

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

Atonement

By Ian McEwan

Introduction

"On the hottest day of the summer of 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis sees her older sister Cecilia strip off her clothes and plunge into the fountain in the garden of their country house. Watching Cecilia is their housekeeper's son Robbie Turner, a childhood friend who, along with Briony's sister, has recently graduated from Cambridge." By the end of that day the lives of all three will have been changed forever. Robbie and Cecilia will have crossed a boundary they had never before dared to approach and will have become victims of the younger girl's scheming imagination. And Briony will have committed a dreadful crime, the guilt for which will color her entire life.

(Manitowoc Public Library)

About the Author

Ian McEwan was born in England in 1948. His father was an officer in the British army, and Ian spent many years of childhood in foreign countries such as Libya and Singapore. He attended the University of Sussex, graduating with a B.A. in 1970, and moving on to the University of East Anglia, where he earned an M.A. in creative writing the next year. His first short story collections began to appear in 1975 with the publication of *First Love, Last Rites*. He produced a second collection, which was published as *In Between the Sheets* in 1978.

He has also published eight novels, most of them dealing with darkly comic themes of sexual aberration, obsession and familial dysfunction. Though he writes about such macabre and violent subject matter, McEwan's writing style is rather matter of fact, indeed, almost "clinical" in a way that makes the violence and oddity seem to be just another part of normal life. His first book, *The Cement Garden* (1978), details the sordid lives of a group of orphaned children. He followed this with *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), a novel about a British couple staying in Venice and the sinister events they encounter there. It was turned into a film in 1990 with the help of the (slightly sinister) playwright Harold Pinter, and starred Christopher Walken.

His next three books have all been critical successes: *Black Dogs*, *Enduring Love*, and *Amsterdam* (1998). His prizes for fiction have been numerous, but the most prestigious was the Booker Prize he was awarded for his achievement in *Amsterdam*. It was with

Amsterdam that McEwan turned his hand to social satire of the kind adopted earlier in the century by Evelyn Waugh, satirizing the wealthy and powerful of society and saying goodbye to the type of conservative government that had dominated Britain throughout the 1980's under Margaret Thatcher.

Apart from his short stories and novels, McEwan has been active in adapting his own works for the screen and has also written children's stories and magazine essays. *Atonement*, his most recent novel, appeared in 2001. When asked what he might like to do if not a writer, McEwan told England's *Guardian* newspaper, "I wouldn't mind being the lead guitarist in an incredibly successful rock band. However, I don't play the guitar." (Quoted from *The Guardian Unlimited* at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/authors/author/0,5917,-108,00.html>)

(*NoveList*)

Ian McEwan Interview

Q: Your novel “Atonement” — the story of Briony Tallis, a novelist who tells a lie in her girlhood and hurts her older sister in a way for which she can never atone — has been made into a film, and I was surprised to see that you are the executive producer. Most novelists run from film, afraid that the care they lavished on their prose will be squandered. I know. Well, it will be squandered whether they run or not.

So why are you the executive producer? So I could stay involved but not write the screenplay. I refused to write the screenplay. I didn't want people sitting around a table — a producer, a director — telling me that I hadn't fully understood these characters.

The film is bleaker than the novel, perhaps because the human cost of World War II is depicted with such devastating directness. I hope it's not entirely bleak. It's a love story. Like all love stories, the love has to be threatened, and in this case, we see that it's only the novelist who has brought the lovers together. In real life, they have been separated by war.

It seems to me that the impulse to atone is a religious one, and yet you are a self-declared atheist. Yes, I am an atheist, and probably Briony is, too. Atheists have as much conscience, possibly more, than people with deep religious conviction, and they still have the same problem of how they reconcile themselves to a bad deed in the past. It's a little easier if you've got a god to forgive you.

Not necessarily. Faith in itself is not easy to sustain. Well, we won't get into that.

Your own life has not lacked for dramatic plot. Just a few years ago you discovered you had an older brother whom you'd never met, a bricklayer. Are you in touch with him? Oh, absolutely, yes. Most months we talk, or have a drink, or sometimes some food in a pub.

He was born before your parents married and put up for adoption with a newspaper ad. Did he like his adoptive parents? Fortunately he was very loved as a child. He was really cherished. It's not clear to me that he would have a better life or a worse life had he been kept.

And now you have two grown sons of your own. They're much nicer to me than I was to my parents. I was managed as a child. I don't think anyone ever said to me, "Are you happy?" I was once on a plane flying from North Africa back to boarding school in England, and a man sat next to me and said, "Do you believe in God?" For the next two hours he engaged me in a conversation about God. I was only 10. I was absolutely thrilled to be taken so seriously by a grown-up.

You were probably already a nonbeliever. No, I was just beginning to see through it all, but not quite.

Your fellow novelist Martin Amis is being shredded in the British press after criticizing various aspects of Islam. He was attacked in The Guardian, in a shrill manner. All religions make very big claims about the world, and it should be possible in an open society to dispute them. It should be possible to say, "I find some ideas in Islam questionable" without being called a racist.

Which ideas do you mean? Well, the idea that any apostate should be punished is revolting. This is completely hostile to the notion of free thought and everything we hope to stand for. I think Martin has suffered terribly at the hands of The Guardian.

Novelists are bigger personalities in England than they are here. Really? You just had Norman Mailer die.

True, but he was probably the last American novelist who was known as much for his antics as for his writing. Boxing and writing were wonderfully confused in his mind.

Are you working on a new novel? Yes.

Can you tell us what it is about? No, it's too soon. I don't even tell myself yet.

Is it set in the present? Broadly. Now you've ruined it. I'll have to come up with a new one.

(Deborah Solomon, The New York Times)

Reviews

“With a sweeping bow to Virginia Woolf, McEwan combines insight, penetrating historical understanding, and sure-handed storytelling despite a conclusion that borrows from early postmodern narrative trickery. Masterful.” --*Kirkus Review*

“Every lustrously rendered, commanding scene is charged with both despair and diabolical wit, and McEwan’s Jamesian prose covers the emotional spectrum from searing eroticism to toxic guilt. In sum, he excels brilliantly at depicting moral dilemmas and stressed minds in action without losing a keen sense of the body’s terrible fragility, the touching absurdity of desire, and time’s obstinacy.” --*Booklist Review*

Further Reading

The Rage of the Vulture by Barry Unsworth

Alias Grace by Margaret Atwood

The Kitchen God’s Wife by Amy Tan

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. What sort of social and cultural setting does the Tallis house create for the novel? What emotions and impulses are being acted upon or repressed by its inhabitants?
2. What is the importance of the scene between Robbie and Cecilia at the fountain?
3. Why does Briony denounce Robbie so forcefully and maintain that position with such determination?
4. Lola has a critical role in the story's plot. What are her motivations? Why does Briony decide not to confront Lola and Paul Marshall at their wedding five years later?
5. How does Robbie's march to Dunkirk relate to the rest of the book's themes?
6. Why does Briony choose to enter nursing and turn her back on her family?
7. Do you sympathize with Briony? Can you understand why she acted as she did?
8. What does "atonement" mean for the various characters?
9. Does Briony ever find the atonement that she seeks?
10. What does *Atonement* have to say about books and the interpretation of their meanings?
11. Did the ending surprise you? In what ways?
12. Trace the interactions of Robbie and Cecilia. How does their relationship sustain them both? What does this say about love?

(Manitowoc Public Library)