

Emily Horton, "Reassessing the Two-Culture Debate: Popular Science in Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* and *Enduring Love*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 59:4 (2013): 683-712.

Horton's objective is to clarify the significance of scientific ideas in two of Ian McEwan's most successful novels: *The Child in Time* (1987) and *Enduring Love* (1997). No one has ever doubted that theoretical physics and evolutionary psychology are crucial to each novel respectively, but there has been sustained critical debate about the extent to which McEwan relativises, or even undermines, scientific facts and arguments with narrative sleights. Joe Rose, for instance, the narrator and protagonist of *Enduring Love*, is a science writer whose 'diagnosis' of a homosexual stalker, Jed Parry, is informed by evolutionary psychology and clinical psychiatry. His fears are ultimately vindicated by Parry's terrifying behaviour, leading critics such as David Malcolm to read *Enduring Love* as a paean to scientific rationality. On the other hand, Rose's narration is self-qualifying and, in minor respects, factually unreliable, as well as being counter-balanced by the questions and criticisms of his literary wife Clarissa. The limitations McEwan imposes on Rose's narration have led critics such as Jago Morrison and Sean Matthews to assert that the novel ultimately, as Horton puts it, "reconfirm[s] the instability of evolutionary psychology as a credible mode of personal and social analysis" (706). Given that McEwan's public pronouncements favoured the first position over the second, the emphasis on the novel's scepticism required far greater trust in the tale than the teller.

Horton's achievement in this essay is to have negotiated brilliantly between the opposing positions regarding each novel, whilst demonstrating equal facility with the texts of both Ian McEwan and his mentors in popular science. In the case of *Enduring Love*, she is inclined to split the difference between the critics who (to put it crudely) side with Clarissa or with Joe. She acknowledges, with the first group, that the novel's gestures towards narrative unreliability relativise those assertions Rose grounds in 1990s evolutionary psychology, but admits the key point of the second camp: that Joe is much *more* right about Jed than Clarissa, who doubts his very existence until he invades her home with murderous intent. Horton concludes that "McEwan leaves the ending open, positioning the narratives against each other and showing how each invokes a different (and differently problematic) form of reason" (707). Being of the party of Joe myself, I am obviously unsatisfied with this conclusion, not least because it underestimates the extent to which *admittedly* unreliable narration actually strengthens our confidence in a narrator (a fact of human nature discussed in William Flesch's superb treatment of Darwinism and literature, *Comeuppance* (2007)).

Whereas Horton's analysis of *Enduring Love* synthesises the existing criticism, her handling of *The Child in Time* is more overtly original and progressive, largely because she really understands David Bohm's eccentric philosophico-scientific ideas, McEwan's main intellectual influence in that novel. As she points out, critics have wrongly conflated speculations about quantum physics and the non-linearity of time expressed by Thelma, the novel's feminist physicist character, with postmodernist ideas about epistemological relativism and temporal fragmentation. Yet McEwan's ecofeminist ideals at the time, informed by fatherhood, anti-nuclear activism and his relationship with his first wife, Penny Allen, tended much more towards "an aspiration for wholeness of vision that complicates relativist principles"

(697). The novel therefore, on her view, supplants official notions of linear, homogenous time with the real “complexity and integration of temporal experience” (698).

I’m sure she’s right about this, although I’m not convinced that her explanation redeems the desperate implausibility (scientific or literary) of the ‘time travel’ scene in *The Child in Time*. The larger remaining question is why anyone in 2014 should care how Ian McEwan sought to mediate between the ecofeminism of the Greenham Common era and Bohm’s philosophical ruminations, which were considered far out in 1980 and have not improved in scientific standing since then. This, perhaps, is the greatest risk that novelists take when they seek to integrate scientific findings: that their novels will date much more quickly and dramatically than they otherwise might.

For this reader, McEwan is most successful in those novels that work scientific ideas in seamlessly rather than overtly. *Atonement* (2001) and *On Chesil Beach* (2007) are just as deeply informed by scientific psychology as *Saturday* or *Enduring Love*, but are less concerned to advertise the fact. Moreover, as McEwan’s relationship to contemporary science continues to change, he incorporates self-satirising elements in newer novels: Henry Perowne scoffs in *Saturday* (2005) at a time-travelling narrator like Stephen in *The Child in Time*; the anti-hero of *Solar* (2010), physicist Michael Beard, mocks writers who, like McEwan, seek to ‘fight climate change’ with art; and the ostensible narrator of *Sweet Tooth* (2012), Serena Frome, is dismayed by her novelist boyfriend’s misconstrual of a mathematical paradox she has explained to him. While each episode of self-mockery is ironised in its turn (e.g. *Sweet Tooth* turns out to be authored by the very boyfriend who previously seemed unable to get his maths right), it certainly seems that McEwan’s trajectory is very much towards scepticism. Not scepticism towards science itself, though; only towards the ability of writers to effect the constructive negotiation that Horton imagines for him. Coming from the leading exponent of fiction that embodies ‘consilience’, E.O. Wilson’s dream of unified knowledge beyond disciplinarity, that is worrying news indeed.

Greg Garrard
University of British Columbia