

Conversations with Ian McEwan

Edited by Ryan Roberts

“A Thing One Does”: A Conversation with Ian McEwan

Ryan Roberts/2008

Interview conducted in London on 12 June 2008, specifically for this volume. Printed with permission of author, with special thanks to Ian McEwan.

Ryan Roberts: Throughout your work, you have dealt with various aspects of relationships, often setting these relationships against external forces or individuals, but, as with *On Chesil Beach*, also exploring the intimacies associated with being a newly formed couple. What is it about such relationships that interests you?

Ian McEwan: My first reaction is to say, well, you'd have to be a psychopath or suffering from autism not to have an interest in relationships. We are social creatures, and relationships are where we live, unless our lives are spent tragically alone. And it's really where literature in the modern age—over the last 400-500 years—has lived. And the novel in particular has become the form to investigate them. So my own interests are fairly conventional.

I used to be drawn to the idea that any *sexual* relationship was a microcosm of power, but I feel less strongly about that. It's less the power aspects of the relationship that appeal to me these days and more the intricacies of misunderstanding, and for breakthrough into self-knowledge, for the ways in which relationships can disintegrate—and what makes them endure. *On Chesil Beach*, I suppose, was a small-scale investigation of some of those elements, particularly the misunderstandings that arise when people not only are unable to describe their feelings to each other, but can't even describe them to themselves.

Roberts: There's a bit of that in *The Innocent*, too, where Leonard and Maria murder Otto—there's an inability to come back from that, to find a way of communicating again.

McEwan: There are ways back, in all things, but often it simply doesn't happen. Emotions get in the way—emotions like pride, self-persuasion. That's

another aspect of this that interests me, and it's a concept associated with Bob Trivers, the evolutionary psychologist. I think it was Trivers who first said, when talking about deceit, that the simplest way to deceive someone is first to deceive yourself. If you want to cheat, it's far more effective to persuade yourself, because then you have nothing to hide. You're speaking your truth, as it were. I don't know how true it is in evolutionary terms, but this seems to say a lot about the way people are in confrontations or difficulties, personal difficulties. And we see it, too, in larger political terms. People distort or are selective with their memories and with evidence. It's that element now, in relationships, that seems to me so rich for investigation.

Roberts: Since we have this ability to self-persuade, what is your sense of the idea of a "truth" that is out there? If you only talk to parties who have been aggrieved, I assume that's just their perception of some greater truth?

McEwan: I don't hold with the sort of postmodern relativist view that the only truth is the one an individual asserts. I do believe there are realities that await our investigation. In that sense I'm an objectivist. I also accept from biology that through perception, cognition we have to construct the world . . . I mean, the extraordinary advances made, say, in the neuroscience of vision show that only a tiny portion of the retina actually shows us the world in detail. The rest is constructed around it. But there's something out there, and it's consistent and we've evolved in it and can operate in it and can successively refine our descriptions of it. In our perception of the truth, self-persuasion does play a role. We all stand somewhere on a spectrum. There are people who can be quite clinical about their own feelings in relation to what they think is really there. And there are other people who really cannot see the world apart from their feelings and projections about it. Somewhere along there we all must stand.

The pleasure and interest of writing a novel, of course, is that you can dictate all those terms. You can set the dials, as it were, of the narrative in such a way that the only truth you can know is through one character's eyes, or conversely, you can vary it as you go along or opt for some god-like omniscience.

Something rankles in me when people talk about "My truth." You must be more familiar with this in the universities than I am, especially in the world of literary theory. There's a strong anti-rationalist streak that I find intellectually repellent. I can't engage with it at all. That's one more reason why I find that I would rather read a cognitive psychologist, or an evolutionary psychologist, or a neuroscientist on human behavior, than I would, say, Jacques Derrida, Lacan, or Baudrillard.

Roberts: How do you view attempts by, for instance, the academy to lay on theory or to approach your work from that angle?

McEwan: Well, critical writing varies enormously. There are people still writing in terms that I can identify with—writing at the higher end of literary journalism. I'm happy reading Frank Kermode on Shakespeare. I don't even know what it's called—moral criticism perhaps—it's in the language that we speak. It's gratifying to a writer, to come under the gaze of a mind that has read a lot and thought a lot.

Clearly, the postmodern bandwagon has come to a halt, because it has lost a wider readership, and can't engage with the culture. For the first time in years I found myself reading a book about literary theory—it's by Edward Slingerland—on what science offers the humanities. It's a superb book, actually. But that's a bit of a digression.

Roberts: This ties in with the question of human nature that you wrote about in your piece about your expedition to the Arctic with Cape Farewell (and it sounds as if your new work will also focus on aspects of human nature). The essay revolves around the boot room, a place where equipment is put on, then shed, then taken by other members of the expedition as their needs dictate. There's a crucial passage in the article about human nature, art, and our ability to effect change: "But we will not rescue the earth from our own depredations until we understand ourselves a little more, even if we accept that we can never really change our natures." And you talk about the need for rules—boot room rules. How do we resolve within ourselves this sort of engagement with global issues (and there are many, not just climate issues, but AIDS, tyranny, poverty, etc.)? How do we engage with such issues when we're so inept at managing ourselves? Do you see any hope for engaging with any of these larger issues?

McEwan: I *do* see hope. We clearly are inept left alone to flounder, but we make societies, we live in cities, by and large they function, because we've devised rules, we've made social contracts that all trump our private needs for immediate gratification—to have what's not ours is pursued at a cost. Most of the really perceptive writers on climate change, accept that the problem has to be addressed within the context of global poverty. Burning fossil fuels has driven our civilization and has lifted millions, tens of millions *out* of poverty. Moral considerations apart, poverty is very bad for the climate.

The issue challenges our nature. Individually, we're competitive. Nations are competitive. They have to collaborate on this, and they can only do this if they exercise their rationality and agree on a set of rules within which they can compete. We get these standoffs between the United States, saying it won't sign up for anything unless China and India do, and they say they won't sign up because they have to lift millions out of poverty and, besides, they are not the real problem, the United States is. We need good rules within which these circular problems are going to be resolved.

There hasn't been much ground for optimism lately. CO₂ is rising two or three parts per million every year. We're now approaching the 400 level. The talk of trying to stabilize at 560 parts per million this century is looking increasingly shaky. And yet we know enough science, technology, and negotiating know-how. People know what needs to be done. In the end, self-interest rather than idealism is going to focus our minds. And even greed can be regulated in our favor—an effective carbon trading system could help drive down CO₂. And as I said in that piece, we're used to doing good works for those who might return the favor. We're fine-tuned to that process. Now we have to think outside the framework of an individual lifetime and start doing favors for unborn people.

The time scales are longer than what human nature is evolved to deal with. We're really looking at the next hundred or two hundred years. The severity of this is going to really hit people later in this century when you and I will be gone. So it is a challenge, and I *have* been writing about it. I'm writing a novel that has at its center a character who has rather too many weaknesses and faults. He's determined to do something about climate change. But what keeps getting in the way are all his defects. That's the simple premise.

Roberts: There's another quote from the same article in which you say, "Leave nothing to idealism or outrage, or even good art—we know in our hearts that the very best art is entirely and splendidly useless." In the face of needing rules to regulate us and to help push us along, could you elaborate on this idea? Do you think writing a novel that has at its center the subject of climate change will spark discussion? What can art do in such cases?

McEwan: I don't think it can do much. And I don't think it can do much about climate change. I suppose it can reflect the problem and pose the problem in terms that might be useful to people. I think we *do* face a test of our nature, and the more we know about that nature, the better we'll be able to face that test. That is why it's so important to look empirically at what we

are, how our cognitive abilities shape our interactions with the world and with each other. But, no, when I'm writing this novel I don't think I'm going to save the world, that's for sure.

Roberts: When it gets reviewed, the headlines will undoubtedly bring up the issue of climate change. Green is "in" now—there's a lot of fashion in the idea of "going green." Do you see that as just dressing up? As something that really doesn't have a lot of impact—the marketing of "going green"?

McEwan: What will really matter is when a country like the United States starts to build massive solar energy installations and, in doing so, decommissions something that's pouring CO₂ into the atmosphere. Using less of this or that helps in that it delays the problem, but it does not solve it. Driving a smaller car, turning down the thermostat might make us feel better. But ultimately we have to shift to clean energy sources.

There are many ways of seeing this problem. One eminent writer on climate change, Wallace Broecker, has made the analogy with sewage. In the nineteenth century, many large cities in the West started to deal with the problem of sewage disposal. There were people writing at the time saying that sewage is just a part of what we are and it's part of what we must pay for the privilege of living in a city. The cost of doing it is estimated at something like a hundred billion dollars, and it was done in the West over a period of a generation or two. *Huge* underground networks built at *fantastic* expense. Now, we might have to think of CO₂ as our new sewage.

But I don't mind the fashionability of it; it is important either way. There is a quiet industrial revolution taking place. Those hip West Coast guys who refined the internet want to relive their youth by developing clean energy technologies. There is a huge amount of innovation in solar energy going on. Then there is the boring economic stuff. The Germans allow people to sell the electricity they generate on their rooftop back to the utility companies at a highly subsidized rate. It's created a quarter of a million jobs in the solar and wind sector. Again, it's boot room rules stuff . . . within which consumerism could still go on. People could be just as greedy and competitive and say, "I've got a better solar roof top than you." That's fine. Human nature can flourish within that enclosure.

Roberts: There's so much to deal with when you think about such larger issues that it's hard to grapple with just how the different levels play with each other—how the popular, fashionable movements play in with the politics and how much the politicians are influenced by those fashionable movements.

McEwan: Yes, well within a democracy it is very useful that there are fashions and that politicians who want to be reelected must attend to them. But it also suggests a receptivity to anyone with enough vision to take a lead. From this point of view alone, what was a great tragedy of wasted opportunity it was, the election of George Bush. And we just have to hope that whoever is next (and I hope it is Obama) will take a lead on this.

Roberts: Again, it's that acceptance of change, acceptance of the reality around them. In the U.S. we've seen gas go up 50 percent, then double, and now when you look around at prices you find yourself saying, "Oh, this is the cheap gas. It's under \$4.00!"

McEwan: Yes, and we think your gas is free. It's amazing what everyone gets used to. I mean, we're living with, I would guess, the equivalent of about \$8.00 a gallon. It doesn't stop people filling up their cars . . .

Roberts: Related to the issue of politics, I wonder about the issue of a nation atoning for its past, its actions. Is there atonement on a national level, do you think? How does that differ from our personal atonements?

McEwan: I think it's quite difficult to do anything about a deed done in the past. But there some things you can do. This year I was in Australia on the day that its prime minister apologized to the aboriginal population. Even in the cynical Australian press, it was very significant, although mostly symbolic. I see the same has happened recently in Canada. Some nations have confronted their past more effectively than other. Atonement is simply being aware of the past rather than repressing it or distorting it. So on the one hand the commission set up in South Africa after the apartheid regime fell did enact for the national conscience the cruelties of the regime. I think the Germans have been better than most in dealing with their past. In contrast the Turks are still in denial about the Armenian massacre and are prosecuting writers for mentioning it. The Japanese have their own forms of denial. Atonement on a national scale is about dredging up the muck rather than burying it. This can't be played out before any supernatural entity that can forgive you. It's really about how the national narrative incorporates what happened.

Roberts: What do you feel is the role of an author related to political discourse or such social issues? What sort of voice or what impact do you think authors can have on such issues?

McEwan: Well, writers have to be careful about being drawn in to a celebrity-opinion culture that has a view about everything. Yet, on the other hand, sometimes it's important to speak up when certain public issues cross your own concerns. The media now are so relentless and hungry and ubiquitous and permanent. They roll through every hour of the day and night. And in their hunger they constantly, *constantly* churn out opinion. Opinion is cheap, I guess—you don't have to send anyone anywhere—and it's sometimes difficult to take it seriously.

So it's really a matter of balance. The other thing is that writing fiction is a private, obsessive business, and as soon as you come out . . . there's never anything final if you say something in public. You are likely to get misquoted, then attacked on the basis of something you never said. It's like shaking one of those little snow storms in a jar—a million blogs float up. The levels of debate are pretty low, with much fury and spite. And yet, there are quite sensible things, but finding them is difficult. Still, for all the noise and pointlessness, it is still worth speaking up if you feel strongly.

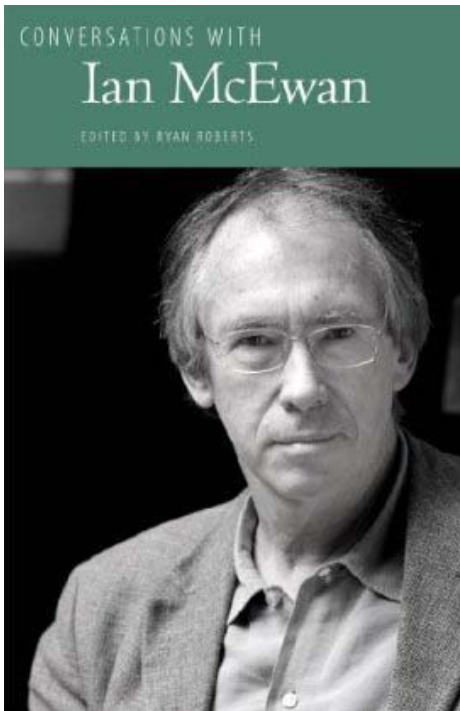
Roberts: You say that writing is very personal and obsessive, that it takes a lot of quiet and a great deal of introspection. How has that changed over your career?

McEwan: The world is louder. The internet has made it loud, and rolling news has made it loud. Also adding to the volume, and this is a local matter in Britain, the national temperament has changed. It has become a lot more febrile, more emotional, idiosyncratic, labile. The nation has constant mood swings. The prime minister can be God one week and Satan the next. Every small remark can create days of pointless rumination by professional rune-readers. I'm not saying you can't have solitude these days, but the difference now is that you have to work for it, whereas in the seventies and eighties it was there anyway. It was the air you breathed and, if you wanted to be in public, *that* was the effort you made. Now it's the other way around.

Roberts: Let's turn to music. It features in several of your works, and you recently mentioned to Ivan Hewett in the *Telegraph* that "music can tie itself to memory in a special way."¹ Other than serving as a subject for your work, to what extent does music or other artistic forms influence your writing?

1. Hewett, Ivan. "Ian McEwan: Opera? Great Music, Terrible Plots." *The Guardian*, 26 May 2008. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/05/26/bomcewan126.xml>.

For the full interview, please consult *Conversations with Ian McEwan*, Edited by Ryan Roberts
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Conversations with Ian McEwan collects sixteen interviews, conducted over three decades, with the author of such highly praised novels as *Enduring Love*, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *On Chesil Beach*, and *Solar*.

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.

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SOLAR – A New Novel by Ian McEwan

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Dan Franklin, Publisher, comments: '*Solar* is a novel about one of the most serious threats to our world – global warming – but is also very, very funny. It shows a fresh side to Ian McEwan's work, that he's a comic writer of genius.'

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