

Books in a Box

Reading Guide

Blaine
Bookmobile
Deming
Everson
Ferndale
Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org

the best place to begin



whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- ◆ Kits check out for six weeks.
- ◆ Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- ◆ One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- ◆ Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- ◆ Go to www.wcls.org
- ◆ Click on “catalog”
- ◆ In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What sort of social and cultural setting does the Tallis house create for the novel? What is the mood of the house, as described in chapter 12? What emotions and impulses are being acted upon or repressed by its inhabitants? How does the careful attention to detail affect the pace of Part One, and what is the effect of the acceleration of plot events as it nears its end?

2. A passion for order, a lively imagination, and a desire for attention seem to be Briony's strongest traits. In what ways is she still a child? Is her narcissism -- her inability to see things from any point of view but her own -- unusual in a thirteen-year-old? Why does the scene she witnesses at the fountain change her whole perspective on writing? What is the significance of the passage in which she realizes she needs to work from the idea that -- other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value? Do her actions bear this out?

3. What kind of a person is Emily Tallis? Why does McEwan decide not to have Jack Tallis make an appearance in the story? Who, if anyone, is the moral authority in this family? What is the parents' relationship to Robbie Turner, and why does Emily pursue his conviction with such single-mindedness?

4. What happens between Robbie and Cecilia at the fountain? What symbolic role does Uncle Clem's precious vase play in the novel? Is it significant that the vase is glued together by Cecilia, and broken finally during the war by Betty as she readies the house to accept evacuees?

5. Having read Robbie's note to Cecilia, Briony thinks about its implications for her new idea of herself as a writer: No more princesses! . . . With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help. Why is Robbie's uncensored letter so offensive within the social context in which it is read? Why is Cecilia not offended by it?

6. The scene in the library is one of the most provocative and moving descriptions of sex in recent fiction. How does the fact that it is narrated from Robbie's point of view affect how the reader feels about

what happens to him shortly afterwards? Is it understandable that Briony, looking on, perceives this act of love as an act of violence?

7. Why does Briony stick to her story with such unwavering commitment? Does she act entirely in error in a situation she is not old enough to understand, or does she act, in part, on an impulse of malice, revenge, or self-importance? At what point does she develop the empathy to realize what she has done to Cecilia and Robbie?

8. How does Leon, with his life of agreeable nullity, compare with Robbie in terms of honor, intelligence, and ambition? What are the qualities that make Robbie such an effective romantic hero? What are the ironies inherent in the comparative situations of the three young men present Leon, Paul Marshall, and Robbie?

9. Lola has a critical role in the story's plot. What are her motivations? Why does she tell Briony that her brothers caused the marks on her wrists and arms? Why does she allow Briony to take over her story when she is attacked later in the evening? Why does Briony decide not to confront Lola and Paul Marshall at their wedding five years later?

10. The novel's epigraph is taken from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, in which a naïve young woman, caught up in fantasies from the Gothic fiction she loves to read, imagines that her host in an English country house is a villain. In Austen's novel Catherine Norland's mistakes are comical and have no serious outcome, while in *Atonement*, Briony's fantasies have tragic effects upon those around her. What is McEwan implying about the power of the imagination, and its potential for harm when unleashed into the social world? Is he suggesting, by extension, that Hitler's pathological imagination was a driving force behind World War II?

11. In McEwan's earlier novel *Black Dogs*, one of the main characters comes to a realization about World War II. He thinks about the recently concluded war not as a historical, geopolitical fact but as a multiplicity, a near-infinity of private sorrows, as a boundless grief minutely subdivided without diminishment among individuals who covered the continent like dust, like spores whose separate identities would remain unknown, and whose totality showed more sadness than anyone could ever begin to comprehend. Does McEwan intend his readers to experience the war similarly in *Atonement*? What aspects of *Atonement* make it so powerful as a war novel? What details heighten the emotional impact in the scenes of the Dunkirk retreat and Briony's experience at the military hospital?

12. When Robbie, Mace, and Nettle reach the beach at Dunkirk, they intervene in an attack on an RAF man who has become a scapegoat for the soldiers' sense of betrayal and rage. As in many of his previous novels, McEwan is interested in aggressive human impulses that spin out of control. How does this act of group violence relate to the moral problems that war creates for soldiers, and the events Robbie feels guilty about as he falls asleep at Bray Dunes?

13. About changing the fates of Robbie and Cecilia in her final version of the book, Briony says, "Who would want to believe that the young lovers never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism?" McEwan's *Atonement* has two endings -- one in which the fantasy of love is fulfilled, and one in which that fantasy is stripped away. What is the emotional effect of this double ending? Is Briony right in thinking that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end?

14. Why does McEwan return to the novel's opening with the long-delayed performance of *The Trials of Arabella*, Briony's youthful contribution to the optimistic genre of Shakespearean comedy? What sort of closure is this in the context of Briony's career? What is the significance of the fact that Briony is suffering from vascular dementia, which will result in the loss of her memory, and the loss of her identity?

15. In her letters to Robbie, Cecilia quotes from W. H. Auden's 1939 poem, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats,"

which includes the line, "Poetry makes nothing happen." In part, the novel explores the question of whether the writing of fiction is not much more than the construction of elaborate entertainments -- an indulgence in imaginative play -- or whether fiction can bear witness to life and to history, telling its own serious truths. Is Briony's novel effective, in her own conscience, as an act of atonement? Does the completed novel compel the reader to forgive her? (Questions issued by publisher.)

Author Bio: Ian McEwan

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2009.

Critical praise was heaped upon McEwan upon publication of his 2002 novel *Atonement*. The story of a highly imaginative British preteen whose desire to gain dramatic stature within her family results in a false accusation of rape and the destruction of a young man's life, *Atonement* also provokes the reader into questioning the role of the novelist in creating realistic fiction, and what Commonwealth contributor Edward T. Wheeler called "the relationship between artistic imagination and truth of life." In McEwan's novel, a story is told from the point of view of an impressionable young narrator clearly identified as imaginative and inclined to interpret events to suit her penchant for drama; while the story is narrated by that child grown to adulthood, assertions come into question, facts become clouded, and McEwan's final chapters "undermine the fictional reality of the entire novel," according to Antioch Review critic Barbara Beckerman Davis. Davis praised *Atonement* as "McEwan's most intricate book," while in *School Library Journal* Susan H. Woodcock praised it as a "thought-provoking novel" with a story that is "compelling, the characters well drawn and engaging, and the outcome ... almost always in doubt." In 2006, although McEwan had credited Lucilla Andrews's memoir *No Time for Romance* as a source for *Atonement*, he was nonetheless accused of copying sentences and phrases from the book. Many prominent writers came to McEwan's defense, including Margaret Atwood, John Updike, Zadie Smith, Martin Amis, and Thomas Pynchon.

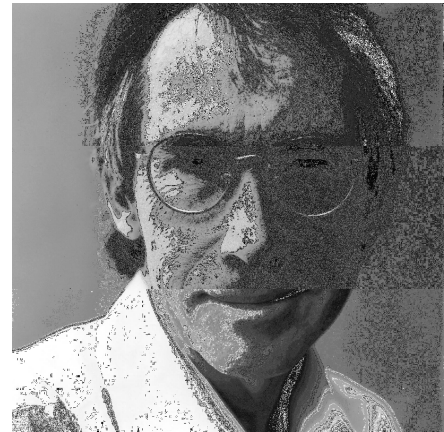


Photo credit / Eamon McCabe

As Connie Ogle noted in her Miami Herald review of *On Chesil Beach*, "Ian McEwan is a dedicated student of cataclysm, delving into psychological temblors large and small." Queried by a contributor to *Time* why his novels were often so dark and bleak, McEwan replied simply: "Look at the front page of today's newspaper. We are a troubled lot, and literature is bound to reflect this. Any examination of the human state will take you into some dark places."

Reviews

[Publishers Weekly](#)

★ McEwan, Ian. [Atonement : A Novel](#). New York: Anchor Books, 2007.

This haunting novel, which just failed to win the Booker this year, is at once McEwan at his most closely observed and psychologically penetrating, and his most sweeping and expansive. It is in effect two, or even three, books in one, all masterfully crafted. The first part ushers us into a domestic crisis that becomes a crime story centered around an event that changes the lives of half a dozen people in an upper-middle-class country home on a hot English summer's day in 1935. Young Briony Tallis, a hyperimaginative 13-year-old who sees her older sister, Cecilia, mysteriously involved with their neighbor

Robbie Turner, a fellow Cambridge student subsidized by the Tallis family, points a finger at Robbie when her young cousin is assaulted in the grounds that night; on her testimony alone, Robbie is jailed. The second part of the book moves forward five years to focus on Robbie, now freed and part of the British Army that was cornered and eventually evacuated by a fleet of small boats at Dunkirk during the early days of WWII. This is an astonishingly imagined fresco that bares the full anguish of what Britain in later years came to see as a kind of victory. In the third part, Briony becomes a nurse amid wonderfully observed scenes of London as the nation mobilizes. No, she doesn't have Robbie as a patient, but she begins to come to terms with what she has done and offers to make amends to him and Cecilia, now together as lovers. In an ironic epilogue that is yet another coup de the tre, McEwan offers Briony as an elderly novelist today, revisiting her past in fact and fancy and contributing a moving windup to the sustained flight of a deeply novelistic imagination. With each book McEwan ranges wider, and his powers have never been more fully in evidence than here.

Enthralling. . . . With psychological insight and a command of sensual and historical detail, Mr. McEwan creates an absorbing fictional world." (**The Wall Street Journal**)

"[McEwan's] best novel so far. . . . It will break your heart." (**The Star - Toronto**)

"Magical. . . . A love story, a war story, and a story about stories, and so it hits the heart, the guts and the brain." (**The New York Observer**)

Suggested Readalikes

The Handmaid's Tale, by Margaret Atwood.

Girl with a Pearl Earring, by Tracy Chevalier.

Underworld, by Don DeLillo.

The Memory Keeper's Daughter, by Kim Edwards.

Middlesex, by Jeffrey Eugenides.

The Corrections, by Jonathan Franzen.

Love in the Time of Cholera, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, by Mark Haddon.

Enduring Love, by Ian McEwan.

On Chesil Beach, by Ian McEwan.

Infinite Jest, by David Foster Wallace.

The Book Thief, by Markus Zusak.

Web Resources

LitLovers Guides: www.litlovers.com/guide_atonemt.html

Author Webpage: www.ianmcewan.com

San Francisco Chronicle interview: www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2002/03/10/RV51718.DTL

McEwan discusses Atonement on the BBC World Book Club (audio): www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/133_wbc_archive_new/page4.shtml

BBC Animated Map—The Fall of France (Dunkirk): www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/launch_ani_fall_france_campaign.shtml

Imperial War Museum: www.iwm.org.uk