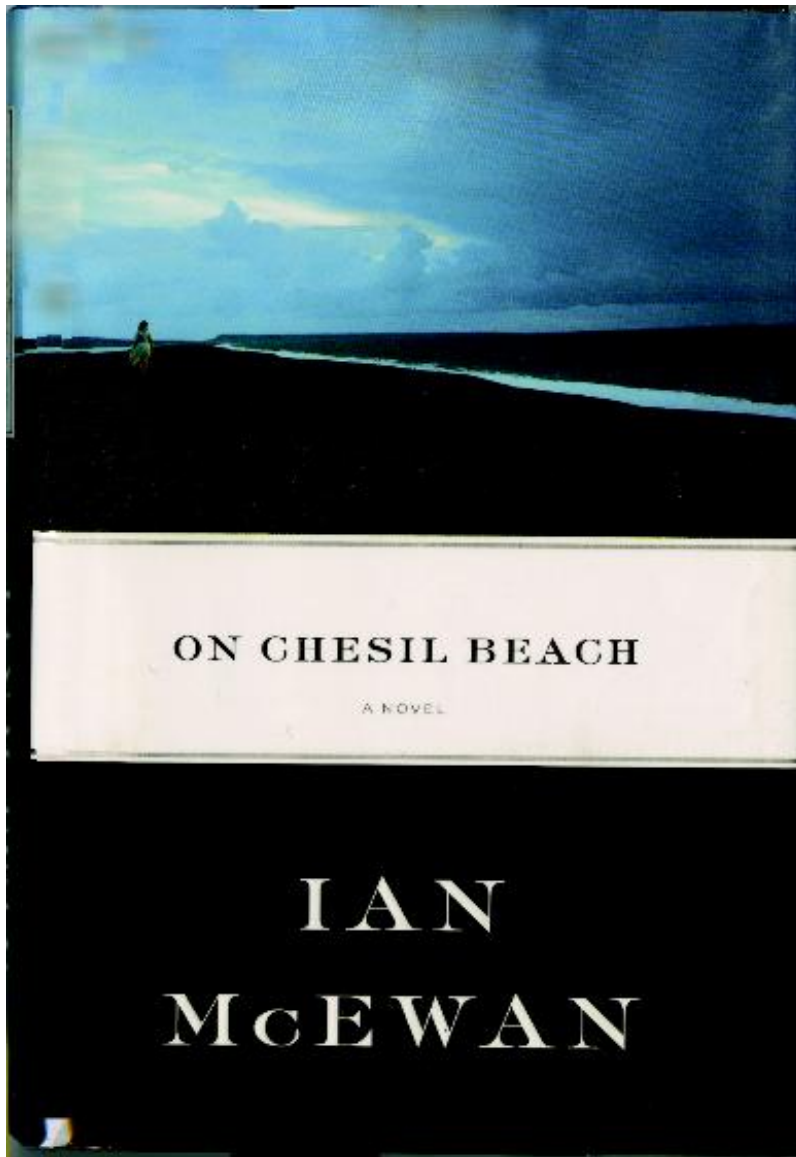


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

About the Book



Recently married, a young couple-- Florence, a talented musician and shy daughter of an aloof Oxford academic and a successful businessman, and Edward an earnest history student with little experience of women--looks forward to the future, but cannot help but worry about their upcoming wedding night.

About the Author Source: <http://www.ianmcewan.com>

Ian McEwan was born on 21 June 1948 in Aldershot, England. He studied at the University of Sussex, where he received a BA degree in English Literature in 1970. While completing his MA degree in English Literature at the University of East Anglia, he took a creative writing course taught by the novelists Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson.

McEwan's works have earned him worldwide critical acclaim. He won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1976 for his first collection of short stories *First Love, Last Rites*; the Whitbread Novel Award (1987) and the Prix Fémina Etranger (1993) for *The Child in Time*; and Germany's Shakespeare Prize in 1999. He has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction numerous times, winning the award for *Amsterdam* in 1998. His novel *Atonement* received the WH Smith Literary Award (2002), National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award (2003), Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction (2003), and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel (2004). He was awarded a CBE in 2000. In 2006, he won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for his novel *Saturday*.

Awards

On Chesil Beach was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize (<http://www.themanbookerprize.com/>).

Reviews

Booklist *Starred Review*

In previous novels, McEwan has measured the effect of the cataclysmic moment on personal lives. And he has never shied away from full-tilt exploration of the tensions inherent in human sexuality. These two predilections merge, almost gently, in his new novella, which, despite its short length, is anything but small in its creative concept and the consequent poignancy it arouses in the reader. This achingly beautiful narrative, which seamlessly flows between the points of view of the two primary characters, peers behind closed doors, but never lasciviously, at a young married couple on their honeymoon night. The time is the brink of the 1960s, but the young couples virginity, and their stiltedness in general and certainly with each other (McEwan makes certain to take several glances backward to fill in their separate biographical and psychological profiles), seems a remnant of Victorian times rather than anticipating the free and easy sexuality of the decade to come. The cataclysmic moment here is simply a case of premature ejaculation during the couples first lovemaking; and from that incident, which under normal circumstances, with normally accepting and loving individuals, would have been a minor glitch in their marital history, immediately arises a deep misunderstanding that proves disastrous to the marriage. Conventional in construction and realistic in its representation of addled psychology, the novel is ingenious for its limited but deeply resonant focus.

Publishers Weekly * Starred Review *

Not quite novel or novella, McEwan's masterful 13th work of fiction most resembles a five-part classical drama rendered in prose. It opens on the anxious Dorset Coast wedding suite dinner of Edward Mayhew and the former Florence Ponting, married in the summer of 1963 at 23 and 22 respectively; the looming dramatic crisis is the marriage's impending consummation, or lack of it. Edward is a rough-hewn but sweet

student of history, son of an Oxfordshire primary school headmaster and a mother who was brain damaged in an accident when Edward was five. Florence, daughter of a businessman and (a rarity then) a female Oxford philosophy professor, is intense but warm and has founded a string quartet. Their fears about sex and their inability to discuss them form the story's center. At the book's midpoint, McEwan (*Atonement*, etc.) goes into forensic detail about their naïve and disastrous efforts on the marriage bed, and the final chapter presents the couple's explosive postcoital confrontation on Chesil Beach. Staying very close to this marital trauma and the circumstances surrounding it (particularly class), McEwan's flawless omniscient narration has a curious (and not unpleasantly condescending) fable-like quality, as if an older self were simultaneously disavowing and affirming a younger. The story itself isn't arresting, but the narrator's journey through it is.

Literary Criticism

The Magus of Fitzrovia: Ian McEwan Talks about His New Novel

I meet Ian McEwan for lunch at Elena's L'Etoile near his Fitzrovia home. He is greeted like a member of the family, and he tells me with relish that the restaurant features in *The Dean's December* by one of his literary heroes, Saul Bellow.

McEwan's last book, *Saturday*, was explicitly influenced by Bellow, and in many ways a homage to the American master. But his new and eleventh novel, *On Chesil Beach* (a short masterwork), explores different terrain. Set in 1962, it takes as its narrative focus the wedding night of a virginal couple, Edward and Florence, at a hotel on the Dorset coast, and, more specifically, their first, disastrous sexual encounter.

The choice of year, McEwan readily concedes, is no accident, chosen because Britain was then on the cusp of a revolution in sexual mores, social norms and pop music. As Larkin famously wrote: 'Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three / (which was rather late for me) / Between the end of the Chatterley ban / And the Beatles' first LP.' In the novel, Edward is already entranced by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and first meets Florence at a CND meeting in Oxford. They have premonitions of what is to come, the tremors beneath their feet. But, as with Larkin, the transformation does not come quite in time for their wedding night.

'And what stood in their way?' McEwan writes. 'Their personalities and their pasts, their ignorance and fear, timidity, squeamishness, lack of entitlement or experience or easy manners, then the tail end of a religious prohibition, their Englishness and class, and history itself. Nothing much at all.' The novelist, who is 58, has the sparkling eyes, gentle manner and easy smile of a compact magus. Remembering this line from the book, he chuckles over his duck starter: 'It is meant to be a little joke. They can just tower over you and trap you, all those things, and yet somehow we do keep clear in

our head a very powerful fiction of free will. The first few notes I wrote for this novel were all about the tone of the narration and the words were something like "forgiving" and "a little wry". I wanted somebody who has already seen it, seen the whole story to its end and has forgiven everyone. It was no one's fault. Edward and Florence are of their time, and they are not armed for getting themselves out of this mess.' As the sexual debacle unfolds, and Florence dashes out on to the elemental stretch of shingle, some of the first readers of the novel have anticipated an outburst of savagery--the literary terrors associated with McEwan's early short stories and novellas. 'A lot of people did say they expected Edward to pick up a rock and dash her head off with it, which would have been rather crass,' he says, a little ruefully.

If anything, however, the repression of the primal as the lovers confront one another is more unsettling than its violent release would have been. We learn that Edward, the upright, bookish son of a schoolmaster, has previously discovered 'a spontaneous, decisive self' in fist-fighting.

Florence's horror of sex, meanwhile, has roots much darker than mere social conformity--abuse by her father, hinted at by McEwan but never spelt out, and all the more troubling for that. 'There was another element,' he writes, 'far worse in its way and quite beyond her control, summoning memories she had long ago decided were not really hers.' For Florence, liberation and self-control are discovered in her creation of a string quartet, and the redemptive power of music is at the heart of *On Chesil Beach*. In an earlier novel, *The Child in Time*, a bereft mother discovers hope in Schubert's String Quintet in C major. In McEwan's new book, it is Mozart's String Quartet in D major that suffuses the story as a reminder of the sublime.

'I have written a lot about music,' he says. 'I am just finishing an opera with Michael Berkeley and it is very exciting to collaborate. We live reasonably near the Wigmore Hall and we can walk there. In fact the last thing that really made a huge impression on me, hearing it again, was the Schubert Octet. I did write a story in the early Seventies about a string quartet but I've lost it, I can't find it anywhere.' The opera will receive its premiere in June 2008, and then tour the country. 'It is a chamber opera, but Michael has scored it in such a way that it is 14 musicians, 15 musicians, but it can be easily turned into a Beethoven style, medium-sized classic orchestra. So he has made an allowance for that if we want to do it in a grander way, and I think there is going to be a performance in Switzerland with a big orchestra, and maybe also Sydney.' He enthuses about a production of *The Barber of Seville* he has just seen. 'My sons [by his first marriage] have no interest in classical music, and I have laid it on them at various times. How can they go through life not knowing the things that we might take for granted? I suppose the pleasure is so intense that it does make one, whether one is a believer or not, thrilled to be alive. Music is the one area where I feel there is something almost inhuman about the genius. I feel this especially about Bach, but Mozart as well.' The title of his new book invites obvious comparison with Arnold's *Dover Beach* (1867), a poem that also featured prominently in *Saturday*. If Arnold was

marking the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of the Sea of Faith, what is McEwan saying about the global currents and tides about to change the world in 1962?

'I didn't decide [on the title] until the end, actually, and at that point on the computer I just called it "Seaside Novella" or something bland like that. Maybe I just called it "Short Novel", I can't remember.

'But inevitably, once I did call it that, I thought back that maybe it is a sort of resumption. I don't think the novel would have made any sense if it had been set in a little hotel in the Midlands, or inland anywhere. It had to be on the sea.' Much of the novel's imagery--'the matter lay between them, as solid as a geographical feature'--as well as its physical context is supplied by landscape. He calls the beach 'a stage projected into the water' where a terrible human drama is played out.

'Landscapes are so powerful, I think, to people in love,' he says. 'To be in a landscape in love--I mean, the city obviously has its attractions, too, but there is something that I remember as thrilling to be in love in a beautiful place where all those pathetic fallacies really do reign.' All who know the novelist attest to the personal happiness and peace that he has enjoyed since marrying his second wife, the journalist and author, Annalena McAfee, ten years ago. Arnold's poem ends on a famously pessimistic note, whereas McEwan, a humanist to the last, concludes by celebrating the healing power of 'love and patience'--even if it is too late for Florence and Edward.

'If only he had spoken up--a word or a gesture--but he understands that, that's the difference, I suppose. Anyway, his life hasn't added up to much, but it's not tragic, and we can assume that hers was at least a success professionally. I spent a long time thinking that, actually, I had to make her disappear from the last pages or else we wouldn't miss her in the way he does. She has to be off-stage, she has to just be an unseen box, a collection of Schubert or Beethoven.' Although he is happy to be doing only 'minimal' publicity for *On Chesil Beach*, this is a big year for McEwan, as his acclaimed novel, *Atonement* (recently the subject of a contrived plagiarism row), reaches the silver screen, starring Keira Knightley and James McAvoy. The novelist, who is executive producer on the movie, sings the praises of the young actress, Saoirse Ronan, who plays the lead character aged 13, and he seems unfazed at the prospect of his words once again being turned into multiplex fodder.

Which is not to say that every film of his books has turned out exactly as he had envisaged--Daniel Craig in *Enduring Love* being a prime example. 'Once he took up the Bond job, I realised that, actually, that was always my disquiet, because he is quite a tough-looking guy, and he can't disguise it even wearing specs. So he was never really that threatened [by his male stalker]. In the script, and then in the movie, the Daniel Craig character goes round to his pursuer and smashes his place with a baseball bat!' McEwan has been admirably thoughtful in his response to the war on terror, and refused to endorse the kneejerk slogans of either side in the debate. Iraq,

he says, 'has clearly been a total disaster and one would wish that it had never happened'. But he remains convinced that there was a powerful humanitarian case for the removal of Saddam, which needed to be backed up by serious plans for reconstruction.

'I desperately wanted it to succeed, and this is where I parted company with those who would rather that Iraq was reduced to a pile of burnt toast than to see George Bush succeed. I thought that was just parochial and cynical. I didn't like to see murderous Zarkawi supporters slaughtering Muslims at prayer, or in market places, and be hailed by sections of the Left as liberators, freedom-fighters or even insurgents. The silence of the mosques here bothers me when another 80 people are killed.' He remains a man of the Left, but inquiringly so, constantly testing assumptions and orthodoxies. As a longstanding environmentalist, he watches David Cameron with keen interest. 'I will judge him by what he does. Obviously riding round on a bicycle is not going to be it.

And I bought one of those wind turbines and I sent it back, it was complete nonsense. You cannot generate any useful energy from a £1,500 thing from B&Q.' As for Blair, he thinks the final audit will be kinder once the bitterness of Iraq has subsided.

I admit that Ian McEwan is a hero of mine: a man of letters and liberty, sceptical, decent and free. As we part company outside the restaurant, the stone of London looking its best in the early spring light, he recalls Bellow's line that a man could be happy living on Charlotte Street.

He looks pretty happy to me.

Source: McEwan, Ian, and Matthew DaAncona. "The Magus of Fitzrovia: Ian McEwan Talks about His New Novel." Spectator 9321 (7 Apr. 2007): 16-17. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 269. Detroit: Gale, 2009. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions *Source: <http://www.randomhouse.com>*

1. What do the novel's opening lines tell us about Edward and Florence? How did your perceptions of them change throughout the subsequent pages? What details did you eventually know about them that they never fully revealed to one another?
2. Is Edward's libido truly the primary reason he proposes marriage, or were other factors involved (perhaps ones he did not even admit to himself)? Are relationships harmed or helped by cultural restrictions against sex before marriage?

3. Ian McEwan describes the novel's time period as an era when youth was not glorified but adulthood was. We are also told that Edward was born in 1940, while his parents contemplated possible outcomes of the war with Germany. At what point did Edward and Florence's solemnity become viewed as old-fashioned? What contributed to that shift? What are your recollections, or those shared by relatives who lived it, of the emerging youth culture of the late 1960s and '70s?
4. Chapter two describes how Florence and Edward met; the first paragraph tells us that they were too sophisticated to believe in destiny. How would you characterize the kind of love they developed? What made them believe they were perfect for one another? Are any two people perfect for one another?
5. What did Edward's decision to go to London for college indicate about his goals? What was Florence's dream for her future? Was marriage a greater social necessity for her, as a woman? Would her career as a classical musician necessarily have been sacrificed if she had remained with Edward?
6. Compare Edward's upbringing to Florence's. How did their parents affect their attitudes toward life? How did the limitations of Edward's mother shape his feelings about responsibility and women? Was Florence drawn to her mother's competitiveness?
7. To what extent was the financial gulf between Edward and Florence a source of trouble? How might the relationship have unfolded, particularly during this time period, if Edward, not Florence, had been the spouse with financial security?
8. Chapter four recounts the moment when Edward tells Florence he loves her because she's "square," not in spite of it. Are their opposing tastes the product of their temperaments or the episodes in their young lives? What is your understanding of her revulsion to sex?
9. Discuss the novel's setting, which forms its title. What is the effect of the creaky hotel McEwan creates, and the crashing permanent waves on a beach where the temperatures are still chilly in June? What does it say about the newlyweds that this is the scene of their wedding night?
10. In the end, Edward explores various "what ifs." Would their marriage have lasted if he had consented to her request for platonic living arrangements? What are the best ways to predict whether a couple can sustain a marriage?

11. How would Edward and Florence have fared in the twenty-first century? Has the nature of love changed as western society has evolved?
12. The author tells us that the marriage ended because Edward was callous, and that as Florence ran from him, she was at the same time desperately in love with him. Why did Edward respond the way he did? Why was it so difficult for them to be honest about their feelings? How would you have reacted that night?
13. Discuss the structure of *On Chesil Beach*. What is the effect of reading such a compressed storyline, weaving one night with the years before and after it? How did it shape your reading to see only Edward's point of view in the end? What might Florence's perspective have looked like?

Multimedia

Ian McEwan's 'On Chesil Beach' (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10582223>

Ian McEwan: On Chesil Beach (Video Clip)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKkzkR_uE7c

It is spring 2007. An American bookseller and filmmaker spend the day with McEwan in London. By film's end, a press kerfuffle has been averted, Kafka has come up in conversation twice, and the natural balance of England's beaches has been restored.

Further Reading

***Solar* by Ian McEwan**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1351695>

(Call number: Fiction McEwan)

The literary event of the season: a new novel from Ian McEwan, as surprising as it is masterful. Michael Beard is a Nobel prize-winning physicist whose best work is behind him. Trading on his reputation, he speaks for enormous fees, lends his name to the letterheads of renowned scientific institutions, and half-heartedly heads a government-backed initiative tackling global warming. While he coasts along in his professional life, Michael's personal life is another matter entirely. His fifth marriage is crumbling under the weight of his infidelities. But this time the tables are turned: His wife is having an affair, and Michael realizes he is still in love with her. When Michael's personal and professional lives begin to intersect in unexpected ways, an opportunity presents itself in the guise of an invitation to travel to New Mexico.

***Atonement* by Ian McEwan**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1186117>

(Call number: Fiction McEwan)

On a summer day in 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses a moment's flirtation between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, the son of a servant. But Briony's incomplete grasp of adult motives and her precocious imagination bring about a crime that will change all their lives, a crime whose repercussions Atonement follows through the chaos and carnage of World War II and into the close of the twentieth century.

Saturday by Ian McEwan

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1237533>

(Call number: Fiction McEwan)

Saturday is a masterful novel set within a single day in February 2003. Henry Perowne is a contented man -- a successful neurosurgeon, happily married to a newspaper lawyer, and enjoying good relations with his children. Henry wakes to the comfort of his large home in central London on this, his day off. He is as at ease here as he is in the operating room. Outside the hospital, the world is not so easy or predictable. There is an impending war against Iraq, and a general darkening and gathering pessimism since the New York and Washington attacks two years before. On this particular Saturday morning, Perowne's day moves through the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Amsterdam by Ian McEwan

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1146294>

(Call number: Fiction McEwan)

On a chilly February day, two old friends meet in the throng outside a London crematorium to pay their last respects to Molly Lane. Both Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday had been Molly's lovers in the days before they reached their current eminence: Clive is Britain's most successful modern composer, and Vernon is editor of the newspaper *The Judge*. Gorgeous, feisty Molly had other lovers, too, notably Julian Garmony, Foreign Secretary, a notorious right-winger tipped to be the next prime minister. In the days that follow Molly's funeral, Clive and Vernon will make a pact with consequences that neither could have foreseen.

Author's official website

<http://www.ianmcewan.com/>

Information, news, and resources about the author.

Read-Alikes

London Fields by Martin Amis

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1006037>

(Call number: Fiction Amis)

London Fields is Amis' murder story for the end of the millennium. The murderee is Nicola Six, a "black hole" of sex and self-loathing intent on orchestrating her own extinction. The murderer may be Keith Talent, a violent lowlife whose only passions are pornography and darts. Or is the killer the rich, honorable, and dimly romantic Guy Clinch?

Goodbye, Columbus by Phillip Roth

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1057945>

(Call number: Fiction Roth)

Roth's award-winning first book instantly established its author's reputation as a writer of explosive wit, merciless insight, and a fierce compassion for even the most self-deluding of his characters. *Goodbye, Columbus* is the story of Neil Klugman and pretty, spirited Brenda Patimkin, he of poor Newark, she of suburban Short Hills, who meet one summer break and dive into an affair that is as much about social class and suspicion as it is about love. The novella is accompanied by five short stories that range in tone from the iconoclastic to the astonishingly tender and that illuminate the subterranean conflicts between parents and children and friends and neighbors in the American Jewish diaspora.

The Book of Illusions by Paul Auster

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1193241>

(Call number: Fiction Auster)

A man's obsession with a silent-film star sends him on a journey into a shadow world of lies, illusions, and unexpected love Six months after losing his wife and two young sons in an airplane crash, Vermont professor David Zimmer spends his waking hours mired in a blur of alcoholic grief and self-pity. Then, watching television one night, he stumbles upon a clip from a lost silent film by comedian Hector Mann. Zimmer's interest is piqued, and he soon finds himself embarking on a journey around the world to research a book on this mysterious figure, who vanished from sight in 1929 and has been presumed dead for sixty years.

Mr. Phillips by John Lanchester

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1166912>

(Call number: Fiction Lanchester)

Mr. Phillips wakes on the morning of July 31 in his modest, nearly mortgage-free home, in the bed he has contentedly shared with his wife of thirty years (though to be honest, at night he lies beside her and dreams of other women), ready to face another ordinary day. Except that for Mr. Phillips, it is not an ordinary day, for on Friday, July 28, he was summarily sacked. Nonetheless, he rises at his usual hour and prepares himself as he has done his entire working life for the office he no longer has. This is the story of one day in the life of a decent man who only forty-eight hours before knew exactly who and what he was--husband and father, accountant, home-owner, son--and who on this day wonders who and what he can become.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

