

20th century fiction II



Graham Swift

The Sweet Shop Owner (1980)

Waterland (1983)

Last Orders (1996)

The Light of the Day (2003)

Waterland

characters:

Tom Crick, history teacher, narrator

Mary Crick, his wife

Dick Crick, his brother, mentally retarded

Henry Crick, their father

Freddie Parr, Tom and Dick's friend

setting: the Fens (Fenlands, in eastern England)

from *Waterland*

Tom Crick teaching history

So I began to look into history—not only the well-thumbed history of the wide world but also, indeed with particular zeal, the history of my Fenland forebears. So I began to demand of history an Explanation. Only to uncover in this dedicated search more mysteries, more fantasticalities, more wonders and grounds for astonishment than I started with; only conclude forty years later—notwithstanding a devotion to the usefulness, to the educative power of my chosen discipline—that history is a yarn. And can I deny that what I wanted all along was not some gold nugget that history would at last yield up, but History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dissPELLER of fears of the dark?

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man—let me offer you a definition—is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall—or when he's about to drown—he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.

Graham Swift on storytelling

1997 interview

[Swift] The story is the heart of the matter. However you talk about it, however you analyze it, it is this ultimately magical, marvelous, mysterious, wonderful thing. It's got to be there. That's what makes the reader read. Whatever else you're attempting, whatever else you're doing, it's the story that remains. I know it is not a very fashionable view of fiction.

[interviewer] I think we're rediscovering the value of storiness, the more we understand that experience is simply stories. We survive by telling ourselves stories, by fictionalizing our lives.

[Swift] Absolutely. Quite apart from the special domain of novels, in life generally we're constantly telling stories, constantly comforting ourselves, each other, entertaining ourselves and each other, strengthening ourselves and each other through telling narratives of one kind or another; they don't have to be sophisticated.

[interviewer] Meaning-making in a sense is story-making. Story-making conditions the way we make sense of our lives and the world.

[Swift] Yes, so that it only makes more ridiculous that question writers get asked, "So what is the meaning of your novel?"-because the meaning is the story.



Julian Barnes

Metroland (1980)

Flaubert's Parrot (1984)

*The History of the World in 10 ½
Chapters* (1989)

The Sense of an Ending (2011)

image: wikipedia.org

from *The Sense of an Ending*

Tony reads a letter he wrote forty years ago

I noticed the date at the top, and the handwriting: my own, as it used to be, all those years ago. 'Dear Adrian,' the letter began. I read it through, got to my feet, took my glass of wine, poured it rather splashily back into the bottle, and made myself a very large whisky.

How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but—mainly—to ourselves.

Dear Adrian—or rather, Dear Adrian and Veronica (hello, Bitch, and welcome to this letter),

Well you certainly deserve one another and I wish you much joy. I hope you get so involved that the mutual damage will be permanent. I hope you regret the day I introduced you. And I hope that when you break up (...) you are left with a lifetime of bitterness that will poison your subsequent relationships.

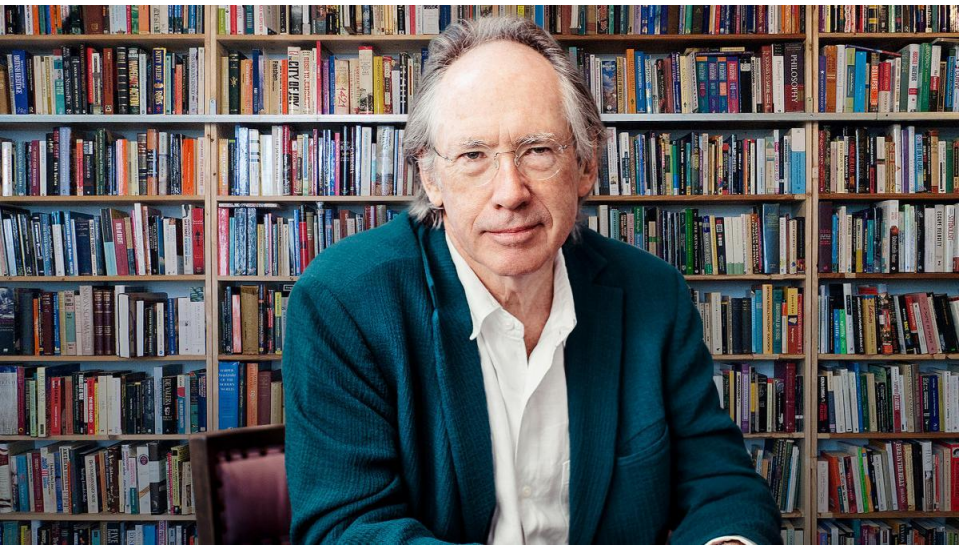
from *The Sense of an Ending*

Tony's reflections at the beginning of Part Two

Later on in life, you expect a bit of rest, don't you? You think you deserve it. I did, anyway. But then you begin to understand that the reward of merit is not life's business. (...) What you fail to do is look ahead, and then imagine yourself looking back from that future point. Learning the new emotions that time brings. Discovering, for example, that as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been. Even if you have assiduously kept records—in words, sound, pictures—you may find that you have attended to the wrong kind of record-keeping. What was the line Adrian used to quote? 'History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.'

from *The Sense of an Ending*
ending

You get towards the end of life—no, not life itself, but of something else: the end of any likelihood of change in that life. You are allowed a long moment of pause, of time enough to ask the question: what else have I done wrong? (...) There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest.



Ian McEwan (born 1948)
The Cement Garden (1978)
Amsterdam (1998)
Atonement (2001)

image: [thetimes.co.uk](https://www.thetimes.co.uk)

from *Atonement*

ending: Briony's reflections on writing and atonement

It is only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away. All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. That I never saw them in that year. That my walk across London ended at the church on Clapham Common, and that a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital, unable to confront her recently bereaved sister. That the letters the lovers wrote are in the archives of the War Museum. How could that constitute an ending?

What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. I'm too old, too frightened, too much in love with the shred of life I have remaining. I face an incoming tide of forgetting, and then oblivion. I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism. (...) The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point.

The attempt was all. I've been standing at the window, feeling waves of tiredness beat the remaining strength from my body. The floor seems to be undulating beneath my feet. I've been watching the first gray light bring into view the park and the bridges over the vanished lake. And the long narrow driveway down which they drove Robbie away, into the whiteness. I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration ... Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at the Trials of Arabella? It's not impossible. But now I must sleep.