

5

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Cold War Fictions

The publication of *Sweet Tooth* in 2012 confirmed McEwan's interest in the Cold War themes of global politics and the individual experience, extending them into the 1970s politics of the cultural sphere and forward into the second decade of the new millennium. Its story of woman MI5 agent Serena Frome, assigned to the secret literary project of supporting a writer, Tom Haley, who is not entirely unlike the early McEwan himself, allowed him to perform a self-conscious fictional return to the world of the short stories that had brought his first success, and also to his television play *The Imitation Game* of 1980, in which secret political history and espionage came centre stage and which also had a female protagonist, Cathy Raine. *Sweet Tooth* further invited a re-evaluation of *The Innocent* (1990) and *Black Dogs* (1992), the two novels which were produced at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 when the Cold War era ended, or at least took on a different shape. In doing so, *Sweet Tooth* not only reframed the earlier McEwan as a writer of the Cold War decades from the birth of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (1949) to the Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), but also highlighted his use of certain typical features of that political era as metaphors for an ongoing exploration of human and sexual relations, the nature of fictional representation and the relationship between the writer and the reader in the new century.

To contextualize these concerns in McEwan's career, it is helpful to reconsider the introductions which he wrote to *The Imitation Game* volume (1981) and *A Move Abroad* (1989). The former began with his thoughts about the differences between writing for fiction and for television, and provided a number of insights about several topics: the typical procedure of the short stories (for instance, as 'chasing one or two ideas to logical, or even illogical, conclusions', *IG*, p. 9); the mathematical ideas in 'Solid Geometry' as well as the sexual censorship that frustrated the television adaptation of it; the backgrounds to *The Imitation Game* in the story of Alan Turing and the cracking of the Enigma code in wartime Bletchley that

inform the play; and his interview with Sussex tutor Peter Calvocoressi, who had previously worked for Air Ministry Intelligence (*IG*, pp. 16–17). For McEwan, this was ‘doing something completely different’ (*IG*, p. 9), something different for him and, it might be added, for Cold War spy writing too.

The Turing Bletchley story has since become more widely treated as the subject of the 2001 thriller *Enigma* and the 2014 film about Turing’s life which was also called *The Imitation Game*, though it was not based on McEwan’s work so much as on the biography of Turing by Andrew Hodges, which appeared in 1983 and focused especially on Turing’s prosecution for homosexuality in 1952. In McEwan’s ‘Play for Today’, as he explained, what was especially of interest to him was having Cathy Raine, a woman war worker, at the centre of the action where war secrets, the gender politics of the workplace and a failed sexual relationship might clash: ‘at the centre would be a sexual relationship; its misunderstandings would be the consequence of the absurdity of the structure’ (*IG*, pp. 17–18). The ‘structure’ he refers to here is one of wartime security and espionage, but also the structure of gender relations that might help to fuel war, a perspective that anticipates the ultra-feminist credo of *Or Shall We Die?* (*MA*, p. 23).

In the introduction to *A Move Abroad* (1989), containing the libretto for *Or Shall We Die?* and *The Ploughman’s Lunch*, McEwan further recalls the period when, between novel projects in 1980–1, it seemed to him that a ‘new cold war had begun’ at the start of the Reagan presidency, and the ‘two contestants were full of swagger’ (*MA*, pp. xviii, xix). The argument for a radically feminized consciousness to overcome militarist swagger is somewhat reminiscent of the pacifist ‘female’ consciousness advocated by D. H. Lawrence in a well-known letter to Gordon Campbell written on the eve of the First World War,¹ though with the distinctive turn that it is a ‘new physics’ that is said to be required to reform dangerously binary oppositions here. Gender-inflected interest in physics feeds into McEwan’s meta-modernist novel *The Child in Time*, appearing in 1987, whose protagonist Thelma Darke is a physicist, much as Serena Frome in *Sweet Tooth* has trained as a mathematician. Cold War history comes to inform the two novels of the fall of the Berlin wall, *The Innocent* (1990) and *Black Dogs* (1992), the first of which captures the anxiety and intrigue of the early Cold War period and the second of which attempts to dig more deeply into the historical nightmares of the European past whilst recording some of the potentially optimistic transitions of the later moment. Both, as Dominic Head explains, address and unravel binary forms of thought.²

The situation of war and conflict enables McEwan to use his distinctive gift for relentlessly realistic, while also darkly gothic depictions of the violent and grotesque. It also permits him to develop his interest in the intensely

private individual consciousness and his micro-mapping of the emotional tensions in sexual relationships, while at the same time developing an increasingly public and engaged kind of fiction. The particular pressure put on individuals by the profound ethical and intellectual ambiguities of Cold War situations informs his backward glance and resonates deeply with the intellectual anxieties of the rapidly changing and unstable present at the turn of the new century.

It might be said of the Cold War that among its powerful effects was the prevention or at least delay of a proper mourning of the Second World War, especially problematic for the generation born after it, but without direct memories of it, and with new perspectives of their own. For that reason, the adventure of reading Ian McEwan's fiction through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was in part an adventure of discovering the repressed memories of that wartime through changing Cold War circumstances. The fictions rewrote a political history as a generational coming of age for the baby boomer generation, whose historical significance was not, for once, marked by its military encounters so much as by its near utopian sense of the suspension of another total war, albeit under the shadow of the darker apocalyptic nuclear threat. For McEwan, as for his contemporary Martin Amis in the collection of stories *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), the 'thinkability' of the nuclear threat that so darkened the balance of power needed to be readdressed.³ Intriguingly this coming of age is negotiated through stories of sex and gender that explore the Cold War experience in more depth than its more familiar genre manifestations could allow.

The Innocent (1990)

The Innocent tells the story of the naïve post office engineer Leonard Marnham, in his twenties, drawn into the intertwined secret worlds of espionage, adultery and murder in 1955 Berlin, where the immediate legacy of the Second World War, the special relationships of the recently formed NATO, and the new threats of the Cold War are keenly felt. Leonard falls for an older German woman at a night club and is led into murdering her husband and disposing of his body in the secret spy tunnels built under the Russian sector of the city to monitor communications to Moscow, just before their secrecy was betrayed by the notorious double-agent George Blake. The mixture of real history and spy fiction is key to the novel's impact and McEwan meticulously details the geography and experience of Berlin, hidden from many throughout the Cold War period, though familiar from a wide range of cultural representations in Graham Greene-style thriller

noir, Christopher Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin* and the musical and film which followed it.⁴

In a strategy that has become familiar in his novels, McEwan provides a brief but fascinating 'Author's note' re-grounding the fiction in the historical facts of the CIA-MI6 'Operation Gold' Berlin Tunnel project, noting the involvement of George Blake (*I*, p. 247), acknowledging the help of particular individuals and significantly contextualizing early Cold War 1950s history in his personal end-of-the-Cold-War experience of a visit to the site in 1989, and citing David C. Martin's book *Wilderness of Mirrors* as a source. This eminently scholarly strategy of acknowledging sources was well-judged for a novel with a strong basis in historical fact and factional negotiation with Cold War spy thriller and gothic romance genres, even though in *Comfort of Strangers*, and later in *Atonement*, some commentators accused McEwan of plagiarism from the very works he cited.⁵

The novel invites the reader to investigate its source materials and to revel in the intertextual play they represent. The use that is made of such materials is part of the intrigue, *The Wilderness of Mirrors* being a case in point. It is at once the source of many authentic historical details of the tunnel project, whilst also providing a powerful metaphor in its title for the world of lies, secrecy and intrigue that the Cold War produced for political and for personal relationships in the novel.⁶ As Leonard catches a glimpse of himself and his bespectacled face in the mirror in his new quarters, a rich sense of his 'innocence' is developed. This sense defines his professional and emotional situation, working on the secret spying project, but is also symbolic of a wider epistemological condition according to which his knowledge of facts, of other people, and of himself might be said to be distorted by his lack of worldly self-interest and clouded by reflections of his self and his illusions which not even his later retrospective vantage point in the final chapter may fully dispel. As readers, we share Leonard's innocent perspective, which, paradoxically, renders the wealth of historically informed detail all the more believable.

David C. Martin's title, *Wilderness of Mirrors*, thus resonates with a key constituent of McEwan's distinctive aesthetic. In one of the books he may well have ingested as a student of English in the later 1960s, *The Mirror and the Lamp* by the American critic Meyer Abrams, theories of literature are separated into the 'mimetic' and 'expressive' camps indicated by these two metaphors, Abrams's underlying point being to identify the shift from mimetic to expressive theories in Romanticism.⁷ Subsequent literary theory deeply complicates such a move and arguably returns to theorizing in terms of the mimetic, though in ways which draw out the more complex inner logic

of reflection as opposed to a representation that may be drawn from the image of the mirror.

Such a move might, at any rate, help us to see the relevance to his narrative strategies of McEwan's 'move abroad' to physics in his thinking about subject-object relations. In the introduction to *Or Shall We Die?*, he referred to the 'Theory of Complementarity' of Neils Bohr and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (*MA*, pp. 13, 15), and the principle of the post-Newtonian quantum universe that 'reality is changed by the presence of the observer' and that 'the observer is a part of what he observes' (*MA*, p. 13). The presence of Thelma Darke, the female physicist who appears in *The Child in Time* (1987), provides a scientific context for the radical shifts in time and parent-child relations as well as gender perspectives which shape that novel. McEwan makes Serena Frome in *Sweet Tooth* a gifted but reluctant mathematician more enthused by the literary and cultural knowledge denied in her chosen educational pathway, yet mathematical concepts of probability (albeit poorly grasped ones) play an interesting role (*ST*, pp. 205–12).

McEwan's Tom Haley, the writer character in *Sweet Tooth*, whom Serena has to recruit as part of the Cold War strategy of covert cultural propaganda, is a highly self-reflexive character. He is the author of a number of short stories, several of which we are shown in detail during the course of the novel and many directly recall the short stories with which McEwan began his own writing career in the 1970s. Among them is the story 'Reflections of a Kept Ape' (*IBS*, pp. 19–35), which is recognizable here in the account of a story narrated by a talking ape given to 'anxious reflections' about his lover (*ST*, p. 193). McEwan revels in the mirror chamber of such self-reflexive literary trickery, drawing on it to create the experience of the unreliability of appearances in a world of espionage or in the potentially treacherous world of misunderstanding between sexual partners which he so excruciatingly explores.

Black Dogs (1992)

Black Dogs drew more directly still on the generation-defining experience of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It is a novel with a modernistic attention to its formal construction, jumping back and forward in five short sections between the Cold War bookend dates of 1946 and 1989. McEwan uses a personalized narrator, Jeremy, an independent book publisher compiling the memoirs of his parents-in-law, to simulate the historical and biographical curiosity of the reader as if we too were researching their history. From the start, it is a narrative where the presence of the observer is as prominent as that of the events narrated, sensational and powerfully symbolic as they are.

Jeremy's parents-in-law, June and Bernard Tremaine, have separated. He has been soliciting June's memories in a nursing home before she died and these accounts are corroborated or revised with information he elicits from Bernard on their shared trip to Berlin in 1989. By this technique, the reader is afforded a sense of objectivity and of the deep incommensurability there may be between two different accounts of the same events, arising from two different world views. Behind the implied division of political ideologies represented by the Berlin Wall and the Cold War, McEwan constructs a disjuncture between June's intuitive spiritual vision of symbolic evil that has informed her life and Bernard's rational scepticism. Clearly, gender is at stake as well as ideology in this, and a dynamic of gender conflicts and accords recurs throughout the novel. Jeremy sees two contrasting types of certainty emerging from their respective reactions to their wartime experience and, beyond that, a generational divide between himself and both of them. He sees them as certain in their respective beliefs, but himself as orphaned, believing in nothing, attached to no 'enduring principle' or 'fundamental idea' (*BD*, p. 18), born after the war and living a comparatively affluent, cultured and leisured life whose access to the nightmares of their history comes only through their witnessing and their certainties, which cause him to question his own. He is 'uncertain whether our civilization . . . is cursed by too much or too little belief, whether people like Bernard and June cause the trouble, or people like me' (*BD*, p. 20).

It is the gradual revelation of a horrific, previously suppressed historical atrocity that drives the evolving story across its various times and locations, and the episodic structure of five parts accentuates the alternation of perspectives between the generations and between the sexes that remains a key feature of McEwan's writing. The dramatic physical landscapes include June's nursing home in Wiltshire, 1980s Berlin, Jeremy's adolescence in Notting Hill, the sublime natural rift of the Gorge de la Vis, and the primeval Dolmen de la Prunarède and village of St Maurice de Navacelles in the Cevennes region of Southern France, where June's defining event has taken place and whose importance as actual as well as symbolic place is acknowledged by McEwan's brief endnote to this novel.

Highly significant also is the Cold War setting of one brief flashback interlude recounting Jeremy's first meeting with his wife Jenny in the Polish city of Lublin and the spontaneous birth of their relationship on a visit to the preserved structure of the Majdanek concentration camp. A feature of the ending of the Cold War division of Europe was the sudden revelation of much previously suppressed traumatic history of the Holocaust. This is vividly portrayed in the scene where the nightmare of the concentration camps, which has been concealed from the liberated Western Europe by

the fact of the Cold War, proves to be still horribly visible in the urban landscape of Lublin–Majdanek. Jeremy’s reactions are disturbing in their honest, disillusioned, first-hand, non-stereotypical account: ‘they lay side-by-side, Lublin and Majdanek, matter and anti-matter’ (*BD*, p. 109). He is, as he puts it, ‘liberated from the usual constraints of selfhood’ by the experience, and with striking results, finding a rare moment of spontaneity in which he does ‘something uncharacteristically brilliant’, kissing Jenny with whom he spends the rest of the day making love (*BD*, p. 112). Their relationship, bred out of the precariousness of post-war Europe, promises a life-affirming renewal.

In 2016 at a launch of *Nutshell* in Bristol when asked which of his novels a new reader should start with, he suggested *Black Dogs* as an enduring personal favourite. It is a novel whose prominence in the cultural memory is not (or not yet) supported by a widely known film adaptation (such as is the case with *Atonement*, the war novel that followed in 2001), but it remains important and impactful, powerfully concentrating so many of his distinctive narrative strategies, as well as psychological and political concerns.

Sweet Tooth (2012)

The Woman Intelligence Agent

The assured return to Cold War history in *Sweet Tooth* draws on these precedents, bringing the material up to date and closer to home. The novel uses the 1970s setting as a vehicle for the creation of one of McEwan’s most complex and convincing women characters to date, for the exploration of conflicts between personal and public relationships, and as an opportunity for an unprecedented level of authorial self-reflection on his own work and on the relationship between readers and writers as it persists in the unnervingly transformed twenty-first century cultural world.

The outline history of the 1970s period is neatly sketched in a series of embedded contextualizing devices that begin with Serena’s education in the ‘concerns of the day’ in leader articles from *The Times* (*ST*, p. 23), which she puts to good effect in her successful job interview with MI5 at the start of chapter 3 (*ST*, pp. 34–6), and then develops in her much better informed discussion with MI5 colleague Max Greatorex, with whom she debates the respective threats to national security in the 1970s posed by the Provisional IRA and the ‘grisly factions’ of terrorism, as against the hundred and five Soviet agents expelled as a result of the defection of Oleg Lyalin (*ST*, pp. 60–1). Historical detail provides a background of substance for McEwan’s imagined private lives: American and Russian support for Israel and Palestine in the Middle East stokes fears of a ‘new Cuban Missile Crisis’

(*ST*, pp. 161–2); Serena revives her ‘newspaper habit’ of reading the ‘why-oh-why?’ pieces on the state of the nation in the opinion pages (*ST*, pp. 189–90); and news reports of the social unrest of the winter of 1973–4 figure as the backdrop to the start of chapter 20 (*ST*, pp. 267–8).

McEwan’s endnote to *The Innocent* cited *The Wilderness of Mirrors* as a key source; the equivalent list of acknowledgements in *Sweet Tooth* (*ST*, p. 323) lists fifteen titles, a substantial reading list for the construction of the novel’s world, which includes histories of the 1970s by Dominic Sandbrook, Andy Beckett, Alwyn Turner and Francis Wheen.⁸ McEwan acknowledges several of the works that have animated the discussion of the security services in the last decades, including Peter Wright’s *Spycatcher* (1987) and histories of MI5 by Christopher Andrew and Thomas Hennessey and Claire Thomas.⁹ He also cites R. N. Carew Hunt’s *Theory and Practice of Communism*, which dates back to the early Cold War in 1951, and *Reluctant Judas*, a book by Geoffrey Robertson about the IRA informer Kenneth Lennon, found dead in mysterious circumstances in 1974, a book that provides details of the MI5 interest in the Provisionals’ terror campaign (*ST*, p. 170).¹⁰ Campaigning journalistic history such as Frances Stonor Saunders’s *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* is also acknowledged, which – along with studies by Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, Hugh Wilford and Carol Brightman on Mary McCarthy – underpin the heated controversy about the CIA funding of culture that informs the main plot.¹¹ The sensational headline vocabulary of these source texts – ‘cultural cold war’, ‘writing dangerously’, ‘reluctant Judas’ – charges the anxious atmosphere of the novel throughout, even where it deals with nuanced personal material and adopts an understated tone.

There is ample material here to spawn informed and acute studies by future literary researchers. Especially noteworthy is the explosion of espionage discourse itself, to which this list testifies, and two key texts which inform the novel and the new-century espionage world might be highlighted in this connection. The first is *Open Secret: The Autobiography of the Former Director-General of MI5* by Stella Rimington, the first woman Director General of MI5 from 1992 to 1996, whose name was publicized on her appointment, who has since taken to writing prolific spy fiction under her own name. She appears briefly in the novel as Millie Trimmingham (*ST*, p. 39), rendering McEwan’s reflection of the contemporary gender composition of the real world of the secret service as topical as was the casting of Judi Dench as M in the millennial James Bond movies from *Goldeneye* (1995) to *Skyfall* (2012).¹² McEwan’s topicality goes further here, beyond the question of gender, to speak to the circumstances of the digital information world, rapidly transformed through the apparent digital availability

of everything to everybody, in which the reputation of the free world for freedom may depend as much on the freedom of access to sensitive information for an informed public as on the concealment of such information from actual or supposed enemies.

The second key text is *Operation Mincemeat* by Ben Macintyre, the story of the successful disinformation hoax perpetrated by the British intelligence services during the Second World War to distract the Germans from the Allied invasion of Sicily, attributed by Macintyre to none other than Ian Fleming.¹³ Added together, these two texts appear to allow McEwan to register a world in which women are no longer at the margins, but at the very centre of power, a world where the work of the secret services may no longer be to be 'secret' so much as to operate within and attempt to manipulate the world of publication and media publicity wherever possible.¹⁴ It is also a world in which the comfortable assumed divide between the real world of the secret intelligence services and the worlds of fiction – whether of James Bond, Stella Rimington, or even of Ian McEwan himself – may be unnervingly subverted, transgressed or lost.

Early in *Sweet Tooth*, Serena reminisces on 'those days', the 'Cold War years of binary thinking' (*ST*, p. 9). Such clear binary opposition between the capitalist west and communist Russia in the early Cold War years, already unsettled in *The Innocent* and *Black Dogs*, is further complicated in the retrospective view on the world of the 1970s in this novel. Along with the destabilized macropolitical binary of America and Russia, the recent history of the cultural sphere is precisely one of destabilized binaries of gender, of race and ethnicity, of social class, between the arts and sciences and between elite and popular cultures. An aspect of McEwan's interest in changing East–West relations may be found in the complex character of the Polish housekeeper Maria in his libretto for the Michael Berkeley oratorio *For You* in 2008.¹⁵ To plot the history of such change in more detail, much of *Sweet Tooth* is given over to an account of the cultural, political and sentimental education of Serena Frome. The character of Tom Haley does not enter until the eleventh of twenty-two chapters and, even then, much of his early function is to continue Serena's literary education. (She is an observant reader and notes a similar strategic use of character in one of Haley's stories, *ST*, p. 105). Much of this material in the novel has a powerful nostalgic quality for any (presumably most) of McEwan's readers who have themselves enjoyed an education in the humanities during the last quarter of a century. For those who may not have done so it provides its own crash course in contemporary literary and cultural history, especially that of the novel.

As significant, then, as the official reading list provided on the acknowledgments page is the extensive reading list indicated in this densely allusive novel itself, a ‘polyreferential’ work, as Peter Childs has called it.¹⁶ Serena discovers herself through a cultural education that includes such diverse Cold War reference points as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Ian Fleming’s *Octopussy*: the transition from the latter to the former initiates her decline, as she puts it, (*ST*, p. 8). She imagines herself in the language of an Austen heroine (*ST*, pp. 42–3), and the Camden where she lives as that of the *Dombey and Son* that Tom Haley can quote by heart (*ST*, p. 175). Closer antecedents for her type of character might be found in the works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, or Iris Murdoch, whose characters she acknowledges as part versions of herself in her bedsit life (*ST*, p. 65); closer still may be those of Muriel Spark, a writer (among others) she later discusses with Haley (*ST*, p. 184). Serena’s literary education closely follows the sentimental education of her affair with her first boyfriend’s history tutor Tony Canning, then the relationship she initiates with her colleague Max Greatorex (*ST*, pp. 58–62) and then the most intense one that develops with Haley. Her sex life and literary life progress through these three degrees. We might observe that Frome, which (we are told more than once) rhymes with plume (*ST*, pp. 1, 139) – as in *nom de plume?* – also rhymes with James Joyce’s narrator of her own sentimental and self-taught literary education, Molly Bloom.

The novel is credibly about an educated intelligence community and draws characters who are marked by their intelligence, so the reader is made aware of the depth and diversity of their intellectual enthusiasms, ranging from Dante (*ST*, p. 8), how to identify edible ceps (*ST*, p. 19), the Elizabethan mathematician John Dee (*ST*, p. 21) and the Saavedra endgame position in chess (which is known for its strategic underpromotion to rook instead of queen *ST*, p. 36). McEwan includes a host of literary references to the literary journals and personalities of the day, including *Encounter* and Stephen Spender, at the centre of a CIA funding scandal in 1967, Ian Hamilton of *The New Review*, Tom Maschler and the iconic Bloomsbury Pillars of Hercules pub (*ST*, p. 258), among a variety of famous meeting places, Fitzrovia literary pubs and restaurants from the era. Avant-garde novelists such as William Kotzwinkle (*ST*, p. 193) and Alan Burns (*ST*, p. 184) are discussed. A list of just the *Bs* on the contemporary literature bookshelf, would include J. G. Ballard, A. S. Byatt and Elizabeth Bowen (*ST*, pp. 184–5), as well as Anthony Burgess (*ST*, p. 267) and McEwan’s UEA tutor Malcolm Bradbury (*ST*, p. 68). The American agents also boast impressive academic credentials. For example, Pierre, the CIA man who comes to talk on the Sweet Tooth project to the MI5 officers, is an expert

on the Spartan Hegemony and on Agesilaus the Second and the beheading of Tissaphernes (*ST*, p. 240).

Sweet Tooth travels lightly through this intimidating world of elite education where even the most contemporary of social symptoms has a Latin or a Greek name. The early McEwan imagined the Cold War as a collective madness presented as sanity (*MA*, p. 4). In this post-millennial re-evaluation, Serena notes Tony Canning's use of the term *akrasia* (acting against one's better judgement), registering a stage beyond *akrasia*, not just in a single character, but in society at large, at least according to the language of the news media in 1972: 'But there *was* no better judgement, nothing to act against. Everyone had gone mad, so everyone said' (*ST*, pp. 23–4).

The character of Serena makes for lightness in McEwan's presentation of such learning: the innocent narrator can carry a huge burden of necessary knowledge and awareness without threatening, excluding or patronizing the reader. Among her many fictional analogues, Charles Highway the comic adolescent narrator of Martin Amis's *The Rachel Papers*, who 'crams' literary knowledge in his attempt to get into Oxford, comes to mind. McEwan highlights the connection, in fact, including a scene in which Tom Haley and Amis share the same platform and Amis reads from this very novel (*ST*, p. 254). In *Sweet Tooth*, the power of innocence is one of the many paradoxical points of resemblance – and also a point of symbiotic relationship – between the worlds of the intelligence services and of cultural knowledge that the novel is able to exploit. Max Greatorex advises her when their relationship breaks up, and her friend Shirley has lost her job, and Serena suspects that she is under surveillance by someone in the service, to 'stop acting as though you know more than you do. You'll end up getting followed' (*ST*, p. 133). Mostly this is advice she hardly needs. In her first briefing for the Sweet Tooth project, she is described by Harry Tapp as being 'awfully well read and quite in with the scene' of contemporary literature, to which she modestly responds: 'I like reading in my spare time, sir' (*ST*, p. 88). Throughout, her straightforward Alice-in-Wonderland curiosity guides her into the strange worlds of the secret service, and of literary learning, where her agency as a bearer of cultural intelligence and the values of civilization can succeed at different complex levels. The innocent narrator can be a strategy in fiction as effective as the underpromotion of the pawn in the Saavedra ending in chess.

Reader–Writer Relations

It is an engaging paradox of Serena's situation, and that of Tom Haley as he begins to enter and gradually become more prominent within the narrative,

that they seem to represent the best values of civilization and intelligence when they are least attempting to do so. This deftly understated defence of Western Civilization is apparently ingested by Serena during her affair with Tony Canning, even before she knows she is being drawn into the world of Defence. ‘Thanks to Tony’, she thinks, ‘I now knew with what trouble it had been assembled, Western civilisation, imperfect as it was’ (*ST*, p. 38). Though he turns out to have been a double agent, Tony’s civilizing values remain a positive force in her education and prepare the reader for the idea which gradually emerges in *Sweet Tooth*: that in the longer term, intellectual freedom is its own best defence, the best creative writer or artist being a witting or unwitting ‘secret agent’ of freedom, whether funded by the state or not.

The first chapters of *Sweet Tooth* chart Serena’s education, but it is in chapter 7, when her mission becomes clear, that ‘the story began’ (*ST*, p. 86), as she puts it, and from this point (after she cannily negotiates a work promotion on the strength of it), the scrutiny of Haley’s work and the assessment of his suitability as an MI5 agent – or to put it another way, the construction of McEwan’s portrait of the artist as a young man – begins. Haley is a splendidly judged creation of a writer of that period, who has traces of McEwan himself, but also many features that make him a plausibly representative figure for a moment when a new generation of writers was emerging, and a renaissance of serious literary fiction in England was in the offing.

Chapter 8 comprises Serena’s study of an invented short story by Haley, a conscientious combination of plot summary, inserted quotation and a mix of personal and professional reflections on the story that construct, just as tellingly as the figure of an author, the figure of the reader of, and in, the text. The chapter is thus a clever double-parody by McEwan: on the one hand, we have a certain type of story, of marital complication amongst the English middle classes, containing elements indicative of a number of the more serious novelists of the era; and on the other hand, we have a certain kind of literary reader response, genuine and intelligent, if not always informed by the latest academic literary criticism. Had, for example, Serena been a real student of literature at degree level in the early 1970s, she might well have encountered (along with the postmodern writers her ‘sophisticated friends’ press on her, *ST*, p.77) that classic essay by Roland Barthes ‘The Death of the Author’, first published in 1967, which steers the academic critic away from authorial determinants of meaning and the figure of the author.¹⁷ Serena, by contrast, feels herself a ‘born empiricist’ (*ST*, p. 76) and

allows her experience of reading to be ‘skewed’ by being about to meet the author in person (*ST*, p. 109). The title of Haley’s story, ‘This is Love’, is a richly ironic title (noticeably unlike the sensational Cold War titles of McEwan’s acknowledged sources for the novel), and it might well gesture towards another well-known work by Barthes from 1977, *A Lover’s Discourse*.¹⁸ Barthes’s later work did not address the reader–writer relations as directly as the earlier one, but it certainly worked to efface the binary relationship between the reader and the writer at a theoretical level and so seems an appropriate point of reference for a novel in which we see the relationship of reader and writer develop from a professional relationship into a love relationship. McEwan’s version of this relationship is also suggestive in being a Cold War relationship of secret lovers and collaborators in the narrative that follows. At the end of the chapter, Serena thinks, ‘if I hadn’t wasted three years being bad at maths at Cambridge, I might have done English and learned how to read. But would I have known how to read T. H. Haley?’ (*ST*, p. 109). This is a good literary-critical as well as an autobiographical question for her, as the reader of the teasing *mise-en-abyme* or wilderness of mirrors that is *Sweet Tooth* might well be thinking, at some self-reflexive level, about ‘how to read’ and what makes or does not make a good reading of such a nuanced literary text.

As the novel continues, Serena’s self-conscious reading of Haley’s fiction, and the reader’s self-conscious reading of both, become a fascinating experience. Indeed, the reader–writer relation is something that she tries to articulate: ‘writers owed their readers a duty of care, or mercy’ she thinks at one point (*ST*, p. 105), hoping that the author will not be too hard on his main character, despite his weaknesses. Later on, she distrusts the ‘fictional trick’ embodied in the story of the kept ape, believing that there is an ‘unwritten contract’ with the reader that the invented world ‘had to be as solid and self-consistent as the actual’ (*ST*, p. 193).

The application of legalistic language to the writer–reader ‘contract’, subject to a ‘duty of care’ stems from Serena’s embroilment in government officialdom, but it also ironically foreshadows a key episode in Haley’s career: the mini-crisis that results from his departure from politically innocuous brief fictions of bourgeois life, to his first foray into a longer novel conceived as an anti-capitalist post-apocalyptic dystopia entitled *From the Somerset Levels*. Haley’s ability to convince and engage Serena as a reader is supported by the basic kind of contract she describes. At a subtler level, *Sweet Tooth* establishes a more sophisticated kind of contract with its

readers, always being on the verge of revealing the ‘open secrets’ of its own construction, of the fact that its fictional world, and perhaps even also the supposedly real worlds of politics and public life, have a necessarily fictive dimension. Max Greatorex attempts to warn Serena that the line between imagination and reality is blurred ‘a big grey space’, where you imagine things ‘and you can make them come true’ (*ST*, p. 134).

In the novel’s denouement, Serena’s deepening dilemma revolves around her inability to reveal her identity as an MI5 agent to Tom without, she fears, destroying the unwritten contract on which their love affair has been based. Her innocence consists in her fear that their love may not survive the collapse of this basic contract. Suffice it to say that, in plot terms, this innocence is challenged by the final chapter in which the dynamic of innocence and experience, the reader and the writer, the spy and the spied upon, the narrator and the narrated, and the blurred grey space between the fictional and the real, are called into question, and where there is some suggestion that a deep emotional relationship may thrive on the excitement of betrayals and deceptions as much as on contractual literalism.

That chapter is written in the form of a letter and, like so much in *Sweet Tooth*, plays on intertextual resonance both within and beyond McEwan’s earlier writing. The retrospective epilogue to *The Innocent* comes immediately to mind as a precedent for a mode of closure which offers a temporally distanced perspective on the action we have witnessed. The narrative technique of the final chapter in the novel may also be an acknowledgment of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which ends with a chapter in the form of a letter from Mellors to his absent lover Connie which gives some readers a new perspective on his character. McEwan here adds a radical twist of perspective indicating that Haley may not have been an entirely innocent party in their relationship, but was potentially using Serena for his purposes as much as she has used him for hers. Cold wars between the sexes, between ideologies, between reader and writer, literature and politics and fiction and reality have been the stuff of McEwan’s fiction from the 1970s and he returns to them in this remarkable, self-reflexive fiction of his maturity. Early in the novel the learned CIA man Pierre floats the widely resonant idea that the more interesting part of the Cold War is that it is a ‘war of ideas’ (*ST*, p. 240). He also says that the Cold War is not over (*ST*, p. 244), which has proved true in the historical context, and recurs as a disturbing thought for our political times once again, and as an intriguing one for the reader of McEwan’s fiction, speculating on how it might resurface and in what guises in his work somewhere, in another time.

NOTES

- 1 *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence Volume II*, eds. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 218.
- 2 Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 91–119.
- 3 Martin Amis, *Einstein's Monsters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987).
- 4 See Richard Brown, 'A Wilderness of Mirrors: The Mediated Berlin Backgrounds for Ian McEwan's *The Innocent*' *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* (Heidelberg), 21 (September 2010), 2, pp. 49–56.
- 5 McEwan responded to the claims that he had plagiarized from *No Time for Romance* by Lucilla Andrews in an article in *The Guardian*, 27 November 2006. His adaptation of a line by Craig Raine at the close of *A Comfort of Strangers* is recalled in a reference by Mark Lawson in his review of *Saturday* in *The Guardian* (22 January 2005) to the use of lines by Raine for the poetry of Daisy Perowne.
- 6 McEwan did not just draw on the historical details in Martin's book. For example, he also borrows an anecdote about a dog named George, the warehouse mascot, mistaken for a soldier who might be compromised. See David C. Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors* (1980; Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2003), p. 82.
- 7 M. H. Abrams *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 30–5.
- 8 These historical works are: Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were Britain 1970–1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010); Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: What Really Happened to Britain in the Seventies* (London: Faber, 2010); Alwyn W. Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the 1970s* (London: Aurum Press, 2008) and Francis Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed: The Golden Age of Paranoia* (London: Harper Collins, 2008).
- 9 Full details of these works are: Peter Wright, *Spycatcher: The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer* (Australia: Heinemann, 1987); Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (Canada: Penguin, 2009); Thomas Hennessey and Claire Thomas, *Spooks: The Unofficial History of MI5* (London: Amberley Publishing, 2010) and R. N. Carew Hunt, *The Theory and Practice of Communism: An Introduction* (1951; London: Penguin Books, 1973).
- 10 Geoff Robertson, *Reluctant Judas: Life and Death of the Special Branch Informer Kenneth Lennon* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1976).
- 11 See Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 2009); Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War: 1948–1977* (London: Sutton Publishing, 1998); Hugh Wilford, *The CIA, the British Left and the Cold War: Calling the Tune?* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Carol Brightman, *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1992).
- 12 Stella Rimington, *Open Secret: The Autobiography of the Former Director-General of MI5* (London: Hutchinson, 2001).
- 13 Ben Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).
- 14 Christopher Andrew describes Rimington's agenda as 'the demystification of the Service and the creation of a more informed public and media perception' (*Defence of the Realm*, p. 30).

- 15 Ian McEwan, *For You* (London: Vintage, 2008).
- 16 Peter Childs 'Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth*: "Put in Porphyry and Marble Do Appear"', in *Ian McEwan*, second edition, ed. Sebastian Groes (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 139–43 (p. 139).
- 17 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142–8.
- 18 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979).