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**CHECK THE BOOK**

Epilogues or short additional notes at the end of novels are often used to tie the ends of a work together, achieving resolution and coherence. This is the opposite of McEwan's use of the epilogue. A good example is the 'Note' at the end of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker which replaces the trauma of the preceding chapters with a picture of perfect marital bliss. Stoker goes so far as to say 'Every trace of all that had been was blotted out' (Wordsworth Classics, 2000, p. 315).

The structure is deceptive. Before we read the epilogue, it looks as though the novel has presented an event and then the key points that lead towards its resolution: Robbie's survival in France and Briony growing up enough to face a meeting with the lovers where they will start the process of mending the damage done. The epilogue, by denying that this is what happens, wrenches the structure out of shape and pulls the two stories apart so that Robbie's ending and Cecilia's ending are split between parts of the novel and between England and France. The messy, frustrating lack of resolution is the very thing Briony tried to avoid in her childhood stories. Once again, she has used fiction to impose an order and rightness to events that they do not really have.

CRITICAL HISTORY

Atonement is a very recent novel (2001). Although it has received much critical acclaim, there has been insufficient time for it to have become the subject of a body of criticism. It was reviewed extensively when it was published and received a few more notices when it was nominated for or awarded various prizes. In addition, McEwan has given several interviews and written articles himself on the subject of his life and work. These are the most useful for background information on the novel and on McEwan's intentions in writing it.

Reviews on the publication or nomination of a novel generally aim to give a flavour of the book and set it in the context of the writer's other works. The intention is to help readers to decide whether to buy or read the book. This makes them rather different from other forms of critical writing, which generally assume that the reader is already familiar with the text. It does not mean that reviews are necessarily superficial, but they give a broad sweep, indicating the main themes or concerns and the general character of the book. An excellent appraisal of the reviews and some more scholarly articles on *Atonement* is Peter Childs, *The Fiction of Ian McEwan: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Childs provides sizable quotations from some key articles and reviews, including those by Frank Kermode, Claire Messud, Hermione Lee, Geoff Dyer and James Wood.

Several critics have discussed the more obvious themes of the novel – love, writing, and imagination. Hermione Lee has also discussed how it explores a larger political topic in showing how twentieth-century society was shattered and remoulded by the Second World War and the events surrounding and following it ('If your memories serve you well ...', *Observer*, 23 September 2001).

Several critics have written of the relationship of *Atonement* to the work of other writers. Frank Kermode ('Point of View', *London Review of Books*, 4 October 2001, pp. 8–9) notices a superficial similarity to Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897), a novel

**CHECK THE NET**

There is an up-to-date list of articles and books on McEwan's own website: www.ianmcewan.com

**CHECK THE BOOK**

Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide, by Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes (Vintage, 2002), offers a series of reading and thinking activities to help exploration of the text.

World events	Author's life	Literary events
		<p>1747–8 Publication of <i>Clarissa</i> by Samuel Richardson</p> <p>1818 <i>Northanger Abbey</i> by Jane Austen published posthumously</p> <p>1896 <i>A Shropshire Lad</i>, poems by A. E. Housman</p> <p>1897 <i>What Maisie Knew</i> by Henry James</p>
<p>1914–18 First World War</p> <p>1919 Treaty of Versailles establishes the grounds of peace after the First World War</p> <p>1920 League of Nations comes into being; foundation of the Imperial War Museum in Crystal Palace, London</p> <p>1921 Adolf Hitler becomes leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party</p>		<p>1922–39 T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) edits the <i>Criterion</i></p>

World events	Author's life	Literary events
		<p>1924 <i>A Passage to India</i> by E. M. Forster</p> <p>1927 <i>Dusty Answer</i> by Rosamund Lehmann</p> <p>1927 <i>To the Lighthouse</i> by Virginia Woolf</p> <p>1928 Publication in Italy of <i>Lady Chatterley's Lover</i> by D. H. Lawrence</p> <p>1929 <i>The Last September</i> by Elizabeth Bowen</p> <p>1931 <i>The Waves</i> by Virginia Woolf</p>
<p>1935 Abyssinia Crisis – Mussolini invades Abyssinia and Hitler sends German troops to help the Abyssinians; the League of Nations fails to respond</p> <p>1936 Imperial War Museum moves to its current location in Lambeth</p> <p>1939 Outbreak of Second World War</p>		<p>c. 1939–c. 50 Literary journal <i>Horizon</i> published</p>