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On Chesil Beach by Ian McEwan

Reviewed by Jessica Allen
7.3.07

This slip of a novel describes the wedding night of Edward and Florence, at a hotel overlooking Chesil Beach, in the summer of 1962. But what concerns Ian McEwan most is the way the fate of these “young, educated . . . virgins” on their honeymoon intersects with that of their homeland, England, and its own struggle to find its way to postmodern maturity.

Essentially, the plot answers two questions, *Will they or won't they finally have sex? And with what effects?* Edward, a recent college graduate with a degree in history, proposes to Florence, a violinist, because he can no longer take the sexual tension. For these two, and so many young people in the postwar period, “constant easy sex without having to meet each other's parents” was a myth and sustained eye contact was the “closest they came to making love.” Yet, when it comes time to take what they consider to be the last steps to adulthood, Edward and Florence stand paralyzed by:

[t]heir personalities and pasts, their ignorance and fear, timidity, squeamishness, lack of entitlement or experience or easy manners, then the tail end of a religious prohibition, their Englishness and class, and history itself. Nothing much at all.

Edward and Florence belong very much to their era, to the “thousand unacknowledged rules” that bind them even when they are alone, not to the years that follow and certainly not to the present. At the risk of ruining the dénouement, let me say only that I was surprised by the climax and its aftereffects. Feminists and Freudians alike will find rich ground for analysis and argument in the characterization of repression that drive the novel.

Impressionistic writing laden with innuendo fills the book's first several pages. Each moment seems pregnant with possibility, as indeed it was for the two 22 year olds. Florence, familiar with the sex act from a recently purchased handbook for newlyweds, imagines herself as a “drawing room” that Edward will enter as they try to get through dinner together. “Here it comes,” Florence whispers as the waiters bring beef and sherry trifle. Outside, the waves sound “like a distant shattering of glass,” and a nearby garden contains “swollen” cabbage and “sensuous” shrubbery.

 by [Donald Antrim](#)

216pp

[Nan Talese / Doubleday,](#)

2007

\$22.00

[New York Times Review](#)

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But politics keep cropping up. With nothing to say to each other, Edward and Florence listen to the wireless downstairs as they chew food they have no appetite for. (Not eating was not an option, due to social mores and politeness, though the food is terrible.) They dream of electing a Labour candidate as charming as John F. Kennedy, and they recognize England's status as a "minor power," leagues behind the United States and Soviet Union. Later, Edward thinks of Conservative prime minister Harold Macmillan to keep from "arriving too soon."

His study of British history has taught Edward what a privilege it is to be living in the "peaceful, prosperous" early 1960s. They cannot know it, of course, but we do: Edward and Florence live at the cusp of a "celebrated decade." In 1962, Britain, for all its peace and prosperity, is floundering, its empire gone and its place in the world uncertain. But a year after the events of the novel, the Labour Party rises to power and introduces legislation that leads to the so-called permissive society, including the legalization of abortion, prohibition of censorship in the arts, decriminalization of homosexuality, and abolition of the death penalty. Meanwhile, the Beatles hit the scene, along with miniskirts and the Pill. As McEwan's narrator notes, "social change never proceeds at an even pace." Who can blame us, the novel wonders, for romanticizing the late 1960s, given the awful awkwardness of the early 1960s?

McEwan uses Edward as an English everyman, who embodies these great changes by witnessing so many. The name Edward has an importance in English history, dating back to the medieval kings Edward I, II, and III. The Edward of the novel is born during the Battle of Britain, when the German Air Force attempted to subdue the Royal Air Force for several months in 1940. At that time, Edward's village does not have running water; by the time he marries Florence, however, London's sprawl has swallowed nearby towns. He is a country boy who likes to fight but who also earns a first from University College. This linking of Edward and England continues into the summation of Edward's life at the end of the novel, when we learn the ways in which Edward did—and did not—take advantage of his times.

Today Chesil Beach is an 18-mile protected area in Dorset. But the English middle class would rather vacation in Ibiza or Croatia. An article in the April 12, 2007, edition of the *New York Times* summed up the decline of such English vacation destinations in its title: "Postcard from Ailing British Coasts: Wish You Were Here." Nevertheless, Britain has never been so popular. Its economy remains one of the strongest in the world; its cuisine rivals that found in Paris and New York. Politically, Britain under Tony Blair unabashedly goes against fellow members of the European Union, from refusing to adopt the Euro to supporting the second war in Iraq, and some pundits speculate that Britain might eventually give up its EU membership. History marches forward, for better or worse. Someday future McEwans will look back on our lives as quaint and even repressive, hopefully as sympathetically.

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