

Ian McEwan: *Atonement* (Cape) R170.00

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Ian McEwan has made a name for himself as Ian Macabre, by producing deft little studies in evil like *The Comfort of Strangers*, *Black Dogs* and *Amsterdam*. In all of these, evil is a given, an unquestioned if mysterious attribute of those strangers upon whose comfort one may be unfortunate enough to depend, as unmistakable as two black dogs in a deserted countryside. *Atonement*, then comes as a surprise: McEwan has not only done something better than anything he's done before, he's done something different. For if evil is still present, it is no longer a simple presence: it could be as apparently straightforward as the rape of a young girl, but it could equally be the unintended result of an action prompted by love in pursuit of justice.

*Atonement* has been compared with Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* and LP Hartley's *The Go-Between*, and indeed it does have in common with those novels a naïve protagonist upon whose uncomprehending but strangely precocious consciousness the perplexities of adult sexuality are registered in a distorted but vivid way.

But McEwan's epigraph points us to a different novel, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*: also the story of an over-stimulated young girl whose hyperactive imagination leads her into humiliating error. Austen was making fun of the vogue of her time for Gothic novels, and of its effect upon the young imagination; McEwan's novel is no less of a reflection upon the relation between fiction and presumption.

For if Briony, his young protagonist, is on the one hand a naïve thirteen-year old, she is on the other an aspiring novelist, and her act of betrayal, or of disastrous misinterpretation, is in essence a story she constructs from the events around her: coming upon her cousin being sexually assaulted in the dark, she "recognises" the assailant as her sister's lover, Robbie, whom she regards as a "maniac," having read a sexually explicit letter he wrote her sister: "Everything connected. It was her own discovery. It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her."

For Briony, a satisfyingly symmetrical construction; for Robbie, five years in prison. But Briony's story is not a malicious fabrication, as Robbie assumes: it is an interpretation informed by her preconceptions: "The truth instructed her eyes. So when she said over and again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate."

Her sincerity does not prevent Briony from entering into her own plot with an avidity that to an outsider would seem monstrous, but that is in fact only the fervour of the budding novelist gathering material: "The very complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit."

*Atonement*, then, is as much about the business of writing novels as about a group of English upper-class people in the nineteen thirties – which probably makes the novel sound deadly dull, whereas in fact it's a riveting read. This is because McEwan has lost nothing of his narrative drive in extending his range, and never turns his characters into mere vehicles for his ideas: however eloquently they negotiate these ideas, they remain acutely observed individuals in a meticulously recreated milieu. The time is the summer of 1935, while England is preparing for war; and a large part of the novel takes us into that war with Robbie, more specifically during the retreat to Dunkirk – a masterly reconstruction of that event as well as a necessary exploration of Robbie's consciousness.

As part of Briony's atonement she opts not to go to Cambridge like her sister before her, but to become a nurse; and again the recreation of the atmosphere in a large wartime hospital is engrossing in its own terms and yet functional for its place in Briony's narrative.

McEwan brings these two protagonists, the aspiring novelist and her victim, together for a confrontation – not quite an expiation, not quite the atonement Briony was seeking, but an effort at reparation that is extended and accepted: “Robbie said softly: ‘Just do all the things we’ve asked.’ It was almost conciliatory, that ‘just’ but not quite, not yet.”

Briony interprets her task more broadly than Robbie’s commission: her atonement has to be enacted in her own terms: ‘She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin.’

In Briony’s beginning is our ending. The running irony is of course that the novel Briony resolves to write is the novel we have been reading, only we have read it with very much more understanding than she has at the time. And the insight that emerges, the crime for which she seeks atonement, is that she has subordinated the narratives of other people to her own plot: if there is a villain of the piece, it is not the rapist (although he is there too, and he is horrible), but the novelist gathering all experience into the net of her fiction.

By the novelist’s logic, the way to atone for this it is to commence a “new draft,” that is, to make the act of appropriation as thorough and conscientious as possible. This may be less self-serving than it sounds: McEwan has said in a recent interview that “Novels are about showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else. It is the basis of all sympathy, empathy and compassion.”

This is not a consolation McEwan offers his novelist-protagonist. In the book’s curious coda, the seventy-seven-year-old Briony, now a successful writer, realises: “The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her.”

There is a sense in which this is a highly arrogant claim, casting the novelist as the supreme creator and arbiter of values. But there is a sense also in which it is a chastened recognition that there is a human price to be paid for the gift of writing; if it is often other people who pay that price, the novelist is left with a debt she – or he -- cannot repay. In this particular transaction the privileged party is the reader of this quite magnificent novel.