



◉ Contemporary British Novelists

**IAN McEWAN**

**Dominic Head**

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Dominic Head

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# Contemporary British Novelists

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*To Mum*  
*Loving, kind, generous and inspiring*  
Peggy Jane Head  
27 May 1933–7 July 2006

## Series editor's foreword

*Contemporary British Novelists* offers readers critical introductions to some of the most exciting and challenging writing of recent years. Through detailed analysis of their work, volumes in the series present lucid interpretations of authors who have sought to capture the sensibilities of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Informed, but not dominated, by critical theory, *Contemporary British Novelists* explores the influence of diverse traditions, histories and cultures on prose fiction, and situates key figures within their relevant social, political, artistic and historical contexts.

The title of the series is deliberately provocative, recognising each of the three defining elements as contentious identifications of a cultural framework that must be continuously remade and renamed. The contemporary British novel defies easy categorisation and rather than offering bland guarantees as to the current trajectories of literary production, volumes in this series contest the very terms that are employed to unify them. How does one conceptualise, isolate and define the mutability of the contemporary? What legitimacy can be claimed for a singular Britishness given the multivocality implicit in the redefinition of national identities? Can the novel form adequately represent reading communities increasingly dependent upon digitalised communication? These polemical considerations are the theoretical backbone of the series, and attest to the difficulties of formulating a coherent analytical approach to the discontinuities and incoherencies of the present.

*Contemporary British Novelists* does not seek to appropriate its subjects for prescriptive formal or generic categories; rather it aims to explore the ways in which aesthetics are reproduced, refined and repositioned through recent prose writing. If the overarching architecture of the contemporary always eludes description, then the grandest ambition of this series must be to plot at least some of its dimensions.

Daniel Lea

# List of abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for references to these editions of McEwan's work. (Date of first publication given where a later edition is used.)

- Am* *Amsterdam* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998)  
*At* *Atonement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001)  
*BD* *Black Dogs* (1992; London: Picador, 1993)  
*CG* *The Cement Garden* (1978; London: Picador, 1980)  
*CS* *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981; London: Vintage, 1997)  
*CT* *The Child in Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987)  
*D* *The Daydreamer* (1994; London: Red Fox, 1995)  
*EL* *Enduring Love* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997)  
*FL* *First Love, Last Rites* (1975; London: Picador, 1976)  
*I* *The Innocent* (1990; London: Picador, 1990)  
*IBS* *In Between the Sheets* (1978; London: Vintage, 1997)  
*IG* *The Imitation Game* (1981; London: Picador, 1982)  
*MA* *A Move Abroad: 'Or Shall We Die?' and 'The Ploughman's Lunch'*  
(London: Picador, 1989)  
*RB* *Rose Blanche* (1985; London: Red Fox, 2004)  
*S* *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005)



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## Introduction

Writing about contemporary literature is a hazardous business for a variety of reasons, most of which stem from the speculative nature of this branch of criticism. Without the benefit of hindsight, the critic is drawn to make judgements about the worth of a writer, and to posit ideas about his/her place in literary history. Both elements of this critical process are vulnerable: judgements are often made in the absence of consensus; and the related business of tentatively articulating an emergent literary history might construct, for posterity, an anachronistic understanding of literature's importance.

In the case of Ian McEwan, his current standing, as one of the most significant British writers since the 1970s, seems secure. More problematic is the related claim I would wish to advance: that he is possibly the most significant of a number of writers (including Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro and Graham Swift) who have resuscitated the link between morality and the novel for a whole generation, in ways that befit the historical pressures of their time. Implicit in such a claim is the assumption that the novel is a significant form of cultural expression – by which I mean a special vehicle for an oblique form of social and cultural work – that is worthy of detailed study and public appreciation. This is the assumption that may ultimately prove vulnerable: social change and technological developments make the survival of the novel as the primary form of literary expression impossible to predict with certainty. Given the persisting human hunger for narrative, however, and that the novel preserves certain narrative principles that film (the chief rival in the narrative stakes) is not so dependent upon, my hunch is that McEwan will continue to be studied in fifty years, as a latter day Joseph Conrad, perhaps.<sup>1</sup>

McEwan is one of those rare writers whose works have received both popular and critical acclaim. His novels grace the bestseller lists, and he is well regarded by critics, both as a stylist and as a serious thinker about the function and capacities of narrative fiction. It is that bridge between notionally different readerships, the ability to make the serious popular, and the popular serious, that indicates McEwan's importance, as a writer who has helped reinvigorate thinking about the novel within and without academia.

His novels treat issues that are central to our times: politics, and the promotion of vested interests; male violence and the problem of gender relations; science and the limits of rationality; nature and ecology; love and innocence; and the quest for an ethical world-view. Yet he is also an economical author, who 'writes only a few paragraphs each day', which he then 'works on intensively', paring them down, and allowing 'the spaces between sentences, the moments where the reader pauses, to do some of his work.'<sup>2</sup> McEwan's readers are called upon to attend, not just to the grand themes, but also to the precision of his spare writing.

From the perspective of an emerging twentieth-century literary history, McEwan occupies a central role in a new wave of British novelists whose mature writing began to emerge in the Thatcher era. McEwan stands alongside those writers mentioned above – Martin Amis, Graham Swift and Kazuo Ishiguro – a quartet of key writers who fashioned an ethical vision for the 'post-consensus' period. Grappling with the moral problems that present themselves in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, a period characterized broadly by the growth of self-interest, the expansion of corporate power and the collapse of the Welfare State, these writers sought to forge (or resuscitate) the moral impulse in a period that was not conducive to such a venture.

If we are prepared to date the demise of consensus politics earlier than 1979, then the much-discussed literature of shock (especially evident in early works by Amis and McEwan) can be seen as one strategy for awakening the collective conscience. So, although McEwan's later works are more overtly political, more humane, and more ostentatiously literary than the early work, it is important to stress the continuity as well as the sense of evolution through the oeuvre. His quest to establish a viable ethical stance for the contemporary novelist is visible even in the disturbing early fiction.

Ian Russell McEwan was born on 21 June 1948 in Aldershot, the son of Scotsman David McEwan, a soldier in the British army (later an

officer), and Rose Lilian McEwan, whose previous husband had died in the war, and by whom she had already had two children. In the early years of his childhood, McEwan lived at British military bases, at home, and abroad in Singapore and Libya. To this sense of geographical rootlessness was added the feeling of being in a form of class limbo when his father was 'commissioned from the ranks'.<sup>3</sup> Because both parents were working class, the family experienced 'a curious kind of dislocated existence.'<sup>4</sup> This is an important factor in McEwan's development as a writer, and one that enabled him to fly by the nets of traditional class affiliation in a way that marries with the broader dissolution of the traditional class model in British society.

Another important stage in the writer's emerging political consciousness stemmed from his experience as (in his words), an 'army brat':<sup>5</sup> the Suez crisis of 1956, which emphatically demonstrated the waning of Britain as a world power, occurred when McEwan was eight years old and living in Libya. 'Anti-British feeling was naturally strong among the Libyans', he recalls, 'and Army families were herded into armed camps for protection.' Living in a tent with other children, 'not so very far from a machine-gun nest', and noticing the 'service revolver' strapped to his father's waist, McEwan claims to have 'understood for the first time that political events were real and affected people's lives' (*MA*, p. 27). Here, in McEwan's introduction to the screenplay for *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1983), in which parallels are drawn between Suez and the Falklands campaign, the writer retrospectively locates the birth of his political consciousness with the death of Britain as a colonial power (even if later adventures in British foreign policy did not acknowledge the fact).<sup>6</sup>

At the age of eleven, he was sent to a state boarding school in Suffolk, Woolverstone Hall, which he recalls as 'a rather successful experiment by a left-wing local authority in old-fashioned embourgeoisement.' Despite having 'the trappings of a public school', the 'ethos was rather stylishly undermined by the intake of mostly grammar-school level working-class lads from central London.'<sup>7</sup> This unconventional institution, with its contradictory class and social signals, set the tone for McEwan's educational career, and his attendance at two new universities: the University of Sussex, where he read English and French as an undergraduate (1967–70), and the University of East Anglia, where he was the first student to study creative writing (with modern fiction), in 1970–71. Like Woolverstone Hall, the new universities of the 1960s and 1970s, which facilitated the expansion of

higher education, epitomized a society in flux. The University of Sussex, which was associated with radical left-wing politics, was a particular focus for new social and political thought. During his MA year, at the University of East Anglia, McEwan was taught by both Angus Wilson and Malcolm Bradbury.<sup>8</sup> This was not a course in creative writing exclusively – it offered the facility ‘to submit a little bit of written fiction instead of the thesis’.<sup>9</sup> However, the experience of being the first student *nationally* to take an emerging subject is a key marker of another cultural change in which McEwan is a central participant.

In 1972 McEwan experienced the counter-culture first hand, following the hippy trail to Afghanistan. With hindsight, this might seem another kind of convention. Certainly, his recollection of the experience – ‘boredom and smoking hash in huge quantities without any real point’ – would seem to suggest this.<sup>10</sup> Yet it is another instance of the writer’s direct experience of new cultural energies.

At the beginning of 1974 he moved from his flat in Norwich to take an attic room in Stockwell, ‘belonging to a one-eyed antiquarian bookseller called Cyclops’. Cape was due to bring out his first collection of stories, but not for eighteen months; and at this time, while working on the second collection, he made contact with Ian Hamilton’s *New Review*, an important literary journal, funded by the Arts Council. In ‘The Pillars of Hercules’, the pub that ‘was the *New Review*’s outer office and unofficial club room’, he reports meeting “‘my generation” of writers – male, born in the late Forties’, including Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Craig Raine. Most of the writers had yet to publish their first books, but this was clearly a new literary establishment in the making; ‘a clique’, perhaps, but also ‘remarkably open’, in the spirit of a new meritocracy. Writers were drawn to the *New Review* and its ‘fierce literary standards’, recalls McEwan, ‘because they respected Ian [Hamilton]’s ideas of quality’.<sup>11</sup>

McEwan has been married twice; first in 1982, to Penny Allen, with whom he had two sons. They were divorced in 1995, and the first marriage ended in acrimony, with a dispute over custody of the children. Allen, ‘a trained spiritual counsellor and healer’, bought a farm in Brittany, with the intention of establishing a new family home. At the end of a summer vacation, she initially refused to return the boys (then aged thirteen and fifteen) to England despite a court ruling in McEwan’s favour.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, after the intervention of the French legal system, McEwan was reunited with the youngest son, who had

remained in Allen's care, as she was apparently on the run from the police.<sup>13</sup> McEwan's second marriage, in 1997, was to literary journalist Annalena McAfee. Interviewed in 1998, and while avoiding any direct comment on his personal life, he remarked that 'no one . . . has an ordinary family life', given the 'incredible cross-alliances and third wives, second husbands, children by previous marriages, lovers who live in – mayhem, at street level.'<sup>14</sup> If the *extraordinary* domestic situation is becoming more commonplace – the new *ordinary* – then McEwan's domestic life corresponds with another important new social trend, which has gathered pace during his lifetime.

In a memoir of his mother, McEwan recalls that he read Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), the flagship book of second-wave feminism, in 1971, and found it 'a revelation' because it 'spoke directly' to his family's life, and the problem of his father's dominance: 'my female characters became the repository of all the goodness that men fell short of. In other words, pen in hand, I was going to set my mother free.'<sup>15</sup> In a sense, this is a surprising claim. Feminism is engaged, in important preliminary ways, in both the screenplay for *The Imitation Game* (transmitted as a BBC 'Play for Today' in 1980) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981); but it is only in his work of the mid-1980s – in the words for the oratorio *Or Shall We Die?* (first performed in 1983) and in *The Child in Time* (1987) – that McEwan produces a sustained creative response to the implications of feminism. Nevertheless, the early encounter with feminism is another important formative influence, with an immediate experiential resonance.

The author's personal experiences, in short, have been affected by a variety of key social and political changes, including: fading colonialism; the dissolution of the British class structure; educational reform; the transformation of family life; and the second wave of feminism. It is a life that has been directly touched by those significant social trends that the fiction clearly responds to. That response is important; but it does not reveal dramatic technical innovations, where new fictional forms are moulded in direct response to new social energies. Like most significant literary developments, the work of those key British novelists who came to prominence in the Thatcher years is characterized by a combination of innovation and continuity. In McEwan's work, for example, there is evident continuity with an anxiety about the function of the novel that has been brewing for a significant period of time, through modernity and into postmodernity.

This is the wider intellectual context into which McEwan's particular preoccupations must be inserted.

Commenting on McEwan's first two books (both collections of short stories), Bradbury remarks that 'not since Angus Wilson had a major career started with two volumes of stories rather than a novel', and finds it 'significant' that Wilson had been his teacher.<sup>16</sup> One must allow for a degree of self-deprecation in Bradbury's comments: he also tutored McEwan at East Anglia. McEwan has, however, acknowledged the influence of Wilson on at least one of his stories.<sup>17</sup> The significance of the Wilson-Bradbury connection, in a broader literary-historical sense, is that McEwan comes out of a literary stable (so to speak), associated with the liberal identity in crisis. The 'disturbing and disruptive themes' of McEwan's early work seem to take him in an entirely new direction; but this work comprises an initial response to a time when 'the self was unable to define itself as a part of society' and 'moral coherence was gone.' Shock tactics can then be seen to embody the attempt 'to open the novel to a psychological realm in which the sense of crisis was felt.'<sup>18</sup>

McEwan's first book, the collection of stories *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) epitomizes the kind of reception he has always enjoyed: the book received critical praise – it won the Somerset Maugham Award (1976) – and also caused a stir, bringing the writer a reputation for shocking or macabre writing that was difficult to shake off. In 1983, the year in which he was named by *Granta* magazine as one of the 20 Best Young British Novelists, he began to produce more politically conscious work, and he was awarded *The Evening Standard* award for best screenplay for one such work, *The Ploughman's Lunch*. He has also won the 1987 Whitbread Novel Award for *The Child in Time*, and the Booker Prize in 1998, for *Amsterdam*. He has been short-listed for the Booker on three other occasions: for *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), for *Black Dogs* (1992) and *Atonement* (2001), which won the W. H. Smith Literary Award. International prizes include: the 1993 French Prix Fémina Étranger; the Shakespeare Prize (Germany) in 1999; and the 2003 National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award (USA) for *Atonement*. He was awarded the CBE in 2000. Although McEwan is now chiefly known as a novelist, it is worth remarking upon the versatility of his output: in addition to his film screenplays and short stories, he has also written scripts for TV, children's fiction, and the words for an oratorio by Michael Berkeley.

To advance the case for McEwan's prominence – pre-eminence, even – in the canon of contemporary British novelists, we need to consider more closely his serious anxieties about the function of the novel and the role of the novelist. One of the underlying premises of this book is that McEwan seeks to reconnect narrative fiction with moral sense, and that he therefore *develops* the sense of liberal identity crisis that one associates with Angus Wilson, or with the Malcolm Bradbury of *Stepping Westward* (1965) and *The History Man* (1975). In Bradbury's account, *The Child in Time*, 'a book of much greater sensitivities', marks a turning point in that 'what had essentially been private concerns, personal fantasies and psychic disorders become public and political ones.' Bradbury sees McEwan consolidating this shift of sensibilities, in works like *Enduring Love* (1997) and *Amsterdam*, to become 'the latter-day humanist, concerned with the need for the human spirit to confront its own dangerous impulses', the 'danger' comprising a threat to the social order as well as to the individual.<sup>19</sup>

This, however, may be to co-opt McEwan rather too easily into the literary tradition suggested by the Wilson-Bradbury East Anglia connection. Certainly, the development of the writer is usually thought to reveal significant differences between the first books and the more mature productions. Kiernan Ryan begins his excellent study of McEwan (1994) by responding to the 'received wisdom' which traces the trajectory of his career from an obsession with 'the perverse, the grotesque, the macabre' in his published work of the 1970s, through a 'marked evolution' consequent upon the writer's 'increasing involvement with feminism and the peace movement', which transforms his fiction of the 1980s. Ryan wryly observes the 'moral fable' that underpins this narrative, in which McEwan is cast as 'a kind of Prodigal Son', who matures into 'a responsible adult novelist', having burst onto the literary scene as the author of a series of 'nasty adolescent fantasies'. While crediting it with a degree of plausibility, Ryan resists the 'contrived and reassuring' air implicit in 'the exemplary tale of moral maturation', which obscures the ways in which 'nightmare and despair' return to undercut McEwan's evolving engagement with history and society. The simple narrative of linear development will not do to account for the recurring power in the novels 'to unseat our moral certainties'. It is this 'art of unease', in Ryan's phrase, that may be the key to McEwan's work.<sup>20</sup>

David Malcolm's study of 2002 suggests a further qualification to the moral fable account of McEwan's career. He does discern a trajectory



of development in which the lack of moral judgement of character or situation in the early work is set against the more obvious moral positions taken in the work of the 1980s and beyond, notably in *The Child in Time*, *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love*. Yet, Malcolm notes, 'the trajectory is not a perfect one', since it is complicated by a return to moral relativism in *The Innocent* (1991), and the amorality of *Amsterdam*.<sup>21</sup>

I began this introduction by acknowledging that writing about contemporary literature is a hazardous business, since judgements must be made in the absence of a critical consensus established over time. Narrowing my focus to offer a specific hostage to fortune, I should recall that I have suggested elsewhere that McEwan continues the tradition, associated most strongly with Iris Murdoch in British fiction since 1950, characterized by 'scrupulous thinking about the role of the novel and the novelist in the advancement of an ethical world-view'.<sup>22</sup> This is not to suggest that one can discern obvious examples of her influence in his work. It is true that McEwan has reported being, at the age of fourteen, 'an entranced reader of the handful of novels' she had published by then.<sup>23</sup> However, he has numbered her among those authors he felt himself to be reacting *against* at the start of his career.

In an interview conducted in 1994, McEwan considers his emergence as a writer, working 'very much in reaction against a certain kind of English writing which took the form of social documentary, and which was principally interested in the nuances of English class.' His early stories, he says in this interview, were dramatizations of the 'exclusion' and 'ignorance' that stemmed from his uncertainty about where he stood 'in relation to British society generally.' Because his parents were both working class, the family experienced 'a curious kind of dislocated existence' when his father was commissioned as an army officer, 'but not an officer of the middle class.' This, in McEwan's account, has a significant bearing on his own assessment of the English novel:

I really didn't know where I fitted in. [...] when I read the fiction of Angus Wilson or Kingsley Amis or John Wain or Iris Murdoch – figures who were central to English writing at the time – I could find no way in for me there. I didn't really understand the middle-class world they described. Nor did I recognize the working-class world described by David Storey or Alan Sillitoe. I had to find a fictional world that was socially, and even historically disembodied.<sup>24</sup>