THE

THE CONNELL SHORT GUIDE

TO IAN MCEWAN'S

ATONEMENT

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ROBERT HARRIS

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Theo Tait

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Introduction

When *Atonement* was published in 2001, Ian McEwan was already one of Britain's leading novelists, but his new book took his career to a different level. John Updike noted that whereas McEwan's previous novels had tended to be "short, smart and dark", *Atonement* was "a beautiful and majestic fictional panorama". His earlier fiction had consisted of two identifiable cycles. First came two short story collections and two short novels, *The Cement Garden* (1979) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), which earned him the nickname "Ian Macabre". These works combine lurid detail – sexual aberration, violence, cruelty – with a steely detachment; his prose was often described as "surgical". After that followed a series of five slightly longer novels which retain a nightmarish edge: they feature fatal balloon accidents; hideous protracted murders; dogs trained by the Gestapo to rape. However, they also have an explicit political or social aspect. *The Child in Time* (1987) begins with a child-snatching, but widens out into an examination of child-rearing and Thatcherism. *The Innocent* (1990) and *Black Dogs* (1992) both examine 20th century European history against fraught personal relationships, while *Enduring Love* (1992) turns a story of sexual obsession into a wider argument about rationality and irrationality, evolution and self-interest.

Atonement preserves some of these features. At its centre is a shocking episode, or two shocking episodes, concerning taboo sexual desire; and this private drama is played out against a larger historical canvas. It has the tough-minded precision of his earlier work, but seems to take place in a different key – grander, more expansive and warmer. It is sophisticated and features a range of styles set over four different periods of time, yet in some ways it resembles a mainstream family saga, a conventional love story.

Atonement was very well received both by the critics and by the public. James Wood described it as "certainly" McEwan's "finest and most complex novel". Frank Kermode agreed, calling it "easily his finest", while Hermione Lee suggested it was his best yet – though some critics, like many readers since, complained about the frustrating ending. His previous novel, *Enduring Love*, had been a bestseller, but *Atonement* was a much bigger commercial success, selling more than four million copies in Britain and abroad during its first decade in print, and spawning a successful film. Along with the novels that followed it, *Saturday* (2005) and *On Chesil Beach* (2007), it helped establish McEwan as, in The New Yorker's words, "England's national novelist".

Designed to be read on several levels at once, *Atonement* is both a gripping yarn about love,

survival and lives turned upside down, and also a reflection on truth and memory, guilt and atonement, experience and literary tradition.

A summary of the plot

Part One takes place over the course of a day and a night, during a heat wave in the summer of 1935, at the Tallis family's grand country house in Surrey. Briony Tallis, 13, a budding writer, is preparing to stage a melodrama that she has written in order to impress her brother Leon, who is coming home that evening with his friend, a confectionary tycoon named Paul Marshall. She dragoons her visiting cousins – Lola de Quincey, 15 and twins Jackson and Pierrot, 9, "refugees from a bitter domestic civil war"– into taking part.

Briony's mother, Emily, who suffers from migraines, spends much of her time in bed, while her father, a senior civil servant, is a distant presence, away in London. Her sister, Cecilia, has recently graduated from Cambridge, and has been sent out by her mother to collect wildflowers for Paul Marshall's bedroom. She takes a valuable vase, given to her Uncle Clem shortly before his death in the First World War, to fill it in the fountain at the front of the house. There she encounters her "childhood friend and university acquaintance", Robbie Turner – the son of the Tallises' charlady and protégé of her father Jack – who is working in the garden. Their relationship has been "difficult" since Cambridge, where Robbie was sent at Cecilia's father's expense, and they argue, over his plan to train as a doctor, again bankrolled by her father. Robbie offers to fill the vase for her. She refuses; he tries to grab the vase and breaks it; a section of the lip falls into the water. Furious, Cecilia strips down to her underwear, and dives into the fountain to retrieve it.

Briony, looking out of the nursery window, misinterprets the scene: she thinks that Robbie has ordered Cecilia to take her clothes off and dive in. Cecilia tries to repair the vase, and Leon and Paul Marshall arrive. Cecilia learns, to her annoyance, that Leon has invited Robbie to dinner. At his mother's bungalow, Robbie writes a letter to Cecilia, attempting to explain himself. In a roundabout way, it suggests that he loves her, but he spoils it with an obscene declaration of his infatuation. He then writes a fair copy. Walking over towards the big house, he meets Briony and asks her to take the letter to Cecilia. Only when Briony is in the house does he realise that he has given her the obscene version. Cecilia receives the letter on the terrace, and thinks: "Of course, of course." She also realises that Briony must have opened it.

Soon afterwards, Briony goes into the library, and sees Robbie and Cecilia having sex; she thinks that he is attacking her sister, and that he is a dangerous "maniac". A tense, hot dinner follows, during which it emerges that the twins have run away. The dinner guests go out into the grounds to look for them. Briony stumbles upon Lola being raped by a man who then disappears into the dark. Lola can't or won't say who it was; Briony thinks, or decides, that it was Robbie.

The police arrive; Briony is interrogated and gives a statement blaming Robbie. She also finds Robbie's letter to Cecilia, and shows it to her brother and the police. Cecilia is very angry. At dawn, Robbie re-emerges with the twins, whom he has found. He is arrested and driven away by the police. His mother screams at the car as it passes.

Part Two is set in France in 1940. Robbie, having been convicted of rape, imprisoned, and then drafted into the army, is retreating across the countryside towards Dunkirk ahead of the advancing German forces. He is wounded, with shrapnel in his side. He is with two corporals, Nettle and Mace. They stay the night in a French family's barn.

That night, Robbie remembers his last meeting with Cecilia, in 1939, shortly after his release from prison. They have remained dedicated to each other, writing each other letters every week during his time in prison. Cecilia has cut off all contact with her family since 1935, and has trained as a nurse. Lately, Robbie has learnt that Briony thinks she was wrong to blame him for Lola's rape, and wants to change her evidence.

The next day the three men join a long line of retreating soldiers, civilians and vehicles on the road to Dunkirk. An officer tries to recruit them for a small counter-attack, but the corporals bluff their way out of it. They are strafed and bombed by German planes. They finally reach the sea at Bray Dunes. Robbie is feeling increasingly light-headed; his wound is throbbing. The scene on the beach is chaotic. In the resort of Bray, there are soldiers drinking in ruined cafes. In one, angry soldiers have surrounded an RAF man, whom they blame for not protecting them from the Luftwaffe. The corporals and Turner rescue him. Having lost Mace, Robbie and Nettle are given food and drink by a Frenchwoman. They find shelter in a bombed-out basement; Robbie eats and falls into a delirious sleep.

Part Three takes place in London in 1940. Briony is a probationary nurse at St Thomas's Hospital; her training is described in some detail. She is also writing stories, and has submitted one to the literary magazine Horizon. Briony receives a letter from her father, telling her that Paul Marshall and Lola de Quincey are to be married, which she regards as a "confirmation" of her suspicion that Marshall was the rapist.

After a half-day off, she returns to the hospital to find that the casualties of Dunkirk – large numbers of badly wounded men – are arriving at the hospital. Briony cleans infected wounds, pulls out shrapnel, and talks to a young Frenchman who dies in her arms. Following a very long shift, she returns to her room and finds a letter from Cyril Connolly at Horizon rejecting her novella – which turns out to be a version of the events in Part One – but encouraging her and suggesting improvements. A few days later, Briony walks across London to Clapham to witness the marriage of Paul Marshall and Lola. She then walks further south to Balham, and finds Cecilia living in a down-at-heel terrace. Cecilia is furious with her. Robbie, who unexpectedly emerges from the bedroom, is angrier still. Briony is relieved that he is still alive. The couple insist that Briony should go to her parents and inform them that her evidence was false. They are still under the impression that the rapist was Danny Hardman, a servant at the house; she reveals to them that it was Paul Marshall. Briony apologises to the pair and resolves to make her atonement. Part Three is signed, at the end, "BT, London 1999".

The epilogue is set in London in 1999. It is Briony's 77th birthday. She visits the Imperial War Museum, shortly after finishing the novel that constitutes the rest of the book. She has just learnt that she is suffering from vascular dementia, which will eventually rob her of her speech and sanity. As her taxi arrives, she sees, by chance, Paul and Lola, now Lord and Lady Marshall, who are benefactors of the museum.

She returns home, and then sets off in the afternoon in another taxi for the Tallis family house, now Tilney's Hotel, for her birthday party – organised by Pierrot's grandson Charles. The family assembles in the old library: mostly the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Pierrot, Jackson (now dead), and Leon (now confined to a wheelchair). Writing at her desk in the early morning, Briony reveals that the current book has gone through half a dozen drafts, between January 1940 and March 1999; she has been unable to publish it before the Marshalls' death, for fear of being sued for libel. All her previous drafts, she says, were "pitiless"; it is only in the final version that "my lovers end well". Briony then suggests strongly that Robbie died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes in 1940, and that Cecilia was killed later that year by the bomb in Balham; that she never saw either of them again.

What kind of novel is *Atonement*?

In Chapter Four, Briony approaches her sister

Cecilia, on the verge of tears about her play, The Trials of Arabella. "The whole thing's a mistake," she says. "It's the wrong genre!" *Atonement* is a self-conscious work, marinated in the history of the English novel, which is itself also a meditation on literary form: on the need to find the right genre for expression. The book occupies no very obvious genre, or perhaps more accurately, several at once. It could be called a postmodernist novel – a term for fiction which pastiches or imitates other, earlier styles, and which does so in a self-conscious and knowing way.

The first part of the novel, for instance, is a pastiche of a country house novel, a tradition in English literature that stretches from Jane Austen via Henry James to Elizabeth Bowen – all writers alluded to in the text – and on to the present day. Specifically, the story echoes L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, a 1953 novel set in the year 1900. McEwan himself has acknowledged the inspiration, saying that Hartley's book "in some way formed the seed for" *Atonement*. Both novels feature a child protagonist who stumbles across an adult love affair between two people of different social classes. In both cases, the child is employed to carry a letter between the lovers, with disastrous results. Both feature an epilogue in which a character looks back on the episode, many years later, after a world war. There are so many similarities between the two books, in fact, that some critics have seen *Atonement* as a rewriting of *The Go-Between*.

However, if the seed for *Atonement* was provided by Hartley, the style and many of the incidents in the first half recall Virginia Woolf. Her novel *The Waves* (1931) is mentioned as an influence in Part Three. As in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Part One is set over the course of one long day. The dinner party recalls the dinner party at the end of the first section of Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927). In general, the book is so full of echoes of writers from the first half of the 20th century (see the section on allusions) that McEwan has been described by Geoff Dyer as "retrospectively inserting himself into the Pantheon of British novelists" of the period.

Atonement is also a coming-of-age story, and a love story of a fairly traditional kind – about ardent lovers kept apart by adverse circumstance – as well as a war story. And, of course, it is a historical novel. When Hartley wrote *The Go-Between*, he was remembering the world of his own childhood. For McEwan, however, born in 1948, the novel's setting had to be recreated from other books and sources: novels, archives, memoirs, poems, his father's memories. Furthermore, *Atonement* is a meta-fiction: a novel that tells the story of how it came to be told. By the end of Part Three it has been confirmed that Briony is the author of everything we have so far read; she is both a character and the narrator. This is called a