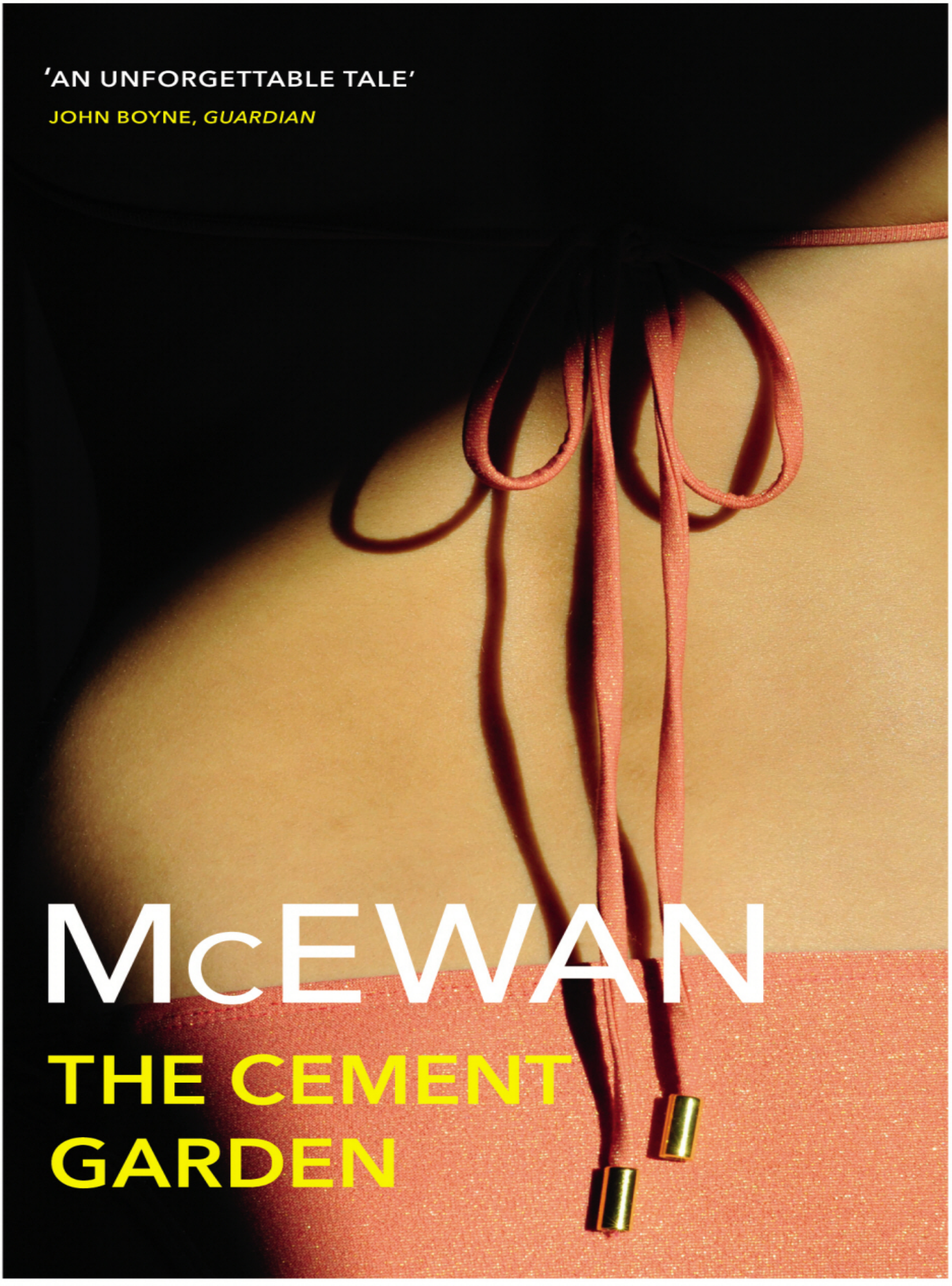
'AN UNFORGETTABLE TALE'
JOHN BOYNE, *GUARDIAN*
McEWAN
THE CEMENT GARDEN

Contents

About the Book

In the arid summer heat, four children – Jack, Julie, Sue and Tom – find themselves abruptly orphaned. All the routines of childhood are cast aside as the children adapt to a now parentless world. Alone in the house together, the children's lives twist into something unrecognisable as the outside begins to bear down on them.

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*.

Also by Ian McEwan

First Love, Last Rites
In Between the Sheets
The Comfort of Strangers
The Child in Time
The Innocent
Black Dogs
The Daydreamer
Enduring Love
Amsterdam
Atonement
Saturday
On Chesil Beach
Solar
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The Children Act

Ian McEwan

The Cement Garden

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART ONE

1

I DID NOT kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way. And but for the fact that it coincided with a landmark in my own physical growth, his death seemed insignificant compared with what followed. My sisters and I talked about him the week after he died, and Sue certainly cried when the ambulance men tucked him up in a bright-red blanket and carried him away. He was a frail, irascible, obsessive man with yellowish hands and face. I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sisters and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal.

In the early summer of my fourteenth year a lorry pulled up outside our house. I was sitting on the front step rereading a comic. The driver and another man came towards me. They were covered in a fine, pale dust which gave their faces a ghostly look. They were both whistling shrilly completely different tunes. I stood up and held the comic out of sight. I wished I had been reading the racing page of my father's paper, or the football results.

'Cement?' one of them said. I hooked my thumbs into my pockets, moved my weight on to one foot and narrowed my eyes a little. I wanted to say something terse and appropriate, but I was not sure I had heard them right. I left it too long, for the one who had spoken rolled his eyes towards the sky and with his hands on his hips stared past me at the front door. It opened and my father stepped out biting his pipe and holding a clipboard against his hip.

'Cement,' the man said again, this time with a downward inflection. My father nodded. I folded the comic into my back pocket and followed the three men up the path to the lorry. My father stood on tiptoe to look over the side, took

his pipe from his mouth and nodded again. The man who had not yet spoken made a savage chop with his hand. A steel pin flew free and one side of the lorry fell away with a great noise. The tightly packed paper sacks of cement were arranged two deep along the floor of the lorry. My father counted them, looked at his clipboard and said, ‘Fifteen.’ The two men grunted. I liked this kind of talk. I too said to myself, ‘Fifteen.’ The men took a sack each on their shoulders and we went back down the path, this time with me in front followed by my father. Round to one side of the house he pointed with the wet stem of his pipe at the coal hole. The men heaved their sacks into the cellar and returned to their lorry for more. My father made a mark on the clipboard with a pencil which dangled from it by a piece of string. He rocked back on his heels, waiting. I leaned against the fence. I did not know what the cement was for and I did not wish to be placed outside this intense community of work by showing ignorance. I counted the sacks too, and when they were all done I stood at my father’s elbow while he signed the delivery note. Then without a word he returned indoors.

That night my parents argued over the bags of cement. My mother, who was a quiet sort of person, was furious. She wanted my father to send the whole lot back. We had just finished supper. While my mother talked my father used a penknife to scrape black shards from the bowl of his pipe on to the food he had barely touched. He knew how to use his pipe against her. She was telling him how little money we had and that Tom would soon be needing new clothes for starting at school. He replaced the pipe between his teeth like a missing section of his own anatomy and interrupted to say it was ‘out of the question’ sending the bags back and that was the end of it. Having seen for myself the lorry and the heavy sacks and the men who had brought them, I sensed he was right. But how self-important and foolish he looked as he took the thing out of his mouth, held it by its

bowl and pointed the black stem at my mother. She became angrier, her voice choked with exasperation. Julie, Sue and I slipped away upstairs to Julie's bedroom and closed the door. The rise and fall of our mother's voice reached us through the floor, but the words themselves were lost.

Sue lay on the bed giggling with her knuckles in her mouth while Julie pushed a chair against the door. Together we rapidly stripped Sue of her clothes and when we were pulling down her pants our hands touched. Sue was rather thin. Her skin clung tightly to her rib cage and the hard muscular ridge of her buttocks strangely resembled her shoulder blades. Faint gingerish down grew between her legs. The game was that Julie and I were scientists examining a specimen from outer space. We spoke in clipped Germanic voices as we faced each other across the naked body. From downstairs came the tired, insistent drone of our mother's voice. Julie had a high ridge of cheekbone beneath her eyes which gave her the deep look of some rare wild animal. In the electric light her eyes were black and big. The soft line of her mouth was just broken by two front teeth and she had to pout a little to conceal her smile. I longed to examine my older sister but the game did not allow for that.

'Vell?' We rolled Sue on to her side and then on to her belly. We stroked her back and thighs with our fingernails. We looked into her mouth and between her legs with a torch and found the little flower made of flesh.

'Vot to you think of zis, Herr Doctor?' Julie stroked it with a moistened finger and a small tremor ran along Sue's bony spine. I watched closely. I moistened my finger and slid it over Julie's.

'Nothing serious,' she said at last, and closed the slit with her finger and thumb. 'But ve vill votch for further developments, ja?' Sue begged us to go on. Julie and I looked at each other knowingly, knowing nothing.

'It's Julie's turn,' I said.

‘No,’ she said as always. ‘It’s your turn.’ Still on her back, Sue pleaded with us. I crossed the room, picked up Sue’s skirt and threw it at her.

‘Out of the question,’ I said through an imaginary pipe. ‘That’s the end of it.’ I locked myself in the bathroom and sat on the edge of the bath with my pants round my ankles. I thought of Julie’s pale-brown fingers between Sue’s legs as I brought myself to my quick, dry stab of pleasure. I remained doubled up after the spasm passed and became aware that downstairs the voices had long ago ceased.

The next morning I went down into the cellar with my younger brother Tom. It was large and divided into a number of meaningless rooms. Tom clung to my side as we descended the stone stairs. He had heard about the cement bags and now he wanted to look at them. The coal hole gave on to the largest of the rooms and the bags were strewn as they had fallen over what remained of last year’s coal. Along one wall was a massive tin chest, something to do with my father’s brief time in the Army, and used for a while to hold the coke separate from the coal. Tom wanted to look inside so I lifted the lid for him. It was empty and blackened, so black that in this dusty light we could not see the bottom. Believing he was staring into a deep hole, Tom gripped the edge and shouted into the trunk and waited for his echo. When nothing happened he demanded to be shown the other rooms. I took him to one nearer the stairs. The door was almost off its hinges and when I pushed it it came away completely. Tom laughed and had his echo at last returned to him from the room we had just left. In this room there were cardboard boxes of mildewed clothes, none of them familiar to me. Tom found some of his old toys. He turned them over contemptuously with his foot and told me they were for babies. Heaped up behind the door was an old brass cot that all of us had slept in at one time or another. Tom wanted me to reassemble it for him and I told him that cots were for babies too.

At the foot of the stairs we met our father coming down. He wanted me, he said, to give him a hand with the sacks. We followed him back into the large room. Tom was scared of his father and kept well behind me. Julie had told me recently that now Father was a semi-invalid he would have to compete with Tom for Mother's attention. It was an extraordinary idea and I thought about it for a long time. So simple, so bizarre, a small boy and a grown man competing. Later I asked Julie who would win and without hesitation she said, 'Tom of course, and Dad'll take it out on him.'

And he was strict with Tom, always going on at him in a needling sort of way. He used Mother against Tom much as he used his pipe against her. 'Don't talk to your mother like that,' or 'Sit up straight when your mother is talking to you.' She took all this in silence. If Father then left the room she would smile briefly at Tom or tidy his hair with her fingers. Now Tom stood back from the doorway watching us drag each sack between us across the floor, arranging them in two neat lines along the wall. Because of his heart attack my father was forbidden this sort of work, but I made sure he took as much weight as I did.

When we bent down and each took hold of a corner of a sack, I felt him delay, waiting for me to take up the strain. But I said, 'One, two, three . . .' and pulled only when I saw his arm stiffen. If I was to do more, then I wanted him to acknowledge it out loud. When we were done we stood back, like workers do, looking at the job. My father leaned with one hand against the wall breathing heavily. Deliberately, I breathed as lightly as I could, through my nose, even though it made me feel faint. I kept my hands casually on my hips. 'What do you want all this for?' I felt I now had a right to ask.

He snatched at words between breaths. 'For . . . the garden.' I waited for more but after a pause he turned to leave. In the doorway he caught hold of Tom's arm. 'Look at the state of your hands,' he complained, unaware of the

mess his own hand was making on Tom's shirt. 'Go on, up you go.' I remained behind a moment and then began turning off the lights. Hearing the clicks, so it seemed to me, my father stopped at the foot of the stairs and reminded me sternly to turn off all the lights before I came up.

'I already was,' I said irritably. But he was coughing loudly on his way up the stairs.

He had constructed rather than cultivated his garden according to plans he sometimes spread out on the kitchen table in the evenings while we peered over his shoulder. There were narrow flagstone paths which made elaborate curves to visit flower beds that were only a few feet away. One path spiralled up round a rockery as though it was a mountain pass. It annoyed him once to see Tom walking straight up the side of the rockery using the path like a short flight of stairs.

'Walk up it properly,' he shouted out of the kitchen window. There was a lawn the size of a card table raised a couple of feet on a pile of rocks. Round the edge of the lawn there was just space for a single row of marigolds. He alone called it the hanging garden. In the very centre of the hanging garden was a plaster statue of a dancing Pan. Here and there were sudden flights of steps, down then up. There was a pond with a blue plastic bottom. Once he brought home two goldfish in a plastic bag. The birds ate them the same day. The paths were so narrow it was possible to lose your balance and fall into the flower beds. He chose flowers for their neatness and symmetry. He liked tulips best of all and planted them well apart. He did not like bushes or ivy or roses. He would have nothing that tangled. On either side of us the houses had been cleared and in summer the vacant sites grew lush with weeds and their flowers. Before his first heart attack he had intended to build a high wall round his special world.

There were a few running jokes in the family, initiated and maintained by my father. Against Sue for having almost