

= Sweet Tooth ( novel ) =

Sweet Tooth is a novel by the English writer Ian McEwan , published on 21 August 2012 . It deals with the experiences of its protagonist , Serena Frome , during the early 1970s . After graduating from Cambridge she is recruited by MI5 , and becomes involved in a covert program to combat communism by infiltrating the intellectual world . When she becomes romantically involved with her mark , complications ensue .

McEwan wanted to write a novel dealing with the social turmoil of the 1970s , and Sweet Tooth is to a large extent based on his own life . The story explores the relationship between artistic integrity and government propaganda , and addresses competing approaches to literature ; the boundary between reality and fiction is tested throughout . The novel is dedicated to McEwan 's late friend Christopher Hitchens . He is not referred to directly in the book , but he did play a part as the host of a real @-@ life literary event fictionalised in the book , involving McEwan and Martin Amis , who does appear in the story . Critical reception was mixed ; some reviewers found the novel moving and poignant , while others saw it as weaker than much of McEwan 's previous work .

= = Plot summary = =

The plot is set in early @-@ 1970s England . Serena Frome ( " rhymes with plume " ) , the daughter of an Anglican bishop , shows a talent for mathematics and is admitted to the University of Cambridge . But she struggles academically , and graduates with a third . While at Cambridge she becomes romantically involved with Tony Canning , a professor , who before abruptly ending the affair secures a position for Serena with MI5 . The job is low @-@ level , but a more exciting opportunity appears when Serena is offered a chance to take part in a new covert program codenamed " Sweet Tooth " . To counter Communist propaganda during the Cold War , the agency wants to offer financial assistance to young writers , academics and journalists with an anti @-@ Communist bent . Serena , who is an avid and quick reader of fiction , is given the task of vetting burgeoning writer Thomas Haley .

Serena is immediately taken by Haley 's published short fiction . She travels to the University of Sussex , where he works , to offer him a stipend from the fictional Freedom International Foundation . Soon the two begin a romantic affair , but things gradually start to unravel . Serena discovers that Professor Canning ( who , it turns out , broke off their affair only because he knew he was dying from cancer ) was in fact a Soviet spy , and she was recruited because the agency wanted to keep tabs on Canning . Then , when Haley 's first novel comes out , it is a great critical success , but its dystopian , anti @-@ capitalist theme is not well received by the agency . Finally , his affair with Serena is exposed by the press , and the whole Sweet Tooth program is threatened .

Serena fears that she has lost Haley 's love forever , now he knows she has deceived him . Haley , however , had known about the program for months , and instead of ending the affair , had decided to turn the story into a novel . The reader now discovers that the author of Sweet Tooth is in fact Haley , despite its being written from Serena 's first @-@ person perspective . As the novel ends , Haley asks Serena in a letter to marry him .

= = Autobiographical elements = =

Several reviewers have pointed out that the Thomas Haley character shares many traits and biographical details with the author . Like Haley , McEwan studied at the University of Sussex ( later also at the University of East Anglia ) , and not at one of the more prestigious Oxbridge universities . Haley 's stories , summarised briefly in the novel , are in several cases strikingly similar to some of McEwan 's earlier work . This goes particularly for Haley 's dystopian début novel , which closely follows the plot of " Two Fragments " , a short story from McEwan 's 1978 In Between the Sheets . The novel wins Haley the fictional Jane Austen Prize for Fiction , just as McEwan 's debut First Love , Last Rites was rewarded with the Somerset Maugham Award in 1976 . Several of McEwan 's acquaintances from this period also make cameo appearances in the novel , including his friend

Martin Amis , his first publisher Tom Maschler , and his mentor Ian Hamilton .

McEwan has been open about the autobiographical elements in the book , and has called it " a muted and distorted autobiography " and " a muted , or transmuted , memoir of myself as a young writer . " There are , however , significant differences between author and character . Haley is both an academic and a writer of fiction , while McEwan has been a professional author for his entire career . The intelligence agency plot is also completely fictional ; there was never a scheme such as the one described in the book run by MI5 . As McEwan says himself , " unfortunately a beautiful woman never came into my room and offered me a stipend . "

= = Genre and style = =

Sweet Tooth is a love story , a spy novel , and a book about literature itself . Serena and her boyfriend Haley ? she a well @-@ read but uncritical lover of literature , he a highly accomplished writer and literary scholar ? have different attitudes towards literature . Serena prefers a realist approach , where life in the book reflects real life . Haley on the other hand is of a more modernist school , and enjoys experimentation in his work . McEwan plays with these differences , firstly by placing himself in the novel and blurring the line between author and character , and secondly by writing what appears to be a straight first @-@ person narrative , only to distort this perception at the very end .

= = Themes = =

McEwan had long wanted to write a novel about the 1970s , a formative period in his life he refers to as " the time of my life . " For the United Kingdom it was a turbulent period , with striking miners , energy crisis , escalation of the conflict over Northern Ireland , repeated states of emergency and several shifts of government . It was also the period of the Cold War , when Western governments were trying to win the war of ideas against a highly radicalised intelligentsia . Operation Sweet Tooth is entirely fictional , but the story is inspired by the actual scandal affecting the conservative literary magazine Encounter , which in 1967 was revealed to have received covert funding from the CIA . McEwan uses this back @-@ story to explore the relationship between artist and government , and the need for literature to remain independent . According to McEwan , the problem was not the anti @-@ Communist crusade itself , but the secrecy with which it was conducted . " All that 's really required is that anything the state does in relation to the arts is laid on the table where we can see it . "

= = Critical reception = =

Lydia of The Observer enjoyed the " Russian doll " of the novel 's multiple layers , and its " keen emotional pull . " Though she had certain misgivings along the way , she felt that the last few pages answered all her questions and " moved [ her ] almost to tears . " Lucy Kellaway of the Financial Times was taken by the stories within the story , and though they tended to " suck vivacity from the main narrative " , she saw this as a device to illuminate the " different crafts of writing short stories and novels . " Benjamin Errett , writing for the National Post , pointed out how McEwan had blended spy fiction and literary criticism to a combination that was both exciting and intellectually stimulating . In reference to Serena and Tom 's different literary preferences , he concluded that " [ t ] his novel is juicy enough to satisfy them both . "

Other reviewers were less enthusiastic . The Daily Telegraph 's Catherine Taylor found the protagonist " a little too credulous . " She also found McEwan 's " wilful narrative sadism " sadly missing from the work . The review in The Economist was even more scathing : referring to Sweet Tooth as " not Mr McEwan 's finest book " , the reviewer concluded that by the end , " it is hard to feel much of anything for these heroes , who are all notions and no depth . " James Lasdun of The Guardian found that there were " momentous political questions " raised in the earlier parts of the novel , which were not fully addressed by the end . Stylistically , Serena found herself caught in

exactly the kind of narrative she disliked , but , asked Lasdun , " to what end ? " Particularly the ending of the book was polarising . Kellaway saw it as " a good excuse to go back to the beginning and read this rich and enjoyable novel all over again " , while another reviewer confessed that , though the ending " might be enough to send McEwan acolytes scurrying back through the novel to see how he did it ... it made me want to throw the book out the window . "

The statistical journal " Significance " analyses McEwan 's representation of the famous mathematical conundrum : the Monty Hall Problem .