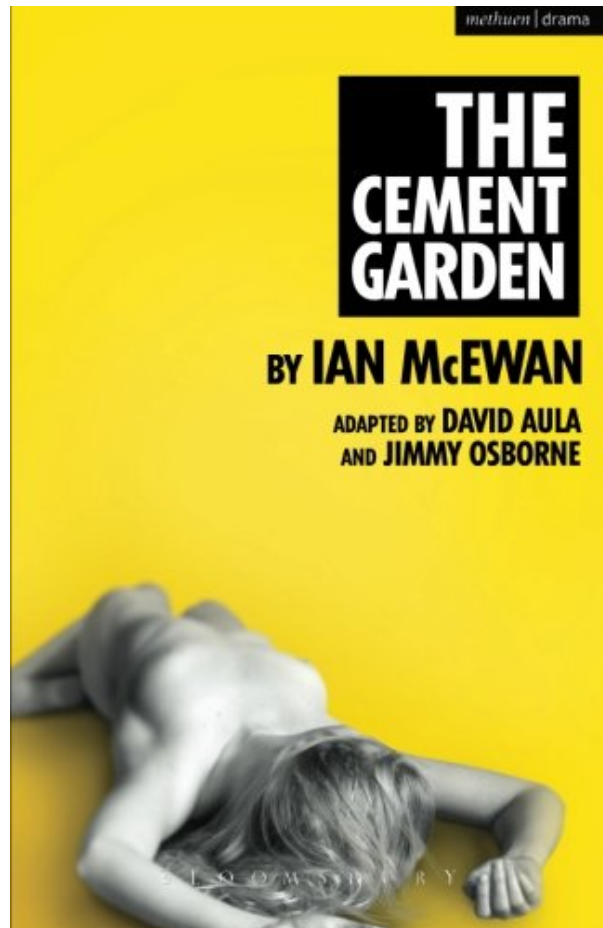


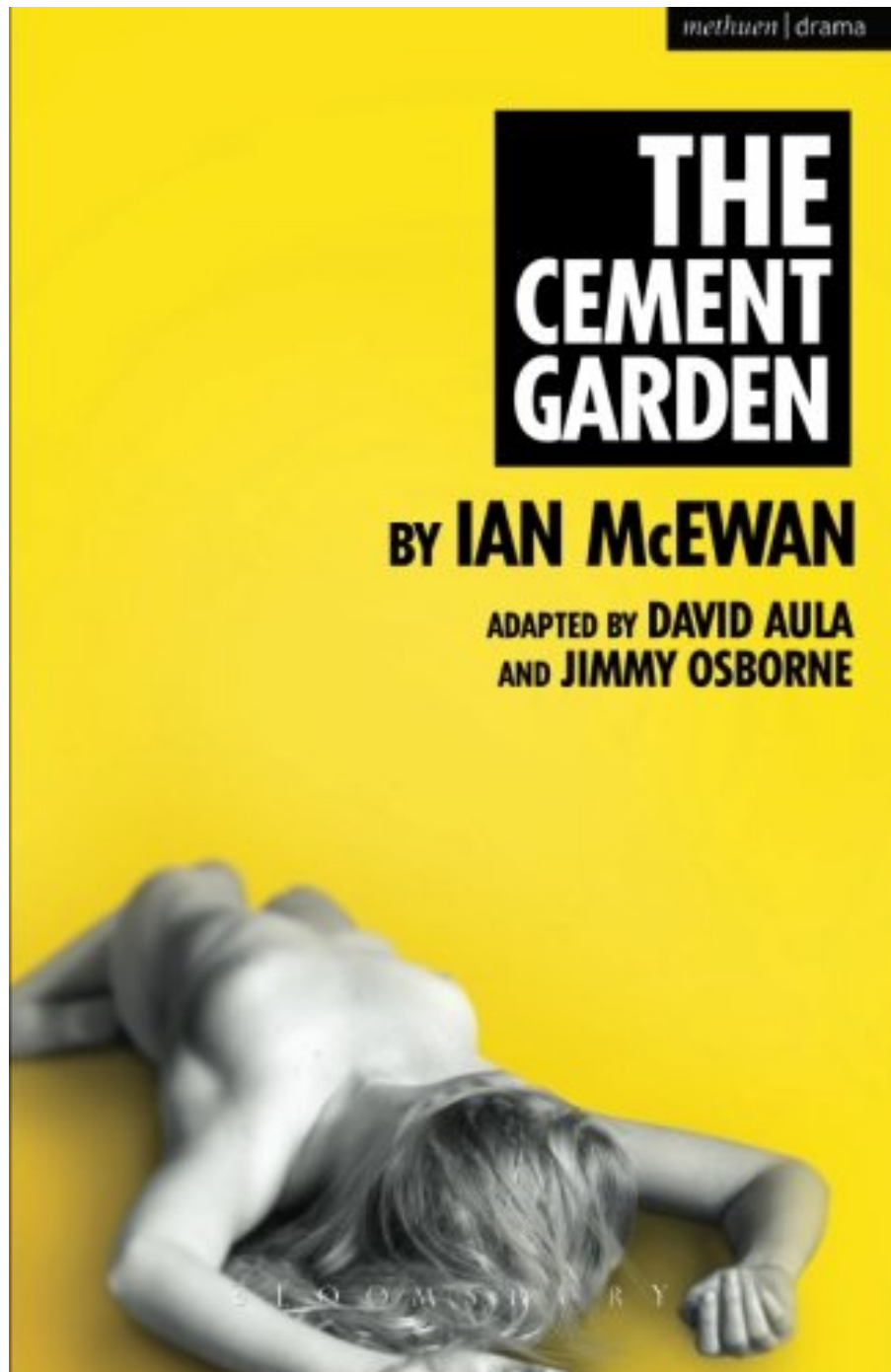
THE CEMENT GARDEN (MODERN PLAYS)

BY IAN MCEWAN



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A novel and a collection of short stories by English writer McEwan offer chilling portraits of sexual obsession.

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"I did not kill my father, but sometimes I felt I had helped him on his way. And but for the fact that it coincided with a landmark in my own physical growth, his death seemed insignificant compared with what followed. I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sisters and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal."

In the relentless summer heat, four children retreat into an isolated world left to them by their parents and attempt to create their own version of a family. Ian McEwan's first novel, *The Cement Garden*, written in 1978, explores coming-of-age, burgeoning sexuality and the distortions of a fourteen-year-old mind.

David Aula and Jimmy Osborne's stage adaptation approaches the horror of the story through the innocent eyes of children, and encourages an audience to remember the games, irreverence, and shadows of their youth: to remember and reinvent their sense of invincibility.

The Cement Garden received its world premiere as part of Vault Festival Waterloo, on 28 January 2014.

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What is "Normal?" What is "Natural"?

By Paul Frandano

Ian McEwan freezes our attention on the grotesque, then renders grotesquerie plausible, even "normal." Indeed, what is "natural" assumes an expanded range of possibility in McEwan's writing, adding fresh dimension to psychological horror. *The Cement Garden*, his first novel (and better described as a novella), brings these observations graphically to life, in precise, crystalline prose.

The Cement Garden has been likened to Golding's *Lord of the Flies* for its careful evocation of a society of young people, suddenly relieved of adult oversight, that evolves rapidly, opportunistically, organically in response to specific challenges posed by an unusual environment. In McEwan's working of these materials, related in the flat, dispassionate voice of Jack, the 14-year-old narrator, the challenging environment is the solitary house in which Jack, his brother, and two sisters live, set in the midst of a desolate urban landscape cleared for a freeway that never gets built.

The book takes its name from the paved-over garden Jack's fussy, acerbic father, a heart patient, envisions as tidier as easier to maintain. The exertions of the project kill the father, to no one's apparent regret, in the first chapter, leaving a sizable inventory of cement behind. With the demise of their long ailing mother shortly thereafter, the orphaned children are forced to recreate the family unit. Fearful of the split-up of the family, foster care for little Tom, and other worrisome ministrations of an impersonal state, the children decide to tell no one of their mother's death and to entomb her in concrete in the basement.

Jack recounts these and other details, and the changes each child undergoes, in his matter-of-fact voice. McEwan charges his tale with an extraordinary measure of sexual tension, primarily between Jack - much more than the stereotypically acne-covered, pubescent, serially self-abusing "sullen teen" - and his beautiful, athletic older sister Julia, who assumes the maternal role of "Wendy" to the family's "lost children." The movement of the story is aided and abetted by Derek, Julia's "bloke," a professional snooker player, asking all the questions the nosey private eye in a Hitchcock picture usually asks. The dreaded resolution of the relentlessly rising tension, carefully withheld until the closing pages, relieves narrative pressure but raises disturbing perspectives on love, the family, the "ties that bind."

The Cement Garden renews, at least in my mind, the great question of what it is that prompts a lavishly gifted writer to explore so sensitively the wholly bizarre. Great writing generally works simultaneously at several levels and admits layers of meaning. McEwan writes about familiar characters who before our eyes become something very, very different. He begs us to inquire beneath the surface familiarity into worlds unseen by, or denied to, passing spectators. He compels us to ask ourselves "what is 'normal'?" "What is 'natural'?" His answers may unsettle, but they are the product of a novelistic logic that, in its internal workings, is eminently reasonable.

The Cement Garden is assuredly not for every taste. More than once, I looked up from the page with an "ugh." McEwan's imagination teems with clambering spiders. But as an early example of McEwan's art and his project to redefine, or reinvent, the psychological horror story, this book is a worthy, if unsettling, read.

35 of 35 people found the following review helpful.

It's a 1st-person, urban, erotic *Lord of the Flies*!

By jjwylie@intermind.net

"I did not kill my father," this slim novel begins, "but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way." Soon the mother is dead as well, and four children are left to fend for themselves in a secluded house in a dying

part of the city.

There's Julie, the eldest, a ripe & willful beauty who's almost a woman; there's Jack, the narrator, a boy bewildered by his growing body & appetites; there's Sue, bookish & ever-observant; and then there's Tom, the baby of the family, who actually seems to get younger, regressing as the days go by. These four form an uneasy family, slowly learning to be self-sufficient in this strangely apocalyptic setting.

But an intruder in the form of Julie's new boyfriend threatens their fragile stasis by asking too many questions. How long have the four of them been alone? And just what is buried under the crumbling pile of cement in the basement?

This book has been mistakenly marketed as a horror novel; it's horrific, sure, but not as horrible as the pulp that defines the genre. What makes it particularly good is its characters, the children who are both recognizably sympathetic and exotically extraordinary.

Ian McEwan has created a taut & provocative thriller written in pitch-perfect and stripped-down prose. Beyond being a macabre morality tale, *The Cement Garden* is a psychological-suspense yarn, a perceptive portrayal of adolescence that will keep you riveted up to the final, climactic scene in an upstairs bedroom.

24 of 24 people found the following review helpful.

We are family-

By A Customer

Incest is the latest trendy topic- be it in book, movie, fiction, memoir- and it would be easy to brush it off as mere titillation. At first, "*The Cement Garden*" seems to be the epitome of this sort of gratuitously shocking genre, as it painstakingly gets inside the head of a young man and his secret desires. Upon closer examination, "*The Cement Garden*" reveals itself to be a far more ominous book. His desire for his sister becomes indicative of his need to grab an anchor in a world that has left him behind. As these four children struggle to make a family, the sexual energy that emerges becomes a better form of family love than that which they've known before. Though the children are English, they are the British equivalent of the kind of people we so quickly and easily make fun of- the natural target of a certain type of elitist humor. Rather than mocking these children for their transgression, the book's success comes when we ultimately understand the ways and the whys of why they do what they do. Therein lies the power, and the horror of the bleak landscape of the novel- it's the only love they'll maybe ever know. Having said that the book is an artistic achievement, I also want to add that when I finished it I couldn't be sure that I was glad I took that particular journey. I was utterly enthralled with the story and its raw honesty, but so depressed when it was over, as the world of the book was so hermetic and insular that there was no way out- necessary to the book but brutal on the reader. As an aside, the film adaptation is highly worth checking out as a most faithful visual translation, mostly as a result of the bizarrely appropriate casting. The film stars Charlotte Gainsbourg, daughter of French pop star Serge Gainsbourg and Chelsea girl Jane Birkin. (Serge and Charlotte appeared in bed together in a print ad in the early 80s.) Furthermore, the film is directed by Jane's brother and hence Charlotte's uncle Andrew Birkin, and the younger children are played by the director's own children- Charlotte's cousins.

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