

IAN McEWAN. 2012. *SWEET TOOTH*. TORONTO: ALFRED A. KNOFF CANADA, 294.

Ian McEwan, an English novelist, short-story writer and screenwriter, whose ravishingly refined prose style intensifies his own subversive humour and disquieting subject matter, has published more than ten novels. His work falls into two distinct periods: an early one, culminating in the publication of his short story collections *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978), earns McEwan the reputation of a controversial writer who is obsessed with “the perverse, the grotesque, and the macabre”; his later works display, as David Malcolm puts it, “a more mature engagement with the wider world of history and society,” focusing much more on psychological and moral complexities. Although these later novels reveal considerable growth in the range and depth of his work, they are still laced with a sense of dread and suspense. Also, they deal with a number of recurring themes using a range of self-reflexive forms, the relationship between fact and fiction, intertextual references and historical context. Adopting an “overtly political approach,” while, at the same time, emphasizing the private psyche of individuals, McEwan underlines the distinction between subjective and objective realities. He often plays with these differences, prompting readers to reconsider their critical assumptions about literature. It seems that he enjoys playing tricks and his new novel is certainly another one. McEwan’s latest novel *Sweet Tooth* is a story of Serena Frome, a “quite gorgeous” Cambridge math student who meets Tony Canning, an older history professor, that secures a position for her with MI5, the domestic counterespionage service. She takes part in a secret operation which recruits and funds anticommunist writers, and thus, embarks on the cultural front of the Cold War. Being a quick and voracious reader, Serena is given the task of enticing a young novelist, Tom Haley, into this program. She becomes infatuated with Haley’s short stories and then, after meeting him in person, with Haley himself. As the novel progresses, this romantic affair blossoms and evolves into real love, making Serena feel more and more uncomfortable with her subterfuge. How long is she to maintain her cover story? Is she to reveal that she works for MI5? And how are her superiors to react when they discover she has taken her mark as her lover?

The novel does not only deal with the social turmoil of the early 1970s – the strikes, the IRA terrorist attacks and espionage intrigues, the hippie culture and its false optimism – but it also explores the boundary between reality and fiction, the relationship between the storyteller and the reader. This subject matter McEwan has examined in his previous novels, perhaps most obviously in *The Innocent* (1990) and *Atonement* (2001). While *The Innocent* is primarily concerned with the disastrous effects of history on individual’s life, *Sweet Tooth*, although dealing with the politics of culture, centers more on the process of writing and the nature of

fiction itself. Similar ideas, and indeed similar tricks, lie at the heart of *Atonement*, a truly complex, intricate and multi-layered novel in terms of its themes, structure and transtextual relations. In *Sweet Tooth*, McEwan incorporates metafictional elements into the narrative, making allusions to both literary works and his own biographical details. For instance, the character of Tom Haley is suggestively similar to McEwan – some of his acquaintances make appearance in the novel, including his friend Martin Amis, his first publisher Tom Maschler and his mentor Ian Hamilton. Moreover, Haley's short stories strikingly resemble the style and themes of McEwan's early fiction. As the narrative progresses, the novel becomes a slightly self-regarding story of McEwan's own experience. It seems that he revisits his youth through Haley, who is, he says, "not me, but not completely not me."

Exploring the world of literature, McEwan makes frequent allusions to various authors and their works – from Shakespeare, Jane Austen to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Doris Lessing. Thus, one of Haley's short stories bears a strong resemblance to one of Shakespeare's plays, *The Winter's Tale*, in which Hermione, a wife of Leontes, is accused of infidelity and turned into stone. Similarly, in the short story, a man falls in love with a store mannequin he names Hermione, brings her home, sleeps with her and then dismantles her just because of an imagined affair she is having with his housekeeper. This story, like many others, is also a variation on McEwan's early texts – such bizarre fantasies and obsessions are explored in *Dead As They Come* from *In Between the Sheets*. Although McEwan invokes these historical layers of English fiction as well as his own works, he also indulges us with some humorous scenes – we meet Martin Amis in the bar, buying Haley a triple scotch, or we find out that George Orwell was also helped by the secret service to publish his *Animal Farm* and *1984*. All these narrative frames enfold upon themselves, underlying, once again, the lucid interaction between the author and the reader in a highly postmodern way.

McEwan's literary style has undergone a substantial change in the course of his career. McEwan reaches a new, more mature phase but he does not abandon his polished naturalism and its unusual details. One of Serena's boyfriends, for example, has an "unfortunate, sharply angled pubic bone, which first time hurt like hell. [They] settled the matter by making love with a folded towel between [them], a remedy [Serena] sensed he had often used before." Apart from these details, McEwan also portrays his characters with psychological precision, underscoring their essential personality and providing the reader with clues about their temperament: the most calculating and opportunistic characters in *Amsterdam* (1998), the children who bury their mother in the basement in *The Cement Garden* (1978), the 13-year-old girl in *Atonement* who tells a lie, the consequences of which are devastating for everyone, especially for her own mind and soul. Similarly, McEwan depicts Serena, presenting us with extracts from novels she reads, and thus, suggesting that she is an avid but poor reader; she reads only for entertainment, rarely getting below the surface to the richer, deeper meaning of the text. As such, she does not engage in any serious critical thinking,

“reading [is her] way of not thinking ... [Her] needs [are] simple.” On the contrary, Haley writes a dystopian and nihilistic novel in which the humanity is brought to near-destruction. He is grappling with more complex issues, picturing the world of fears and uncertainties combined into a frightening prospect. These gloomy descriptions of the future in ruins, the last remnants of humanity left to wander and suffer from incurable diseases, represent the current affairs that could likely lead the world to such horrors. Haley, despite being paid to spread the word of capitalism, offers a critique of the society, suggesting that literature is the only retreat from such conditions, a conduit of the creative imagination. Speaking for McEwan as well, he points out the powerful influence literary works can have upon life.

McEwan is a genuine master of tension and surprise, deception and digression. He keeps us unaware of his metafictional con throughout the whole novel. He uses his game to intensify and expand the alluring illusions of reality, satisfying conventional readers like Serena as well as those like Haley. *Sweet Tooth* is an amusing story of love, pretense and intrigue. Combined with references to a vast range of literature and the period of 1970s, this novel abounds in stories within stories, keeping readers interested all the way until the very end. It is cleverly written and certainly worth a read.

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