

Some excerpts from 'better' critics re *Children Act*

1)

5 The Children Act, McEwan's 13th novel, presents us with some of the usual trappings that have come to characterise his recent work: the well-educated and well-off protagonist whose equilibrium is suddenly upset by a powerful external force; and a single moment of apparently innocuous, but ultimately momentous, misunderstanding. (Observer, Lucy Scholes. 2015)

10 McEwan's own atheism rings loud and clear from the very beginning...L:S:

Interestingly, these mini-tales are by far the most compelling elements of the novel. ... - but there's something about the studied solemnity of McEwan's tone that held me captivated. L.S.

15 <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/26/the-children-act-ian-mcewan-review-compelling-rational-religious-belief>

2)

20 ... Other forms of authority, in the real world, seem so much more dignified and consequential than writing fiction. The great institutionalised authorities fascinate Ian McEwan: in Saturday his protagonist belongs to the upper echelons of the medical profession, in Solar he is a research scientist, in Sweet Tooth she is an agent for MI5, and in his new novel The Children Act Fiona Maye is a high court judge. There ought to be a book about politics sooner or later - or perhaps finance. Tessa Hadley (Guardian 2015)

25 (insiders sometimes can't see the wood for the trees.) McEwan's bold ambition is to describe the wood: to have his novels address what novels often shy away from - the intricate workings of institutionalised power. T H

30 The novel form is notoriously better suited to conveying the subjective flow of experience, less good at ideas or abstract argument. McEwan overrides that predisposition almost heroically. ...This determination, to import inside the story some of the heft of complicated facts and sustained argument, ought to be worth the effort.... (but) ...the digressions make the flow of life in The Children Act feel oddly halting, and, although the plotting is intricate, there's nothing in the writing of Fiona's private life that is as interesting as the legal arguments. T H

... The separation which has always seemed straightforward, between her private self and her public function as an instrument of impartial law, begins to break down...
40 This ought to be rich subject matter. The problem is the novel's prose seems not so much to imitate the flow of Fiona's experience, as to offer a fairly pedestrian summary. ... At least this time there's no magical whisking away of the narrative rug from under our feet at the last moment, as in Atonement or Sweet Tooth. In fact, the closing paragraphs of the novel are tender and serious. And the climax is more palatable than in Saturday,
45 ... The power of poetry and music are invoked again in The Children Act, but in this novel they work with more subtlety. Rather than boosting the lawyer's confidence in her authority, they seem to shadow and erode it as the story unfolds.

Tessa Hadley (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/11/the-children-act-ian-mcewan-review-novel>)

50

55

3)

As one begins an Ian McEwan novel - this is his 13th - one feels an immediate pleasure in returning to prose of uncommon clarity, unshowiness and control. I was going to add that it's marvellous to feel you are in a safe pair of hands - only safe is something McEwan has never been. This is the best novel he has written since *On Chesil Beach* (2007), . Kate Kellaway Observer, 2014

The *Children Act* opens with what resemble comprehensive stage directions - Bernard Shaw would have approved. ...That "probably a fake" is typical McEwan. He leads us in one direction, then points us in another. And what one especially prizes is this ability to turn on his heel, change everything within a sentence or a well-placed word. From the start of this masterly novel, there is a larger sense, as Fiona lies on her chaise longue, that an elegantly established equilibrium is about to be rocked - his other work, if nothing else, makes one sure of it. K K

70

(Says McEwan has studied a lot of law etc.)

But this is not journalism, and the novel raises questions about how imagination and research coexist. In its most moving chapter, McEwan throws away all his legal notes as Fiona, in an independent move, heads off to visit Adam in a hospital wittily likened to "a modern airport. With altered destinations." The scene is marvellous precisely because it borders on the unbelievable, rises confidently above the ordinary, confounds expectation. When Adam plays his beginner's violin and Fiona sings by his hospital bed, the feeling is of freedom. The warmth of the scene arises partly, one supposes, out of the coldness of Fiona's domestic affairs. And the sad song speaks to everyone. It's a scene that is a triumph of imagination over research. K K

The portrait of Fiona's marriage is also hugely enjoyable. K K

Yet, as McEwan keeps showing, kindness is complicated. He keeps us tensely guessing - everything hingeing on Fiona's decision about the boy. And it will not spoil the plot to say that this is a novel which, above all, considers what it might mean to be saved - and not in the queasy sense in which Jehovah's witnesses have claimed the word. K K

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/07/the-children-act-review-ian-mcewan-masterly>

95

100

105

4)

110

When Anne Darwin died.... (He felt there was no God.) On the whole, the secular mind seems far superior in making reasonable judgments.” In McEwan’s early novels, intelligent characters had often “slithered” along the “axis of belief and unbelief,” just as he had. Not anymore. Atheism and the secular state are under attack, and he must defend them.

115 DEBORAH FRIEDELLEPT. 12, 2014 NYT

120

“The Children Act” tells the story of a British High Court judge whose docket is overwhelmed by the woes of families and the faithful: “divorcing Jewish parents, unequally Orthodox, disputing their daughters’ education”; Catholic parents who refuse to separate their conjoined twins, even if it means that they’ll die, “in order not to interfere with God’s purpose.” The novel’s first sentences – “London. Trinity term one week old. Implacable June weather” – are supposed to make us think of “Bleak House,” but Fiona Maye is nothing like Dickens’s judges, who fall asleep on the bench and are more concerned with the quality of Inner Temple mutton than with justice. Indeed, Justice Maye is nearly indefectible: wise, learned, conscientious, compassionate. Her life’s work is bringing “reasonableness to hopeless situations.” Who wouldn’t want to vest the power of the state in her, even if she doesn’t believe in God? D F

125

130

Although Adam’s faith drives the plot, it goes oddly unexplored. ... This is peculiar, because McEwan is usually one of the most inquisitive of novelists. D F

135

For previous books about neurosurgeons or physicists or posh girls during World War II, he so intensely studied his characters’ worlds that he was able to write about them seemingly from the inside. Yet Adam’s beliefs never seem particular, as though he could be representing any stubborn believer. This vagueness makes the novel seem more allegorical than real, a kind of fable about Faith versus Science and the State. I wonder if McEwan’s Jehovah’s Witnesses remain vague because they are really standing in for something else, which he felt unable to write about directly.

140

McEwan partly grew up on a military base in Libya, and has spoken about his long interest in Islam.

145

A newcomer to McEwan will find little here to indicate why his reputation as a storyteller is so tremendous. There is no dazzling opening scene, In “The Children Act,” Fiona, meeting Adam in the hospital, sings to him lines from Yeats’s “Down by the Salley Gardens.” In its last couplet – “She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs; / But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears” – he recognizes himself. Art, life, love: All seem open to him, and as if for the first time, he senses that the world outside his sect might have something going for it after all. The only complication is that Adam confuses his passion for the poem with passion for the 59-year-old woman who introduced him to it; maudlin complications ensue. McEwan may disdain belief in the supernatural, but the powers he claims on behalf of literature must also be taken on faith.

150

155

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/books/review/the-children-act-by-ian-mcewan.html?_r=0