

# On Chesil Beach

Ian McEwan

## Author Background

- Birth—June 21, 1948
- Where—Aldershot, England
- Education—B.A., University of Sussex; M.A. University of East Anglia
- Awards—Somerset Maugham Award; Whitbread Award; The Booker Prize; Fellow, Royal Society of Literature; National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award
- Currently—lives in Oxford, England

McEwan was born in Aldershot, Hampshire, the son of David McEwan and Rose Lilian Violet (nee Moore). His father was a working class Scotsman who had worked his way up through the army to the rank of major. He spent much of his childhood in East Asia (including Singapore), Germany and North Africa (including Libya), where his father was posted. His family returned to England when he was twelve. He was educated at Woolverstone Hall School; the University of Sussex, receiving his degree in English literature in 1970; and the University of East Anglia, where he was one of the first graduates of Malcolm Bradbury's pioneering creative writing course.

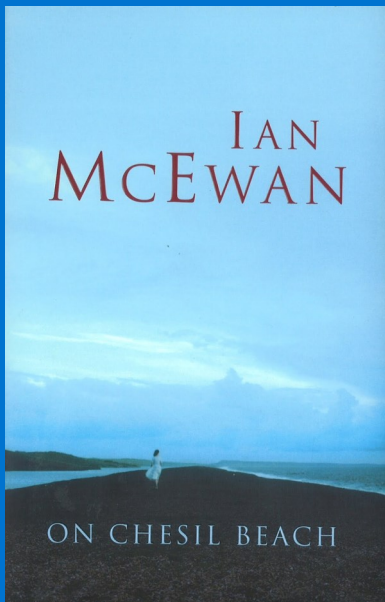
McEwan's first published work was a collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), which won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1976. He achieved notoriety in 1979 when the BBC suspended production of his play *Solid Geometry* because of its supposed obscenity. His second collection of short stories, *In Between the Sheets*, was published in 1978. *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) were his two earliest novels, both of which were adapted into films. The nature of these works caused him to be nicknamed "Ian Macabre". These were followed by *The Child in Time* (1987), winner of the 1987 Whitbread Novel Award; *The Innocent* (1990); and *Black Dogs* (1992). McEwan has also written two children's books, *Rose Blanche* (1985) *The Daydreamer* (1994).

His 1997 novel, *Enduring Love*, about the relationship between a science writer and a stalker, was popular with critics, although it was not shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It was adapted into a film in 2004. In 1998, he won the Man Booker Prize for *Amsterdam*. His next novel, *Atonement* (2001), received considerable acclaim; *Time* magazine named it the best novel of 2002, and it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In 2007, the critically acclaimed movie *Atonement*, directed by Joe Wright and starring Keira Knightley and James McAvoy, was released in cinemas worldwide. His next work, *Saturday* (2005), follows an especially eventful day in the life of a successful neurosurgeon. *Saturday* won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for 2005, and his novel *On Chesil Beach* (2007) was shortlisted for the 2007 Booker Prize. McEwan has also written a number of produced screenplays, a stage play, children's fiction, an oratorio and a libretto titled *For You* with music composed by Michael Berkeley.

*Solar*, was published by Jonathan Cape and Doubleday in March 2010. In June 2008 at the Hay Festival, McEwan gave a surprise reading of this work-in-progress. The novel concerns "a scientist who hopes to save the planet." from the threat of climate change, with inspiration for the novel coming from a trip McEwan made in 2005 "when he was part of an expedition of artists and scientists who spent several weeks aboard a ship near the north pole to discuss environmental concerns". McEwan's twelfth novel, *Sweet Tooth*, is historical in nature and set in the 1970s., and was published in late August 2012.

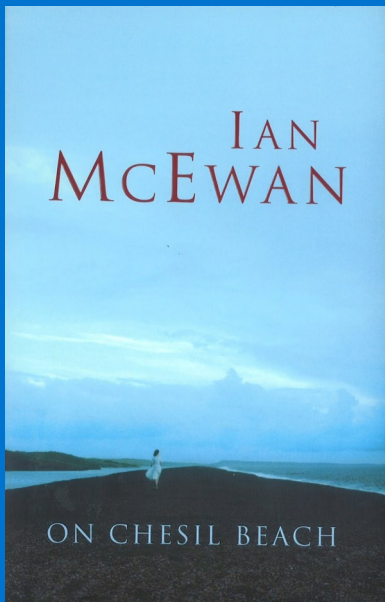
In 2006 he was accused of plagiarism; specifically that a passage in *Atonement* (2001) closely echoed a passage from a memoir, *No Time for Romance*, published in 1977 by Lucilla Andrews. McEwan acknowledged using the book as a source for his work. McEwan had included a brief note at the end of *Atonement*, referring to Andrews's autobiography, among several other works. Writing in *The Guardian* in November 2006, a month after Andrews' death, McEwan professed innocence of plagiarism while acknowledging his debt to the author.

(Adapted from Wikipedia.)



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## Book Summary

### ***On Chesil Beach***

*Ian McEwan, 207*

*Random House*

*224 pp.*

*ISBN-13: 9780307455826*

Ian McEwan's emotionally charged novel follows an inexperienced young couple through their disastrous wedding night at a Dorset hotel in 1962. Very much in love, Edward and Florence are predictably nervous, but for different reasons.

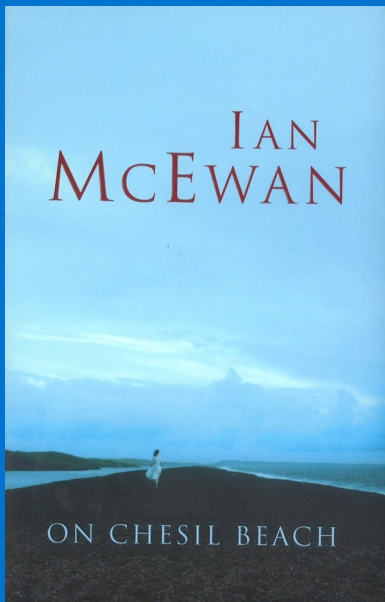
He longs to consummate the marriage; she is repelled by the very idea. Locked in their inhibitions and utterly unable to discuss their fears and needs, they are victims not only of personal experience but of a distinctively British brand of repression destined to crumble in the sexual revolution. One of McEwan's greatest skills is his ability to limn the precise, irrevocable moment in which life changes forever. And although that moment is telegraphed within the first few pages of this rueful tale, it loses none of its tragic, devastating force when it occurs. Brief and elegiac, *On Chesil Beach* spotlights the talents of a literary grand master at the top of his game.

*(From Barnes & Noble .)*

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## Discussion Questions

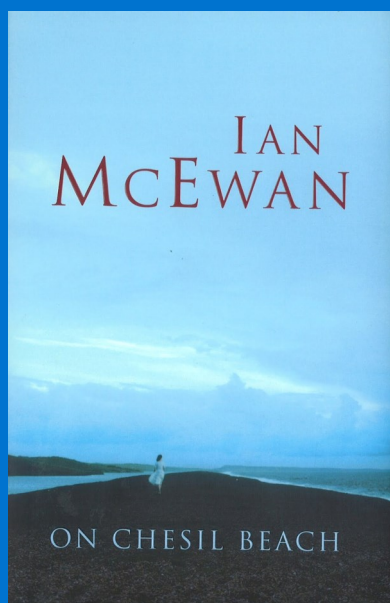


1. What do the novel's opening lines tell us about Edward and Florence? How did your perceptions of them change throughout the subsequent pages? What details did you eventually know about them that they never fully revealed to one another?
2. Is Edward's libido truly the primary reason he proposes marriage, 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? Would this marriage have taken place if the couple had met when birth-control pills were no longer just a rumour?
3. Edward replays the words "with my body I thee worship" in his mind. What might have been the intention in including that line when this version of the marriage ceremony was written? How does it make Edward feel?
4. 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?
5. Were Florence and Edward incompatible in ways beyond sexual ones? What do their difficulties in bed say about their relationship altogether? Or is sex an isolated aspect of a marriage?
6. 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?
7. 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 musician necessarily have been sacrificed if she had remained with Edward?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. 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?
12. 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?
13. How would Edward and Florence have fared in the twenty-first century? Has the nature of love changed as western society has evolved?
14. 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?
15. 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?
16. In what ways does *On Chesil Beach* represent a departure for Ian McEwan? In what ways does it enhance the themes in his previous fiction.

(Questions issued by publisher.)

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## Reviews

The bulk of *On Chesil Beach* consists of a single sex scene, one played, because of the novel's brevity and accessibility, in something like "real time." Edward and Florence have retreated, on their wedding night, to a hotel suite overlooking Chesil Beach. Edward wants sex, Florence is sure she doesn't. The situation is miniature and enormous, dire and pathetic, tender and irrevocable. McEwan treats it with a boundless sympathy, one that enlists the reader even as it disguises the fact that this seeming novel of manners is as fundamentally a horror novel as any McEwan's written, one that carries with it a David Cronenberg sensitivity to what McEwan calls "the secret affair between disgust and joy."

**New York Times**

This breathtaking novel, Ian McEwan's 11th, tells the story of that night. Like a number of his previous books—among them *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *Black Dogs* and *Amsterdam*—*On Chesil Beach* is more a novella than a novel, weighing in at around 40,000 words, but like those other books it is in no important sense a miniature. Instead, it takes on subjects of universal interest—innocence and naiveté, self-delusion, desire and repression, opportunity lost or rejected—and creates a small but complete universe around them. McEwan's prose is as masterly as ever, here striking a remarkably subtle balance between detachment and sympathy, dry wit and deep compassion. It reaffirms my conviction that no one now writing in English surpasses or even matches McEwan's accomplishment.

**Washington Post**

(*Audio version.*) It should not come as a surprise that Florence and Edward, newlyweds who cannot discuss their previous sexual experiences (or lack thereof), do not communicate out loud with one another until all their emotions boil over at the conclusion of the first night of their honeymoon. That their lives are constructed as narratives and memories makes this novella a particularly good choice for McEwan to perform his own work. McEwan provides a deft sense of cadence, timing and emphasis. McEwan reads this poignant, sad and occasionally amusing gem with entrancing skill, precision and perfect pace. In short, McEwan's performance is mesmerizing. An excellent addition to the recording is a thoughtful interview with the author. The conversation provides insight into McEwan's choice of setting, time period (1962) and characters. McEwan reveals that he tries out his works in progress on audiences, a technique that pays off beautifully. This author-read *work is outstanding.*

**Publishers Weekly**

(*Starred Review.*) Conventional in construction and realistic in its representation of addled psychology, the novel is ingenious for its limited but deeply resonant focus. —Brad Hooper.

**Booklist**

Most critics found McEwan's vivid prose both wry and heartrending.... Some critics complained about the novel's narrow focus, unlikable characters, and explicit descriptions of the newlyweds' attempts to consummate their marriage. Others, however, appreciated McEwan's obvious compassion for the Mayhews.

**Bookmarks Magazine**