

EVERYBODY WANTS A HAPPY ENDING

Reflections on Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

If any of you haven't yet read *Atonement* or seen the recent film, and don't want the ending spoiled, well ... you're in the wrong place; because all will be revealed very shortly.

But if it's any consolation, I do think that the story is worth reading or viewing, even when you know what's coming; because the issues that it raises bear thinking about.

Here's the story in a nutshell.

Briony, the not-quite-adolescent daughter of an English country household in the 1930s, is a budding writer who enjoys the god-like power of ordering fantasy worlds—and ordering the world according to her fantasy.

Impelled by an over-active imagination, she gets it in to her head that Robbie, the friend of her elder sister, Cecilia, is a sex maniac. Then one night her cousin Lola is raped; and Briony assumes that Robbie did it. He didn't do it; but Briony swears that she saw him. Robbie is arrested, convicted and sent to prison, his would-be medical career aborted. War breaks out. Robbie is drafted into the army, shipped to France, slightly wounded, and eventually finds himself stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk, awaiting evacuation.

Will Robbie be reunited with Cecilia? Will Briony be reconciled with her sister, now estranged, and with Robbie? Will there be atonement? Will there be a happy ending?

Meanwhile, back in England, Briony has become a nurse, doing hard penance by caring for the wounded, mutilated, and dying young men recovered from Dunkirk—and in her spare time, trying to order the fateful past by writing a novella about it.

Eventually, she tracks Cecilia down in her flat and discovers Robbie there, just returned from France. The encounter is tense; and Robbie is only just restrained from violence. But it ends with Briony promising to make public confession of her perjury, with a view to securing Robbie's pardon. Atonement is just around the corner.

Fast forward from 1940 to 1999. Briony, now an accomplished writer, is dying; and she is reflecting on her last novel, which will be published posthumously. It is in fact the final version of the novella that she had begun as a nurse, but had not been able to complete over the intervening fifty-nine years. The reason that she'd not been able to complete it, was that the whole truth was, in fact, unbearably pitiless.

The whole truth is that she never did meet Cecilia and Robbie again in 1940. That ending, which was at least open to the possibility of final happiness, had been merely her literary fabrication—a figment of her ordering imagination. In fact, Robbie had died of blood-poisoning at Dunkirk, and Cecilia had been killed in the Blitz. Briony had not confessed her perjury, because it could have achieved nothing. Atonement had been put beyond the reach of possibility.

In the last three intriguing pages of the book, McEwan has Briony muse on why it was that she had pulled her literary punch—why she'd not been able to bring herself to give the story its true, pitiless conclusion:

“How could that constitute an ending?”, she says. “What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them.... I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism....

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her.” (Ian McEwan, *Atonement* [London: Vintage, 2002], p. 371).

Briony writes as an atheist; and, I suspect, McEwan writes as an atheist through her. So if there is nothing beyond, no God and no after-life to which God can bring us, then there is no atonement for the likes of Briony, Robbie and Cecilia. There is no healing. Just the wound, left forever gaping.

But I think it's remarkable that Briony cannot muster the courage of her pessimism. And it's even more remarkable that nor can McEwan. In the very last lines of his book, he has Briony say this:

“I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, *not yet*. If I had the power to conjure them ... Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love *It's not impossible*.

But now I must sleep. (ibid., p. 372. My italics.)

What does she mean, “Not yet”, and “It’s not impossible”?

According to atheism, the whole truth is that there is no ‘not yet’; and it is entirely impossible. Since there is nothing outside us, since there is no Beyond, atonement is nowhere on the horizon.

So what does McEwan mean by ending his book on an ambiguous, tentatively hopeful note?

And, of course, the film of his book is far less tentative, leaving us in its concluding scene with Robbie and Cecilia, very much alive and very much in love beneath those wartime icons of homecoming and safety, the White Cliffs of Dover.

From an atheist’s point of view, this is all so much loss of nerve, so much failure of courage in the face of pitiless truth. These stands against oblivion and despair can be nothing other than absurd, even contemptible moments of weakness.

From a Christian's point of view, on the other hand, these stands against despair, these shy assertions of hope and possibility, are reflex expressions of faith. Faith that what is evidently *not* possible in this world, within the bounds of time and space, is *yet* possible—possible beyond, beyond this world, beyond the power of any human art.

And it's remarkable that atheists such as Briony, and her own literary creator, just can't seem to stop themselves affirming what they claim to be absurd.

Is it really just weakness? Or might the visceral revolt against ultimate injustice be an expression of inadvertent wisdom?

Now, of course, wanting something to be true doesn't make it so. Badly wanting a happy ending—badly wanting ultimate atonement—doesn't give us the right to believe in it. Strength of will or desire or need doesn't amount to a ground or reason. It was the German social theorist, Max Horkheimer, who once said that just because it's too awful to suppose that generations of innocents will never see justice, doesn't give us warrant to believe that God is coming to their rescue at the End of Time.

Well, that would appear to be true. And yet I wonder. I think it's missing something. What it's missing I find quite hard to articulate. But here are some thoughts.

There are two different kinds of wishful thinking. One is magical thinking that would make the world serve one's selfish purposes by force of will or imagination or ritual. This is childish, immature, and egotistical; and what is wished for is usually trivial.

But the kind of wishful thinking that Briony and McEwan can't stop themselves from, the kind of wishful thinking that is faith, is altogether more serious, more grave, more weighty—and it's born, not of childish selfishness, but of a very grown-up *love* for human persons and their flourishing.

The hope for the raising up of human persons beyond death, the hope for ultimate healing and atonement, is born of love for things that are intrinsically valuable. It's as if their injury and rupture and death naturally appears to us as a sacrilege, as a deep wrong that must be righted—if not here and now, then there and then.

The desire, the hope for the resurrection of the dead and the binding of what's been ruptured is an extension, it seems to me, of the logic of love. It's not merely that death and ultimate rupture aren't *wanted*. It's more that they *just don't make sense*. It is *they* that are absurd.

Loving the goodness and beauty of human fulfillment makes sense. Loving what deserves love makes sense. And continuing to love them even when death has taken them beyond our care, makes better sense than concluding that that our love was foolish.

The yearning for a happy ending and the refusal of ultimate pitilessness—whether it be Briony’s or McEwan’s—is not an absurd failure of courage. It’s a natural expression of love, impelled by the intrinsic value of what love embraces to assert religious faith in the face of all that death cuts absurdly short.

Love might be mistaken, of course. The world might be so designed as to cause love to lead us by the nose into hope, only to have death make fools of us. It could be so. Only the End of Time will tell.

In the meantime, it is not at all clear to me that the ultimate pitilessness of things makes more sense than the logic of love and its natural extension into religious faith.

And I draw strength from the fact that, when push comes to shove, it’s not even clear to atheists like Ian McEwan.

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