

Annotating Passages in Ian McEwan's Saturday

The key word for the commonplace book is "annotated." It is not just an anthology; the compiler reacts to the passages he has chosen or tells what the passages have led him to think about. A piece of prose, a poem, an aphorism can trigger the mind to consider a parallel, to dredge something from the memory, or perhaps to speculate with further range and depth on the same theme.¹

I marked forty-five separate passages in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, an intellectually rich novel about a single day in the life of Henry Perowne, a British neurosurgeon. As is my practice and that of most other readers who keep a commonplace book, I did not annotate those selections at the time they were recorded. However, I paused to give some thought to many of them and have expanded upon those considerations in the following commentary.

Perowne is a deeply reflective man. He muses, ruminates, broods and wonders about one thing or another--the nature of his discipline, his family the routine chores that occupy his day, and the troublesome times in which he lives during the early years of the 21st century. The changing conditions of the contemporary world are a constant worry, as is the apparent decline of Western values and ideals. McEwan describes "the drift, the white noise of [Perowne's] solitary thought" and at one point characterizes his state as a "folly of overinterpretation."

In turn, I was led to ponder his musings and the extent to which I agreed with them or not. As a result, although it was not a very lengthy novel, it took me forever to read—a pleasure devoutly treasured by this reader. McEwan speculates a good deal about the origins of human behavior and difficulties of identifying them with any precision. Since I have been concerned with those very same issues throughout my professional life, I marked a goodly number where McEwan writes about this issue.

¹ William Cole. Speaking of Commonplace Books. *New York Times* May, 3, 1970.

Parental Influence

It's a commonplace of parenting and modern genetics that parents have little or no influence on the characters of their children. You never know who you are going to get. Opportunities, health, prospects, accent, table manners—these might lie within your power to shape.

I have come to believe that the influence of parents on their children is more subtle than McEwan implies here. To be sure, you can never predict the outcome of your children's early experiences or their genetic heritage. But that, in itself, is not grounds for concluding parents have little influence on their children

We hear much doubt expressed today about the direct impact of parents on their children's personality and adult behavior, indeed, whether or not they matter at all or matter as much as their peers. It is said, for example, that parental influence on their children has been overestimated. Studies of identical twins (reared apart or together) are cited to show that genetic factors control about a half of a person's intellect and personality. Other studies of fatherless children are said to be consistent with this evidence. Rearing a child without an adult male in the household appears to have very little *particular* impact on children. Instead, factors associated with income, frequency of moving, and peer relationships are said to matter more.

My own feeling is that these claims say less about the influence of parents on their children and far more about the methods used to obtain the evidence, especially the methods used to assess adult behavior and personality. Frankly, I do not believe these methods tap the important dimensions of human personality and intellectual ability. Nor do I think the findings have a very high degree of generality

I also believe whatever influence parents have on their children is not likely to be very specific. Instead, their influence has much more to do with very general personality and character dimensions rather than specific behaviors, table manners included. We learn

from our parents *very general aspects of character and motivation*. We learn to value learning, not any particular discipline. We see what it means to be generous and helpful, not any particular instance of these acts. In short, our parents provide exemplars for those deeper aspects of human character and feeling that find are expressed in the sort of person we become.

Genetic Control

But what really determines the sort of person who's coming to live with you is which sperm finds which egg, how the cards in the two packs are chosen, then how they are shuffled, halved and spliced at the moment of recombination. Cheerful or neurotic, kind or greedy, curious or dull, expansive or shy and anywhere in between; it can be quite an affront to parental self-regard, just how much of the work has already been done.

No one can deny the powerful impact of genetic factors on personality and behavior, although the fine details of how this occurs remains a mystery. Still to say that genes are “what really determines the sort of person who's coming to live with you” goes well beyond the evidence. It is a truism to say they interact and work in combination with environmental factors.

The real advances in our knowledge will come from determining the mechanism whereby genes exert their control and whether or not this mechanism is modifiable or reversible. We cannot change a person's eye color but we may be able to alter other characteristics that are under genetic control, such as height, weight and the risk of certain diseases. In such cases, well known diet, exercise, and general lifestyle patterns can be decisive.

I recall an early experiment in behavior genetics. Two strains of rats can be breed over successive generations that differ markedly in their aggressiveness, with one strain highly aggressive in the presence of another rat and the other very non-aggressive in the same

situation. However, these differences can be completely reversed by varying their early rearing experiences.

When an aggressive strain is reared in the presence of other rats, they no longer attack other rats in adulthood. However, if this strain is raised in isolation, they continue to behave aggressively as adults. On the other hand, when the non-aggressive strain is raised in isolation, they become extremely aggressive as adults in the presence of other rats. But they do not behave this way if they are reared in a social situation.

In a word, some forms of behavior normally thought to be under genetic control can be modified and completely reversed under appropriate environmental conditions. This finding is not restricted to aggressive behavior or to rats. The principle has been demonstrated to hold with other behaviors and other species, including humans. There is, indeed, far more to determining “what really determines the sort of person” your child will be than the random meeting of two eggs.

Neurophysiological Effects

McEwan is clearly interested in many other current issues confronting the study of human behavior. Indeed, there are several long sections in *Saturday* that treat in highly technical and at times chilling language various neurophysiological diseases and the surgical procedures that Perowne employs in attempting to restore normal brain function. I did not make note of any of these passages, largely because they were well beyond my comprehension. But were I a neuroscientist I might have. However I did note one passage concerning chemical factors governing the transmission of nerve impulses.

Who could ever reckon up the damage done to love and friendship and all hopes of happiness by a surfeit or depletion of this or that neurotransmitter?

For years I have pondered the mystery of my father’s illness, the alternating cycles of depression and elation that governed his life. I wondered whatever was at work to give

rise to this strange and sad mix of horrible and wonderful days. And I have read the countless accounts of the relationship between brain chemistry and this malady and the way it can sometimes be corrected by drugs that counteract whatever neurotransmitter malfunction exists to give an individual some relief, sometimes total relief, from its symptoms.

But all this has never really helped me to better understand his torments. Neither psychoanalytic therapy, the drugs available at that time, electroshock treatment, or the best private "rest homes," gave him any lasting relief. Would the newer drugs and treatments available today have made a difference? Perhaps they might have made it easier for him to manage the furies more effectively or put them at a greater distance.

However, I am not at all sure about this and I remain a skeptic about the current views of the brain mechanisms that may be responsible for what is now known as bi-polar disorder. Yes, he may have had some kind of chemical imbalance, but I saw the world in which he grew up, the way his mother and father treated him, and how he had to spend his working days in the family business. It was never a placid situation. There was no escaping the world he brought with him but neither could he escape the one he had to live through during each and every day of his relatively brief life.

Non-verbal Behavior

In several sections of *Saturday* Perowne mulls over the significance of the odd quirks of his patients and those he encounters during the course of that day. For example, the moment he sees Baxter, the driver of the car he bumped into, Perowne senses something about him is not quite right. He notes at once signs of "poor self control, emotional lability, explosive temper suggestive of reduced levels of GABA among the appropriate binding sites on striatal neurons." Perowne is truly a diagnostician of the first order. I made note of other passages in which McEwan ponders the meaning of non-verbal behaviors, including the following one:

But can anyone really know the sign, the tell of an honest man? There's been some good work on this very question. Perowne has read Paul Ekman on the subject. In the smile of a self-conscious liar certain muscle groups in the face are not activated. They only come to life as the expression of genuine feeling. The smile of a deceiver is flawed, insufficient.

It seems that at almost every moment of waking life, we attempt to make inferences about other individuals based on incomplete knowledge or unreliable indicators. Often I wonder what can you tell about a person by the e-mails they write? Are they telling the truth or performing before you in this communicating medium? Do their words reflect authentic self, the one you would encounter when you meet them?

Here I think the issue is not so much the authenticity of the e-mailer but rather the accuracy of the attribution process. How often I have been struck by the discrepancy between the picture I have of an e-mail correspondent whom I have yet to meet and the reality of the person once we do eventually come face to face.

A person once told me they charmed by the words in my e-mails but that the real me was not the least bit appealing. And in an essay on an online relationship she had formed, Megham Daum writes "*...though we both knew that the "me" in his mind consisted largely of himself... I was horrified by the realization that I had invested so heavily in a made-up character ...*" She was somewhat taken aback when she finally met the person she had been e-mailing for months and notes that if she had met him at a party she would have scarcely spoken to him.

To the best of my knowledge no one has investigated the accuracy of perceptions formed from e-mail messages. I find the issue fascinating and because it is so commonplace now, I am sure it will be examined before too long. Here the question is really no different that determining the truth of what another person says on the basis of their facial

expression or the way they express themselves in ordinary language as conveyed by the words they write on their keyboard. People vary widely in the style and manner they write e-mails and this must surely be related to other aspects of their personality and character.

Scientific Truth

In *Saturday* and elsewhere McEwan has expressed his optimism about the ability of science to unravel the mysteries of the brain and the truth about consciousness. There are several passages in *Saturday* that deal with general matters of scientific inquiry and method. I was especially struck by this succinct remark.

...statistical probabilities are not the same as truths.

This claim is at the heart of the disenchantment I began to experience with the work I was doing in psychology. Psychologists seek to establish very general laws of human thought and action. Yet I never understood how evidence derived by averaging the scores of a group of individuals could serve as the foundation for a science of *individual* behavior. Laws based on such aggregate data tell us very little about specific individuals and serve only to obscure crucial features of human variability and uniqueness. Further, the many exceptions to these laws severely limits their generality. Thus, it is impossible to say with much confidence that they hold for a particular individual at a particular time and place.

This conclusion is not unlike one often voiced in judicial proceedings, where the legal standing of psychological research is also called into question. It took me a while to understand why courts were so hesitant to admit social science evidence, let alone take it seriously in adjudicating cases. Yet legal cases are decided on an *individual* basis and so, even when the weight of evidence clearly supports the relevant social science generalization, the courts still require "proof" that it applies in the case being adjudicated. When judges ask psychologists to link the general principle to the specific case, it is difficult, if not impossible for them to do so with certainty. But that is what the law

requires. Psychologists can provide relevant case knowledge and guidance, but the information they present is rarely, if ever, decisive in judicial decision-making.

Similarly, I know enough about psychology to be wary of psychological generalizations and the statistical methods brought to the data they obtain. You can never be entirely confident about the applicability of evidence derived from this approach. I have come to believe that psychology will always have to be content with this sort of limitation. Laws based on group means hold for some people, some of the time, but one never can be sure on any given occasion if they apply to a particular individual in the situation at hand.

Fortuitous Events

Random events play a key role in many of the situations described in *Saturday*.

The random combination of two embryonic eggs is said to determine a great deal about a person. The collision of the cars driven by Perowne and Baxter might have been a largely fortuitous event that might not have happened had either driver taken a different route or varied the speed they were driving. Elsewhere McEwan highlights the role of chance encounters in human events.

It troubles him to consider the powerful currents and fine turning that alter fates, the close and distant influences, the accidents of character and circumstance...

The random ordering of the world, the unimaginable odds against any particular condition, still please him.

Most accounts of personal change have neglected the powerful role of such events. One need only reflect on the major changes in their own life to realize the significance they have. When I ask students how their parents met, many report it was due to a chance meeting. One reported that his father was driving home from a business meeting and was involved in a serious automobile accident that required several weeks of hospital recuperation. The student's mother was his nurse and six months later they were married.

In a *New Yorker* profile, the late Yitzhak Rabin, former Prime Minister of Israel, described how he met his wife: “It began with a chance encounter in a Tel Aviv street in 1944; a glance, a word, a stirring within and then a further meeting.” Nancy Reagan, wife of the former President Ronald Reagan, experienced a similar turn of events. In response to her concern over the receipt of a series of mail announcements of Communist party meetings that were intended for another person with the same name, she sought the advice of Ronald Reagan, then president of the Screen Actors Guild. Not long after that they were married.

A chance encounter between two individuals is not a totally random event. Rather it is the intersection of their lawfully governed paths, like the embryonic eggs or the two automobiles, that occurs by chance and can sometimes launch two individuals together on entirely new one. Had the chance encounter not occurred, the two lives might have taken an entirely different course.

Social Change

No more big ideas. The world must improve, if at all, by tiny steps.

People mostly take an existential view—having to sweep the streets for a living looks like simple bad luck. It’s not a visionary age. The streets need to be cleaned.

People often wonder why they should bother to vote when their vote doesn’t matter anyway. Or they say ask why should they go to the trouble of taking the bus, when their attempt to save energy or reduce pollution in these ways isn’t going to have the slightest effect on either of these problems.

Those who argue like this ignore a fundamental principle of social change. Although any single act has only a very modest effect, the cumulative impact of each individual act can be quite substantial. For example, relatively modest energy savings at the individual

level, say by turning down your thermostat or taking the bus once a week can lead to rather considerable energy savings when projected at the aggregate level.

The same is true for any situation that is influenced by the collective action of a large number of individuals. No one member of the population can determine the outcome of an election, but a large group of like-minded voters can. One need only recall recent elections in which candidates were victorious by margins of only one or two votes. If you voted for the winning candidate in this kind situation, it is clear that your vote made a difference. If you didn't vote for the losing candidate, again it is clear that your vote mattered. When taken together the individual actions of a small number of individual voters can have a very powerful effect on election outcomes.

Individuals have to believe that what they do matters even though it is often difficult for them to appreciate this in any real sense. Isn't one of the major issues then one of counteracting this widespread belief? Describing the Tragedy of the Commons might be one way. Imagine a group of herdsman grazing their cattle on a common range. To increase their profits, each is motivated to add a new animal to their herd. Since a herdsman will initially profit by doing so, each adds further animals to his herd. As a result, there is an inevitable increase in the total number of animals. This leads very quickly to a serious overgrazing problem. The range is simply not adequate to support the increasing number of animals and, as its resources are gradually depleted, the animals in turn, are unable to survive. This eventually ends with the tragic ruin of all the herdsman.

Garrett Hardin has described such a situation as the "tragedy of commons" arguing that the logic of the commons operates whenever individuals have unlimited access to a cheap but finite resource. This logic dictates that through the rational actions of individuals pursuing their own well-being, the resources will inevitably be exploited until they can no longer support the population at large. Similarly John Platt has characterized such situations as "social traps." He suggests that such traps occur when individuals, by

pursuing their own self-interests, produce consequences that collectively are damaging to the group as a whole.

These concepts capture rather vividly the way in which the individual actions of a small group of individuals can influence a much larger population in the community as a whole. At the same time, they suggest how this logic can also be applied to the preservation of these resources. When the separate actions of individuals, say by driving less or using alternative transportation, are multiplied countless times over, year after year across a large number of individuals, their collective impact can be enormous.

In short, by thinking twice about their short term interests, individuals can not only benefit the community as a whole but themselves as well. There is nothing glamorous about these actions or the least bit visionary, but little by little, with these “tiny steps” they will keep the air clearer and the gas flowing at the pumps.

Literary Experience

There is some discussion of literature in *Saturday* as Perowne’s daughter is a poet and he is amused by her tutorials to try to get him up to speed about literary works. They have some delightful exchanges about his lack of interest in following her lead. And it is clear that Perowne is not much of a reader. So even though he is a deeply reflective man, I suppose one should not have been surprised, as I was at first, by the following passage

Henry read the whole of Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary, two acknowledged masterpieces. At the cost of slowing his mental processes and many hours of his valuable time, he committed himself to the shifting intricacies of these sophisticated fairy stories. What did he grasp after all? That adultery is understandable but wrong, that nineteenth-century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so.

Yet it was literature that saved the lives of Henry Perowne and his family in *Saturday*. It occurred in a dramatic incident when Perowne returns home after a harrowing day about the time the United States was about to launch its second war in Iraq. On the way to his early morning squash match, Perowne has a minor automobile collision with a person he senses at once is a criminal with an irreversible brain disease.

Later that day, the criminal returns to Perowne's home to take revenge on him and those in this family who have gathered to welcome the return of Daisy. Baxter, the criminal, is holding a knife to Perowne's wife, Rosalind, and asks Daisy, whom he has told to strip, to read from her newly published book of poems. She is terrified, doesn't know if she can begin or what to read, and looks to her poet grandfather, Grammaticus, for a hint. He senses her dilemma and tells her to read the one she used to recite for him. Daisy catches the hint at once and begins reciting *Dover Beach*.

Baxter is transfixed by the beauty of the poem. "You wrote that. You wrote that," he says in amazement. He asks her to read it again. When she is done reciting, Baxter's mood changes suddenly. He is thoroughly disarmed, overcome, as McEwan writes, by "a yearning he could barely begin to define." He removes the knife from Rosalind's neck, puts it back in his pocket, and tells his sidekick he has changed his mind. The tension is broken, the threat is over, and the overpowering of Baxter can begin.

Here, in the extreme is the power of literature.

Daisy recited a poem that cast a spell on one man. Perhaps any poem would have done the trick, and thrown the switch on a sudden mood change. Still, Baxter fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live.

The experience is not only the stuff of fiction. While not exactly a work of literature, reading from a book called *The Purpose-Driven Life* played a central role in saving the life of Ashley Smith, who was recently held hostage for hours in her suburban apartment near Atlanta by Brian Nicholas, on the run after killing two people during his escape from

a courthouse trial for an earlier murder. Smith claims that reading and speaking with Nicholas about the book gave her a chance to simply talk with him and begin the process of gaining his trust so that he would allow her to leave her apartment so that she could see her daughter. Once out of the apartment, Smith called 911; Nicholas was captured moments later. Who knows what might have happened had she not been able to read sections of the book to Nicholas?