



In Search of the “Telling Detail”:

Ian McEwan, Briony Tallis, and the Demands of Authorship

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Abstract: Much scholarly interest surrounding Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* has focused on the abrupt shift that occurs in the novel’s final section, “London, 1999.” This essay argues that this final section makes clear that the main story of the novel is not the entanglement of Briony, Robbie, and Cecilia due to Lola’s teenaged rape but, rather, Briony’s development as a writer, her *Künstlerroman*. As such, “London, 1999” is crucial to the novel, not simply a metafictional ploy, because it illuminates the lengths to which Briony has gone in writing her final book and fulfilling her youthful promise. McEwan’s response to a real-life accusation of plagiarism reinforces his depiction of Briony as an author who searches for “the telling detail,” as opposed to one who cleaves to verifiable, historical accuracy.



For a novel published in 2003, Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* has already sparked a great deal of debate among critics on at least three fronts: its myriad intertextual references; McEwan’s storytelling and the novel’s narrative structure; and the dialogue into which it enters with modernism, especially the high modernism of Virginia Woolf. Interestingly, as scholarly attention has coalesced around the book’s final section, “London, 1999” – where McEwan reveals that Briony Tallis, one of the main characters, is in fact the book’s “author”¹ – debates regarding the significance of this move have continued to play out, even as critics disagree over what to make of the revelations contained in its pages. For example, Earl G. Ingersoll argues that Briony’s final version of *Atonement* has not completely escaped the modernist tendencies decried by Cyril Connolly in his fictional response to an earlier draft, *Two Figures by a Fountain*, because of her continued belief that “the transformative power of Art” will allow her to atone for what she did in the “real world” (254). Brian Finney, meanwhile, finds a different lesson in Briony’s revision of *Two Figures*: instead of turning Robbie and Cecilia, the novel’s

¹ Obviously, the whole of *Atonement* belongs to Ian McEwan, the book’s actual author, but, in the ontology of the novel itself – and keeping in mind Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” – McEwan presents the majority of the novel, after the fact, as having been authored by an aging Briony Tallis, looking back on the events of her youth.

other main characters, into “flash-frozen” lovers for the sake of art, he sees Briony’s revisions as her attempt to truly understand them as human beings. As such, he concludes that, even though “Robbie and Cecilia’s happiness cannot be restored to them[,] [...] the attempt to imagine the feelings of others is perhaps the one corrective that we can make in the face of continuing human suffering” (82). More recently, Richard Robinson has argued that “[t]he novel’s metafictional identity” is “designed to modify modernist claims for the autonomy, monumentalism, and transcendence of literature” (475). Based on the many revisions of *Two Figures*, “Briony, once the modernist, is now a parodied demiurge of nineteenth-century realism” (Robinson 488). What, then, should we make of Briony? Is she a stubborn modernist, an empathetic author, a godlike throwback to an earlier era, or something else entirely?

The difficulty of answering such a question demonstrates the richness of McEwan’s novel. To add to the challenge, we must be careful to distinguish between the two novels present in *Atonement*. The first 330 pages are presented as belonging to Briony Tallis, comprised of the revisions of *Two Figures by a Fountain* to which Ingersoll, Finney, and Robinson refer above. “London, 1999,” however, as well as the book in its broadest sense, belongs to McEwan. I believe that dividing the book in this way helps explain the differing impacts of the final section and points towards an answer to the question posed above: just as “London, 1999” demands that we rethink the events of Briony’s *Atonement*, it also requires a reconsideration of the demands of authorship – for both Briony’s and McEwan’s respective *Atonements*. I attend, too, finally, to the events surrounding a real-life accusation of plagiarism levelled at McEwan that underscores the novel’s concerns with historicity and fact, fiction and non-fiction, as well as illustrating Briony’s similarities to her creator.

Critics such as Finney, who points out the “uncertain” relationship of “London, 1999” to the novel that precedes it (81), and Stefanie Albers and Torsten Caeners, who refer to its “postmodern shock” (707), fail to acknowledge that this

section also serves a traditional realist function by satisfying readerly curiosity, a function that would be unnecessary if Briony’s novel ended with the final sentence on page 330. Such an ending would emphasize her remorse at having erroneously accused Robbie of her cousin’s rape and provide the closure readers expect in her determination to write “[n]ot simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement” (330). Without the addition of “BT/ London, 1999” at the bottom of the page, this “new draft” refers to the letter she intends to write to her parents and the statement she plans to make to the authorities that will absolve Robbie and, presumably, expose the true aggressor, Paul Marshall. However, the presence of Briony’s initials and the reference to the fifty-nine-year gap between the events at the end of Part Three and the book’s completion undercut any sense of finality this section provides. No reader perceptive enough to grasp the countless intertextual references to more than two centuries’ worth of English literary history would be satisfied if McEwan’s novel ended without reconciling the mystery of these missing decades. It is important to note that this is, of course, McEwan’s responsibility, not Briony’s. McEwan emphasizes the shift from Briony’s “new draft” to his own larger work by inserting a spatio-temporal reference, “London, 1999,” in place of a more consistent designation (such as “Part 4”), not to mention the shift from third- to first-person narration. Readers learn from “London, 1999” that, in the years between 1940 and 1999, Briony becomes a successful novelist, one so highly regarded that her teenaged relatives are assigned her books in school (345). This status makes it unnecessary for *her* to explain the gap between the end of her *Atonement* and the year noted beneath her initials, because her reputation will precede her for anyone who purchases “her” book. In fact, one imagines a new novel by Briony Tallis being touted in the same way that McEwan’s books are now, with widespread media coverage alerting

readers to the novel and laudatory blurbs from fellow leading authors and critics filling the back cover.²

McEwan’s readers, however, who believe themselves to be in the world of a third-person narrative set exclusively in the period between 1935 and 1940, and written by the Booker Prize-winning author of *Amsterdam*, know Briony only as McEwan’s creation, a young nurse in war-time London who hopes to someday become a writer and atone for her youthful error in condemning Robbie for Lola’s rape. While Ingersoll’s use of the term “postmodernist ploy” (250) to describe McEwan’s move at the end of the novel is overly harsh, he is more accurate in explaining how the final section alters readers’ perception of the book: “[M]uch of the novel preceding the epilogue is a ‘real’ fiction and thus most, if not all, of it has to be ‘reread’ as Briony’s text, her imaginative reconstruction of a history that must always defy ‘her’ attempts to ‘frame’ it” (251). Ending *Atonement* with the revelation of Briony’s initials on page 330 *would* be a cheap “postmodernist ploy,” but McEwan strives to earn the manoeuvre, first by uniting what Ingersoll separates into “‘real’ fiction” and “‘history.’” He recounts Briony’s vascular dementia, her family’s deaths and marriages, and Paul and Lola’s marriage and continued success, culminating in the appellation Lord and Lady Marshall. None of this carries the weight or drama of the book’s earlier chapters, but it satisfies the desire to know where the fictional characters of Parts One through Three (the “‘real’ fiction”) are as present-day people (“‘history’”). As the first three sections of *Atonement* follow the conventions of a realist novel, McEwan attempts to balance his surprise revelation with readers’ expectations for more of this style of narration. Though readers might be frustrated to learn that the Marshalls face no comeuppance for what occurred in 1935, McEwan’s first-person narration is so

² McEwan emphasized the importance of Briony’s literary reputation in a fictional biographical note, which he removed from the novel while making final revisions but shared with Adam Begley in a 2002 *Paris Review* interview. In addition to adding to *Atonement*’s intertextuality with praise for Briony’s second novel from Elizabeth Bowen and Graham Greene, the note explains that “[o]ther novels and short-story collections consolidated her reputation during the fifties. [...] Tallis’s sixth novel, *The Ducking Stool*, was a best-seller in 1965 and was made into a successful film starring Julie Christie” (qtd. in Begley 105). All of this confirms, and elaborates on, the portrait of Briony found in “London, 1999.”

thoroughly marked as a denouement that the more significant revelations of the concluding paragraphs – especially the deaths of Robbie and Cecilia during the war and, therefore, the entirely fictional nature of the encounter between the trio in Part Three – indeed deliver the “shock” described by Albers and Caeners.³ Unlike these scholars, however, I do not see these revelations as having a “destructive impact” (Albers and Caeners 713) on the earlier story. Instead, “London, 1999” makes clear that the main story of *Atonement* is not the entanglement of Briony, Robbie, and Cecilia due to Lola’s rape but Briony’s development as a writer, her *Künstlerroman*. As such, “London, 1999” is crucial to the novel, and not simply a metafictional ploy, because it illuminates the lengths to which Briony has gone in writing her final book and fulfilling the promise of her youth.

Tellingly, McEwan withholds the vital revelations of Robbie’s and Cecilia’s deaths until after the surprise performance of *The Trials of Arabella* in “London, 1999.” In considering *Arabella* all these decades later, Briony remarks, “I have not traveled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play. Or rather, I’ve made a huge digression and doubled back to my starting place. 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” (349–50). Pitiless, because they described events as they actually happened – Robbie dying during the retreat at Dunkirk and Cecilia killed in an Underground station during the Blitz – instead of the more optimistic version that allows for the lovers’ reunion and Briony’s potential atonement. Kathleen D’Angelo concurs, disparagingly, with Briony’s assessment of her doubling back: “Briony’s narrative, then, is little more than an updated version of the romantic melodrama of her youth” (100). James Phelan shares this dissatisfaction, arguing that Briony’s interest in romance comes at the expense of realism: “Had she been more

³ For Albers and Caeners, this “shock” is enough to divide the novel into two as a result of the “blatantly metanarrative” final section: “The final chapter transforms what has previously been thought to constitute the diegetic narrative into what is essentially now merely a fiction within a metafictional whole; a fictional account narrated by the fictional Briony representing her attempt at atonement” (711–12).

interested in realism here, she would have followed through on revealing the grim consequences of her transgression. Her failure to do that, in a sense, is to turn away from her quest to atone” (331–32). Significantly, the adult Briony anticipates these criticisms by explaining, “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” (351). It does not require much of a stretch to see this as McEwan’s defense against criticisms levelled at his structuring of the novel as well. From his perspective, instead of “weakness or evasion,” “London, 1999” is the only way to conclude Briony’s *Künstlerroman*.

Briony’s “stand against oblivion” is not simply for herself, in the face of dementia, which will serve as “a literal ‘death of the author’” (D’Angelo 102); she takes this stand on behalf of Cecilia and Robbie, as well: “As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love” (350). She justifies her decision not with the romantic notion of a happy ending, for which D’Angelo and Phelan criticize her, but with the belief that such an ending is the best way to ensure that the couple is remembered, even if only as fictional characters in a Briony Tallis novel. Some, such as Ingersoll, see this as misplaced faith in modernist ideals about art (254–55). But Briony explains that, although Robbie and Cecilia’s war-time letters are in the British Museum, available for all to peruse, the pair will more likely be remembered for the novelistic version of their lives, since few would go to the trouble to locate their letters among the countless war-time correspondences mouldering in the nation’s archives. As such, she can give them the ending they would have desired and, perhaps, an ending closer to the one they might have experienced without her erroneous accusation. An even greater defense for this ending comes two pages earlier, when she describes the work that has gone into “[m]y fifty-nine-year assignment,” beginning with the novella *Two Figures by a Fountain* and ending seven drafts later with *Atonement*

(349). Many great writers have laboured in this way for years – sometimes decades – often with mixed results, but “London, 1999” shows Briony’s dedication to getting this final draft right, no matter the cost.

While making a last trip to the British Museum, Briony explains that she has been in contact with Nettle, who accompanied Robbie during the Dunkirk retreat, and that “an obliging old colonel of the Buffs” has reviewed what amounts to Part Two, haughtily critiquing her word choice and relishing in pointing out the occasional typo.⁴ Though Briony herself admits to enjoying “the correction of detail that cumulatively gives such satisfaction” (339), she also acknowledges, “If I really cared so much about facts, I should have written a different kind of book” (340). Here, she makes an important distinction between the historical accuracy the colonel demands and her novelistic dedication to the story, which allows her to resurrect Robbie and Cecilia, as characters, in order to end the novel as she wants. She defends this dedication against those who advise her on how to publish the book without litigation; that is, to “displace, transmute, dissemble. Bring down the fogs of the imagination! What are novelists for? Go just so far as is necessary, set up camp inches beyond the reach, the fingertips of the law” (349). Unlike her publisher, Briony does not fear the Marshalls. Here again, she allows the story’s demands, not her publisher’s concerns, to dictate her work’s final form. While she is willing to change an unhappy ending to one in which the lovers are reunited, she will not allow Cecilia and Robbie to forgive her for her hasty accusation, and she certainly will not allow external pressures to force her to alter the plot or obscure Paul’s and Lola’s identities. In making these decisions, Briony chooses fiction over truth, in keeping with her long, celebrated career as a novelist.

These refusals get at the heart of “London, 1999” – and *Atonement* more broadly. When discussing the genesis of the book with Jonathan Noakes, McEwan

⁴ It is worth noting that, though Briony declares this version of *Atonement* the final draft, all of the colonel’s corrections have been made: “on the double” has become “at the double” (210); the RAF pilot’s beret has turned into a cap (236); and the “thousand-ton bomb” has been corrected to “thousand-pound bomb” (222).

stated, “Part of the intention of *Atonement* was to look at storytelling itself. And to examine the relationship between what is imagined and what is true” (qtd. in Noakes 19). Certainly, a writer must adhere to the law – “You may only libel yourself and the dead” (McEwan, *Atonement* 349) – but, beyond this, each writer makes her own rules, as Briony does: “I’ve regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing – the names, the places, the exact circumstances – I put it all there as a matter of historical record” (349). But, as a strictly “historical record,” or as the kind of truth to which McEwan refers above, Briony’s *Atonement* is clearly flawed: self-serving or not, at some point, presumably in Part Three, her novel diverges from reality, as she herself admits.⁵ She did not see Cecilia and Robbie in 1940, nor ever again. Why, then, the insistence on sticking to the facts, on corresponding with Nettle and double-checking her portrayal of the retreat, if she intends to play fast and loose with the existence of actual people? Perhaps because, although “there’s always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened?” (350), those few are like the old colonel of the Buffs or the Marshalls’ legal counsel; they have narrow interests – military terminology, the presence of libel – and are unlikely to see the entire work as a result. As for the whole, “[t]he answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish” (350). This is what matters to Briony. Two hundred years of British literature, six decades of a family’s life, and the Second World War are all presented as background to the story of Cecilia and Robbie. Putting aside the ethics of her choice,⁶ this decision is ultimately her version of atonement– and, perhaps more significantly, the evidence of her maturation as a writer.

⁵ Phelan makes a convincing case that the break between the “historical record” and Briony’s fiction occurs when she leaves the café on her way to Cecilia’s: “she felt the distance widen between her and another self, no less real, who was walking back toward the hospital. Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham was the imagined or ghostly persona” (311). According to Phelan, “the historical Briony returns to the hospital while her ghostly persona continues to her wish-fulfilling journey to Cecilia and Robbie” (334).

⁶ The ethical implications of Briony’s decision are worthy of greater scrutiny than is possible within the confines of this essay. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that McEwan gives no indication that Briony intends to publish her version as non-fiction; if she publishes her work as fiction, the decision to fabricate some parts of the story is certainly within her rights. For lengthier treatments of this issue, see Cormack; Letissier; O’Hara.

Briony readily admits the problem she faces: “how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?” (350). On the one hand, this invocation points to the modernist belief in the supreme power of the artist. But, in this case, Briony is the sole judge of her fate, within her version of the novel, as she controls the outcome of the plot and knows she is free to write whatever she wants – partly because she will not live to face public scrutiny when the novel is finally published and partly because she is writing fiction and has no obligation, beyond that which she imposes on herself, to the factual truth. In the end, she decides that “[i]t was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all” (351). If this were true, why not stop with one of the previous drafts? Beyond the fact that her dementia will someday make it impossible for her to continue writing, I believe she stops here because she has finally realized that a literal retelling, while in keeping with the “historical record,” is insufficient for her purposes. She tried, with *Two Figures by a Fountain*, to capture events from all three points of view in one story, but it left her with nothing but a “crystalline present moment” (294). Over the years, she moves from modernist experimentation of the Woolfian variety to a more straightforward, realist approach, presumably to no effect. What choice does she have after exhausting the narrative techniques available to her than to use her God-like powers to change the events themselves? Since no one exists to grant her atonement, she must bring Cecilia and Robbie back from the dead. Unfortunately, she realizes too late that she should have gone further: “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” (351). But, of course, it is impossible, as McEwan, and not Briony, is in control. McEwan’s *Atonement* ends not with the tragedy of the young couple’s deaths but with Briony’s realization that, even after all these years, she still has not gone far enough in her quest to atone. Finally, McEwan leaves readers to decide what is more heartbreaking: Briony’s coming up short at

this late hour or her continued belief that atonement is even possible. What is not in doubt, however, is her fictional skill as a novelist. Weaving together personal history, fictional invention, and enough literary references to keep scholars working for years, Briony succeeds as an artist even if she does not achieve atonement as a human being.

Like Briony, McEwan used a combination of personal history and fictional invention to create his *Atonement*. Unlike Briony, his personal history came second-hand, from his father, whose time at Dunkirk and in a Liverpool hospital after the retreat “dictated the [book’s] structure,” according to a 2006 article McEwan wrote for the *Guardian*. In at least one way, his challenge was the opposite of Briony’s: “It is an eerie, intrusive matter, inserting imaginary characters into actual historical events” (“Inspiration”). Where Briony challenged the “historical events” of war-time England by bringing Robbie and Cecilia back from the dead, McEwan went to painstaking lengths to produce an accurate historical setting in which to place a group of entirely “imaginary characters.” McEwan describes this effort – beginning with his father’s stories and continuing in the Imperial War Museum Library – not to demonstrate his impressive dedication but to defend himself against an ultimately unprosecuted charge of plagiarism that stemmed from similarities between Part Three of *Atonement* and the memoir *No Time for Romance* by Lucilla Andrews. The resemblance was first reported by Julia Langdon in the *Daily Mail*, who explained that “both books describe[] the atmosphere in hospital before the retreat from Dunkirk, when the medical staff sense the build-up to some military event. Ian McEwan uses many of Lucilla Andrews’ perceptions to describe the feelings of the nurses, for example, his character Briony’s first sight of the injured patients.” In addition, Langdon pointed to similarities in McEwan’s descriptions of particular tasks, and the article concludes with a “Spot the Difference” exercise featuring excerpts from both books. Andrews, who died before she could confront McEwan, simply wanted more than what Langdon refers to as a “tiny acknowledgement” at the end of the book and had no intention of

filing plagiarism charges, though her agent and portions of the popular press wish she had.

Regardless, the controversy caused enough of a furor – thanks to *Atonement*’s success, McEwan’s notoriety, and the impending Hollywood adaptation – that a number of McEwan’s most prominent colleagues came to his defense. Thomas Keneally, for one, argued that “[f]iction depends on a certain value-added quality created on top of the raw material, and that McEwan has added value beyond the original will, I believe, be richly demonstrated” (qtd. in Lyall). Similarly, Peter Carey explained that the novelist’s job is to “mix[] what we see with what we think, with that which can never be” (qtd. in Lyall). Though both written by male Australian writers, these defences sound similar to Briony’s account of the imaginative confections in her own writing: “I merged [three hospitals] in my description to concentrate all my experiences into one place. A convenient distortion, and the least of my offenses against veracity” (336). This liberty is, of course, common practice, even among memoirists, who must find a way to turn real life into coherent literature. Decades as a novelist have taught Briony that even factual, autobiographical material must be viewed as “raw material,” not whole cloth, if she hopes to make this “fifty-nine-year assignment” worthy of her effort, much as Keneally and Carey, both highly regarded for their historical fiction, have argued.

McEwan’s own defense is significant for my reading of *Atonement*, as it bears more resemblance to Briony’s creative process than the similarity to Andrews’s memoir his detractors have identified. Like his fictional author, McEwan aimed to render the war as realistically as possible: “[O]ne feels a weighty obligation to strict accuracy. In writing about wartime especially, it seems like a form of respect for the suffering of a generation wrenched from their ordinary lives to be conscripted into a nightmare”; the challenge, then, is to find “the telling detail, or the visually rich episode that projected unspoken emotion” (“Inspiration”). McEwan found such details when reading about a cavalry officer

shooting all of his horses and a priest helping soldiers with a bonfire of bibles at Dunkirk, both of which appear in *Atonement*. Moments like these heighten the emotional resonance and realism of Robbie’s experience, but they are ultimately background, rather than key, elements in his character development and the plot in general. Briony does not permit readers to see this far into her process – and one might argue that McEwan would not have either, if not for the *Daily Mail*’s accusations – but, surely, some details stood out to her in the same way, either in her memory of what happened in 1935 and 1940 or from her own research.

Like Briony, McEwan benefited from a “bundle of letters” (*Atonement* 339), though his letters highlighted the universal qualities of war-time nursing in London, including “the familiar, tyrannical ward sister” (“Inspiration”). Unlike Briony, however, who focused her research on Dunkirk, McEwan needed to learn more about nursing, as his letters ended when the evacuation began. He thus needed his own version of the “old colonel of the Buffs,” which he found in Andrews’s memoir about a time for which, as he explains in the *Guardian*, “no other factual account exists” (“Inspiration”). Just like the colonel’s comments to Briony, Andrews’s book describes actual events in careful detail, thus becoming part of “a shared reality” with McEwan’s father’s stories and the nurses’ letters. Langdon quotes McEwan as referring to Andrews’s memoir as “in essence reportage, a history,” and while this may not be an accurate description of Andrews’s book, the assessment is telling in what it expresses about McEwan’s use of it. The acknowledgements at the end of *Atonement* list only three books by title and author: Andrews’s *No Time for Romance* and two histories of the retreat at Dunkirk. The seeming parity of the three titles suggests that McEwan treated them similarly, as sources to mine for the “telling detail” that authenticates his fictional rendering of 1940 London.⁷ Langdon’s article confirms this in its “Spot the Difference” section, which highlights McEwan’s borrowing of technical terms

⁷ Fiction writers often draw on historical documents and reports more freely than they would a more creative or artistic work. Setting aside the issue of how one makes this distinction or whether such a hierarchy should exist, McEwan seems to have treated Andrews’s book as a primary source, like the letters at the Imperial Museum that he drew on to create his portrait of war-time London.

like “gentian violet on ringworm, aquaflavine emulsion,” and “lead lotion.” What difference does it make, both McEwan and Briony might ask, if “she had already dabbed gentian violet on ringworm” (McEwan, *Atonement* 260) or if “[o]ur ‘nursing’ seldom involved more than dabbing gentian violet on ringworm” (Andrews qtd. in Langdon)? How many uses for gentian violet can there be? How many synonyms? Can one writer “own” such a term? If so, should Andrews have cited her nursing textbook? Ultimately, these questions, and their answers, are inconsequential in comparison to the story, whether we think of it as Briony’s account of her “real” life or McEwan’s fictional creation of her and her perceptions. Perhaps this attitude shows the lingering vestiges of modernism, that the superiority of the artist entitles her to appropriate sources as she sees fit. If so, the impact afflicts more than only Briony Tallis and Ian McEwan, as Keneally and Carey were joined by authors as varied as Margaret Atwood, John Updike, and Thomas Pynchon in defending McEwan’s work.

I bring up the plagiarism question not to inject artificial controversy into my reading of *Atonement* but because of the novel’s concern with the line between fact and fiction. To hypothesize about what might have drawn McEwan to Andrews’s memoir, Langdon writes, “Lucilla’s writing was both stylish and powerful – largely because her subject matter was drawn from her own life, rather than research.” While this is certainly a jab at McEwan’s researched novel, I believe that it also fits prevailing attitudes about the two genres. A glance at any bestseller list makes it clear that readers currently prefer books that are considered “true.”⁸ Langdon thus falls for the trite notion that true stories are inevitably more “powerful” than fiction, but she takes this a step further by arguing that they are

⁸ The James Frey and J.T. Leroy scandals, in particular, serve as reminders of what happens when American readers feel cheated by fake authenticity. Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* was billed as a memoir, though he later admitted to taking liberties far beyond conflating three hospitals into one. The subsequent uproar led Random House to refund the cost of the book and Oprah Winfrey to castigate the author on national television. On the other end of the spectrum, JT LeRoy’s first three books were published as fiction but benefited greatly from “his” salacious past as a teenage runaway and truck stop prostitute living with AIDS. In the end, LeRoy was exposed as a persona created by female writer Laura Albert, who hired an actress to dress up as the male author for events. Once again, the books’ sales dropped once readers learned that they were not rooted in personal experience.

also more “stylish,” as though content and style are inextricably linked. Glenys Roberts, also writing in the *Daily Mail*, goes so far as to argue that McEwan could have acknowledged his debt to Andrews by “dedicat[ing] his book uniquely to Lucilla, a brave woman for whom life was not an intellectual exercise, but the harshest of challenges.” Once again, McEwan is the fusty writer who behaves like a vampire, drawing out the lifeblood of a book by an earthy, struggling writer.⁹ One can almost imagine McEwan wondering, in the wake of this controversy, if he tempted fate by having Briony worry about legal challenges to her *Atonement*.

Of course, Briony Tallis’s aim is not to create an exact record of war-time London, as McEwan sought out in Andrews’s *No Time for Romance*, but to create a monument to her “spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince” (350). The success of this monument – her final attempt at atoning for what happened in 1935 – is evident in how thoroughly shocked readers have been by the revelations of “London, 1999.” If Briony, via McEwan, had created a less evocative portrait of the Tallis home, of Robbie’s retreat at Dunkirk, and of a young nurse’s experience in London at the same time, the first 330 pages would not have the power to grip us as they do, nor would we feel such a jolt when the “truth” of these characters’ lives emerges at the end. This power, no matter its “offenses against veracity,” separates fiction from the “bleakest realism” against which Briony rebels and allows it to transcend the “raw materials” of ordinary life. Both McEwan and his fictional author face the same challenge: how to craft a compelling story out of the “historical record.” In McEwan’s case, this requires selective use of additional sources, while Briony must decide which parts of her life to borrow wholesale and which to manipulate. Importantly, this is a challenge faced by all writers, not just stubborn modernists or game-playing postmodernists, as is evident by the range of supporters who came to McEwan’s defence during the plagiarism accusation. Ultimately, Briony transcends the categories mentioned at the beginning of this article, just as her author does. All

⁹ Andrews was hardly unsuccessful in her own right. She died shortly before receiving a lifetime achievement award from the Romance Novelists’ Association, a group she helped found.

fiction writers, regardless of genre or movement, face similar challenges when writing about the past, as well as the present. No matter how much it borrows from the "historical record," *Atonement* reaffirms the novel's unrivalled ability to document how we "crawl our way toward the truth" (339).



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