Thursday, November 12, 2015, at 10:30 A.M.

*The Children Act, by Ian McEwan*

**Discussion Leader: Esther Davidson**

Judge Fiona Maye is at a difficult point in her marriage. Taking refuge in addressing other people’s problems in family court, Fiona extends herself more than usual, meeting a boy whose future is in her hands. McEwan is a masterful observer of human distress. With a simple story and flawed, genuine characters, this novel is poignant and insightful. -- Jennifer Alexander for LibraryReads.

Monday, November 23, 2015, at 1:00 P.M.

*Florence Gordon, by Brian Morton*

**Discussion Leader: Candace Plotsker-Herman**

Seventy-five-year-old feminist and activist Florence Gordon is blunt, brilliant, cantankerous and passionate. Having been named “an American Classic,” she deserves to lay down her burden after raising a family, enjoy her solitude, and get on with writing her memoirs. But her family’s temporary relocation to New York from Seattle intrudes on her work. *(NovelistPlus)*

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**BOOK REVIEW; A marriage runs aground; In 'The Children Act,' Ian McEwan upends expectations by following a woman through a midlife crisis.**


Ian McEwan's most recent novel, "The Children Act," opens with a marital scene.

"I need it," Jack tells his wife. "I'm fifty nine. This is my last shot. I've yet to hear evidence for an afterlife."
"Fifty nine?" his wife snaps. "Jack, you're sixty! It's pathetic, it's banal."

"Fiona, when did we last make love?" Suffice it to say, Fiona doesn't remember. Jack does. ("Seven weeks and a day.")

"I want to have this affair," he says. But not a divorce; Jack is not unhappy with their marriage.

"It's cozy and sweet and I love you, but before I drop dead, I want one big passionate affair," he tells her. "Ecstasy, almost blacking out with the thrill of it. Remember that? I want one last go, even if you don't."

Does Fiona want a last go? It's not clear, even to Fiona. She hasn't -- until this moment -- thought about it. And what Fiona really wants to do this evening when her husband brings all this up, is write the opinion that will go to the printers tomorrow morning. She's a judge who loves her work, in family court.

McEwan, in his recent shorter novels ("On Chesil Beach" is 203 pages, "The Children Act" 221) reveals an uncanny genius for plucking a resonant subject from the pages of lifestyle journalism and teasing it out into full scenes and then pressing them hard for their larger, enduring meanings. While there are numerous examples of tricked couplings and stolen virginities from Shakespeare and Cervantes on, and many detailed accounts of sex (starting with Ulysses and perhaps culminating in Harold Brodkey's "Innocence") I don't think I'd ever, before "Chesil Beach," read a prolonged scene of a wedding night between two virgins.

In "The Children Act," McEwan takes on the midlife crisis. And just as in the earlier book, he puts his characters in a circumstance about which we have a lifetime's worth of assumptions. Much of the reader's pleasure derives from the expansion, dissection, analysis and revelation of what we thought we already knew -- and more comes from overturning our expectations.

This husband and wife in "The Children Act" are privileged (on the first page, we see their scene of marital unhappiness play out in an apartment with a Bokhara rug on wide polished floorboards, near a grand piano), they're cultivated (he's a classicist, she's a judge, they both love opera, Keith Jarrett and traveling) and childless.

"You know I love you," he says.

"But you'd like someone younger," she replies.

"I'd like a sex life."

This, McEwan writes, was "[h]er cue to make warm promises, draw him back to her, apologize for being busy or tired or unavailable. But she looked away and said nothing. She was not going to dedicate herself under pressure to revive a sensual life she had at that moment no taste for."

Fiona does the expected thing: She says no. Jack can't have the marriage and "this affair" and he walks out. So far, predictable. Then, McEwan does the harder thing. He follows the woman and
explores her midlife journey. For several books, McEwan has been working his tool kit to understand gender from the inside. (His last short book, "Sweet Tooth," was a playful riff on these very efforts.)

McEwan renders Fiona's feelings of abandonment in fresh terms: "[T]here was age. Not the full withering, not just yet, but its early promise was shining through, just as one might catch in a certain light a glimpse of the adult in a ten year old's face."

He takes time to mark the fine delineations within the marriage, as she assesses why she wants to be married. "She couldn't, she did not intend to, manage the rest of her life alone. Two close friends her age, long deprived by divorce of their husbands, still hated to enter a crowded room unaccompanied."

Her intelligence works against self-pity as she finds herself "wondering again whether it was not love she had lost so much as a modern form of respectability, whether it was not contempt and ostracism she feared, as in the novels of Flaubert and Tolstoy, but pity. To be the object of social pity was also a form of social death. The nineteenth century was closer than most women thought."

The husband's affair peters out fairly early in the story, with a short, quiet fizzle, and for the rest of the book, we follow Fiona's own midlife affair, which takes a completely uncharted form.

In her work in family court, "she believed she brought reasonableness to hopeless situations." She believes in the law and finds "common themes" in the many sorrows she encounters.

She becomes involved in a case of a young man who refuses a blood transfusion, for religious reasons, and whose parents support him in this choice. Fiona takes the unconventional step of going to the hospital to meet the dying boy. They strike up a relationship. He reads her his poems. She decides for the hospital to force the transfusion so that he will live.

McEwan's inhabitation of a female sensibility is largely successful, though, at one moment, she comes out in a dress for her annual amateur concert and her returned husband, Jack, says, "Here's to living... Concerning which, the dress is fabulous. You look beautiful." And I realize this element of the portrait is a little off -- not once, during this novel about a 59-year-old woman being left by her husband, does she book a facial, or think about a dress, a shoe or her hair. But this is a momentary reservation in a quietly exhilarating book.

This short novel does a particularly hard thing: It chronicles the recalibration of a 30-year marriage after it has fallen out of balance. Each of the two people strays to fulfill a need they don't share and the story resolves in a conversation after an amateur musical performance, in an homage to Joyce's "The Dead." While Jack wanted to have an affair, he realizes his wife has fallen in love.

Marriage, like this book, McEwan seems to believe, begins and ends with a hard, true conversation.
When Anne Darwin died just after her 10th birthday in 1851, her father “lost the joy of the Household.” No longer could he see “as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world.” Charles Darwin’s faith was gone; he began writing “On the Origin of Species.” As Ian McEwan has told interviewers, “rather like Darwin when his favorite daughter died,” on Sept. 11 he “felt, more than ever,” that there was no God, and that “religion was distinctly unhelpful in making compassionate, reasonable judgments about people’s lives. On the whole, the secular mind seems far superior in making reasonable judgments.” In McEwan’s early novels, intelligent characters had often “slithered” along the “axis of belief and unbelief,” just as he had. Not anymore. Atheism and the secular state are under attack, and he must defend them.

“The Children Act” tells the story of a British High Court judge whose docket is overwhelmed by the woes of families and the faithful: “divorcing Jewish parents, unequally Orthodox, disputing their daughters’ education”; Catholic parents who refuse to separate their conjoined twins, even if it means that they’ll die, “in order not to interfere with God’s purpose.” The novel’s first sentences — “London. Trinity term one week old. Implacable June weather” — are supposed to make us think of “Bleak House,” but Fiona Maye is nothing like Dickens’s judges, who fall asleep on the bench and are more concerned with the quality of Inner Temple mutton than with justice. Indeed, Justice Maye is nearly indefectible: wise, learned, conscientious, compassionate. Her life’s work is bringing “reasonableness to hopeless situations.” Who wouldn’t want to vest the power of the state in her, even if she doesn’t believe in God?

Despite her many commitments, her to-do list includes a “letter to draft about a special school for the cleaning lady’s autistic son.” Neither the cleaning lady nor her son is otherwise mentioned in the book; their only purpose is to underscore Maye’s decency. Her sole failing is that she cares too much about the people who come before her, and the case of the conjoined twins in particular has left her depressed and uninterested in sex, imperiling her marriage. By the end of the novel, she must find a way to get her groove back. At the same time, she must make a decision about whether Adam Henry, a Jehovah’s Witness with leukemia, should be forced to undergo a blood transfusion that is necessary to save his life but which his religion prohibits. He’s only a few months shy of his 18th birthday, when under British law he would be allowed to decide for himself.

How should the judge rule? On the one hand: sanctity of life. On the other: personal autonomy, the right to make one’s own decisions, however wrongheaded, about medical treatment. The transfusion must happen soon if Adam is to survive, and most of the book takes place over the few days in which he and his parents attempt to persuade Maye to leave them alone. Although Adam’s faith drives the plot, it goes oddly unexplored. McEwan seems to have little interest in
Jehovah’s Witnesses, and apart from their prohibition against blood transfusions we are told very little about what they believe and almost nothing about their history. This is peculiar, because McEwan is usually one of the most inquisitive of novelists. For previous books about neurosurgeons or physicists or posh girls during World War II, he so intensely studied his characters’ worlds that he was able to write about them seemingly from the inside. Yet Adam’s beliefs never seem particular, as though he could be representing any stubborn believer. This vagueness makes the novel seem more allegorical than real, a kind of fable about Faith versus Science and the State. I wonder if McEwan’s Jehovah’s Witnesses remain vague because they are really standing in for something else, which he felt unable to write about directly.

McEwan partly grew up on a military base in Libya, and has spoken about his long interest in Islam. But in an interview a few years ago, he told Richard Dawkins that he never felt free to write about Muslims: “To be really frank about Islam would cause you to look a little nervously behind you.” When the fatwa against Salman Rushdie was announced, McEwan hid him in his own house. After he gave an Italian newspaper a sound bite about his thoughts on Islam (“I myself despise Islamism, because it wants to create a society that I detest”) in 2008, he thought that his life might be in danger. “Look at the Islamist websites,” he told The New Yorker. “They want me dead.”

A newcomer to McEwan will find little here to indicate why his reputation as a storyteller is so tremendous. There is no dazzling opening scene, as in the balloon crash in “Enduring Love,” or fabulous set piece, as in the evacuation from Dunkirk in “Atonement.” There is none of the humor of “Solar,” or the wonderful wicked perversity of “The Cement Garden” and “First Love, Last Rites.” The novelist has never been as nakedly polemical as he is here, and the only scene in “The Children Act” that seems purely McEwanesque is one of its least plausible. During a home invasion in “Saturday,” a young woman recites Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” and the man who was on the verge of raping her is so moved — “It’s beautiful. You know that, don’t you. It’s beautiful” — that he leaves her alone. In “The Children Act,” Fiona, meeting Adam in the hospital, sings to him lines from Yeats’s “Down by the Salley Gardens.” In its last couplet — “She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs; / But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears” — he recognizes himself. Art, life, love: All seem open to him, and as if for the first time, he senses that the world outside his sect might have something going for it after all. The only complication is that Adam confuses his passion for the poem with passion for the 59-year-old woman who introduced him to it; maudlin complications ensue. McEwan may disdain belief in the supernatural, but the powers he claims on behalf of literature must also be taken on faith.

Deborah Friedell is an editor at The London Review of Books.

**Review: ‘The Children Act,’ by Ian McEwan puts beliefs of Jehovah’s Witnesses on trial**

Believers of a millennial bent might consider this a sign: It’s not every summer that we get two dark and serious novels focused on Jehovah’s Witnesses. The first was Scott Cheshire’s “High as the Horses’ Bridles” about a boy preacher who drifts from the faith. And now, the second coming: Ian McEwan’s “The Children Act,” which puts the church’s beliefs on trial. Surely, members of this small Christian sect would prefer, instead, to get their own hilarious Broadway musical, but authors work in mysterious ways.

The two novels have little in common, except that in both a faithless protagonist is deeply shaken by the behavior of a devout Witness. Cheshire’s debut is a roiling storm of conflicting styles and artistic energy, fueled by the author’s autobiographical demons. McEwan, who’s spent more time on the Booker shortlist than in church, has produced a svelte novel as crisp and spotless as a priest’s collar. “The Children Act” is too long to call a novella, but it has that focused intensity and single arc.

At the dramatic center of the story is Fiona Maye, a mature and well-respected British High Court judge in the Family Division. Fiona has devoted much of her career to adjudicating bloody conflicts between once-devoted husbands and wives. Every day, she observes, “Loving promises were denied or rewritten, once easy companions became artful combatants crouching behind counsel, oblivious to the costs.” In her weary astonishment at these savage ex-lovers, one can sense the expertise McEwan gained when his own divorce and custody fight spilled out into the public arena some 15 years ago. But if abusive spouses absorb the bulk of Fiona’s court time, she has also ruled famously in more wrenching matters. With efficiency and elegance so alien to legal writing, McEwan draws us through her reasoning on several cases, such as one involving conjoined twins, whose devout Catholic parents refused to give permission for them to be separated, though doing so was the only way to save one of them. Fiona appreciates that these crises are always wrenching, always murky. She’s suspicious of secular utilitarians who are “impatient of legal detail, blessed by an easy moral equation.”

Given that curriculum vitae, when the central case of this novel arrives, we know Fiona to be a conscientious jurist wholly determined to judge righteous judgment, someone who believes she brings “reasonableness to hopeless situations.”

The call comes late in the evening: A hospital requests an emergency hearing for permission to treat a young leukemia patient who refuses to accept a transfusion that could save his life. Adam Henry and his parents are Jehovah’s Witnesses, who believe that the Bible expressly forbids “mixing your own blood with the blood of an animal or another human being.”

McEwan re-creates the hearing in the brisk style of an ultra-efficient courtroom, the testimonies and examinations proceeding apace, drained of any artificial flourish or suspense. Instead, he designs the facts to make Adam’s case as morally and legally vexed as possible: Just three months shy of his 18th birthday, Adam can already see that promised land in which his right to determine his own health care would be inviolate.

McEwan may be an atheist, but unlike his late friend Christopher Hitchens, he’s a great novelist, not a great polemicist, and he knows that there can be no tension — no art — if Adam and his parents are reduced to ignorant Bible-thumpers clad in what Hitchens called the “heavy coat of
ignorance and fear.” Fiona reflects her creator’s fair regard for these Witnesses. She finds their
doctor condescending and snobby. She’s sensitive to the way differences in class and education
play into her approach to this case, and she knows she’s weighing one of the most fundamental
human rights. “Courts should be slow to intervene in the interests of the child against the
religious principles of the parents,” Fiona thinks. “Sometimes they must. But when?” Is the state
so infallible and supreme that for want of 120 days, a young man should be torn from his family
and his community and forced to submit to a medical procedure he abhors?

For his part, McEwan doesn’t venture much into the spiritual dimensions of this conflict. Adam’s
devout parents appear only briefly; there’s little effort here to explore their beliefs. But that’s
where the novel differs from its controversial premise: “The Children Act” is not primarily about
religious radicalism or the conflict between faith and science; it’s about the way a woman’s well-
ordered life is shaken by a confluence of youthful passion and old betrayal.

You see, the hospital’s petition involving Adam arrives on the very night Fiona’s husband of 35
years announces that he wants to have an affair. “I need it. I’m fifty-nine. This is my last shot,”
he tells Fiona with calm and creepy candor. “I love you, but before I drop dead, I want one big
passionate affair.”

In the precisely choreographed pages that follow, McEwan presents a ferociously intelligent and
competent woman struggling to rule on a complex legal matter while feeling humiliated and
betrayed by her husband. Beneath her formidable wisdom and accomplishments swirl all the old
anxieties of loneliness and shame. Fiona knows that “to be the object of general pity was also a
form of social death. The nineteenth century was closer than most women thought.” She’s spent
decades training her mind to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant facts, to identify
patches of fogginess and sentimentality in her thinking, but this crisis at home threatens to
disrupt her carefully managed equilibrium. In that disrupted state, she’s moved by Adam’s
irrepressible spirit, and she raises expectations that could either save or doom them both.

And who could blame her? In Adam, McEwan has created a captivating creature with the
confidence and every mirth of a young man hovering at the precipice. Distilled by illness, he has
only his concentrated naivete left. Even as he struggles to breathe, he’s intoxicated by the
fawning attention, the promise of glory, the romantic tragedy of his wasted, blue-veined body.
Fiona’s encounters with him are brief, but absolutely captivating — for us and her. Can this
famously careful woman be careful enough with his fragile soul to understand the true demands
of his welfare?

In the end, McEwan arrives at the same conclusion Hitchens left behind, but there’s no stridency
in these pages, which glide from one quietly perfect sentence to another. “The Children Act”
doesn’t enact the happy triumph of humanism. Instead, it recognizes how fragile we all are and
how cautious we should be about disrupting another’s well-ordered universe. As Emily
Dickinson warned, “The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind.” Given its odd
subject matter, this is unlikely to be anyone’s favorite McEwan novel, but with its mix of arcane
expertise, emotional intensity and especially its attention to the ever-surprising misdirections of
the heart, it’s another notable volume from one of the finest writers alive.
A high court judge is the voice of reason in the face of religious short-sightedness in McEwan’s 13th novel, *The Children Act*, McEwan’s 13th novel, presents us with some of the usual trappings that have come to characterise his recent work: the well-educated and well-off protagonist whose equilibrium is suddenly upset by a powerful external force; and a single moment of apparently innocuous, but ultimately momentous, misunderstanding.

By day 59-year-old Fiona Maye, a high court judge, presides over family division cases; by night she sips Sancerre on the chaise longue in her Gray’s Inn flat, dines with colleagues at Middle Temple, or attends concerts at Kings Place “(Schubert, Scriabin)”. Her 35-year marriage with her academic husband is imploding, but this is background noise; the main event is the emergency case she’s just agreed to take on. A 17-year-old Jehovah’s Witness named Adam – an impossibly beautiful, slightly unbelievable, near ethereal presence who writes poetry and plays the violin – is refusing the blood transfusion that could save his life, and Fiona has to decide whether rational or religious thought wins the day.

McEwan’s own atheism rings loud and clear from the very beginning, and from the cases detailed in the first chapter alone it’s obvious that Fiona’s job is to be the voice of reason in the face of religious short-sightedness – a strict Moroccan Muslim father who wants to remove his daughter from the care of her English mother; another, from an Orthodox Jewish community, who wants to limit the education and life experiences his ex-wife wants for their daughters; and a Catholic couple whose faith is compelling them to watch their conjoined twins die, even though the medical establishment advocates the saving of one at the expense of his much weaker brother.
Interestingly, these mini-tales are by far the most compelling elements of the novel. When we’re brought back to Adam and Fiona, it seems less like McEwan’s in charge of the actions and decisions made by his characters and more like he’s observing their every move, recording their interactions with each other and descriptions of their environments with the formal, unemotional tones of an anthropologist. In many ways it’s a parable of the obvious – “It was not her business or mission to save him, but to decide what was reasonable and lawful” – but there’s something about the studied solemnity of McEwan’s tone that held me captivated.

'The Children Act', by Ian McEwan

Day, Jon. FT.com (Sep 12, 2014).

Small children", wrote Henry James in the preface of the US edition of What Maisie Knew, "have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary." Throughout his career, Ian McEwan has been interested in the perceptions and misperceptions of childhood. The Cement Garden (1978) was about orphaned siblings who bury their mother in the cellar and attempt to navigate the adult world on their own terms. In The Child in Time (1987) a children's author becomes gradually infantilised after his young daughter is kidnapped. Atonement (2001) was, above all, a meditation on the consequences of taking the perceptions of children at face value.

The Children Act, his 14th novel, explores the moral and legal boundaries between childhood and adulthood. Fiona Maye is a High Court judge trapped in a childless though not unhappy marriage. Her husband Jack is a self-consciously bohemian academic. Maye works in the family courts, dealing out verdicts that are sprinkled like moral fables throughout the novel. Should a pair of conjoined twins be separated if the operation will kill one of them? Should the children of divorcing Chareidim Jews live with their devout father or their more liberal mother? Maye writes her decisions with the verve and precision of a novelist, providing "the kind of civilized reach every good judgment needs”. But, McEwan suggests, the writing of judges, unlike that of novelists, has real-world implications.

The tabular content relating to this article is not available to view. Apologies in advance for the inconvenience caused. As the novel opens Jack decides he wants to have more sex - "one last throw" - and leaves Fiona for a twenty-something statistician called Melanie. "Didn't you once tell me that couples in long marriages aspire to the condition of siblings?" he says. "We've arrived, Fiona. I've become your brother. It's cosy and sweet and I love you, but before I drop dead, I want one big passionate affair."

As she's dealing with the break-up of her marriage Maye is asked to judge a particularly difficult case. Adam Henry, a beautiful, talented and self-aware 17-year-old Jehovah's Witness, has leukaemia. He needs a blood transfusion but his parents won't allow it. Adam doesn't want one either: it's against the beliefs of his sect. In his intelligence and religious fervour Adam is reminiscent of Jed Parry, the fanatical stalker in McEwan's Enduring Love (1997). But he's also an aspiring poet and is learning to play the violin, and in McEwanland this is a sure sign he's ripe
for cultural salvation. Should Maye compel the boy - not legally an adult and therefore technically unable to refuse treatment - to have a transfusion, and thus save his life? Or should she "argue him out of existence in thirty-four elegantly argued pages", as she's done before?

McEwan's novels have increasingly aspired to the condition of thought experiments. The opening scene of Enduring Love fictionalised the prisoner's dilemma; Amsterdam (1998) was a rigorously plotted revenge tragedy; Solar (2010) a study of the ethics of science. In The Children Act the didactic nature of McEwan's enterprise overwhelms everything else. Simply stated, his argument is that high culture's purpose is to provide an alternative to religion. The novel is littered with worthy yet creaky allusions to Wordsworth, Shakespeare and Dickens. Maye herself is a talented amateur musician, regularly entering what McEwan calls, rather pompously, the "horizonless hyperspace of music-making". In one silly scene she opens Adam's eyes to the delights of poetry, offering him something to live for by singing along to his violin playing. It's not as laboured a defence of the arts as in Saturday (2005), where a recital of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" causes a hardened criminal to release a family he's holding hostage, but it's similarly unconvincing.

Like the court, which "takes no view" on the question of faith, McEwan wants to present himself as an objective and neutral guide to the principles at stake. Yet he can't resist drawing attention to the absurdity of "supernatural" beliefs; can't help but comment on "Islam's war with itself"; can't help but present reason, art and secular humanism as ways of saving those afflicted with the great disease - religion - from themselves. It's not that he paints the devout as nutters - Adam and his parents are articulate, reasonable and likeable - but that the base assumptions on which his fiction rests are those of an implicit and shared secular reasonableness.

In the end McEwan implies that the religious are, if not idiotic, then at least hypocritical. Adam's parents love their only son but they love their God more: when he is spared by the courts they rejoice. But allegories can be read many ways, and the story of Abraham and Isaac, which McEwan surely has in mind as a biblical parallel here, isn't really about the sacrifice of a son but about the sacrifice of one's will. Court cases resemble fiction only in that they share a narrative logic, and in the past McEwan has shown himself to be sensitive to the fertile ambiguities thrown up by ethical dilemmas. In The Children Act he wants the answers to be obvious, but life isn't so simple as that.
Inns of Court

The Strand and the south facade of the Royal Courts of Justice, London. The griffin-topped Temple Bar, which marks the boundary between Westminster and the City of London, was erected in the 1670s to replace the 14th-century Temple Bar gatehouse.

**Background on the Inns of Court** *(source: Britannica.com)*

In **London**, a group of four institutions of considerable antiquity that have historically been responsible for **legal education**. Their respective governing bodies, the benches, exercise the exclusive right of admitting persons to practice by a formal call to the bar. They consist of the Inner Temple and Middle Temple (both housed within the area known as **The Temple**), Lincoln’s Inn, and Gray’s Inn—all of which are located in the general vicinity of the **Royal Courts of Justice**, at the boundary between the **City of London** and **Westminster**.

The Inns of Court are voluntary societies, unchartered and unincorporated. Hence, their early history is obscure. Since their inception in the Middle Ages, however, they have been devoted to the technical study of **English law**, rather than Roman law, which was taught in the universities (see **Doctors’ Commons**). Previously, law was learned in the course of service, the first rudiments possibly in private clerkship to some official. By the mid-13th century, when the common law had become extensive and intricate, there arose a class of men, literate but lay, who created and dominated the legal profession and set up the Inns of Court as an answer to the problem of legal education. Manuals and books were produced in French rather than Latin. The students listened to arguments in court and discussed law among themselves.

In addition to those who practiced in the courts, there was also a large demand for stewards and legal advisers to landowners to conduct general business and keep manorial courts. These men needed the rudiments but not the refinements of common law. Such, too, was the case with the large class of attorneys and a growing class of bookkeepers and correspondence clerks. They gained most of their knowledge through an Inn of Chancery, an institution for training in the framing of writs and other legal documents used in the courts of chancery.
In the 14th century many of the household clerks (clergy with at least minor orders) of the chancellor’s office formed Inns and appear to have taken students for training. By the end of the century these Inns were in danger of being submerged by a flood of attorneys-to-be and students who used an Inn of Chancery as a preparation for entering an Inn of Court. Eventually, each Inn of Court secured control of one or more Inns of Chancery and supervised its affairs, appointed readers to teach in it, and later often bought its premises, becoming its landlord.

By the 15th century the Inns of Court were governed by their benchers, who had previously given at least two courses of lectures (readings) and who presided over mock arguments (moots) in which students argued difficult points of law before them.

Because the law was highly technical, proficiency could be acquired only by following the demanding studies of the Inns. In practice, the Inns thus had a monopoly over legal education. In the 15th and 16th centuries, however, many students joined the Inns for the purpose of getting a general education, rather than legal training. By the end of the 16th century the Inns of Court had begun to exclude attorneys and solicitors and refused to call them to the bar, with the result that attorneys especially fell back on the Inns of Chancery and finally came to form a profession distinct from that of the barristers.

By the beginning of the 17th century, all the Inns had acquired the actual ownership of their sites and begun building splendid halls, a process that continued through the century.

Various causes brought on the decline of this system of education. For one thing, the great activity of the printing press led students to rely more on printed material, and as a result they neglected attendance at readings and moots. The system broke down completely during the English Civil Wars; readings ceased in 1677, and only the fees survived. Having paid them, the student was deemed to have fulfilled his duties. With no readers to recommend students for call to the bar, the four Inns in the 18th century finally agreed to call students who had been in residence a stated number of terms. Later, it was settled that eating three dinners was equivalent
to attending for the whole term. Meanwhile, the Inns of Chancery were no longer adequate for so large a group as the attorneys and solicitors, and these latter therefore created their own society.

In the 19th century the common law commissioners investigated the Inns of Court, which as a result took steps to resume their educational functions. Readerships were reestablished, and lawyers were engaged in teaching with a view to examinations conducted by the Bar Council of Legal Education, representing all four Inns.

In 1974 the Inns created an administrative body, the Senate of the Inns of Court and the Bar, which oversees such matters as finance, legal reform, and educational standards.

"Inns of Court". Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

Ian Russell McEwan


Ian McEwan, winner of Britain's prestigious Booker Prize for Amsterdam in 1998, was a writer with a well-established and, at times, even somewhat infamous literary reputation before his novels gained a North American readership. For many years he was known primarily for a literary style that delivered horrifically visceral passages but remained compellingly eloquent throughout. In his middle age McEwan began toning down the explicit with horrors that were far more accessible: the loss of a child, the betrayal of a friend, the disintegration of a family. His 2001 novel, Atonement, spent seven months on the best-seller lists in Britain. "McEwan forces his readers to turn the pages with greater dread and anticipation than does perhaps any other 'literary' writer working in English today," declared Atlantic Monthly critic Claire Messud.

McEwan was born in 1948 and spent part of his youth in Singapore and North Africa, where his father was stationed as a British Army officer. He finished his education at a boarding school in England, and went on to earn an undergraduate degree from the University of Sussex in 1970. Enrolling at the University of East Anglia in its graduate literature program, McEwan was part of the university's first-ever creative writing class, led by young British writer Malcolm Bradbury. The course reading list was heavily skewed to the postwar American canon, with selections from Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, John Barth, and others, and McEwan began submitting short fiction pieces along with his coursework to Bradbury. The latter influenced the former, he reflected later in a Guardian article he penned in 2000. "The ambition, the social range, the expressive freedom of American writing made English fiction seem poky and grey," McEwan explained. "To find bold and violent colors became my imperative."
The first story McEwan wrote and handed in to Bradbury was "Conversation With a Cupboardman," a morbid tale about a man who lived in a closet. It was followed by several others of a macabre nature--rife with themes of incest, assault, and even necrophilia--that appeared in First Love, Last Rites, published in 1975. McEwan attributed a crisis of confidence in himself for stoking such unusual creative fires. "I had been invisible to myself in my teens," he told journalist Phil Daoust in an interview that appeared in London's Guardian newspaper some years later. "A lot of my terror of things was in those stories--my terror of not making full or rich emotional relationships."

Other short stories followed, which were collected into a second volume, In Between the Sheets, in 1978. Soon afterward, McEwan was commissioned to write a play for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and based it on a short story that appeared in his debut collection. But Solid Geometry was halted by the BBC mid-production, after executives deemed it "untransmittable" due to its subject matter: the plot concerned a man who keeps a sexual organ, purchased by an ancestor in 1875, pickled in a jar on his desk. The incident caused a minor stir in Britain, with many siding with McEwan, but others asserting that with Britain on the eve of electing its first-ever female prime minister, the story was beyond the realm of being politically insensitive and in just plain bad taste.

McEwan's first novel, The Cement Garden, was published in 1978, and served to further bolster his reputation as a literary maverick. The story concerned four orphaned siblings and was filled with some shocking scenes, including incest and the burial of their deceased mother inside a cement box in the house. In 1981, his second novel, The Comfort of Strangers appeared. Its plot concerned a couple vacationing in Venice who become involved with a mysterious expatriate, who leads them into a dangerous sadomasochistic game. Ten years later, the novel was adapted for film by the playwright Harold Pinter, with Paul Schrader directing a cast that included Rupert Everett, Christopher Walken, and Helen Mirren.

McEwan's fiction changed course in the mid-1980s when he became a parent. The violence in his work began to subside, and the protagonists became less openly deviant. In The Child in Time, his 1987 novel, children's book author Stephen Lewis mourns the loss of his three-year-old daughter Kate, who simply disappeared one day in a grocery store and was never seen again. Time critic R. Z. Sheppard hailed it as "a death-defying story, inventive, eventful, and affirmative without being sentimental."

In his fourth novel, The Innocent, McEwan presents the unusual dilemma of English telephone technician Leonard Marnham, who is co-opted into a Cold War spy plot in 1955 Berlin involving a secret tunnel beneath the divided but not yet walled city. Leonard begins an affair with a German woman, but the plot turns truly sinister when they murder her husband. Leonard carves the victim up in what literary critics called a perfect example of McEwan's talent for writing famously gruesome passages. "He should not have been going through bone," the novel reads, as quoted in the Guardian. "His idea was to get between the joint. His idea of it was vague, derived from roast chicken Sunday lunches." The scene endures for some six pages, and Leonard then carries the cumbersome suitcases containing the parts around the city, looking for an appropriate place to leave them--a section "told with all McEwan's frigid skill," noted a Time review from
Martha Duffy, who also compared him to author Evelyn Waugh for "sheer, mirthful heartlessness."

McEwan's 1992 novel, Black Dogs, took a more prosaic setting, with its protagonist simply attempting to write the memoir of his wife's aging, but still spirited parents. The title is drawn from the couple's 1946 walk in Provence, when the wife sees a terrifying apparition that comes to symbolize to her the darkest part of the human soul. "McEwan's meticulous prose, his shaping of his material to create suspense, and his adept use of specific settings produce a haunting fable," noted a Publishers Weekly contributor.

Around this same time, McEwan had his first experience with the Hollywood film industry. A short story he wrote, "The Good Child," was optioned for a film that eventually starred Macaulay Culkin and Elijah Wood. Wood plays a boy sent to live with relatives after his mother dies, and finds that his cousin Henry (Culkin) is a far more sinister force than he can handle by himself. The film was directed by Joseph Ruben, and Entertainment Weekly reviewer Ty Burr felt that both director and writer "tap into something we rarely admit about childhood: Where most kids learn to temper any innate sadism with ethics, some just don't." But McEwan was released from his contract by order of Culkin's famously influence-wielding father, and the experience soured him. He once described Hollywood screenwriting as "an opportunity to fly first-class, be treated like a celebrity, sit around the pool, and be betrayed," the Guardian profile by Daoust quoted him as saying.

McEwan's 1998 novel, Enduring Love, followed the travails of science writer Joe Rose who, on an idyllic picnic day with his beloved wife, spies a hot-air balloon in the sky that is failing; he and several others nearby grab its ropes, but then the wind kicks up again, with the rescuers left hanging--and so the "crew enacted morality's ancient, irresolvable dilemma: us, or me," the novel reads, and Rose and the others let go. A religious zealot is among the group, and then begins to stalk him. The coolly rational Rose diagnoses the man with a form of erotomania, named after a long-dead French psychiatrist, but the man's actions prove the undoing of Rose's ostensibly happy marriage. "McEwan does a superb job of making us believe what seems so unlikely, and that is the book's great power," noted Independent Sunday's Jan Dalley.

Only with McEwan's next novel, Amsterdam, did his work begin to gain a wider appreciation outside of Britain. Published in the United States in 1998, the story involves two longtime friends who make a pact after the London funeral of their former lover, Molly. She died a painful death, and Vernon Halliday and Clive Linley vow to one another that should the same fate befall them, they would help one another get to the Netherlands, where physician-assisted suicide is legal. McEwan's premise behind the plot is the possibility that euthanasia might be misused, a story that gets underway when Halliday, the newspaper editor, plans to publish incriminating photos of a British politician they both know that were found among Molly's possessions; Linley, the composer, objects strenuously on moral grounds. The novel finally won McEwan the Booker Prize for contemporary fiction, given to the best work of the year by a writer from Britain or its Commonwealth nations. Two of his previous works had also made it onto the estimable Booker list of finalists: The Comfort of Strangers in 1981 and Black Dogs in 1992.
Atonement, McEwan's eighth novel, was also short-listed for the Booker in 2001, and hailed as a tour-de-force on both sides of the Atlantic. It took "the British novel into the twenty-first century," declared Geoff Dyer in the Guardian in 2001. The story begins on a summer day in 1935 at a Surrey country estate at which the members of the Tallis family have gathered. There is Leon, the eldest son and a young London banker, who arrives with his wealthy friend; Cecilia, the older Tallis daughter, comes from Cambridge University, as does Robbie, whose mother is the longtime housekeeper at the Tallis estate. There are also cousins Lola, 15 years old, and her homesick twin brothers. Robbie wrestles with his growing attraction to Cecilia. He writes a letter that concludes with a salacious line, but decides to rewrite it; he accidentally sends the first one via her 13-year-old sister Briony, who reads it, and then when Lola is assaulted later on that evening, claims that Robbie is the culprit. Lola colludes in the accusation, and Robbie is convicted and imprisoned.

The next section of the book shifts ahead five years later to World War II, with Robbie freed from jail but now serving in the military as the Battle of Dunkirk rages--passages which McEwan based on his own father's stories--and Briony a nurse in London. Atonement progresses with a series of fateful pairings and consequences, but in the final section some of this is revealed to be merely the fiction of Briony, who became an acclaimed writer but is haunted by her guilt over that 1935 incident. When she was a young nurse taking the bandages from her patients' battle-ravaged faces, she realized "that a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended," the novel reads, according to Atlantic Monthly's Messud.

Atonement earned overwhelmingly enthusiastic reviews. Boyd Tonkin, writing in London's Independent, termed it "a magnificent novel, shaped and paced with awesome confidence and eloquence; as searching an account of error, shame, and reparation as any in modern fiction." New Yorker fiction critic John Updike reflected that McEwan's previous "novels have tended to be short, smart, and saturnine," and called Atonement "a beautiful and majestic fictional panorama."

McEwan has never failed to tout his first and only writing teacher as the source of his confidence as a writer. He recalled a magical incident in which he became separated from his publicity handlers in the heady Booker Prize announcement ceremony and round of press interviews, and found himself in a deserted hall that led to another corridor. "Coming towards me, from some distance away, were Malcolm and his wife, Elizabeth," McEwan wrote in the Guardian. "We approached each other as in dream, and I remember thinking, half seriously, that this was what it might be like to be dead. In the warmth of his embrace was concentrated all the generosity of this gifted teacher and writer."

McEwan's next novel, Saturday, broke new ground for him. Released in 2005, it takes place on February 15, 2003, during the enormous protest in London against the American and British invasion of Iraq. Unlike past novels of his, it is written in the present tense and from the point of view of a single character. The novel is also semi-autobiographical, with the main character sharing some traits in common with McEwan: the same home in the same town, a journalist wife, a mother with dementia, and an interest in wine and cooking. Though the novel includes political debates and one very violent scene, it is essentially a book about happiness. McEwan said he was trying to capture the uncertain feeling of living in the early 21st century on the brink
of war, but his protagonist also finds comfort in his job, family, friends, and middle-class comforts. The novel won high praise from American critics, while many in his home country began to regard him as Britain's best novelist.

In 2006, McEwan was accused of plagiarizing parts of the Lucilla Andrews memoir No Time For Romance in his novel Atonement. McEwan defended himself, saying he did use the Andrews book as part of his historic research, but had not meant to use similar phrasing. Several prominent novelists, including Margaret Atwood and John Updike, defended McEwan, saying that every historical novel depends on other sources for details from the period. Meanwhile, McEwan began publicly telling the tale of his reunion with his long-lost brother, David Sharp. McEwan's mother had given his older brother away for adoption during World War II because he was born from an affair; McEwan's mother and father began seeing each other while she was married to another man who was away at war. They married after her first husband died in battle. Sharp met McEwan for the first time in the early 2000s after Sharp retraced his adoption to the McEwan family; they discovered they lived near each other in Oxfordshire.

In 2007, a film adaptation of Atonement was released to wide critical acclaim. Meanwhile, McEwan released a new novel, On Chesil Beach, about the terrifyingly awkward wedding night of two British virgins in 1962. "McEwan's books have the air of thrillers even when, as in On Chesil Beach, he seems to have systematically replaced mortal stakes--death and its attendant horrors--with risks of embarrassment, chagrin and regret," wrote novelist Jonathan Lethem in the New York Times. In 2008, McEwan won the Reader's Digest Author of the Year Award and the Galaxy Book of the Year Award for On Chesil Beach.

McEwan's next novel, Solar, was published by Nan A. Talese. A book titled Conversations with Ian McEwin was also published by the University Press of Mississippi later that year. According to McEwin's official Web site, in these interviews "McEwan discusses his views on authorship, the writing process, and the major themes found in his fiction, but he also expands upon his interests in music, film, global politics, the sciences, and the state of literature in contemporary society." Shortly after its release, McEwan received the 2010 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award. The following year, he won the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society.

For a few years, there had been talk that On Chesil Beach would be adapted for film; however, director Sam Mendes was sidetracked with the work on the new James Bond movie. In late 2011, McEwan learned that the adaptation changed hands. Mike Newell, who had worked on Four Weddings and a Funeral and Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, had taken on the task and announced that filming would begin in the spring of 2012.

**Reading Group Questions for The Children Act by Ian McEwan**

by Random House Australia on 2 September 2014

1. Jack refuses to take full responsibility for his decision to have an affair, saying that in part it is due to Fiona (pp.32–3). Do you think she is partly responsible for Jack’s decision? To what extent do you sympathise with Fiona? To what extent do you sympathise with Jack?
2. The word ‘cruel’ occurs several times. Fiona refers to herself as ‘selfish, cruel, drily ambitious’ (p.45), do you agree with her? Later, she thinks of Jack ‘it didn’t seem possible that the person she knew most intimately could be so cruel’ (p.83). Do you think Jack is cruel?

3. The book is full of people set against each other in direct conflict. Consider:  
   - Mother vs father, -State vs religion, -Fiona vs Jack  
Do you think this emphasis on conflict is exaggerated? Can you think of any examples in the book of people working together in harmony towards a common goal?

4. Fiona’s personal problems are constantly juxtaposed with ‘larger’ world issues and with the court cases that she is presiding over. Consider pp.24–31, the Siamese twins case, and p.59, the litany of horrors on the world news. Do you think this sense of scale belittles her personal situation?

5. When Jack comes back to Fiona she responds by hiding behind her work, spreading out work documents in front of her as ‘a form of protection. Without them she would not know what to do with herself’ (p.126). Do you think Fiona is totally defined by her job? What role does music play in the book?

6. Do you think Fiona makes the right decision in ruling in favour of the hospital and allowing them to treat Adam against his wishes?

7. Do you blame Fiona for what ultimately happens to Adam?

8. The title refers to the 1989 Children’s Act, which enshrines the child’s welfare as the ‘paramount consideration’ in any court ruling. Do you think it is an apt title? What else could the book have been called?