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Vanessa Guignery

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## An Interview with Ian McEwan

*Un entretien avec Ian McEwan*

VANESSA GUIGNERY

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### Abstracts

Français English

Cet entretien avec Ian McEwan retrace son œuvre de fiction, de ses textes publiés dans les années 1970 jusqu'à sa novella *Nutshell* (2016) et s'attarde en particulier sur *Enduring Love* (1997), *Saturday* (2005), *On Chesil Beach* (2007) et *The Children Act* (2014). L'auteur revient, entre autres choses, sur sa relation à la tradition littéraire, la manière dont il nourrit sa fiction de recherches, sur son intérêt pour la forme de la nouvelle longue, son amour de la musique et son activité en tant que scénariste. Cet entretien est la synthèse de deux entretiens conduits par Vanessa Guignery au Théâtre des Subsistances de Lyon, pour l'ouverture des Assises Internationales du roman, organisée par la Villa Gillete, le 21 mai 2018 et à l'École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, le 22 mai 2018. Ces entretiens ont été retranscrits avec l'aide de Diane Gagneret, Natacha Lasorak, Héloïse Lecomte et Julia Siccardi. Vanessa Guignery remercie Ian McEwan pour sa relecture et les révisions qu'il a apportées à la version définitive de cet entretien.

This interview with Ian McEwan traces his fictional production from his early work published in the 1970s to the novella *Nutshell* (2016), with discussions of *Enduring Love* (1997), *Saturday* (2005), *On Chesil Beach* (2007) and *The Children Act* (2014). Ian McEwan talks about his relation to literary tradition, his use of research, his interest in the form of the novella, his love for music and his work as a screenplay writer, among other topics. This is an edited synthesis of two interviews conducted by Vanessa Guignery at the Théâtre des Subsistances in Lyon for the opening of the 'Assises Internationales du Roman' organised by the Villa Gillet on 21 May 2018 and at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon on 22 May 2018. The interviews were transcribed



with the very kind help of Diane Gagneret, Natacha Lasorak, H elo ise Lecomte and Julia Siccardi. The editor would like to thank Ian McEwan for kindly and meticulously revising the final written transcript of this interview

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## ***Index terms***

**Mots-cl es :** Ian McEwan, novella, m emoire litt eraire, fiction,  criture de sc enarios

**Keywords:** Ian McEwan, novella, literary influence, fiction, script-writing

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## ***Full text***

**Vanessa Guignery:** We tend to know you as the author of realistic novels but in *Nutshell*, you veer away from realism as the Hamlet-like narrator is an eight-and-a-half-month foetus speaking from the womb of his mother and observing her and his uncle (who is his mother's lover) plotting the murder of his father. How did the idea of a foetus's voice come to you?

**Ian McEwan:** There were two prompts for this story. I was once at a rather dull literary event and I had some hours to myself. So I took some sheets of paper and thought idly about a new novel. A sentence came out of the dark – a gift, as I thought later. It rolled like ticker tape through my thoughts: 'So here I am, upside down in a woman.' I didn't know who was speaking. Clearly a foetus. Who else could be upside down in a woman? But who? I knew immediately that I had to write the novel to find out. Another origin was an earlier conversation I'd had with my daughter-in-law. She was heavily pregnant with her first child, who is now three years old. We were talking about the baby and how exciting it all was. I was aware of the enormous bump. There was someone in there! The thought crossed my mind: 'What if she could overhear us?' That night I made a note.

So, a very restricted narrator: upside down, and he can't move the way he could in his youth when he was just a tiny speck. At first I thought I was writing myself into the tightest corner possible. But in fact I'd found an ideal narrator: not yet part of the world, able to learn about it through podcasts and news broadcasts, overhear conversations, including pillow talk, and have an unusual perspective on his mother's lovemaking. Here was a kind of existential hero, a persona without a past. He will be a witness to an unfolding murder plot. Like Hamlet, he's incapable of acting. But he has a free mind and therefore mental space and an articulate voice. He can reflect on the state of the world he's about to join.

**VG:** You like to quote Joseph Conrad's famous sentence in the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* where he writes that the task he's trying to achieve is 'by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see!'<sup>1</sup> In your novels, you certainly make the reader visualize scenes very precisely, but in *Nutshell*, the narrator isn't supposed to see anything since he is still in the womb of his mother, and yet everything is described from his restricted point of view. How did you deal with this specific difficulty?

**IM:** You're right to evoke Conrad. I've tried to live, or write, by his dictum. It's a little manifesto. Those words, which I read in my twenties, have become a guiding principle: the key to any important scene is to get the reader to see it, to *really* see it. I prefer not to languish in a cloud of ambiguity. I prefer precision, mediated at certain points by a muted lyricism. But even a well-educated foetus can't see in the womb. So my narrator has to go by what he's heard or use his imagination and see it all in the dark. I tried to play by the rules but I broke them whenever I had to. My copy editor pointed out that at the end of the novel the baby observes he's being born onto a blue towel. How does he know it's blue? Here I took a structural view. Blue is close to green; he doesn't know



what that looks either, but he does know that the spectrum is divided up into words, and he can live by these words. But really, it was all smoke and mirrors to persuade the reader that, of course, he sees in his own way.

**VG:** At what point did you think of Shakespeare and *Hamlet*?

**IM:** I'd just written a lecture about the invention of the self in literature, with particular reference to Montaigne, *Hamlet*, and the journals of Pepys and Boswell.<sup>2</sup> I thought of my speaking foetus as a pure self, a voice in the dark.

**VG:** In addition to *Hamlet*, the novel borrows elements from *Macbeth*, especially at the time of the murder. Was it a challenge for you to confront such a monument of English literature as Shakespeare?

**IM:** All British writers live happily in his shadow – actually, more a resource, a liberation, than a shadow. Shakespeare's verse has inflected spoken English as well as our literary prose. If you've managed to survive Shakespeare at school, as a writer, you're probably going to live with Shakespeare all your life. There's no way around it. You'll never be better, you won't be remotely as good. My unborn narrator is Shakespeare as well as Hamlet. I tried to give certain passages an iambic pulse. As for *Macbeth*, I gave my murderers the sweat and torture of guilt, remorse, fear, and the blunders committed to conceal the crime and that deepen the horror. No way back, no way forward. Shakespeare covered it all in this short play and crime fiction, consciously or not, has played at his feet ever since.

**VG:** *Nutshell* is not an exception as you often pay homage to literary traditions in your work, for example Jane Austen and the modernist tradition in *Atonement*, English poetry and in particular Matthew Arnold in *On Chesil Beach*, contemporary writers in the literary spy novel *Sweet Tooth*. Do you use these literary traditions consciously to pay homage to them or sometimes to detach yourself from them?

**IM:** I don't use them with any conscious aim. All of us, as readers, have a certain disposition, mental furniture, which is endlessly rearranged for us by the writers we love and return to. To write honestly is to write through the glass of that altered consciousness. It isn't a matter of being clever or referential. Books shape our minds. All writers began as readers. When I was an undergraduate I thought of the literature I was reading at the time – Kafka, Thomas Mann, Camus among many others – as a conversation, one that I realised I could join. I felt like a child in a roomful of adults. Newton famously said that he succeeded in his work because he sat on the shoulders of giants. An American post-grad scientist pointedly turned this round: 'One reason I can't see very far is because of all of the giants sitting on my shoulders.' Writers have to come to terms with the giants on their shoulders, imitate them, mock them, write pastiche and then, if they can, free themselves. That process can take five or ten years. But the debt lingers. Those writers help shape the prism through which we see the world.

**VG:** The type of books you've written has evolved over the years. Your first short stories (collected in *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets*) and your first novels (*The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*) were very dark and blood-chilling; then you moved to books marked by a threatening vein with *The Child in Time*, *Enduring Love* and *Saturday*; more recently, you introduced a more humorous dimension in *Solar* and *Nutshell*. Could you say a few words about this evolution?

**IM:** I was a rather well-behaved teenager. I liked books, so I wasn't much trouble to anyone. Becoming a writer was my quiet rebellion. I wanted to be some kind of *fauviste*. I'm sorry you missed the jokes, but those early stories were intended to be darkly funny. The friends I handed them around to thought so. When the stories were published as



collections, some critics were horrified. I got my reputation as a bad boy. To live up to that, I persuaded myself that the contemporary English novel was moribund, provincial, unambitious, too obsessed by class, by adultery and divorce. I was completely wrong, of course. Ballard, B.S. Johnson, Golding, Penelope Fitzgerald – plenty of writers around then were more skilful, more formally ambitious than me.

Being a literary bad boy, even a monster, couldn't provide much satisfaction for long. After my first two novels, I began to feel I'd written myself into a corner. It was my material that was claustrophobic, not everybody else's. I had something of a crisis in fiction and went off to work in other forms. I wrote a television play (*The Imitation Game*), then an oratorio (*Or Shall We Die?*), then a state-of-the-nation movie about the Falklands conflict (*The Ploughman's Lunch*), and when I came back to the novel (with *The Child in Time*) I felt ready to open up to the world and incorporate a richer social context, and draw on all the matters that interested me that had never found their way into my stories. History, politics, music, science and much else. With the next novel, *The Innocent*, I discovered the pleasures of deep research.

This came to a head with my novel, *Saturday*. I attached myself to a neurosurgeon, Neil Kitchen, for almost two years. I became a familiar figure in his operating theatre. I was in scrubs and I looked much like all the other surgeons. One day, a couple of medical students came in. Neil was at work on a patient, I was standing back from the operating table. The students asked if they could watch and if I could explain what was going on. I'd been researching for eighteen months. If I couldn't pass myself off as a neurosurgeon, I surely wouldn't be able to write my central character. I took the students over to the light box and showed them the CT scans. I told them that 'we' were clipping a middle cerebral artery aneurism. I referred to a famous route devised by a Canadian neurosurgeon. I talked them through the entire procedure while they took notes. They were very attentive and respectful. After they left I wondered how they got on in their exams, getting their information from a novelist.

Over the years, I've spent a lot of time with psychiatrists, judges, engineers, scientists, musicians, journalists and even an ex-spy or two. Writing *Nutshell* was a liberation from this immersive realism. It was a holiday, and also it was a return to the writing of my youth, to submit to an enclosed self-made world. Claustrophobia no longer troubled me. In fact, it partly became my subject. The novel I'm finishing now (*Machines Like Me*) is similar. I've done no research. I've created a world in which all the rules are mine.

Despite all the research, perhaps because of it, I've always made errors. Kingsley Amis once said that no one can write five hundred words of prose without getting something wrong. I rather enjoy getting letters of correction from readers. I regard them as a form of engagement. For example, in *Saturday* my hero buys himself a Mercedes S500. For months he drives it 'apologetically, rarely in fourth gear' [75]. When the book was published, I had a letter from a motoring correspondent. I paraphrase: 'Dear Mr McEwan, The Mercedes S500 is an automatic. If you want him to change gears himself, you'll have to go down-market and buy him a Mercedes 330K or some such.' So I duly got rid of the manual for the paperback edition.<sup>3</sup>

My mistakes are everywhere. In a novel published in 1981, *The Comfort of Strangers*, I have my characters on a balcony in Venice. It's a beautiful evening in July. I write that they look up and see Orion in the sky. I received a lovely letter from a very old lady living in the Channel Islands. She said that if I wanted my characters to see Orion in July, I'd have to send them to New Zealand. That error had been there for thirty years and no one had pointed it out! But if you have a foetus as your narrator, you've invented your own terms, your own world. You're God at last and can't be contradicted.



**VG:** Your early novels *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*, but also more recent ones like *On Chesil Beach* and *Nutshell* can be called novellas. Why do you particularly like this

shorter format?

**IM:** I've spoken to my friend Julian Barnes about this. Sometimes, rather gloomily, we declare the novella to be the literary form of old age. One lacks the stamina for six hundred pages. But there are better reasons to love the form. It places interesting demands on a writer. Consider how well many great writers of the twentieth century performed when they had to submit to the discipline of brevity: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Mann's *Death in Venice*, the novellas of D.H. Lawrence, *L'Étranger* by Camus. In my view, the greatest novella is Joyce's *The Dead*. It might have been more widely recognised as such if it hadn't been attached to a volume of stories. Perfection is near unattainable in prose fiction but in *The Dead* Joyce came closer than anyone ever has.

What does the novella do to us as writers and readers? Above all, it sharpens our attention, in the way poetry does. I've been collecting novellas by lesser-known writers. *An Untouched House* by the Dutch writer, Willem Frederik Hermans. What a wonderful discovery. The Second World War in a hundred pages, a dream-like minor masterpiece. Then there's Leonard Michaels' *Sylvia*, Fred Uhlman's *Reunion*, Hubert Mingarelli's *A Meal in Winter*. The novel I'm just finishing is more or less at full length. But it's likely that if I'm still writing past my eighties, I'd want to concentrate my thoughts into the shorter form.

**VG :** Several of your novels are directly related to contemporary social and political events such as, in *Saturday*, the war in Iraq and the demonstration that took place in London at the time, or in *Solar*, recent developments concerning global warming. You also sometimes publish articles in the press on topical subjects, as was the case after the 9/11 attacks. Do you see yourself as a committed writer who sometimes takes a stand on political and social issues?

**IM :** I resist the idea that all writers must 'engage'. One has to honour literary diversity. Some writers wish to concentrate on the limitless variations of love affairs, adultery, divorce, and all the other beautiful intricacies of the private life. A free and lively literary culture must allow all possibilities and hope to cover everything. I get drawn into political and social issues because I'm curious and can't resist. I've been surprised and depressed by our leaving the European Union and I've written pieces and given speeches. But just as often, I run, or shrink, for cover. To write a novel is to indulge a sustained form of intimacy. It doesn't sit well with being on television, sounding off about the state of the nation. V.S. Pritchett wrote (unfairly, I think) about Ford Maddox Ford: 'He lacked the capacity for determined stupor.' But 'determined stupor' perfectly describes the necessary state of mind for literary composition. Simultaneously, focussed and dreamlike. Ideally, the time to talk about Brexit would be between novels, but it doesn't work out like that. Our 24/7 news process is voracious. There's a constant need for talking heads. If you do it once, you'll get a constant stream of requests. Keeping your privacy intact is more important. And of course, with the explosive growth of social media, public debate has become rowdy, incoherent and often abusive. There have been times when I've regretted ever saying anything in public at all.

**VG:** In your novel *The Children Act* which you adapted for the cinema, you imagine a situation in which a teenager, Adam, is suffering from leukaemia but he and his parents who are Jehovah's witnesses categorically refuse the blood transfusion that will keep him alive. So a judge has to decide whether the boy can be treated against his will. What interested you in particular when you started to look into this subject? Was it the cumbersome weight of religion or the ethical dilemma this judge is confronted with?



**IM:** I was interested in a contest between deeply held religious conviction and the secular courts. The dilemma here arises because the boy is almost eighteen, after which point he ceases to be a child. Giving medical treatment to an adult against his or her will

is unlawful. Adam and his parents believe that to accept blood from someone else is a violation of God's command. Such beliefs are sincerely and profoundly held. The Jehovah's Witness transfusion case is particularly stark. What happens when the law is approached by a hospital to ask permission to treat the boy against his and his parents' wishes? In the novel, the judge is suffering a crisis in her marriage. When she goes to Adam's bedside to get a clearer idea of his thinking, he begins to take an interest in her. For him it's a kind of awakening. He's lived in a very enclosed religious community. Now he's encountering an open mind. She takes him seriously. She's tolerant of his beliefs. His faith is shaken and he wants her as his guide, his guru. For her part, she tries to draw a line between her role as judge and her personal relations with him. What are the limits of her responsibilities towards him? She rules, as courts generally do, that this child, however close to adulthood, should not be a martyr to his parents' religious beliefs. She grants permission to the hospital to transfuse Adam. *The Children Act* is the story of an engagement, of a collision between the non-religious culture of the law and religious faith. It asks where our responsibilities to others end, and what happens when faith collapses.

**Audience:** Where did you find the inspiration for the character of Adam in *The Children Act*?

**IM:** Tempting to invoke Flaubert and say: 'Adam, c'est moi!' Here, true to some extent. Adam's intellectual enthusiasm is partly borrowed from my own teenage years. I was always looking, in my mid- to late teens, for intellectual heroes. I would latch on to all kinds of people who I thought might be my guide. I was hungry for someone to tell me how to be. I was also an unfaithful disciple. I would move on, look for the next guide.

**VG:** In addition to novels, you've written screenplays among which *The Ploughman's Lunch* in 1983 and the adaptation of Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* in 1988. You also recently adapted two of your novels, *On Chesil Beach* and *The Children Act* that we've just talked about. What do you find particularly interesting in writing screenplays compared to your work as a novelist?

**IM:** At a superficial level, it's good to get out of the house and collaborate. As a novelist, you sit alone in a room with ghosts. On a movie, you might sometimes wish that the director and producer were ghosts, but they're real and generally it's fascinating to collaborate. It's also a pleasure to be engaged with other people's skills. A film set is not only the scene of controlled panic, but an unusual agglomeration of competence. As for the writing – I think of screenplays as novellas. A screenplay should come in at around twenty thousand words. It places the same demands – the rapid establishment of characters and situations. The big difference is that a screenplay is not in itself an intact literary artefact. It's a halfway point. It's the recipe for a meal, not the meal itself. It's also a guide, a set of instructions to as many as a hundred people with their different specialisms. A writer of a screenplay can't help seeing the movie as he's writing it. But the movie you see in your head is never going to be the movie you end up with. That's the tragedy of no longer playing God. Convention has cast the director in that role, though it's changing with serious television. No one remembers who directed *The West Wing*.

I've been writing screenplays from the beginning of my career. I wrote first for television in 1974 (*Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*). The first full-length movies I wrote (*The Imitation Game*, *The Ploughman's Lunch*) were for Richard Eyre, who's just directed *The Children Act*. We've remained close friends ever since. From the point of view of production, *The Ploughman's Lunch* was deceptively straightforward. We wanted to make a state-of-the-nation movie. We were impressed by the Polish film director Andrzej Wajda (who directed *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*). I showed Richard a synopsis. He liked it. I wrote it, and within months we were shooting. We were living in



interesting times. The Falklands war happened halfway through my first draft and I incorporated it. By the end of the process, I thought I saw the pattern of my life ahead of me: a club sandwich; novels interspersed with movies. Very soon, I discovered how lucky I had been as a beginner.

I finished a novel and then I worked with Bernardo Bertolucci. We collaborated a long time on a novel by Alberto Moravia, called *1934*. Bernardo was and is a towering figure, a master and a legend among cinema auteurs. He knew absolutely everything, and I learnt a great deal from him. But he wanted his screenplay-writer to be like a secretary to his imagination. ‘Ian, I think this is a Lubitsch comedy.’ So I went off, watched a lot of Lubitsch and wrote a comedy. Then, ‘Hmm, I think maybe it’s a tragedy.’ So I wrote a tragedy. And then, one day, he announced he was going to China to make *The Last Emperor*. And it was the right decision – he made a brilliant film. But that was when I began to understand how fragile the movie-making process is. My club-sandwich life never happened. *On Chesil Beach* took seven years from first draft to final cut, and I count myself lucky. Most novels get written. They don’t always get published, but they get written. Most movies don’t get made.

**VG:** We could add another layer to the club sandwich, which is music, as you wrote an oratorio entitled *Or Shall We Die?* in 1983 and the libretto for an opera called *For You* in 2008, both based on music composed by Michael Berkeley. Music also plays an important role in your work because we might say there’s a melody in your writing and some of your characters are composers (in *Amsterdam*) or musicians (in *The Child in Time*, *On Chesil Beach* or *The Children Act*). Could you tell us more about the place of music in your life and as a writer?

**IM:** Well, I used to play the flute. About twenty years ago, I gave up. I could read the treble clef line well enough, but my tone was poor. Still, I’m a passionate listener and, as with poetry, music is simply an intrinsic part of my subjective life. Whatever kinds of music we love, they become an element of who we are. If music gets onto my pages, it’s because it wouldn’t occur to me to exclude it. Sometimes it’s more focussed than that and becomes a means of defining or distinguishing characters. *On Chesil Beach* is an example. A young couple comes straight from their wedding to a hotel room by the sea for their honeymoon. They’re sexual innocents. The year is 1962 and the novel traces the first six hours of their marriage, by which time it’s all over. It’s a tragedy of mutual incomprehension, and music is their defining difference. She plays first violin in a string quartet. He loves Chuck Berry and blues and rock and roll generally. Florence can’t understand why a simple song by Chuck Berry, which is in 4/4 time, would need drums. Why can’t the musicians keep the beat in their heads? Why do you need all this clatter, beating out 4 to the bar? He, on the other hand, thinks of classical music as ‘prim agitation’. It seems so unfree, bottled up, stuffy and uninteresting. That they struggle to love each other’s music becomes the emblem of their sad failure in love.

**Audience:** Several of your novels are marked by an impossible relationship as the characters can’t love each other. This is the case of *On Chesil Beach* in which the protagonists seem to have everything to make them happy and have certain affinities, but they can’t take their love story right through to its logical conclusion. In *Atonement*, a passionate relationship is tragically interrupted. So there seems to be a tragic dimension in your love stories and in the way you write about love. Could you tell us more about that and about whether you could envisage happy endings for your books?

**IM:** It was your very own Henry de Montherlant who famously said: ‘Happiness writes in white ink on a white page.’ We novelists are not so interested when things go well. We’re drawn to complexity, in trying to understand people when they’re put to the test. It’s not given to the human condition to be constantly happy. Lyric poetry may set itself the task of celebrating the peaks of delight or ecstasy. Such moments are pinpricks in





time. The novelist must track human fates as they evolve through time. There may be happiness, but the interest lies in something getting in the way. Tolstoy wrote about happiness at length in *Anna Karenina*, when Levin gets married – here is one of the most extended novelistic descriptions of pure happiness that I can recall. But it can't last. A visitor comes to stay, there's a bout of jealousy, and our interest intensifies.

As for happy endings, the issue is not whether the characters are happy or not. The question is whether the reader is happy. Or the novelist. Does the architecture of the whole make sense? For Jane Austen, a wedding was a satisfactory conclusion. For the modern novelist, a wedding might only be the beginning of a whole other set of interesting problems. We find happiness in structural coherence.

**Audience:** I had the pleasure of studying *Enduring Love* when I was at school and absolutely loved it, and it was what made me start reading all of your books. Do you find it an honour that there are many students in England who are analysing the words you've written, or do you find it frustrating that some people are making up wild reasons for why you used a certain adjective?

**IM:** I have mixed feelings about this. I don't like the idea of young people being forced to read my novels. But when a seventeen-year-old appears in a signing queue with her copy of *Enduring Love* or *Atonement*, and there are marginalia, and little bits of yellow paper sticking out and the cover is falling off, and I can hardly find an empty space to sign my name, then I'm really thrilled, proud and delighted to be read and re-read so closely.

**VG:** When your son Gregory was at school, he had to read *Enduring Love* and write an A-Level essay on it. What did that episode tell you about literary criticism?

**IM:** This is an old story which for some reason has suddenly resurfaced in the newspapers. My son Gregory was sixteen years old (he's now thirty-two). He was obliged to study *Enduring Love*. He had an essay to write about the 'moral centre' of the novel and he came to see me. I told him I wouldn't help with the actual essay, but I'd give him some general guidance on what he might think about. Incidentally, it was disconcerting to read in the essays lying around the house his references to 'McEwan' rather than 'Dad'.

The story goes that Greg got a 'D' for that essay. He's pointed out that he actually got a C. But the story was better with a D. The episode raised questions about teaching literature. It was clear to me that the narrator, Joe, is the flawed moral centre. He takes a rational approach to a man who's stalking him. He finds out what his symptoms are. They're of a delusional psychotic. From this he forms a prognosis. Meanwhile, he's opposed by his wife, Clarissa, a Keats scholar, a good person, if we have to think in these terms, but she's wrong in her judgment. Greg's teacher disagreed. She regarded Clarissa as the moral centre of this novel. She thought I was making a feminist point about overblown male rationality. Whereas I don't think men are any more or less rational than women. I think that at this stage, when you're sixteen or seventeen, you should be marked on the quality of your exposition, not on whether you happen to agree or not with your teacher.

**VG:** *Enduring Love* opens with the quite extraordinary image of an air balloon accident. Where did that image come from?

**IM:** I knew how this novel ended, but I didn't know how it began. I started in the middle, and left the opening for later. I was in the west of Ireland with my regular hiking companion who's a neuroscientist. He told me that he'd read about a ballooning accident. A balloon was on the ground in a high wind. Two men were struggling with ropes to hold it down. But it lifted up, one let go, and the other fell to his death. I saw



my beginning. Six people on the ropes – a microcosm of social cooperation. One man lets go, four others follow and the last man on the rope is swept away. Once the structures of social harmony come apart, it might be rational to be selfish. It's far easier to be good when decent norms prevail.

But I couldn't find the origin of this story. My friend, Ray Dolan, said he'd read it in a German newspaper. These were pre-internet days. My wife was working at the *Financial Times*, which had access to an expensive database, a forerunner of a search engine like Google. So I asked her to use the word string, balloon/death/Germany. Back came by fax a hundred and twenty closely printed pages of balloon accidents – one reason why I've never been up in one – but nothing corresponding to Ray's story. Two years after the novel was published, I was in Munich doing a signing queue. A woman handed me a photocopy of the story. It had happened in Bavaria. It was a man and his son trying to hold down a helium balloon in a high wind. The son had let go, the father was carried up, then dropped to his death. It had become a scandal because cameras were there – it was some balloon racing event – and that night the accident was shown on Bavarian television, to the great distress of the relatives.

I had a reverse case with my first novel, *The Cement Garden*. In it, a mother dies, the children don't want the authorities to come and split them up by sending them into orphanages, so they conceal their mother in the basement and cover her with cement. I was in Austria, and someone presented me with a photocopy of a newspaper front page of just that story. But it had happened after I had written my novel – an instance of the imagination preceding the event.

**VG:** The first appendix to *Enduring Love* is a psychiatric paper on de Clérambault's syndrome from which one of the characters suffers in the novel. Some readers thought it was a genuine scientific paper, and not an invention. Did you imagine that people would take this paper as an authentic one?

**IM:** I thought I had succeeded beyond expectation with this appendix when the book critic of the *New York Times* accused me of plagiarism, of deriving my novel from a scientific paper! Its two authors, Wenn and Camia, are an anagram of my name. It was a pastiche of the various psychiatric papers I'd read during my research. My intention was to summarise the novel in these different terms. I decided to send it to a psychiatric journal – a very famous one, *The Yellow Journal*. Then immediately, I regretted it. This was a serious publication, and if they published my fake paper, sooner or later the source would be discovered and they would look foolish. I was relieved six weeks later when I received a letter of rejection addressed to Drs Wenn and Camia. They were no longer interested in single case studies. To draw scientific conclusions, I would need a minimum sample of twenty-four. In a stroke they negated Freud's papers on his Wolfman, Anne O and other patients. Rightly, I think. You cannot make general observations based on one case. But I had the best of both worlds. *The Yellow Journal* took me seriously, and I didn't make the people there look like fools.

**Audience:** How do you manage to reflect the spirit of an era in your novels? Is it through historical analysis, through subject or through a character who is imbued with a certain emotion or sensibility?

**IM:** It is largely a matter of immersion. I don't separate research out from the writing itself. The two run in parallel. Research and the writing are acts of discovery. When I was writing *Saturday*, I immersed myself in the professional life of a neurosurgeon, Neil Kitchen. Another way to explore the spirit of an age is to read contemporary novels. For example, when I was writing *Atonement* and needed to know the feel of daily life in London during the Second World War, I reread Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*. A novel can give you that close-up subjective sense of a time which a history book never



can. Other than that, it's a matter of extending the imagination, and hoping you've got something right. As well as inevitably getting things wrong, you'll get things right.

**Audience:** You stressed the fact that literature had influenced you very much when you were young, that you were a very eager reader. What would have happened if your parents had not fed you with books but had put you in front of a television set and made you watch cartoons the whole day long?

**IM:** Well, as it happened, there was no tv in our home. My parents were not literary: their family backgrounds were working class. My father was an army officer, having worked his way up through the ranks. Both parents left school at fourteen. They wanted me to have the education that they never had. My mother's view of books was that they were basically untidy objects, and that when you put down your book, it had to be put away, though only after it had been dusted. Or, in our case, returned to the library. Much of my childhood was in north Africa in the fifties and there was no question of television. My books came from an army library, where there was a children section – not very big – and between the ages of six and eleven, I worked my way through the whole lot. My parents had no sense of the tradition of children's literature. They were never read to, and as children they never had books in their homes. Too expensive. I had no one to tell me what to read. It was only at boarding school and university that I learned what I should have been reading as a child. I soon caught up.

**Audience:** Do you remember the moment you decided to become a writer?

**IM:** I wish it was a moment of revelation but it wasn't. I drifted into it through reading. My very first attempt, when I was a second year undergraduate, was to write a play. I'm not exaggerating – this was a terrible play. It was about a set of people, only one of whom, a Christ-like figure, realises that they are in a play. He keeps trying to warn the others that the end is nigh, but they don't believe him. Perhaps this was the highly self-conscious thing one has to write in order to get started, or to get over the embarrassment, the self-entitlement of writing. I submitted my piece to the student drama club at the beginning of the academic year when they discussed which plays they were going to do. I sat in the back row with a thudding heart, waiting for my name to come up. It didn't. No one had read it! It was probably forgotten under a pile. I crept away in shame. But this may have been my first bit of good luck as a writer.

**Audience:** As your first work was a play and Briony's first work in *Atonement* is also a play, I was wondering if you identified to Briony in that novel.

**IM:** To create Briony, I drew on various memories from my childhood. But you've made a connection that has never occurred to me. As a child, Briony writes a terrible play. When it fails, she moves on into fiction – just as I did. I've never connected the two, but clearly, I was conflating my own beginnings as a writer with Briony's. Now I come to think of it, her play, *The Trials of Arabella*, is better than mine, which was called (most pretentiously) *Cry Credo!*

**Audience:** In the coda to *Atonement*, the older Briony reflects on the novelist's 'absolute power of deciding outcomes' which makes her God (371).<sup>4</sup> What do you think of the idea of the novelist as God?

**IM:** God has a problem here. He's omnipotent – he can make anything happen. But he also knows the future – he's omniscient. You can't be omniscient and omnipotent at the same time. If God knows the future, then he can't escape it or change it without having been wrong about it – and he doesn't make mistakes. The novelist has something of the same problem about the future, not of the characters, but the future of the project of the



novel that he or she is writing. The deeper in you go, the more your options begin to narrow. In the first sentence, you are free to write absolutely anything. By the time you get twenty sentences in, determinism begins to take hold. It's like running down a tunnel that narrows as you proceed. On a more mundane level, yes, the novelist is God. She knows that for sure when she goes off to work on a movie and finds herself demoted to an angel of the lower ranks.

**Audience:** Is the non-realist form of *Nutshell* one you're interested in developing in later books?

**IM:** Possibly. I don't really want to talk about the novel I'm writing now, but I'll admit that it's a kind of science-fiction novel set in the recent past, in which history is radically altered. I'm interested in contingency. Where and what we are now, politically, socially, scientifically could easily be other than what it is or was. A small event, an invention, a book, a life, could push the process of history in some other direction. The present is a fragile construct. Who knows, perhaps I'm entering a late phase in which breaking with the seeming inevitability of whatever *is*, feels like liberation. I'm learning to fly. All writers in search of a new novel are looking for new ways to be free. But even as I say this, I know that my novel, *Machines Like Me*, is ultimately rooted in the here and now and is just one more tilt at realism, however that's defined. And I'm fine with that.

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1 Joseph Conrad. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), ed. Robert KIMBROUGH, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979, 147.

2 'Examining the Self.' The Royal Institution, London. 31 March 2016.

3 In later editions, 'rarely in fourth gear' was replaced by 'rarely at speed.'

4 Vintage, 2016.

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