“The best book ever written about bad sex”?
“It made us all feel like peeping Toms”

On Chesil Beach focuses on just three hours - the wedding night of a young couple -- Edward and Florence. We are drawn into the spirit of the novel by the very first line. "They 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."

And the second line reads: "But it is never easy." These five simple words tell us this is a story for all time.

We are told that the story is in the past, but at this stage, it is not clear how long ago. Some of us felt at first that it must be set in the 1800s – certainly not as late as 1962. But one group member thought this Philip Larkin poem was appropriate:

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty three
( which was rather late for me)
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles’ first LP

We discussed why McEwan had chosen to set the novel in 1962. 1962 was before the availability of the contraceptive pill, before the sexual revolution of the late sixties, before the youth culture had emerged. Young people then longed to be adults and to gain status through marriage. Men mostly had to propose marriage before being able to have sex. Many men, like Edward, were still virgins on their wedding night. And so were the vast majority of girls.

As one of our group members said, West Africa was still like this in the 1970s and 80s. There could be no sexual relationship until marriage had taken place. One of us had grown up in a small Catholic town in Germany during the sixties, and she assured us that sex was never discussed but hidden as though it were disgraceful.

Our mothers and grandmothers had told us horrendous stories of the fear many women felt on their wedding night. One woman had locked herself in the bathroom. Another had refused to be touched by her husband for some weeks.

In Greek and Italian communities a sheet was placed over the woman with an embroidered hole strategically placed, and many couples lived their whole lives without showing themselves naked. My own mother told me that she had never enjoyed sex. She couldn't see what all the fuss was about!

Florence is a woman of her time – nervous and anxious on her wedding night. But she also feels revulsion at the idea of physical intimacy. Were there underlying reasons for her distaste?

Some of us thought that she had been abused by her father, others that she had just felt an adolescent embarrassment in his presence. One or two felt that she may have witnessed her father's arousal and been disgusted. McEwan only hints at possible abuse. Their many trips abroad together are mentioned - and staying in hotels - her shameful secret is the strongest hint but there is nothing concrete.

Is she frigid or just inexperienced? Because she does have a moment of sexual awakening when she feels a slight tingling sensation, we decided she was inexperienced. Edward had been so excited that he couldn't control himself, comes too soon and Florence is revolted by the whole experience.

"She was incapable of repressing her primal disgust, her visceral horror at being doused in fluid, in slime from another body. In seconds it had turned icy on her skin in the sea breeze, and yet, just as she knew it would, it seemed to scald her. Nothing in her nature could have held back her instant cry of revulsion. The feel of it crawling across her skin in thick rivulets, its alien milkiness, its intimate starchy odour, which dragged with it the stench of a shameful secret locked in musty confinement - she could not help herself - she must be rid of it."
"And what had stood in their way? Their personalities and pasts, their ignorance and fear, timidity, squeamishness, lack of entitlement or experience or easy manners, then the tail end of a religious prohibition, their Englishness and class, and history itself. Nothing much at all."

If only the couple had been patient with each other and not expected so much on the first night, they probably would have learnt to gradually enjoy sex together. But Edward realises too late, when he is older and wiser.

"Love and patience - if only he had had them both at once - would surely have seen them both through."

And for many a favourite line: "This is how the entire course of a life can be changed - by doing nothing."

Why had the couple, when they clearly loved each other, given up on their marriage so easily? We were generally puzzled. Surely, after a day or so, they would have contacted each other and apologised. Wouldn’t they?

We felt many factors came into play. Pride, embarrassment, anger, shame and humiliation and failure. All played their part.

Sex, bad inexperienced sex, comes between, rather than binding them as Edward hoped. While her fear of sex may be normal, her revulsion after a first, unsatisfactory experience seems extreme. She offers to allow him lovers, if he will leave her alone sexually. He is outraged at the time, because he wants her and has saved himself sexually for her. But he wonders 40 years later whether he should have agreed and whether, if he had, he would still have the woman he loved.

Group members thought this was unrealistic for two young newly-weds, but knew of “open marriages” where affairs had kept couples together.

Edward and Florence also come from different backgrounds. Edward is from a loving but lower middle class family. Florence’s family are wealthy and have given a large amount of money to the couple as a wedding present. Florence’s father has also offered Edward a job in his business. We speculated whether, if the situations had been reversed and Edward had been in a strong financial situation, the marriage would have stood more chance of surviving.

Women generally looked to their husbands for financial support in 1962 – some of course still do today – but are generally more independent financially. It was unusual in 1962 for the wife to have more money than the husband. If Florence had not been so financially advantaged, maybe she would have worked harder at saving the marriage. If Edward had been in a position to support her without her family's help, maybe his male pride would not have been quite so wounded.

McEwan paints such a convincing picture of the genuine love between Edward and Florence that it seems unrealistic that they give up so easily and never see each other again. We felt this was a weakness. But we admitted that there wouldn’t have been a story to tell if this hadn’t happened!

And what a tragic story it is. We see Edward forty years later admitting that he has never loved another woman as much as Florence. We see Florence, the successful violonist, playing at the Wigmore Hall, searching for Edward in the audience.

Edward has never fulfilled his ambition to write history books about great men. He has drifted through life, managing record shops, with another short failed marriage behind him. We aren't told about Florence's personal life, but we are given the impression that she is still alone.

Maybe her music was always more important to her than Edward? Artists often have difficulty in being as passionate about other areas in their lives. We examined that possibility. Members of the group with artists as partners (present or past) said they felt they came second to art.

Most of us felt that Florence had at least fulfilled herself through her music. Edward seemed more the lost soul. We were divided in our sympathies. Edward was the one we felt most sympathy for. Florence had been so cruel to him - calling him a failure. But Florence also had her supporters in the groups. Some of us thought that she had worked much harder than Edward at the relationship.
The core of the tragedy was that they couldn't express their feelings and be honest about their sexual fears on the wedding night. If only Florence could have told Edward about her misgivings, in a gentle kind way, Edward would have responded with tenderness. He shows himself to be a kind man. If only Edward had confessed his lack of experience, they could have taught each other over time.

And why have they chosen Chesil beach for their honeymoon? Eighteen miles of stony beach - windy and cold and bleak. Not a fun or very romantic setting for a young couple.

At the end of the novel we see Edward "watching her hurry along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of the small waves, until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense straight road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light."

Chesil beach can be seen as a symbol of life's long and stony path. They set out into the future, only to stumble on the first stones. It's a vivid and sad image. We were all moved by the ending.

Such tragedy is a hallmark of McEwan's writing but we mustn't forget his skill at writing comedy. Most of us had marked the passages on food as our favourites. There are some very amusing descriptions of appalling English cuisine in 1962:

"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 candle-heated plate warmers, waited slices of long-ago roasted beef in a thickened gravy, soft boiled vegetables and potatoes of a bluish hue."

McEwan highlights how class determines our experience of and attitude to food. Edward encounters food he has never tasted before, while staying at Florence's home.

"During that Summer he ate for the first time a salad with a lemon and oil dressing and, at breakfast, yoghourt - a glamorous substance he knew only from a James Bond novel."

Then later: "....Entire meals without potatoes, and most challenging of all, a fishy pink paste, tarama salata. Many of these items tasted only faintly repellent, and similar to each other in some indefinable way, but he was determined not to appear unsophisticated. Sometimes, if he ate too fast, he came close to gagging."

He was not prepared for "the aubergines, green and red peppers, courgettes and mange-touts"

And "Ruth giggled for minutes on end, until she had to leave the room, when he called a baguette a croissant."

Food reflects culture, class and generation. Some younger members of our group were very surprised to hear that yoghurt had once been unusual. Older members remembered making sour milk at home - it was very popular in Germany before the advent of flavoured yoghurts.

Some foods are still considered "posh", like confit of duck and bouillabaisse. Even some vegetables like aubergines and mangetouts are regarded as exotic. Working class families would still eat very few of the items that Edward mentions. The vegetables eaten in a household are an indicator of class. One can glance in a shopping basket and guess the class of the owner by the types of food being bought.

The appreciation of music, too, is class-ridden - particularly in England. Classical music is enjoyed mainly by the middle and upper classes. (Margaret Hodge, the current British Culture Secretary, just a few weeks ago said that one hardly sees a black face at the last night of the Proms, causing a huge furore in the media.)

Edward is passionate about rock music. Florence is driven by her love of classical music. The clash of interests highlights their different backgrounds. Each could have shared their passions with the other. But it was not to be - either in music or in bed.

We liked the fact that On Chesil Beach is written in the third person - giving us insight into the inner feelings of both characters. Our only criticism was that we sometimes felt like "peeping toms."
Should we be able to see the intimate details of this couple's disastrous wedding night? How often do we have this insight? Couples mainly keep the secrets of their sex lives to themselves. Most of us see our relationships with our partners as very private. However, I was impressed at the groups' willingness to discuss sex in general. I had worried that some of us might be very embarrassed by talking openly about sex. *On Chesil Beach* proved me wrong.

The best compliment to Ian McEwan is to quote one of our comments "On Chesil Beach is the best book ever written about bad sex."
I hope he would be pleased with such an accolade.

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McEwan's works have earned him worldwide critical acclaim (see below). Back in 2005 we discussed his novel "Saturday" and McEwan received praise from us too. Saturday focused on one day- the major demonstration in London against the war in Iraq.

Lots of new people have joined the groups since then, so it seemed a good idea to return to McEwan for our March choice. Some of us had read McEwan before. For others *On Chesil Beach* would be an introduction to his work.

His earliest novels are dark and disturbing – sucking the reader into worlds that spin with violence, sexual aberration and paranoia. Nicknamed fiction's black magician and Ian Macabre, some of us had been put off by his reputation. Lately his fiction has come to seem more open and humane -- while losing none of its potency. "Not many things in life get better as you get older," McEwan says. Writing, he implies, is one of them.

I would agree that his writing has improved as he has matured. He is now famous for tales of bitter love and for portraying pessimistic human nature. Following the recent wordier *Atonement*, On Chesil Beach is a return to his earlier style of the novella – a poignant but succinct tale of tragedy. But it is not dark and creepy like the earlier novellas *The Comfort of Strangers* and *The Cement Garden*. As a young writer, he has admitted that he liked to shock his readers. He is altogether a more sensitive and thoughtful writer than in his youth.

Ian McEwan won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1976 for his first collection of short stories *First Love, Last Rites*; the Whitbread Novel Award (1987) and the Prix Fémina Etranger (1993) for *The Child in Time*; and Germany's Shakespeare Prize in 1999. He has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction numerous times, winning the award for *Amsterdam* in 1998.

His novel *Atonement* received the WH Smith Literary Award (2002), National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award (2003), Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction (2003), and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel (2004). He was awarded a CBE in 2000. In 2006, he won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *Saturday*. He is one of Britain's most respected contemporary novelists.