

**First love last rites pdf**

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Jack Slay, Jr., has described the appearance of Ian McEwan's first collection of stories, *First Love, Last Rites*, as a "shock into literature," owing to the themes and subject matter contained in the collection's eight stories. The shock derives, first and foremost, from the primary themes and subject matter of most of the stories: A 14-year-old boy rapes his 10-year-old sister in the story "Homemade"; in "Butterflies," a man draws a young girl to a secluded location under a canal bridge, sexually molests her, and drops her body—after she knocks herself unconscious trying to escape him—into the muddy canal waters; in "Cocker at the Theatre," two actors rehearsing a scene in a play engage in sexual intercourse on stage, in front of the entire cast. Such incidents usually stand at the center of the story's plot, but they also often appear scattered throughout the stories in less noticeable ways. While the man lures the girl to her fate in "Butterflies," the two of them pass a group of boys who are preparing to roast a live cat over a fire. The stories shock at a second level by the neutral and nonjudgmental descriptions of the violence. The narrator of "Solid Geometry," who causes the wife he has come to hate to disappear using a complex mathematical trick, finishes his tale in this way: "Her voice was quite tiny, 'What's happening?' and all that remained was the echo of her question above the deep blue sheets." The narrators or main characters—six of the stories feature a first-person narrator—express no remorse for their actions and no sympathy for their victims, and the stories themselves do not seem to offer any moral or ethical judgments on anyone or anything. Once the story has committed to an act of murder or sexual perversion, McEwan follows it through to its end, leaving no detail unobserved. Although most—though not all—of the stories feature violence and sexual perversity, a more clear and consistent connection links all of the stories' narrators or main characters: They are all isolated from human society or are alienated from the dominant culture. It is impossible to say whether McEwan expects the reader to see an inevitable link between these kinds of characters and the violence and perversities in which they engage, but he seems to suggest that isolation and alienation lead to a loss of sympathy for and understanding of others that creates the conditions for such acts. Ian McEwan / Geraint Lewis The quintessential exploration of this theme appears in "Conversations with a Cupboard Man," with a narrator who is initially kept isolated from society without his knowledge; given his freedom, however, he chooses to remain in isolation. The cupboard man narrates his story to a social worker who sits outside his cupboard, listening, and to this worker he describes how his mother kept him in a state of suspended childhood, completely separate from the outside world. He never objected to this treatment for an obvious reason: "I didn't know any other life, I didn't think I was different." She keeps him in a crib until he is 17, feeds him baby food, and tries to construct a special high chair for him when he is 14. She loosens her hold on him when she marries another man, and the cupboard man finds himself out in the world and forced to fend for himself for the first time. He takes a job as a hotel dishwasher, where he is locked in a large oven by a sadistic chef on two occasions. After taking his revenge on the chef, he leaves the hotel and begins stealing for a living, which eventually lands him in jail. He enjoys the isolation of his cell so much that he asks the warden if he can stay in jail indefinitely; his request is denied, and he is forced to leave. He abandons his subsequent factory job for full-time life in his cupboard, where he remains at the conclusion of the story. The cupboard man's trajectory is a familiar one in McEwan's short fiction: A character's initial state of involuntary isolation from society leads to voluntary behavior that alienates him from that society. In the cupboard man's case, that behavior—with the exception of his treatment of the chef, which is arguably revenge—takes a relatively innocuous form in his desire for isolation in small, enclosed spaces. In other stories the forms are more violent, perverse, or damaging. The 14-year-old narrator of "Homemade" disparages the "thousands who each morning poured out of the terraced houses like our own to labour through the week" and separates himself from them with his drinking, smoking, and stealing and the rape of his 10-year-old sister. The main character of "Disguises," forced into a curious world of gender confusion by his deceased mother's sister, eventually comes to embrace the little girl's costume she makes him wear and to envision his identity merging with that of a girl he has met at school. The narrator of "Butterflies" suffers from the strange physical defect of having no chin, which frightens people: "[I]t breeds distrust. . . . Women do not like my chin, they won't come near me." When he has his orgasm, he cements the connection between his isolation and his crime: "All the time I spent by myself came pumping out, all the hours walking alone and all the thoughts I had had, it all came out into my hand." Unable to establish meaningful human relations with anyone, the narrator ends up expressing himself in his warped relationship with the little girl. Even the two stories that do not feature overt acts of violence or perversity, "Last Day of Summer" and "First Love, Last Rites," depend on a background of violence or grotesque and repugnant imagery. In "Last Day of Summer," a teenager lives in a commune with his older brother after the death of his parents in a car crash. The narrator has an obsessive interest in describing the flesh of an overweight girl who comes to live in the commune and who takes on a maternal role in the house. At the end of the story, the girl's weight causes a boating accident that kills her and a young child; the narrator survives, and the story concludes as he drifts alone down the river on the capsized boat. In "First Love, Last Rites," a young couple living in a dirty flat become obsessed with a rat living in their walls. When they finally manage to kill the rat with a poker, a purple bag containing five baby rats slides out of its belly. The story ends in a moment of seeming hope, as they resolve to clean their flat and take a long walk, but the weight of the story's unrelentingly dark imagery makes it difficult to see real hope in its conclusion. *First Love, Last Rites* remains a collection of interest for the study of postwar British literature and for the study of Ian McEwan, who has since achieved wide fame with multiple Booker Prize nominations for his later novels and with the Booker Prize-winning novel *Atonement* (2002). He published only one subsequent collection of short stories, *In Between the Sheets* (1978), which focuses on many of the same themes as his first collection. Although his tendency to depict violence and perversity explicitly has become muted in the novels that followed the publication of his two short story collections, his interest in the origins of violence and evil in the human condition has remained. *First Love, Last Rites* clearly reflects an interest in the nature of violence that featured in many works of British literature in the several decades following World War II, from the savage nature poetry of Ted Hughes and the fictions of William Golding and Anthony Burgess to the quietly violent dramas of Harold Pinter. With very few exceptions, most of the stories in the collection remain firmly within the tradition of a stark, gritty realism. Elements of postmodernism surface occasionally in the stories, especially in "Solid Geometry," but McEwan's short fiction has little in common with the self-referential or academic fiction of more clearly postmodern novelists and short story writers such as John Fowles or Jeanette Winterson, who were a dominant presence on the British literary landscape of the 1970s and 1980s. BIBLIOGRAPHY Malcolm, David. Understanding Ian McEwan. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002. McEwan, Ian. *First Love, Last Rites*. London: Cape, 1975; New York: Random House, 1975. Raban, Jonathan. "Exiles: New Fiction," *Encounter* 44 (June 1975): 81. Ryan, Kiernan. Ian McEwan. Plymouth, England: Northcote House, 1994. Slay, Jack, Jr. Ian McEwan. New York: Twayne, 1996; London: Prentice Hall, 1996. 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