

CHAPTER 25

Dr. Henry Perowne

in *Saturday*

by Ian McEwan¹

Themes

- What can happen to a fashionable London neurosurgeon in one day
 - Rare medical diagnosis made from observing the subject on the street
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The British novelist Ian McEwan, born in Aldershot in England in 1948, was educated at Eton, the University of Sussex and the University of East Anglia, where he took a creative writing course taught by the novelists Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson.

His first published work was a collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*, which won the Somerset Maugham award in 1976. This was followed by three novels that received some success in the 1980s and early 1990s. The first of his later novels, regarded as masterpieces, was *Enduring Love*, about a person with the rare neurological de Clerambault's syndrome. In 1998 he was awarded the Booker Prize for the novel *Amsterdam*. His book *Atonement* was named by *Time Magazine* the best novel of 2002. The novel *Saturday*, considered by some critics as his best, received the James Tall Black Memorial Prize for 2005.

McEwan has won a reputation as one of Britain's greatest literary minds. He is praised for a concise, thoughtful, elegant and restrained style, though some critics believe that his novels are too structured. His latest book is a slim volume entitled *On Chesil Beach*.

SATURDAY

The novel records events taking place on a single day, February 15, 2003, in the life of a 48-year-old neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, who is a senior physician in a teaching hospital in London. His somewhat younger wife, Rosalind, is an attractive lawyer and a writer, the latter talent inherited from her father, the famous poet John Grammaticus, who, after his wife's death, settled in a castle in Southern France. No less talented are the two children of Rosalind and Henry, 21-year-old Daisy, who has just published a book of poems, and 18-year-old Theo, a promising guitarist playing in a touring band. A family reunion of these five people is planned for the evening in the spacious and elegant apartment of the Perownes. Henry is a happily married man; he loves his wife and is proud of the children and his own physical prowess, allowing him to play a brisk game of squash and run a half-marathon each year. The only regret he has is that medicine leaves him no time to read literary works suggested by Daisy. On this particular non-working Saturday his routine includes a squash game with his anesthetist friend, Jay Weiss, a visit to his mother, who is losing the last vestiges of her memory in a home for old people, purchasing ingredients for an elaborate fish stew he will cook tonight, attending the rehearsal of his son's concert, and making love to his wife twice, in the early morning and the late evening. But the day also includes two extraordinary events.

As he awakens at 3:40 a.m. and peers through the window of the living room he sees an airplane with one wing aflame streaking toward Heathrow airport. Later, when he watches the news on TV, he learns that this was a Russian cargo plane on the way from Riga to Birmingham, and that it landed safely, but the image of the handcuffed pilot and co-pilot on the next newscast hints at a possible terrorist action. More important to him personally is a minor car collision, which occurs while driving in his luxurious 500 Mercedes to the squash game. En route he encounters a large protest demonstration against the imminent invasion of Iraq, which forces a diversion of traffic. A busy policeman, overwhelmed by the chaos, allows Henry to turn into a one-way street going in the wrong direction, and his car brushes against an oncoming BMW vehicle. The Mercedes suffers minor scratches on the right side, and the sideboard mirror of the BMW is knocked off. The driver of the BMW with the detached mirror, a pugnacious thug named Baxter, and his two accompanying hoodlums, Nark and Nigel, approach Dr. Perowne and ask for cash to fix the damage. When he refuses on the grounds that it needs to be settled by the insurance companies, the response is a severe blow to his chest which nearly knocks him off his feet. He escapes further thrashing in a curious way. Observing Baxter's twitching face and the coarse tremor of his hands, he suspects that Baxter is

afflicted by the hereditary Huntington's chorea, which is lethal in mid-life. Curious about the correctness of his diagnosis, he asks Baxter about his father. The perplexed Baxter is even more baffled by finding out that this man in the rumpled sweatsuit is a doctor, and he lets Henry drive off to his game, but he remains offended, resenting the perceived indignity imposed by the wealthy doctor who penetrated the secrets of his illness.

Baxter reappears in the evening and walks over to Rosalind, who has just returned home, and points a knife at her neck. She receives a little cut to remind the assembled family that Baxter is serious. More damage is done to the nose of John Grammaticus for taunting him. Baxter is accompanied by his pal Nigel. Both behave badly. They demand the surrender of all phones and order drinks. Baxter forces Daisy to undress, which reveals that she is pregnant. He spots the book of her poems and asks her to recite some of them, which somehow changes his mood. He allows Daisy to get dressed and pockets the book. He becomes intrigued when Henry speaks of new therapy for his disease and accompanies him upstairs to retrieve the literature about this new procedure. This provides an opportunity for Henry and Theo to jump on Baxter, disarm him and push him down the stairway. Baxter's head hits the floor; he suffers a concussion and skull fracture and is transported by an arriving ambulance to Henry's hospital emergency room. Later Dr. Perowne receives a call from his anesthetist friend asking him to operate on Baxter because the complexity of the traumatic injury requires unusually skillful handling.

Perowne takes a look at Baxter's head to make sure Rodney [the registrar] shaved him in exactly the right place. The laceration is straight and clean – a wall, a skirting board, a stone-floor landing rather than the grit and filth you see in wounds after road traffic accidents – and has been sown up by A and E. Even without touching, he can see the top of his patient's head has an area of boggy swelling – blood is collecting between the bone and the scalp.²

This and other details of this operation and the diagnosis of Huntington's chorea made on the street are but a few displays of the author's diligently acquired knowledge of neurology and neurosurgery. From his days as a registrar Henry recounts a case of the surgical removal of a hypophyseal tumor pressing on the optic chiasm and nearly blinding a young law student, who becomes his wife and the only love of his life. Further recollections involve other procedures, such as clipping the neck of a middle cerebral artery aneurysm, craniotomy for a meningioma and resection of a pilocytic astrocytoma. This approach of showing off the author's knowledge of human anatomy, pathology, biochemistry and genetics can be appreciated by the medical profession but is

way above the heads of lay readers. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was ignored in all published reviews available to us, and that the reviewers tended to concentrate on family interactions and on the way we live today.

Subjecting this enjoyable reading to a stricter scrutiny, we recognize a skillfully constructed collage from newspaper clippings, TV images and excerpts from medical textbooks. We are reminded that a single error of judgment can have devastating consequences. But this is nothing new. Similarly there is no surprise in Daisy's accurate forecasting of what will happen in Iraq after the invasion.

Comparing this day with James Joyce's June 16, 1904, when Bloom roamed the streets of Dublin, or with Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, revealing the horrors of Soviet gulag, would be an unpardonable sacrilege.

REFERENCES

- 1 McEwan I. *Saturday*. New York: Anchor Books; 2005.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 257. No permission required by the publisher.