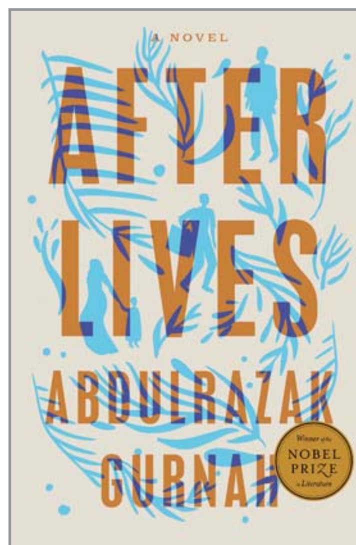
Afterlives

Author: Abdulrazak Gurnah (b. 1948)
First published: 2020, in the United Kingdom
Publisher: Riverhead Books (New York). 320 pp.
Type of work: Novel
Time: Twentieth century
Locale: German East Africa



Courtesy Penguin Publishing Group

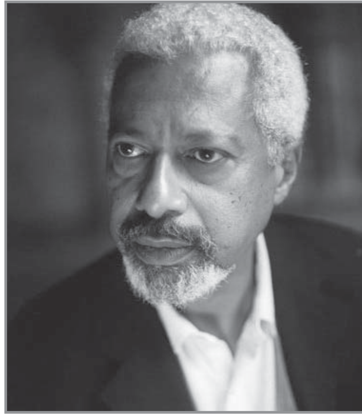
Nobel Prize winner Abdulrazak Gurnah's epic novel explores the impacts of colonialism on the lives of a handful of characters in East Africa from the early 1900s to the 1960s.

Principal characters

Afiya, an orphan living in colonial East Africa
Ilyas, her brother, who becomes an askari solider fighting for Germany
Khalifa, Ilyas's best friend, a clerk
Bi Asha, Khalifa's wife
Hamza, a runaway who becomes an askari soldier and later marries Afiya
The Oberleutnant, a German officer

In 2021, Abdulrazak Gurnah was awarded the most prestigious prize in literature, the Nobel. Before then, Gurnah, who was born in Tanzania and fled to England at the age of eighteen following the Zanzibar Revolution, was not widely known in the United States. Like *Afterlives*, his tenth novel, published in the United Kingdom in 2020 and the United States in 2022, most of Gurnah's novels chronicle the effects of colonialism on his native Tanzania and have earned some measure of recognition. But for readers in the United States, the Nobel Prize, along with the subsequent publishing of the US edition of *Afterlives*, gave Americans a chance to finally catch up with Gurnah's unique blend of personal and historical storytelling.

Afterlives is a book that is epic in scope and intimate in detail. It tells the story of a handful of characters living in colonial East Africa from the beginning of the 1900s to the 1960s. The first character that Gurnah introduces is Khalifa, who is twenty-six years old at the beginning of the book. Khalifa, who is of mixed Indian and African descent, begins working for the merchant Amur Biashara as a clerk. Biashara arranges for him to marry his niece Bi Asha. Khalifa and Bi Asha make an odd and not always successful pair. Bi Asha is serious-minded, somewhat stern, and a devout Muslim, whereas Khalifa is more sarcastic and not interested in religion.



Courtesy Penguin Publishing Group

Abdulrazak Gurnah

Khalifa's best friend is a man named Ilyas. Running away from home, Ilyas was captured by German colonial troops only to be rescued by a kind German missionary and educated at the missionary school. Now an adult, he has arrived in Khalifa's town to work on a sisal estate. Shortly after, he finds out that he has a sister back in his native town that he had not known about. Traveling back to that town, he finds that this sister, a young woman named Afiya, was orphaned when their parents died and is living with a family where she is poorly treated. Ilyas takes Afiya to live with him and teaches her to read and write.

The early part of the book is set against a period of unrest in East Africa. The land where the characters live, which is in modern-day Tanzania, is controlled by the Germans. The German rule is challenged by several armed uprisings by African groups and eventually by the British. As World War I begins and fighting in East Africa intensifies between the British and the Germans, Ilyas voluntarily joins the Schutztruppe, the German army comprised of Africans, out of loyalty to the Germans. He leaves his sister and his friends and disappears.

The book's final main character is named Hamza, a young man with a mysterious past who also joins the Schutztruppe. A sensitive person, he is clearly unsuited to army life, but he is taken under the wing of an officer known as the Oberleutnant and becomes his assistant. The Oberleutnant teaches him German, treats him alternatively with kindness and derision, and exudes an air of sexual menace in regard to his assistant. After Hamza is seriously wounded by a vicious attack from another German officer, he is nursed back to health by a pastor, and then comes to live and work in Khalifa's town. He befriends Khalifa and, after a long courtship, ends up marrying Afiya, who, in Ilyas's absence has been raised by Khalifa and Bi Asha. Hamza and Afiya's son, named Ilyas after his uncle, ends up a troubled young man, seemingly possessed by some unsettled spirit. This possession is ultimately revealed to be connected to the elder Ilyas, and the final part of the book consists of a journey on the part of the younger Ilyas to determine his namesake's fate.

Afterlives is a book that is very heavy on plot, particularly in the early sections, and Gurnah is not shy about providing the reader with a lot of information at once. As such, the book is a slow burn, building its power steadily as the reader gets to know the characters and the full weight of the decades comes to be felt. Because the book takes place over half a century of time and because the progression of time happens often imperceptibly, the aging and changing circumstances of the characters has a tendency to sneak up on the reader in a way that is often stirring. For a book whose characters are so tied to history, the final revelations, which come at the end of the narrative, is especially devastating and moving.

Among the book's greatest achievements is its shrewd interweaving of the lives of its characters with the history of East Africa. Several of the book's characters are caught up in the colonial struggle in ways that place them at the heart of the action. In particular, Ilyas presents an interesting case, illustrative of the mindset of some colonized people. Loyal to the occupying Germans, he gladly joins their cause, taking it as his own, but not everyone around him sees things the same way. His friends, including Khalifa, give him a hard time about his decision, and the omniscient narrator even weighs in. "The askari left the land devastated," Gurnah writes, "its people starving and dying in the hundreds of thousands, while they struggled on in their blind and murderous embrace of a cause whose origins they did not know and whose ambitions were vain and ultimately intended for their domination."

Alongside the world-changing events that the characters find themselves caught up in, though, are intimate moments. While Ilyas and Hamza fight in the Schutztruppe, the other characters go about their daily lives. Gurnah gives readers glimpses of Khalifa gossiping with his friends on their nightly visit to his house; the squabbles between Khalifa and Bi Asha over their diverging views of religion; and the growing womanhood of Afiya. This last development is one that Gurnah uses to describe an interesting dynamic. As Afiya becomes a young woman, Bi Asha's attitude toward her shifts. For the religious Bi Asha, Afiya's growth becomes a kind of threat and she treats the younger woman harshly and severely restricts her mobility. Throughout the book, Gurnah handles questions of sexuality with extreme subtlety, shrewdly hinting at complex feelings without spelling anything out. This is as true for Bi Asha's attitude toward Afiya as it is for the Oberleutnant's interest in Hamza. While there is clearly a sexual feeling that he has toward his young assistant, Gurnah only hints at its implications, presenting the officer's attitude toward Hamza as both tender and menacing.

Afterlives is a book that necessarily contains its share of brutality, but it also excels in relating softer, more tender moments. This is never more true than in the unexpected love story of Hamza and Afiya. Occurring about two-thirds of the way through the novel, the growing mutual attraction and eventual marriage of Hamza and Afiya is one of the book's most affecting sequences. After the relentless plotting of much of the book, Gurnah here slows down and allows the relationship to play out at its own pace. The result is a tender series of scenes that shows that, even in a life marked by war, poverty, and uncertainty, genuine human connection can still be found. This merging of the personal with the political, the ability to find the human amidst the world historical, is ultimately Gurnah's greatest achievement.

Afterlives was extremely well received by critics in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Typical of the critical reception both for the book and for the author was Imbolo Mbue's characterization of Gurnah as a "novelist nonpareil, a master of the art form who understands human failings in conflicts both political and intimate" in his review of *Afterlives* for the *New York Times*. These sentiments were shared in the United Kingdom, where Maaza Mengiste praised Gurnah's "compelling" novel in the *Guardian*. Mengiste was especially impressed by the author's exploration of "the generational effects of colonialism and war," and how Gurnah "asks us to consider what remains in the aftermath of so much devastation."

Upon the publication of *Afterlives*, the *New Republic* published an in-depth review that also provided American readers with necessary background on Gurnah's career. While offering high praise for both the author and his latest novel, the *New Republic* reviewer Siddhartha Deb offered some suggestions as to why Gurnah's books had not previously caught on with American audiences. According to Deb, "there is little in the novel that follows the dominant trends of American writing and publishing." It does not, for example, follow a single character or allow any heroism in its war stories. It also leans heavily on summary rather than the preferred American method of "show, rather than tell."

Nonetheless, as Deb explained, Gurnah's books, with *Afterlives* as a superlative example, are rich and powerful explorations of the lives of people living against a harsh historical backdrop. They also pose questions that are "hauntingly contemporary." As Deb put it, the central question of the novel is "How does one live one's everyday life through what appears to be the end of the world?" This question may well resonate with contemporary readers and may help introduce this vital author to a new and hungry audience.

Author Biography

Abdulrazak Gurnah taught English and postcolonial literature at the University of Kent in England for nearly forty years before retiring. His other novels include *Paradise* (1994), which was short-listed for the Booker Prize and the Whitbread Award, and *By the Sea* (2001), which was long-listed for the Booker Prize. He was awarded the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Andrew Schenker

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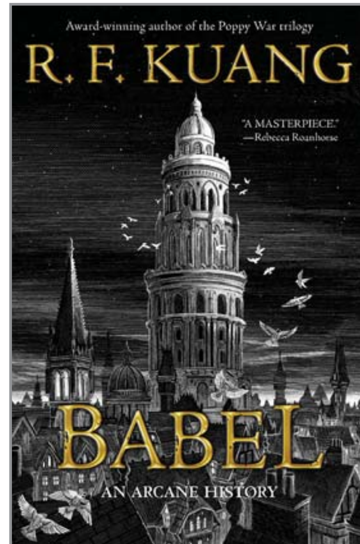
Babel
Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution

Author: R. F. Kuang (b. 1996)
Publisher: Harper Voyager (New York). 560 pp.
Type of work: Novel
Time: 1828–40
Locales: London and Oxford, England; Canton, China



Courtesy HarperCollins Publishers (Harper Voyager)

In this dark and violent historical fantasy novel, R. F. Kuang constructs an alternate version of 1830s England to offer thought-provoking commentaries on academia, race, colonialism, and empire. It focuses on a Chinese immigrant-scholar who, along with three of his cohorts, learns how to harness the magical and destructive powers of silver-working while studying at Oxford University's vaunted Royal Institute of Translation, colloquially known as Babel.

Principal characters

Robin Swift, a.k.a. Birdie, a Chinese immigrant, linguist, and scholar
Professor Richard Lovell, his British guardian; an Oxford sinologist
Ramiz Rafi Mirza, a.k.a. Ramy, his best friend, fellow student, and roommate; a young Muslim man from India
Victoire Desgraves, his friend and fellow student; a young Black woman from Haiti who lived in France before coming to Oxford
Letitia Price, a.k.a. Letty, his friend and fellow student; a young White woman from Brighton
Griffin Harley, his half brother; a leader of the Hermes Society

The year is 1828, and a deadly cholera plague has swept across Asia, arriving in Canton, China, with an unstoppable fury. There, an eleven-year-old Chinese boy named Robin has become orphaned after losing his entire family to the disease. Enter Professor Richard Lovell, an enigmatic Oxford University sinologist who has traveled from London and made his way through Canton's back alleys to rescue and, it is soon revealed, to recruit him. Before the plague, Robin had learned to speak "remarkably good" English from an Englishwoman who was mysteriously retained by his family though they were not well off, and, thanks to his years roaming around

Canton's docks, he has been predisposed to a plethora of other foreign languages. Thus, he is a perfect candidate for Oxford's Royal Institute of Translation, colloquially known as Babel, where Professor Lovell is a leading authority. The professor takes Robin in as his ward, and within days, Robin sails off to London to begin a comfortable new life at the professor's estate.

Enjoying the privileges of that life, however, comes under one condition: in return for free room and board, Robin must undergo a rigorous regime of language study, one of Professor Lovell's design, in preparation for eventual entry into Babel—which is fittingly housed in an imposing tower—as a student and scholar. Robin becomes a diligent pupil and adopts a new Anglicized identity, taking the surname Swift after the Anglo-Irish satirist Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726); later, he learns that Professor Lovell is his biological father and that his reasons for being in China run a lot deeper than they initially appear to be. This all ultimately establishes the premise of author Rebecca F. Kuang's erudite and expansive fourth novel, *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022), which, as is apparent in her first chapter's opening epigraph, is concerned less about academia for academia's sake than it is about how languages fuel empires in their quest for world domination.

Courtesy HarperCollins Publishers

R. F. Kuang

In this case, it is the British Empire, a vast imperial behemoth that derives its power from the speculative technology of silver-working. The technology produces silver bars that form the lifeblood of Britain's cities, driving all their industrial machines and mechanisms, from steam engines to clock towers to water sanitation systems. And Babel plays a central role in unlocking the bars' magical powers: student-translators there learn how to inscribe silver bars with "match-pairs," or pairs of corresponding words in different languages whose gaps in meaning create uncanny effects, with bigger gaps yielding more powerful results.

As the author of the acclaimed *Poppy War* fantasy trilogy, Kuang is well versed in the dark and mystical arts and thus wastes little time introducing the novel's magical elements. In the opening pages, for instance, when Robin is on the verge of dying from cholera, Professor Lovell cures him after placing a silver bar on his chest that pairs the Old French word *triacle*, meaning "antidote," with the English word *treacle*. Over the course of the novel, silver match-pairs are used for a variety of other, albeit progressively darker, purposes, from invincibility to self-defense to murder. For Kuang, this magical system serves as an effective device to critique British colonialism, prompting deeper questions about Western imperialism and how it is used as a tool of oppression and discrimination. "How does all the power from foreign languages just somehow

accrue to England?" Robin's half brother, Griffin Harley, asks him at one point in the novel. "This is no accident; this is a deliberate exploitation of foreign culture and foreign resources."

Babel is the engine for that exploitation, with its scholars functioning as "the blades of empire." When, after years of studying ancient Greek, Latin, and Chinese under Professor Lovell, Robin finally enrolls as a student at Babel, he is mostly unaware of this reality. Instead, Robin dives headlong into his studies, enjoying Oxford's tranquil environs and befriending a cohort of fellow outsiders. He meets his best friend and roommate Ramiz "Ramy" Rafi Mirza, a charming and loquacious Muslim student from Calcutta, India, who was groomed for Babel like Robin was; Victoire Desgraves, a bold but guarded Haitian student from Paris, France; and Letitia "Letty" Price, a strong-willed and outspoken English student from upper-class Brighton whose father is a politically connected admiral. Together, over the course of the novel's five books, the four friends form a familial bond as they progress through their studies and become indoctrinated in the intricacies of silver-working. They wax enthusiastic over the nuances of language and etymologies of words, agonize over looming exams, scrutinize professors and their teaching styles, harbor crushes and jealousies, attend lavish balls, and debate gastronomic delights.

What emerges is a story of friendship, one grounded in an unbridled love of learning and knowledge. Kuang, a Marshall Scholar who earned graduate degrees in Chinese studies at both Oxford and Cambridge, effectively draws on her experiences as a student on both campuses to create realistic depictions of academia and campus life. Her scholarship, too, is impressively on display throughout the novel, which features numerous academic footnotes, historical references, etymological and idiomatic phrases in more than a dozen languages, and quotes from a who's who of literary luminaries, among them Herodotus, John Milton, and William Wordsworth.

Kuang additionally offers relevant commentaries on race, gender, and class, which are once again informed by her own first-hand experiences as a Chinese American woman in academia. At various times throughout the novel, Robin and his friends face uncomfortable episodes of racism and discrimination, which force them to question and reconsider the very system they serve, which is "the business of colonialism." Things get particularly complicated once Robin, not long after commencing his studies at Oxford, is unwittingly recruited into the Hermes Society, a cloak-and-dagger organization dedicated to sabotaging the work performed at Babel. The organization is led, in part, by Griffin, a third-year Babel dropout who, as he does with other operatives, tasks Robin with pilfering silver, manuscripts, and engraving materials, which are then funneled out of England to counteract British imperial expansion. Though Robin's relationship with Griffin becomes a highly contentious one, it is through Griffin that Robin becomes privy to the true purpose of silver-working, whose scope of influence is much broader and destructive than he previously imagined.

Robin hides his Hermes work from Ramy, Victoire, and Letty until certain circumstances inevitably prevent him from doing so. As readers eventually learn, some of his friends, too, may or may not be working behind the scenes. Torn between serving Babel, which has afforded them a life of unparalleled educational opportunities and

privilege, and the impoverished British colonies most of them were carried away from, Robin and his cohorts are forced to confront a series of moral and ethical dilemmas that test the bounds of their friendship. Tense scenes involving these characters give Kuang's novel emotional weight.

Later chapters center around Babel's direct involvement in the first real-life Opium War, which was fought between China and Britain between 1839 and 1842. The war was, unsurprisingly, sparked by Britain's uncompromising thirst for silver, a thirst that inevitably drives the novel toward its violent and bloody conclusion in 1840. Murders, betrayals, chaos, and magic abound in these entertaining final chapters in a steady stream of page-turning action.

Babel was a number-one New York Times Best Seller upon its release in 2022. Many critics were entertained by *Babel*, particularly by the breadth of scholarship and research Kuang seamlessly wove into it, which "feels akin to alchemy," as Lacy Baugher Milas wrote in a representative review for *Paste* magazine. Commenting on Kuang's "beautiful . . . obviously academic" prose, Milas called *Babel* "absolutely the most ambitious fantasy novel you'll read this year," one "with plenty of flaws," but whose "obvious depth of research, lovely prose, fascinating linguistic-based magical system, and utter dedication to giving voice to sorts of topic we rarely see tackled at this level of depth in this genre make it a book that's worth your time." Much of the negative criticism aimed at the novel centered around Kuang's decision to include lengthy and unsubtle explanations about the perils of imperialism and academic life, which Milas, echoing the sentiment of several of her peers, described as "didactic and lecture-y, rather than fully transformative."

As evidenced by her opening author's note, Kuang herself anticipated potential pushback, acknowledging that "writing an Oxford novel" will unavoidably draw scrutiny from "anyone who has spent time at Oxford." While some readers may be turned off at times by what can be perceived as a didactic tone, others will undoubtedly appreciate Kuang's zeal for language and knowledge, which permeates virtually every page of *Babel*. Thus, flaws aside, the novel ultimately succeeds on many genre-crossing levels: as a counterpoint to the traditional campus novel, as a parody of the nineteenth-century bildungsroman, and, most importantly, as an inventive and culturally relevant take on the historical fantasy genre. As Natasha Pulley put it in her *Guardian* review of *Babel*, "It is a fantastically made work, moving and enraging by turns, with an ending to blow down walls."

Author Biography

A Marshall Scholar and translator, R. F. Kuang is the author of the award-winning *Poppy War* fantasy trilogy, which includes the novel *The Poppy War* (2018) and its sequels *The Dragon Republic* (2019) and *The Burning God* (2020). *Babel* is her first stand-alone novel.

Chris Cullen

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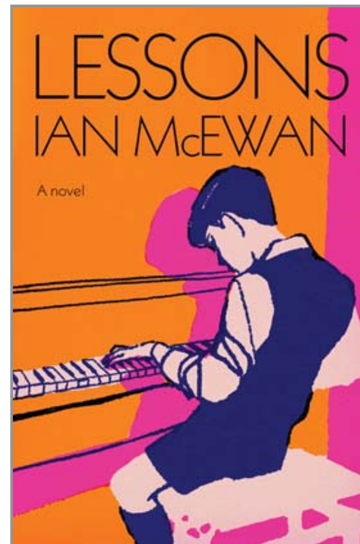
Lessons



Courtesy Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group

Author: Ian McEwan (b. 1948)
Publisher: Alfred A. Knopf (New York). 448 pp.
Type of work: Novel
Time: 1950s–present
Locales: Libya, England, Germany

The novel Lessons *follows one man's life over the course of more than sixty years of history, tackling existential questions of time, relationships, trauma, and meaning*.

Principal characters

Roland Baines, the protagonist, a British man seen from youth through old age
Miriam Cornell, his boyhood piano teacher, who emotionally and psychologically abuses him
Alissa Eberhardt, his wife, who abandons him and their son
Lawrence, his son
Daphne, a friend of his
Peter, Daphne's ex-partner

Lessons (2022) is one of the prolific novelist Ian McEwan's most ambitious and accomplished books. Written during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, this meditative novel finds the author taking stock of his own life and of the times through which his generation has lived. Longer than any of his previous novels, it is also perhaps his most personal one. McEwan mines his own life history for this project, giving his protagonist, Roland Baines, many of his own experiences. Yet Roland struggles to find the success and sense of purpose that his author has. Rather, his life is warped by two women who betray his trust: Miriam Cornell, an emotionally and psychologically abusive piano teacher who initiates a sexual relationship with the teenaged Roland, and Alissa Eberhardt, the wife who abandons him and their child for a life as a writer. By following Roland from his boyhood in the 1950s all the way to the present day, *Lessons* explores how a life is shaped both by chance encounters and by the inescapable pressures of history.

The novel opens by poignantly fusing two seminal periods of its protagonist's life. In the present, Roland Baines's wife, Alissa, has walked out on him and their infant son. Unable to sleep at night and feeling a deep sense of betrayal, Roland finds himself remembering another traumatic event: his boyhood relationship with Miriam Cornell, the piano teacher at his boarding school who groomed him and ushered him, at fourteen, into a torrid and damaging sexual relationship. These two events are linked in

Courtesy Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group

Ian McEwan

Roland's mind and in the reader's understanding of his character and personal history.

There is an inherent risk in alternating between two timeframes, in that a reader may find themself enjoying either the backstory or the foreground story more. But McEwan ensures that each half of this narrative is equally gripping. Alissa's disappearance makes Roland a suspect in the eyes of the police, and a detective begins stopping by Roland's house to alternately chat with or interrogate him. As he has in many of his other novels, McEwan deftly employs some of the tropes of the cat-and-mouse detective story, and readers themselves may begin to wonder whether Roland is as innocent as he seems to be.

The backstory, meanwhile, unfolds in an equally compelling way. Roland was shipped at age eleven from Libya, where his father was stationed and where he spent several of his early years, to a boarding school in the English countryside. These sorts of institutions are often portrayed in literature and in memoirs as exceedingly cruel places, but Roland's school is a fairly enlightened one, and the teachers and boys are generally kind and supportive. However, Roland's betrayal ultimately comes at the hands of the woman teaching piano at the school who had been assigned to give the boy lessons. Miriam begins abusing Roland when he is eleven, pinching him hard enough to leave welts and speaking to him in a domineering way that he finds at once frightening and sexually titillating. She orders him to come to her house on a particular weekend, but fearing what will happen there, Roland refuses and breaks off his lessons. Three years later, at fourteen, he finally makes this visit. As with many of the pivotal events in Roland's life, his personal history is intimately tied to the history of the twentieth century. In this case, he is prompted to seek out his teacher—and the promise of a sexual liaison—out of the fear that the Cuban Missile Crisis has engendered in Roland and his classmates. The world does not, in fact, end during the tense stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union, but in many senses, Roland's old life does. He begins spending his free time at Miriam's cottage, where they have sex and where Miriam uses her power, as his teacher and as an adult, to direct Roland's life. The thought of Miriam and of the sex act comes to dominate his thinking, so that he cannot concentrate on his studies and can no longer truly connect with his peers. When the relationship eventually explodes, Roland walks away from school, from the prospect of attending a university, and from a potential career as a concert pianist.

Again and again, Roland's life is shaped by both chance encounters—such as signing up for a German class that happens to be taught by the woman who will become his wife—and by the foundations of world history. He is, as Ron Charles put it in a review for the *Washington Post*, "a kind of Zelig character," a passive witness to crucial

moments in history. For example, as an adult, Roland has a lifelong connection to Germany. His wife is German, and even after her disappearance Roland stays close to his in-laws. He makes regular visits to East Germany, where the terrors of the Stasi secret police and the cruelty of the communist surveillance state challenge his Labour Party orthodoxies and ultimately prompt him to break with many of his socialist friends. Roland is in Berlin in 1989 when the Berlin Wall comes down, and his experiences there are a brilliant set-piece and one of the highlights of the book. As is typical of Roland's life, it is on this very night that there is further proof that the personal and the historical are, for him, inescapably bound together.

McEwan captures not just the events of the past several decades, but, perhaps more impressively, the emotional timbre and outlook of the times. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the general sweep of the 1990s seemed to herald a new century of enlightenment, in which reason, empathy, democratization, and the free market would solve the problems of the world. Roland and his friends shared in this optimism, as did perhaps most readers who lived through that time. To capture the zeitgeist of a particular era is a great accomplishment, and one of the pleasures of this novel.

In retrospect, though, Roland realizes that his generation had "lolled on history's aproned lap, nestled in a little fold of time, eating all the cream" and that he himself had "had the historical luck and all the chances." His boyhood and youth took place in a comparatively halcyon place and time, particularly when compared to the austerity and jingoism of the 1980s-era Thatcher administration or to the oppression that Roland sees on his visits to East Germany. One's personal choices and life experiences certainly count for something, but they may ultimately be less determinative than the time in which one lives. As the novel progresses, McEwan follows his protagonist through the next several decades of history. The buoyant optimism of the 1990s gives way to 9/11, the Iraq War, democratic backsliding, rising authoritarianism, climate catastrophe, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a lesser writer's hands, this march through world history could begin to feel overly determined and episodic. Yet, McEwan masterfully fuses landmark global events with the progress of Roland's life, such that the passage of the decades never takes on the didacticism that the novel's title might imply. Roland learns lessons, certainly, from his life and times, but they are always compelling and fascinating ones. Ironically, even as the times around him become darker, Roland's life takes on a brighter hue. As he ages, he finds himself surrounded by friends, children, and other beloved individuals. He seems gradually to accept the lineaments of his actual life. With age, it seems, comes wisdom, and Roland resolves himself to the inherent paradox that all one has is a product not just of choice, but of chance.

Critics have lauded *Lessons* as one of McEwan's most successful novels, on the level of earlier acclaimed works like the Booker Prize–winning *Amsterdam* (1998), *Atonement* (2001), and *Saturday* (2005). In his *Washington Post* review, Charles noted that McEwan's last few novels had been "minor, fantastical stories," and hailed *Lessons* as a return to form and as "a profound demonstration of his remarkable skill." For Charles, McEwan's decision to write at length allowed "all the space he needs to record the mysterious interplay of will and chance, time and memory." Charles

concluded his review by arguing that *Lessons* "demonstrates the peculiar power of the novel form." Writing for NPR, Heller McAlpin has similar praise, suggesting that the novel "ranks among McEwan's best work, including *Atonement*." In a review for the *Guardian*, Beejay Silcox described the book as "old-fashioned, digressive, and indulgently long" but also "deeply generous." Reading it as an indictment of McEwan's baby boom generation and of the choices this pivotal cohort made or failed to make, Silcox concluded, "*Lessons* is the book it hopes to be: a hymn to the 'commonplace and the wondrous,' a tale of humane grace." Meanwhile, in a piece for the *New York Times*, Molly Young noted that McEwan tends to "slice time into 'before' and 'after' segments by building his plots around a decisive event." In *Lessons*, Young argued, McEwan manages to fuse these before and after segments into a unified narrative. She saw in this a refreshing new development, writing, "One way to read *Lessons* is as a self-repudiation of the maneuver at which McEwan has become virtuosic. More authors should repudiate their virtuosity. The results are exciting."

Lessons is a brilliant meditation on the ways in which chance encounters and the weight of history can define one's life. It would be hard to find a reader whose plans were not disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and who did not find themself thinking over those years about the intersection between world events and one's personal life. *Lessons* speaks directly to this issue, offering readers a generous and profound vision of how to see the world around them and their own place in history.

Author Biography

Ian McEwan has written numerous books, including the novels *Amsterdam* (1998), which won the Booker Prize; *Atonement* (2001), which was adapted into a prominent film; *The Children Act* (2014), also adapted into a film; and *Machines Like Me* (2019).

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