

THE INVADED HOME IN IAN MCEWAN'S *SATURDAY* AND *SOLAR*

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Ian McEwan has become almost notorious for the highly dramatic set pieces that appear in several of his novels, on which the narrative generally hinges. These set pieces range from the dramatically surreal—as in the moment at the beginning of *Enduring Love* (1997) in which a hot air balloon drifts away into the air—to the intensely personal, such as the crucial plot hinge in *Atonement* (2001) in which the protagonist witnesses her sister at a moment of great sexual tension. As such, we can view the isolated dramatic incident as something that is characteristic of McEwan's writing. Both of the novels that I address in this paper, *Saturday* (2005) and *Solar* (2010) include scenes of this nature; however they are less integral to their narratives than the comparable moments in *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*. What is particularly interesting about these two scenes is that they both occur in the setting of the home, and in both novels this location is given great importance.

Rather than being centred on certain key incidents, *Saturday* and *Solar* are focused around their protagonists, successful middle-aged men who are at the peaks of their respective careers. *Saturday* revolves around Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon. Indeed, the novel's focus is tied exclusively to him, and this allows for an intricate, intimate portrait of his character. This is made all the more detailed by the novel's temporal restriction: its action takes place over the course of one day, Saturday 15 February 2003, when more than half a million people took to the streets of London to protest against the invasion of Iraq. This device, which places McEwan in the illustrious company of the great modernist writers Joyce and Woolf, was one feature that caused the initial reception of *Saturday* to be divided. There were also concerns about the character of Perowne, whose evident affluence and almost implausibly perfect family provoked some criticism. And then there was the rather unlikely climactic scene that I intend to consider later in this paper, in which an unhinged intruder who is threatening the protagonist's family at knife-point is subdued by the recitation of a Matthew Arnold poem.

The protagonist of *Solar*, Michael Beard is also the exclusive focal point of the novel. Like Perowne, he too is fiscally wealthy, but he is a much more flawed character. He is a Nobel Prize winning physicist who is attempting to harness solar energy successfully. Five times divorced,

he has a significantly less exemplary family life than Perowne; he also displays unfavourable traits such as greed and infidelity in both his personal and professional lives. McEwan includes several comic episodes in *Solar* which serve to strengthen his portrayal of Beard, but there is also one scene of considerable dramatic tension, on which I will concentrate. Here, Beard unexpectedly finds one of his junior colleagues, Tom Aldous, in his house and deduces that he is having an affair with his wife, Patrice. In the ensuing altercation, Aldous bangs his head on a table and is killed, and Beard has to ensure that he is not suspected of murder.

This episode is comparable to the scene in *Saturday* in which Perowne has to deal with the intruder, Baxter, for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is the fact that in both cases the protagonist's home is invaded by an unwelcome guest with whom they have some familiarity. Secondly, there is in both novels a grudge between the protagonist and the invader—although in *Saturday* this has developed earlier in the novel, while in *Solar* Beard's animosity towards Aldous emerges during the key scene. However, perhaps the most significant similarity is the fact that both of these episodes occur in the desirable London homes of affluent men. Therefore these events draw attention to the importance of the home as a device in fiction, and act as threats to the security that these large, well-protected houses provide to their inhabitants.

Wealth is something that Perowne and Beard share, and something that is difficult not to notice. In *Saturday* especially, Perowne's prosperity is always apparent. He drives a top-of-the-range Mercedes and, visiting the fishmonger, buys 'three monkfish tails that cost a little more than his first car' (127). Even when he puts on a moth-eaten old sweater, it is made of cashmere. But the most obvious signifier of his wealth is his home. In the novel's opening pages, a series of references gradually reveal this. On the first page we learn that his bedroom is large enough to require three windows, and its substantial size is verified in the next paragraph. When Perowne looks out of one of these windows and surveys his neighbourhood, it is revealed to be a Fitzrovia square laid out by Robert Adam (4). Further into the book we hear of vast built-in wardrobes with automatic lights (55) and a nineteenth-century French chandelier (65). Waking up on this Saturday morning, Perowne quotes to himself a line from Darwin's *Origin of Species*: 'There is grandeur in this view of life' (55). Darwin's comment on the process of evolution is here reclaimed as a marker of financial accomplishment and a marking of Perowne's territory.

Beard is in some ways presented as though he is less well off. He is 'always on the lookout for an official role with a stipend attached' as 'his university salary, lecture fees and media appearances were never quite

sufficient' (*Solar*, 16). But it is greed rather than impecuniousness that causes him to feel this way; his home in the expensive North–West London area of Belsize Park is testament to his prosperity. As was the case in *Saturday*, there are references to Beard's house from the first page of *Solar*. We are told that his wife is having an affair with a builder, 'who had repointed their house, fitted their kitchen, retiled their bathroom' (3). This information reveals that Beard's home is kept well-maintained, and also serves to introduce a comparison between his house and the builder's. With its mock–Tudor styling and a boat on the driveway, this house is presented as kitsch and inelegant compared to Beard's more neutral, more refined home. Further through the novel, the house is described in greater detail; it is

neat, early Victorian, of grey London brick, with stone mullions on the downstairs windows, and standing on its own patch of wintry garden with its one bare birch and, to the side, an ancient apple tree. Not many London houses had a hundred feet of front garden, and a path of flaking brick in herringbone pattern making a shallow curve to the front door, and mossy brick walls marking the boundaries. (81)

While this dwelling is less grand than Perowne's townhouse, it is equally desirable, and in this passage it is presented as though it is superior to the majority of other homes.

In *Saturday*, the Fitzrovia townhouse occupies a central position in the narrative. It is the weekend, and when he is not running various errands, Perowne is at home. His daughter and his father-in-law, who both live abroad, are visiting, and he is planning a family dinner. This occasion is interrupted by the invasion of Baxter, the intruder who enters the home. In a chance incident that is typical of McEwan's work, Perowne is involved in a minor car accident with Baxter on the morning of *Saturday*. There is an altercation in the street; Perowne uses his medical expertise to overcome this, observing that Baxter displays the symptoms of Huntingdon's disease, thus unsettling his assailant. It is in revenge for this small humiliation that Baxter forces his way into the home and threatens his family. The fact that the novel's climactic scene takes place within Perowne's home, and functions as an invasion of his territory, is crucial. This space has been an integral part of the novel, and has come to define the protagonist, so there is a clear upheaval for both the narrative and the character when it is invaded in this way. Much is also made of the devices that are put in place to keep the house secure.

There are multiple locks on the door, a burglar alarm that is described as ‘reassuring’, and a panic button in the bedroom (36). But Baxter is able to bypass all of these; he makes his way through the front door as Perowne’s wife lets herself into the house.

In *Solar*, the home tends to have less importance. This is largely because Beard spends much of his time away from it, often travelling for work; this distance serves to represent his alienation from domestic and family life. In the first part of the novel, he is working on a renewable energy project based outside of London and travels to its base near Reading on a daily basis. Later on, his work with solar energy takes him to America, where the novel’s third and final section is set. The home is an uneasy place for Beard, who seems to prefer being away from it. This means that it is fitting that the most uncomfortable episode in *Solar* takes place in his house. Arriving home early from a trip abroad, Beard finds Aldous, who confesses that he has been involved with Beard’s wife. They two men argue, and Beard asks Aldous to leave. Aldous gets up and, in his agitated state, slips on a polar bear skin rug and hits his head on a glass coffee table. Although the result of this fatal accident might resemble murder, Beard is fortunate that his wife has another lover, their builder, who has left some tools and personal effects in the house. By placing a hammer and a few hairs from the builder’s comb near to Aldous’ body, he is easily able to frame the innocent man.

In *Saturday*, it is not only the home but also the setting of the square that has a certain status: having territory in this place gives its owner more to be proud of than if it was elsewhere. McEwan remarks that ‘people often drift into the square to act out their dramas. Clearly, a street won’t do’ (60). The square is presented as a theatrical space, a stage on which McEwan can play out Perowne’s life. Perowne has an eighteen-year-old son, Theo, who is an up and coming blues guitarist. In the afternoon of *Saturday*, Perowne attends a rehearsal and hears one of his son’s newly composed songs. The lyrics of this song are quoted in the text:

*Baby, you can choose despair
Or you can be happy if you dare.
So let me take you there,
My city square, city square. (70)*

So the square acts not only as a stage, but also as an inspiration for artistic output. But in addition, the lyrics of this song serve as a reminder that Perowne’s home territory is not solely his. He shares it with his wife, Rosalind, and with his son. Rosalind is a less developed character

than Theo—she is out at work for most of this Saturday—but Perowne and Theo share space in the novel on several occasions. At the rehearsal, they arrive and leave separately and Theo is playing the whole time, so they do not actually interact here. The only location where they do engage with one another is the house.

The first instance of this is when Perowne goes down to the kitchen, having woken in the middle of the night, and finds Theo, who has recently come home after playing a gig. They meet again in the kitchen at lunchtime, but eat separately. While there is no tension between this father and son—and this is something that some critics have remarked upon—there is a clear sense that they use their space very differently. Theo's bedroom on the top floor of the house is beyond the borders of Perowne's territory, but there are zones, like the kitchen, which they share. It is certainly significant that Theo is introduced early on in the novel, as the overlaps in his and his father's use of space, which quickly become apparent, foreground the theme of territory. One of the few occasions when any conflict at all is hinted at is when Perowne considers the chaos of the city, and imagines 'the whole world resembling Theo's bedroom' (122). Evidently the intended effect of this is comic, but implicit is a sense that Perowne's ordered territory may be threatened by the encroaching clutter of his son's.

In contrast, the setting of Beard's home does not remain constant, and the major threat to its environment is Beard himself. Soon after the incident in Belsize Park, he divorces his fifth wife and moves into a flat in Marylebone, where he lives alone. However, he regards his new home with very little affection. When the second part of *Solar* begins, five years after Aldous' death, Beard is once again flying in to London from a trip abroad, and thinks of two locations below him that function as home spaces. The first of these is 'his icy, neglected, chaotic Marylebone apartment' (109). The second is that home of his current lover, which is later described as 'an unpoetically tidy domain' (163). As Beard flies in, McEwan tells us that 'Whichever direction his gaze fell, this was home, his native corner of the planet' (110). This clearly indicates that home is a far less specific location for Beard than it is for Perowne; he considers his home country as his territory, rather than the small part of it that he actually owns, or his address. Indeed, when he unexpectedly finds Aldous in his house, his anger at the invasion of his territory seems almost anomalous. But this does not diminish his anger when he unexpectedly finds Aldous in his house.

Beard's slobbish habits are described at length. His flat is described as a 'midden' (109); then, in greater detail, we are told that 'over the plates in the dining room, the pans in the kitchen, on the garbage in the

pail and spread across the chopping board, and even on the coffee grounds in the dried-out filter paper, there would be vigorous, differently hued fungal growths in creamy white and soft greyish-greens' (110). This description continues at even greater length, until the uninhabitable state of Beard's flat is fully apparent. Further through *Solar*, we learn that he can only stand to remain in the flat for a few days at a time, 'until its grime and multiple defects drove him out' (221). We are then given an extensive list of these defects, which includes a leaking roof, a broken tap and carpets that have not been cleaned in six years. We are also told that the flat 'was supposed to be a stopover on his path to the austere and well-lit refuge, as innocently clean as Eden, purged of clutter and distraction, where a free and open mind could range unimpeded' (222). This is a significant passage, not only because it reveals the failings in Beard's character, but also because it indicates the aspirations he has about his home environment. Although the squalid home that he has in *Solar* is less important to the novel than Perowne's house in *Saturday*, it is evident that Beard also strives for a life whose view will provide him with some grandeur.

Perhaps this is why he is so unsettled by the appearance of Aldous in his Belsize Park home, which comes across as the grandest of the places that serve as a home for Beard in *Solar*. When he is discovered by Beard, Aldous is 'on the sofa, with dripping hair, wearing a dressing gown, Beard's dressing gown in black silk with a paisley pattern, a Valentine's gift from Patrice' (83). He has not only invaded Beard's personal space, but he has also dressed himself in his clothing. In addition, it is at this point that it becomes immediately apparent to Beard that Aldous has been sleeping with his wife, and this constitutes another invasion. The intruder does not just break in to Beard's home but is also instrumental in breaking up his already fragile family life. So, as is the case in *Saturday*, home and family are connected in *Solar*; Beard's inhabits his most desirable home at the point in the novel when he is married.

In *Saturday*, Baxter invades the home and breaks up the family gathering, thus shattering the confluence of family and home. The notion of territory or personal space is seen as being important from Perowne's first encounter with Baxter, the car crash. When Perowne tells Baxter that he pulled out from his parked position without looking, Baxter challenges him, saying, "I didn't need to be looking, did I? The Tottenham Court Road's closed. You aren't supposed to be there'" (89). Here, Baxter perceives Perowne as someone who has transgressed into a space that should have been closed off to him. This is inverted later on in *Saturday*, when Baxter forces entry into the Perowne house. However,

Baxter may be making a risky move when he invades in this way, as he is confronting Perowne on his opponent's home territory—and this territory now becomes something to be defended. Baxter's function is as a challenge to the territory. John Banville has said that 'Henry has everything, and as in all good fairy tales, he gets to keep it, after getting rid of the troll who had sought to challenge his right of ownership' (12).

The home is also an important notion to consider if we turn from *Saturday* to its author. Like Perowne, Ian McEwan is a resident of Fitzrovia, and lives on a square there. Since there is only one square in Fitzrovia, it is not difficult to determine that the home of both character and author is Fitzroy Square, and that McEwan has based Perowne's house on his own home. This means that Perowne's space is also McEwan's space. There are some details in *Saturday* that indicate this: one is the presence of a library in the fictionalised house. Perowne is a sporadic reader, who is more likely to have books pressed on him by his daughter, a poet, than to actually choose to read them himself. McEwan qualifies the inclusion of the library by saying that 'the collection was put together by Marianne [his mother-in-law]. Henry never imagined he would end up living in the sort of house that had a library' (66), but it is also described as 'the most imposing room in the house' (65). In Perowne's richly detailed lifestyle, the library seems out of place, as though it has been imported by McEwan—whose home in fact has two libraries. Indeed, the house might seem to be more McEwan's than Perowne's; this comes across in one interview with McEwan which also considers some other real-life details that informed the character.

Neil Kitchen, a brain surgeon whom McEwan shadowed while researching the novel, told me that he'd been a guest at McEwan's house, and had been served the same fish stew that Perowne prepares in *Saturday*. (It was delicious.) Alas, a real British neurosurgeon couldn't afford to live in Fitzroy Square. 'I live in a smaller house in Islington', Kitchen said. 'I ride a collapsible bike to work. I don't have a big Mercedes'. Perowne combines the fine motor skills of Kitchen with the granular self-consciousness of McEwan. (Zalewski 48)

In another interview with McEwan we are told: 'He seems proud of his high-ceilinged home, enough to make it the dwelling of his protagonist, Henry Perowne, in *Saturday*—a decision he now says "might have been a mistake", as it led many readers to assume that the decent but possibly

self-satisfied brain surgeon was McEwan himself' (26). So McEwan is not trying to project himself into his novel, but he has consciously decided to use his home as its setting. It is as though he is asserting his own possession of the property in this text in which the notion of possession is an important one. This emphasises both his ownership of a large, desirable house, and his status as author.

Solar does not operate in the same way. Beard's homes, which are a less significant part of the novel than Perowne's house is in *Saturday*, cannot be directly compared to McEwan's—even though his flat in Marylebone is said to be located on Dorset Square, a garden square not dissimilar to Fitzroy Square. However, the home is still important in *Solar* in that it provides McEwan with a way of controlling and grounding the novel. The domestic environments that provide much of the setting for both *Saturday* and *Solar* give both texts a solid foundation and also function as extensions of the characters that inhabit them. This means that the detail we are given about these characters is richer, and their contexts are more convincing. On to the backdrop of the home, McEwan overlays moments of tension. Such moments are regular occurrences in his work but, in these novels, the fact that they take place on the solid domestic foundations of the texts means that they are all the more unsettling.

McEwan does at least provide firm resolutions to these incidents, although in the case of *Saturday*, the way that this resolution comes about is rather far-fetched—hence Banville's fairy tale comparison. Having forced his way into the house and threatened Perowne and his family, Baxter breaks the nose of Perowne's elderly father-in-law and demands that his daughter undresses, and then reads him some of her poetry. Rather than reading a poem of her own, she recites Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'. This has a peculiar effect on Baxter; his aggression is quelled and he is easily restrained. While it is arguable that Huntingdon's disease may have affected Baxter's thought processes and brought about this unexpected change in behaviour, this is unquestionably a strange moment. If we suspend possible disbelief and consider the context, in which Perowne's daughter has been taught to recite poetry by her grandfather, then in this incident McEwan seems to be telling us that a close family can protect their territory by working together. Beard has no such close family, only a string of former wives. When his lover decides to have his child towards the end of *Solar*, he is reluctant to be involved and finds it difficult to bond with his daughter. His resistance towards any kind of family setup means that when he is faced with the problem of Aldous' death in his house, he has to act alone

to resolve the situation. Though Beard's territory may be more personal to him, it turns out to be less defensible for this reason.

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