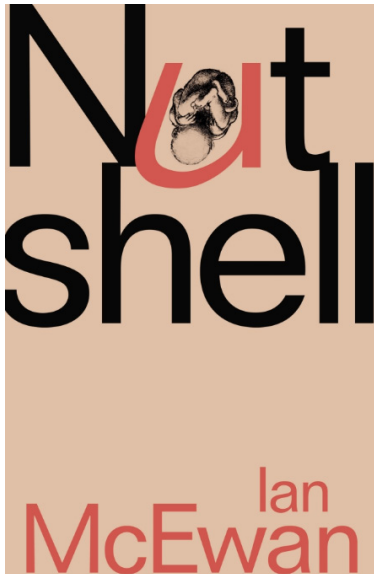


VINTAGE READING GUIDE



SYNOPSIS

Trudy has betrayed her husband, John. She's still in the marital home – a dilapidated, priceless London townhouse – but not with John. Instead, she's with his brother, the profoundly banal Claude, and the two of them have a plan. But there is a witness to their plot: the inquisitive, nine-month-old resident of Trudy's womb.

Told from a perspective unlike any other, *Nutshell* is a classic tale of murder and deceit from one of the world's master storytellers.

QUESTIONS

- Discuss the idea of 'retelling'. When did you realise that the novel was a retelling of Hamlet? Did this bring anything extra to your reading of the book?
- 'McEwan can be counted on to make the implausible plausible and the outrageous reasonable' (Booklist review of *Nutshell*, August 2016). Do you think this statement is true in regards to *Nutshell*?
- 'I've no taste for comedy.' Did you find the book funny? Did you think it was supposed to be funny?
- 'I'm an organ in her body, not separate from her thoughts. I'm party to what she's about to do.' How does McEwan use the foetus/mother relationship to drive the story forward? Do you think he uses it effectively?
- 'Words, as I'm beginning to appreciate, make things true.' Discuss how McEwan explores this idea in the novel, and whether you agree with it.
- 'Pessimism is too easy. It absolves the thinking classes of solutions.' Do you think the end result of the novel proves this statement? If so, why, and if not, why not?
- Look at the narrator's attempted 'suicide' alongside the start of Trudy's labour, and discuss how McEwan uses these two events to explore the notions of control? Who do you think is really in control in the narrative: Claude, Trudy or the foetus?
- 'She's sees that the crime... was not a crime at all. It's a mistake, it always was.' Discuss Trudy's attempts to justify the crime.
- 'This is a step into the complete freedom – if it is freedom – of a fantasy.' (Ian McEwan in conversation with Michael W. Miller, *Wall Street Journal*, August 2016) How would you classify this novel? Some reviewers have classified it as a domestic thriller: would you agree?
- Discuss the ending of the novel. Did you expect it to end this way? Did you find it satisfying?

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WIDER DISCUSSION

McEwan has described the choice to have a foetus as the narrator as 'a lovely rhetorical challenge... The idea struck me as so silly that I just couldn't resist it.' (Ian McEwan in an interview with Decca Aitkenhead, *Guardian*, August 2016). Can you think of other highly unusual narrators? How does this one compare?

'Without women readers the novel would be dead', Ian McEwan in an interview with Decca Aitkenhead, *Guardian*, August 2016. Do you agree? Do you think it is fruitful to conceive readers as 'male' or 'female'?

'Updatings of Shakespeare often strain at their own seams', Kate Clanchy, *Guardian*, August 2016. Do you agree? Discuss with reference to *Nutshell*.

Read the article below, written by Ian McEwan in the wake of the Brexit referendum result. Use it as a starting point for a discussion on the themes of control, the future and the post-factual political climate within *Nutshell*. Do you think that McEwan is pushing a particular political agenda in this novel? Do you think it could be read as an allegorical indictment of our post-factual age, chiming with McEwan's words below?

It's easy enough these days to wake troubled even before you remember the cause. Then you do. Everything is changed utterly. Or about to be, as soon as your new leader is chosen. The country you live in, the parliamentary democracy that ruled it, for good or bad, has been trumped by a plebiscite of dubious purpose and unacknowledged status. From our agriculture to our science and our universities, from our law to our international relations to our commerce and trade and politics, and who and what we are in the world – all is up for a curious, unequal renegotiation with our European neighbours. How did we get to this? What can you do?

By now you are putting on your shoes and running through the sequence yet one more time. The Conservative party needed to settle an old dispute within its ranks. The quarrel once wrecked the sleep of John Major. The schism needed to be healed to shore up the position and sleep of David Cameron. Certain newspaper owners and a large minority of Tory backbenchers had to be appeased. The promise to let the people decide was in the Conservative manifesto, and the country had voted for a Conservative government. It was legal and proper to have a referendum.

The campaign was conducted by and was an argument between Conservative politicians – at its simplest, Cameron–Osborne against Johnson–Gove. The role of UKIP was merely to make everyone else seem reasonable. We watched and wondered, as Kremlinologists once did. The Jeremy Corbyn Labour party was shamefully, or shamelessly, absent until it was too late. The status of the 2015 parliamentary act that enabled the referendum was clear, but we didn't read it. Was it advisory, like some referendums are, or was it binding?

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The question didn't come up. We failed to ask it. No use declaring, as you may keep declaring after it didn't go your way, that all along it was merely advisory. You should have thought of that earlier. And what was the nation's democratically tendered advice to our lawmakers? That we're almost evenly split. One third wants to leave, fractionally less than a third wants to stay, and a third doesn't know or doesn't care. Seventeen million against 16 million. Each full of contempt for the other. And on this basis and unlike any other country in the world, we are about to redraft our constitution and much else besides.

You'll be at the coffee before you remember all over again the lies that needed to be told to gain the result. The £350m a week that would become available to the NHS; that we could halt immigration from Europe and remain in the single market; that Turkey was about to join; that we could 'take back our country' – as if any international treaty was not, in a rule-bound context, a diminution of sovereignty in exchange for a greater good.

On your second cup you might check online for the Conservative party rules for selecting a new leader, as if knowing them might empower you somehow. Or you might take another look at the far simpler Article 50 that sets out the means of our departure. Barely 400 words, remarkably easy to read, given that it was drawn up by lawyers. When we've invoked the clause we're committed to leave within two years. Our partners don't want to negotiate with us until the article is invoked. If these were the rules of a card game only a mug would sit down to play. The banker takes all. How can parliament, even assuming it has a say, vote on a deal it cannot see until it's too late?

And yet we are told, even by the defeated Tory remainder faction, that 'the people have spoken'. Perhaps this is what the party wanted all along – all of it. We hardly know. The minority of us who read newspapers know less than a tenth of what's happening. But we can be sure of the contempt each Tory caucus holds for the others, with some contempt to spare for us bystanders.

We may assume that powerful Conservative figures wanted Boris Johnson gone, for historical as well as proximal reasons. Someone lofty may have spoken smoothly into the ear of his lieutenant, Michael Gove, to persuade him he was prime minister material and that he should desert. When he did and Johnson stepped aside, a so-called grandee, Michael Heseltine, was on hand to disembowel the corpse. Then, for his 15 minutes, Gove was before us, cross-gartered like foolish Malvolio, until another grandee, Kenneth Clarke, in concert with the *Daily Mail*, was ready to knife his guts. Two down in the summer of contempt.

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Or it happened another way. We Kremlinologists can only guess at what's being turned over in the clubs of St James or the farmhouses of Oxfordshire. But we do know that what all sides are calling the greatest political crisis of our generation is a creature imagined into being by the Conservative party alone. It, not UKIP, offered the referendum; it fought it, it won as well as lost it. For such services, for the mayhem and poison that followed and are clouding the leadership contest, we should now be watching it shredded by an effective, eloquent opposition. But by their silence Corbyn and his troubled, paranoid court have delivered us, in effect, and for the time being, into a one-party state, and not the Leninist version certain courtiers dream of.

Now you watch helplessly as your prime minister is chosen. It is, of course, constitutionally correct that you have no say in the matter. But it's hard to shake off that below-stairs feeling. We can do no more than gossip round the kitchen table. The butler has a theory, and so does the second chambermaid. Even 'boots' knows all about tactical voting. Our first-naming paradoxically measures our distance from events. Is Boris biding his time, or is he truly finished? What does it tell us about the party, post 2008, that Andrea Leadsom, an ex-banker hostile to the minimum wage, could soon be prime minister? Was Theresa's reticence during the referendum campaign astute and tactical? Or merely an expression of her character? Or is she the remainers' mole? Can we believe that the chancellor isn't plotting? We hear footsteps above our head – more comings and goings. But who?

You might cling to the butler's mole theory even as you worry that your hopes are loosening your grip on reality: the powerful faction that wanted to remain, and whispered flattery and enticements in Gove's ear, has cleared the field of Johnson, the other side's most powerful contender, and eased one of its own into place as PM. The exit negotiations begin and are inevitably protracted in a game with such stacked odds. Our European friends, watching their own backs, will not be offering kindly terms. Only a fool would want to invoke the dread article too soon.

Meanwhile, the economy is in decline, the pound is drifting towards parity with the dollar, the jobless lines are lengthening. Racists and xenophobes are gripped by an elated sense of entitlement. The cry gets louder for a second referendum. The voices come from the only quarter that matters – the Party. Ex-attorney general Dominic Grieve is among the first, then some ex-ministers, then those grandees again. At last, with no loss of face, Prime Minister May reluctantly grants their wish. It's what, in her heart, she always wanted. And clearly, the public mood has shifted. On hard-pressed council estates leavers are suffering what we've learned to call buyers' remorse. Second time around, Remain sweeps the board. We're back in. In fact, we never left. It was all a bad dream. The summer of contempt will be soon forgotten. Take your shoes off. Go back to bed. When you wake, Boris Johnson will be leader of the Labour party. He was, he says, always well to the left of Tony Blair. What can you do?

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/09/country-political-crisis-tories-prime-minister>

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Further reading:

Hogarth Shakespeare Series: great contemporary authors retell Shakespeare's classic tales.

The Gap of Time by Jeanette Winterson

Vinegar Girl by Anne Tyler

Shylock is my Name by Howard Jacobson

Other McEwan novels that share themes with *Nutshell*:

Unusually clever narrator: *Atonement*

The blind luck of where you might be born: *The Children Act*

London and the current political climate: *Saturday*

Sexual politics: *First Love, Last Rites*

About the author

Ian McEwan is a critically acclaimed author of short stories and novels for adults, as well as *The Daydreamer*, a children's novel illustrated by Anthony Browne. His first published work, a collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*, won the Somerset Maugham Award. His novels include *The Child in Time*, which won the 1987 Whitbread Novel of the Year Award, *The Cement Garden*, *Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam*, which won the 1998 Booker Prize, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *On Chesil Beach*, *Solar*, *Sweet Tooth* and *The Children Act*.

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