

On Chesil Beach by Ian McEwan (Jonathan Cape) R212.00

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After the triumphal series of *Amsterdam*, *Atonement* and *Saturday*, Ian McEwan's latest offering seems modest: running to a mere 166 pages, it is a low-key, indeed excruciatingly slow, account of the wedding night of an inexperienced young couple in 1962.

Why 1962? Were wedding nights any different then? Well, yes.

It seems inescapable, in reviewing this novel, to quote the opening of Philip Larkin's wonderfully wry poem, *Annus Mirabilis*: "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 setting his novel so precisely in 1962, McEwan must have amused himself with the thought that he was writing an exemplum on Larkin's text. For Edward and Florence, the twenty-two-year old couple blundering into marriage, are imprisoned in the attitudes that, according to Larkin, blighted sexual relations in their generation ("A shame that started at sixteen/ And spread to everything").

There is something arrogant about a writer at the height of his powers, blithely defying the anxious rules lesser writers feel constrained by. McEwan unapologetically adopts the unfashionable device of the omniscient narrator: where most modern novelists pretend to know only as much as their characters, McEwan revels in the wisdom of hindsight, and, as knowingly and authoritatively as any nineteenth-century novelist, pronounces on the blunders and blindnesses of his time-bound characters. Speaking of the couple's impulse to leave their wedding dinner uneaten, he comments: "It was, in theory, open to them to abandon their plates, seize the wine bottle by the neck and run down to the shore and kick their shoes off and exult in their liberty. . . . In just a few years' time, that would be the kind of thing quite ordinary young people would do. But for now, the times held them." The danger of this assumption of superiority is, of course, that the author could seem to be sneering at his characters, and inviting his readers to do the same: How quaintly clumsy they are, compared with our enlightened views and sexual poise!

But this is where McEwan can trust his command of his medium: his narrative is so finely and intimately controlled that even while we may be amused at some of the solemnities of the time, we smile in recognition of a common human awkwardness, in solidarity, not condescension.

We get to know Edward and Florence in two time schemes: along one axis of the novel their wedding dinner and its aftermath are described in minute detail, along another axis we are given the prehistory of the marriage. The wedding night in a sense has been predetermined by the prehistory: unique as Edward and Florence are, they are also the products of a very precisely defined and described background.

Edward, a graduate in history from University College, London, the son of a small-town schoolmaster and a brain-damaged mother, has about him a certain belligerence, usually well hidden under his grammar-school manner and basic decency, stemming from social awkwardness and inexperience. Sexually, his imagination outstrips his experience, and he is not as confident as he likes to appear: "His specific worry, based on one unfortunate

experience, was of over-excitement, of what he had heard someone describe as ‘arriving too soon’”.

Florence, the daughter of a well-to-do businessman and an Oxford don, is an aspiring musician and graduate from the Royal College of Music, firmly in command of her string quartet, diffident in less structured situations. Sincerely as she loves Edward, she cannot bring herself to want him sexually, or to want to subject herself to his all-too-evident desire: “She simply did not want to be ‘entered’ or ‘penetrated’. Sex with Edward could not be the summation of her joy, but was the price she must pay for it.”

McEwan alternates between Florence’s perspective and Edward’s, and it becomes achingly clear that each has a coherent and convincing point of view, deficient only in being blind to the other’s. Every gesture Florence makes in an attempt to postpone the dreaded culmination of the wedding meal, is interpreted by Edward as a sign of passion, even an invitation, until, when they are at last on the formidable marriage bed ... well, suffice it to say that things go messily, hilariously, tragically wrong.

McEwan repeatedly seems to imply that in a later, more conscious and articulate age, Edward and Florence could have found “a shared language” to discuss what it is that unites and separates them: “The language and practice of therapy, the currency of feelings diligently shared, mutually analysed, were not yet in general circulation.”

On this reading, we are better off than Edward and Florence, in having a sexual vocabulary with which to negotiate the treacherous shoals of human relations. But what makes this novel more than an entertaining period piece is MacEwan’s insight into the aloneness that lies just under so much human discourse, even in our most intimate moments.

Edward and Florence are types not of the young people of 1962, before the invention of sexual intercourse, but of all people of all times who have been separated by what they thought they most had in common, who have placed their faith in the magic words “I love you” : “the unfading formula that bound them, and that surely proved their interests were identical.”