

# Ian McEwan: Life's Lessons [C1]

Con una carriera tra le più prestigiose e prolifiche, l'autore di "Lessons" ripercorre la storia della seconda metà del XX secolo attraverso il suo personaggio più autobiografico.



Born in 1948, the accomplished British author and screenwriter Ian McEwan has been prominent on the literary scene since his debut short story collection *First Love, Last Rites* back in 1975. His novel *Amsterdam*, about a euthanasia pact between two friends, won the Booker Prize in 1998. [Atonement](#), a love story set [against a backdrop](#) of the Second World War, was made into a film in 2007 which was nominated for various Oscars, winning one for Best Original [Score](#).

## TOPICAL THEMES

Complex characters and [compelling](#) storytelling make McEwan's work popular. He also [broaches subject matter](#) on scientific and technological themes. The novel *Solar* (2010), for example, explores climate change from the perspective of a depressed physicist, and in the more recent *Machines Like Me* (2019), McEwan imagines a dystopia run by humanoid robots. The author has also taken an overtly political [stance](#). His satirical anti-Brexit novella [Cockroach](#) (2019) is about a fictional British prime minister whose body is taken over by a cockroach.

## LIFE'S LESSONS

While it is a work of fiction, McEwan's latest novel *Lessons* includes details that relate to the author's [upbringing](#) as the son of an officer in the British army, who was posted in North Africa. The novel's central character Roland Baines spends his childhood in Tripoli, Libya in the 1950s, around the time of the Suez Crisis in neighbouring Egypt. By the end of the novel, Roland is in his 70s, looking back on his life. The reader is invited to compare Roland's experiences and the lessons he has learned with those of McEwan.

## PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

Personal experiences and global events conspire to make Roland who he is. While a teenager at [boarding school](#), he has a sexual relationship with his piano teacher, Miss Cornell. After [dropping out](#) of school and [drifting through](#) his twenties, he finds himself a single father at thirty-seven when his wife leaves [to pursue](#) a literary career in Germany. Meanwhile, events on the world stage impact the way the characters' lives [unfold](#). To find out more, Speak Up attended a press conference where McEwan discussed *Lessons*. As he explained, he'd begun the book with two main ambitions and those ambitions turned into organising principles. It began when I wrote out all the large-scale political crises or [breakthroughs](#) on the world stage that had had some impact on my life. So they started with the Suez Crisis and they went straight right up to the Berlin Wall coming down and the pandemic. And then the assault on the Washington capital. So that was one. And then a little later, I started to think about writing a novel in

which its central character would have some deep connections with myself and at certain points my own life, particularly my family life, my parents' lives, would intrude. But he would also be a completely separate figure, whose life goes off in another direction. I gave him my responses to virtually every situation. And in some ways, I suppose I could say that Roland Baines is the kind of person I might have been if I had never discovered writing.

## MEMORY IS MESSY

Roland's life story is not told in chronological order. McEwan explains why he chose a non-linear structure. **Ian McEwan:** There's a strong element of memory in this novel. Memory from my point of view. I did absolutely no research for this novel. Everything was just waiting for me, and memory is a wonderful but also very [faulty device](#). I mean, evolution has not [granted](#) us a photographic memory and nor do we have a very firm [grip](#) when we're trying [to recall](#) events, even just two years ago, of their sequence. Memory comes to us almost like a kaleidoscope from which you can pick. And I think from its very beginnings, the novel, the European, South American and American novel particularly, was always interested in [rendering](#) subjective time, I think. And that is why readers find it so easy when faced with a novel that does not simply proceed from the start of the alphabet to the end. I think it's deep both in our memory but also just in the flow of consciousness.

## CHANCE OR CHOICE?

The role of [chance](#) in shaping who we are is a theme that McEwan has explored before, notably in *Enduring Love* (1997), in which various strangers are brought together by a freak accident. He returns to the theme in *Lessons*. **Ian McEwan:** This is an important question for me, and it [bears](#) very much on this novel. How much choice do we have in the lives we have made? Or is our life just a succession of reactions to events or to circum[stances](#)? The nature of accident rather than choice, I think, is fascinating, and it's right there at the beginning of our lives. It's worth reflecting on the fact that if your parents had made love five seconds later, you wouldn't be you. You would not exist. So, already you're an accident waiting to be born. You do not choose your genes. You do not choose your parents, all that is entirely out of your range. Nor do you get to choose your friends or the you or what happens in the society in which you grow up. So that's why I created the character of Alissa, the young German woman that Roland marries. And she one day, when their baby is only seven months old, leaves a note behind and simply [vanishes](#). She makes a [ruthless](#) choice about her own [fate](#). Very few of us are ever in the position to do this — and we might condemn it, and I think we condemn women more than men. And that was also something I wanted to explore, this double [standard](#). But I think somewhere in our hearts we also admire it. There's

something rather splendid about someone who could say “This is what I want and this is what I’m gonna do.”

## THE SUEZ CRISIS

The Suez Crisis also known as ‘the Second Arab–Israeli war’ in the Arab world and ‘the Sinai War’ in Israel. The Suez Canal in Egypt is strategically important as a [trade route](#). Until July 1956 it was owned by the Suez Canal Company, who had built the canal in 1869. The company was administered mainly by French and British [shareholders](#), as Egypt’s king had sold his shares. In July 1956, Egyptian revolutionary leader and now president Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal Company, [triggering](#) a crisis. In late October, this escalated when Israel invaded Gaza and the Egyptian Sinai. Britain and France issued an ultimatum to cease fire, which was ignored, and then landed troops along the Suez Canal. Egypt responded by blocking the canal by [sinking](#) forty ships in it. It later became clear that Israel, France and Britain had conspired to plan the invasion with the [aim](#) of regaining control of the Suez Canal and to [remove](#) Nasser. They failed: heavy political pressure from the United States and the USSR led to a [withdrawal](#).

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# Glossary

- **to recall** = ricordare
- **Atonement** = espiazione
- **Cockroach** = scarafaggio
- **upbringing** = educazione
- **boarding school** = collegio, convitto
- **rendering** = rappresentare
- **remove** = rimuovere
- **compelling** = coinvolgente
- **unfold** = svolgere
- **breakthroughs** = passi avanti
- **device** = congegno
- **granted** = concedere
- **ruthless** = spietata
- **aim** = obiettivo
- **withdrawal** = ritiro, retrocesso
- **broaches** = trattare
- **stance** = posizione
- **drifting through** = andare alla deriva
- **fate** = destino
- **trade route** = rotta commerciale
- **triggering** = indurre, provocare
- **faulty** = difettoso
- **vanishes** = scomparire
- **standard** = doppia morale
- **sinking** = affondare
- **grip** = comprensione
- **chance** = caso, fortuna
- **against a backdrop** = sfondo, scenario
- **Score** = colonna sonora
- **dropping out** = abbandonare
- **subject matter** = argomento di attualità
- **to pursue** = dedicarsi a
- **bears** = premere su
- **shareholders** = azionisti