STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

***Atonement* by Ian McEwan**

About This Book

Ian McEwan's symphonic novel of love and war, childhood and class, guilt and forgiveness provides all the satisfaction of a brilliant narrative and the provocation we have come to expect from this master of English prose.

On a hot summer day in 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses a moment's flirtation between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, the son of a servant and Cecilia's childhood friend. But Briony's incomplete grasp of adult motives–together with her precocious literary gifts–brings about a crime that will change all their lives. As it follows that crime's repercussions through the chaos and carnage of World War II and into the close of the twentieth century, Atonement engages the reader on every conceivable level, with an ease and authority that mark it as a genuine masterpiece.

Discussion Questions

1. What sort of social and cultural setting does the Tallis house create for the novel? What is the mood of the house, as described in chapter 12? What emotions and impulses are being acted upon or repressed by its inhabitants? How does the careful attention to detail affect the pace of Part One, and what is the effect of the acceleration of plot events as it nears its end?

2. A passion for order, a lively imagination, and a desire for attention seem to be Briony's strongest traits. In what ways is she still a child? Is her narcissism—her inability to see things from any point of view but her own—unusual in a thirteen-year-old? Why does the scene she witnesses at the fountain change her whole perspective on writing? What is the significance of the passage in which she realizes she needs to work from the idea that "other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value" [p. 38]? Do her actions bear this out?

3. What kind of a person is Emily Tallis? Why does McEwan decide not to have Jack Tallis make an appearance in the story? Who, if anyone, is the moral authority in this family? What is the parents' relationship to Robbie Turner, and why does Emily pursue his conviction with such single-mindedness?

4. What happens between Robbie and Cecilia at the fountain? What symbolic role does Uncle Clem's precious vase play in the novel? Is it significant that the vase is glued together by Cecilia, and broken finally during the war by Betty as she readies the house to accept evacuees?

5. Having read Robbie's note to Cecilia, Briony thinks about its implications for her new idea of herself as a writer: "No more princesses! . . . With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help" [pp. 106–7]. Why is Robbie's uncensored letter so offensive within the social context in which it is read? Why is Cecilia not offended by it?

6. The scene in the library is one of the most provocative and moving descriptions of sex in recent fiction. How does the fact that it is narrated from Robbie's point of view affect how the reader feels about what happens to him shortly afterwards? Is it understandable that Briony, looking on, perceives this act of love as an act of violence?

7. Why does Briony stick to her story with such unwavering commitment? Does she act entirely in error in a situation she is not old enough to understand, or does she act, in part, on an impulse of malice, revenge, or self-importance? At what point does she develop the empathy to realize what she has done to Cecilia and Robbie?

8. How does Leon, with his life of "agreeable nullity" [p. 103], compare with Robbie in terms of honor, intelligence, and ambition? What are the qualities that make Robbie such an effective romantic hero? What are the ironies inherent in the comparative situations of the three young men present—Leon, Paul Marshall, and Robbie?

9. Lola has a critical role in the story's plot. What are her motivations? Why does she tell Briony that her brothers caused the marks on her wrists and arms [see pp. 109–13]? Why does she allow Briony to take over her story when she is attacked later in the evening [see pp. 153–60]? Why does Briony decide not to confront Lola and Paul Marshall at their wedding five years later?

10. The novel's epigraph is taken from Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey, in which a naïve young woman, caught up in fantasies from the Gothic fiction she loves to read, imagines that her host in an English country house is a villain. In Austen's novel Catherine Norland's mistakes are comical and have no serious outcome, while in Atonement, Briony's fantasies have tragic effects upon those around her. What is McEwan implying about the power of the imagination, and its potential for harm when unleashed into the social world? Is he suggesting, by extension, that Hitler's pathological imagination was a driving force behind World War II?

11. In McEwan's earlier novel Black Dogs, one of the main characters comes to a realization about World War II. He thinks about "the recently concluded war not as a historical, geopolitical fact but as a multiplicity, a near-infinity of private sorrows, as a boundless grief minutely subdivided without diminishment among individuals who covered the continent like dust, like spores whose separate identities would remain unknown, and whose totality showed more sadness than anyone could ever begin to comprehend" [Black Dogs, p. 140]. Does McEwan intend his readers to experience the war similarly in Atonement? What aspects of Atonement make it so powerful as a war novel? What details heighten the emotional impact in the scenes of the Dunkirk retreat and Briony's experience at the military hospital?

12. When Robbie, Mace, and Nettle reach the beach at Dunkirk, they intervene in an attack on an RAF man who has become a scapegoat for the soldiers' sense of betrayal and rage. As in many of his previous novels, McEwan is interested in aggressive human impulses that spin out of control. How does this act of group violence relate to the moral problems that war creates for soldiers, and the events Robbie feels guilty about as he falls asleep at Bray Dunes?

13. About changing the fates of Robbie and Cecilia in her final version of the book, Briony says, "Who would want to believe that the young lovers never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism?" [p. 350]

STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

McEwan's Atonement has two endings—one in which the fantasy of love is fulfilled, and one in which that fantasy is stripped away. What is the emotional effect of this double ending? Is Briony right in thinking that "it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against

Author Biography

Ian McEwan is the bestselling author of more than ten books, including the novels The Comfort of Strangers and Black Dogs, both shortlisted for the Booker Prize, Amsterdam, winner of the Booker Prize, and The Child in Time, winner of the Whitbread Award, as well as the story collections First Love, Last Rites, winner of the Somerset Maugham Award, and In Between the Sheets. He has also written screenplays, plays, television scripts, a children's book, and the libretto for an oratorio. He lives in London.

Extras

Official Author site: **www.ianmcewan.com**