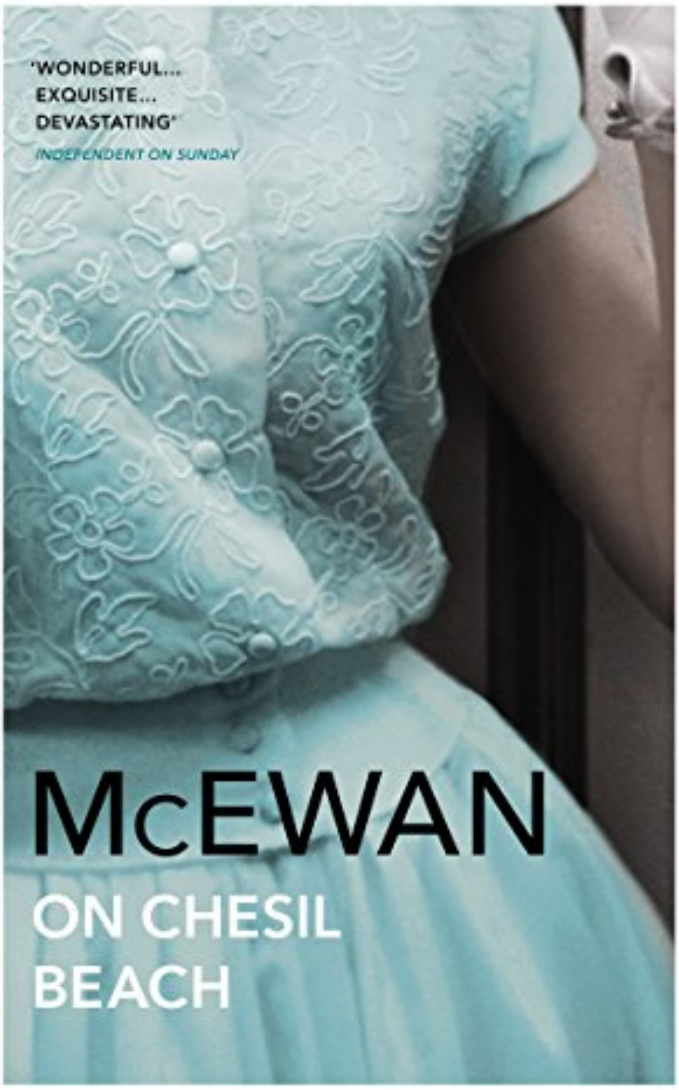
On Chesil Beach



Par Ian McEwan
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Par Ian McEwan : On Chesil Beach before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised On Chesil Beach:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIt is July 1962. Edward and Florence, young innocents married that morning, arrive at a hotel on the Dorset coast. At dinner in their rooms they struggle to suppress their private fears of the wedding night to come and, unbeknownst to them both, the events of the evening will haunt them for the rest of their lives..comSuch is Ian McEwan's genius that, despite rambling nature walks and the naming of birds, his subject matter remains hermetically sealed in the hearts of two people. It is 1962 when Edward and Florence, 23 and 22 respectively, marry and repair to a hotel on the Dorset coast for their honeymoon. They are both virgins, both apprehensive about what's next and in Florence's case, utterly and blindly terrified and repelled by the little she knows. Through a tense dinner in their room, because Florence has decided that the

weather is not fine enough to dine on the terrace, they are attended by two local boys acting as waiters. The cameo appearances of the boys and Edward and Florence's parents and siblings serve only to underline the emotional isolation of the two principals. Florence says of herself: "...she lacked some simple mental trick that everyone else had, a mechanism so ordinary that no one ever mentioned it, an immediate sensual connection to people and events, and to her own needs and desires...." They are on the cusp of a rather ordinary marital undertaking in differing states of readiness, willingness and ardor. McEwan says: "Where he merely suffered conventional first-night nerves, she experienced a visceral dread, a helpless disgust as palpable as seasickness." Edward, having denied himself even the release of self-pleasuring for a week, in order to be tip-top for Florence, is mentally pawing the ground. His sensitivity keeps him from being obvious, but he is getting anxious. Florence, on the other hand, knows that she is not capable of the kind of arousal that will make any of this easy. She has held Edward off for a year, and now the reckoning is upon her. McEwan is the master of the defining moment, that place and time when, once it has taken place, nothing will ever be the same after it. It does not go well and Florence flees the room. "As she understood it, there were no words to name what had happened, there existed no shared language in which two sane adults could describe such events to each other." Edward eventually follows her and they have a poignant and painful conversation where accusations are made, ugly things are said and roads are taken from which, in the case of these two, the way back cannot be found. Late in Edward's life he realizes: "Love and patience--if only he had them both at once--would surely have seen them both through." This beautifully told sad story could have been conceived and written only by Ian McEwan. --Valerie RyanExtraitONEThey were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible. But it is never easy. They had just sat down to supper in a tiny sitting room on the first floor of a Georgian inn. In the next room, visible through the open door, was a fourposter bed, rather narrow, whose bedcover was pure white and stretched startlingly smooth, as though by no human hand. Edward did not mention that he had never stayed in a hotel before, whereas Florence, after many trips as a child with her father, was an old hand. Superficially, they were in fine spirits. Their wedding, at St. Marys, Oxford, had gone well; the service was decorous, the reception jolly, the sendoff from school and college friends raucous and uplifting. Her parents had not condescended to his, as they had feared, and his mother had not significantly misbehaved, or completely forgotten the purpose of the occasion. The couple had driven away in a small car belonging to Florences mother and arrived in the early evening at their hotel on the Dorset coast in weather that was not perfect for midJuly or the circumstances, but entirely adequate: it was not raining, but nor was it quite warm enough, according to Florence, to eat outside on the terrace as they had hoped. Edward thought it was, but, polite to a fault, he would not think of contradicting her on such an evening.So they were eating in their rooms before the partially open French windows that gave onto a balcony and a view of a portion of the English Channel, and Chesil Beach with its infinite shingle. Two youths in dinner jackets served them from a trolley parked outside in the corridor, and their comings and goings through what was generally known as the honeymoon suite made the waxed oak boards squeak comically against the silence. Proud and protective, the young man watched closely for any gesture or expression that might have seemed satirical. He could not have tolerated any sniggering. But these lads from a nearby village went about their business with bowed backs and closed faces, and their manner was tentative, their hands shook as they set items down on the starched linen tablecloth. They were nervous too.This was not a good moment in the history of English cuisine, but no one much minded at the time, except visitors from abroad. The formal meal began, as so many did then, with a slice of melon decorated by a single glazed cherry. Out in the corridor, in silver dishes on candleheated plate warmers, waited slices of longago roasted beef in a thickened gravy, soft boiled vegetables, and potatoes of a bluish hue. The wine was from France, though no particular region was mentioned on the label, which was embellished with a solitary darting swallow. It would not have crossed Edwards mind to have ordered a red.Desperate for the waiters to leave, he and Florence turned in their chairs to consider the view of a broad mossy lawn, and beyond, a tangle of flowering shrubs and trees clinging to a steep bank that descended to a lane that led to the beach. They could see the beginnings of a footpath, dropping by muddy steps, a way lined by weeds of extravagant sizegiant rhubarb and cabbages they looked like, with swollen stalks more than six feet tall, bending under the weight of dark, thickveined leaves. The garden vegetation rose up, sensuous and tropical in its profusion, an effect heightened by the gray, soft light and a delicate mist drifting in from the sea, whose steady motion of advance and withdrawal made sounds of gentle thunder, then sudden hissing against the pebbles. Their plan was to change into rough shoes after supper and walk on the shingle between the sea and the lagoon

known as the fleet, and if they had not finished the wine, they would take that along, and swig from the bottle like gentlemen of the road.And they had so many plans, giddy plans, heaped up before them in the misty future, as richly tangled as the summer flora of the Dorset coast, and as beautiful. Where and how they would live, who their close friends would be, his job with her fathers firm, her musical career and what to do with the money her father had given her, and how they would not be like other people, at least, not inwardly. This was still the erait would end later in that famous decadewhen to be young was a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance, a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the beginning of a cure. Almost strangers, they stood, strangely together, on a new pinnacle of existence, gleeful that their new status promised to promote them out of their endless youthEdward and Florence, free at last! One of their favorite topics was their childhoods, not so much the pleasures as the fog of comical misconceptions from which they had emerged, and the various parental errors and outdated practices they could now forgive.From these new heights they could see clearly, but they could not describe to each other certain contradictory feelings: they separately worried about the moment, sometime soon after dinner, when their new maturity would be tested, when they would lie down together on the fourposter bed and reveal themselves fully to each other. For over a year, Edward had been mesmerized by the prospect that on the evening of a given date in July the most sensitive portion of himself would reside, however briefly, within a naturally formed cavity inside this cheerful, pretty, formidably intelligent woman. How this was to be achieved without absurdity, or disappointment, troubled him. His specific worry, based on one unfortunate experience, was of overexcitement, of what he had heard someone describe as arriving too soon. The matter was rarely out of his thoughts, but though his fear of failure was great, his eagernessfor rapture, for resolutionwas far greater.Florences anxieties were more serious, and there were moments during the journey from Oxford when she thought she was about to draw on all her courage to speak her mind. But what troubled her was unutterable, and she could barely frame it for herself. Where he merely suffered conventional first-night nerves, she experienced a visceral dread, a helpless disgust as palpable as seasickness. For much of the time, through all the months of merry wedding preparation, she managed to ignore this stain on her happiness, but whenever her thoughts turned toward a close embraceshe preferred no other termher stomach tightened dryly, she was nauseous at the back of her throat. In a modern, forwardlooking handbook that was supposed to be helpful to young brides, with its cheery tones and exclamation marks and numbered illustrations, she came across certain phrases or words that almost made her gag: mucous membrane, and the sinister and glistening glans. Other phrases offended her intelligence, particularly those concerning entrances: Not long before he enters heror, now at last he enters her, and, happily, soon after he has entered herWas she obliged on the night to transform herself for Edward into a kind of portal or drawing room through which he might process? Almost as frequent was a word that suggested to her nothing but pain, flesh parted before a knife: penetration.In optimistic moments she tried to convince herself that she suffered no more than a heightened form of squeamishness, which was bound to pass. Certainly, the thought of Edward's testicles, pendulous below his engorged penisanother horrifying termhad the potency to make her upper lip curl, and the idea of herself being touched down there by someone else, even someone she loved, was as repulsive as, say, a surgical procedure on her eye. But her squeamishness did not extend to babies. She liked them; she had looked after her cousin's little boys on occasion and enjoyed herself. She thought she would love being pregnant by Edward, and in the abstract, at least, she had no fears about childbirth. If only she could, like the mother of Jesus, arrive at that swollen state by magic.Florence suspected that there was something profoundly wrong with her, that she had always been different, and that at last she was about to be exposed. Her problem, she thought, was greater, deeper, than straightforward physical disgust; her whole being was in revolt against a prospect of entanglement and flesh; her composure and essential happiness were about to be violated. She simply did not want to be entered or penetrated. Sex with Edward could not be the summation of her joy, but was the price she must pay for it.She knew she should have spoken up long ago, as soon as he proposed, long before the visit to the sincere and softvoiced vicar, and dinners with their respective parents, before the wedding guests were invited, the gift list devised and lodged with a department store, and the marquee and photographer hired, and all the other irreversible arrangements. But what could she have said, what possible terms could she have used when she could not have named the matter to herself? And she loved Edward, not with the hot, moist passion she had read about, but warmly, deeply, sometimes like a daughter, sometimes almost maternally. She loved cuddling him, and having his enormous arm around her shoulders, and being kissed by him, though she disliked his tongue in her mouth and had wordlessly made this clear. She thought he was original, unlike anyone she had ever met. He always had a paperback book,

usually history, in his jacket pocket in case he found himself in a queue or a waiting room. He marked what he read with a pencil stub. He was virtually the only man Florence had met who did not smoke. None of his socks matched. He had only one tie, narrow, knitted, dark blue, which he wore nearly all the time with a white shirt. She adored his curious mind, his mild country accent, the huge st...