Atonement: A Conversation with Ian McEwan

Edited by **Vanessa Guignery**

In **Études anglaises 2018/3 Vol. 71** , pages 332 to 340
Publisher **Klincksieck**

ISSN 0014-195X
ISBN 9782252041628
DOI 10.3917/etan.713.0332
Uploaded: 01/23/2019

Atonement: A Conversation with Ian McEwan

Edited by Vanessa Guignery

This is the edited transcript of an interview with Ian McEwan which was conducted on 22 May 2018 at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon in front of an audience of students. The editor selected the parts of the conversation which concentrated on Ian McEwan's 2001 novel Atonement *and its 2007 film adaptation by Joe Wright. Ian McEwan kindly and meticulously revised the final written transcript of this interview.*[1]

Vanessa Guignery: Does *Atonement* hold a special place in your work and for what reasons?

Ian McEwan: Yes, it does hold a special place. When I was within three months of finishing the book, I told my editor that I'd be sending him a novel he'd find difficult to sell. I said it was a novel for other writers, a book about the moral responsibilities of the imagination, if they exist at all. I told him I didn't think he'd sell more than a few thousand copies. Clearly, I know nothing about these things. When my editor had finished reading, he said: 'From the point of view of the British market, it has the three elements that we know will sell a novel: the Second World War, a country house and a love story.' At that point I saw the novel from the outside, but these elements were not my main interest at all. The centre of the book for me is the character of Briony. The child's character as well as the older manifestations of Briony went to make my most complete character, the most 'rounded', to adapt Forster's word. A special place

1. The editor would like to thank Diane Gagneret, Mathilde Le Clainche, Héloïse Lecomte and Julia Siccardi for helping her transcribe the interview.

Atonement: A Conversation with Ian McEwan. Edited by Vanessa Guignery, *ÉA* 71-3 (2018): 332-340. © Klincksieck.

structurally too. I conceived of the novel as three novellas and a coda, and I have never done anything like that since.

All writers shy away from the idea that their reputation rests on one novel, so I'm pleased when people come up to me and say: 'I think your greatest novel is *Saturday* or *Solar* or *The Child in Time* or *The Children Act*.' But *Atonement* is studied a great deal in schools and universities. It gives me no pleasure to think that people are forced to read it, but on the other hand, I'm pleased when a seventeen-year-old appears in a signing queue with her copy of *Atonement*, and it looks like it's been through three world wars and has so many notations that I can hardly find a place for my own signature!

VG: Your archives are stored at the Harry Ransom Humanities Center at the University of Texas in Austin, and they include the notebook which contains the first handwritten draft of *Atonement*. The date at the top is 20 February 1999 and you wrote in the margin: 'Atonement begins here' (*Papers* 1.8). This very first draft starts with an unnamed young woman coming into a drawing room with flowers. On the first typescript, this young woman is named and the first sentences are the following:

> It was an untruth, a dour superstition locally endorsed, that to gather wild flowers from the water meadows in June was to court unhappiness in love. This thought occurred to Cecilia – as she paused to catch her breath in the doorway of the drawing room, and made her smile. (*Papers* 2.2)

In the first revised typescript (*Papers* 2.5), most of that beginning was crossed out and it is therefore absent from the published version. Could you say a few words about this original beginning of the novel, about why you chose this specific image of the flowers and why you then deleted it?

IM: The ghost that stalks this novel is that of Jane Austen. The epigraph is a paragraph from *Northanger Abbey*, which is about a young girl, Catherine Morland, whose imagination runs riot. General Tilney brings her back to reality and Catherine, upset and guilty, runs to her room. What you see in the very first draft of *Atonement* is an inversion of the famous opening of another novel by Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife' – an exercise of free indirect style because we are inside the mind of Mrs Bennet.

Atonement began life with an image of a young woman entering a drawing room with some wild flowers she has just picked. She's in search of a vase to put them in. She doesn't want to go into the garden where a young man, Robbie, is working. She feels both hostility towards and fascination with him. At that stage, I thought I was writing a science-fiction novel. It was set two hundred years in the future. Elites believed technology to be vulgar. Only the proletariat had access to the internet or its equivalent. The upper classes had returned to live the life as they

imagined it of the characters of a Jane Austen novel – a pre-industrial eighteenth-century lifestyle in large country houses. They played the harpsichord, they sent messages by servant, they rode horses, or in carriages, never cars. These were the marks of their distinction. In this earliest draft, when we first encounter Robbie, his head is bald and the diodes implanted in his skull give him direct access to the internet, to all human knowledge. But he is just the gardener. You could see why I abandoned this idea! But that was the origin of Jane Austen's presence in the novel.

After two months' playing around with this story, I set it aside and started again with Cecilia's younger sister, Briony, a child author with a recently completed play – *The Trials of Arabella*. At which point I saw the entire novel, played out over a lifetime through this young girl. Sometimes, you have to make a mistake to discover where you want to go. In my notebooks, there are many references, made long before all this, to a novel that resembled the one I finally wrote. These were messages to myself about a character who makes a life-altering error, and then, in old age, comes on stage, as it were, to address that error. I was influenced by the century then coming to an end. What would it mean to look back on its errors, and to own those errors?

It is fascinating for me, after eighteen years, to see these notebook jottings and be reminded of *Atonement*'s origins.

VG: In some of the notes you took about the novel before you had decided on all the threads, the Tallis family was called the Berners, and you wrote: 'Privileged access to Robbie is a dead end. What is good about this story? Only Briony really. That's where the life is, and where there are roots. The writer, the watcher, the fantasist. The eagerness to stretch the language.' (*Papers* 1.8) Why did you think privileged access to Robbie was a dead end?

IM: In fact, I changed my mind. I did give myself privileged access to Robbie, as I did to Briony's mother. At that early stage I thought that Briony would be the complete centre of consciousness. But as I proceeded, I decided to broaden it into a multi-layered set of different minds. I'd been listening to a famous piece of choral music, a forty part motet, *Spem In Alium*, a glorious instance of polyphonic writing, by Thomas Tallis. I was beginning to think of the novel as a set of interweaving voices.

The second half of my note, however, is correct. By the time I'd finished the second chapter, I had the entire novel in mind – not its precise content, but the three novellas and the coda. I also knew by then that the novel I was writing was written by Briony. I needed to think my way into the prose of an esteemed elderly lady novelist – which was a liberation. I was no longer Ian McEwan, I became Briony Tallis writing about herself in the third person, long after the events. An impersonation began. There's a description of a sunset in the novel: I thought my

novelist, Briony, would want to describe such a thing, whereas I've never been interested, much as I like to watch one over a glass of wine.

VG: In the notebook, you also imagined various plot lines which you then gave up. I have selected two of them that I wish you would comment on. The first one is about Cecilia: 'Eventually made passive by misery, Cecilia marries Marshall, but still in love with Robbie.' The second is about Robbie and the 'rout at Dunkirk': 'Brings him finally to face Marshall. Extracts confession at point of bayonet. Kills him' (*Papers* 1.8).

IM: I don't remember those plot notes. This is the curious thing about any long-term project: you forget everything you rejected that was once so lively as a possibility, so *possible*. These look wrong to me, and I think I would have discarded them without much trouble. Slightly vulgar, to have Robbie kill Marshall on the end of a bayonet after extracting a confession. It would be completely inappropriate for Cecilia to marry Marshall. Much better that he conceals his abuse of Lola in plain sight by marrying her. Writing a novel is like running down an infinitely wide passageway that narrows as you progress. At the beginning you have a thousand possibilities. Later, the room for turning this way or that diminishes. You have to try everything out in your thoughts. Strange how what you do choose seems inevitable later on. But it never was. At every point along the way, nothing is inevitable.

Audience: Some scholars have suggested that Robbie might be Jack Tallis's son. Is that something that ever crossed your mind or not at all?

IM: No, it never crossed my mind. I don't mind if it crosses other people's minds. I'm not sure what it adds or detracts, but it was not in my scheme, as I remember it.

Audience: Among the centres of consciousness that we find in the novel are Briony, Robbie, Cecilia, Briony's mother and even the cousins from the North, but we are not given access to Robbie's mother's thoughts. Have you ever thought about including her in the centres of consciousness or was it never a possibility for you?

IM: No, she was always a walk-on part, a minor character. Her big moment is beating up the police car with her umbrella. I could have given her a part, but it would have pushed the story sideways rather than forwards, from my point of view. She was never going to be a central character. Once the idea of a polyphony of minds was established in the first part of the novel, Robbie lying in the bath in his mother's little estate cottage, contemplating what he wanted out of life was enough from that particular household.

VG: In the archives, there is also a very small notebook with '2001 *Atonement*' written on the front cover. This contains notes on the last part of the novel and the question 'how must it end?' (*Papers* 66.10) At what point did you know you were going to jump ahead to 1999 in the coda?

IM: When the character of Briony was emerging, I had the structure – three novellas and the coda that would be contemporaneous with the writing. What would be in that coda, I didn't know, but it was always my intention that elderly Briony would step forward to deliver her soliloquy at the end. In 1999, in the dying months of the twentieth century we were looking back on some successes and many horrors. Briony reflects that she made an error of the imagination (as a child when she identified Robbie as the rapist), and that her atonement has been to write successive drafts of this novel throughout her life. We have just read the last version, in which she has radically altered the facts. What she would say or what her circumstances were, I didn't and couldn't know. This was what I had to write towards, and discover. Novels are, for most writers, varieties of exploration.

VG: Another source of inspiration for *Atonement* was your father's memories of the Second World War and his involvement in Dunkirk. In November 1989, you recorded an interview with your father where you talked about his childhood and his service during the war. You sent the transcript of the conversation to your father with a letter in which you wrote that you were thinking of putting together a memoir of 100 or 150 pages (*Papers* 47.15). You never wrote that memoir, but ten years later and three years after your father passed away, you started writing *Atonement*. Did you consciously connect the writing of *Atonement* with these memories of your father and the memoir that was never written?

IM: Very much so. My father told these stories many times. When I was writing the Dunkirk scenes, I inserted my own version of moments that he himself had witnessed. For example, he saw a lynching. Infantrymen on the beaches thought they weren't getting enough protection from the RAF. They turned on a young RAF filing clerk, easily identified by his grey-blue uniform.

I didn't know how to approach Dunkirk in the novel. European civilisation collapsing before a terrifying, violent ideology. An entire defeated army driven towards the coast. A third of a million men on a beach, waiting to be rescued. I'd finished the 1935 country house section and I was waiting for an idea. It came while I was hiking in a remote corner of Andalusia. I remember walking out of a little village on a hot day and entering a cork forest. Down a steep hill was a stream which I crossed on a narrow, slippery plank. There were a lot of exotic plants underfoot, and as I put my foot on the plank, it sank into the mud. And I realised: 'It's a hike, that's how I'll do Dunkirk!'

I remembered my father, separated from his unit, making his way overland to Dunkirk beach, avoiding the roads and the Stuka dive bomb-

ers. My father's experiences were very important. I was sad that he died only a few years before I could show him this novel.

Audience: Is the name Nettle, which is that of one of the soldiers who walks with Robbie to Dunkirk, a reminder of the nettles Briony slashes at in the first part?

IM: I don't know why I called the soldier Nettle. I must have heard of someone with that name. I'm always looking for names. I dislike the idea of characters' names bearing meaning. Fine perhaps in *Pilgrim's Progress* or even in Dickens. But in my work, it's a false trail. My Nettle does not sting. It just happens to be his name.

VG: The novel is centred around striking images such as the 'leg in a tree' (192) which Robbie sees when he is a soldier in the Second World War – an image which was not kept in Joe Wright's film adaptation of the novel but replaced by a disquieting vision of dead schoolgirls lying on the ground. How important were these images for you?

IM: Some of these images were derived from research at the Imperial War Museum. I read unpublished letters written by soldiers just before France collapsed in 1940. The dead orphaned children laid out on the ground was from a letter written by a young lieutenant to his girlfriend. What it evoked was the savagery of artillery fire, of lobbing bombs into a landscape. Sooner or later, an innocent target, a house, will be hit. We saw it in the destruction of Aleppo: dumb bombs, as they are now called, or barrel bombs, tipped out of helicopters onto clinics. When a bomb lands among people, their limbs fly off. A terrifying thing to witness.

Audience: What did you feel when you knew that *Atonement* was going to be made into a movie?

IM: I was asked if I would like to write the screenplay. I was already deep into *Saturday* and I knew from past experience that getting *Atonement* onto the screen would take two or three years at least. But I was executive producer, so I remained close, all the way through production. Things happen slowly in movies, then they accelerate. The money wasn't there, then it was; the script wasn't right, then it was. Did we have the right girl for Briony? First we didn't, then, wonderfully, in Saoirse Ronan, we did. There were doubts about Keira Knightley. I thought straight away she would be perfect. She was. The British tabloid fascination with Keira meant we had to spend a lot of time and money on security guards to keep tabloids away from the set. They were on nearby hills with telescopic cameras. I can't open the novel now and not see Saoirse Ronan. She kidnapped Briony. Vanessa Redgrave, who looks so convincingly like an older Saoirse, kidnapped the coda with her haunting, valedictory tones.

VG: What did you think of the end of the film with Briony as an elderly writer being interviewed in a television studio?

IM: I think it worked. The interviewer, Anthony Minghella (who was the director of *The English Patient*), was a wonderful man, a lovely presence in the film. He had died by the time the movie was released. What I did miss was *The Trials of Arabella,* replayed sixty-five years later, returning us to the power of Briony's imagination.

VG: You referred in several interviews to your interest in *The Go-Between*, the 1953 novel by L.P. Hartley and the 1971 film adaptation directed by Joseph Losey from a screenplay by Harold Pinter. One can see common points between *Atonement* and *The Go-Between*. Could you tell us what you found interesting in Hartley's book?

IM: I read *The Go-Between* at the age of fourteen. I was at a state-run boarding school from the age of eleven to eighteen, deep in the English countryside. The central building was a beautiful Palladian country house, originally belonging to the Berners family. There were well-laid out grounds on a rise overlooking the River Orwell. I was immersed in Hartley's novel, slumped in a chair in the school library – a lovely room with an Adam-style ceiling. The central figure, thirteen-year-old Leo, who acts as the go-between for the lovers, is far from home, in the school summer holidays, somewhat out of his depth socially in a grand country house. I became Leo. The year is 1900. It's a July heatwave, there's a thermometer by the green house. Will the temperature ever reach 100 degrees Fahrenheit? Leo keeps checking. He notes that when that week's copy of the satirical magazine, *Punch*, arrives, its figurehead is shown on the cover mopping his brow. Reading this, I had a sudden inspiration. I stood up from my chair, crossed the room to where all the bound copies of *Punch* were kept, took down the 1900 volume, turned to July – and there he was, mopping his brow. I was transfixed. That fiction and reality should blend – for me, now – well, it felt as if the story was true, even when I knew it was not. True in some new sense. I'd like to pretend that this was the moment I decided to become a writer. But it was an intense moment of engagement with the novelist's art, and the excitement never left me. There is only one 'go-between' letter in *Atonement* and it serves as my tribute and thanks to Hartley for giving me a magical reading experience that demonstrated how the imagined and the real could be woven together.

Audience: How did you come to conceive the country house in *Atonement*?

IM: That Palladian house of my schooldays was always present during the writing. It haunted me. But for the purposes of the novel, I dreamed

up an uglier place – a late-nineteenth-century neo-Gothic monstrosity, with imitation battlements. Briony's father is not landed gentry. He's a civil servant. His father has made his fortune in ironmongery. The family is two generations on from *nouveau riche*. The Tallis children (though not Briony) and their father stake a claim to a Cambridge education. They are meritocrats, if you like, with a business background. But the big park, the space, the privilege, the oppression of formality – all have their origins in my experience of that grand Palladian house of my school, Woolverstone Hall, long ago closed down.

Audience: You said that in *Atonement*, you wanted 'to enter into a conversation with modernism' (Silverblatt). Could you explain what you meant by this?

IM: Briony's first draft of this novel is written as a flow of consciousness. She draws from Virginia Woolf who, in turn, drew from Henri Bergson. When Briony is a nurse, in 1940, she receives a long letter from the critic Cyril Connolly. He was editor during the war of the literary magazine, *Horizon*. He's interested in the draft she has sent him, but it's too much in thrall to Woolf. He feels – and he's right – that her interest in a dazzling verbal surface is obscuring some important truth about her characters. What her readers need, he tells her, is 'the backbone of a story'. He cannot know that the suppressed story is of how Briony sent an innocent man to prison and destroyed a love affair. What he's asking of her, in effect – and this is, in part, my lifetime's project – is to marry the lessons of modernism and postmodernism with the beauty and ambition of nineteenth-century fiction. And when I say beauty, I mean its moral, exploratory quality and its faith in the notion of character.

Virginia Woolf said famously: 'character is dead'. I beg to differ. I think that the great masters of the nineteenth-century character (Flaubert, Tolstoy, George Eliot, and many others) have handed us a precious vase. No need to break it over the head of modernism. We can never unlearn the lessons of modernism, just as we can't write symphonies like Mozart, except in pastiche. We can't write novels that are entirely innocent of their own processes. But the baby mustn't go out with the bathwater. Connolly's advice to Briony is my advice to myself.

Successive drafts of *Atonement* take Briony Tallis nearer and nearer to the truth. Her final draft and its coda step back from that truth. This has been a problem for some readers – Briony tells us what 'really' happened to the lovers: they died before they could be re-united. The disappointment, even outrage, those readers express goes to the heart of what I wanted to explore. Our investment in stories, especially in endings, has a moral quality. 'What really happened?' Well, Briony tells you. But I am telling you – nothing happened. And that, I'm afraid, is just one aspect of a twentieth century aesthetic revolution.

Audience: *The Trials of Arabella* does not seem to have any external or previous reference. Was there any source of inspiration for this play?

IM: I don't know where it came from. But it is integral to the novel. I spontaneously imagined the kind of thing that Briony might write, and in doing so, I mapped out some elements of the novel I was starting to write. It's a fairy tale. I drew on memories of my stepdaughter, who used to love writing plays. She was a highly imaginative, confident eleven-year-old, and, naturally, she would get frustrated when things did not quite work out. Her sister, who was two years younger, would obligingly play the roles of servant or innkeeper or even a horse, and Polly, the older girl, would be the princess or queen. She would write these plays, design the poster and tickets. But there was sometimes creative disappointment, when the inevitable shadow fell between the conception and the reality. It's a struggle that's there for all of us as we grow up: the imagination maps out one thing, only to discover that life is not so easily marshalled, or controlled. The failure of Briony's play in 1935 tries to catch this spirit. Sixty-five years later, it is triumphantly redeemed.

Audience: You said that Briony's writing was a way for her to atone for what she did, to face her mistakes. Do you ever approach your own writing as a way to atone?

IM: No, I can't say that I've ever written anything consciously as an act of atonement. But it's worth saying that the novel is a profoundly personal form. Hard to separate from the personality of the novelist, even if the connections are obscure. When you write a novel, you reveal yourself. When Briony moves from playwriting to writing fiction, she finds it acutely embarrassing to make things up. Even the 'he said', the 'she said' make her uncomfortable. That was my own feeling, at the beginning of my literary career. I have no vile deeds in my past that I've atoned for in fiction. I have not, like Briony, caused an innocent man to be sent to prison. And if I had, of course, I wouldn't tell you!

Works cited

McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. 2001. London: Vintage, 2002.
—. *Papers*. Harry Ransom Humanities Center at the University of Texas in Austin. Manuscript Collection MS-4902.
Silverblatt, Michael. "Interview with Ian McEwan." *Bookworm*, KCRW. 11 July 2002. Retrieved on 1 August 2018
< https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/ian-mcewan >
Wright, Joe, dir. *Atonement*. 2007. DVD Universal Studios, 2007.