



THE NEW YORKER

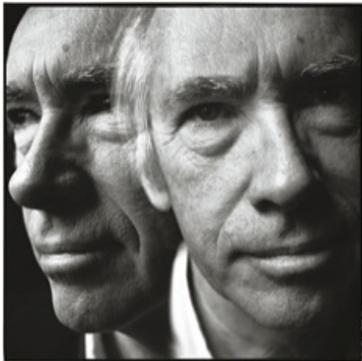
LIFE AND LETTERS

THE BACKGROUND HUM

Ian McEwan's art of unease.

by Daniel Zalewski

FEBRUARY 23, 2009



One of McEwan's goals is to "incite a naked hunger in readers." Photograph by Steve Pyke.

All novelists are scholars of human behavior, but Ian McEwan pursues the matter with more scientific rigor than the job strictly requires. On a recent hike through the woods surrounding his new country house—a renovated seventeenth-century brick-and-flint cottage, in Buckinghamshire—he regularly punctuated his observations about *Homo sapiens* with the citation of a peer-reviewed experiment. After discussing his many duplicitous characters—such as Briony Tallis, the precocious adolescent of his 2001 novel, "Atonement," who ruins two lives when she makes a false accusation of rape—McEwan pointed to a "study in cognitive psychology" suggesting that "the best way to deceive someone is first to deceive yourself," because you're more convincing when you're sincere. ("She trapped herself, she marched into the labyrinth of her own construction," McEwan writes of Briony. "Her doubts could be neutralized only by plunging in deeper.") Speaking of the way that the brain surgeon Henry Perowne, of his 2005 novel, "Saturday," struggles with the impulse to take revenge on a man who invades his home, McEwan made reference to brain scanners: "When people take revenge, the same reward centers of the brain are activated that are associated with satisfying hunger, thirst, sexual appetite. It was rather bleak, the perception."

Writers have long been content to generate such insights on their own—somebody without the aid of a brain scanner came up with "revenge is sweet"—but McEwan is wary of relying too much on intuition. He has what he calls an "Augustan spirit," one nourished equally by the poems of Philip Larkin and by the papers in *Nature*. Indeed, he told me that his 1997 novel, "Enduring Love," in which a relentlessly rational man defeats a relentlessly irrational stalker, was conceived as a reply to the "unexamined Romantic assumption that still lingers in the contemporary novel, which is that intuition is good and reason bad."

McEwan's interest in science isn't antiseptic; it sets his mind at play. He is surely the only novelist who owns a tie patterned with images of a craniotomy—a tool for drilling holes in the skull. When he spots an opportunity, he will conduct an amateur experiment. After he wrote the Nabokovian coda to "Enduring Love"—a pastiche of an academic case study of Jed Parry, the stalker—he mailed it to one of his best friends, Ray Dolan, who directs the Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging, in London. "The package appeared to be from a psychiatrist in Dublin," Dolan recalls. "It said, 'I just had this article published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.' It was formatted just like pieces in the journal, with two columns and a header. I sat down that evening to read it. I was halfway through before the penny dropped." Three years ago, McEwan culled the fiction library of his London town house, in Fitzroy Square. He and his younger son, Greg, handed out thirty novels in a nearby park. In an essay for the *Guardian*, McEwan reported that "every young woman we approached . . . was eager and grateful to take a book," whereas the men "could not be persuaded. 'Nah, nah. Not for me. Thanks, mate, but no.'" The researcher's conclusion: "When women stop reading, the novel will be dead."

McEwan's empirical temperament distinguishes him from his friends Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, and Julian Barnes. McEwan recalls a recent afternoon spent with Barnes: "Julian was reading an article in the *Guardian* about a ship that, in 1893, got frozen in the polar ice. The explorers had set up a primitive wind turbine for electricity, and the captain's log described how they'd got it running just before the final sunset that marked the beginning of the dark Arctic winter. Julian handed the story to me. I read it and said, 'That's amazing. A wind turbine in 1893!' He said, 'No, no. I mean the captain's description of the final sunset. What a beautiful piece of prose.' And I said, 'Oh. Yeah, yeah.'"

Perhaps the one thing that McEwan shares with his more Romantic peers is a love of the long walk. At sixty, he has probably rambled more miles than any English writer since Coleridge. For four decades, he has canvassed the Lake District and the Chilterns—the chalk hills between London and Oxford. Outside England, McEwan has conquered swaths of the Bernese Oberland, the Atlas Mountains, and the Dolomites. Usually, he walks slightly ahead of a companion, and his knapsack contains two stainless-steel cups and a very good bottle of wine. McEwan’s journeys have grown even more exotic since the international success of “Atonement,” which has sold more than four million copies since it was published. In the winter of 2007, after McEwan completed publicity rounds for the novella “On Chesil Beach” and the film of “Atonement,” he and his wife, Annalena McAfee, a former editor at the *Guardian*, travelled for three months; they trekked the Himalayas, the Southern Alps of New Zealand, and the coast of Tasmania.

Our hike, on a breezy summer day, began in a sloping field of wildflowers behind McEwan’s cottage. He had worked hard to create the pastel plot, now waist high. “A wildflower meadow is a matter of incredible artifice,” he confessed at one point. “It’s hard for flowers to defeat grass. I had a local farmer help me.” A German gardener assists in maintaining the grounds.

McEwan was spending much of the summer in Buckinghamshire, trying to settle into a new novel. He said that “On Chesil Beach,” which is about an English couple’s disastrous wedding night, in 1962, had “struck a nerve in France,” and interviewers were pursuing him in London again. At a moment when the hardback novel seems endangered, McEwan’s work is almost scandalously popular. Although his novels headily explore ideas, and his gift for visual detail approaches that of John Updike (Briony’s cousin, fondling a suitcase: “The polished metal was cool, and her touch left little patches of shrinking condensation”), his international success has a lot to do with an old-fashioned talent for creating suspense. His plots defy what he calls the “dead hand of modernism.” (Even “Saturday,” which takes place in a single day, has enough incident to rival “24”: a plummeting plane, a car crash, a break-in, a tumble downstairs, lifesaving surgery.) McEwan said that one of his goals was to “incite a naked hunger in readers.” He discussed his technique reluctantly, as if he were a chemist guarding a newly filed patent. “Narrative tension is primarily about withholding information,” he said.

McEwan is a connoisseur of dread, performing the literary equivalent of turning on the tub faucet and leaving the room; the flood is foreseeable, but it still shocks when the water rushes over the edge. That’s how it is with the hounds that descend upon a woman in the 1992 novel “Black Dogs”; the orgiastic murder in the 1981 novel “The Comfort of Strangers”; the botched sexual initiation in “On Chesil Beach.” At moments of peak intensity, McEwan slows time down—a form of torture that readers enjoy despite themselves. In “The Child in Time,” from 1987, a man’s little girl is kidnapped at the supermarket, and his rising panic is charted with the merciless precision of a cardiogram. In “The Innocent,” a 1990 tale of espionage in postwar Berlin, McEwan spends eight pages conjuring a corpse’s dismemberment. And “Saturday” keeps the reader jangled for nearly forty pages, wondering along with Perowne if an airplane descending on London has become a terrorist missile. Martin Amis says, “Ian’s terribly good at stressed states. There’s a bit of Conrad that reminds me of Ian. It’s ‘Typhoon,’ when the captain is heading into this terrible storm and Conrad is in the position of first mate. Going into the captain’s cabin, he notices that the ship is yawing so that the captain’s shoes are rolling this way and that across the floor, like two puppies playing with each other. You think, Wow, to keep your eyes open when most people would be closing theirs. Ian has that. He’s unflinching.”

Page-turning excitement has long been a suspect virtue in a literary novel, and some critics have disparaged McEwan as a hack with elegant prose. He does lean on noirish tropes—the climaxes of “Enduring Love” and “Saturday” both involve a deranged man, a trembling woman, and a knife. But McEwan believes that something stirring should happen in a novel. Though he is animated by ideas, he would never plop two characters on a sofa and have them expound rival philosophies. The opening to “Enduring Love” offers a crisp illustration of game theory: when a balloon becomes untethered, each of the five men holding a rope is forced to make a decision without knowing what the others will do. But most readers enjoy it as a thrilling set piece. On our walk, McEwan twice cited Henry James’s dictum that the only obligation of a novel “is that it be interesting.” Later, McEwan declared that he finds “most novels *incredibly* boring. It’s amazing how the form endures. Not being boring is quite a challenge.”

It is now a commonplace that McEwan has edged past his peers to become England’s national author. The London press pursues McEwan with an avidity otherwise reserved for Amy Winehouse. Shortly after “On Chesil Beach” was published, David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party, was photographed reading the novel on the Tube. After McEwan noted, in an interview, that a bookshelf in his study was adorned with some pebbles from Chesil Beach—a protected site—the *Daily Mail* wondered whether this behavior was befitting an exemplar, and McEwan gave them back. In June, McEwan mentioned the subject of the new novel, at a literary festival in Wales. The next day, the *Guardian* front page declared, “CLIMATE CHANGE PLOT FOR MCEWAN NOVEL.”

A lawnmower had carved a silvery-green path through McEwan’s wildflowers, and we headed toward a hillside planted with wheat. McEwan has papery skin that reddens at the slightest solar provocation, and when the sun suddenly glared forth he trotted back to the cottage to retrieve a wide-brimmed hat. He also turned up the collar of his gray work shirt. Even with this covering, his eyes squinted behind his oval spectacles. His weathered cheeks etched parentheses around his mouth. The knees of his pants had a dusty patina suggesting recent grindings in the dirt. All that was missing was a spade: he looked less like a literary titan than like an older version of Robbie, the gardener in “Atonement.”

We ascended the crop field; behind us, solar panels on the roof of McEwan’s cottage glistened in the sun. Entering a fern-carpeted wood, McEwan joked that he places his friends along a divide: those who enjoy hiking (Barnes, Michael Frayn) and those who consider it a fatuous premodern practice (Amis, Christopher Hitchens). McEwan relishes the mental restoration that comes from being in nature. “The sensual pleasure of it traps you fiercely in the present,” he said. “It has knock-on effects when you go back to work.”

Much of McEwan’s best writing can be tied directly to a long walk. Ray Dolan, McEwan’s most frequent hiking partner, recalled an excursion along the western coast of Ireland. Whipping winds reminded Dolan of a story that he’d read in a foreign newspaper. Somewhere in Europe, a balloon had become unanchored, and a boy was pulled skyward on a rope; he let go and died. (McEwan searched in vain to locate the incident. After “Enduring Love” was published, someone at a reading supplied the answer: Bavaria.) The climactic encounter of “Black Dogs” is a dark echo of a hike that McEwan took in France with his friend Jon Cook, a professor of literature at the University of East Anglia. Cook recalls coming across two dogs as big as ponies: “We felt quite menaced. It was a solitary place, particularly silent—no birdsong—and it felt uncanny, almost supernatural. Afterward, we felt we’d frightened each other as much as anything else.” When McEwan was writing “Atonement,” he struggled for months with the Dunkirk section. How could Robbie’s dream possibly register amid such chaos? He was stalling in Andalusia with McAfee when it came to him: “I

Robbie's drama possibly register amid such chaos? He was stroking in Andalusia when it came to him. "I realized, it's a hike. I'm not going to write about the Dunkirk evacuation. I'm going to write about Robbie trying to get to the beach."

McEwan's novel-in-progress was inspired by the most magnificent hiking trip he has ever taken, along a frozen fjord in Spitsbergen, a group of Norwegian islands in the Arctic Ocean. He went there in March, 2005, as part of an expedition with Cape Farewell, a British organization concerned about climate change. "Honestly, the hikes were the reason I went," he says, laughing. Accompanied by a guide with a gun, McEwan walked for miles on snow-scabbed ice. "There was a constant danger of polar bears," he recalls. "We saw only tracks, but it was a thrill to think that there was something out there that wanted to eat me." There were twenty-five people on the expedition, all berthed on an icebound ship. Climate scientists mingled with artists, including the British sculptor Antony Gormley.

"The air was the cleanest I've ever breathed," McEwan recalls. "One manifestation of this was the light—the hyperreal clarity of things. It was as if you had twenty-twenty vision, and someone said, 'Here's an extra pair of glasses.' Everything was pinprick sharp." That winter, the ice in Spitsbergen had formed months later than usual, but it was still laceratingly cold. A photograph that Gormley took of McEwan shows him standing atop a plateau of shale shards. Enveloped in a puffy purple snowsuit, McEwan stretches out his arms in a putative gesture of exultation, but he looks more like a desperate explorer, frantically waving for help as the rescue helicopter comes into view.

McEwan knew that global warming was precisely the kind of grand, public-spirited subject that a national author is expected to take on. "Who would be *for* the planet becoming degraded?" he said. "What reader wants to be told what attitude to strike?" Yet the subject tugged at him. Climate change offered a particularly potent source of dread.

In Spitsbergen, McEwan found the catalyst that he needed. He recalls, "On the boat, we were asked to store outer clothing—heavy shoes, splash suits, goggles, balaclavas, gloves—in a boot room. I spent seven years in boarding school, and I took one look and said, 'I'm putting my stuff under my bed.' Within three days, the boot room was chaos. People were losing their stuff, stealing things. Meanwhile, we'd be sitting inside our little ark, with the whole of the planet's population below us, talking about how we were going to save the world. These were motivated, decent, kind people. I thought, Ah. The interesting thing here is human nature. Global warming suddenly wasn't an abstract issue, because humans had to solve it—untrustworthy, venal, sweet, lovely humans."

McEwan was walking slightly ahead of me, amid beech trees. He started work on the new book, as yet untitled, in December, 2007. "On Chesil Beach" is historical fiction, and he likes to alternate between novels set in the past and those set in the present. "Enough time has now gone by since 'Saturday,'" he said. "The present has aged a bit, developed new neuroses."

He foresaw the new novel as having "three acts, thirty thousand words each." (McEwan envisaged "On Chesil Beach" as a forty-thousand-word book; it came in at thirty-nine.) He promised that the novel would not be didactic. "I've given a false impression that it's *about* climate change," he said at one point. "It will just be the background hum of the book." The novel is a character study of the kind of idealist who'd steal somebody else's splash suit. Its protagonist, Michael Beard, is McEwan's third to have a science background—he's a Nobel Prize-winning physicist. ("I like to have them be rational, or at least to like rationalism," McEwan says.) But Beard is far less admirable than Henry Perowne. He has been coasting on his Nobel for twenty years, and he's screwed up several marriages. "He's much dodgier," McEwan said. "He's an intellectual thief. He's sexually predatory. He's a compulsive eater, a round and tubby fellow who has profound self-belief. He has this weird boldness in asking women out to dinner. Able to take a slap on the face and say, 'Better luck next time.'" Beard seemed to have crystallized in his mind, but he wasn't sure yet what would happen to him. Some critics have called McEwan's plotting schematic, but he says that his characters lead the way: "What happens to people is so much a function of who they are."

It had taken months, McEwan said, to establish the "tone of the implied narrator. I feel comfortable now with a certain ironical voice." He added, "The difficulty is, when you have a character like this, you don't want to disgust the reader. It's written in free indirect style, so you travel closely to his thoughts."

Beard, whose specialty is the physics of light, makes a discovery that might help save the planet. "He's definitely hit on something," McEwan said. "The question is whether his personality is going to get in the way—which, in a sense, is our shared problem." He was thinking of embroiling Beard in a public scandal. "It isn't angels necessarily who are going to save us," he said. "Michael Beard is racketsy, quarrelsome, competitive, greedy, ambitious, politicking. But, somehow, behind all this there could be some goodness."

The book's first act, which focusses on Beard's personal life, was nearly complete. At the literary festival in Wales, McEwan had read a comic excerpt in which Beard boards a train with a bag of potato chips. He is incensed when his seat mate opens the package and starts eating. ("One of those guys in their mid-thirties with a shaved head and a gym-thickened neck," McEwan told me. "Millions of them in Britain.") Beard notices that the man has a bottle of water and retaliates by grabbing it and taking a sip. Upon disembarking, McEwan said, "Beard puts his hand in his pocket and his package of crisps is in there, untouched."

After McEwan finished his reading, an audience member observed that a similar riff had appeared in Douglas Adams's "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" series. The next day, the British press halfheartedly raised the question of plagiarism—a pale retrace of a furor two years ago, when the *Mail on Sunday* revealed that several phrases in "Atonement" resembled medical descriptions in a nurse's wartime memoir. (McEwan had thanked the nurse in his acknowledgments.) McEwan claimed to be unfazed by the Wales incident. The chips story, he said, was an urban legend dating to the nineteen-twenties. "The scene is partially about what happens if you have an experience, and then you're told it's an urban legend. Your life is suddenly rendered inauthentic. Now, one of Beard's friends can say, 'But I read that in a Douglas Adams novel!' So it's even better."

Some of the later portions of McEwan's novel will delve into Beard's profession. In preparation, McEwan was reading up on "oil and solar technologies." He was thinking of visiting solar-panel installations in New Mexico and Spain. The Spanish site, he said, was a "beauty": "It's an enormous tower with huge mirrors focussed on its top. That's the gathering point for all the heat. So you have a spire with a glowing orb." Field research was necessary, he told me, whenever his characters had complex jobs. "It's worth knowing about ten times as much as you ever use, so you can move freely," he said.

McEwan had sifted through alternative-energy technologies and concluded that "artificial photosynthesis" was the most promising arena for Beard's potential breakthrough. "Leaves are basically solar panels converting photons to create new chemical bonds," he told me. "Some of the best-endowed labs in the world are trying to replicate what your humble pavement-crack weed does all day." McEwan hoped that the scientists wouldn't take too long. "If current curves hold, in fifty or sixty years' time we will have a Mediterranean-type climate here," he said.

We left a summit glade. McEwan immediately pointed out a missing: a profusion of frogs, wildflowers, orchids, dragonflies. He had read a naturalist's account of the Chilterns from the forties, and found it depressing. He said, "In the past, in late June, on these beds of nettles here you would see clouds of butterflies. I see not a one."

His eyes suddenly widened. "A cabbage white!" he said, pointing. "O.K., then. One."

Fitzroy Square, a few streets west of Bloomsbury, is the kind of imperious London address that is studded with plaques naming illustrious former residents: Virginia Woolf once lived there, as did George Bernard Shaw ("From the Coffers of His Genius He Enriched the World"). Completed in 1835, the square is bordered by four-story mansions, painted along the spectrum between cream and white. A circular central garden is sequestered by an iron gate bearing the announcement "PRIVATE GARDEN / RESIDENTS ONLY." Outside the garden, pressed gravel, newly restored by Polish laborers, adds a menacing crunch to one's footsteps. McEwan's house, which he bought in 2002, does not yet have a plaque.

Fitzroy Square is where Henry Perowne and his wife, Rosalind, live in "Saturday." Neil Kitchen, a brain surgeon whom McEwan shadowed while researching the novel, told me that he'd been a guest at McEwan's house, and had been served the same fish stew that Perowne prepares in "Saturday." (It was delicious.) Alas, a real British neurosurgeon couldn't afford to live in Fitzroy Square. "I live in a smaller house in Islington," Kitchen said. "I ride a collapsible bike to work. I don't have a big Mercedes." Perowne combines the fine motor skills of Kitchen with the granular self-consciousness of McEwan. (Perowne, a "habitual observer of his own moods," is given to reveries about his mental processes which suggest William James and Henry James rolled into one: "His eyes are wide open in the dark; the exertion, his minimally raised blood pressure, is causing local excitement on his retina, so that ghostly swarms of purple and iridescent green are migrating across his view of a boundless steppe, then rolling in on themselves to become bolts of cloth, swathes of swagged velvet, drawing back like theatre curtains on new scenes, new thoughts.") Kitchen said that McEwan's descriptions of operations were "extremely accurate," requiring almost no corrections. Many medical students find brain surgery hard to watch, but McEwan never winced: "He sat in the corner, with his notebook and pencil." Kitchen loved "Saturday," but didn't see much of himself in Perowne; though he is a man of science, he would never look at nurses crossing a square and think of them as "hot little biological engines with bipedal skills."

During his apprenticeship, McEwan played one of his scientific games. "One day, Neil was operating on an aneurysm," he said. "I was all scrubbed up, and two sixth-year students came in. They said, 'Doctor, what's going on in this procedure?' I took them over to the light box and explained the route Neil was taking. They were very respectful."

On the first of several visits to Fitzroy Square, McEwan greeted me at the door in a state of genial distraction. He was throwing a party that evening—it was June 20th, the day before his sixtieth birthday—and, like Clarissa Dalloway, he needed to run some errands in the West End. McEwan took me downstairs into the kitchen to prepare coffee. The house has so many floors that each domestic act necessitates a stair climb. There are two sitting rooms, two studies, two libraries, and a room for watching movies. When I read "Saturday," I was surprised that a pre-dawn trip that Perowne takes from his kitchen to his bedroom made him alert enough for a bout of lovemaking; the daunting staircase expelled my doubts.

Walking upstairs with our mugs, we passed McAfee. They married in 1997; it was the second marriage for both. They met when she profiled him for the *Financial Times*; their "very first words" to each other are still preserved on tape, he says. The marriage is, by all accounts, tranquil: they like to cook and listen to chamber music at Wigmore Hall, which is in walking distance. McAfee, who is fifty-six, has light-brown hair, green eyes, and a composed wit. She later told me that she was "scientifically illiterate," adding, "I've forced myself to work up to a certain level to be able to participate in family conversation." She said that she often felt outnumbered by McEwan and her stepson William, a twenty-five-year-old graduate student in genetics at the University of Glasgow. McAfee told me that William's research focussed on "these lions who have the AIDS virus but no symptoms. He apparently gets sent a lot of lion blood in the post."

McEwan led me into the ground-floor sitting room and sat on a brown leather sofa. Mirror-image Bridget Riley prints, just like the ones in Perowne's house, framed the mantel. On a lacquered side table, a collection of liquor bottles propped up an unframed eight-by-ten photograph: McEwan, Hitchens, and Amis, their arms thrown around one another. The picture was taken in 2004, McEwan said, during what the men call "the Refulgencia"—an extended reunion in Uruguay, where Amis was living at the time. Hitchens recalls that the location held special appeal for McEwan: "We met on this part of the coast near José Ignacio, where the Beagle, Darwin's ship, had put in. We went to see where he put ashore and took samples."

In the seventies, Amis presided over the "Friday lunch," a weekly gathering at a restaurant in Bloomsbury. McEwan and Hitchens were among the regulars. Fuelled by alcohol, the men peacocked for hours, competitively spinning variants on clichés such as "cruising for a bruising." (Amis: "Angling for a mangling." Hitchens: "Aiming for a maiming.") The talk was often lewd. Amis later told me that McEwan was "more evolved" than the others. "There was a higher standard around Ian about being empathetic. You could have disgusting conversations with other friends. That wasn't Ian's style. He wanted to talk intimately, but not the sort of 'Come on, darling, you know you love it' chat that I'm definitely capable of."

Adjoining the sitting room is McEwan's poetry library. His friendship with Amis, he told me, was forged, in part, by a shared love of verse: "We would sit around in the seventies, drink a bit, get a bit stoned, and talk about poetry. Larkin came up a lot. Stuff by friends—Craig Raine, James Fenton. Sometimes Shakespeare. Pulling books off shelves and just *tasting* things." As for prose, both men had a strong affection for writers living in America—Nabokov, Roth, Bellow, Updike—and a contempt for what McEwan calls the "overstuffed, overfurnished English novel."

Amis told me that McEwan and he, for all their affinities, have little in common as prose stylists. "I am more surface and he is more undercurrent," Amis said. "I am very caught up with how words sound and he smooths it out more. He's more interested than I have ever been in very subtle gradations." McEwan, when told this, said, "I'm less expansive and musically *performative* than Martin, but in terms of the pulse of a sentence I care as much as anyone. I like Bach more than I like Wagner, chamber music more than orchestral music. I like a certain kind of terseness into which the occasional image will shine brighter. Style is an extension of personality."

He went on, "When I'm writing, I don't really think about themes." Instead, he keeps in mind a phrase of Nabokov's: "fondle details." McEwan explained, "Writing is a bottom-up process, to borrow a term from the cognitive world. One thing that's missing from the discussion of literature in the academy is the pleasure principle. Not only the pleasure of the reader but also of the writer. Writing is a self-pleasuring act."

He spoke of a passage that he was still polishing, in which Michael Beard reunites with a lover whom he hasn't seen in months. McEwan said that Beard reflects "on what a wealth of sensual data he's forgotten—on how much of her had emptied out of his mind. Although he has thought about her, he's forgotten the feel of her body, the springiness of her fingers, the particular smell of her scalp, which he likes." Beard concludes that this is "one of the pleasures that our feeble memory affords." McEwan said, "These little asides are one of the writer's great pleasures. You write a dialogue passage, and you're allowed to write in a commentary—squeeze in a generalization—between statements made only seconds apart."

Greg, McEwan's younger son, entered the sitting room in a bright-blue bathrobe. He had spiky black hair and his father's slitted eyes. McEwan chatted briefly with him about Argentina—in two days, Greg was beginning a semester abroad. Now twenty-two and a graduate student in international relations at the University of London, Greg was a source for Theo, Perowne's guitarist son in "Saturday." Greg later told me that he had a persistent virus that kept him at home, "under observation," when his father was writing the novel. Though he had Theo's loping grace, he noted a key divergence: "I definitely don't wear tight black jeans!" He recalled, "I used to play the guitar a lot, and I think he foresaw me going into music. I used to really like the blues." His father, he noted, plays the flute and is also a blues fan. "He gave me loads of instruction. He taught me my first chords. He'd play Oasis with me." Some reviewers found the father-son relationship in "Saturday" dubiously chummy, but not Greg. "I'm not sure if we've ever argued," he said. "He walked us to school and picked us up, yeah. He'd drive us to my friends', and watch out for us when we went to skate parks." His father didn't "close himself off with the work," he said. "I could walk into his study at any time of the day."

The portrayal of familial contentment in "Saturday" was meant as a provocation. "No one ever says, except in conversation, that they're actually enjoying their children, that they might be a source of interest and pleasure," McEwan said. "I thought there was some bad faith in omitting that as a possibility." The book is equally rosy about marriage; Perowne has sex with his wife twice in one day. John Banville, in *The New York Review of Books*, seized upon that detail, writing, "Apparently in the purlieu of north London, or at least in McEwan's fantasy version of them, no one suffers from morning breath, and women long-married wake up every time primed for sex." McEwan says, "The critic was revealing far more about himself and his wife's teeth-flossing habits than anything about the book."

McEwan grew up in a very different kind of household than the one he celebrates in "Saturday." He is from a military family that, he says, had almost no books. "It used to drive me crazy," he recalled. "I'd be reading a book, and I'd go out of the room and come back half an hour later. I'd say, 'Where's my book?' My mother had tidied it away, because the table was polished and it interrupted the view."

He was born in 1948, in Aldershot, southwest of London, but he spent most of his childhood abroad, at military bases. The family's longest posting was in Libya. For a time, they stayed on a peanut farm. His father, David, a career Army officer, worked long hours, and McEwan was often alone with his mother, Rose, a housewife. From the start, he enjoyed contemplating his brain. "The moment in 'Atonement' when Briony is crooking her finger and wondering at which point the intention is actually resolved into a movement is something very much from my childhood," he says.

McEwan's mother was on her second marriage. Her first, to a housepainter named Ernest Wort, produced a son, Jim, and a daughter, Margy. Wort served in the Second World War, and died from combat injuries in 1944. Three years later, Rose married David McEwan, who wanted little to do with his stepchildren. Jim was raised by Ernest Wort's mother; Margy was enrolled at a boarding school for soldiers' orphans. As a result, McEwan felt like an only child.

His parents, who both left school at fourteen, had few literary interests, but, he says, "The writer in me is from my mother. She was a great worrier, which requires an imagination. She was always convinced that she left the iron on." In a tender essay, "Mother Tongue," McEwan writes about Rose's intense intellectual anxiety. Ashamed of her working-class accent, she spoke with absurd slowness in front of posh women, treating the English language "as something that might go off in her face, like a letter bomb."

McEwan's father was domineering and temperamental, but he loved Ian fiercely; they hunted for scorpions in the desert with a jam jar, and roughhoused in the Mediterranean. "I used to stand on his shoulders, which were very slippery because the sea would wash his Brylcreem off his hair," he recalls. David McEwan, an acutely intelligent man—he received the highest test scores in his school district before his mother asked him to drop out and start earning a wage—served in the Second World War, and was wounded at Dunkirk; the Army offered to send him to college, but he declined. "He was too cautious," McEwan said. "It used to drive me to despair, his love of doing the same thing each day. Each Saturday, he'd go to the same pub and have a pint of beer while my mother went and did the vegetable shopping. She was to come back half an hour later, and if she took longer he'd start looking at his watch. And she would know that he'd be looking at his watch, so she'd be hurrying—a tightness around the heart. She couldn't bear his disapproval. And then she would have a sherry, and then he would ask her if she wanted another one, and she would say no, and he would say, 'Well, I'll have another beer,' and then he would have another beer, and then they would drive home." The marriage was "quite troubled," and there were episodes of domestic violence, McEwan recalled. "There was always a sense of exile and boredom, a lack of ordinariness." He never understood why his parents remained abroad, as they had no zest for travel. From 1961 to 1981, they lived in Germany, watching television each night without understanding a word.

"Mother Tongue," McEwan's attempt to understand his mother's "timorous" life, was published in October, 2001, when she was succumbing to dementia. It's especially moving to read now, because he was only a few months away from a discovery that cast a new light on her clenched unhappiness. In February, 2002, McEwan learned from a family-tracing service that he had an older brother.

Evidently, Rose and David McEwan had begun an affair while Ernest Wort was fighting in Italy. She became pregnant, and in December, 1942, they placed an ad in the Reading *Mercury*: "Wanted, Home for Baby Boy, age 1 month; complete surrender." Two weeks later, Rose and her sister stood on the platform of the Reading train station, and handed the baby off to the first couple that had answered the ad. Afterward, she could not offer her sister an explanation for her act; "I just had to," she repeated. McEwan's father may well have demanded that Rose give up the child. The British Army would likely have dismissed him for committing adultery with another soldier's wife.

McEwan made contact with his brother, Dave Sharp, who lives in Oxfordshire. Sharp told McEwan that he was a "brickie"—a bricklayer—who had been raised by loving parents. They met at a hotel bar near Oxford and soon figured out that they were, as Sharp puts it, "chalk and cheese." An outgoing man who favors broad jokes, Sharp told McEwan that he was a football fan; his brother confessed to little interest. Sharp was surprised when someone waylaid McEwan for an autograph while McEwan was ordering drinks at the bar. Sharp had only just learned of his brother's books. In an essay published in the *Guardian*, McEwan writes that they soon found common ground "that could not be

accounted for by experience alone: an aversion to tobacco, a tendency to develop basal cell carcinomas, and the interesting fact that we had stayed at the same hotel in Spain the preceding summer. A gene for hotel preference awaits expression.”

Since the meeting, there have been tense moments, especially in 2007, when Sharp told the story of his adoption to a British tabloid without informing McEwan. Last summer, Sharp, with the help of a ghostwriter, published a memoir, “Complete Surrender,” and McEwan reluctantly contributed a foreword. “At first, I thought I’d have nothing to do with it,” he said. “Then I realized that that would become a story, too, so better to write something.” Nevertheless, the brothers have learned to enjoy each other’s company. Sharp told me that he had just laid a brick wall outside McEwan’s Buckinghamshire cottage. “Ian brought out a sandwich, we got to chatting and mucking around, and he decided to lay a few bricks,” Sharp recalled. “Believe me, he will never be as good a bricklayer as me, as long as he has a hole in his rectum! So I wrote, on one of the bricks, ‘IAN.’ He said, ‘What’d you do that for?’ I said, ‘I don’t want to get the blame for *that*.’”

Though McEwan says that he’s happy to have found a brother—he likens it to “a Shakespeare comedy”—the discovery entailed a pained “recalibration” of his family history. His parents’ life had been tyrannized by a single act. By living abroad, the McEwans had been hiding from their past, and from Rose’s first two children, who were seven and five at the time of the accidental pregnancy. McEwan said, “In a slow-drip way, it was quite upsetting, because it threw into focus the terrible divide that occurred between the world of my mother’s first husband and the world of the second.” He recalled that, in 1989, he had interviewed his father about his life. His dad, who died in 1996, spoke freely into a tape recorder about the horrors of Dunkirk. “The story had always been that he had met my mother toward the end of the war,” McEwan said. “We’d been going about three hours in the evening, both drinking but not drunk. And I said, ‘Tell me about the time you first met Mum,’ thinking it was a fairly innocent question. He hit the roof. ‘How dare you ask me this question? Turn the damn thing off!’ I had hit a very sensitive point. Clearly, he met my mother in 1941, not 1945.”

Critics have noted that many McEwan novels hinge on a single, transformative event: the balloon, the abduction, Briony’s accusation. (In “Black Dogs,” in what may be a self-inoculating gesture, McEwan has his narrator tweak the idea: “Turning points are the inventions of storytellers and dramatists, a necessary mechanism when a life is reduced to, traduced by a plot.”) Yet the story of his parents conforms to this template. It may be true that some of McEwan’s novels are overplotted; it is also true that some lives are overplotted.

His mother plainly felt the loss of her son. When McEwan was seven, she told him that he was about to have a new brother. The McEwans had petitioned to adopt a child. Rose even told McEwan his brother’s name—Bernard—and said that he would arrive as Ian’s Christmas present. But, at the last moment, the adoption agency told the McEwans that a life of foreign postings was unstable. McEwan now wonders if the agency had learned of the trail of abandoned children. In 1982, he wrote an essay about his anticipatory fantasies concerning Bernard—his first fictional character. After learning that Bernard wasn’t coming after all, he writes, “I adopted him as an invisible playmate.”

The act of giving away one child, McEwan believes, set in motion a perverse pattern. When Ian was eleven, his parents enrolled him at an English boarding school. “I was sent away,” he said. “David was given away at a railway station. My half brother and half sister were sent away. Not till my brother appeared did all that come into focus.”

McEwan recalls sobbing as he boarded the plane from Libya to England, but the experience allowed him to reinvent himself. Woolverstone Hall, in Suffolk, was an experimental school for bright but disadvantaged children. McEwan was a timid pupil but a voracious reader. Initially, he preferred Agatha Christie mysteries and “slightly superior blockbusters,” such as “The Cain Mutiny,” but he soon graduated to Graham Greene and Iris Murdoch. Embarrassed by the same speech patterns that had burdened his mother, he enlisted a friend to correct him when he said things like “I done it.” His shyness concealed a bold mind. In 1965, in the school magazine, McEwan published a darkly comic poem commemorating the recent decision in Britain to outlaw capital punishment. McEwan describes a convicted murderer who is eagerly awaiting his death, to be “spared the blank years / of prison and more bitter tears.” Then comes the twist: “But didn’t you know hanging is banned? / We’ve put in your hour-glass plenty of sand. / You spend your life in a solitary cell, / But never you mind, we only wished well.”

McEwan enjoyed studying calculus—“It was like trying to lift a weight that was a little too heavy”—but he settled on literature, and showed enough promise that he was urged to apply for a scholarship at Cambridge. During the interview, McEwan’s intellectual anxiety came to a head: “Three dons sat down and talked to me about tragedy. They asked me about Aristotle’s views on this, and I was able to tell them that. Then we talked about ‘Julius Caesar,’ ‘Othello.’ Then ‘Macbeth.’ I hadn’t read ‘Macbeth.’ I knew the story, and so I passed over it lightly, and said, ‘On the other hand, in ‘Coriolanus’ . . .’ Then one of them said, ‘Mr. McEwan, can we get back to ‘Macbeth’?’ And I began to flounder. Then another one said, ‘Mr. McEwan, have you *read* ‘Macbeth’?’ And I said no. I was crippled by this, and refused to answer any more questions. I was just so humiliated.” He did not get the scholarship, and after a gap year in London, where he worked part time as a trash collector, he enrolled at the University of Sussex.

He arrived in 1967, and by his final year had developed two new passions: reading Freud and writing fiction. Upon graduating, he enrolled in a master’s program in comparative literature, at the University of East Anglia, which allowed him to submit stories as part of his degree. From the beginning, his prose had an unnerving discipline. Descriptions were precise; there was no failed wordplay or tortured metaphors; sentences had a razored gleam. (“I saw my first corpse on Thursday,” one story began. “Today it was Sunday and there was nothing to do.”) In “Mother Tongue,” McEwan explains that his surgical prose was, in part, a product of class anxiety. He composed words “without a pen in my hand, framing a sentence in my mind, often losing the beginning as I reached the end, and only when the thing was secure and complete would I set it down. I would stare at it suspiciously. Did it really say what I meant? Did it contain an error or an ambiguity that I could not see? Was it making a fool of me?”

McEwan’s sentences were hypercontrolled, but his themes were lurid. “Butterflies” nestles inside the mind of a pedophile as he molests a young girl, then tosses her into a canal. “In Between the Sheets” captures a father’s attempts to repress a sexual attraction for his daughter. Incest also dominates his first novel, “The Cement Garden” (1978), a grim fantasy of abandonment, in which teen-agers become unmoored after their parents die. When Jack, the fifteen-year-old narrator, observes his dying mother, he notes that “her eyes, set in dark skin wrinkled like a peach stone, were sunk so far into her skull she seemed to stare out from a deep well.” Later, Jack becomes sexually involved with his older sister; the Oedipal foundation of this act is signalled when he touches her nipple, which is “hard and wrinkled like a peach stone.” The poet Craig Raine, a longtime friend, cites this repeated image as an example of McEwan’s “tremendous sense of form.”

When McEwan was twenty-four, Theodora Solotaroff, the editor of the influential *American Review*, accepted

When McEwan was twenty-four, the *Innocent* editor, the editor of the influential *American Review*, accepted “Disguises,” a story about an orphan whose aunt forces him to cross-dress. “I remember opening the post,” McEwan says. “The issue was shocking pink. On the cover were these names: Susan Sontag, Philip Roth, Ian McEwan. That was extraordinary.” Renown soon followed. V. S. Pritchett hailed McEwan as an heir to Beckett and Kafka; a reviewer in *Encounter* called McEwan’s prose “constitutionally incapable of being appalled.” McEwan’s audacity especially attracted young readers. James Fenton, another longtime friend of McEwan’s, recalls, “If you were young, reading a book, in love with a girl, and unhappy about it, you were probably reading an Ian McEwan story.”

McEwan soon became friendly with Roth, who was living in London at the time. (In a published diary entry, McEwan writes of Roth, “The intelligence is warm, with a touch of cruelty to keep you alert.”) “Portnoy’s Complaint” was a clear influence on McEwan, whose debut collection, “First Love, Last Rites,” begins with a tale of a boy so intent on losing his virginity that he settles on his sister. “I took from Roth some sexual devil-may-care,” McEwan says. “I gave him ‘The Cement Garden’ in typescript. He phoned and said, ‘We’ve got to talk.’ He came around to my flat, and he spread it all out on the floor. He was really passionate. I was flattered—Philip, by that time, was colossal. He said, ‘The first half is great, but once the parents die all hell has got to break loose.’ And I said, ‘I can see that it would be a better novel than my novel. But it would be a novel by Philip Roth.’”

McEwan developed a notorious public persona. The jacket copy for a paperback edition of his second story collection, “In Between the Sheets,” declared, “Nobody ever said he was nice. Nasty, yes. Erotic, prophetic, even at times delicious; inventive, lewd, insolent and lyrical, to be sure; always grimly fantastic; but nice, never.” Much has been made of the diminishing ferocity of his work—if “In Between the Sheets” is a wolf, “Saturday” is a lamb—and devotees of McEwan’s early fiction often regard him with the same pity that music fans have for rock stars who turn to symphonies in their dotage.

McEwan told me that he was “trying to shock” with his early experiments; there was a tone of disavowal. “I began to feel that I had written myself into a corner,” he said. “As I got older, the rather reckless pessimism of my early fiction deserted me.” In fact, the change in his work is not as extreme as it may seem. McEwan’s presiding interest has always been psychology, and, like many scientists of his generation, he has shifted his intellectual allegiances. At first, he studied perversity; now he studies normality. His first god was Freud. Now it is Darwin.

One evening in September, McEwan met me at L’Étoile, a bistro on Charlotte Street, just south of Fitzroy Square. In Saul Bellow’s “The Dean’s December,” the title character dines at the restaurant, and muses that “he could live happily ever after on Charlotte Street.” In “Saturday,” Henry Perowne recalls the line while driving through the neighborhood but can’t remember the novelist.

McEwan often has dinner at L’Étoile, and we were seated by the front window. The walls were covered with signed photographs of London celebrities, one of which was a recent acquisition: the snapshot of McEwan, Amis, and Hitchens that had perched on McEwan’s liquor table. (At the restaurant’s request, McEwan had donated the photograph.) In this public setting, the intimate picture had the outlaw air of a “Wanted” poster; for months, the London press had been criticizing the trio’s political stance on Islam. A commentator for the *Independent* had called them the “clash-of-civilisations literary brigade.”

Amis had taken the most flak, after declaring in an interview, “There’s a definite urge—don’t you have it?—to say, ‘The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.’” McEwan then weathered his own “press storm,” as he called it, for coming to Amis’s defense. McEwan told *Corriere della Sera* that Amis’s target had been radicals, not all Muslims, and said, “I myself despise Islamism, because it wants to create a society that I detest, based on religious belief, on a text, on lack of freedom for women, intolerance towards homosexuality and so on.” The *Independent* ran an article on McEwan’s remarks, calling them an “astonishingly strong attack.” He was dumbfounded. “I’m just criticizing illiberality,” he said. He posted a message on his Web site, making clear that “Islamism” meant “extremism.” The incident rattled him. “Look at the Islamist Web sites,” he told me. “They want me dead. I can’t see why the *Independent* did this.”

McEwan first confronted Islamism in 1989, when the fatwa against Salman Rushdie was declared. McEwan had access to a cottage in the Cotswolds, and Rushdie secretly stayed with him there. “I’ll never forget—the next morning we got up early,” McEwan said. “He had to move on. Terrible time for him. We stood at the kitchen counter making toast and coffee, listening to the eight-o’clock BBC News. He was standing right by my side and he was the lead item on the news. Hezbollah had put its sagacity and weight behind the project to kill him. I was close to tears, but I didn’t want him to see.”

McEwan prides himself on his politeness, but he can’t repress a sneer when he speaks of religion. One afternoon at Fitzroy Square, he declared, “The idea of an afterlife, that we’ll meet again in some . . . *theme park*? There seems no good reason to think so.” In an essay on “apocalyptic beliefs,” he writes, “It is not for nothing that one of the symptoms in a developing psychosis, noted and described by psychiatrists, is ‘religiosity.’” On another occasion, McEwan, speaking of 9/11, told me, “Faith is at best morally neutral, and at worst a vile mental distortion. Our habits are to respect people of faith, but I think we’ve been forced to question those habits. The powers of sweet reason look a lot more attractive post-9/11 than the beckonings of faith, and I no longer put them on equal scales.”

According to Hitchens, McEwan’s hostility to irrational thinking has “something of the zeal of the convert.” He recalls that McEwan was once on the other side of the divide: “He was teasing as someone who had this slightly mystical view of things. He didn’t believe that the material substrata was the be-all and end-all.” He went on, “Ian has gone from someone who was a little bit promiscuous and flirtatious when it came to Gaia—slightly overawed impressions of the numinous—to someone who has, very sternly and brilliantly, committed himself to the integrities of objectivity, evidence, reason, and investigation.” Timothy Garton Ash, the Oxford historian, says, “Ian lived the sixties, with all their fascination with alternatives of various kinds. There’s absolutely no question that this was a personal journey.”

In 1972, McEwan and two friends bought a used microbus and drove from Munich to the Khyber Pass. “Ian was more of a hippie than I was,” Amis says. “I was an opportunistic hippie—more velvet suits and flowered shirts. He was more . . . ‘*Afghanistan*, yeah.’ He had several caftans, you know. And beads, I think. A bit of that.” (McEwan denies ever owning a caftan, but a diary entry from 1976 is instructive: “We eat *Psilocybe* mushrooms, canoe, swim naked in the electric-cold water, take saunas, play volleyball, drink wine and talk about Jimmy Carter, and Ezra Pound.”)

In the mid-seventies, McEwan fell in love with Penny Allen, whom he had met at East Anglia. She was divorced and had two daughters, Polly and Alice. James Grant, a philosopher who was friends with them both, describes Allen as “quite prominent in the feminist movement” and an “intelligent student of literature. She would read his stuff and talk seriously about it.” Allen admired the poet Adrienne Rich. McEwan’s epigraph to “The Comfort of Strangers” quotes

Rich's verse: "How we dwelt in two worlds / the daughters and the mothers / in the kingdom of the sons." Martin Amis said that McEwan was attracted to Allen's ideological stance: "Ian was saying things in the mid-seventies like the immediate future of the novel was to deal with the emancipation of women." Allen wrote fiction herself, but she did not find success. She was also fascinated with astrology and spirituality, and eventually began teaching a class called "Meditation, Healing, Astrology, and Creativity."

McEwan struggled to find scientific grounding for such alternative beliefs. In the late seventies, he read "The Dancing Wu Li Masters," a book, by Gary Zukav, that draws tendentious connections between quantum mechanics and Eastern mysticism. McEwan recalls, "I thought that perhaps I'd found a consilience of Eastern and Western thought." He wrote an essay that, citing Zukav, celebrates "the new physics": science "has perhaps reached a point where it might no longer be at odds with that deep intuitive sense—which seems to have always been with us—that there is a spiritual dimension to our existence, that there is a level of consciousness within us at which a transcendent unity may be perceived." The essay applauds "the great resurgence of interest in mysticism, eastern philosophies, ancient forms of divination and healing," and "forms of healing that lie outside the mechanistic approach of conventional medicine."

McEwan resists his friends' notion that he has fundamentally changed. "I was *always* interested in science," he says. "I explored mysticism as much as I could, but it never added up for me."

In 1979, McEwan bought a house in Clapham, in South London. McEwan and Allen married three years later, and she and her daughters moved into the house. In 1984, after their son William was born, the McEwans left London for a larger house in Oxford. McEwan was immediately embraced by a literary crowd that included Craig Raine and James Fenton. Allen was a less natural fit. Redmond O'Hanlon, a travel writer who was part of the circle, recalls an incident at a dinner party: "She declared that on Oxford High Street everyone had these brown auras, which was apparently the pits." O'Hanlon responded incredulously, and, as he recalls it, "Ian said, 'Redsy, you know we all have a weak magnetic field round us.' At that stage, he was defending her." McEwan speaks of Allen with reticence, saying only, "My first wife was very New Age. I tried to accommodate it."

"The Child in Time," published in 1987, hints at a split in McEwan's mind. One character, a theoretical physicist, declares, "Shakespeare would have grasped wave functions, Donne would have understood complementarity and relative time. They would have been excited. What richness!" But the novel also features a curious metaphysical sequence in which the protagonist, a writer named Stephen Lewis, stares in the window of a pub and sees his parents, as young people, discussing an unexpected pregnancy. McEwan said that the moment was meant to be akin to a wormhole: "It was my toe in the water of magical realism. I thought I could do it behind the fig leaf of a rather loose interpretation of quantum mechanics." The scene now has an additional resonance—it's as if McEwan had somehow divined his mother's secret pregnancy.

In 1980, McEwan and Ray Dolan met in London, through mutual friends. They became close, and by the late eighties were taking hikes that lasted for days. Dolan recalls that he and McEwan were trying to "shake off" some "post-hippie junk." They began a sustained study of evolution. "At the end of the eighties, we had very intense conversations around the issue of geology and evolutionary theory, so I think there was clearly a change occurring," Dolan said. They read biographies of Darwin and visited his home in Kent. Independently, they went to a churchyard, in the Malvern Hills, where Darwin's favorite daughter, Annie, was buried at the age of ten. McEwan said, "Annie was heartstoppingly articulate. Most terrible event in Darwin's life. It reinforced his wife's faith and emptied Charles's."

McEwan's 1992 novel "Black Dogs" is about a terrible event that sunders a husband and wife. After June Tremaine escapes an attack by dogs—"spirit hounds, incarnations"—she is left "convinced of evil and of God." She declares, "Without a revolution of the inner life, however slow, all our big designs are worthless." Her husband, Bernard, a doctrinaire rationalist, cannot abide the "lengthening roll call of June's certainties: unicorns, wood spirits, angels, mediums, self-healing, the collective unconscious, the 'Christ within us.'" McEwan renders their falling out with admirable equipoise. At the novel's end, he offers a lyrical description of June in a meditative trance:

She was delivered into herself, she was changed. This, now, here. Surely this was what existence strained to be, and so rarely had the chance: to savor itself fully in the present . . . the smooth darkening summer air, the scent of thyme crushed underfoot, her hunger, her slaked thirst, the warm stone she could feel through her shirt, the aftertaste of peach, the stickiness on her hand, her tired legs, her sweaty, sunny, dusty fatigue.

In a 1992 interview, McEwan said, "I've always had a great love of science, and yet I've never been convinced that rational explanations are enough. On the other hand, my spiritual dimension is so out of focus that all I can say is that it is an ill-defined dissatisfaction, a feeling that the material visible world is not either quite all or all that it seems."

Over time, the material world came to seem more than enough. McEwan began exchanging friendly e-mails with Richard Dawkins, the Oxford evolutionary biologist who is an outspoken atheist. Such alliances were inimical to McEwan's wife. Allen began working on a New Age book, "The Face of the Deep: Healing Body and Soul," which declares, "Through our over-concentration on the logical, the conscious and the light of reason, we have endangered the fabric of life." They separated in 1994, and divorced a year later.

They argued over custody, and in 1999 Allen, who was living in Brittany, ran off with Greg, who was then thirteen. Timothy Garton Ash went with McEwan to France to look for his son. McEwan was living the nightmare of "The Child in Time," and the British papers pounced on this coincidence. Garton Ash recalls being in a hotel restaurant with McEwan, and realizing that all the other diners in the room were journalists. "They were absolute snakes," he recalls. "They found out where Greg was before Ian did, but they didn't let on about it, because they wanted to secure an interview first." The French police found Greg bicycling with his mother along a road in Saint-Brieuc, thirty-five miles from Allen's house. McEwan took him back to Oxford. McEwan was given full custody of the boys, and he has remained close with his step-daughters. A judge barred Allen from speaking publicly about her relationship with McEwan, and said that she was "more governed by her emotions than her intellect."

Galen Strawson, a philosopher who lives in Oxford, said that the breakup freed McEwan to "become radically more scientific than any one of us." McEwan's next novel was "Enduring Love." Whereas in "Black Dogs" the intellectual war is between equals, Joe Rose's logical mind clearly shows up that of his girlfriend, Clarissa. A Romantic scholar, she doubts his evidence that he is being stalked, and nearly ends up dead. McEwan remembers that not every reader accepted the point: "Poor Greg had to study 'Enduring Love' in school. He had a female teacher. And he had to write an essay: Who was the moral center of the book? And I said to Greg, 'Well, I think Clarissa's got everything wrong.' He got a D. The teacher didn't care what I thought. She thought that Joe was too 'male' in his thinking. Well. I mean, I only wrote the damn thing."

As McEwan has grown more outspoken in his rationalism, his books have become fully anchored in old-fashioned

realism. "It's enough to try and make a plausible version of what we've got, rather than have characters sprout wings and fly out the window," he says. His few gestures toward the postmodern have been gingerly. Although "Atonement" ultimately makes the reader uncomfortably aware of its status as fiction, McEwan achieves the effect in a manner often associated with Hollywood thrillers. The fact that Robbie's story is a romantic fantasy invented by Briony, the person who betrayed him, is presented as a twist ending.

More than anything, the structure of "Atonement" resembles one of those psychological studies which McEwan so admires. If the reader becomes fully invested in the drama—to the point of resenting the revelation that the story is Briony's invention—then, according to McEwan, the experiment worked. "I'm still often asked, 'What really happened?'" he said. "I don't tire of it, because I think that to ask that question of me means I succeeded in something." He explained, "We can't retreat to the nineteenth century. We now have a narrative self-awareness that we can never escape, but we don't want to be crushed by that, either. 'Atonement' was my attempt to discuss where we stand."

"Saturday" was an even more personal statement—a direct assault on the modern novel's skepticism toward science. There are mathematical equations in "Gravity's Rainbow," but Pynchon suggests that they are almost always used for pernicious, occult ends; in Don DeLillo's "White Noise," technology creates Airborne Toxic Events and pills that induce delusion. "Saturday" presents technology in a far more sanguine light. The book's rapturous descriptions of multiblade razors, car stereos, and digital cameras—which strike some readers as blindly consumerist—suggest Perowne's appreciation of the human ingenuity behind even incremental invention. "Not everything is getting worse," he admonishes. Postmodern novelists have suggested that the contemporary world is an enveloping mystery, a dark chain of conspiracies. For McEwan, though, we live in a widening cone of light—a time of the decoded genome, the Hubble telescope, the illuminated brain. Such glories might best be appreciated by a novelist with an Augustan spirit.

When dusk arrives at the London Zoo, the animals let loose a collective bedtime squawk. And so the conversational hum of the two hundred and thirty guests arriving for McEwan's sixtieth-birthday party was accompanied by a bestial din. The event was held in a ballroom overlooking the zoo's grounds, and by the time some of London's most esteemed writers—Tom Stoppard, Kazuo Ishiguro, Julian Barnes, Edna O'Brien—showed up for the catered dinner the place felt like an aquarium overfilled with tropical fish. McEwan did not want his party to resemble a book launch. Accordingly, the invitation was insistently lowbrow—"OLD MAN AT THE ZOO," accompanied by the image of a gorilla with a raised middle finger—and the evening's entertainment was a thumping blues band.

Most novelists do not have two hundred good friends; McEwan is unusually social. He was on the younger end of his crowd. Michael Frayn, the seventy-five-year-old author of "Copenhagen," spent much of the cocktail hour sitting down. "We stayed at the McEwans' last weekend," he told me. "We had a long talk about philosophy and science, and I was suddenly humiliated, because he knows far more than I do. I felt very much on the back foot." Frayn recently published a book-length essay, "The Human Touch," in which he argues that "the laws of physics and numbers are not entities out there, independent of ourselves." He told me later, "Ian's very much a Socratic talker. But, clearly, from the drift of his questions, he disagrees quite strongly."

Three of the guests at the party—Galen Strawson, Craig Raine, and Timothy Garton Ash—get to read his work before publication. (Not Amis, McEwan said: "I don't want a *novelist* reading my work, thank you very much!") In 2001, Garton Ash persuaded McEwan to drop the "An" from the title of his new novel, "An Atonement." In the published version of "On Chesil Beach," there is a hint that Florence's wedding-night fear might be tied to memories of a predatory father. The draft, Garton Ash told me, was "one of the very rare cases in which Ian was saying a bit too much." Garton Ash added, "So much of English literature, specifically, is about the unspoken."

Raine's specialty is lapses in prose. McEwan spoke of an incident with the manuscript of "The Child in Time": "Stephen Lewis visits his friend, and they sit before a flickering log fire, drinking wine. Craig mocked 'flickering log fire' heavily. Much later, I read a piece of Craig's in his book 'Haydn and the Valve Trumpet.' There was a cliché, and I marked it 'F.L.F.': Flickering Log Fire."

McEwan is not always so jovial about criticism. At one point, he asked me if Raine had recounted his savage assessment of "The Comfort of Strangers." They met for lunch, McEwan recalled. "Craig said, 'Listen, love. It's complete crap, and you should put it in a drawer and forget it.' I was furious. And I broke the unspoken rules of engagement. I'd given him the typescript—he wasn't bound to like it. Anyway, I was very offended. He took a while to get forgiven." They didn't speak for nearly two years. (Raine confirmed the incident, but said that his opinion had been rendered decorously.)

McEwan's advisers sometimes disagree. At the party, Strawson and Raine sparred over "Black Dogs." Following Strawson's counsel, McEwan had made changes to a section describing the fall of the Berlin Wall. McEwan had been in Berlin at the time. As Strawson saw it, "Ian had a diary and got slightly too in love with his entries."

"You're so wrong about this!" Raine said. "At first, I felt exactly the same thing. Then I read it again and realized how it all fitted together."

Garton Ash told me that, in McEwan's circle, there was a protocol for discussing one another's new work. "Novelist A calls Novelist B. They talk for three minutes, in which Novelist B talks about the latest political atrocity, about football, about drink. Finally, Novelist A says, 'Why didn't you like my book?'" McEwan agreed that he was sometimes "honest with silence." Asked about intramural competition, he said, "It's there, in the background. But I've always felt that the intellectual space for good writing is infinite. It's not what economists would call a 'positional' good. A good novel does not preclude the possibility of another good novel."

All McEwan's literary friends praise his talent—Craig Raine calls him "the most complete of the novelists that I know"—but they have an odd tendency to dismember his books. Amis, asked to name McEwan's greatest achievement, said, "The first two hundred pages of 'Atonement.'" Fenton cited "the beginning of 'Enduring Love.'" Strawson said bluntly, "Ian is essentially a short-story writer." He said that McEwan's books were often stories "pushed into a novel. I feel that about the losing of the child in the supermarket in 'The Child in Time,' which is brilliant and horrifying. Ian writes best at a length shorter than the full-scale novel; this is connected with his being a master of unease. I've said, 'Write more short stories and novellas. Look at Henry James—they're arguably his greatest legacy.'" Strawson went on, "Ian's novels are very, very accomplished. But none has the unity of drive that the best novels have. 'Atonement' is his best shot."

During dinner, McEwan sat at a large circular table with his family, including Polly and Alice. Around nine o'clock, he stood up. Singing "Happy Birthday," McEwan announced, had been forbidden, since he hates the tune. "Your best achievement in life is your community, your friends, your family," he said. He was wearing a loose-fitting gray suit and no tie. "It's very heartening—delicious—to see you all here. I can face death with a stolid heart, knowing that I have

the. It's very heartening—delicious—to see you all here. I can face death with a stolid heart, knowing that I have such marvellous friends.” Earlier that day, McEwan had said, “When you wake in the morning, you enter that pre-existent state where you're just pure self. You come into full consciousness, and your identity leaps back at you. One of the essential bits of that is where you are in the story. And it's a little disappointing to discover that you're approaching the end.”

Amis, who is a year younger than McEwan, joked to Raine, “I'd like to have a Mutton Dressed As Lamb party. Everyone has to come in old clothing, *haunting* their old bodies.”

After McEwan's speech ended, the band launched into a riotously loud tribute to Bo Diddley. The party suddenly resembled a wedding—merriment enforced by volume. A few dozen guests fled outside. Raine led the way, wryly lamenting “this pathetic, sentimental notion Ian has that people like live music.” Amis, who stayed, smiled and said, “He always does this—deafening, teeth-rattling music. Sorting out the old from the young is what he's doing.” For a few numbers, Amis took to the floor, shuffling with the ironical stiffness of someone determined to conceal a lack of rhythm. McEwan, who stripped off his jacket, was more graceful.

Outside, wineglasses rested on the edges of tree planters. Raine noticed a slug crawling up the side of one glass. “It's creepy, like out of one of Ian's early shorts,” he said. Zadie Smith walked over, in a nubbly canary-yellow dress, and said, “It must be very good wine.”

When the music finally ended, McEwan, sweaty from dancing, chatted with Ray Dolan, who said, “Ian, we sure have got into a lot of craic”—mischief. Once, while hiking in California, they came across a menacing man straight out of a McEwan novel. The man, brandishing a gun, demanded that they “clear the area immediately.” Dolan was terrified, but he recalled that McEwan remained “extremely calm and rational,” informing the man that he didn't have the authority to tell him what to do, and walking off with Dolan.

An old neighbor from Oxford gave McEwan a hug. “Your sons are so grown up and beautiful!” she said.

“They are all wonderful,” McEwan said of his family. “I'm so lucky.” He paused, but he couldn't help himself, and paraphrased a line from “Saturday”: “It's now the dominant scientific position, you know, that parents have almost no influence.”

On a drizzly afternoon in October, McEwan went to Covent Garden and found his way to a basement theatre. He had come to watch a dress rehearsal of “For You,” an opera by the British composer Michael Berkeley, for which McEwan had written his first libretto. He sat down next to me, and after several minutes leaned over and whispered, “This is possibly the first moment of penile dysfunction in opera.”

Onstage, the baritone Alan Opie—portraying a philandering composer named Charles Frieth—was lying on a chaise longue, groping the increasingly unclad body of Rachel Nicholls, a soprano playing a much younger French-horn player. The orchestra heightened the sleazy mood with sozzled gestures of atonality. Nicholls suddenly frowned, singing, “They say an erection never lies. / But this is also eloquent.”

To insure that the audience caught every word, the production featured surtitles. “It was a condition,” McEwan said. “It's not so distracting. A saccade is all that's required.”

The libretto offered proof that bourgeois contentment hasn't vanquished McEwan's love of the grotesque. “For You” offers a diabolical variation on his 1998 novel “Amsterdam,” a comic parable about a vain composer's rivalry with his best friend. Charles views his musical talent as a license for misbehavior. (As McEwan told me, his protagonist buys into the myth “that if you're not a monster you're no good.”) Charles is nasty to musicians and assistants, and cheats on his ill wife, Antonia. “History will forgive my ways because / My music outstared the sun,” he sings. His Polish maid, Maria, is oblivious of his cruelties, and worships him. Determined to have Charles to herself, she murders Antonia and frames him for the crime. The creepy final tableau suggests that McEwan's fascination with life imprisonment has not faded since his Woolverstone days: as Charles is led offstage in handcuffs, Maria sings, “I'll make your cage a happy one. / In the desert of empty time, my visits / will be your sweet oases.” As in “Don Giovanni,” a Lothario ends up in Hell.

McEwan worked on “For You” while completing “On Chesil Beach.” He and Berkeley are old friends; his literary agent is Berkeley's wife. During intermission, they had dinner in an upstairs cafeteria. Berkeley mentioned that, in the sex scene, the percussionists had used an instrument called a “lion's roar,” but it had been inaudible. “You pull a string through a drum head, and it makes this odd sound,” he explained. “It needs to be loud, like someone grunting during wild sex.”

The taxonomist in McEwan was delighted: “A lion's roar! I wished I'd known that when I wrote the libretto.”

We returned to the theatre for Act II. Antonia lies unconscious in the hospital, recovering from an operation. Maria enters and unplugs her life-support machine. “It's nice to have an operatic death registered technologically,” McEwan commented. (As Antonia succumbs, Berkeley's music alludes to the machine's shrill beeps.) McEwan said that one of his rules for the opera was that it be anchored in psychological realism. “So many are supernatural fairy tales,” he said.

“For You” had its première on October 28th, and received mostly strong reviews. The *Sunday Times* said that McEwan's text “is manifestly open to the idea of music . . . without foregoing literary appeal.” The production was darkly entertaining, at times verging on camp—less “Don Giovanni” than “Fatal Attraction.” McEwan's libretto felt like an arch agglomeration of favored motifs: a delusional admirer, a narcissistic artist, a terrible misunderstanding.

It did not surprise me to learn that McEwan keeps a plot book—an A4 spiral notebook filled with scenarios. “They're just two or three sentences,” he said. One night at Fitzroy Square, after some prodding, he retrieved the notebook from his study and looked at it with me. “Here's one,” he said. “A comedy of beliefs set in a laboratory. Into this realm comes a young Islamic scientist who is technically brilliant. The head of the laboratory is a secular humanist, and the two become entangled. Something short and vicious, like Nathanael West.” He paused, abashed. “When you have the bare bones like this, they seem like nothing.” He scanned more pages.

“Actually, here is my current novel,” he said. “I was coming to London in a plane, held in a stack for forty-five minutes. As I waited, I realized that this could be the opening image.” He read from his notes: the city was “rotating beneath him.” A man sees a degraded city below, a “sick sky” approaching night. The panorama, however, fills him with energy: “He couldn't wait to get home.” It was an inversion of the opening of “Saturday”—an anxious Londoner watching a plane descend in the pre-dawn sky.

McEwan said that he never rushes from notebook to novel. “You've got to feel that it's not just some conceit,” he said. “It's got to be *inside* you. I'm very cautious about starting anything without letting time go, and feeling it's got to come out. I'm quite good at not writing. Some people are tied to five hundred words a day, six days a week. I'm a hesitater.”

When McEwan does begin writing, he tries to nudge himself into a state of ecstatic concentration. A passage in

“Saturday” describing Perowne in the operating theatre could also serve as McEwan’s testament to his love of sculpting prose:

For the past two hours he’s been in a dream of absorption that has dissolved all sense of time, and all awareness of the other parts of his life. Even his awareness of his own existence has vanished. He’s been delivered into a pure present, free of the weight of the past or any anxieties about the future. In retrospect, though never at the time, it feels like profound happiness. It’s a little like sex, in that he feels himself in another medium, but it’s less obviously pleasurable, and clearly not sensual. This state of mind brings a contentment he never finds with any passive form of entertainment. Books, cinema, even music can’t bring him to this. . . . This benevolent dissociation seems to require difficulty, prolonged demands on concentration and skills, pressure, problems to be solved, even danger. He feels calm, and spacious, fully qualified to exist. It’s a feeling of clarified emptiness, of deep, muted joy.

For McEwan, a single “dream of absorption” often yields just a few details worth fondling. Several hundred words is a good day. At one point, we spoke of a line from “The Child in Time.” Stephen Lewis, watching his wife give birth, muses, “This is really all we have got, this increase, this matter of life loving itself.” Such whispers are McEwan at his best. He told me, “You spend the morning, and suddenly there are seven or eight words in a row. They’ve got that twist, a little trip, that delights you. And you hope they will delight someone else. And you could not have foreseen it, that little row. They often come when you’re fiddling around with something that’s already there. You see that by reversing a word order or taking something out, suddenly it tightens into what it was always meant to be.”

For several days, McEwan played with the Heathrow image, and began conjuring his character. He imagined Michael Beard impatiently shifting under his seat belt in the darkening sky. He decided that his protagonist was flying into London from Berlin. But he didn’t want to begin the novel with mere description. From the start, he wanted the “background hum” to catch in the reader’s ear. So McEwan spent a few mornings, and suddenly the words tightened into a row: “He was running out of time. Everyone was, it was the general condition.” ♦

To get more of *The New Yorker*'s signature mix of politics, culture and the arts: **Subscribe Now**