



## The Children Act

*Ian McEwan*

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## **The Children Act** Ian McEwan

A fiercely intelligent, well-respected High Court judge in London faces a morally ambiguous case while her own marriage crumbles in a novel that will keep readers thoroughly enthralled until the last stunning page.

Fiona Maye is a High Court judge in London presiding over cases in family court. She is fiercely intelligent, well respected, and deeply immersed in the nuances of her particular field of law. Often the outcome of a case seems simple from the outside, the course of action to ensure a child's welfare obvious. But the law requires more rigor than mere pragmatism, and Fiona is expert in considering the sensitivities of culture and religion when handing down her verdicts.

But Fiona's professional success belies domestic strife. Her husband, Jack, asks her to consider an open marriage and, after an argument, moves out of their house. His departure leaves her adrift, wondering whether it was not love she had lost so much as a modern form of respectability; whether it was not contempt and ostracism she really fears. She decides to throw herself into her work, especially a complex case involving a seventeen-year-old boy whose parents will not permit a lifesaving blood transfusion because it conflicts with their beliefs as Jehovah's Witnesses. But Jack doesn't leave her thoughts, and the pressure to resolve the case - as well as her crumbling marriage - tests Fiona in ways that will keep readers thoroughly enthralled until the last stunning page.

## **The Children Act Details**

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## From Reader Review The Children Act for online ebook

### Elyse says

"My Lady is Captivating"!

"Adam Henry is Captivating"

This entire story is """"CAPTIVATING""""!!!

Delicate Situations!!!!!!

Written with real energy --totally 'ALIVE'....

I've been a long time fan of Ian McEwan --and this small novel (with 5 parts) --confirms the depth and breadth of Ian's talents!

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### Iris P says

The Children Act

I read this book in two days, which for a slow reader like me is quite an achievement.

There's a certain "stream of consciousness" vibe on McEwan's writing, at least on this novel, but I absolutely adore his graceful, elegant prose.

Not sure why this book is classified as a mystery/thriller, it's nothing of the sort. However, if the idea of a novel featuring a strong female family court judge in charge of handling complex ethical issues sounds intriguing, this novel might be for you.

If nothing else, you might enjoy McEwan's exquisite writing, it's also a very short read so probably a good return on your investment. I've been meaning to read The Children Act for a couple of years now, glad I finally got to it.

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### Agnieszka says

McEwan is, in my opinion, very uneven writer. I really enjoyed *The cement garden* , *Enduring love* and *Sweet tooth* ; *The child in time* moved me deeply while *Amsterdam* was rather disappointment and *The comfort of strangers* total disaster.

McEwan relishes quirk and macabre, likes to handling very disturbing and bizarre, not to say creepy behaviours and relationships in his novels. He is very efficient and his writer's skills are indubitable but there is some coldness about his writing. As if he only was doing his homework and wanted to meet someone's expectations. Sometimes he tries too much as if he wanted to say us *lo and behold, here I am, I can take any theme, any hot topic and adapt it in my book. I can write on spies and an euthanasia, on amorality and an*

*obsession, on strange relationships* and so on.

In *The Children Act* McEwan raises really weighty issues and moral dilemmas like human dignity, freedom of choice, the right to refusal of treatment, marital breakdown but it all lacks true involvement. He just glides through the problems; portraits of the main characters of the drama seem too sketchily drawn and the end feels somewhat hasty.

His protagonists enter the scene, make their speech to swiftly disappear. I would have probably more enjoyed that one if McEwan had shown more interest in deepening background, more heart and passion in delving moral quandaries. Let's take Adam. He lost everything not gaining anything in return, such situation just begs for more space and psychological nuances.

Maybe because I expected more commitment, more sharpness, more roughness it all felt a bit too smooth. But it is not a bad novel since McEwan is really a deft writer only I found his writing here too cold, almost clinical.

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### **Angela M says**

Don't let the fact that this is a pretty short novel deceive you into thinking that there is not much substance here. When I finished reading this book, I couldn't stop thinking about the enormous power that Family Court judges have over the lives of so many young children whose families are in crisis and then even if the decision seems right, what happens to these children afterwards? Fiona Maye, a High Court Judge in the Family Division of the Courts in England (and this could be anywhere) has had to make many decisions in the course of her career that impact the lives of children.

We learn of some of the thought provoking cases that she has ruled on – a custody battle over two Jewish sisters whose divorcing parents are at odds over whether or not their daughters should be brought up in the strict orthodox Jewish tradition; the case of conjoined twins and whether to save one or let them both die. I was completely fascinated with the description of the laws and then the reasoning behind her decisions. Although, I felt that her decisions were clear and reasonable, the important thing was that they really seemed to be looking out for the best interest of the children.

The case that is at the heart of this novel involves 17 year old Adam Henry who has leukemia and his Jehovah Witness parents refuse to allow him a blood transfusion that will save his life. Adam's story and Fiona's ultimate decision, the relationship that they develop, and what happens to Adam captivated my attention such that I couldn't put this book down.

Fiona herself is going through a crisis in her marriage and has some decisions to make about herself and her own life. Whether she believes it or not, the court decisions have affected her life and her marriage. I have to admit that I was not shocked at the ending, but none the less impacted by it. This is a must read for anyone who appreciates the intelligent, cohesive writing of Ian McEwan.

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### **Kalliope says**

Not long ago, while having my morning coffee and while perusing GR, I encountered Fionnuala's review of this book. It immediately drew my attention because not only am I a fan of Fionnuala's takes on books and have liked several of McEwan's books, but also because I was going to attend a trial in court within the next few hours.

Children and parents. Parents and children. Oof!. What should be only a love relationship can easily, and too often, turn into a thorny one, charged with distressing emotions. Nature can go awry indeed.

Luckily for me, I was just attending to give support to a friend. Nonetheless, the topic has been engaging my attention and I immediately ordered the book. I finished it last night and it proved to be again a very engaging book, as McEwan's books often are. I read it in a couple of days.

And in a few hours I will be at court again. The trial had to reconvene because someone had simply not shown up.

Reading the novel I particularly enjoyed having the point of view of the judge, someone who in principle stays out of the action but who has been placed at the centre of it by McEwan. It seems that the author, who is also situated outside of his plot, has been an actor in similar circumstances. He should know then.

Familiar are McEwan's ability in sustaining the intrigue, familiar is also his portrayal of obsessive minds (and *Enduring Love* comes to mind), but I also enjoyed his discussion on music.

And here I could not help bringing in some information I had about McEwan and his having been the "Literary Guest" of the Pianist **Angela Hewitt** in her Trasimeno Music Festival, a few years ago. As the main character is also a serious amateur pianist whenever I read the musical sections I could not help but think of how much of McEwan's writing would have originated from discussions with Hewitt. And my conclusion was that a fair amount, not only is one of Bach's Partitas featured (and Hewitt's rendition is the one I normally listen to), but also because at one point, the stupendous, exclusive, and rarely seen in concerts, **Fazioli** piano features in the novel.

Angela Hewitt is known for her keen support of this extraordinary instrument. She will not play but on a Fazioli.

Anyway, time to forget the music and leave for court. The emotionally stinging situations, the discussions of the entangled legal system, so intriguingly presented by McEwan, will be on my mind while I hear the judicial proceedings today.

But will return to the music - the best solace.

## Ron Charles says

Believers of a millennial bent might consider this a sign: It's not every summer that we get two dark and serious novels focused on Jehovah's Witnesses. The first was Scott Cheshire's "High as the Horses' Bridles" about a boy preacher who drifts from the faith. And now, the second coming: Ian McEwan's "The Children Act," which puts the church's beliefs on trial. Surely, members of this small Christian sect would prefer, instead, to get their own hilarious Broadway musical, but authors work in mysterious ways.

The two novels have little in common, except that in both a faithless protagonist is deeply shaken by the behavior of a devout Witness. Cheshire's debut is a roiling storm of conflicting styles and artistic energy, fueled by the author's autobiographical demons. McEwan, who's spent more time on the Booker shortlist than in church, has produced a svelte novel as crisp and spotless as a priest's collar.

"The Children Act" is too long to call a novella, but it has that focused intensity and single arc. At the dramatic center of the story is Fiona Maye, a mature and well-respected British High Court judge in the Family Division. Fiona has devoted much of her career to adjudicating bloody conflicts between once-devoted husbands and wives. Every day, she observes, "Loving promises were denied or rewritten, once easy companions became artful combatants crouching behind counsel, oblivious to the costs." In her weary astonishment at these savage ex-lovers, one can sense the expertise McEwan gained when his own divorce and custody fight spilled out into the public arena some 15 years ago. But if abusive spouses absorb the bulk of Fiona's court time, she has also ruled famously in more wrenching matters. With efficiency and elegance so alien to legal writing, McEwan draws us through her reasoning on several cases, such as one involving conjoined twins, whose devout Catholic parents refused to give permission for them to be separated, though doing so was the only way to save one of them. Fiona appreciates that these crises are always wrenching, always murky. She's suspicious of secular utilitarians who are "impatient of legal detail, blessed by an easy moral equation."

Given that curriculum vitae, when the central case of this novel arrives, we know Fiona to be a conscientious jurist wholly determined to judge righteous judgment, someone who believes she brings "reasonableness to hopeless situations."

The call comes late in the evening: A hospital requests an emergency hearing for permission to treat a young leukemia patient who refuses to accept a transfusion that could save his life. Adam Henry and his parents are Jehovah's Witnesses, who believe that the Bible expressly forbids "mixing your own blood with the blood of an animal or another human being."

McEwan re-creates the hearing in the brisk style of an ultra-efficient courtroom, the testimonies and examinations proceeding apace, drained of any artificial flourish or suspense. Instead, he designs the facts to make Adam's case as morally and legally vexed as possible: Just three months shy of his 18th birthday, Adam can already see that promised land in which his right to determine his own health care would be inviolate.

McEwan may be an atheist, but unlike his late friend Christopher Hitchens, he's a great novelist, not a great polemicist, and he knows that there can be no tension — no art — if Adam and his parents are reduced to ignorant Bible-thumpers clad in what Hitchens called the "heavy coat of ignorance and fear." Fiona reflects her creator's fair regard for these Witnesses. She finds their doctor condescending and snobby. She's sensitive to the way differences in class and education play into her approach to this case, and she knows she's weighing one of the most fundamental human rights. "Courts should be slow to intervene in the

interests of the child against the religious principles of the parents,” Fiona thinks. “Sometimes they must. But when?” Is the state so infallible and supreme that for want of 120 days, a young man should be torn from his family and his community and forced to submit to a medical procedure he abhors?

For his part, McEwan doesn’t venture much into the spiritual dimensions of this conflict. Adam’s devout parents appear only briefly; there’s little effort here to explore their beliefs. But that’s where the novel differs from its controversial premise: “The Children Act” is not primarily about religious radicalism or the conflict between faith and science; it’s about the way a woman’s well-ordered life is shaken by a confluence of youthful passion and old betrayal.

You see, the hospital’s petition involving Adam arrives on the very night Fiona’s husband of 35 years announces that he wants to have an affair. “I need it. I’m fifty-nine. This is my last shot,” he tells Fiona with calm and creepy candor. “I love you, but before I drop dead, I want one big passionate affair.”

In the precisely choreographed pages that follow, McEwan presents a ferociously intelligent and competent woman struggling to rule on a complex legal matter while feeling humiliated and betrayed by her husband. Beneath her formidable wisdom and accomplishments swirl all the old anxieties of loneliness and shame. Fiona knows that “to be the object of general pity was also a form of social death. The nineteenth century was closer than most women thought.” She’s spent decades training her mind to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant facts, to identify patches of fogginess and sentimentality in her thinking, but this crisis at home threatens to disrupt her carefully managed equilibrium. In that disrupted state, she’s moved by Adam’s irrepressible spirit, and she raises expectations that could either save or doom them both.

And who could blame her? In Adam, McEwan has created a captivating creature with the confidence and every mirth of a young man hovering at the precipice. Distilled by illness, he has only his concentrated naivete left. Even as he struggles to breathe, he’s intoxicated by the fawning attention, the promise of glory, the romantic tragedy of his wasted, blue-veined body. Fiona’s encounters with him are brief, but absolutely captivating — for us and her. Can this famously careful woman be careful enough with his fragile soul to understand the true demands of his welfare?

In the end, McEwan arrives at the same conclusion Hitchens left behind, but there’s no stridency in these pages, which glide from one quietly perfect sentence to another. “The Children Act” doesn’t enact the happy triumph of humanism. Instead, it recognizes how fragile we all are and how cautious we should be about disrupting another’s well-ordered universe. As Emily Dickinson warned, “The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind.” Given its odd subject matter, this is unlikely to be anyone’s favorite McEwan novel, but with its mix of arcane expertise, emotional intensity and especially its attention to the ever-surprising misdirections of the heart, it’s another notable volume from one of the finest writers alive.

*This review originally appeared in The Washington Post:  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>*

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### **Julie Christine says**

Perhaps it’s best I read *The Children Act* in the space of a day, curled on my sofa. Otherwise I might have been spied in my favorite cafe purring like a contented cat, stroked by the sublimity of Ian McEwan’s prose.

Words adore Ian McEwan, submitting readily to his firm but empathetic hand. They are sleek and gorgeous dancers to his choreography; alone, the words are admirable, but under his direction they assume nuance and strength. His works never fail to take my breath away. It is a comfort to know, regardless of the story I am about to witness, that I will be treated with the utmost respect by an author who assumes I revere language and composition as much as he does. It is because of writers like Ian McEwan that I have come to cherish the art of writing.

But even the most skilled and erudite writing cannot save a flawed story. Fortunately, this author takes his craft as seriously as his art.

In the vein of *Saturday*, *The Children Act* imposes an ethical dilemma on a member of the elite caste of British society and places its protagonist in crisis. In this most recent of McEwan's thirteen novels, Fiona Maye, a High Court judge in Britain's Family Division, hears a case of a young Jehovah's Witness with leukemia whose parents refuse to allow a critical medical procedure. His religion forbids blood transfusions and the hospital has appealed to the High Court to force the treatment on the dying patient. Time is running out—Fiona, or 'My Lady' as she is addressed in court, has only a few days to hear the case and render her decision before it is too late to save the young man's life.

Complicating an already impossible situation is Adam, the patient. He is nearly the age of consent—just a few months shy of his eighteenth birthday—and his objection to the transfusion is as strong as his parents'. There is legal precedent to allowing a older minor to make life or death decisions about his care, and the judge must decide if Adam is fully aware of the consequences of his choice. His death will be agonizing, or in the unlikely event he lives, his future will be a half-life spent in blindness and compromised mental capacity. Standing against her is a sheltered faith of dubious theological framework, and the right to determine one's own destiny.

The control and confidence with which Fiona Maye handles her cases belies the mess of her life at home. At the start of this slim novel, her husband Jack, a university professor, announces he would like to have an affair and hopes she'll understand his need to assert his sexuality in the waning light of his life. Fiona and Jack have been married for thirty years and although they have no children, their life is enriched with the frequent presence of nieces and nephews.

McEwan brings to the page a paradox that fascinates me: how many can be in such supreme command of their professional lives, yet find themselves mired in disaster at home. But this is where *The Children Act* stumbles and strains for me. Jack offers as defense for the necessity of his fling the fact that he and Fiona have not had sex for "seven weeks and one day," a period during which Fiona was trying an exceptionally draining and emotional case. As she ruminates about their marriage, Fiona recalls an active and passionate sex life.

As sensitive and starkly real a portrayal of new marriage as McEwan rendered in *On Chesil Beach*, I found myself disbelieving the mature marriage in *The Children Act*. I couldn't determine if the author expects us to believe a man would pursue an affair after a brief dry season and that he would want his wife to accept to an open marriage, a marriage that had heretofore known great sex. But later, as Fiona and Jack find their way back to each other, the tiny, tender moments of frail solidarity seep in and mostly redeem the incredulous bits.

The troubled marriage plays in the background. It is the case of Adam and his faith that allows us to enter Fiona's intellect and to battle with our own ethical and moral demons. Fiona's internalized anguish over her own childlessness adds poignancy to her strength on the bench of family court. She determines the fate of so

many children, yet Fate has determined that she will have none of her own.

In this era of doorstop novels—those giant, bloated affairs that become the darlings of the literati (and of me, yes, I have loved many a 500-hundred-plus-pager in recent months!)—it is a gift to read a rich, complete, thoughtful novel that combines meticulous research with exciting imagination in a mere 221 pages. *The Children Act* isn't perfect (and what a relief that it isn't, right?). But it's vital, full of emotion, and so beautifully written, it made me purr.

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## Cecily says

UPDATED August 2018 with film review at the end.

“ *She felt shrunken to a geometrical point of anxious purpose .*”

This was my eighth McEwan. I rated *On Chesil Beach* as 5\*, five others as 4\*, and *Black Dogs* as 2\*. That track record gave me high hopes for *The Children Act*, raised further by the intriguing dilemma at its heart: whether a bright and articulate Jehovah's Witness boy, very nearly 18, should be forced to have a life-saving blood transfusion, against his religious-based wishes (and those of his parents).

I was disappointed.

### **Disappointed Because...**

Part of the reason was a mismatch of expectations, which is no fault of McEwan's. Although the dilemma about Adam is important, the erratically-beating heart of the novel is the marriage of Fiona (the judge) and Jack (an academic). The tasteful opulence of their home, life, and careers is established on the first page, and the cracks in their longstanding marriage are exposed on the second. She's 59 (“in the infancy of old age”), he's a year older. They never quite got round to having children of their own, their sex life has diminished, and Jack is restless, but honest (and not entirely plausible). Nevertheless, the most incisive and poignant writing relates to Fiona and Jack's relationship.

The various court cases, including the headline one (which isn't the only one where a strict and insular religion is a child welfare issue), are echoes, analogies, and catalysts of that core dynamic. I didn't find them especially insightful, in part because much of it seemed trite, sentimental, and predictable. The dilemma, which I was expecting to be the cream of the book, was more like semi-skimmed milk. The legal points were carefully explained and finely balanced, but mostly familiar to anyone who's read about such cases in the news. These passages had more of the feel of a text book or debate, than paragraphs of a novel, despite McEwan's exploring the corresponding emotional consequences.

### **Two Realms Cross**

There is painful irony of Fiona protecting families, while failing to create her own, and of her sorting out other people's relationships, to the detriment of her own. “Where was her protective judge?”

She has devoted her adult life to the application of man-made law (and the laws of classical music). Adam has committed his life to obeying the Jehovah's Witness interpretation of God's law.

Jack doesn't defer to a similar external authority; maybe that contributes to his crisis and ultimatum?

As Fiona and Jack drift, she becomes increasingly involved in Adam's case, possibly exacerbating the situation with Jack. Or maybe the fractured marriage frees her, or even sends her, deeper into her work?

### **Better than it Sounds**

The many 4\* and 5\* reviews attest the merits of the book. Also, for all that I thought the ending was far too easy, it was preferable to the one I feared was coming around the two thirds mark.

Overall, a 2\* experience of what is more objectively at least a 3\* book. I've rounded up because I've enjoyed most of his others. And because of the music.

### **Music**

A friend observed that many of McEwan's works feature music. I hadn't really noticed that before, but here, it's impossible to miss. I like that aspect. The varying moods and situations of the characters are reflected in what music they listen to and perform. The periods where music is **not** mentioned are at least as significant.

- Music is integral to Fiona and Jack's relationship from the start: "He thought he might further seduce her with jazz... He... wanted to prise her loose from the tyranny of strict notation and long-dead genius."
- Music relieves stress: "Playing to her inner ear a piece she had learned by heart... It was her ideal self she heard, the pianist she could never become."
- Music is in the weather: "Over the drumming of raindrops on her umbrella, she heard the lilting andante, walking pace, a rare marking in Bach, a beautiful carefree air over a strolling bass, her own steps falling in with the unearthly light-hearted melody."
- Music is part of Fiona's (brief) errant youth, when she was a groupie who dated the lead singer of a band.
- Music is performance, and a step into a different persona or world: "The horizonless hyperspace of music-making, beyond time and purpose."
- Music is a means of communication: Fiona once learned a jazz piece (his taste more than hers) as a birthday gift to Jack.
- Music is a means of **avoiding** communication: "She could not bear to hear herself explain her situation and make it irreversibly real... In a spirit of defiance, she played through her Bach partita."
- Ultimately, music is a metaphor: "Her childlessness was a fugue in itself... a flight from her proper destiny." (There's a whole essay in the last three words of that quote.) The fact that Adam opts to learn the violin shortly before he's expected to die is pertinent, but its power is diluted by McEwan hamfistedly spelling it out as "an act of hope, it implied a future", lest readers fail to notice.

### **Is this Really McEwan?**

I associate McEwan with dark currents and darker undercurrents, but if they were here, I somehow missed them (other than the general shadows of child welfare and near cultish religion), to the extent that if I'd not known the author, I'd have been more likely to guess Picoult than McEwan. (That may not be fair, as I've only read one Picoult, and that was eight years ago, but I certainly wouldn't have guessed McEwan.) I suppose his trademark brutality is there, but of a very different, and self-imposed kind.

The pacing is also a little odd: the first 130 pages takes place over a couple of days; the remaining 83 pages race through several months.

It's extraordinary how different this is - in every respect - from another McEwan portrait of a dysfunctional marriage, *On Chesil Beach*, reviewed [HERE](#).

## Quotes

- “Couples in long marriages aspire to the condition of siblings.”
- “She preferred an imperfect existence” to the risk of leaping into the unknown...  
“If he stayed, humiliation, if he left, the abyss.”
- “The worm of suspicion infected her past.”
- “The silence between them expanded.”
- Remembering treats, “These offerings representing only a tiny fraction of the happiness she urged on him”.
- “There must be a price for leaving her and here it was, to be in exile, a supplicant to his previous life. She would not permit him the luxury of two addresses.”
- “Waking up with a cold part of the bed to her left - a form of amputation.”
- “They both knew the vitality of the unsaid... What was required now was a row.”
- “Stepped daintily around each other... They were terse and competitively polite... distracted by raw awareness... of the other’s radioactive presence.”
- “He spoke to her with an awkward delicacy. They kept away from the subject that might have destroyed them.”
- “She belonged to the law as some women had once been brides of Christ.”
- “The law... at its worst not an ass, but a snake.”
- “The confident voice of a man who took his own competence for granted, well used to giving orders... Not men who ran the world, but who made it run.”
- A shiny new hospital, with shops and a business centre around a fountain, “The model was... the modern airport. With altered destinations... and... signs with motorway lettering.”

## **Update: Real-life case, similar to the secondary one in this story**

August 2016 and The Independent reports Ultra-Orthodox Jews launch million-pound fundraising bid to stop children living with 'irreligious parents' after divorce

## **Film Adaptation, 2018**

Ian McEwan, as screenwriter of his own works, has been busy in recent months. First **On Chesil Beach** (see my review of book and film [HERE](#)), and now this.

I enjoyed the film of The Children Act more than the book, which is unusual, but more likely to apply to books I've been disappointed with or even disliked.

Although the novel is not long, some streamlining was necessary. On screen, the story is almost entirely Fiona determining Adam's fate, and the consequences of that. Her other cases are mentioned only briefly. That's fine.

Jack and Fiona's failing marriage is relegated to a backdrop. Although I thought it too dominant a storyline in the book, by reducing it so much, the parallels and conflicts between the two relationships are not really explored. Nevertheless, McEwan doesn't alter the whole premise of the book by tagging on an incongruous postscript, as he did for Chesil.

Music features strongly, as in the book: it sounds as good as it looks. But Fiona and Jack's musical differences are not mentioned at all. Another small loss.

Regardless of that nitpicking, the casting and acting is superb, most obviously Emma Thompson as the luminous, earnest, agonised Fiona and Fionn Whitehead as thoughtful, passionate, ethereal Adam. Whitehead is definitely an actor to watch out for in future. Jason Watkins is subtly excellent as the not-quite-comic assistant to M'lady, and Stanley Tucci play Jack perfectly.

More details on [imdb](#) [HERE](#).

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## **Margitte says**

Fiona Maye is a High Court Judge in London, married to Jack, and an experienced pianist. Her fierce intelligence and immersion in her cases rendered the opinion of the Lord Chief Justice himself describing her as "*Godly distance, devilish understanding, and still beautiful.*"

Almost sixty years old, Fiona finds herself in a failing marriage while presiding over a case in which a multi-talented 17-year-old teenager, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses religious group, refuses to receive blood transfusions as a treatment for his leukemia. In her typical crisp prose, which has been described as almost ironic, almost warm, and in her typical compact terms for which she have received high praise by her colleagues, Fiona resolves this case within a day. However, the aftermath will change everything.

A moral dilemma establishes itself often when life itself demands different solutions to the same articles of

law. When to give life and when to take it away, and how to deal with the emotions and consequences after the fact. Where does the decision ends? Relying heavily on the British Children Act of 1989, Fiona delivers her judgement on this case, withholding justment on her own life for the time being. However, life is short, and the consequences of decisions is often final ...

It is the first encounter for me with this author's work and it was a striking one. Imagine my delight when I realized that this intricate tale, told in eloquent prose, was concluded in only 167 pages! Needless to say that the author's economy with words, the careful selection of detail, and the fast-moving plot, left a feeling of gratitude as well as admiration.

The clever way in which the author used music to glue the story together, brought another much deeper dimension to the story. It not only act as a *grande finale* to emotional turmoil, but also brought insight into a situation that was dotted with emotional warfare and the physical distress of the parties involved.

The final outcome came as a surprise; the emotions it left me with were real and the moral of the story kept me thinking about the characters and the circumstances for many hours afterwards. I was baffled, enchanted, mind-blown, and sad. However, it was destiny that had the final say and it was good one. So very good.

A wonderful, deeply touching story that left me grateful for the experience. There are much deeper elements hidden in this story that can be explored.

A perfect read!

PS. After finishing my review, I hopped over to read friends's reviews of the book. Since reviews often contains spoilers, I prefer to read the book first and then enjoy the thoughts of others afterwards. By reading the book first I have more insight in the reviews. So if you have read the book already, you will be grateful for these recommendations below.

Two reviews of friends that deepened my understanding and appreciation for this book, and changed my experience completely, can be read here:

1) **Roger Brunyate**

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

2) **aPriL does feral sometimes**

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Thank you Roger and April.

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### **Katie says**

You could argue that the character at the heart of this novel is dangerously close to being a misogynistic cliché - the career woman who deep freezes her feelings in order to succeed professionally. Fiona Maye is a High Court judge in her late fifties. At the beginning of the novel her husband, maddened by his wife's sexual detachment, leaves to embark on an affair with a much younger woman.

It's easy to forget every judge has a personal life and that her professional life will have repercussions on her private life and vice versa. On any given day, during any given case, who knows what private torments the

judge is undergoing and which may easily affect her judgement? McEwan examines what happens when the closed door between the professional and private swings open.

The case she has to try after her husband's defection involves a 17 year old boy who has leukemia and requires immediate treatment, but he has been brought up as a Jehovah's Witness and the religion forbids the transfusion of blood. His family and the hospital are thus at loggerheads. To be honest there's never much doubt on whose side Fiona will come out as McEwan, one of the most doggedly rational novelists out there, has a hard job concealing his scorn for Jehovah's Witnesses despite protesting otherwise with a passage like this - "Religions, moral systems, her own included, were like peaks in a dense mountain range seen from a great distance, none obviously higher, more important, truer than another."

We all though love a good court drama and this was easily the most compelling part of the novel. However, once the court case is decided, the novel fell flat on its face for me. There's very little, if any, lived life in this novel. The novel rarely comes alive as anything but a succession of ideas tailored together into a kind of fable. And everything that happens after the sentence felt wooden and forced. The subplot involving Fiona and her husband always seemed like an underpainting and never really acquired body. At times implausible – so much left unsaid that it was like watching two people with the sound turned off. It's a short novel but even so it felt padded out with a lot of unnecessary detail. In fact the more I think about it, the more critical and disappointed I become. Poor show from the man who wrote Atonement.

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### **Sharon says**

I have to stop reading McEwan's books, because I never enjoy them. There's something clinical, removed, about the way he tells his stories - I don't get the sense that he likes human beings, and he is writing about them to display his proficiency with structure and nuance rather than out of interest or sympathy. This is probably a three-star book, but a two-star experience.

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### **Marialyce says**

How truly utterly perfect was this story! The story was of a family court judge, her husband, her "on the rocks" marriage and the young man so tragically ill who came into her life and offered her love and the chance for redemption.

It was a beautiful story and one that sent goosebumps down your spine as the ending approached and try as you might you could not change it. Caught up in the turmoil that parents and religion can oftentimes put children through, the novel captures the true element of the concept of without a given belief system in place humans struggle with themselves. Change or challenge a long held belief and oftentimes one is thrown to the lions without protection.

This is the stuff of headlines of medical ethics and its sometimes clash with religious beliefs and customs. Caught in the middle of all this, lies a child's welfare. Hard religious beliefs can and do impact a child in many ways and at times can be life threatening. However, once one opens the gate for disbelief a person

might be left rudderless and bereft of what they once believed was the concepts that made them who they were.

Sad and tragic yet inspiring, this book was outstanding in its approach and I loved it!

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## **Wen says**

4.5 stars. For me a book by McEwan is a low-risk pick, as he would unlikely let me down. If all else failed, I'd always have his exquisite prose and his good ear for music to fall back on. It turned out, this skinny 221-page book was one of my favorites of his.

This book had two main themes running in parallel: the marriage crisis between 59-year-old high court family division judge Fiona and her geology professor husband Jack, and the emotional entanglement between Fiona and a 17-year-old boy Adam, whose life was saved by Fiona's ruling against the fundamental belief of Jehovah's Witness. The two themes from time to time intersperse with each other over jagged terrains, fed into each other, and indirectly influenced the outcome of each.

Comparing to half of dozen other McEwan's books I have read, this one was particularly polemical. Should it be morally acceptable for one partner of a listless marriage to occasionally indulge in the carnal excitement elsewhere without breaking the vows? Do religiously devout parents have the right to make life-or-death medical treatment decisions on behalf of their children?

McEwan adequately and fairly presented supporting arguments through his storytelling for both sides, but he didn't go to great length to hide his personal position regarding to open marriage and religions; for example, just consider the seemingly hypocritic reactions of Adam's parents after Fiona's ruling that saved their son's life.

McEwan once again impressed me by his excellent portrayal of a female protagonist. Fiona was an emotionally-sensitive middle-aged woman who had low tolerance for risks, evidenced by the fact that she was constantly distracted at work by her muddled thoughts on Jack's betrayal. But her job as a judge required her to be cool-headed and rational, and to stay personally detached to maintain objectivity. The conflicts of these two forces manifested itself in her messy involvement with the boy Adam and the tragic ending.

Adam was also a strong and memorable character. He was precocious, but not as mature as most people associated with him in the book believed. He was all too eager to impress and please those in possession of authority. He romanticized and glorified death, not so much influenced by his religion, as everybody had thought, as by the artistic personality, consistent with him being a quick study in poetry and violin. His initial feeling toward Fiona was little more than starry-eyed worship (he insisted on calling Fiona my lady), and he stalked Fiona only to find a new anchor after being lost in the religionless world. However, the feeling was elevated and distorted by the kiss as confusing to Fiona as to himself.

I've read complaints about Most McEwan's protagonists being upper-middle class and having eminent life. His prose certainly reflects that—elegant, refined, fluent, dressed up... more akin to a glass of wine than a bottle of beer. However, I find this style comforting because his metaphoric expressions are like the kind of prose being appreciated in Chinese literature.

The two poems Adam composed, and the lyrics of the song Down by the Sally's Gardens were heart-wrenchingly beautiful. They threaded together Adam's story in the most compelling way. I had a strong premonition in the middle of the book when Fiona and Adam performed the song together at his bedside.

I could not find an exact violin-and-voice version. This one I thought might match the mood of the story.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=027ZJ...>

I found Fiona and Jack's story less powerful, and the resolution at the end a bit forced and too convenient. I felt I wasn't provided enough material to get sufficiently acquainted with Jack. Hence 4.5 stars.

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## Maciek says

As I began to read *The Children Act*, I thought that it would be the antithesis to McEwan's other novel, *On Chesil Beach*, where the marriage of a young newlyweds is damaged beyond repair in a single moment, by what essentially is lack of communication.

In *The Children Act* the couple is much older and has been married for decades - Fiona is a 59 year old court judge, and is married to Jack, a 60 year old professor of ancient history. They have been together for 35 years, and led what could be described as a successful and stable life - until now. One evening Jack surprises Fiona with a confession - he asks her to give him permission to begin an affair with a much younger assistant. Although he states that he loves Fiona and wants to stay with her, Jack justifies his demand for an open marriage by claiming that her passion for him has evaporated - their sex life is non-existent, and at 60 the affair is a last chance at a passionate and exciting relationship.

In *On Chesil Beach* the couple's tragedy resulted from not knowing one another and not talking about their issues; I expected *The Children Act* to be the total opposite, an analysis of the rise and fall of a mature marriage with the couple engaging in a honest and open conversation about their own lives. This doesn't happen - although torn internally by her need for Jack in her life, Fiona is justifiably infuriated and refuses to even talk to him about his needs and reasons behind them, which only disgust her.

The issue of Fiona and Jack's failing marriage is too quickly swept under the rug when Fiona is ordered to judge over a case involving Adam, a teenager on the verge of legal maturity who suffers from leukemia, and his parents - Jehovah's Witnesses, who object to him undergoing a blood transfusion which could save his life. Both parents object on religious grounds, using scripture as proof that a transfusion is incompatible with their beliefs - which the boy shares and has no objection to, even if they will eventually result in his very painful death.

The focus from Fiona's marriage shifts to the court case, as Fiona has to hear testimonies from doctors, church officials, Adam's parents and Adam himself to understand all sides of the argument. To make the difficult decision, she decides to visit him as he slowly withers away - finding a passionate and talented teenager, whose interest in music and the arts draws her to him and who slowly becomes obsessed with her, which reminded me of another English novel - *Notes on a Scandal*.

This is a short, but ambitious book - as it tries to take on many challenging topics: disintegration of a long marriage, the influence parents have on their children, and the influence that religion has on their decisions. Despite being well-constructed and written, I found that it simply had nothing new or particularly insightful to add on these issues - it was more of a clinical presentation of them, rather than engaging fiction dealing

with these dilemmas. The reader is shown all points of view regarding Adam's case, but my real interest lay in the relationship of Fiona and Jack - how both are going to deal with the crisis it suffers. Unfortunately, both Fiona and Jack are presented as rather detached characters, not only from one another but from life in general. I found the story to contain hardly any surprises, and could easily see the denouncement - which was probably intended to be shocking - coming from a mile away. As a result, the novel (or rather a novella, considering its length) carries less impact than it might have had were all its themes developed further.

*The Children Act* will undoubtedly stir interest and gain readership, but it's certainly not Ian McEwan's best work, and I found his last novel - *Sweet Tooth* - to be more interesting and enjoyable.

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## **Debbie says**

I'm embarrassed to say that before *The Children Act*, I was a McEwan virgin. But now I've turned into a McEwan slut, anxious to read his earlier books. I can't help myself. What a great writer!

This is the story of Fiona, a highly respected judge who presides over family court. She has to make hard decisions that determine the fate of families. She doesn't seem to question her power or choices until her husband rocks her world and wants her to approve his plan to have an affair. Fiona, the ever rational and confident decision maker, suddenly has to examine her life and question what she is doing now and what she should do in the future.

The book starts with Fiona and her husband having a restrained argument, though underneath the cool façade, Fiona is steaming. She's passive-aggressive, and she doesn't communicate her feelings. Her husband acts like a jackass.

I was immediately drawn into their lives and was pissed when the next chapter plopped me down in the courthouse. Thankfully, it didn't take long before I got sucked into Fiona's life as a judge. But even though her professional life was intriguing, I suddenly found myself reading about interesting cases that were leading nowhere. I was left wandering around the courthouse in search of a plot thread to hold on to. For me, the book lost focus at that point. No doubt McEwan wanted to give us a flavor of the moral issues Fiona faced every day, but I wanted to get to the plot line already. Luckily I didn't have to wander around for very long.

The case that has Fiona all stirred up involves 17-year-old cancer-stricken Adam, a Jehovah's Witness who is refusing a life-saving transfusion. The book goes back and forth between Adam's case and her broken relationship with hubby. Both stories are good, though the Adam story gets more air-time and is way more compelling.

For most of her adult life, Fiona has not been an emotional creature, and we watch as she struggles with uncomfortable feelings and a big moral crisis. Perhaps for the first time in her life, she experiences intense anger, embarrassment, longing, denial, and remorse.

What makes this book great is the sophisticated language, which flows easily. The writing is nuanced and understated, and there's a lot going on between the lines. It's straightforward, yet complex. Really, it's beautiful prose. It's obvious that McEwan loves language, and he's so deft at manipulating words and constructing a compelling story it's not even funny.

Here's a sample:

"She inferred from his evasive but morose remarks that in the statistician's bedroom he had not passed through the gates of paradise."

Where I really said "Wow!" was when a quiet little incident took place. It happened in the blink of an eye, and it caught me off-guard and gave me a jolt. The incident was small and weird but was pivotal to the story. The scene itself and the way McEwan slowly led up to it, plus the element of surprise which McEwan teased us with, were so masterful it made me shake my head in happy wonder.

Besides the random court cases that were thrown at me at the beginning of the book (text that took up precious space in this compact novel), there's a too-long concert scene at the end. I'm sure McEwan meant it as a build-up to the finale, but it was distracting and boring, and I just wanted to get out my red pencil and delete big chunks of it. So yes, there were two cases where an editor could have done some judicious chopping, but otherwise the book is nice and tight.

This is a short book with a big impact. It left me wondering what I would have done in Fiona's shoes. We learn, along with Fiona, that there are no simple answers and that our actions can have huge consequences for others. This is a thought-provoking, insightful, and beautiful character study of a complex woman.

As I said, I'm off to check out McEwan's earlier books. I'm a book slut and I'm proud of it.

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### **John Grisham says**

THE CHILDREN ACT is about the law and sensational cases, but it is not a legal thriller. Rather, it is a beautiful and sad story of a High Court Judge forced to choose, literally, between life and death. Her ruling, though proper and legally sound, leads to both.

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### **Suzanne says**

Not having read this author before, I'm very glad to have picked this one off of my 300 plus owned books. It will be easy to miss many great books this way won't it?!

Fiona holds an immensely important job being a highly regarded High Court Judge presiding over families. She's at a crossroads, or rather her husband is, and we see a fine story unfold as a marriage is being questioned and a brilliant woman teeters on the edge. At the same time Fiona has to decide how to apply a life and death judgement involving a seventeen year old Jehovah's Witness boy, Adam. He is a beautiful character and he lit up this story. The finale gave me hope for Fiona and her patient and loving husband, but I was oh so sad for Adam.

Literary fiction is not my genre of choice, but it was an effective story. Perhaps too much legal technicality that to me was not required, but the writing was good and it was a quick read. My thanks go again to 'The Whisperer', who has provided me with another quality book.

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## Emily May says

### Do you like to people watch?

You know what I mean... just sit somewhere in a busy place and watch people bustle past in all their colourful weirdness. It's a habit I've acquired with age. Sometimes I think back to being a teenager and remember how I always wondered if I was strange in some way - I guess a lot of teens wonder that same question: am I normal? I wonder, had I taken the time to people watch back then, if I would have felt so lost and strange. I don't see how I could have. People are all damn weird creatures and they're really not very good at hiding it.

I'm saying this because *The Children Act* feels like people watching. Some books are easy to sell to other readers because I can promise you dragons and magic, heart-stopping action and romance that will steal your heart straight from your chest. This is not that kind of book. It's not even easy to put into words what this book is about. But it was, for me, nothing short of fascinating.

The main plot follows the life of an aging judge called Fiona whose husband has just announced that he wants to have one last passionate love affair with a younger woman before they can both settle into old age. He seems to believe she will be okay and accept the situation because of his openness and honesty. He is, not surprisingly, wrong.

I guess this book is what people tend to call a "character study" but that sounds so boring, right? Like something you'd be set for a college assignment, leave until the last minute and rush out in a mediocre essay (possibly while drunk). It isn't. Fiona's tale may be a quiet journey through the inner workings of someone's life, job and marriage, but it is also an extremely interesting portrait of a woman who continues to go through the motions of her everyday life while her private life may be falling apart.

Fiona (and the reader) finds herself emotionally pulled inside the case of a boy who is a Jehovah's Witness and wants to be allowed to refuse medical treatment. Because he is a few months shy of eighteen, Fiona must rule whether he should be allowed to refuse the blood transfusion or whether the hospital can ignore his wishes and proceed to save his life.

I don't know how to convince others that this book is interesting. I have to admit that I would not have picked it up without having read the author's previous work. It's such a simplistic, quiet story that is transformed into a powerful tale in McEwan's hands. I have absolutely nothing in common with Fiona, but her thoughts, emotions, doubts and insecurities feel extremely relatable.

There are some authors that create stories which feel very personal and particular, but simultaneously feel completely universal. For me, this was one of those rarities. I am so glad I took a chance on this book and got to immerse myself in Fiona's life.

## Lizzy says

From the first page, I realized Ian McEwan's *The Children Act* would conquer me. This novel is more a character study than a simple courtroom drama, as it deals with marriage, religion, and life choices. The story centers on the family court Judge Fiona Maye as she faces a crisis in her marriage, questions her life choices and stumbles practically on the edge of both her personal and professional life.

"Her judgment must be ready for printing by tomorrow's deadline, she must work. Her personal life was nothing. Or should have been. Her attention remained divided between the page in her hand and, fifty feet away, the closed bedroom door."

While dealing with the demons in her relationship with her husband, Fiona has to decide a life-and-death case involving a seventeen-year-old Jehovah's Witness boy in need of a blood transfusion to treat his leukemia. I liked the characters and felt that McEwan developed them fully for such a short story. From the start, I felt a strong affinity with Fiona and could understand her life dilemmas. A whole person emerges through McEwan prose, flawed like most of us, and I could not help but empathize with her. His exquisite narrative, the details of the court cases and its musical references and metaphors only added to make this a refined and earnest reading.

"Over the drumming of raindrops on her umbrella, she heard the lilting andante, walking pace, a rare marking in Bach, a beautiful carefree air over a strolling bass, her own steps falling in with the unearthly lighthearted melody as she went by Great Hall. The notes strained at some clear human meaning, but they meant nothing at all. Just loveliness, purified. Or love in its vaguest, largest form, for all people, indiscriminately."

I loved how McEwan takes an already engaging story and adds an interesting element that makes it extraordinary despite its brevity. His sophisticated prose only leaves us wanting more.

"The melancholy tune and the manner in which it was played, so hopeful, so raw, expressed everything she was beginning to understand about the boy. She knew by heart the poet's words of regret. But I, being young and foolish ... Hearing Adam play stirred her, even as it battled her. To take up the violin or any instrument was an act of hope, it implied a future."

As we read on, we discover how Fiona's decisions will come to haunt her as the novel approaches its ending, when she discovers that she still can count on her husband to support her. A powerful, poetic and stunningly realistic novel.

"Everyone knew the urge to run from the world; few dared do it. She listened gravely, or appeared to, and gave short responses and nods. She felt like a hospital patient who longs for her kindly visitor to leave so she can resume being ill. The fire took, and Jack, noticing that she was shivering, guided her toward it, and there he poured the rest of her champagne."

Wistful and tragic yet inspiring and hopeful, I found *The Children Act* outstanding and simply loved it!

Highly recommended.

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### **Fionnuala says**

One of the Ian McEwan books I've most enjoyed and a book which inspired the most vigorous debate my book group has ever had - a debate which felt like a day in court as all the 'barristers' present argued their cases; one, for the rights of children; another, the rights of parents; a third the letter of the Law; a fourth, the rights of the characters; a fifth, the rights of readers; a sixth the wrongs of the author.

No, scratch that last one off the record, court secretary; the conclusion was that the author had more than competently handled the facts of the case although there was disagreement about how he wound them up and some doubt as to how he acquired them in the first place, a piece of evidence having come to light at the last minute to indicate that some of his facts might be inadmissible since they infringed on the privacy of a third party - his wife!

The court adjourned at a late hour.

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