

**Atonement** by Ian McEwan  
(Jonathan Cape, 2001)

*reviewed by Christopher Priest, © 2001*

This is an example of modern metafiction: the book you are reading and physically holding in your hands, the one written by the author named on the cover, turns out at the end to have been ‘written’ by one of the characters named in the novel. Why should anyone do this? Well, it’s all a bit close to home, as those who take an interest in such things might already have noticed.

It seems to me that the point of a novel within a novel, or a narrative within a narrative, is that the story becomes framed by the reader’s expectations. By putting what appears to be the ‘hot’ narrative of a real novel inside the ‘cooler’ context of a frame, making it into a told story or a found account, the author (i.e. the real one, named on the cover) is distancing the reader from the subject matter, an invitation to think while reading.

This is different from the ‘frame’ often found in 19th century fiction: an after-dinner story in a London club, an old salt’s yarn in a quay-side bar, a message found in a bottle, and so on. A modern frame is used instead for discourse.

To take the most obvious example (the one trivialized by conservative critics to try to undermine the larger concept of metafiction), it can discuss the nature of fiction itself by drawing attention to the narrative contained within the frame.

Beyond that, the perception of reality may be questioned through metafictional devices. Also, memory or truth or social assumptions can be challenged. The question of identity can be raised. The reader’s assumptions may be undermined. As a literary device metafiction lends itself to many superb extra opportunities for the writer who is prepared to take a chance or two: for example the text might become unreliable, or incomplete, or deniable by other characters. It’s a powerful and compelling technique.

What is interesting about *Atonement* is that McEwan, whose literary structures have always been conservative and risk-free, should have belatedly started exploring this valuable material – what is not all that interesting is the use to which he puts it.

At the end of *Atonement* it turns out that most of the book we have been reading was written by one of the characters, to ‘atone’ for a guilty act in childhood (described, of course, as we go along). In fact, if you read the book closely, you realize that it is not an atonement at all, but a narrative written under the awareness of the writer’s imminent death, a few last words before it’s too late. The contrivance McEwan comes up with is that had the story (i.e. the novel we have just read) been told earlier, then the two people directly involved would have sued for defamation, and most likely would have won. That’s not my idea of an expiation of guilt.

The first part of the story concerns a weekend party in a large country house in 1935. The wealthy middle-class owners, their extended family and their friends, have unoriginal worries, plans, concerns, illnesses and erotic involvements. People misunderstand each other, but not for any unusual reason, they lie in darkened rooms with migraine, they accidentally break valuable *objets d’art*. Meanwhile, sexual activity takes place in the corner of the library, rape is committed in the bushes in the extensive grounds, childish frustrations are diverted into guilty acts.

Part Two is set in northern France five years later, in the days leading up to the evacuation of the British army from Dunkirk. The central character in this section of the novel is the young man traduced in Part One, after he has completed his prison term for the rape he did not commit. Already wounded in action, he is bearing a serious injury that might or might not lead to his death.

Part Three is still in 1940 and concerns the two sisters at the centre of the original miscarriage of justice – they are both now nurses, working at St Thomas’s Hospital in the centre of London. As the casualties from Dunkirk start arriving the sisters are caught up in the horrors of war. The injured man from Part Two turns up in London, apparently recovered from his wounds, and there is a sort of reconciliation between the three.

The final part is a short coda: the child who was at the centre of the 1935 scandal is in the present day an elderly and famous author, and in this coda we learn why she wants to write the novel we have, as it were, just read.

*Atonement* is ‘well written’ throughout. It goes at a stately pace, with many delays for loving and detailed descriptions, all done rather well.

It does not seem to be a novel that should be read for plot (although the point about metafiction, in *Atonement* as elsewhere, is that the plot becomes of immense importance). A good literary style is the main strength of McEwan’s writing in general and of this book in particular. But inescapably, because of his metafictional plan, he is creating a plot set-up and it is here he is weakest. The events which seemed trivial and over-familiar while you were reading them – but on which you suspended harsher judgment until you found out what McEwan was intending to do – gain little by the revelation at the end.

The long opening sequence, which actually takes up half of the whole thing, still reads like the scenario for a middlebrow TV drama, the kind of family saga written by Mary Wesley, Elizabeth Jane Howard or Rosamund Pilcher.

The Dunkirk section is again fairly well done on a line by line basis, but the relevance of it is a bit vague. There’s nothing new to learn about Dunkirk, for instance, and the extra insights we get into the central character are small and uninteresting. If you’ve read WW2 novels here’s another one, or part of one, with a long chunk that reads like all the ones you know already, with only a fine style to commend it (and in this sequence, not that fine either). Uncertainty of voice mars this passage, and the reader gets a feeling that McEwan was venturing into literary territory with which he felt uncomfortable. The question of the young man’s death (or avoidance of death) is not described in any definitive way. This is McEwan at his worst: when he gets into water deeper than he planned, he takes the easy way out.

The book itself comes dramatically alive with the scenes set in the hospital, but again their relevance to the overall story is incidental.\*

Towards the end of Part Three of *Atonement* the confrontation between the three main characters starts making sense of the metafictional structure, but by this time we are more than three hundred pages into a long novel (with no inkling until now that what we have been reading is not exactly what we have been reading).

In fact, when you know how the book turns out, and you cast your mind back over some of the incidents, you realize it hadn’t been like that at all. There are few internal clues: most of the book reads like a McEwan novel, the sudden attribution at the end being an unexpected switch, a distancing of the author from his own efforts. In other words, rather than bringing the reader into the metafiction, McEwan expels himself from it. You can’t help wondering if the switch might have been an afterthought to try and make something of his prosaic material, a sudden loss of nerve at the end.

I bought and read *Atonement* for two reasons: I had quite admired McEwan’s last serious novel, *Enduring Love*, and this new one received almost universally favourable reviews. But all the way through I could not get out of my mind the thought that general literary writers working in Britain today, the authors of ‘mainstream’ novels, are a bit strapped for serious or original material. If you have any doubt about this, the novels of highly praised writers like Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro or Julian Barnes will reveal the shallowness and banality of their concerns (e.g., darts playing, butlers, love stories, respectively). These days,

only some science fiction and (as Philip Pullman has pointed out) the serious end of children's literature seem able to take on real themes, subjects that challenge the readers. When you recognize the technical skill with which McEwan writes, it underlines the thinness of his subject matter, the imaginative range available to him that he either chose to ignore or didn't realize was there. At the end of this novel I was furious that valuable and intriguing metafictional material had been so commodified and banalized by McEwan.

It is in short a gutless novel, dragged down by conservative and unimaginative material, but also one that is frustrating. Because of his stylistic ability, his general seriousness of intent, you are reminded all the way through what McEwan might be capable of producing, and which in *Enduring Love*, his best novel, he once briefly did.

\* Some time after the novel was published, and the first version of this review appeared, it was revealed that for his hospital scenes McEwan had drawn heavily on a book called *No Time for Romance*, by Lucilla Andrews. He claimed it was historical research, but a close examination of the two texts revealed multiple borrowings, embarrassingly alike. The consensus of mild forgiveness at the time seemed to be based on McEwan's self-evident seriousness as a writer, and that this shielded him from charges of plagiarism.