics, which is

the basis of this novel. Regrets, feelings of loss, grief and buried hostilities are brought to the surface as friends, relatives and offspring gather to celebrate a grandfather's 80th birthday. A surprising backstory emerges from the internal musings of two of the characters as the preparations unfold, in a deceptively low key build up of revelations. The fraught mother and daughter relationship is particularly poignant, with Norris showing unusually perceptive insight into a female point of view, whilst his skill as a dramatist is demonstrated in his command of dialogue, bringing the scenes alive. A lyrical and thought-provoking piece of literary fiction.

Thanks to the publisher for the ARC via NetGalley

Also reviewed on Whichbook.net

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## Gumble's Yard says

*In Ireland, starving was always about honour. The old way among the peasants of that country, as I understand it, was that if someone had wronged you, you sat down at their doorway and went on hunger strike. And if you died there at the person's door, they were forever dishonoured, and reparations would have to be paid to the family of the deceased. To get the hunger striker up from where they sat, amends had to be made for whatever wrong you'd done them, and then they'd eat again. That was the history the IRA were drawing on, every time they used the hunger strike as a weapon.*

Barney Norris is an award winning play-writer and poet and now novelist (all before his is 30).

His debut play was *Visitors* described by the Guardian as striking for its "extraordinary understanding of the stresses and strains of old age and its highly unfashionable tribute to married love and by the writer himself as a hymn to a "life long love" inspired by his grandparents seventy plus year marriage and his idea to "put a marriage on stage, in the hope that other people might find the idea of a successful marriage as profound and beautiful as I do

Further he said talking about his plays: *Theatres are empathy engines: nothing is as effective as a good play at generating sympathetic understanding of other lives. I hope I have used that essentially loving act, the act of watching a play, suspending your own life and paying close attention to someone else's, to encourage a wider consideration of the value to us of empathy, of love.*

Norris's debut novel was *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain*. Again quoting from the Guardian review, which captured my own views on that book: *There are different kinds of good writing. Technical skill – good prosody, pace, description and so on – counts for a lot, as does the ability to tell a story well. But there is another quality I look for, and it can't be learned at writing classes. It shines out when characters are granted their complexity and handled with empathy and compassion, and it comes, I think, from being a decent human being. Judging by this tolerant and insightful debut, Norris has it in spades.*

What you think of Norris's works will I think depend of own views not of the above sentiments (love, compassion and empathy) but whether you wish to see them celebrated in literature. For many writers and reviewers, increasingly it seems that literature is somehow only authentic or true literature when it celebrates and revels in their opposites (for example the 2015 Booker winner and one of the 2016 shortlist). I

increasingly take my own view on the literature I wish to read from Philippians 4:8 and so am a big fan of Norris's approach.

This book, Norris's second novel was initially based entirely around the Boston Tapes. These were a rather ill-judged project by Boston College to form an oral history of The Troubles in Ireland by recording candid interviews with loyalist and republican paramilitaries about their involvement on the understanding that the tapes would only be released on their deaths - an understanding which broke down when the security forces on both sides of the Atlantic realised they could not ignore what were effectively confessions to crimes, and which lead at one stage to the arrest of Gerry Adams. When Transworld announced that had signed the rights to the novel that described it as also tackling the issue of eating disorders - *a subject close to the author's heart*, something also alluded to by a deeply touching acknowledgements section at the end of the novel.

The quote at the start of my review shows how Norris draws these two themes together brilliantly.

The book is effectively set the day of Gerry Adams arrest and the following day. In structure it consists of two alternating first person narrators - Robert a now retired, former UK diplomat based in Northern Ireland and his 20 something granddaughter Kate - broken up by fictional excerpts from the tapes.

Robert is 80, recently widowed, he has agreed to continue a long tradition practiced by his wife on his birthday of hosting a big family get together. Kate, we learn has been in hospital for nearly 3 years, is suffering from the aftermath of some form of accident and the memories of an old boyfriend Joe. She is estranged from her mother, who anticipates meeting for the first time in years at the party. She had hoped her student boyfriend Sam would join her, but he, as often the case is unable to face the idea of a large social occasion and has bailed out. Robert is contacted by his main historical liaison point with the IRA (a University professor) who wants to visit him to discuss the aftermath of the tapes.

As the alternating stories continue, and as greater insights into each character's backstory gradually emerge, we also gain further understanding of the pain at the heart of both Robert and Kate's life. Robert and Kate themselves are forced to understand more of what has happened to them and about the motivations (often hurt and pain driven) of those closest to them. One crucial character turns out (to the attentive reader) to be from Norris's debut novel, and although the characters are different, Robert's marriage and relationship with his wife clearly draw on the same inspiration as Norris's debut play.

Much of the writing and imagery is beautiful - Norris clearly drawing on his poetic skills. A few examples.

Kate in hospital and trying to cut herself off from those who cared for her *My friends seemed moth-like and beautiful as they tried to reach me, beating their wings against the screen of my phone.*

Kate reflecting in her Grandmother's love of family events: *she always loved to mark the little rhythms of the year, the birthdays and the holidays. They were the waves she swam over as she made her way out into the open water of her life. Her life always seemed to organise itself around preparing for the next celebration, the next wave rising to meet her.*

And much of the best language is around the fundamental themes of the book - how we develop through life, and how our lives experiences shape us and shape those around us, about empathy, understanding, guilt, reconciliation, forgiveness.

*That's how people hold on to their identities, and hold together their images of themselves, by*

*remembering, playing out the feeling of their childhoods like a high clear note from a clarinet cutting through the hubbub of their buzzing adult lives.*

*People caught in old photographs always look like early drafts of themselves to me, unfinished. I never think people look like they've fallen away from who they really are as they get older. All their lives, as they turn grey, as the lines grow deeper, people seem to me to be working their way towards their true faces, until the last face they present to the world is finally like the telling of the whole truth.*

*There ought to be truth and reconciliation in every stratum of the lives people live. All that laying out of things shouldn't be only reserved for the public sphere, the fractures in families are just as complex, just as terrible.*

*What is needed is an amnesty, a forgetting. What might save us all is a way to put our lives behind us, and love facing into the future, not always turned back looking for the past. But the song of memory is forever calling.*

Overall this is another excellent novel from a huge talent.

My thanks to Transworld Publishing for an ARC provided via Net Galley.

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## **Cheryl M-M says**

It isn't often one finds an author self-assessing their own novel at the end of said novel, and then pinpointing exactly what my thoughts are on the story in question.

Norris himself says that initially this started out as a story about the Boston Tapes. They started out as a series of frank interviews given by former loyalist and republican paramilitaries that chronicles their involvement in the Troubles, in an attempt to create an oral history of those times. In return for names, dates, places and details, the former paramilitaries made a deal that the interviews wouldn't be made public until after their deaths.

Including the frank admission that Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams had his own squad within the IRA, who were responsible for the so-called 'Disappeared' of the Troubles. The people who were targeted, kidnapped, murdered and secretly buried by the IRA.

I digress.

Turning for Home is like reading two stories in one, and I am sure both would make excellent stand-alone novels. Together they become something special. A spark ignites and weaves its way through this poignant tale of pain, grief and control.

The reader follows Robert and Kate, grandfather and granddaughter. Their individual tales collide at the annual celebration for Robert's birthday. A family reunion that has an air of finality to it, especially since the loss of Robert's wife.

Robert is dealing with the implications of the Boston Tapes. The possibility of secrets being aired has some of his connections running scared, and after so many years the past has the power to insert itself into the future.

Kate's story is a wee bit more complex. She suffers from anorexia nervosa, which comes under eating disorders in the DSM. Norris gives the reader a candid look into the thought process of someone with an eating disorder, and how many misconceptions there are about how to help someone with the disorder. Even so-called mental health professionals have difficulty really comprehending the grip it can have, and the impact it has on entire families.

It's all about control and loss of control. When you experience loss of control it is a normal response to try and regain it. You start to look for the one thing no one else can control but you. Food, fat and calories become the enemy and you start to fight them with every inch of your body.

Aside from the obvious familial connection, the thread that connects both Robert and Kate, and their stories, is coping with loss and feelings of guilt. Unresolved emotional distress, trauma and conflict are the equivalent of malignant tumours in our bodies. Sometimes the inner enemy is evident and sometimes it is a ticking time-bomb waiting to explode.

Norris writes with a finesse and wisdom beyond his years. He has the gift of gab, a knack for telling a story and pulling his readers along with him on a journey even he doesn't have the directions for. Eventually he brings himself and us home, regardless of wherever that may be.

\*I received an ARC courtesy of the publisher .\*

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## **Cleo Bannister says**

A Grandfather on his eightieth birthday and his grand-daughter a mere quarter of a century old are the figureheads for the talented Barney Norris's latest book, *Turning For Home* but don't be mislead this is far deeper than the conventional birthday gathering where memories are both revived and made.

Robert Shawcross is eighty and despite the loss of his wife the year before he is holding his annual birthday party, the one Hattie his wife instigated when he was forty, originally conceived as an opportunity for the scattered family to gather. The party itself has diminished over the last few years with the decline in the older family members but Hattie's sister Laura has taken up the baton and is there preparing the food for the gathering.

Robert is moved to reflect on his life, a civil servant he spent much of his time in Belfast and was there at the time of the Enniskillen bombing on Remembrance Sunday in 1987. A bomb which killed many civilians, missing the British Troops it was planned to kill. The reflection of this time is prompted by the arrest of the Sinn Fein Leader in 2014, the news hitting the press just before Robert's big party. The Boston Tapes were recordings of interviews carried out with Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries between 2001 and 2006 on the understanding that they would not be published until the interviewee was dead, what it seems no-one had appreciated was that these men could implicate those still living, leading to the arrest of Gerry Adams following a police probe.

So we have real life events based on the 'Troubles' with both the Enniskillen bombing and the Boston Tapes but Barney Norris chooses smaller more intimate stories against this gigantic backdrop. We have Robert's

story, the part he thinks he played in the negotiations towards peace along with recognition that he was one small cog in a whole bigger wheel, told alongside his Grand-daughter, Kate's tale whose far shorter life hasn't been without its own struggles. Her story is less clear to begin with but with incremental revelations we see a young woman who had much to live for until tragedy struck and her life derailed leading to a spell in hospital. Kate's story is of loss and of her search for something that perhaps will never materialise. This is a story of families who never really know the truth about each other and individuals who struggle with the gaps between the truth and hope.

And I think perhaps it's very human as well. Isn't the life of any person made up of the telling of two tales, after all? People live in the space between the realities of their lives and the hopes they have for them.

This is a deeply poignant book, as books about characters nearing the end of their life are bound to be in some respects but it also has a message of hope. That just because the space between reality and dreams is wider than we'd like shouldn't stop us from trying. Kate's story is painful to read at times but worth persevering with, seeming just as relevant to this reader as the wider canvas that is its backdrop.

Barney Norris gives us both stories, interspersed with extracts from the Boston tapes, with lyrical prose and real depth. The struggles the two characters face being unique to them but the language used will strike a chord as it charts the rise and fall of human emotions that are common to all of our lives.

A fantastic tale of betrayal, of love and hope and all the great emotions we ride throughout our lifetimes bought down in scale reflected through two people's eyes, hearts and minds.

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### **Mary Crawford says**

Robert is celebrating his 80th birthday, it is a sad time for him as his wife has died in the past year. Kate his granddaughter is helping today, she has not attended this family event for the last three years as she has been unwell. The story develops between these two characters, one looking back over his life and the other trying to make sense of her life. Their relationship is close without being intrusive. Robert has been a high level civil servant working in the North and he receives a phone call from someone he has worked with in the past on the Boston Tapes. This starts him thinking about his life has worked out. Kate's story is harrowing and well written.

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### **Eleanor says**

It's very hard to describe what *Turning For Home* is "about", because in the conventional sense it is virtually without plot: an old man, Robert Shawcross, has a birthday party, his troubled granddaughter Kate attempts to reconcile with her mother, and a figure from the past reappears at the party to complete some unfinished business related to Robert's career as a civil servant, during which time he served as a diplomatic backchannel between U.K. government and the IRA. It is a book much more concerned with states of mind: Robert's grief at the recent loss of his wife, his shock at the discovery that his contact was far more involved in IRA business than he realised; Kate's struggle with guilt over an ex-boyfriend's life-changing car accident, which manifests in an eating disorder that nearly kills her. This sounds a bit melodramatic, and occasionally Norris's plot and character choices are, but for the most part, his writing lifts the events from pot-boiler territory. Instead he shows us ways to find beauty, and the keys to memory, in absolutely everything; for all

the trouble in its pages, it is a very uplifting book. I preferred his debut, *Five Rivers Met...*, but will be recommending this to lovers of introspective literary fiction.

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### **Ronnie Turner says**

I adored *Turning For Home* by Barney Norris. It is an emotional, achingly beautiful book that is literally impossible to put down. In this book are some very heavy themes – death, heartache, darkness of mind and darkness of soul, grief so inconsolable it seems to hijack your heart and take the reins on your life. But running aside all this is a heart-wrenching story of family, elements of love, life and happiness. You don't realise how deeply Barney Norris' words touch you until a bubble of immense emotion rises up to overwhelm you.

Robert is celebrating his eightieth birthday with a customary bang, just as he has done so many times before. A huge party filled with his nearest and dearest, the family he treasures and adores all coming together for a celebration. All except one: his beloved wife. As Robert tackles a part of his past that has come back to haunt him, memories and thoughts of his adored wife overwhelm him.

Kate is struggling with demons from years ago, an accident that shifted the flow of the future she thought was hers onto a brand new path. Something she never could have predicted. Now she is awaiting the arrival of her mother, the woman who made her childhood a misery, and who gave her the scars she carries constantly today. Kate and Robert – granddaughter and grandfather – both suffering with their own troubles, find solace in each other throughout the day, deriving comfort from one another's presence.

Kate was my favourite character. Her chapters were almost a dissection, an unearthing of the troubling facets lurking in her childhood. She never felt good enough, never felt worthy of love, never felt she deserved kindness growing up and still doesn't as an adult. Her story throughout the book was a journey she took with herself, a way of coming to terms with aspects of her life and finding a way to go forward into the future. And it was an emotional journey that had me utterly gripped.

I couldn't have loved this book more than I did. Go to the bookshop, find *Turning For Home* and read it because you'll unearth something incredibly special.

Poignant. Tender. Heartwarming.

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### **SueLucie says**

This didn't turn out the way I expected it to, not that that's a criticism. We have two narrations and at first

Robert's seems to dominate. He has retired from some kind of security role with the British Government, at one point dealing with Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles. His former activities and contacts come back to haunt him with the threatened fall-out from the Boston Tapes, a supposedly confidential series of interviews with people who took part in operations on both sides.

Once his granddaughter Kate arrives to help celebrate his 80th birthday, her narration alternates with his and her story begins to take centre stage. A highly charged story it is, too, and I became very engaged with it - her physical and emotional breakdown, her estrangement from her mother and her struggle to move forward in life.

The two strands seem to have little in common apart from the family bond, but towards the end they become more entwined. If I read the author's intentions correctly, we are led to see that amnesty is the only way forward for those in both predicaments. But amnesty is not enough really, the people involved hanker for, if not absolution, then at least avowal and acknowledgement of who did what to whom, the reasons for and the consequences of their actions. I felt a niggling feeling of foreboding throughout and was relieved that at least Kate's story ends on a note of hope.

A slightly disjointed experience, but I enjoyed this novel very much, not least for its emotional depth and sensitive handling of the themes of guilt, abandonment and bereavement.

With thanks to Random House Transworld/Doubleday via NetGalley for the opportunity of a review copy.

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### **Susan Corcoran says**

I would like to thank the publisher Doubleday, author Barney Norris and blog tour organiser Anne Cater for the ARC copy of *Turning For Home* in return for an honest review.

I recently heard blogger Savidge Reads talk on his Youtube channel about how some books just 'chime' with you as a reader. It's a perfect way to explain, how there are books that for one reason or another, make a connection with a book lover, which will never be broken.

Without any doubt this book will forever be one of my most cherished reads and started off 2018 with a resounding five star rating. It will take a supreme effort for another book to knock it from the dizzying heights I have placed it on, among my all time favourite reads. Much like *Tin Man*, which was my favourite book of 2017, Barney Norris's second novel is hauntingly beautiful and will stay with me for some time.

It is rare for me to find myself emotionally connected to a book, but it was instant with *Turning For Home*. Both main characters seemed to speak to me and I loved them both without question. I wanted throughout, to take a journey with them, to wherever Barney Norris had decided their fate lay. He made me care and captured my heart from the opening sentence.

We all want to read great books and *Turning for Home* is an outstanding piece of literature. One for which Barney Norris should be celebrated and showered with praise. The prose is lyrical and speaks straight to the heart of the reader of love and the complicated relationships we form, with the many strands of family and loved ones throughout our lives. Barney Norris has an intrinsic understanding of human frailty and how the dreams we have of the lives we will lead, are tied up with the reality of experience and the pain of giving of ourselves to others. His writing reminds me of the poetic style of the late writer Helen Dunmore, whose book *The Lie* was imbued with a tale of haunting simplicity and yet was at the same time astonishingly intimate.

If you want to step into the pages of a great book then this should be there on the top table. It filled me with wonder and joy. It's an emotional read at times, but it gives you hope that even when life shatters the dreams you held dear, new ones can hold you close in their safe embrace. It said to me that we are more than the day to day routine of work and responsibility; we are indeed both dreamer and builder of castles in the sky.

Barney Norris is one of Britain's finest young talents and *Turning For Home* is a crowning achievement confirming all the promise he displayed in his first novel *Five Rivers Met On a Flooded Plain*. Both are the work of a wonderfully talented writer and I am excited to see all the books he will write in the years to come.

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## Joseph says

4.5\*

The "Boston Tapes" were an oral history project about the Irish Troubles, commenced by Boston College in 2001. Researchers conducted interviews with both republicans and loyalists, on the understanding that the transcripts of the interviews would not be released to the authorities, at least until the interviewees' deaths. Years later, investigators sought access to the tapes, giving rise to legal and diplomatic issues which, it is often argued, might have had an impact on the Irish peace process.

This novel is inspired by the Boston Tapes, and short (fictitious?) extracts from the transcripts are included at salient points of the narrative. However, "Turning for Home" is neither about the Boston Tapes nor about the Troubles. Barney Norris seems less concerned with the "grand canvas" of History than with the intimate histories of his characters.

Interwoven with the "tapes" are two first-person narrations. On the one hand, there is that of Robert Shawcross, a widower and retired civil servant, who was on placement in Belfast at the time of the Enniskillen bombing in 1987. In his understated way, Robert contributed to negotiations between the English Government and the Republicans following the bombing. On his 80th birthday, as family and friends converge on his country home for his yearly birthday party, he is briefly brought out of his retirement by two old contacts concerned about developments involving the Tapes.

In counterpoint with Robert's story, there is the narrative of his granddaughter Kate, still nursing emotional and physical scars following a horrific accident. Kate returns to her Granddad's party after a three-year absence, and has to face meeting her estranged mother, Robert's daughter Hannah. Against the "set-piece" of the open-air party, we learn Kate and Robert's stories and, through them, that of the persons close to them.

There is much to enjoy in Norris's novel. For a start, the unobtrusive yet well-crafted way he builds the structure of the novel – the alternation between the voices of Robert and Kate (as well as the 'Boston Tape' witnesses) is elegant and flowing, yet Norris also knows how to keep some surprises up his sleeve. What binds the different narrations together are a number of common themes running throughout the book. The theme of history and memory, for instance; how the past shapes us and how we in turn shape our past (or our reading of it, at least). There is also the theme of relationships and the sense of emptiness when these are lost or compromised – we are given to understand that both history and History are ultimately driven by personal relationships and personal needs. What struck me throughout the novel, in fact, was this constant interplay between the public and the intimate, between the extraordinary and the mundane. The novel certainly tackles

major philosophical themes, but it also deals with the everyday – characters get out of bed, have breakfast, go for walks, go to the bathroom, have normal conversations over lunch, argue about whether to wash the dishes or chuck them in the dishwasher. This is also reflected in the language of the novel. Often poetic and rich in eminently quotable “nuggets”, it nonetheless contains passages of unexpected simplicity. And this is, I think, what ultimately makes it so poignant and moving.

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## **Anne says**

Sometimes I really struggle to write a review of a book, and this is one of those struggles. How can I, a mere reader and blogger even begin to put into words just how beautiful, moving and really quite wonderful this story is?

I'll try, but to be honest, I'd like to say just go out and buy it, read it, savour it and then you'll realise my difficulties. This is a book that touched me, that send spears of emotion through my heart, and made me feel so grateful to be a reader. Having the opportunity to read books like these is one of the greatest gifts, and pleasures. It's truly wonderful.

Barney Norris weaves a special kind of magic with his words. Not one single phrase or sentence is superfluous, each one is expertly placed.

The story is narrated by Robert and his granddaughter Kate. Decades apart in age, connected by family, but disconnected recently by events that have rocked them. It's Robert's 80th birthday party; traditionally, over the years, this has been a major family event. Attended by family members and friends; those who are close, those who have been distant, but always those who respect Robert.

Kate is attending the party for the first time in three years. She's been distanced from her family, hospitalised, struggling with illness and with grief, she was affected by a tragic accident that turned her life upside down. Today will be the first birthday party without her grandmother, and the first time she's seen her own mother for years.

Interwoven through the narration are both Robert's and Kate's back stories. The reader learns about Robert's career as a Government officer and how the work he carried out has been brought into the present day after the revelations made by those who fought on both sides during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. It doesn't become clear until much later on in the story just how involved Robert was, and just how close he came to becoming a target during those years.

For me, Kate's story was the most powerful and Barney Norris' explains her illness in such vivid detail. His understanding and perception of something that is all too often dismissed as faddy and 'all in the mind' is startling and full of empathy.

Turning For Home explores how families lose their connections, and the long and often difficult process of bring them back together. This author is incredibly talented and his story is an extraordinary portrait of a family, it is complex, yet compelling and is breathtakingly accomplished.

<https://randomthingsthroughmyletterbo...>

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## **Karen Cole says**

I finished *Turning For Home* last week and I've been putting off writing this review because I'm not sure I'm going to be able to find the words that do this exquisitely beautiful book justice.

The story is told through the perspectives of Robert and his granddaughter, Kate as they narrate alternate chapters. Kate has arrived at Robert's house ahead of his annual birthday party - this year a milestone as it's his 80th birthday. Both are preoccupied by their pasts but for very different reasons. Robert is jolted back to his civil service days as confessions heard on the Boston Tapes - an oral history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland - bring an unexpected visitor from his past and lead to his discovering shocking secrets from that time and to having to contemplate his own role in events. The feeling of being involved again is almost intoxicating to Robert for whom this party is a poignant reminder of his own ageing and of loved ones lost, particularly his beloved wife.

Meanwhile, Kate has her own troubles. This is the first time she has attended the party for three years and she is dreading coming face to face with her estranged mother. The reasons for Kate's fragility are gradually revealed; a terrible tragedy led to her becoming very ill and ultimately needing hospitalisation. This is not my story to tell so I'm not going to discuss details of her illness suffice to say that it is covered with extraordinary sensitivity and empathy, bringing a touching clarity to a misunderstood condition without ever becoming sentimental. Male authors are often criticised for the way they write their female characters but Barney Norris has created a woman who is deeply complex and utterly authentic.

This is a story that is allowed to develop gradually, the alternating chapters are long, allowing the characters' narratives to unfold organically. Nothing feels rushed, this is a book to become engrossed in, to feel as much as to read. As it reached its conclusion the tears were streaming down my cheeks; *Turning For Home* shines a light on the complexities of family life and on love, loss, guilt and forgiveness with an exceptional perceptiveness. With its beautiful, lyrical prose that meant I reread passages to really appreciate them, *Turning For Home* is one of those books that speaks to your soul. Every word of praise you will read about this very special novel is absolutely deserved, it may only be January but this will undoubtedly be one of my books of the year. Highly, highly recommended.

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## **Paul Fulcher says**

*There ought to be truth and reconciliation in every stratum of the lives people lead.*

Barney Norris is a very talented young writer - playwright, poet and novelist - and his debut novel *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain* was certainly striking if, to my taste, rather flawed (see <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>)

His second novel *Turning for Home* was inspired by the true-life story of what came to be known as The Boston Tapes, a series of recorded interviews conducted in 2001-6 with (former) Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries. These were intended to be confidential and to be largely about their experiences and motivations, but in many of those interviewed, rather unexpectedly, confessed crimes and named names. In 2011, the Police Service of Northern Ireland began a legal bid to gain access to the tapes and on 30 April 2014, Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Féin was arrested based on allegations part founded on the material (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern...>).

This novel is set, although the characters thoughts journey back in time, almost entirely on the following day.

Robert Shawcross, a grammar school boy from humble stock who rose to be a senior government official in Northern Ireland, but now retired, is celebrating his 80th birthday, but also reflecting on the tapes:

*They called them the Boston Tapes in the papers, not discs, not sound files. I thought that was strange at first; it made me wonder how the interviews had been recorded. I suppose it's just the phrase still echoing onwards, even though we've surely all left cassettes behind by now. There is something about a tape that means the image holds interest long after it has been rendered technologically obsolete. The idea of a ribbon of speech, a voice speaking one truth on one side and then saying something else completely different on the other, two stories that might have contained anything at all, separated only by the breadth of the tongue they were told by. That is magical.*

*And I think perhaps it's very human as well. Isn't the life of any person made up of the telling of two tales, after all? People live in the space between the realities of their lives and the hopes they have for them. People spin myths from the quotidian roots of their experience, in order to create a small cocoon of space in which they can live between the dream they could never hope to grasp and the indifferent ordinariness of everything around them, in which they can tell themselves things might be about to get exciting, no matter how cramped the quarters seem, how dark the dawn, how low the ceiling.*

Robert, living in a large country house, is the paterfamilias of a large extended family:

*A few years ago, it became clear to me that I was now occupying a role as de facto head of my family in its diaspora, as the generation that had come before me fell slowly and finally silent.*

and family tradition has an annual large gathering of the family (typically 100 or more people) at his house ostensibly to celebrate his birthday. But this year is the first he is hosting without his beloved wife, who died in the last year, so heavily coloured by sadness.

And he is also contacted and then visited on the same day by Frank Dunn, an retired Oxford professor, but who served as an unofficial communication conduit for talks with the IRA (with Robert representing the British government), notably in the immediate aftermath of the 1987 Enniskillen bombing. Frank, also retired, has been reactivated by senior Republicans to sound out Robert as to the British government's intentions with respect to the information revealed in the Tapes.

Robert's first person narrative alternates with that of his granddaughter Kate (see below) as well as fictionalised extracts from the Tapes. He reminded me of an Ishiguro narrator (from *Remains of the Day*, or *Artist of the Floating World*) looking back on his own part in historic events and perhaps overstating his role a touch. For example, he regards the dialogue between two 80 year old men as a sensible way even now to handle the concerns of the Republicans:

*It seems perfectly reasonable to me to mistrust the capacity of the younger generation to handle these old issues with the tact they require.*

and he sees himself as now having a role to play in healing his family (see below):

*That is all I have ever wanted really - to have done my share. And perhaps in some way I have, in some walks of life. And perhaps there is still time to do more, to be of some use to my family.*

Although unlike Ishiguro's narrators, Robert believes himself to be firmly on the right-side of history. However, as the novel progresses he does gain some new and unwelcome perspectives on his past dealings.

The alternating narration is by Kate, his 25 year-old granddaughter. We learn early on that this is the first birthday celebration she has attended for 3 years, that meanwhile there has been an accident and she has spent a lot of time in hospital, and that she is estranged from her mother, and indeed this party will be their first encounter for some time.

Kate is a deeply wounded character:

*It's weird, but it always throws me when someone shows me kindness. I never think I deserve it. Even when I need someone's sympathy, it still makes me feel sick to ask them for some understanding, because I'm sure one day, when I want reassurance, I'll call someone and they'll tell me I'm not worth their time, they've seen through the act, they don't want to know me any more.*

This reference being made in the context of her new boyfriend Sam, a character from Norris's first novel [indeed the very character that most sums up my issues with that novel] making a reappearance.

And her own account makes her childhood and her mother's treatment of her sound dreadful. For example a family dinner when her mother, unusually decides to cook typically ends with her first asking Kate to do the potatoes, then:

*'You have to get those bits out with the end of the peeler! Can't you see them? Why would you want to eat them? They're disgusting. You have to get them out like this.'* She would snatch the potato and the peeler from my hands, and finish the job for me, sighing and harried. By the time dinner reached the table, and I sat down with Mum and Dad to eat, the air in the kitchen was usually thick with the threat of her censure.

Kate is also given to rather lengthy meditations on life which at times rather slow the narrative:

*On the day we're born, the future lies infinite before us, and all our lives can be spoken of as lying the future. Then a change, a migration begins. Little by little you journey away from the place where you started, and start to grow a past for yourself, and trail that out behind you. In the end, a day comes when you have no future left at all, only the past tense to speak in. What nothing in the world ever changes, though, is the present. The present is always only one day long. It's always now, and everywhere, and endless. And that's the most important screen we have to protect us – the world we're mired in, distractions and details and miracles of the everyday.*

But her genuinely very moving story gradually filters out over the course of the novel. Indeed, perhaps Norris over-relies on withholding information. It's almost a quarter of the way through the book when we learn her mother's name, a third before we find out about the accident, past halfway when we find out about her time in hospital (although rather heavy hints are there from the early pages so it comes as no great surprise) and one crucial revelation is saved, twist-like, until the end.

That said this withholding does reflect her personality. She has a new boyfriend but they seldom discuss their pasts:

*We hardly talk at all about our different darknesses, our histories. We've picked up little secrets here and there.*

...

*No subject too big that it can't be avoided with a cup of tea, a chat about the football. All real speech can happen through the secrecy of those intermediaries, and the steam rising from a cup of tea is the mast all hopes are hoisted on.*

And the reference to the "intermediaries" is a deliberate nod to the roles played by intermediaries (such as Frank and Robert) in the Troubles. Ultimately Norris's theme as the opening quote suggests seems to be the need for truth and reconciliation all round, at the level of personal as well as societal conflicts. As Robert decided in his new found mission as peace intermediary for his family, but also reflecting on why so much was poured out in the Tapes:

*What people want above all isn't just forgiveness. What people love is the dream of laying it all out into the open and letting the light play over the acts of their days, all crimes confessed, all sins revealed. The idea of amnesty is only the end of a process the whole world longs for: the comforting dark of the confessional, the ease of the psychiatrist's couch, the non-judgemental blank sheet of paper listening to them, and the giving up of sins into words. Only then, at the end of all that, do they long for some absolution to come from baring the soul. Above all what everyone wants to do is sing of their sorrows and sins.*

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