



On Chesil Beach

By Ian McEwan

First published in 2007

Genre & subject

Domestic fiction

Man-woman relationships

Honeymoons

Intimacy (Psychology)

Synopsis

It is July 1962. Edward and Florence, young innocents married that morning, arrive at a hotel on the Dorset coast. At dinner in their rooms they struggle to suppress their private fears of the wedding night to come and, unbeknownst to them both, the events of the evening will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

Author biography

Ian Russell McEwan CBE FRSA FRSL (born 21 June 1948) is an English novelist and screenwriter. Born in Aldershot, Hampshire to David McEwan and Rose Lilian Violet (née Moore). McEwan spent much of his childhood in east Asia (including Singapore), Germany, and north Africa (including Libya), where his father was posted. His family returned to England when he was 12. He was educated at Woolverstone Hall School; the University of Sussex, where he received a degree in English literature in 1970; and the University of East Anglia, where he undertook a master's degree in literature (with the option to submit creative writing instead of a critical dissertation).

McEwan began his career writing sparse, Gothic short stories. *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), his first two novels, earned him the nickname "Ian Macabre". These were followed by three novels of some success in the 1980s and early 1990s. His novel *Enduring Love* (1997) was adapted into an eponymous film. He won the Man Booker Prize with *Amsterdam* (1998). His following novel, *Atonement* (2001), garnered acclaim and was adapted into an Oscar-winning film starring Keira Knightley and James McAvoy. This was followed by *Saturday* (2005), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), *Solar* (2010), *Sweet Tooth* (2012), *The Children Act* (2014), *Nutshell* (2016), and *Machines Like Me* (2019). He was awarded the Jerusalem Prize in 2011.

McEwan has been married twice, first to Penny Allen, then later to Annalena McAfee, who was formerly the editor of *The Guardian's Review* section.

Discussion starters

1. What do the novel's opening lines tell us about Edward and Florence? How did your perceptions of them change throughout the subsequent pages? What details did you eventually know about them that they never fully revealed to one another?
2. Is Edward's libido truly the primary reason he proposes marriage, or were other factors involved (perhaps ones he did not even admit to himself)? Are relationships harmed or helped by cultural restrictions against sex before marriage? Would this marriage have taken place if the couple had met when birth-control pills were no longer just a rumor?

3. Edward replays the words “with my body I thee worship” in his mind. What might have been the intention in including that line when this version of the marriage ceremony was written? How does it make Edward feel?
4. Were Florence and Edward incompatible in ways beyond sexual ones? What do their difficulties in bed say about their relationship altogether? Or is sex an isolated aspect of a marriage?
5. Chapter two describes how Florence and Edward met; the first paragraph tells us that they were too sophisticated to believe in destiny. How would you characterize the kind of love they developed? What made them believe they were perfect for one another? Are any two people perfect for one another?
6. What did Edward’s decision to go to London for college indicate about his goals? What was Florence’s dream for her future? Was marriage a greater social necessity for her, as a woman? Would her career as a classical musician necessarily have been sacrificed if she had remained with Edward?
7. Compare Edward’s upbringing to Florence’s. How did their parents affect their attitudes toward life? How did the limitations of Edward’s mother shape his feelings about responsibility and women? Was Florence drawn to her mother’s competitiveness?
8. To what extent was the financial gulf between Edward and Florence a source of trouble? How might the relationship have unfolded, particularly during this time period, if Edward, not Florence, had been the spouse with financial security?
9. Chapter four recounts the moment when Edward tells Florence he loves her because she’s “square,” not in spite of it. Are their opposing tastes the product of their temperaments or the episodes in their young lives? What is your understanding of her revulsion to sex?
10. In the end, Edward explores various “what ifs.” Would their marriage have lasted if he had consented to her request for platonic living arrangements? What are the best ways to predict whether a couple can sustain a marriage?
11. How would Edward and Florence have fared in the twenty–first century? Has the nature of love changed as western society has evolved?
12. The author tells us that the marriage ended because Edward was callous, and that as Florence ran from him, she was at the same time desperately in love with him. Why did Edward respond the way he did? Why was it so difficult for them to be honest about their feelings? How would you have reacted that night?

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