Born in London, Brian Finney was educated at Bunce Court School in Wem, and Lord Williams's Grammar School in Thame. He obtained a BA (hons) in English and Philosophy at the University of Reading and a PhD on D. H. Lawrence's shorter fiction at the University of London. He spent three years as an officer in the Royal Air Force at Abingdon, then five years as an internal management consultant at Joseph Lucas Electrical in Birmingham and as a production controller at Standard Telephones and Cables in Harlow. In 1964 he transferred to the University of London's Department of Extra-Mural Studies where he taught literature and arranged extra-mural courses in the arts from 1964 to 1987.

In 1987 he emigrated to Southern California. After two years as a visiting professor at the University of California, Riverside and subsequent adjunct positions at UCLA and the University of Southern California, he became a full-time professor at California State University, Long Beach, teaching primarily in the English department, but also for Comparative Literature and the Honors program. He is currently a Professor Emeritus in the Department of English.

He has published eight books. Since How It Is: A Study of Samuel Beckett's Later Fiction (Covent Garden Press, 1972) was the first critical work to examine Beckett's later shorter fiction and incorporated responses by Beckett. His second book, Christopher Isherwood: A Critical Biography (Faber & Faber / Oxford University Press, New York, 1979), was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for non-fiction that year. It was also voted one of the best three books of the year by Philip Toynbee in the Observer. He went on to publish The Inner I: British Literary Autobiography of the Twentieth Century (Faber & Faber / Oxford University Press, New York, 1985), the first full-length study of British literary autobiography; D. H. Lawrence: Sons and Lovers: A Critical Study (Penguin Books, 1990); English Fiction Since 1984: Narrating a Nation