

Atonement by Ian McEwan

What can I say, the novel made me just as mad as the movie did! In all fairness, I saw the movie first. I don't usually read the book after I watch the movie, but I found that the movie made me want to know more about how the story was written. I wanted to know the order in which it was told, POV, clues, etc. I truly think that the movie did a great job "telling" this story and I feel satisfied after having read the novel too.

I will start by saying that this story is beautifully written, with so much detail and emotion. It is really a story based on one misunderstood moment between two people. I feel like it really speaks to our modern times where we tend to misinterpret peoples actions and we assume we know what people are doing. As a society, we judge others by their mannerisms, use of words, their social standing, their age, their wealth, their education, race, gender and general lot in life. It is a great look into society and its unyielding portrayal of hierarchy and its power. And, it's infuriating!

This book evokes anger for its unfairness, for the lies it supports, for the lives it ruins and for its lack of atonement. Yes, I said lack of atonement. The meaning of atonement is to make amends or make right what was wrong. There is never an atonement made in this novel. There are slight attempts and meaning well but never is the wrong made right. Even Briony states that she doesn't consider herself a liar despite knowing she didn't tell the truth.

Briony's "crime" as identified by the narrator is that she is a liar. She is spinner of tales and a teller of tales. All of these are nice ways of saying that she makes things up...or lies. She does nothing but lie about who she saw attack Lola. She could have said it was too dark to be sure who it was and just give a description. She could have helped Lola remember what the perpetrator looked like. She could have said it was too dark to be sure. Any of these explanations would have been acceptable. The explanation that is not acceptable is that she repeatedly says she "saw him".

I felt like it could have all been different if Robbie had never written the sexually driven note or if he had put the sweeter one in the envelope. But I guess it had already been fated that his life would not be easy from this moment. If he had just delivered the note directly to Cecilia or if Briony had never opened the note. There were so many moments that could have altered the ending for Cecilia and Robbie. Cecilia and Robbie were never given the opportunity to live a true life together so Briony should not have been absolved a lifetime of guilt. Briony describes herself as a conceited child when she reflects on that fateful night in the final chapter of the novel. She is right. That is why she never apologizes, she merely writes an alternate ending to her book where Cecilia and Robbie are together.

Did you like this novel? Was the order in which it was written affect your feelings about the story?

What was the moment you felt was pivotal to creating the series of events that lead to Robbie's demise?

What was your opinion of Briony? Do you feel that Briony atoned for her lies?

Could Cecilia and Robbie have made a life together if Robbie hadn't gone to prison and war? What do you think of the ending?

If you've seen the movie, what questions did the book answer for you? Did you prefer the movie or the book?

I'm glad that you liked the overall story. I was also put off by some of the wordiness. A little was unnecessary but some of it added to the background and descriptive tone of the story. It is a common in English literature to have this long winded, flowery word structure. I sometimes feel that it adds to the story and sometimes feel that it detracts. For the most part, I think Atonement uses it to convey all of the little details that go into the "lie" at the root of the story. It's almost as if the more details the author gives, the more we know it's based in deceit. I felt that Briony's depiction of what she does to atone herself and providing the full details of what happened to Cecilia and Robbie is her elaborate lie. Its deceitful because I found myself believing the end of the story only to find that she lied about it all.

I think the irony is in the title of this book. There is no atonement for what was set in motion by Briony and until the end she believes that her attempts to say something were good enough. Briony thinks that her intentions to confess were enough to reset the world.

The movie is very true to the book and vice versa. The book does provide a few answers to some untold stories in the movie but I really think the movie adaptation is a great homage to this great novel.