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Introduction

Ian Russell McEwan (1948–) holds a pre-eminent place in late twentieth-century and contemporary British fiction. His standing as one of the most significant British writers since the 1970s is well established, and the interest in his work extends beyond Britain, especially to the United States and Europe, where he is widely read (and studied): his works have received both popular and critical acclaim, and he is, apart from Salman Rushdie (1947–), perhaps the most truly *international* author among his peers, the novelists of his generation, born in the 1940s: Martin Amis (1949–), Julian Barnes (1946–), Graham Swift (1949–). The larger underlying claim, which this *Companion* explores in its different facets, is that McEwan is at the forefront of a group of novelists who reinvigorated the ethical function of the novel, in ways that embody a deep response to the historical pressures of the time. Indeed, from the perspective of literary history, McEwan occupies a central role in a new wave of British novelists whose mature writing began to emerge in the Thatcher era, all of whom found different ways to address the moral problems that presented themselves in Britain from the late 1970s through to the 1990s, a period characterized broadly by the growth of self-interest, the expansion of corporate power and the collapse of the Welfare State. At the same time, McEwan has expanded our understanding of the novel's capacity – and especially the various ways in which the discourse of the novel can intersect with the discourses of science – so that the attempt to place him historically must address the history of ideas as much as his social and political context.

McEwan engages fully with the ideas as well as the social preoccupations of his time, so that his novels sometimes seem to treat these questions head-on, or at least less obliquely than is customary in a novelist's work. The following topics have all figured prominently in his writing: politics; male violence and the problem of gender relations; science and the limits of rationality; nature and ecology; love and innocence; and the basis of morality. Yet, if his work has sometimes been seen as over-dependent on ideas, he

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has also pre-empted his critics by treating the problem of ideas self-consciously, and by making it subordinate to questions of narrative technique; and he is also a great stylist, so his readers can always take pleasure in his carefully-wrought spare prose. This *Companion* has been structured to highlight the points of intersection between literary questions and evaluations, and the treatment of contemporary sociocultural issues and topics.

McEwan's work has received much praise and public recognition. His first book, the collection of stories *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), won the Somerset Maugham Award (1976). In 1983, he was named by *Granta* magazine as one of the 20 Best Young British Novelists and was awarded *The Evening Standard* award for best screenplay for *The Ploughman's Lunch*. He has won the Whitbread Novel Award for *The Child in Time* (1987) and the Booker Prize in 1998, for *Amsterdam*. He has also been short listed for the Booker on four other occasions: for *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), *Black Dogs* (1992), *Atonement* (2001) and *On Chesil Beach* (2007). He won the French Prix Fémina Étranger in 1993, and the Shakespeare Prize in 1999. He was awarded the W. H. Smith Literary Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for *Atonement*, all in 2002. *Saturday* won the James Tait Black prize for fiction in 2005, and McEwan has also won the Book of the Year award for *On Chesil Beach* at the British Book Awards in 2008, and the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for *Solar* in 2010. He was awarded the CBE in 2000.

There are several ways in which McEwan's life can be seen to inspire his social preoccupations. For example, his background seems to relate strongly to his frequent portrayal of new kinds of family dynamic, and especially how a changing class structure impacts on domestic space. McEwan was born on 21 June 1948 in Aldershot. His Scottish father David McEwan was a soldier in the British army (later an officer), and his mother was Rose Lilian McEwan, whose previous husband had died in the Second World War, and by whom she had already had two children. In 2007, McEwan discovered that he had an elder brother, Dave Sharp, given up for adoption during the war.¹ In the early years of his childhood, McEwan lived at British military bases, both in Britain and abroad in Singapore and Libya, so he was not rooted in any specific place or region. A different sense of displacement ensued when McEwan's family found themselves in a form of class limbo, when his father was 'commissioned from the ranks'.² Because both parents were working class, the family experienced 'a curious kind of dislocated existence'.³

His childhood also produced a nascent political consciousness, stemming from his existence as (in his words), an 'army brat'⁴: the Suez crisis of 1956,

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which emphatically demonstrated the waning of Britain as a world power, occurred when McEwan was eight, and living in Libya, where anti-British sentiment was running high. When he saw the ‘service revolver’ strapped to his father’s waist, McEwan claims to have ‘understood for the first time that political events were real and affected people’s lives’ (*MA*, p. 27). Here, in McEwan’s introduction to the screenplay for *The Ploughman’s Lunch* (1983), in which parallels are drawn between Suez and the Falklands campaign, the writer retrospectively locates the birth of his political consciousness with the waning of Britain as a colonial power.⁵

McEwan’s education was also unusual, but in ways that put him in the vanguard of class transition. Aged eleven, he was sent to a state boarding school in Suffolk, Woolverstone Hall, which he has characterized as having ‘the trappings of a public school’, yet with an intake of ‘grammar-school level working-class lads from central London’.⁶ McEwan’s later education was also illustrative of a changing world. He attended two new universities: he was an undergraduate at the University of Sussex (1967–70), and he was the first student to study creative writing (with modern fiction, 1970–1) at the University of East Anglia. The new universities of the 1960s and 1970s, and the expansion of Higher Education they embodied, signalled a key step in the democratization of learning, and the University of Sussex was a particular focus for new (and often radical) social and political thought. In 1972 McEwan experienced the counter-culture first hand, following the ‘hippy trail’ to Afghanistan.

In 1974, he moved from his flat in Norwich to take an attic room in Stockwell. At this time, he made contact with Ian Hamilton’s *New Review*. Through this key literary journal, he was introduced to, as he puts it, ‘my generation’ of writers, including Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Craig Raine. If, with hindsight, this looks like a new literary establishment in the making, it was also ‘remarkably open’, in a meritocratic spirit.⁷ The idea of a meritocratic society was another key marker – or aspiration – that can be associated with McEwan’s generation, experiencing the upheavals of class change in post-war Britain.

McEwan’s later family life also has a bearing on his perception of social change. He has been married twice; first in 1982, to Penny Allen, with whom he had two sons. They were divorced in 1995, but the first marriage ended in acrimony, and a dispute over custody of the children. McEwan’s second marriage, in 1997, was to literary journalist Annalena McAfee. Interviewed in 1998, and whilst avoiding any direct comment on his personal life, he remarked that ‘no one ... has an ordinary family life’, given the ‘incredible cross-alliances and third wives, second husbands, children by previous marriages, lovers who live in – mayhem, at street level’.⁸ To some extent

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McEwan's domestic life corresponds with this social trend, which has continued during his lifetime, with the traditional stable nuclear family becoming increasingly less commonplace, a point reinforced by the discovery, mentioned above, of a long-lost brother in 2007.

The key social and political changes of McEwan's lifetime, then, have also affected him personally, influencing his creativity. That influence, however, has not resulted in extravagant technical innovations in the manner of novelists such as Angela Carter or Salman Rushdie, writers who fashioned new fictional forms in direct response to a rapidly changing society, and who rendered in new imaginative forms the consequences of feminism and migrancy. In McEwan's work, there is continuity with a longer-term examination of the function of the novel, a process that has extended through modernity and into postmodernity. Placing McEwan in the canon of post-Second World War British writers, therefore, is not straightforward. He may not be overtly experimental, in the manner of Carter or Rushdie, but this does not mean his work is devoid of innovation, a quality that is held in balance with his interrogation of tradition. One source for the traditional element in this balance of influences is suggested by his early mentors. During his MA year, McEwan was taught by both Angus Wilson and Malcolm Bradbury, two writers whose work addresses the liberal identity in crisis.⁹ The disturbing themes of McEwan's early work seem to take him in an entirely new direction; but his later preoccupation with the self and moral responsibility is apparent, even here, a facet of McEwan's ongoing intent to reconnect narrative fiction with moral sense, and, in some measure, to develop the sense of liberal identity crisis that one associates with Wilson and Bradbury, but for a new generation. The literature of shock (especially evident in early works by Martin Amis as well as McEwan) can be seen as one strategy for awakening the collective conscience in an era of bewildering social transition. So, although McEwan's later works are more obviously engaged with political questions, with interpersonal relationships, and with literary influence, we should not overlook the continuity as well as the sense of development through the oeuvre: his ongoing interrogations of the relationship between ethics, fiction and the act of writing are evident even in the disturbing early fiction.

The *Companion* begins with a detailed look at the emergence of McEwan as a writer, through a series of works with thematic coherence. His career began in startling fashion, with three books that achieved a degree of notoriety, and which earned him a reputation for writing unpleasant shorter fictions preoccupied with violence and deviant sexuality. As I have intimated, it is obvious now that McEwan's early work embodied a challenge to a staid literary establishment. His two short story collections, *First Love*, *Last*

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Rites (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978), and the novella *The Cement Garden* (1978), had a significant impact on the literary scene, making an important contribution to the ‘post-consensus’ renaissance in British fiction. McEwan’s second longer work, *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), is the culmination of this early phase, a work offering a hint at one direction his subsequent fiction would take: at its heart there is a considered evaluation of one effect of ideas and belief systems, an interest that sees him breaking out of his early stylistic straitjacket. At the same time, the early shock lit reveals its own concern with broader social questions. As Eluned Summers-Bremner shows in Chapter 1, McEwan’s early work is distinctive, a voice emerging from a mood of national despondency, and reflecting on concerns arising from the erosion of the British welfare state, in a longer trajectory of historical reflection on the slow dismantling of the post-Second World War political consensus.

Discovering the connections between the early and later fiction requires us to see beyond the surface differences – which, superficially, suggest a maturation away from the early shock lit and towards a denser form of prose with greater social amplitude. Yet this can be problematic in two ways: if this simple account overlooks the early burgeoning moral sense, it also downplays the ways in which McEwan continues to disturb and unsettle us: his is an ‘art of unease’, in Kiernan Ryan’s phrase.¹⁰ If McEwan’s early writing, especially the claustrophobic interiorized short stories, signals a turning away from the kind of social embodiment current in the English novel, at the same time he catches a generational mood, the sense of dislocation chiming with a broader public feeling. This is the germ of his interest in morality, which progressively became more central to his compositional processes, and the dilemmas presented in his fictions. His conviction that ‘we are innately moral beings, at the most basic, wired-in neurological level’ leads to a significant advance in the novel’s concern with morality, as McEwan comes increasingly to link moral questions to his interest in scientific advancements, especially in evolutionary psychology, but also in neuroscience. He is inspired by the understanding that evolution produces instinctive social behaviour, made possible by the imagination and the ability to empathize, though in the writing of a novel these connections become rich and indeterminate. It is this ‘wired-in’ capacity for morality that fiction both feeds and responds to: ‘fiction is a deeply moral form in that it is the perfect medium for entering the mind of another. I think it is at the level of empathy that moral questions begin in fiction’, he has said.¹¹

McEwan makes moral questions central to his work by presenting us with ways in which his characters are tested by a contingent world, and the moral dilemmas that result from the unforeseen event. McEwan’s readers know

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that he is renowned for his vivid rendering of such scenes, which build to suggest a world view troubled by randomness, chaos. Indeed, the failure to cope with the random nature of experience is a recurring aspect of McEwan's treatment of character, leading, for example, to: Briony Tallis's crime (*Atonement*, 2001); the initial failure of Stephen Lewis to cope with grief (*The Child in Time*, 1987) and Joe Rose's problematic response to his stalker, Jed Parry – but especially to the delusional and destructive behaviour of Parry himself (*Enduring Love*, 1997).

Readers of McEwan have come to expect his novels to make use of an engrossing set piece – the abduction of a child in a supermarket (*The Child in Time*), a ballooning accident (*Enduring Love*), an encounter with ravenous wild dogs on a remote mountain road (*Black Dogs*, 1992), a car accident (*Saturday*, 2005), a moment of catastrophic misinterpretation (*Atonement*) – to frame the moral dilemma of his novels. And such treatments are often more complex than they first appear. In Chapter 2, Lynn Wells shows how McEwan's ethical reflections are highly self-conscious, sometimes involving ironic interrelationships between the narrator, the characters and the implied reader: we have to look beyond the plotlines, the presentation of actions, and resist the simple interpretation of those scenes with a seemingly incontestable moral purport. At the same time, as Wells makes clear, these complications of the moral treatment do not prevent us from getting a purchase on the ethical questions emerging from McEwan's contexts. In several of his novels the conflicts between altruism and self-interest are clearly linked to historical and political questions, especially where political power, and the role of the state, impinges on interpersonal relationships.

Where consolation comes, in such a vulnerable and disturbing world, it is always compromised. Even in the 'positive' resolutions of novels like *The Child in Time*, *Enduring Love* and *Saturday*, we are still unsettled. If Joe Rose is ultimately proved 'correct' about Jed Parry, his responses to the stalking have exposed his inadequacies; and Parry's destructive delusion persists. In *The Child in Time*, the reconciliation of Stephen and Julie, and the birth of the new child, cannot compensate for the loss of their daughter Kate, which remains unresolved. The thwarting of the intruders at the end of *Saturday* leaves us troubled about new perceptions of inequality, opened up by neuroscience, but also by the world 'outside' privileged spaces. The ultimate refusal of consolation for McEwan's readers comes at the end of *Atonement*, when we realize that the reuniting of the lovers is Briony's invention.

If McEwan denies consolation in an unpredictable and unreliable world, there is a counter-dynamic formed by McEwan's preoccupation with models of knowing: his works betray an ongoing search for systematic ways of

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understanding the world, as a defence against contingency. Where explanatory systems are absent (as they are, for example, for the children in *The Cement Garden*, and for the protagonists in *The Innocent* and *Amsterdam*), or are inappropriate or inadequate (as for Colin and Mary in *The Comfort of Strangers*, Jeremy in *Black Dogs*, Joe Rose in *Enduring Love* or Briony Tallis in *Atonement*), an inner lack is exposed, often with catastrophic consequences.

An interest in science figures prominently in the oeuvre, embracing a range of topics, including: quantum physics (*The Child in Time*); evolutionary psychology (*Enduring Love*); neurosurgery (*Saturday*) and climate crisis science (especially in *Solar* but also in *The Child in Time*). In his nonfiction – in articles and essays about science – McEwan often seems to celebrate and revere the achievements of science in a straightforward fashion. In his fiction, however, the engagement of science is invariably more metaphorical, and also more ambiguous. McEwan engages with a cultural moment in which popular science has become more advanced, with eminent scientists writing bestsellers in which complex ideas are mediated for an increasingly sophisticated general readership. As Astrid Bracke demonstrates in Chapter 3, McEwan sees science and literature as complementary parallel traditions, although they are often explored through the tensions and oppositions they reveal, as well as the potential resolution of these oppositions. For Bracke, this complementarity is exemplified in climate change novels like *Solar*. Despite the ecocritical disappointment with this novel, it belongs to a category of climate change fiction that does not simply reflect contemporary perceptions, but which may also have a role in shaping public discourse.

Prominent ideas – social and philosophical, as well as scientific – abound in the oeuvre. There is, for example, the overtly political screenplay ‘The Ploughman’s Lunch’ (broadcast 1983); and the self-conscious debate about the relative merits of rationality and spirituality in *Black Dogs*, in which the starkness of the opposition is subtly undermined and deconstructed. In this novel, as in others, ideas and the achievement of fictional suspense are not mutually exclusive. McEwan’s great skill has been to use ideas (especially ideas drawn from popular science) to enrich his evocation of contemporary life. The prominence of ideas in successive novels has sometimes been taken as an invitation to question his accomplishment as a novelist: the ideas, it is suggested, are not always assimilated into convincing fictional worlds. This is the focus of Chapter 4 by Michael LeMahieu, which develops the account of McEwan’s reliance on science for creative inspiration, and then extends that seminal concern as an aesthetic consideration. LeMahieu shows how McEwan’s novels of ideas are always something more than this implies, with

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an aesthetic dimension beyond their ideational bases: they are animated by ideas, but never overwhelmed by them.

McEwan's portrayal of character and the quest for identity that underpins it sits in an interesting tension with ideas and with systemic explanations. The emphasis is often on the *quest*, not on the resolution of it. Yet McEwan's interest in science, and especially in scientific explanations for consciousness and emotional response, suggests a resource that is less equivocal, reducing consciousness to neurological function. For McEwan, however, science does not supply bald factual confirmation about consciousness; rather, scientific models provide explanations for consciousness, and the basis of selfhood, that the novelist subjects to scrutiny. The neurologist Antonio Damasio, a direct influence on McEwan, has expressed scepticism about 'science's presumption of objectivity and definitiveness', intimating that 'scientific results, especially in neurobiology' should be seen as 'provisional approximations, to be enjoyed for a while and discarded as soon as better accounts become available'.¹² This is in tune with McEwan's use of science, which suggests a form of complementarity where neither literature nor science can lay claim to be a definitive authority about consciousness, or to have exclusive access to it.

McEwan's concern with locating the self has much affinity with realist models of the past, but in a new guise. As he summarizes his persuasive dismantling of the realism/experimentalism dichotomy that has influenced much thinking about fiction in post-war Britain, Andrzej Gasiorek cites McEwan's view that experimentation 'should have less to do with formal factors . . . and more to do with content – the representation of states of mind and the society that forms them'.¹³ This view has a lasting relevance to McEwan's work, and his steady focus on states of mind and cultural shaping forces.

One way in which that preoccupation with inner and outer worlds is manifested is through McEwan's long-term interest in Cold War themes, another career-spanning concern, reaffirmed with the publication of *Sweet Tooth* (2012), an artful and self-conscious deliberation on fictional representation. *Sweet Tooth* occasions a re-evaluation of *The Innocent*, the most neglected of McEwan's novels, perhaps because of the stylistic departure it embodies, with its mood and plot directly influenced by the Cold War spy novel. Like *Sweet Tooth*, *The Innocent* uses the Cold War as a way of framing its deliberation on the moral state of Britain (in this case the setting is 1955–6, in the former, it is 1972). As in *The Innocent*, in *Black Dogs* the treatment of individual motivation and choice becomes a central focus, and – as Richard Brown demonstrates in Chapter 5 – a way of articulating a wider anxiety about ethics and responsibility in post-war Europe, anchored in the

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generation-defining experience of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In Brown's account, the densely allusive *Sweet Tooth* makes intelligence (in the sense of espionage) interact with cultural intelligence in a sophisticated exploration of civilized values, from which intellectual freedom emerges as its own best defence.

The conventional wisdom that the novel is the medium in which public themes and concerns receive their most powerful expression in the private realm requires significant re-articulation to account for the treatment of interpersonal relationships in McEwan. David Malcolm, in Chapter 7, shows how McEwan is interested in both public institutions, on the one hand, and the minutiae of the personal, on the other, revealing powerful extremities of treatment: his observations can be microscopically physical, but can also engage with public themes on a grand scale. The interaction of public and private is crucial to McEwan's fictional worlds. Malcolm illustrates the ways in which the personal and the public interpenetrate each other, and how institutions can constrain, but also enable the personal: either way, the trajectory of public life is intimately related to the private realm. In addition to tracing this recurring fascination with the public-private nexus, Malcolm's chapter also presents a typology of interpersonal relationships, discovering six categories of relationship in a range of relative positivity and negativity.

Perhaps the most important social change that had an impact on McEwan in his formative years was second-wave feminism. He recalls that he read Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* in 1971 and found it 'a revelation' because it 'spoke directly' to his family's life, and the problem of his father's dominance.¹⁴ Some readers may find this surprising. Feminism is certainly engaged, in important preliminary ways, in both the screenplay for *The Imitation Game* (1980) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981); but it is only in his work of the mid-1980s – in the oratorio for *Or Shall We Die?* (1983) and in *The Child in Time* (1987) – that McEwan produces a more overt response to the implications of feminism. Yet the more subtle influences discernible in his treatment of sexuality and gender abound. Several of the chapters discover common ground between early and later fictions in this connection, and also between stories, novels screenplays, and other publications: the oratorio for 'Or Shall We Die?' (text published 1989), for example, marks a significant moment in McEwan's transition towards a greater comprehension of feminist principles, foreshadowed in the screenplays collected in *The Imitation Game* (1981). McEwan's ongoing interest in male-female relationships is another route in to his investigations into the state of society, and the ways in which it impinges on individual identity and behaviour.

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Still more prominent in McEwan's oeuvre is his concern with male experience. Adam Mars-Jones's famous critique of *The Child in Time*, as an exemplary instance of the dubious new man in British fiction, identifies a turning point in McEwan's career, and the beginning of a fresh investigation of masculinity, which can be construed more positively. In this novel, McEwan is not interested merely in the psychological nature of gender identity (important though that is): he is equally concerned with the connection between mainstream masculinity and patriarchal power. The question of masculinity is revisited in different ways throughout the oeuvre, from the dysfunctional narrators of the short stories, through the rape fantasy of *The Innocent*, the personal feud in *Amsterdam*, to the unsettling of Joe Rose's worldview in *Enduring Love*. The professionalism of Henry Perowne in *Saturday* is a fascinating case study in masculinity, which is subverted in the figure of *Solar*'s Michael Beard. All of these instances illustrate the ways in which the relational and provisional matter of gender is a textual matter. In Chapter 8, Ben Knights offers a thorough investigation of masculinity, evaluating the scope of McEwan's contribution to a model of thinking about gender that now seems like a generational concern, a model that has less purchase on twenty-first century society. If debates about gender have now gravitated towards identity wars, Knights reminds us that the wider debate about masculinity in the 1980s and 1990s was focused on the formation or questioning of patriarchy, and on the related dynamics of power. Underpinning this preoccupation with masculinity and patriarchal authority there is, as Knight shows, a continuing search for alternative models.

In Chapter 6 Peter Childs investigates a topic intimately related to questions of masculinity in the oeuvre: the construction of childhood. *The Child in Time*, McEwan's first major novel, is at the heart of his interest in childhood, and how the child is central to the self-definition of British society. Against the manipulations of the child – the *Authorized Child-Care Handbook*, which reveals the political construction of childhood; and the question of children's imagination, as a publishing construction – this novel seeks to connect childhood and adulthood in a thoughtful account of self-realization, in a world where disconnection is the root of both personal tragedy and social decay. As Childs shows, the fascination with childhood, which has endured throughout McEwan's career, from the early stories of the 1970s through to recent works including *The Children Act* (2014) and *Nutshell* (2016), is also a barometer for social care in a broad sense. From his early concern with child neglect and abuse, McEwan progresses to ponder the loss of children and the childlessness of adults in novels of the 1980s and 1990s, and has latterly dwelt on vulnerable children, as a way of investigating the role of the state in the twenty-first century. In *The Children*

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Act, the legal construction of the child becomes the focus of self-enquiry and moral agency, in a typically self-conscious treatment. McEwan's own publications for children, *Rose Blanche* (1985), and *The Daydreamer* (1994), are also interesting in this connection. *The Daydreamer*, in particular, emerges as another attempt to re-think the categorization of childhood, with (as Childs shows) its recurring theme of transformation.

The *Companion* ends with four chapters that are more explicitly concerned with formal questions, although they also register the profound interrelationship of McEwan's recurring themes and concerns. One aspect of McEwan's celebrated status as a stylist is his distinctive contribution to the novella, a genre that arguably reached its pinnacle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Novellas like *Amsterdam*, with its focused critique of the left-leaning elite who did well in the Thatcher era, and *On Chesil Beach* (2007), with its apparently precise anatomy of sexual mores, reveal how McEwan uses the novella as an incisive instrument of cultural analysis. Chapter 9 examines these works, as well as *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*, demonstrating McEwan's fascination with the novella, and the ways in which he uses the distinctive features of this form, usually associated with earlier writers, such as James, Conrad, and Lawrence: he has revived the fortunes of a form once thought to be the most sophisticated mode of shorter fiction.

The social and political focus of McEwan's fictions signals a deep reliance on an extended tradition of realist writing, reaching back to the great exponents of nineteenth-century socio-political realisms. Using the varied capacities of the realist tradition – the ability to register the dilemmas surrounding vertiginous social change, as well as the capacity to record a contingent reality – McEwan reworks realist codes in a variety of ways to engage social and political questions. Returning to the Cold War as a case study in McEwan's treatment of social and political reality, Judith Seaboyer, in Chapter 10, discovers a sophisticated form of post-realism at work in *Black Dogs* and *The Innocent*, and also in Part Two of *Atonement*, in its powerful blend of metafiction with verisimilitude and historical accuracy.

Critics have often been drawn to observe the connections between McEwan and canonical modernist writing, for example, in the treatment of time in *The Child in Time*, or the echoes of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* in *Saturday*. In Chapter 11, Thom Dancer concentrates on McEwan's later works, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *Solar* and *The Children Act*, to consider the influence of modernism, and especially how McEwan extends some of the stylistic features of literary impressionism. Working in the spirit of 'meta-modernism' – an approach that traces twenty-first century engagements with the innovations of the early twentieth-century – Dancer reveals how

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McEwan ‘reaches back’ to earlier technical influences, given the intellectual cul-de-sac he sensed in postmodernist experimentation. The emphasis here is on how McEwan makes aspects of modernist style relevant for the new conditions of living, writing and thinking in the twenty-first-century, conditions in which the strategy of ‘making new’ is no longer available. In particular, McEwan revitalizes modernist impressionist aesthetics, but without the transgressive politics, or the grand claims of literary innovation they once carried. Dancer shows how the legacies of modernism issue in a more limited function for literary effects, no longer transcendent, but rather a reminder of our human failings.

McEwan’s particular brand of literary self-consciousness embraces different strategies, from the counter-intuitive ethical implications of the early shock lit, through to the extended treatments of narratorial unreliability in *Black Dogs* and *Atonement*, where the point of the fictions hinges on an engagement with narrative technique. In Chapter 12, David James examines McEwan’s narrative artifice, revealing its several sources: he shows how *Atonement* (for example) combines influences from modernism, meta-fiction and nineteenth-century realist characterization. James shows how McEwan’s work draws attention to its own procedures, but without disrupting the affective experience of reading. Indeed, James shows how McEwan’s various methods for commenting on his creativity oblige us to reflect on our own critical habits, in a venerable tradition of reflexive fictional prose.

This overview of McEwan’s preoccupations and the coverage of the *Companion* signals many points of intersection between McEwan’s artistic, social, political and ethical emphases. In an attempt to capture this pervasive ideational interaction, the chapters herein are written on thematic topics, rather than on individual works in a chronological sequence. The intention is to provide several intersecting perspectives on his work, and a more complex understanding about his richest works, rather than treating them in individual chapters. Readers of this book will thus be able to gain a multi-faceted perspective on the most discussed fictions, which are read through more than one lens. For example, in the case of *The Child in Time*, emphasis can be placed on its concerns with gender and climate change (Chapter 3), or the prominence of ideas (Chapter 4), or the construction of childhood (Chapter 6). Similarly, *Atonement* can be read through separate, but complementary lenses: morality (Chapter 2), the modernist legacy (Chapter 11) or formal hybridity (Chapter 12). And these layers of reading reveal the kind of complementarity not easily attained in a single reading: if we consider McEwan to be ‘dressing up’ as Briony (Chapter 8), does this staging of masculinity in relation to narrative unreliability suggest a complementary or parallel reading to the emphasis placed on Briony’s guilt as a response to

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modernist style in Chapter 11? Or, as Chapter 12 suggests, does McEwan's assembled literary heritage in *Atonement* sit self-consciously at odds with Briony's practice as a novelist? As Chapter 10 suggests, this extraordinarily complex work can also be read as a metafictional mapping of the literary history of novelistic realism and its influence. This book has been designed, then, to serve as a prism of interpretation, revealing the various interpretive emphases each of McEwan's more complex works invite, and to show how his various recurring preoccupations run through his career. This intention to open up our understanding of McEwan, in the various readings the fiction inspires, is presented in a spirit of invitation: to encourage and stimulate further variety in the future criticism of this leading contemporary novelist.

NOTES

- 1 See Dave Sharp and John Parker, *Complete Surrender* (London: John Blake, 2008).
- 2 'Mother Tongue: A Memoir', in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 34–44 (p. 35). The piece was first published in *The Guardian*, 13 October 2001.
- 3 Liliane Louvel, Gilles Ménégald, and Anne-Laure Fortin, 'An Interview with Ian McEwan', *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 8 (1995), pp. 1–12 (pp. 1, 3).
- 4 'Mother Tongue', p. 36.
- 5 In *The Child in Time* (pp. 69–74), Stephen Lewis's childhood recollections seem to be McEwan's.
- 6 'Mother Tongue', p. 36.
- 7 'Wild Man of Literature (c1976): A Memoir', *The Observer*, 'Review', 7 June 1998, p. 16.
- 8 William Leith, 'Form and Dysfunction' (author profile), *The Observer*, 'Life', 20 September 1998, pp. 4–5, 7–8 (p. 8).
- 9 Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, revised edition (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 437.
- 10 Kiernan Ryan, *Ian McEwan* (Plymouth: Northcote House/British Council, 1994), pp. 2, 4, 5.
- 11 Louvel, Ménégald, and Fortin, 'An Interview with Ian McEwan', p. 4.
- 12 Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994; New York: Quill, 2000), p. xviii.
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