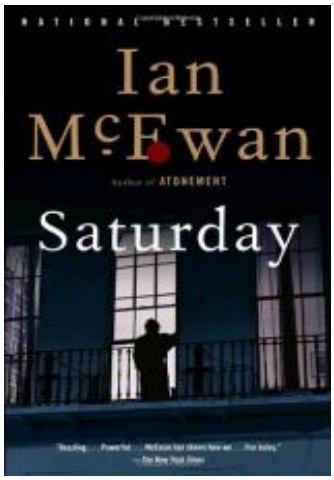
Saturday

by Ian McEwan



About the Book

Ian McEwan's fiction never fails to make us think a little differently-about humanity, and storytelling, and the beliefs that comprise our myth and memory. In **Saturday**, he has created a storyline that brings to bear the full weight these facets in the contemporary world.

With intense precision, McEwan draws us into the life of London neurosurgeon Henry Perowne. Taking place over a single day, **Saturday** follows Henry as he copes with everyday quandaries: insomnia, aging, the quest for a moment of leisure in the midst of so many obligations. But this particular day ripples with unexpected fears. Before the sun is up, he sees fire glowing from an airplane as it lumbers above the Thames. Newscasters deliver conflicting accounts of the incident. Later, as Henry drives to a game of squash, anti-war protestors clog the streets. And then his car scrapes against another, a fender-bender that should have had only minor consequences. Yet, as much as Henry tries to enjoy an ordinary day, this is not meant to be a day of minor consequences. With every tender encounter-stolen moments with his wife, tea with his fragile mother, marvelous discussions with his grown children-he is looking over his shoulder. As he should be. For this is the day his fears will become realized, and he will have to choose the best means of defense.

Discussion Guide

1. Saturday's epigraph comes from Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow, whose novel **Herzog** features an academic facing the shortcomings of his life. The novel was published in 1964; how might the history of the early Sixties have influenced Bellow's perspective? Forty years later, how does Ian McEwan's protagonist embody current events?

2. At the end of **Saturday**'s first paragraph, as Henry wakes too early, McEwan writes, "And he's entirely himself, he is certain of it, and he knows that sleep is behind him: to know the difference between it and waking, to know the boundaries, is the essence of sanity." To what else does Henry awaken as the novel progresses? In the book and in the world, who remains asleep (and unaware of their slumber)?

3. When Henry hears about the cargo plane's safe landing, McEwan observes, "Schrödinger's cat was alive after all." How does Schrödinger's thought-experiment, allowing two outcomes to co-exist during a period of uncertainty, apply to Henry's daily life? How does it express the nature of human thought during times of anxiety?

4. Was the collision between Henry's car and Baxter's an accident? What visual cues (the type of car Henry associates with criminals, the "scarecrow" clothes that make him look like something other than a doctor) stoke the fire? What class conflicts are projected as the men argue? What determines who has more power in that situation?

5. Discuss the irony of the novel's title. Henry intended to spend the day relaxing; does the modern world allow for any true respite from worry?

6. In your opinion, what accounts for the bliss between Henry and his wife? When he met her, did her vulnerability (through illness) feed their attraction, or was it merely a means for them to find one another? What accounts for Henry's uneasy relationship with his father-in-law?

7. In researching **Saturday**, Ian McEwan spent months observing brain surgery. What parallels exist between a writer's craft and a surgeon's? What is the effect of McEwan's decision to cast Henry in the specialty of neurosurgery (as opposed to thoracic or orthopedic surgery, for example)? How does Henry's ease with medical terminology, but discomfort with the vocabulary of literature, influence your reading experience?

8. Jay Strauss moved to the U.K. in part because of his enthusiasm for socialized medicine. How would you describe the healthcare system presented in the novel?

9. Do you think Jay personifies most or few Americans? Is he more competitive than Henry?

10. As Henry watches his mother's dementia worsen, he labels the physiological reasons for her decline. Does his familiarity with science ease or aggravate the sadness of losing her?

11. One of Henry's last errands in the novel is to listen to attend a performance by Theo's band. What does blues music, along with its American flavor, mean to Theo? Does Henry experience this art differently from the way he hears Daisy's work?

12. Why was Baxter's invasion of Henry's house essential to this novel? In what way can this scene be explored as a metaphor for politics, war, even global economics? Why was it also necessary for Henry's security system to be proven ineffective that night?

13. Using an anthology or website, read Matthew Arnold's nineteenth-century masterwork "Dover Beach" in its entirety. What caused it to resonate with Baxter's memories? Can you think of any contemporary poems in free verse that would have served Daisy's purpose so well?

14. What saves Henry's family from Baxter and his cohorts: Poetry? Pregnancy? Bravery? Intelligence? Luck? Divine intervention? Baxter's illness? How would you have reacted in a similar situation?

15. As Henry returns to the hospital that night, he realizes this is where he feels most comfortable-even more so than when he's in the world of alleged leisure. Earlier in the novel, McEwan describes how orderly Henry's mother was; Henry wishes he had just once invited her to the operating theater. Is this sense of order and belonging innate to Henry's profession, or is it something Henry has ascribed to it? In what locale do you personally feel you're at the top of your game? Is this the same locale that puts you at ease?

16. Why is Henry willing to perform surgery on Baxter? What keeps Henry from craving the revenge Rosalind anticipated? Would you be able to drop the charges, as Henry hopes to do? How do you respond to McEwan's questions: "Is this forgiveness? . . . Or is [Henry] the one seeking forgiveness?"

17. Can Henry's surgery on Baxter be called revenge? Is his probing of Baxter's brain a violation? Or, is Henry's magnanimous act a victory of enlightened liberalism over Baxter's primal power politics?

18. During Henry's reunion with Daisy, they waver between words of affection and a rapid-fire ideological debate about Iraq. How would such a debate have unfolded in your household?

19. Four generations are presented in **Saturday**, including Daisy's child. What does each generation bestow, or hope to bestow, upon the next? What spurred such an exceptional level of accomplishment among the members of the Perowne family?

20. Discuss the element of storytelling itself in **Saturday**. Do the stories disseminated within this novel-by the broadcasters, the protesters, the lawless, the keepers of family legacy-all describe the same reality? Who or what has the power to influence what we believe? What literary devices did Ian McEwan use to evoke realism in this novel?

21. Examining the works of Ian McEwan as a continuum, how does **Saturday** enrich the portrait of life he has been crafting throughout his career?

Author Bio

Ian McEwan is the critically acclaimed author of 19 novels and two short story collections. His first published work, a collection of short stories, FIRST LOVE, LAST RITES, won the Somerset Maugham Award. His novels include THE CHILD IN TIME, which won the 1987 Whitbread Novel of the Year Award; THE CEMENT GARDEN; ENDURING LOVE; AMSTERDAM, which won the 1998 Booker Prize; ATONEMENT; SATURDAY; ON CHESIL BEACH; SOLAR; SWEET TOOTH; THE CHILDREN ACT; NUTSHELL; and MACHINES LIKE ME, which was a #1 bestseller. ATONEMENT, ENDURING LOVE, THE CHILDREN ACT and ON CHESIL BEACH have all been adapted for the big screen.

Critical Praise

"In **Saturday** he is at his best - thoughtful, eloquent, yet restrained. The novel has all the technical assurance of its predecessors, and suggests as well a newly political sensibility and a seductive, Joycean attention to the textures of normality."

Saturday
by Ian McEwan

Publication Date: April 11, 2006
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 304 pages
Publisher: Anchor
ISBN-10: 1400076196
ISBN-13: 9781400076192