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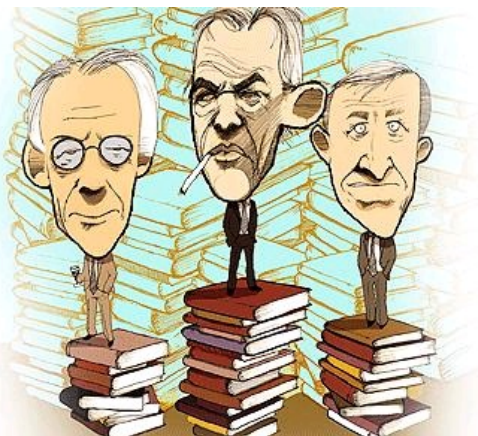
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Martin Amis, Ian McEwan: does the golden generation still glitter?

As Martin Amis and Ian McEwan bring out new books, Alex Clark looks at the gang of headline-grabbing novelists (now in their sixties) and wonders whether they have lived up to their early promise.

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Books Life : Ian McEwan, Martin Amis and Julian Barnes Photo: Andy Watt/Folioart

Despite his previous professions of distaste for the comic novel, one might almost suspect **Ian McEwan** of using fiction to make a joke at our expense – or even his own.

At the end of last year, an extract of his forthcoming novel, *Solar*, appeared in the New Yorker magazine and immediately posed the reader a question: is literature at its most useful – or is it indeed only useful – when you are trying to get someone into bed?

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In the extract, we learn that the novel's protagonist, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, a serial marrier and dedicated philanderer, makes his first significant youthful romantic conquest by convincing the object of his affections that he is an aficionado of Milton and, to boot, that he has little time for the hoary old opposition of art and science: "All knowledge interested him, he said; the demarcations between subjects were mere conveniences or historical accidents or the inertia of tradition." Mastering art by dint of furious mugging up and a little rational thought makes Michael Beard, we hear, feel "intellectually free" (even though his first wife eventually walks out on him after having her consciousness raised). Unseasonably speaking, we might accuse McEwan of being a turkey voting for Christmas.

The novel, to be published here in March, has been billed as a satirical look at climate change and was germinated on a trip to the Arctic to observe that very phenomenon, in which McEwan saw that the vagaries of group behaviour might provide a useful insight into our tricky relationship with the planet. But McEwan's recurrent concern with the uses and abuses of fiction – in evidence in perhaps his most widely read novel, *Atonement* (2001), hung on a narrative trick revealed only at its conclusion, and in the thrillerish denouement of 2005's *Saturday*, which juxtaposed violence with Matthew Arnold, provides an intriguing portrait of a novelist consistently

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interested in the purpose and potential of his form. At the same time, McEwan has also pulled off that rare feat in the world of the literary novel – writing books that appeal to a large and loyal readership while also garnering attentive and, even when mixed, serious reviews.

In the flood of novels to be published in the opening months of the decade, Solar stands out, alongside **Martin Amis's** *The Pregnant Widow* and **Peter Carey's** *Parrot and Olivier in America*, as among the most eagerly anticipated. Together with Julian Barnes and Kazuo Ishiguro, both of whom had books out last year, these writers can be seen as the lasting success stories of a generation of writers who rose to prominence in the Seventies and Eighties and who have emerged – in that impossible parlour game of second-guessing posterity – as those with at least a fighting chance of being read in a few decades. But what does that tell us about our literary landscape, its recent past and its likely future?

There is, in the first instance, an obvious point to be made about the peculiar nature of literary celebrity. Of the writers mentioned above, it is Amis and McEwan whose books are most breathily previewed and whose pronouncements on a range of topics, most noticeably both writers' comments on Islamic fundamentalism, have been widely reported and minutely dissected; added to which, Amis in particular has frequently seen his private life come under scrutiny.

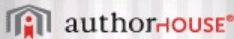
In a culture in which it is debatable whether any writer is ever really "famous" – Amis's most recent tangle with the press came when he had the temerity to question the writing talents and physical attributes of Katie Price, a celebrity nonpareil – Amis and McEwan come the closest Britain has. In Amis's case, the (not entirely literary) reasons are clear enough: the combination of a famous writer father, an early determination to include an awful lot of sex in his work and the odd diary-friendly interlude such as expensive dental work is enough to create a reputation for controversy and notoriety. For McEwan, there is something a little more subtle at play, with widespread media attention only arriving in the past few years. It was *Saturday*, set against the anti-Iraq War demonstrations of 2003 and frequently adopting something close to a documentary style, that catapulted its writer on to the national news; it was as if we felt that here was a writer to whom we could entrust the task of telling us what was going on, in a language that we could understand.

That level of recognition does not, however, guarantee blanket approval. McEwan has seen his fair share of negative reviews, most notably when fellow novelist John Banville wrote a vehemently dissenting review of *Saturday* in *The New York Review of Books*; it was, he said, "a neoliberal polemic gone wrong", its author demonstrating "a disturbing tendency towards mellowness". Last year, the critic James Wood, writing in the *London Review of Books* in far more generally approving terms, drew attention to McEwan's predilection for narrative manipulation and wrote suggestively about the reader's own collusion with it.

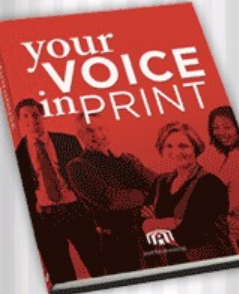
But if McEwan sometimes finds himself on the receiving end of a less-than-enthusiastic critical reception, Amis must surely wonder who will be first to take a potshot. After the brief respite of his memoir, *Experience* (2000), which appeared to surprise critics with its candour and painstakingly delineated emotion, Amis came in for a drubbing when he published the novel *Yellow Dog* in 2003, with Tibor Fischer even writing that he feared being seen reading it on the Tube. *The Pregnant Widow*, which is set in an Italian castle in 1970 and centres on the sexual adventures of a group of young men and women, has been described in advance as a discussion of feminism; whether Amis's detractors, who accuse him regularly and

with highly arguable accuracy of misogyny, view it that way remains to be seen. There is much less to fear, one imagines, for Peter Carey, whose new novel is a re-imagining of the American adventures of Alexis de Tocqueville; following the ambitiously fractured narrative of political extremism in his last novel, *His Illegal Self*, it suggests a writer whose fascination for oddballs and off-kilter stories ensures a resistance to easy categorisation.

It is a truism that any examination of a group of writers generally concludes that they have little in common; those who dedicate their lives to creating literary fiction are usually striving to isolate their own voices rather than to tune in to others'. If Amis and McEwan repeatedly attract the noisiest attention, it is both a testament to the steadfastness of their ambition – McEwan's commitment to exploring his fascination with the intervention of chance calamity into ordinary and otherwise ordered lives, for example, or Amis's bravura probing of the possibilities and limits of his pyrotechnical style – and an interesting commentary on our own attitudes towards the contemporary novel. Despite the critical and commercial success of her Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Wolf Hall*, and the consistently exceptional quality and curiosity of her earlier work, Hilary Mantel has not often been spoken of in the same breath as the triumvirate of McEwan, Amis and Julian Barnes; similarly, A.S Byatt, Rose Tremain and Pat Barker, even though their work has pleased both prize juries and large numbers of readers. It is hard not to see a gender bias at work here, though not only that; one wonders if there is a suspicion of a certain sort of narrative complexity. It is hard to consider the work of such diverse writers as Howard Jacobson, John Banville, Sebastian Barry or the late Gordon Burn and judge them to be lesser talents than their more volubly discussed contemporaries; but in each, there is a less immediately apparent artistic



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agenda that can almost be seen as a greater willingness to immerse themselves in the ambiguities and meandering byways of the form.

But if all the writers who are loosely grouped together as contemporaries can be credited with invigorating the novel over the past 30 or 40 years – and with freeing it from some of the dead-ends that conventional realism had pulled it towards – then what of the coming generation? Easy though it is to come up with a list of novelists in their thirties or forties – many of whom featured, like their predecessors, on Granta's once-a-decade list of the Best of Young British Novelists – it is also true that the literary landscape is much altered. Now, writers such as David Peace, Zadie Smith, Sarah Waters, A.L Kennedy, Nicola Barker and Andrew O'Hagan, to name but a few, must operate in an environment where there is far less opportunity for critical discussion and far more pressure on a writer to perform well earlier in their career. And these are the writers who have already enjoyed a large measure of success – including not only the approval of reviewers but also the attentions of screenwriters keen to map their work onto another medium or the imprimatur of television book clubs. For an even newer generation of writers to flourish – and for us to discover who will be the next Ishiguro or Barnes, Amis or McEwan – the reading public must first keep faith with the novel, in all its time-consuming and often puzzling variety, whether or not that reading experience takes place electronically or on old-fashioned paper, and whether or not it comes accompanied by an author's podcast or online interview.

In the meantime, during the coming weeks critics and readers will determine the success or otherwise of a clutch of heavyweight new novels. Whatever the verdicts, the longevity of their creators can hardly fail to impress

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