



ATONEMENT

A NOVEL

IAN MCEWAN

A KNOFF  BOOK

International acclaim for Ian McEwan's

ATONEMENT

“In the seriousness of its intentions and the dazzle of its language, *Atonement* made me starry-eyed all over again on behalf of literature’s humanizing possibilities.”

—Daphne Merkin, *Los Angeles Times*

“Resplendent.... Graceful.... Magisterial.... Gloriously realized.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“A work of astonishing depth and humanity.... It is rare for a critic to feel justified in using the word ‘masterpiece,’ but [*Atonement*] really deserves to be called one.”

—*The Economist*

“McEwan is technically at the height of his powers, and can do more or less anything he likes with the novel form.”

—*The New York Review of Books*

“Astonishing.... Lush and heavily populated, [with] one of the most remarkable erotic scenes in modern fiction.... [It] is something you will never forget.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Enthralling ... extraordinary.... Ambitious.... With psychological insight and a command of sensual and historical detail, Mr. McEwan creates an absorbing fictional world.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“*[Atonement]* hauls a defining part of the British literary tradition up to and into the 21ST century.”

—*The Guardian*

“Seductive and redemptive.... His most complete and compassionate work to date.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Astonishing.... Gorgeous.... Bewitching.... A thought-provoking, luxuriant novel.”

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“Extraordinary.... Marvelous.... Certainly his finest and most complex novel.... McEwan is one of the most gifted literary storytellers alive.... *[Atonement]* implants in the memory a living, flaming presence.”

—James Wood, *The New Republic*

“*[McEwan’s]* best novel so far.... It will break your heart.”

—*The Star* (Toronto)

“A masterpiece of moral inquiry.... Beautiful and wrenching.”

—*New York*

“A first-rate novel on any scale.... Few, if any, novelists writing today match McEwan in ingenuity and plotting, and those skills are demonstrated best in this, his most expansive and ambitious book.”

—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“Magnificent.... Memorable.... Suspenseful.... McEwan forces his readers to turn the pages with greater dread and anticipation than does perhaps any other ‘literary’ writer working in English today.”

—Claire Messud, *The Atlantic Monthly*

“The extraordinary range of *Atonement* suggests that there’s nothing McEwan can’t do.”

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“Magically readable.... Never has McEwan shown himself to be more in sympathy with the vulnerability of the human heart.”

—*Sunday Times* (London)

“Magnificent.... Suspenseful, psychologically astute and intellectually bracing.”

—*Newsday*

“Not since the 19TH century has a writer stepped in and out of his characters’ minds with such unfettered confidence.”

—*The Plain Dealer*

“Extraordinary.... Powerful ... at once strange and shattering and sublime.... The finest book yet by a writer of prodigious skills.... McEwan writes with abundant authority.... [He] has ... told a story that reaffirms in every syllable our need for storytelling and its own transformative power.... It has passages so powerful and beautiful they make the heart race.... McEwan is building a mighty edifice that will stand for many years.”

—Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post Book World*

“A masterwork, a novel of artistry, power and truth that puts it among the most extraordinary works of fiction of the last decade.... Reading this book is an experience to remember—and savor. I found every page riveting. It is, quite simply, magnificent—a masterpiece.”

—Michael Pakenham, *The Baltimore Sun*

“Thoroughly convincing.... Memorable.... The book’s battle scenes are some of the most vivid and disturbing in recent memory. And the depiction of English country life, with all its hypocrisy, is worthy of E. M. Forster or, for that matter, Jane Austen.”

—*The Oregonian*

“Magical.... A love story, a war story, and a story about stories, and so it hits the heart, the guts and the brain.... McEwan is eerily convincing. When he’s writing at his best, he’s invisible; and he’s never less than elegant and precise.... *Atonement* is the work of a novelist at peak power.”

—*The New York Observer*

“Luminous.... McEwan’s writing has often made me blink, but never before blink with emotion.... [McEwan] is at one with his talent.”

—Robert Cremins, *Houston Chronicle*

“*Atonement* can’t be laid down once it’s been picked up.... McEwan writes like an angel and plots like a demon.... He can write rings around most others writing in English today.”

—*The Weekly Standard*

BY IAN McEWAN

First Love, Last Rites

In Between the Sheets

The Cement Garden

The Comfort of Strangers

The Child in Time

The Innocent

Black Dogs

The Daydreamer

Enduring Love

Amsterdam

Atonement

Saturday

The Imitation Game

(plays for television)

Or Shall We Die?

(libretto for oratorio by Michael Berkeley)

The Ploughman's Lunch

(film script)

Sour Sweet

(film script)

IAN McEWAN

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Ian McEwan is the bestselling author of more than ten books, including the novels *The Comfort of Strangers* and *Black Dogs*, both shortlisted for the Booker Prize, *Amsterdam*, winner of the Booker Prize, and *The Child in Time*, winner of the Whitbread Award, as well as the story collections *First Love, Last Rites*, winner of the Somerset Maugham Award, and *In Between the Sheets*. He has also written screenplays, plays, television scripts, a children's book, and the libretto for an oratorio. He lives in London.

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A NOVEL

IAN MCEWAN



ANCHOR BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

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To Annalena

“Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?”

They had reached the end of the gallery; and with tears of shame she ran off to her own room.

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

PART ONE



One



THE PLAY—for which Briony had designed the posters, programs and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper—was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch. When the preparations were complete, she had nothing to do but contemplate her finished draft and wait for the appearance of her cousins from the distant north. There would be time for only one day of rehearsal before her brother arrived. At some moments chilling, at others desperately sad, the play told a tale of the heart whose message, conveyed in a rhyming prologue, was that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed. The reckless passion of the heroine, Arabella, for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune when she contracts cholera during an impetuous dash toward a seaside town with her intended. Deserted by him and nearly everybody else, bed-bound in a garret, she discovers in herself a sense of humor. Fortune presents her a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor—in fact, a prince in disguise who has elected to work among the needy. Healed by him, Arabella chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on “a windy sunlit day in spring.”

Mrs. Tallis read the seven pages of *The Trials of Arabella* in her bedroom, at her dressing table, with the author’s arm around her shoulder the whole while. Briony studied her mother’s face for every trace of shifting emotion,

and Emily Tallis obliged with looks of alarm, snickers of glee and, at the end, grateful smiles and wise, affirming nods. She took her daughter in her arms, onto her lap—ah, that hot smooth little body she remembered from its infancy, and still not gone from her, not quite yet—and said that the play was “stupendous,” and agreed instantly, murmuring into the tight whorl of the girl’s ear, that this word could be quoted on the poster which was to be on an easel in the entrance hall by the ticket booth.

Briony was hardly to know it then, but this was the project’s highest point of fulfillment. Nothing came near it for satisfaction, all else was dreams and frustration. There were moments in the summer dusk after her light was out, when she burrowed in the delicious gloom of her canopy bed, and made her heart thud with luminous, yearning fantasies, little playlets in themselves, every one of which featured Leon. In one, his big, good-natured face buckled in grief as Arabella sank in loneliness and despair. In another, there he was, cocktail in hand at some fashionable city watering hole, overheard boasting to a group of friends: Yes, my younger sister, Briony Tallis the writer, you must surely have heard of her. In a third, he punched the air in exultation as the final curtain fell, although there was no curtain, there was no possibility of a curtain. Her play was not for her cousins, it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, toward the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony’s services as a bridesmaid.

She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so. Whereas her big sister’s room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony’s was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way—toward their owner—as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled. In fact, Briony’s was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her

straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressing table—cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice—suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen's army awaiting orders.

A taste for the miniature was one aspect of an orderly spirit. Another was a passion for secrets: in a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint, and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her own invention. In a toy safe opened by six secret numbers she stored letters and postcards. An old tin petty cash box was hidden under a removable floorboard beneath her bed. In the box were treasures that dated back four years, to her ninth birthday when she began collecting: a mutant double acorn, fool's gold, a rainmaking spell bought at a funfair, a squirrel's skull as light as a leaf.

But hidden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony the simple truth: she had no secrets. Her wish for a harmonious, organized world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes, and she did not have it in her to be cruel. Her effective status as an only child, as well as the relative isolation of the Tallis house, kept her, at least during the long summer holidays, from girlish intrigues with friends. Nothing in her life was sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding; no one knew about the squirrel's skull beneath her bed, but no one wanted to know. None of this was particularly an affliction; or rather, it appeared so only in retrospect, once a solution had been found.

At the age of eleven she wrote her first story—a foolish affair, imitative of half a dozen folktales and lacking, she realized later, that vital knowingness about the ways of the world which compels a reader's respect. But this first

clumsy attempt showed her that the imagination itself was a source of secrets: once she had begun a story, no one could be told. Pretending in words was too tentative, too vulnerable, too embarrassing to let anyone know. Even writing out the *she saids*, the *and thens*, made her wince, and she felt foolish, appearing to know about the emotions of an imaginary being. Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. What other authority could she have? Only when a story was finished, all fates resolved and the whole matter sealed off at both ends so it resembled, at least in this one respect, every other finished story in the world, could she feel immune, and ready to punch holes in the margins, bind the chapters with pieces of string, paint or draw the cover, and take the finished work to show to her mother, or her father, when he was home.

Her efforts received encouragement. In fact, they were welcomed as the Tallises began to understand that the baby of the family possessed a strange mind and a facility with words. The long afternoons she spent browsing through dictionary and thesaurus made for constructions that were inept, but hauntingly so: the coins a villain concealed in his pocket were "esoteric," a hoodlum caught stealing a car wept in "shameless auto-exculpation," the heroine on her thoroughbred stallion made a "cursory" journey through the night, the king's furrowed brow was the "hieroglyph" of his displeasure. Briony was encouraged to read her stories aloud in the library and it surprised her parents and older sister to hear their quiet girl perform so boldly, making big gestures with her free arm, arching her eyebrows as she did the voices, and looking up from the page for seconds at a time as she read in order to gaze into one face after the other, unapologetically demanding her family's total attention as she cast her narrative spell.

Even without their attention and praise and obvious pleasure, Briony could not have been held back from her writing. In any case, she was

discovering, as had many writers before her, that not all recognition is helpful. Cecilia's enthusiasm, for example, seemed a little overstated, tainted with condescension perhaps, and intrusive too; her big sister wanted each bound story catalogued and placed on the library shelves, between Rabindranath Tagore and Quintus Tertullian. If this was supposed to be a joke, Briony ignored it. She was on course now, and had found satisfaction on other levels; writing stories not only involved secrecy, it also gave her all the pleasures of miniaturization. A world could be made in five pages, and one that was more pleasing than a model farm. The childhood of a spoiled prince could be framed within half a page, a moonlit dash through sleepy villages was one rhythmically emphatic sentence, falling in love could be achieved in a single word—a *glance*. The pages of a recently finished story seemed to vibrate in her hand with all the life they contained. Her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so. A crisis in a heroine's life could be made to coincide with hailstones, gales and thunder, whereas nuptials were generally blessed with good light and soft breezes. A love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping, the former being set aside exclusively for the morally dubious, the latter a reward withheld until the final page.

The play she had written for Leon's homecoming was her first excursion into drama, and she had found the transition quite effortless. It was a relief not to be writing out the *she saids*, or describing the weather or the onset of spring or her heroine's face—beauty, she had discovered, occupied a narrow band. Ugliness, on the other hand, had infinite variation. A universe reduced to what was said in it was tidiness indeed, almost to the point of nullity, and to compensate, every utterance was delivered at the extremity of some feeling or other, in the service of which the exclamation mark was indispensable. *The Trials of Arabella* may have been a melodrama, but its author had yet to hear the term. The piece was intended to inspire not laughter, but terror, relief and instruction, in that order, and the innocent

intensity with which Briony set about the project—the posters, tickets, sales booth—made her particularly vulnerable to failure. She could easily have welcomed Leon with another of her stories, but it was the news that her cousins from the north were coming to stay that had prompted this leap into a new form.

That Lola, who was fifteen, and the nine-year-old twins, Jackson and Pierrot, were refugees from a bitter domestic civil war should have mattered more to Briony. She had heard her mother criticize the impulsive behavior of her younger sister Hermione, and lament the situation of the three children, and denounce her meek, evasive brother-in-law Cecil who had fled to the safety of All Souls College, Oxford. Briony had heard her mother and sister analyze the latest twists and outrages, charges and countercharges, and she knew her cousins' visit was an open-ended one, and might even extend into term time. She had heard it said that the house could easily absorb three children, and that the Quinceys could stay as long as they liked, provided the parents, if they ever visited simultaneously, kept their quarrels away from the Tallis household. Two rooms near Briony's had been dusted down, new curtains had been hung and furniture carried in from other rooms. Normally, she would have been involved in these preparations, but they happened to coincide with her two-day writing bout and the beginnings of the front-of-house construction. She vaguely knew that divorce was an affliction, but she did not regard it as a proper subject, and gave it no thought. It was a mundane unraveling that could not be reversed, and therefore offered no opportunities to the storyteller: it belonged in the realm of disorder. Marriage was the thing, or rather, a wedding was, with its formal neatness of virtue rewarded, the thrill of its pageantry and banqueting, and dizzy promise of lifelong union. A good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the as yet unthinkable—sexual bliss. In the aisles of country churches and grand city cathedrals, witnessed by a whole society of approving family and friends, her heroines and heroes reached their innocent climaxes and needed to go no further.