Given his exceptional success, it is all the more notable that Ian McEwan writes stirringly, even frequently, of unexceptional failure (Lee 1976). From his first collection of short stories, which he published in 1975 at age 27, to the novels he published two or more decades later, McEwan focuses on cretive acts and social gestures that are, as he puts it, "inert, but hauntingly so" (McEwan 2001: 6). There is a remarkable contrast between the perennial impudence of his subject matter and the consistent polish of his style. McEwan is generally praised as "the most technically accomplished of all modern British writers" (Winder 2001). One critic has called him "the cold, clinical technician of contemporary English prose" (Cowley 1998). Early reviews of McEwan's work tend to speak of "fire effects" and of his "power to shock," while more recent assessments celebrate above all his mastery of narrative form: his ability to capture, for example, a child's point of view, the mannered politeness of a rejection letter, or the tone of "sexual unease" (Barnes 1975; Lee 1978; Kermode 2001; Lancaster 2002; McGrath 2002). There is little doubt that McEwan is flourishing; he has won most of the literary awards available to him in Britain and the United States, including the Booker Prize for Amsterdam (1998), the Somerset Maugham Award for First Love, Last Rites (1975), the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award for The Child in Time (1987), and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Atonement (2001). Yet he directs his attention in each of these texts to episodes of carelessness and deflated triumph.

McEwan announced in 1978, two books into his career, "I would like to see the novel less urbanely celebratory of our times and more critical" (McEwan 1978a). This is a telling comment for two reasons. First, it suggests that there is more to McEwan's literary project than the technical accomplishment for which he has been applauded and sometimes disparaged. Second, it suggests that, for McEwan, urbanity and celebration can stand in the way of social critique, while stories of crudeness and clumsiness, which pervade McEwan's novels, may offer new opportunities both for critique and for innovation. Over three decades, McEwan's stories and novels have developed a strategic vocabulary for the pathways of unimpressive or unspectacular achievements, like the orgasm that is "miserable, played-out, barely pleasurable" or the "revolting, once rich in plausible details," which becomes "a passing silliness before the hard mass of the actual" (McEwan 1975: 29; 2001: 76). One of the most important words in McEwan's lexicon is "homemade": it is the title of his first published story, which he later reprinted as the opening tale of First Love, Last Rites. As any dictionary will confirm, homemade objects are plain, simple, crude, or, literally, made for domestic use or in a domestic setting. They tend to be imperfect because they are prepared not from the best ingredients but from the ingredients at hand, not with the practiced skill of the expert but with the ingenuity and enthusiasm of the amateur.

In McEwan's work, homemade objects generate situations that are unexpected and often inappropriate. McEwan's inaugural story features a 14-year-old narrator who, in a pathetic imitation of sexual conquest, loses his virginity to his 10-year-old sister. The narrator's imitation is based on tales of sexual adventure that he has overheard while sitting among a crowd of workmen in a local café. McEwan's way of presenting these tales deflates the bravado of the workmen, of the boy, as well as of the story: there is no real conquest, but there is also no moral; there is no sense that maturity or expertise leads to sexual attitudes that are preferable to the boy's absurd triumph. The narrator reports that he and his friend listened to who and how the dustmen fucked, how the Co-op milkmen fitted it in, what the coalmen could bump, what the carpenter could lay, what the builders could erect, what the meter man could inspect, what the plumber could deliver, the gas man stuff out, the plumber plumb, the electrician connect, the doctor inject, the lawyer solicit, the furniture man install—and so on, in an unreal complex of timeworn puns and innuendo, formulas, slogans, folklore, and bravado. I listened without understanding, remembering and filing away anecdotes which I would one day use myself... (1975: 15–16).

That the narrator "listened without understanding" tells us that these "timeworn puns" constitute an adult sexuality that is no less absurd and no less superficial than the experimentation of a naive 14-year-old.

The sentence as list, the sexual irreverence, the perversity of manners—all of these elements betray the strong influence of Vladimir Nabokov on McEwan's early work. No story suggests this more than the wonderfully horrible anecdote "Butterflies," which is also part of the First Love, Last Rites collection. "Butterflies" takes the plotline of Nabokov's Lolita and replaces the winning sophistication of Humbert Humbert with the unintelligent mannerisms of an unnamed narrator, who lives not in the enchanted world of a rich imagination but in the desolate, ugly world of post-industrial London. McEwan's narrator lures a young girl to an abandoned canal, where he molests her and indirectly causes her death; the title of the story is a nod to Nabokov, novelist and famous lepidopterist, and it is also a reference to the narrator's rule: he tells the girl that there will be butterflies at the canal, but of
course there is only stagnant water and menace. The story is interesting as an example of what McEwan will call "impertinent psychological realism" (2001: 41). It is interesting, also, because it prepares us for McEwan's later, more extensive efforts to display the literary and social expectations — about family, sexuality, and heroism — that readers take for granted.

"Butterflies" lures the reader, who initially trusts the narrator much as the girl does and who initially imagines that our concern — the molestation and death of the girl — is also his. The story begins with a whiff of Proust, "I saw my first corpse on Thursday" (1975: 79). One assumes that the narrator is remembering, simply, that on Thursday he saw a corpse for the first time. One realizes later that he is remembering, instead, that on Thursday he saw the first corpse for which he is responsible: the corpse belongs to him not because he has seen it but because he has made it; it could be no one else's "first corpse" in quite the same way. "Butterflies" is full of duplicitous language, phrases that seem harmless or beautiful in one moment and then menacing or ugly in another. Like butterflies, whose imitative patterns make them difficult to see, these phrases are at first unremarkable: their duplicity can be perceived only by those attentive readers who notice the difference, as Nabokov writes, between "a twiglike insect" and "a dead twig" (Nabokov 1980: 377). In McEwan's story, butterfly-phrases include the first sentence ("I saw my first corpse on Thursday") and also other sentences, such as "I had time to kill" or "I ran through what had happened, and what I should have done" (1975: 81, 96). The last comment refers not to the narrator's remorse about the girl but to his far less sympathetic remorse about his failure to befriend a group of West Indian boys on the street. For the reader, though not for the girl, the story is full of butterflies, but they are metaphorical and in no way benign.

It is important to see that McEwan's story aims to transform both characters and readers: one comes to notice that menace extends, beyond the unconventional narrator, into the conventional world that passes for normal. The landscape of London, whose physical beauty might provide some contrast to the narrator's moral blight, in fact seems to resemble it. The narrator repeats,

There are no parks in this part of London, only car parks. And there is the canal, the brown canal which goes between factories and past a scrap heap, the canal little Jane drowned in. (1975: 80)

Later, he adds: "I drank water from the kitchen tap. I read somewhere that a glass of water from a London tap has been drunk five times before. It tasted metallic" (p. 81). Interperserred among the details of the narrator's encounter with the girl are remarks about the Pakistani family that owns a shop they call "Watson's" and whose "two sons were beaten up by local skinheads" (p. 86). The narrator's actions are horrible, McEwan suggests finally, but they are also ordinary, part of a damaged environment made up of asphalt, recycled water, and brutal incivility.

In his later work, McEwan has continued to focus on social or sexual relationships whose state of damage a new calamity does not introduce but rather displays and exaggerates. His first two novels, The Cement Garden (1978) and The Comfort of Strangers (1981), present in one case a family and in the other a romantic couple, both of which are living uneasily even before they encounter the agents of more explicit or more extravagant disorder. The plot of The Cement Garden involves four children who live alone in a house after their parents have died; in The Comfort of Strangers, an unmarried couple on holiday in Venice meets two strangers who lead them into cruelty, mutilation, and death. The titles of the novels alert us to intimacies that are unconventional or unsuccessful, like a garden made of cement or like the comfort of a stranger. The first half of The Cement Garden concerns the death of the parents: the father dies of a heart attack while mixing cement that he is using to cover over his weed-infested garden; the mother dies of some unspecified disease, and then she is buried in the cement by her children, who wish to avoid the so-called "care" of state intervention (1978a: 66). The second half of the novel follows the children as they bury themselves in wild intimacy and social isolation.

McEwan's novels often begin with an efficient, prophetic set piece: a careful scene that gestures to a future it is just about to determine through some episode of failure or pathetic achievement. The narrator of The Cement Garden explains in the first paragraph of the novel that his father's death, which he has not yet recounted, "seemed insignificant compared to what followed" (p. 13); likewise, the narrator of Enduring Love (1997) announces on the second page, "I'm lingering in the prior moment because it was a time when other outcomes were still possible" (1997: 2); and the narrator of Atremutus says of the heroine's elaborate plans, "Briony was hardly to know it then, but this was the project's highest point of fulfillment" (2001: 4). In each case, the narrator is looking back on an event that comes to shape the perspective from which the novel has emerged. The first chapter of The Cement Garden includes a minor achievement and a major failure whose contiguity is, like the cement garden itself, a "fascinating violation" (1978a: 21); while the adolescent narrator is ejaculating in the bathroom, having taken a break from mixing cement for the garden, his father collapses; the narrator returns from his triumph to find his father, whom he should have been helping, face-down in the soft concrete.

In The Cement Garden, McEwan's narrator is more absorbed by his own sexual acts and fantasies, which are vulgar rather than ominous, than he is by the conditions of economic, emotional, or social damage in which he and his family live. Readers have been shocked by McEwan's explicitness, by which they usually mean his description of the sexual games the narrator "knowingly, knowing nothing" plays with his two sisters, one older and one younger (1978a: 16; Byrnes 1995). Yet the focus of our dismay, McEwan suggests, should be elsewhere: with the father, who loses his temper frequently, cruelly taunts the narrator and his siblings and their mother, and has spent the family's little money on the cement scheme for his garden rather than on school clothes for his youngest son (1978a: 13, 19, 41); with the neighborhood,
"where stinging nettles grew round torn corrugated tin" and where "other houses were knocked down for a motorway they never built" (pp. 27–8); or with Derek, the older sister's boyfriend who alerts the authorities at the end of the novel not out of sympathy or moral concern but out of jealousy, greed, and conventional disgust. The novel even suggests that the family of children provides more intimacy and nurture than the parents provided in the past or that the community will provide in the future: for example, the sisters show sympathy to their youngest brother, 6-year-old Tom, who is bullied at school and wants to dress like a girl, whereas the parents and the teacher offer in matters of sexuality only diagnosis or condemnation.

Characters who adopt a pious or too-earnest relation to sexuality and social behavior are generally marked as hypocrites or as naive strivers in McEwan's texts. Thus Derek only "saves" the children from their isolation and incest because he has been rebuffed by the sister and because he sees the children's house as a financial opportunity for himself (1978: 116, 150). In the later novels, such as Black Dogs (1992) and Enduring Love, would-be heroes are thwarted by minor accidents and persistent uncertainties. These novels offer a critique of chivalry, on the one hand, and of rationality, on the other. McEwan may acknowledge the attraction of rationalism, as Michael Wood has argued, but he cannot share its confidence in the social efficacy of analysis and quantification (Wood 1997: 9). Visiting a former extermination camp while on a visit to Poland in 1981, the narrator of Black Dogs feels that he and his companion are "like tourists" because his emotions are dulled by the enormous weight of numbers, as he looks at the "shoes, tens of thousands of them, flattened and curled like dried fruit" (1992: 93). The narrator explains:

The extravagant numerical scale, the easy-to-say numbers — tens and hundreds of thousands, millions — denied the imagination its proper sympathy, its rightful grip of the suffering, and one is drawn insistently to the persecutors' premise: that life was cheap, junk to be inspected in heaps. (1992: 93)

McEwan's novel does not discard the need for numbers but it finds them insufficient to communicate the experience of extermination camps or of the people who perished there. One alternative that the novel offers to numbers that are "easy-to-say" are words whose many meanings_pool the imagination, as in the novel's title, which refers to a bout of depression, a dishonorable person, a symbol of evil in a nightmare, and attack animals trained by Nazi soldiers. McEwan offers all of these meanings for "black dogs" and then also attaches them to other, less dramatic objects, such as the proverbial "patience of a dog" and a "hot dog" bought in a city street (1992: 69, 72). Allowing his metaphor to register as both transcendent evil and fast-food dinner, McEwan emphasizes the blasphemy of narrative: a rational story of visceral events, a personal account of universal or collective incident, the mix-up of colloquial idiom and moral symbolism (Walkowitz 1998: 108). "Blasphemy," too, is a term that proliferates in the novel: it refers to profanity against God or religion but also to the refusal of other, more secular orthodoxies, including the "sonorous platitude of rational explanation (McEwan 1992: 124).

Black Dogs resists triumphant religion as well as triumphant rationalism, much Enduring Love refuses to allow the practiced reasonableness of its science-writ atheist to trump either the humanism of his wife, a literary critic, or the insanity of an evangelical stalker. The novel opens with the meticulous description of a balcony accident in which Joe Rose, the science writer, and his wife Clarissa witness the gruesome death of a rescue. The initial scene introduces Jed Parry, a stalker, who sees in the disaster a divine manifestation of the love he must share with Joe. McEwan alerts us to the interplay between scientific rationalism and religious triumphalism by suggesting that Jed's obsession with details—the so-called signs of Joe's love, which he finds in a glance or in a smile—is much like Joe's obsession with proof and enumeration. While adding up the "twenty-nine" messages that Jed has left on his answering machine, Joe receives yet another call. It is Jed, who has, he says, received Joe's message: "Joe, brilliant idea with the curtains. I got it straightaway. All I wanted to say is this again. I feel it too, I really do" (1997: 78). Jed imagines the slightest twitch in the curtains of Joe's apartment is an intentional communication, Joe's sign that he wants to be rescued from his marriage and from his atheistic convictions. This seems, of course, crazy, but McEwan would have us notice that Joe's stalling of Joe is only a little more hyperbolic than Joe's manic "investigation" of his acquisition of a gun (not so easy in England), and his decision to shoot Jed when Jed is holding a knife to his own throat. The novel is full of rescues that go awry and McEwan attributes these failures to the psychology of heroic achievement, the assumption of certainty and selflessness that excludes ambivalence but a cooperation.

In Atonement, McEwan's first novel of the twenty-first century, the critique of rational calculation is indirect but devastating: most of the story takes place in 1935 and in 1940, just before and during World War II, and in this context detail enumeration is a characteristic either of unfailing bureaucracy (the too-calm estimation of casualties) or of self-interested capitalism (the too-pleased estimation wartime profit). The novel may focus our attention on the crime of its narrator Briony, who as a child falsely accuses her sister's lover of being her cousin's rapist; McEwan suggests that rigid social attitudes, including sexual hypocrisy and prejudice, have made Briony's accusation almost inevitable. Atonement brings together many of the concerns that McEwan has explored in earlier and in earlier work: critique of urban celebration; the resistance to correction or "atonement" and the idealization of the past; and the assertion that sexual moralism and complacency are embedded in and generative of the economic and political conditions of twentieth-century Britain.

Atonement opens in an English country house. In the foreground is a play, "The tr of Arabella," which 13-year-old Briony Tallis has composed for the occasion of older brother's visit. In the background are preparations for war, which McEwan presents indirectly: we hear of government documents prepared by Briony's fact
a minister who remains in London, and of business plans prepared by Paul Marshall, the chocolate manufacturer whom Briony's brother has worked to the Tallis estate. Briony's mother, who suffers from nervous headaches and whose husband is having the kind of discreet affair everyone recognizes and no one discusses, finds the government documents by accident. Their practiced indifference matches her own:

It was only the mildest of wilful curiosity that prompted her to peer, for she had little interest in civic administration. On one page she saw a list of headings: exchange controls, rationing, the mass evacuation of large towns, the conscription of labour. The facing page was handwritten. A series of arithmetical calculations was interpered by blocks of text. Jack's straight-backed, brown-ink typewriter told her to assume a multiplier of fifty. For every one ton of explosive dropped, assume fifty casualties. Assume 100,000 tons of bombs dropped in two weeks. Result: five million casualties. (2001: 149)

The casual, "straight-backed" prose of this passage should recall the numbing calculations from Black Dogs and Enduring Love. McEwan suggests that human suffering and political causality have been muted by the detached contemplation of "multipliers."

One hears in Jack's estimations and in his transformation of death into "casualties" an echo of Paul Marshall's estimations, which manage in the course of a single, very long sentence to transform the calamity of possible war into the fantasy of possible wealth. In a "ten-minute monologue" presented by McEwan as free indirect discourse, Marshall describes his plan for "Army Amo," a chocolate bar coated in green candy from which he hopes to profit extravagantly, if, as he hopes, there is a war:

The launch of Rainbow Amo had been a triumph, but only after various distribution catastrophes which had now been set right; the advertising campaign had offended some elderly bishops so another was devised; the cinema in the problems of success itself, unbelievable sales, new production quotas, and disputes about overtime rates, and the search for a site for a second factory about which the four unions involved had been generally sullen and had needed to be charmed and coaxed like children, and now, when all had been brought to fruition, there loomed the greater challenge yet of Army Amo, the khaki bar with the Pass the Amo slogan; the concept rested on the assumption that spending on Armed Forces must go on increasing if Mr. Hitler did not pipe down; there was even a chance that the bar could become part of the standard-issue ration packet; in that case, if there were to be a general conscription, a further five factories would be needed; there were some on the board who were convinced there should and would be an accommodation with Germany and that Army Amo was a dead duck; one member was even accusing Marshall of being a warmonger; but, exhausted as he was, and maligned, he would not be turned away from his purpose, his vision. (2001: 49-50)

Whereas Jack Tallis seems more concerned about the exact number of victims than he is about the death of the victims themselves, Paul Marshall thinks more about the chocolate bars he will sell than about the soldiers who will die eating them.

McEwan adds to these euphemistic and triumphalist visions of war several visions of art, whose abstract triumphalism the novel will likewise reject. It will turn out that Briony is not only the author of a play but also of a novella and of the novel we are reading. The play is a rehearsal, as it were, for Briony's later work, and its story displays values that she, and Atoneament, will later discard in favor of other, less insular sentiments. "The trials of Amella" celebrates above all the value of endogamy: a young maiden develops a "reckless passion" for a foreign count; she elopes with the count against the wishes of her family; when Arabella falls ill, the count deserts her, but she is rescued by a prince, disguised as an impoverished doctor, whom she learns to love and eventually marries; the marriage to the prince reconciles Arabella to her family (2001: 3). The heroic resolution of the play will resonate throughout McEwan's novel against the unheroic, uncorrected mistakes that suffice every other episode, both of war and of romance, in the text.

With her play, Briony hopes to rescue her brother by teaching him to embrace the tradition of marriage and family; her later novella, though more sophisticated in its style and approach, also conforms to a rescue plot, at least in its intentions. In the third section of Atoneament, set in late April and early May of 1940, Briony is training as a nurse in a London hospital. She has just completed a novella based on events at the Tallis house. Her vision of this novella comes to her in a moment of quiet, which exists because Briony is running an errand rather than cleaning bed pans and also because the news from Dunkirk - known to the reader from the previous section of the novel - has not yet arrived, while the bombing of London, in which her sister will die, has not yet begun. In the context of this pause, on the edge of hospital routine and wartime disaster, Briony begins to gush about her literary "achievement":

What excited her about her achievement was its design, the pure geometry and the defining uncertainty which reflected, she thought, a modern sensibility... The novel of the marriage was unlike anything in the past. She had read Virginia Woolf's The Water three times and thought a great transformation was being worked in human nature itself, and that only fiction, a new kind of fiction, could capture the essence of the change. To enter a mind and show it at work, or being worked on, and to do this within a symmetrical design - this would be an artistic triumph. (2001: 281, 282)

Briony's fantasy of geometric achievement clashes with the corporeal rawness of the events she is representing and of those that, we know, will soon take place. It might seem that Briony's aspiration is shallow because it focuses on the wrong object: winning a writing prize, say, rather than winning the war. But, for McEwan, the problem is not the endeavor but the effect: the problem is "triumph."

Alongside these visions of triumphant design, McEwan will display the mindless routine of the war hospital and the British army's unglorious "rescue" at Dunkirk. McEwan repeats the word "rescue" here and elsewhere to draw the reader's attention to the continuity between the politics of chivalry and the politics of war (pp. 227, 349). McEwan will inform us at the end of the novel that Cecilia, Briony's sister, dies
a "casualty" (her father's word) of the blitz and that Cecilia's lover Robbie dies in the Dunkirk retreat. The scenes of wartime serve to replace the earlier visions with explicit, embodied sights: a leg hanging in a tree; a soldier with a gaping head wound (pp. 192, 208). They serve, also, to deflate heroic images of family, romance, and art. It is noticeable, for example, that the make-shift, transient families that Robbie and Briony develop during the war are far superior to the conventional family they left behind, and one should think here of McEwan's work in *The Cement Garden*; Robbie makes friends with two corporals who protect him and whom he, though a private, leads to the beach at Dunkirk; Briony allows a dying French soldier to imagine that she is his fiancée. These arrangements, McEwan suggests, are not compensatory: they do not simulate or reconstruct the prewar family; rather, they demonstrate more flexible, more inclusive, and more imaginative relationships than those that the war disrupts.

Robbie's experience of the war leads him to adjust his memory of intimacies in his past, purposefully shattering patois and delicacy where he had only accidentally shorn them before. Renting to Dunkirk, Robbie decides that he will no longer remember having "made love to Cecilia," but will embrace the language of the corporals and remember instead that "they had fucked while others sipped their cocktails on the terrace" (p. 227). It is worth noting here that the deflation of heroic fiction is focused not on the language of war but on the language of sex and sexual intimacy. McEwan uses the war to criticize the peace and to reframe our attention on relations between men and women, on rules of sexuality and marriage, and on the concept of the family, with small and writ large. Briony has composed her novel, she tells us in a coda, to stoke her crime and to reanimate the marriage plot — the love story of Robbie and Cecilia — that her accusation had forediselled. In the novel, as we read it, Robbie survives Dunkirk, and he and Cecilia are reunited in London; in the coda, a diary entry from 1999, Briony acknowledges that she has invented this ending to give the couple in fiction what she sought from them in life.

At the beginning of *Atonement*, Briony's play is most significant as an event that does not take place. It is delayed by an avalanche of social disasters, including the love affair between Cecilia and Robbie, the charlady's son; the elopement of Briony's aunt, who has run off to Paris with a man said to work in the wireless; the disappearance of Briony's young cousins, distressed by their parents' divorce; the rape of cousin Lola by Paul Marshall; and the arrest of Robbie, who is accused of Marshall's crime. In the final scene of McEwan's novel, the play is performed but sixty-four years late. Of the original cast, at least one member has died; some but not all of the remaining cast are now in the audience; their great-grandchildren are the new players; and the family — as a group and as a paradigm — has changed altogether. The belated performance of the play registers the difference between its endogamous fantasy and the exogamous family that watches it.

The prologue of the play, in rhyming pentameter, is given at the beginning of *Atonement* and then again at the end. It tells of "Arabella" and her "extrinsic fellow," from whom she has to be rescued by the doctor-prince (2001: 16, 367). In the first casting of the play, the prologue is to be read by Briony; in the final casting, the prologue is read by a cousin's great-grandson, who has a Cockney accent and who also plays the extrinsic count. As the performance suggests, the family has become extrinsic: the scene remains at the Tallis house, but the house has become a hotel, while the park has become a golf course; Briony is brought to the hotel by a West Indian taxi driver with a law degree from the University of Leicester, whose conversation makes her realize that talk and dress and taste in music no longer convey educational level or even citizenship (p. 362); while a boy with a Cockney accent plays the foreign count, a half-Spanish girl plays the English maid. Trapping Briony's novel, which strives for apology, reconciliation, and heroism, the belated play values mix-ups rather than correction.

Like the young Briony, who uses a thesaurus to replace simple words with jarring but equivalent terms, McEwan updates worn images by introducing indecorous phrases in the middle of romantic fantasies or delicate social gestures. The intrusion of "fucking" in the middle of Robbie's daydream is good example of this strategy. McEwan punctuates his novel with semantic constructions, social acts, and words of art that are, as he says throughout the novel, "homemade," much like Briony's play or like Cecilia's "endearing attempt to seem eccentric, her stab at being bold," which is "exaggerated" but effective in unexpected ways (p. 80). The homemade play is effective because it depicts, in exaggerated fashion, the fantasy of heroic rescue that Briony's novel had led us to embrace. Refusing to endorse this fantasy, except in fiction, McEwan won't give celebration the final word. For all the impartiality of McEwan's "psychological realism," *Atonement* displays a critical target that is hard to miss. Call it chivalry or call it triumphalism. McEwan prefers to the disciplines of unwavering success the innovations of unexpected failure.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


--- (2001) "If your memories serve you well..." *The Observer*, September 23: 16.


In "Margins and the millennium: towards 2000," the concluding chapter of Randall Stevenson’s overview of twentieth-century British literature, the author states that British literature in the twentieth century “not only reflects but seeks to compensate for the problems and anguish of history, reshaping in imagination what is lost or intractable in fact” (1993: 127). The primary source of anguish is found in “the final flourishing, later decline and eventual loss of Empire” (p. 126). One clear effect of this loss, Stevenson suggests, is simply that British fiction became impoverished, having been robbed of the opportunity to encounter unfamiliar subjects, terrains, and characters as well as losing a distanced objectivity in the scrutiny of Britain’s own culture. For Stevenson, the anguish is compensated for nostalgically in British pop culture, in spy thrillers such as Ian Fleming’s James Bond, and in 1980s films such as Gandhi and A Passage to India. He also finds a consequence likely to be more lasting and much more significant in the cross-cultural awareness of transplanted writers or in writers “from national and post-colonial minorities” (p. 140). In this chapter, Stevenson never mentions the novels of Graham Swift. Yet few contemporary writers consider the “problems and anguish of history” more acutely, or articulate the sense of loss more fully, than Swift.

Stevenson’s omission is perhaps understandable. Swift writes from the middle, not the margins. His novels focus on the lives of middle-aged and middle-class men living in South London, where Swift himself was born in 1949 and where he resides. Rarely does Swift depict scenes in the former colonies or include non-white characters. Although it is difficult to say exactly where the plots of Swift’s novels begin, the critical moment in the major characters’ lives comes during or just before World War II. While Swift does not write war novels or depict battle scenes, and while his characters remain physically unscathed by combat, they often suffer from personal and psychological problems stemming from events in the middle of the century. Swift’s fiction, however, does not offer compensation for the anguish of history, as Stevenson suggests is the case in pop culture. Rather, his seven novels confront the tremendous...
Selven, in many ways the representative West Indian writer of the Windrush generation, actually emigrated to Canada in 1976 and lived the last eighteen years of his life in Toronto. And to return to an author justifiably prominent in this chapter: even Rushdie finally abandoned the empire, as one critic has noted, and relocated to New York. Nevertheless, wherever one draws the boundaries, or however one groups what remains within them, one claim may be strongly argued: the black British contribution to English fiction in the second half of the twentieth century deserves wider critical attention than it has hitherto received.

References and Further Reading

Nair, The entries for Dance and Nelson are structurally similar, basic handbooks for Caribbean and Asian Diasporic writers, respectively. Volumes 112, 123, and 157 of the huge Dictionary of Literary Biography (DLB) have longer essays on Caribbean and black African writers, although there are no separate volumes yet on Asian writers in English. Wexfori is a London-based journal featuring “Caribbean, African, Asian and associated literatures in English,” with frequent coverage of black British writing. The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, notwithstanding its shorter dated name, is another excellent journal with comprehensive annual bibliographies.


