

# **Atonement Study Guide**

**Atonement by Ian McEwan**

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# Plot Summary

*Atonement* follows a 13-year-old aspiring writer, Briony Tallis, from the failure of her first childish attempt at drama, *The Trials of Arabella*, to its presentation, six decades later, by the grandchildren of the ginger-haired, freckled cousins who had wanted to be its stars. Briony is the youngest of the Tallises' three children, raised virtually as an only child because a decade separates her from Cecilia and their 12-year-old brother Leon. Leon, an easy-go-lucky banker in London, brings a rich and vapid friend, Paul Marshall, home for a summer holiday, occasioning Briony's play and a formal dinner party in his honor.

The cousins, 15-year-old Lola Quincey and identical twins Pierrot and Jackson, age 9, arrive at the Tallis estate as refugees from parental divorce. Frustrating rehearsals and rivalry with Lola contribute to the collapse of the play, but its demise is more motivated by Briony's decision to write a story about a confrontation she accidentally sees between Cecilia and 23-year-old Robbie Turner, the family landscaper and childhood friend of Briony's siblings, whose education has been financed by their father. Cecilia is ready to move on with her life, but she feels obliged to give the family one last summer of attention. Robbie is looking forward to beginning medical school.

Cecilia and Robbie, albeit vaguely, that they must clarify their relationship before leaving. Preparing for the festive dinner, Robbie types a note to Cecilia that includes inappropriate sexual musings. He handwrites an expurgated version, but in a Freudian slip he hands the wrong version to Briony for delivery to her sister. Briony reads it and is shocked, convinced that Robbie is a threat to her sister.

In the library, Briony misinterprets Robbie and Cecilia making love as a physical assault. When the disgruntled twins run away, search parties are organized and Briony, searching alone, comes upon Lola being assaulted in the darkness by someone she is convinced is the monstrous Robbie. Briony's imagination sends him to prison. Robbie is released three and a half years later on the condition that he join the British Expeditionary Force in France. Wounded by shrapnel, Robbie and two corporals make their hazardous way to Dunkirk for evacuation. Cecilia's love, expressed in letters that begin while Robbie is in prison, are all that sustains him as infection spreads and his strength flags.

Cecilia has become a nurse and has cut herself off from her family. Briony follows her sister's career path and experiences the rigors of training in the Nightingale tradition. Briony is determined to make amends by recanting her testimony. After treating the first wave of wounded evacuees from Dunkirk, Briony drops in on Lola and Paul Marshall's wedding, then on Cecilia, whom Robbie is visiting. After a tense face off, Briony agrees to reveal everything to the world. This endeavor consumes most of the next six decades of Briony's life and after a 77th birthday celebration and diagnosis with vascular dementia, Briony realizes the story will have to be published posthumously. She contemplates how her readers will want a happy ending and she does not show Robbie

dying on the beach of septicemia and Cecilia being killed in the bombing of London. Having done her best to atone, Briony is tired and needs to sleep.



# Part 1, Chapter 1

## Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

Thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis has spent two days preparing to stage her first play, *The Trials of Arabella*. Cousins from up north will arrive today. They will rehearse the play and perform it in the evening to celebrate the homecoming of Leon. Briony wrote her first short story at age 11, a clumsy release of imagination that is tentative, pretentious and foolish. Briony loves creating miniature worlds free of unruliness and filled with justice. She binds her finished stories for her parents, who recognize her strange mind and facility with words and encourage her efforts. Big sister Cecilia's enthusiasm is overstated, condescending and intrusive. Briony's transition to drama, undertaken to involve her cousins, is effortless. It frees Briony from all of the "she saids" and descriptive setup required by story writing. Briony does not realize that *Arabella* is melodramatic. The play is intended to inspire terror, relief and instruction.

When Briony hears a car drive up, she grabs her script and runs out to announce play rehearsal will begin in five minutes in the nursery. Cousin Lola is 15 and her twin brothers, Jackson and Pierrot, are 9. Their coloring, ginger-haired and freckled, does not fit *Arabella*. Their parents are divorcing, a subject Briony knows is not proper for discussion. Weddings entrance Briony. She has no concept yet of sexual bliss. Rehearsal is delayed until 5 p.m.. Lola warns the twins to cooperate or she will tattle to the parents. Lola's attitude shows that her two years' greater experience will put Briony at a disadvantage. The giggly twins cannot act. Lola is rebellious. The performance is in ruins in half an hour.

## Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces the novel's protagonist, Briony Tallis, whose inaugural, albeit juvenile, entry into drama, *The Trials of Arabella*, encapsulates the novel itself. The play's heroine recklessly runs away with a wicked foreign count, falls ill and is deserted, receives a second chance by meeting an impoverished doctor who turns out to be a prince in disguise and marries grandly before her reconciled family on a "windy sunlit day in spring." At age 13, Briony has been writing short stories for years, creating ideal worlds. Her mother and much older sister are introduced as encouraging Briony. Her father is rarely home and freckled cousins from up north bring into the playwright's life a challenge she has never before experienced. Divorce, from which the cousins are refugees, is a poorly understood, alien concept that Briony instinctively resists. Lola, two years older and more sophisticated than Briony, introduces defeatism into Briony's ideal life.



# Part 1, Chapter 2

## Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Cecilia (Cee) Tallis, recently home from university, is desperate with inactivity. Her childhood friend and Cambridge University acquaintance, Robbie Turner, whom she wants to avoid, is weeding a hedge. Recently graduated with a degree in literature, Robbie has pretensions and presumptions, of going on to medical school with the financial support of Cecilia's father, Jack Tallis. Anxious to get on with life, Cecilia feels she owes her family a last uninterrupted stretch of her attention and must resolve relations with Robbie, whose affection from afar she senses although they rarely speak.

Cecilia enters the formal, high-ceilinged, perfectly appointed drawing room and thrusts her flowers into a Meissen porcelain vase once owned by Uncle Clem, a war hero whose funeral she barely remembers. The casual arrangement will brighten the guestroom for her brother's friend, Paul Marshall, as her mother ordered. Cecilia needs water, but she does not want to go into the kitchen where Betty the cook is in a terrorizing mood, so she takes the vase out to the fountain. The sound of her careful approach startles Robbie. They are uncomfortable in each other's presence. Assuming that Robbie will not accept an invitation to dinner tonight, Cecilia does not extend one. Robbie tries to help Cecilia fill the vase, but she resists and a section of the lip splits off and falls into the pool. Both freeze and their eyes meet. Unexpectedly, Robbie accepts full responsibility. Finding this intolerable, Cecilia strips to her underwear and enters the freezing water to retrieve the pieces. She emerges, dresses in a fury and retreats across the lawn. Robbie looks on dumbly. He is banished. He does not exist.

## Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 develops the character of Briony's older sister, Cecilia, who is home for the summer after finishing Cambridge University. Cecilia is bored but reluctant to begin an independent life. We learn that her mother frequently suffers migraine headaches and uses them as an excuse to maintain distance. We also meet Robbie Turner, a fellow Cambridge graduate whom Cecilia has known since the age of seven. He is working as a gardener on the Tallis estate, but he is planning to enter medical school. Cecilia's often-absent father has funded Robbie's entire education. There is tension between Cecilia and Robbie as well as a hint of mutual attraction. The tension is made tangible in wrestling over an expensive vase.

# Part 1, Chapter 3

## Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

Briony feels like everyone is conspiring to ruin her play and she is relieved when everyone wanders off and leaves her alone in the nursery. Sitting on the floor holding her script, Briony thinks about the effort it will take to groom herself like Lola. She studies her hand, contemplating the mystery of how thinking about moving a finger and moving it are related. Briony often thinks about life's mysteries and she wonders whether others do likewise. If they do, life is unbearably complex and she is irrelevant. If not, life is sinister and lonely. Briony squirms in the oppressive heat and the realization that she should have just written a story for Leon. Stories require no intermediaries and have no pressure of time. Story writing is a magical process that instantly joins author and reader.

Briony goes to a window and sees Cecilia and Robby at the fountain. Briony imagines he is proposing. It makes sense that the only son of the family cleaning lady whose whole life has been subsidized by her father would be bold enough to do that. Less comprehensible is the way Cecilia quickly undresses before Robbie and disappears into the water. What power does Robbie hold over her? Blackmail? Threats? The sequence of the scene is wrong. Cecilia should have drowned and been rescued by Robbie before the marriage proposal. Briony is watching adult behavior she cannot understand. Cecilia emerges, dresses, picks up a vase of flowers that Briony had previously not noticed and strides away. A wet patch on the ground is all that remains of the surprising vision.

Briony ponders that this scene would have occurred even if she had not happened to look out the window. She is tempted to run to Cecilia's room to demand an explanation, but she resists, impatient to begin writing up the scene from three distinct and independent points of view. Six decades later and famous, Briony will realize this is the moment she became a writer of amoral psychological realism. Without that moment of revelation at the window, Briony would not be remembered.

## Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 reveals the genesis of the successful writing career that lies ahead for Briony. It comes with a chance viewing of an encounter she is too young to understand, two awkward people struggling over who will fill a flower vase with water. Briony romanticizes it into a fairy tale proposal of marriage. Later that day and worse, that night, Briony will allow her precocious imagination to turn this tale into a real-life tragedy for the couple.





# Part 1, Chapter 4

## Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

By late afternoon, Cecilia is satisfied that her repairs to the vase are undetectable. A red-eyed Briony approaches and rips her Chagall-like poster announcing *Arabella* in half. Cecilia puts down the vase and picks up the pieces, preparing once again to rescue her little sister from self-destruction. Cecilia has always loved comforting Briony, whispering to her after nightmares, "Come back. It's only a dream," and taking her into bed. Soothing Briony would relieve the day's frustrations, but Briony does not want to be cuddled. The twins, Briony admits, are stupid, but the problem is the whole play. The *genre*, a new dictionary find by Briony, is wrong. Briony hobbles off before Cecilia can get her to explain.

Cecilia carries the vase upstairs to the guest room, which Robbie's mother has given a good cleaning. From the window, Cecilia sees Briony crossing the bridge to the island and disappearing into the trees. Further off, Cecilia sees her brother, his friend and Robbie. The thought of Robbie sends her to her bedroom in search of a cigarette.

Glad her father is not home because he disapproves of women smoking in public, Cecilia goes down to meet her brother and Paul Marshall. As she often does when first meeting a man, Cecilia wonders if he will be the one she marries and if this is the moment she will remember for life, with gratitude or regret. Marshall has a comic-brooding look and a dull opening line. Leon had seen Briony by the lake, thrashing the nettles.

Danny Hardman is told to carry Marshall's bags upstairs. Cecilia has noticed him hanging around more than usual and thinks he might have his eye on Lola. Cecilia leads the visitors to the drawing room, where Marshall takes control of the conversation. The launching of a new line of chocolate, Rainbow Amo, has taken up all his time. If the army includes it in ration packs and if there is a general conscription, Marshall will become incredibly rich. Cecilia thinks about marrying such a stupid being and bearing his boneheaded, loudmouthed sons. Leon mentions casually that he has invited Robbie to dinner. Cecilia is genuinely annoyed and tells Leon to cancel it. Childhood sibling feuding does not bother Marshall, but the silence that follows does and he suggests going indoors for a special drink he will prepare. Cecilia would prefer something bitter or sour.

## Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 clarifies the relationships among the Tallis siblings. Leon is two years older than Cecilia and they enjoyed a playful pre-teen relationship. Cecilia is ten years older than Briony and she has enjoyed mothering her. Every time Cecilia meets a new man, she wonders whether he is her intended. Cecilia instantly sizes up her brother's friend,

the almost-handsome and very rich Paul Marshall, as incredibly stupid. She notices that a normally unobtrusive family retainer, 16-year-old Danny Hardman, is showing an interest in cousin Lola. Cecilia resents her brother's inviting Robbie to dinner that night.



# Part 1, Chapter 5

## Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Through the window of an unused bedroom, Lola sees Briony on the island and realizes the play is dead. Lola and her rambunctious brothers are homesick. Tearful Jackson refuses to be convinced they will return home soon and dares to pronounce the unthinkable obscenity, "divorce." Marshall stands in the doorway and introduces himself. Lola studies him carefully. She asks in a grown-up manner that Marshall not to speak about their parents in front of the boys. Marshall sees Lola as a pre-Raphaelite princess and compliments her outfit, embarrassing her. They talk about *Hamlet*, Marshall's expensive shoes and his chocolate factory. Marshall gives them an Amo sample and they discuss the prospects of war. Lola is laughing with a mouthful of green candy when Betty calls her brothers to their bath.

## Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

The brief Chapter 5 brings Paul Marshall and Lola together and Lola struggles to converse as an adult. There is little indication of how Lola and Marshall will play a central role in Robbie and Cecilia's tragedy, which itself is scarcely hinted at yet. Almost all the pieces, however, are now in place.



# Part 1, Chapter 6

## Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

After making sure the children have eaten a sensible lunch, Emily retreats to her cool, darkened bedroom to ward off the migraine she anticipates every day. She thinks about Leon's dwindling prospects as a banker, about how Cecilia's college-inspired pretentious will prevent her from finding a husband, about how Briony no longer wants to be soothed as a child and about Lola, the incarnation of precocious, scheming Hermione, the older sister Emily dares not think about because that will surely bring on a headache. Illness always stops Emily from giving her children a mother's attention. Sensing this, her daughters call Emily by her first name.

Habitual fretting has given Emily a sixth sense about the house. She can lie in the dark and know everything. She hears Cecilia deliver the flowers to the guestroom and Leon and his friend arrive. She knows Cecilia will care for them, so she allows herself to fall asleep.

Emily is awakened by the sound of a man's voice and children answering. She wonders whether the twins are being impertinent with Marshall. Betty's call to bath time relieves her concern. Emily fondly remembers the ritual of bathing Briony, her late-arriving and unexpected baby and she mourns the passing of their eloquent, loving talks. The muted thunder of plumbing makes Emily think about the motherless boys being bathed by heartless Betty. How dare Hermione have a "nervous breakdown" and abandon her children?

Slowly and awkwardly, Emily rises to rejoin the household. Her most important duties are to oversee converting the roast into cold cuts and salads, greet her son, appraise his friend and make Marshall feel welcome. Next, she must look in on the twins. Then she will phone her husband to assure him that he need not feel guilty about missing the evening. Then she will track down Cecilia to make sure she will accept some responsibilities as hostess. Finally, Emily must comfort Briony over the collapse of her play. For that she must don sunglasses and brave the sunlight, for she knows where Briony will go to sulk. Emily lies still a while longer, refining and revising her plans before she feels up to the tasks.

## Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 contributes nothing to the central plot. It analyzes Emily Tallis, a self-pitying character who has retreated to fretting about her family and household to the point that she suffers daily migraines. Briony's unexpected birth when Emily was in her 40s provided a last burst of joy in a lifetime she otherwise resents. Emily has developed a sixth sense that intuits everything going on in the house. Her husband Jack hides behind a gate-keeping telephone receptionist, we learn, but we do not yet know that he

is a philanderer and that Emily accepts his behavior for fear of losing the security she enjoys.



# Part 1, Chapter 7

## Part 1, Chapter 7 Summary

The island temple, an architectural point of interest, has sadly fallen into disrepair. Angrily slashing the nettles that grow around it, Briony constructs a story. She beheads a whimpering, lying, scheming Lola and those who admire Lola and spread rumors about Briony. Next, she sacrifices the twins, who are incompetent actors. Next playwriting itself is attacked for wasting her time. Flaying the nettles becomes an act of self-purification and rebellion against childhood. In thirteen strokes, Briony is free of her show-off years and reliance on her mother's good opinion. Briony imagines herself at the Berlin Olympics, self-trained, concentrating on each nettle and thinking about how close she came to wasting her life writing plays. Reacting to real sounds from the first bridge, Briony, playing the grand master, refuses to acknowledge her big brother, who surely has come to watch her. He accepts the situation and moves on, which upsets Briony a bit, but she continues hacking away as nettles sting her ankles and feet. Briony tires, the fantasy wanes and the difficult "coming back" occurs. She is tired of being outdoors, but she is not ready to be indoors. She decides to wait on the bridge until some real event happens to dispel her insignificance.

## Part 1, Chapter 7 Analysis

Angry at the failure of her play, Briony escapes to her favorite haunt, the island temple and takes out her frustrations on the field of nettles that has taken over the once-cultivated grounds. As she slashes away, imagining she is beheading Lola, then all her enemies, then competing in nettle-slashing at the Olympic level, she hears her brother and his friend arrive and incorporates this into the game. Tired of having to daydream of importance, Briony settles on the bridge to wait for fate to intervene. Chapter 8 will set up that event.



# Part 1, Chapter 8

## Part 1, Chapter 8 Summary

Robbie soaks in his bathtub in a bungalow on the Tallis estate. Robbie forces himself to remember every detail of Cecilia's wet body. She is no longer a horsy sister, now strangely beautiful, carved and statuesque, her movements quick and impatient. Robbie knows he must speak to her soon about his new feelings, before she goes away. Robbie moves from tub to bed and rolls about, wondering what Freud would make of her casual stripping and anger over the broken vase. Robbie knows he should have turned down Leon's invitation. Cecilia will ignore him.

Half-dressed, Robbie moves into his tiny office, which is filled with class notes, poetry, *Gray's Anatomy*, a new typewriter, a photo of his parents on their honeymoon, a recent letter from Jack Tallis offering to help Robbie with medical school costs and application forms and handbooks. He is confronted by the book about Versailles he borrowed from the library days before, feeling like an idiot, entering barefoot from the garden. Robbie types a letter to Cecilia to apologize for the barefoot visit to the library. He adds lines about the broken vase. Still dissatisfied, he tinkers for 15 minutes more, then types a clean copy. Thinking about a favorite page from *Gray's Anatomy*, he impulsively adds lines about kissing Cecilia's "sweet wet cunt." The letter is ruined. Robbie pulls it from the typewriter and decides to write the note in longhand.

Robbie goes down to his mother's quarters for a clean shirt and to shine his shoes. The Tallises took pity on Robbie and his mother Grace when Ernest Turner abandoned them. Today they live in a small bungalow that is legally theirs. Grace's services polishing furniture are valued. As Robbie prepares to leave for the dinner, Grace moans about the Quincy children. Robbie remembers the twins interfering with his work and their sister being leered at by Danny Hardman.

Robbie concludes his preparations, snatches up his letter to Cecilia, puts it in an envelope and heads out, savoring the dusk. He is anxious for his life's story to begin. His mind moves forward to 1962, when he will be 50, an established physician made more effective by a lifetime of collecting literature, well-read, tolerant of the puniness and nobility of mankind. Robbie pushes from his mind thoughts of Cecilia in her room. On the bridge ahead, he sees a white shape, which, as he approaches, resolves into Briony. He asks her to run his note ahead to Cecilia. Briony leaves without a word and Robbie watches her awkward, girlish progress across the grounds. Just as Briony reaches the house, Robbie bellows in horror, realizing he has folded the obscene, typed draft into the envelope rather than the cleaned-up handwritten version.



## Part 1, Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 deepens the portrait of Robbie and Grace. It is divided into three parts. The first is a detailed tour of Robbie's tiny office, tucked under the eaves of the bungalow that he and his mother share. His desk and shelves chronicle his brilliant academic career. His eyes stop on photographs of his parents' honeymoon and a school presentation of *Twelfth Night*. Robbie played the steward Malvolio, who deludes himself into seeing a chance to advance himself with Olivia, his employer. Malvolio turns uncharacteristically joyful as he pursues a dream everyone else knows is impossible and he falls victim to pranksters. Robbie notes this was a fitting part for him, not realizing how closely he is about to live out Malvolio's foolish advances and suffer a more terrible fall. The second fateful artifact is a copy of *Anatomy of the Human Body* by Henry Gray, the standard medical textbook of the day complete with 1,247 engravings, many in color. It lies open to a depiction of the female genitalia.

The second part of the chapter is set in Grace's apartment, where the family tragedy and triumph are reviewed. The third part covers Robbie's enthusiastic, optimistic walk across the estate as far as the bridge, where he entrusts to Briony the letter he has written to Cecilia. Robbie feels it will be better for Cecilia to read the letter in private before they meet. Only when the messenger is nearly at the house does Robbie realize she carries the obscene typed version. Robbie sees no Freudian importance in the slip-up, but one must wonder. The evening clearly will not follow the pleasant course he intends.





# Part 1, Chapter 9

## Part 1, Chapter 9 Summary

Time is running out for Cecilia to be alone with her brother and she cannot think straight. She selects a pink dress and accessories, but she decides she looks like Shirley Temple and changes into a backless green gown that makes her look like a mermaid. She encounters Jackson, barefoot and upset, with Pierrot nearby, also barefoot. Both hold a single sock. Surely, socks cannot make them cry, Cecilia says and Jackson responds that they want to be in Briony's play but she has disappeared. Betty will smack them if they do not come down for tea immediately. Cecilia's solution is to raid Briony's room, while growing worried about what might have become of her missing sister. Adjusting the twins' appearance, Cecilia sends them downstairs. This attention to the twins' needs changes Cecilia's mood. Cambridge supposedly changed her fundamentally, but she readily slips back into the role of family expediter. Cecilia refuses to let tonight frustrate her.

Cecilia descends to the steamy, tension-filled kitchen and finds Betty, Emily, the Hardman father and son and the twins. The kitchen staff has been working hard in great heat all day and Betty is furious that Emily wants to change the menu to cold cuts and salad. Cecilia's dilemma is familiar. She wants to keep the peace without humiliating her mother. Yearning to get free to visit with her brother, Cecilia argues that Leon and Marshall are dying for one of Betty's roasts. A compromise is arranged. Polly will gather produce for a cold salad.

Emily leaves to find and comfort brooding Briony and Cecilia, relieved to be free of her mother, proceeds through the dark drawing room to the patio to join her half-drunk brother. They discuss Cecilia's dress and Leon's dull life at the bank. Cecilia admits to going mad at home. They walk to the fountain, the site of Cecilia's recent disgrace. Cecilia knows Robbie will always be able to picture her, shamefully, in her underwear. The siblings talk about their lives. Leon sees everyone as "a good egg" or "a decent sort." He finds a benign explanation for everything. Literature, politics, science and religion have no place in his world. He has no ambition. He assumes everyone is like himself and people find his blandness soothing. When it comes her turn, Cecilia talks of boredom and solitude. She tries to adopt Leon's generous attitude, but she cannot achieve the polished nullity of her brother's life. She cannot confess to him the morning's behavior. She will be happy to accept Leon's invitation to visit.

From the terrace, Briony impatiently calls their names before being ordered to wash and change for dinner. Briony hands Cecilia the folded sheet of paper. Reading the shocking word, Cecilia instantly understands the whole day, the weeks before, her childhood, the dress, the vase and her inability to leave. She asks Briony whether she read the note. Where is the envelope? Engrossed with her brother, Briony pays no attention. Emily is still calling Briony. Marshall appears with another round of cocktails and insists Cecilia try one.

## Part 1, Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9 develops the characters of Cecilia and Leon. Cecilia is anxious to get on with her life, but she continues to feel the pull of standing in for her absent parents. Leon is the picture of contented mediocrity. Briony's delivery of Robbie's typewritten note sans envelope is nearly lost in the siblings' chatter. The shocking word "cunt," which captures Cecilia's attention, however, suggests it could not have been given to Briony open. Has she read it? There is no answer and the subtle tension is moved forward.



# Part 1, Chapter 10

## Part 1, Chapter 10 Summary

Briony is certain adult emotion will benefit her writing and she allows savage, thoughtless curiosity to override scruples about invading others' privacy. She must know everything. Cleaning up for dinner allows her to escape Cecilia's questioning and to frame an opening paragraph for a new story still set by the fountain but now taking into account Robbie's shocking words. Briony has never heard "cunt" spoken or seen it in print. No one has ever mentioned the part of her body to which she is sure it refers. It is almost onomatopoeically lovely but disturbing because it shows the writer's disgusting preoccupation. Briony is certain Cecilia is threatened and needs her help and Briony knows she must be delicate and tactful lest Cecilia turn on her.

Briony dresses hurriedly so she can concentrate on the story. Her first line, "There was an old lady who swallowed a fly," seems hopelessly childish. As a worldly writer, she must transcend nursery tale ideas of good and evil and assume a godlike, non-judgmental view of people in all their imperfections. Briony is torn between jotting a simple diary account and polishing a story. How can she portray feelings without lowering the scene's immediacy? Briony stares at the remnants of her childhood and realizes with a chill that its freedom and blind trust are gone.

Lola, in her sophisticated dress, startles Briony, sweeping past her dramatically to sit on the edge of the bed and begin a sisterly end-of-the-day chat. The twins have left a long scratch on Lola's arm and chafing on her wrists. Tears brim in Lola's eyes and her voice grows husky. The twins blame Lola for keeping them at this house. Warming to Lola as she comforts her, Briony tells about meeting Robbie on the bridge and reading his note to Cecilia. Hearing the shocking word spelled backwards, Lola declares Robbie a maniac. Briony approves of this refined word and reflects on a time years ago when Robbie gave her swimming lessons. This casts light on the mystery of the fountain, but Briony withholds this from Lola, not wanting to disclose her ignorance should some simple explanation be possible. Briony also withholds her dread of meeting Cecilia. Briony tries to remember other instances of Robbie's mania and decides he has been deceiving them for years. Lola suggests they show the note to the police, because maniacs can attack anyone.

Emily's summoning to dinner turns Lola petulant and Lola leaves the room. Briony hovers over her desk, thinking about how hopeless it is to write about the day's events and wondering whether she has made a mistake confiding in her excitable cousin. Briony wonders how she can sit at the table with a maniac and she is horrified at the prospect of having to say "cunt" aloud in court if Robbie is arrested.

Coming downstairs, Briony notices Cecilia and Robbie's voices are missing from the drawing room. She pauses to consolidate a plan to avoid Lola, Cecilia and Robbie and stay close to the twins. She must also ask Marshall about sweets. It is a coward's plan,



but the only one Briony can think of. It is too late to summon the constable. Attaining adulthood, Briony decides, is all about accepting life's impediments.

Jack Tallis' presence always settles the household, while his absence demands that others step in, however ineffectually. Thoughts of her father make Briony slow by the library door, which is unusually closed. From the drawing room, Briony hears the twins discussing spelling. Briony hears noises behind the library door and, casting herself as Cecilia's protector, she enters. Slowly, shapes appear in the dark corner and Briony's overanxious imagination takes over. Robbie has hold of Cecilia and will not let go. Robbie is huge and wild next to frail Cecilia. Briony wants to approach and shout but cannot. Cecilia frees herself and rushes past without a word of gratitude. Briony is alone, facing the brute. He makes no move to attack her as she backs away and escapes. The hallway is empty.

## Part 1, Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10 shows Briony struggling to understand the day's events and record them in her first adult story. She gets no further than a nursery rhyme-like opening line when Lola interrupts, clearly upset. Her twin brothers have assaulted her, blaming her for their exile in this foreign household. Briony finds herself feeling sorry for her older cousin who previously has shown no vulnerability. Briony confides certain elements of the day's events to Lola, but withholds others that will soon prove crucial. Briony seems to know that she is in over her head intellectually and emotionally, but she accepts the challenge of adult authorship.

Her mind riveted on Robbie's newly revealed maniacal nature, Briony stumbles on him and Cecilia behind closed doors in the dark recesses of the library. She interprets it in the only way her sophistication allows, as a brute's physical assault on her helpless sister. Cecilia vanishes before Briony can talk to her about what she has witnessed.



# Part 1, Chapter 11

## Part 1, Chapter 11 Summary

Everyone is nauseated by the thought of a big meal in the hot, airless dining room. Robbie has no appetite. He notices a scratch on Marshall's cheek and feels Cecilia's warmth beside him and the glare of Briony's eyes. Leon mentions England in hot weather is a different place because gentlemen are allowed to remove their jackets. Emily proclaims her parents' view, "Out of doors, out of control." Cecilia blushes when Leon asks how she has behaved worse today than usual, then jokes about having persuaded Emily to have a roast in Leon's honor, regardless of the weather. As Leon asks the same of Briony, Robbie worries she will blurt out the contents of his note. To his relief, Briony declares that, boringly, she has done nothing wrong today. Jackson corrects her, saying she would not allow them to put on the play. Leon concludes that on a cooler day they would be in the library enjoying theatricals.

The sight of Cecilia's bare shoulder and arm stirs Robbie. He regrets and yet exults in the mistaken letter. Soon they will come together outdoors and begin again, as in Malvolio's line, "Nothing that can be can come between me and the full prospect of my hopes." Robbie remembers walking to the front door, debating avoiding humiliation by fleeing but realizing that not knowing Cecilia's reaction will torment him more. A written apology would be cowardly. Cecilia holds the note when she answers the bell. She is beautiful in her clingy dress, but her face is unreadable. Robbie declares that he made a mistake and, hearing voices, Cecilia leads him into the library and closes the door. The inclusion of a child in this scenario is unfortunate. As Cecilia retreats into the darkness, Robbie follows, continuing to apologize. No one was to have read the "cunt" version.

Robbie realizes Cecilia is not shrinking from him. She is drawing him into the darkness. She is tearful, unable to speak. Finally, Cecilia tells Robbie she has been furious at him and herself all day. Robbie realizes a change has taken place between them and she has understood it first. Cecilia cannot explain the emotions that engulf her. They stare at each other, sensing that something delicately established may slip away. Old friends are embarrassed before their former selves. Intimacy requires a new clarity of purpose. Words are useless. Robbie touches Cecilia's shoulders. They draw closer and kiss, tentatively. Their bemused childhood selves watch, until their tongues touch. Cecilia's sighs fill them both with greed and kissing becomes a gnawing. Cecilia pulls ineffectually at his clothes. Robbie fumbles with Cecilia's breast and her spine shudders. Their pasts are forgotten. Neither has first-hand experience of lovemaking, but they are surprised at how clearly they know their present needs.

Cecilia goads Robbie and they are too selfless now to be embarrassed as they move toward the inevitable end. They hold their breaths as Robbie penetrates Cecilia and they begin moving together. They sign an unseen contract by declaring their love for one another. After half a minute of motionlessness, they resume thrusting. Robbie forces himself to remember dull things in order not to climax, until he thinks Cecilia



invites him to give in. Instead, she is warning that someone has entered the library. At first, Robbie hopes Cecilia is mistaken, but then he sees Briony, standing like a gunslinger at a Western showdown. Robbie realizes he has never hated anyone until now. There is no reason for Briony to be in the library except to find them and ruin the moment. Robbie figures the note made Briony jealous. Briony has succeeded. The couple stands apart, straightening their clothes discreetly.

The main course has been cleared and pudding served as Robbie returns from his reveries. The twins ask to be excused and as they slip away Briony notices they are wearing her socks. Cecilia barks at her "tiresome little prima donna" sister that she gave them the socks. Cecilia declares that Briony has been over the top all day, which provokes the dangerous, indignant little girl. Briony calls attention to Lola's wounds. Marshall confesses he pulled the twins off their sister.

As attention turns to Lola, Briony produces an envelope from Jackson's chair. It is addressed to everyone. Emily demands with unexpected authority to have it. The twins are running away. Silence falls until Lola begins repeating, "Oh hell." Marshall comforts her and announces they will form search parties. Leon agrees and teams with Cecilia. Emily volunteers to stay home and wait. Leon advises her to phone the constable. Robbie leaves last, feeling cheated but sure the cows will scare the twins home soon so he can have the outdoors alone with Cecilia. As the search parties fan out, Briony walks around the side of the house, alone. Robbie too decides that if he cannot be with Cecilia, he will search alone. This decision will transform his life.

## Part 1, Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 deals with the wreckage of Leon's homecoming dinner. It is too hot to enjoy the evening and Emily cannot make it flow properly. Seated between the Tallis sisters, Robbie remembers their fateful rendezvous in the library minutes before. His version recalls the passion with which he and Cecilia had come together in the dark, only to be disturbed by Briony, who lacks the sophistication to perceive in their postures in the corner as anything but an angry assault. McEwan emphasizes that the couple, ten years Briony's senior, have only literature and films to guide them in lovemaking. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a novel by D. H. Lawrence written seven years before the action in *Atonement* takes place, will be banned in England for decades because of its sexually explicit scenes and taboo four-letter words. Robbie had read a black market copy in college.

The miserable dinner is transformed into a dramatic night as Lola discovers a note from the twins, which Robbie feared was his own note, announcing they are escaping this terrible household and their sister. The company divides into search parties. Briony and Robbie each decide to work alone and the chapter ends on the foreboding note that the decision will transform Robbie's life.



# Part 1, Chapter 12

## Part 1, Chapter 12 Summary

Alone in the silent house, Emily is reluctant to deal with reaching the constable and does not know what she would tell him. The twins will probably be back before Vockins could arrive. Emily smolders again at sister Hermione, who like Lola and Briony always stole scenes with histrionics. Emily is convinced that Lola sabotaged Briony's play, causing Briony to sulk. Emily's husband Jack will probably call soon to announce he must sleep at his club. He does this regularly and Emily finds comfort in the lies he tells. She is determined not to lose him. Emily thinks about being a wronged child and a wronged wife. She watches two moths circle the lamp above her unused harpsichord, recalling a science professor once telling her moths only appear to be attracted to light. They instinctively seek the darkest place beyond it. Some things in life simply are not what they appear to be. Emily knows why Jack spends his nights in London. She is appalled by the irresponsibility of his planning for war.

Emily settles into the stillness she began as an overlooked 10-year-old and later perfected, fighting off migraines. The end of Briony's childhood has been haunting Emily lately, causing her to retreat from life into self-pity. Briony will surely leave like Cecilia, leaving Emily only to wait for age and weariness to return Jack to her. How quickly and ruthlessly life passes. Jack's paying for Robbie's education is unfair to Leon and the girls. Still, Briony spoke to Robbie improperly at dinner and Marshall has shown promise, putting everyone at ease. Perhaps he is suitable for Cecilia, even if her Cambridge readings make her feel superior to a mere chemist.

Thirty minutes pass as Emily ponders these branching roads of reveries, unmoving on the sofa. The phone rings and it is Jack, making his apologies. Emily summarizes the day's events, ending in the twins' disappearance. Jack becomes serious only when Emily tells him they have not returned. Jack will call the police. Emily is to phone him if any news arrives. Leon, Cecilia, Briony and Lola appear, looking distraught and Emily suspects the worst. Leon takes the phone and asks his father to come home immediately. Helpless and terrified, Emily allows herself to be guided to a seat in the drawing room to receive the searchers' news.

## Part 1, Chapter 12 Analysis

Chapter 12 deepens our understanding of Emily, wronged as a child and as a wife. Her husband Jack's frequent absences are explained. He is a workaholic government war planner, but he is also unfaithful to Emily and she knowingly accepts this. She wants to keep peace until old age returns Jack to her side. The rest of life is passing her by. Jack takes charge from afar and Leon is his local agent as the searchers return, muddy and distressed. Note that Marshall, Leon's rival for leadership, is missing.





# Part 1, Chapter 13

## Part 1, Chapter 13 Summary

Outside with permission in the delicious night air, Briony is comforted that Cecilia is safe with their brother Leon. Briony pictures the foolish twins floating facedown in death. She exults in running across the firm ground as in her dreams, which always end in her soaring to the base of the clouds. Writing, she muses, is a form of flight. Briony figures that adult hatred, which Robbie must feel toward her for interrupting his assault, must be far worse than children's. Briony will protect her sister even if Cecilia will not acknowledge it. Briony aches to tell, without childish melodrama, this story of an old family friend turned villain. Truth is strange and deceptive and must be struggled for. At a distance, Briony sees Cecilia and Leon walking together. Surely, Cecilia is telling him about the assault and the Tallis children will see the brute expelled from their lives. Lola's mention of "maniac" has filled Briony's mind with "man, mad, ax, attack, accuse."

Knowing the twins will be too frightened to approach the horse stalls, Briony heads to the swimming pool, musing about taking final responsibility for animal or child. Writers do that for their characters. Briony may choose not to have children. She finds no bodies in or around the pool, living or dead. Briony allows herself to contemplate the mysteries of adulthood she has observed before deciding the boys will be in the island temple. Passing the fountain, the scene of the mystery that foretold later brutalities, Briony hears a faint shout and spies movement, but she sees nothing and heads back to the house. Through the windows, she sees a disembodied human leg, which she realizes is just Emily, reclining at an odd angle on the sofa, waiting for the twins. Briony turns away toward the island temple. She selects the safest route.

Crossing the bridge without a light, Briony sees an unfamiliar shrub, which appears to break into two parts, one taller than the other. The tall part backs away and fades into the trees. The remaining patch is a person, struggling to stand up and calling Briony's name. The figure reappears and circles toward the bank. Briony observes his effortless progress toward the roadway, then kneels over Lola. The cousin hugs herself and rocks slowly. Feeling a flowering of tenderness for her cousin, Briony asks about the man and declares, before Lola can speak, that she saw him. Terror brings the two girls close. Elated, Briony wants to seal the crime and close the culprit's guilt by naming him. Lola frees herself, but Briony is determined that this is *her* discovery, *her* story to tell and asks if it was Robbie. *It was Robbie*, Briony repeats, as a statement. Lola asks whether Briony saw him. "How could he?" "How dare he?" Briony responds, then tells Lola about the attack in the library and how she rescued Cecilia. Lola is only half listening, repeating, "You actually saw him." Briony is certain now. "Plain as day." Lola relates how she was grabbed from behind, forced to the ground and had her eyes covered so she cannot say who it was for sure. He had said nothing, just breathed.

These are the positions the two girls will hold for weeks and months to come. Briony is certain and Lola is uncertain. Lola retreats into the background, treated as a wounded





child and recovering victim, while Briony is cast into an adult role that she relishes. Lola never has to lie or look her supposed attacker in the eye because her younger cousin does this for her, innocently and without guile. Lola has only to keep silent about the truth and forget it completely. Everything seems consistent to innocent Briony. She questions only her first assumption that Robbie would limit his attentions to Cecilia. Indeed, Briony herself could have been his victim. This realization strengthens Briony's fervor.

Lola struggles to reconcile herself to Briony's truth. As they stand and walk toward the bridge, Lola finally begins to cry. She is too weak to climb the steep incline. Leon and Cecilia appear and Leon comes to the rescue. Briony tells her brother exactly what she has seen.

## Part 1, Chapter 13 Analysis

Chapter 13 follows Briony on the high adventure of a solo nighttime search for the missing twins. She is sure they are fine and that they will be frightened away from any areas of true danger. Her mind combines childish fantasies of flying with contemplation of the adult story she will create from the day's events. Coming upon Lola under attack by a stranger in dark shadows, Briony spins those events in her mind and "sees" clearly that it is Robbie. Within a few days of repeating her story, Briony, who is young, awestruck and eager please, will find she has trapped herself in a labyrinth of her own making. Once the authorities make up their minds and set a process in motion, they will not overtly pressure or bully Briony but will make it clear they expect her story to remain consistent. Briony will lack the courage to withdraw her evidence, even as she realizes it was too dark for her to "see" the attacker. She will continue, honestly and passionately, to believe she knows the culprit. The authorities will give her no opportunity to express nuances. Once the sentence is passed, Briony will protect her psyche from damage well into her teens by forcing herself to forget and erase the memories. The search for atonement for this sin will follow Briony to the end of her long life. The exchanges between cousins read not as Lola is happy there is a witness to rape but relieved that untrue witness will happily be borne.



# Part 1, Chapter 14

## Part 1, Chapter 14 Summary

Lola is put to bed to await a doctor, leaving Briony with the adults, who listen to her as the grown-up she feels herself to be. Police arrive and find Briony their only available source. Briony's words and tears testify against Robbie and call out to the chief inspector for acceptance and comfort. Marshall comes in from searching and is briefed by the inspectors, who he treats with condescension. Plainclothesmen interview Marshall, Emily and Leon. Having sedated Lola, Dr. McLaren looks briefly at Briony and departs. Cecilia, who would normally take charge in such a situation, is sunk in private misery and paces room to room, speaking to no one, chain smoking and twisting a handkerchief. She glares at Briony through bloodshot eyes. No one says so, but they all await Robbie's return. Leon and Marshall prepare a map to guide a renewed search for the twins by the police.

Deciding that her story needs independent verification, Briony runs to Cecilia's chaotic room for Robbie's letter. She hands it to the head inspector, who reads it rapidly and looks first at Briony, then at Cecilia. Emily demands to read it over Cecilia's loud protestations and attempts to snatch it away. Emily rebukes Cecilia, telling her daughter that had she brought the note to her as she should have, Lola would have been spared her nightmare. Cecilia glares at these people to whom she cannot begin to tell all she knows, turns and leaves the room, giving a cry of sheer vexation that echoes down the hallway. Briony feels vindicated.

After Cecilia leaves, the police formally interview Briony. She answers their questions, shows them the corner where Robbie attacked Cecilia and demonstrates the stances of each. Briony had not told Emily about this because it would have given Emily a migraine and dinner and the twins' disappearance followed too quickly. Briony explains how she obtained the letter and admits she was horribly nosy opening and reading it. The inspector then gently urges Briony to recount the events at the lake. He asks her to forget what she *knows* and concentrate on what she actually saw. Briony repeatedly insists it was bright enough to see the perpetrator.

The police next interview Emily, Leon, Marshall, Old Hardman and Hardman's son Danny. Betty provides Danny with an alibi. Cecilia refuses to come downstairs and by the time she comes forward with the shocking story of what happened in the library, it only confirms the common view that Robbie is dangerous. The police scorn Cecilia's suggestion that they should be looking at Danny Hardman.

Around 5 a.m., Robbie is seen approaching from across the park. Everyone but Lola and Cecilia flies outside. One twin rides on Robbie's shoulders and the other walks at his side. The police intercept and separate them. Briony is outraged at Robbie's calmness, at this cynical attempt to gain forgiveness for the unforgivable. Briony is sent off to bed, but she cannot sleep. The day and night have been too clamorous. She feels



cheated out of rescuing the twins. The adults will take over now. Briony floods her pillow with tears for a half-hour. At the sound of an engine starting, Briony runs to the window. Robbie stands defiantly erect, handcuffed. The disgrace horrifies Briony and confirms to her that he must be guilty. Briony hears Emily cry out and sees Cecilia run toward the police car. Robbie still does not appear ashamed as he confronts Cecilia. They move closer and Cecilia touches Robbie. How forgiving her sister is, thinks Briony, knowing this tragedy will bring the sisters closer together. The indulgent inspector finally separates the couple and Robbie is thrust into the back seat. Cecilia watches them drive away, weeping. Briony has never loved her sister more than now.

Grace Turner, umbrella in hand, storms out to intercept the car, roaring "Liars!" at the police. She gets off several sound blows at the car before she is subdued and disarmed. Hands on hips and still yelling, Grace watches her son vanish into the mist.

## Part 1, Chapter 14 Analysis

Chapter 14 concludes Part 1 of McEwan's novel. It follows the tense hours after Lola and Briony return to the house and Briony's testifying to what she knows she has seen. When Briony produces Robbie's note, Cecilia is enraged and storms to her room. Her refusal to testify that night helps damn Robbie because people's minds are made up by the time she comes forward and her candid recounting of their consensual intimacy in the library only darkens the defendant's image. Watching again from her window an adult scene through a child's eyes, Briony is certain that her actions will draw her and her sister closer. When Robbie is convicted for the assault and imprisoned, however, it will drive a wedge between them that can never be removed. Toward the end of the novel, we will see Briony seeking forgiveness that Cecilia cannot give. Briony's life as a writer has been determined by the unclear sightings of the fountain, library, attacker and arrest and a single act of treachery, the reading and revealing of Robbie's note.



## Part 2

### Part 2 Summary

Three stragglers from the retreating British army reach a bombed-out house and pause to figure out a shortcut to the sea. High up in a tree hangs a pale, smooth leg, severed cleanly above the knee. Two of the stragglers are corporals, Nettle and Mace and the third is a private, Robbie Turner. The corporals defer to Robbie, who looks and sounds like an officer and can read a compass, the one skill they need to reach the coast. Robbie seeks privacy to examine a wound below his rib cage. It does not look as bad today.

Robbie knows they must stay off the road as they swing westward toward the setting sun. They come upon a farmhouse, where Robbie speaks to the owner in French. They push past the frail but energetic woman to drink and refill their canteens. Mace prepares hay mattresses in the barn and they check their weapons before trying to go to sleep on empty stomachs. The woman's sons, whom she describes as brutal killers, approach, bearing a "magnificent feast." For more than an hour, Henri and Jean-Marie Bonnet tell the trio about the massive destruction and casualties they have witnessed near Arras. Robbie confides that he was wounded in a Stuka attack, but he does not want the corporals to know about it. They are walking cross-country to avoid air raids on the main roads to Dunkirk. Robbie is ashamed that the RASC is retreating, but he promises they will return to throw the Germans out of France.

Robbie is exhausted but not sleepy and his wound is throbbing. He remembers three and a half years of sleepless nights and stupid, claustrophobic days spent in a narrow cell. A note in his pocket promises: "I'll wait for you. Come back." This gives him his only reason for staying alert and surviving. He rises to watch flashes of German artillery in the southern sky. Stragglers will be killed or sent to prison, where there will be no offer of early release in return for enlisting in the military. He ponders leaving the corporals behind to speed his flight to the English Channel.

Robbie recalls his only meeting with Cecilia, six days out of prison and one day before reporting to army duty. They had been forced to use literary characters as codes for feelings the prison censors had forbidden the "morbidly oversexed" prisoner. Cecilia wore her nurse's uniform to the café. They could not get beyond inane small talk in the half-hour she had available. They kiss only at the bus stop and too late Robbie thinks of riding with her to Whitehall. They continue writing during his training, freed from censorship but wary of getting ahead of that bus-stop kiss. They look forward to intimacy during his scheduled two-week leave. The army regime is easier than prison. Concerned that Cecilia has cut herself off completely from her family, Robbie urges her to reconsider, but she is adamant. She will never speak to her silly, hysterical sister and never forgive her family's snobbery and stupidity. Cecilia is aware of her bitterness, but she is happy with her new life and friends. Conflicting schedules prevent a meeting and Robbie is shipped to France. He continues urging Cecilia to reconcile with her family.



Cecilia's last letter arrives in mid-May, as the British Expeditionary Force is falling back to the Channel. In the letter, Cecilia writes that as a sort of penance, Briony has begun nurse's training at Cecilia's old hospital rather than following her path to Cambridge. Cecilia pities anyone who receives an injection from that "fantasist." Having begun to understand what her false testimony did, Briony wants to meet with Cecilia. Cecilia believes the dreamer wants to recant officially, legally and Cecilia believes she should consult a lawyer. She will do nothing until she hears from Robbie. Her family must write a proper apology to Robbie before she will talk to them. Cecilia cannot stop thinking about how great a step it was for her sister to enter nursing and she is curious to learn her motivations.

*Horizon* has turned down one of Briony's submissions, which shows someone can see through her wretched fantasies. Cecilia encloses a poem by Auden on the death of Yeats. She will visit Robbie's mother over the weekend. "You're in my thoughts every minute. I love you. I'll wait for you. Come back." Robbie has memorized those lines and lives for her. He is anxious for dawn's first light so he can resume walking to the coast.

Mace awakens Robbie after 45 minutes of sleep. They divide the provisions someone left for them and follow the compass northward, avoiding roads because it is a perfect day for the Luftwaffe. Robbie estimates that they are 25 miles from Dunkirk and the closer they come, the harder it is to stay off the roads. Robbie's side hurts every time he puts his right foot down and he is growing irritable and finds it hard to concentrate. They join a slow-moving truck convoy. Robbie fights the temptation to hitch a ride, knowing trucks are often targeted from the air. The British have been disabling vehicles and equipment to prevent them from benefiting the enemy.

French and Belgian civilians of all ages trudge along with hundreds of soldiers. A crisp column of armored cars comes from the opposite direction, hoping to gain an hour or two for the retreating troop by attacking the pursuing Panzers. Robbie no longer feels responsible for the corporals, but he is too weak to shake them off. Signs of defeat increasingly litter the roadside, as do bodies. Robbie keeps his attention on the sky. The ground begins to steepen and it grows hot. Robbie's pain increases and he is too thirsty to eat the food he carries. He composes a hexameter to keep himself tramping forward: "He walked / across / the land / until / he came / to the sea."

Sixteen miles from the canal, the land levels and wreckage along the road becomes continuous. Robbie and the corporals come upon a gung-ho major from the Buffs who is recruiting soldiers to flush out a Jerry machine gun nest "with cunning and a bit of teamwork." Mace points out that this goes against general orders that all forces proceed at top speed to Dunkirk. Before this act of defiance can be taken up, a bleary Robbie sees a plank of wood headed toward the column at a height of 30 feet. At first he cannot move or call out, but then he recovers and races against pain to an overturned truck just ahead of the ME 109's spray of bullets. Medics quickly attend to the many wounded. The Buffs major advises, as he resumes recruitment, that more fighters will soon appear. Taking Robbie for a senior officer, he lets him off. Robbie puts himself at the medics' disposal, feeling stirrings of his old ambitions to be a doctor. When the column does not resume its trek, Robbie impatiently walks around it. Ten minutes later, he spots



Mace in a stand of poplars and heads toward him. Mace and Nettle are digging a grave for a 15-year-old boy. Thirst reminds Robbie of boyhood fevers that Grace had nursed. His wound is growing inflamed.

The hope for rebirth and triumphant return to pre-jail life that Cecilia's last letter suggests buoys Robbie. He walks forward, head down, protected by his thoughts. The couple will resume life at the point of their interrupted evening walk. Robbie will sit back, proud and fierce and wait for old enemies to apologize. Once his record is cleared, medical school or a commission in the medical corps will be possible. Relations with Emily and Jack will never be close again. How, though, can he ever absolve or accept Briony? The hate for the malignant child that filled his daydreams in prison had once flared in France into a drunken conjuring of her onto the end of his bayonet. It is not reasonable or just to hate Briony, but it helps.

Robbie remembers a beautiful morning in June 1932 when he had given Briony a swimming lesson. He was 19, accepted to Cambridge and heading soon to France to teach English for the summer. She prattled on as they walked to an ideal spot for beginners. She practiced strokes, with his support and she was amused by the swift current. Robbie ignored Briony's protests and they emerged from the water. As they dried off, Briony asked whether Robbie would save her if she fell into the river. Of course, he replied. She jumped into the current. Going in after her, Robbie was angry at her stupid test. Briony could easily have drowned and she could have drowned them both. He was still angry, trudging back to the house, when she asked if he knew why she needed to know he would save her. She said that proved that he loved her. After promising never to do it again, she declared: "I love you. Now you know."

Robbie now believes Briony must have nurtured these feelings, hidden and embellished, for three years until the night of his arrest. He has contemplated for years the strange aspects of their meeting at dusk on the bridge and her acceptance of the envelope. Reading "cunt" marked a betrayal. The library had confirmed it. For vengeance, she named him Lola's attacker. By persistence, she landed him in prison. It will take courage for Briony to get his name cleared. Even so, Robbie will never forgive her.

Nettle points out 15 dots circling above them at 10,000 feet. One speck begins a near-vertical dive as soldiers and civilians scatter. A mother carrying her child cannot figure out where to go. Robbie drags them away from the buildings that are the target of the Stuka's 1,000-pound bomb. Dirt thrown up from its explosion 80 yards away stings their faces. A second bomber dives and his bomb strikes 150 yards away. The pilots will return to strafe everyone in the open fields, so they must seek cover in the trees. Robbie cannot make the mother understand and flees. Mother and son are struck by a third bomb and are vaporized. Robbie's business is to survive, though he has forgotten why. Robbie is desperate for water. His pistol is clogged with dirt, so he discards it. Sergeants and junior officers are rousting dispirited soldiers from the woods. Mace hands Robbie a dead man's water bottle and helps him to his feet. Nettle joins them, carrying a bottle of wine and an Amo bar.





The column resumes the walk to Bray Dunes. Soldiers are abandoning the boots that give them blisters and heavy greatcoats that seem foolish in the dusty heat. A platoon of Welsh Guards marches by in crisp form that puts the stragglers to shame. Robbie remembers riding his father's shoulders at sporting events and carnivals through crowds of people like this. He wishes he were on those shoulders now. He wonders if his father perished in the Great War or perhaps survives somewhere. Robbie contemplates how foolish he had been to revel in his freedom to make his own life with only distant help from Jack Tallis. He wishes he had a father, wishes he could be a father. Everyone walking toward Dunkirk resolves to be a father. The Salvation Army is good at tracking down missing persons.

Toward 1 p.m., the trio approach the bridge across the Bergues-Furnes canal, passing through the stench of rotting meat, smoldering mountains of burning uniforms and blankets, sabotaged equipment and groaning wounded men. Robbie keeps walking. Some men are looting cigarettes, liquor and new shoes from an NAAFI depot. Military police are directing traffic like stewards at a county show. Coldstream Guards, contemptuous of the filthy, disorganized rabble passing by, are dug in around the bridge. A fierce sergeant is pulling able-bodied men out for perimeter defense duties. Mace advises Robbie to get between him and Nettle and limp convincingly. They make it through and keep up the ruse for half an hour, just in case they are being watched. Dunkirk burns seven miles ahead. High-altitude bombers are pounding the port and Stukas are attacking the crowded beach. The walking wounded are falling by the wayside, but there are no ambulances, medicine, or even water to relieve them. Nettle throws away his hated boots, but Robbie retrieves them, finding one atop a rotting corpse.

Robbie's periodic inability to determine where he is in his life story troubles him more than his throbbing wound or the bombers overhead. He is in such a condition as they approach a self-important lieutenant who confronts Nettles over his untied boots. Robbie would have shot the lieutenant had he not lost his pistol. They hear the sea and taste the salt air as they climb through dune grass and the breeze clears Robbie's mind. Dunkirk is the terminus of their terrible rout and all private initiative is again swallowed up in military organization. A 500-yard long jetty of men, seven or eight men abreast, waits for boats that do not arrive, placid as cattle. They are a tiny proportion of the total men who have straggled in. Some are swimming or playing football. Some are digging proprietorial foxholes. Some are getting drunk in the cafés of the nearby resort town of Bray. Thirst decides where the corporals will head and Robbie follows them to a ruined bar. It has cigarettes but nothing to drink. Nevertheless, the bar is full, satisfying a homesick yearning for the Saturday night pub. Word is there were boats yesterday and may be some tomorrow.

A ring of angry soldiers has formed around a short, bespectacled RAF man who they hold responsible for lack of air cover to protect their retreat. Mole-like, the RAF man appears to know he is about to die. He does not defend himself or yell for help, which only increases the mob's anger and he is beaten and kicked. Robbie knows from college experience that it would be foolish to try to rescue him. Mob psychology dictates that the next creative strike will make the assailant a hero. A brutal Welshman is ready



to string up the cowering figure with a belt of canvas webbing. Mace suddenly barges into the circle, hollering like Tarzan. He hoists the terrified victim off the ground in a great bear hug and declares his intention of drowning him in the bloody sea. As hoots and stamping signify the mob's approval, Nettle appears beside Robbie and they realize instantly what Mace has in mind. They quickly move toward the door just in time to impede the mob and they hold out just long enough for the pair to disappear down a side street. Robbie and Nettle melt away, leaving the mob on the vast beach among the thousands watching for boats.

Robbie and Nettle wander the streets, hoping to hook up with the rescuer. Robbie asks a gypsy for water and she agrees if the pair will capture her escaped pig. The squealing sow runs all over town before Robbie lassoes it and they are rewarded with two stone flagons of water. The woman lets them wash up and refills their canteens and she offers them a bottle of wine, a saucisson and some sugared almonds for their haversacks. They resume looking for Mace to share their bounty. It seems hopeless and their blisters hurt, so they decide to find a place to eat, drink and sleep without being robbed. They enter a bombed-out hotel only to find many soldiers have the same idea. They give up trying to squeeze in and head back toward the old gypsy and her sow. Robbie rambles on about precisely the kind of place he wants to find. They settle for the cellar of a bombed-out house, already full of soldiers, most asleep. Robbie and Nettle find a place and cover themselves with a greatcoat they have not cast off. They must be selfish to survive. To Robbie it is the best meal of his life.

Again, Robbie's mind will not allow him sleep. Cecilia's promise to wait seems as heavy as the greatcoat. Everyone in the cellar is waiting for something. Robbie cannot picture Cecilia's face. Nowadays, everyone is guilty of something and no one will be redeemed. Cecilia and Briony certainly have unusual names. And what about that French boy's leg, hanging in the tree? He must retrieve it as he had Pierrot and Jackson. What a reception he had received that morning! He is used to such things now. He must find Mace. He must ask the atomized Flemish mother and son whether they hold him responsible for their fate. Nettle warns Robbie that he is making too much noise, waking everyone up. Robbie's face is burning. Nettle tells him he looks terrible. The navy is organizing on the beach, so he should get some quiet sleep for tomorrow.

Cambridge boys would not understand the benefits of good marching order. What do poets know about survival? Order and cooperation will get them across the tranquil sea. "I'll wait for you" is elemental. It is what keeps Robbie alive. He remembers gravel through thin-soled shoes, icy handcuffs and Cecilia's clinging green gown. She had trusted and loved him beside the police car. She had not been ashamed of him. Time will show that Cecilia meant it. What happened between them in the library, she promised, was their secret and she would share it with no one. Robbie promises Nettle he will not hear another word from him. Wake him at seven.





## Part 2 Analysis

Part 2 shifts not to court and prison as we might expect, but to the open fields of Northern France as the British Expeditionary Forces scramble toward Dunkirk ahead of the Nazi Blitzkrieg into Western Europe. Robbie's bitter three-and-a-half year imprisonment is recalled, but not depicted, because in the British army's need for recruits, Robbie had been granted parole on condition he enlist. Robbie's conviction precludes the officer's commission to which his education would otherwise have entitled him. Robbie is content with his lot because basic training is easier and more interesting than the prison regimen. Clearly, however, Robbie would like to serve in the medical corps. In France, Robbie continues corresponding with Cecilia, as he has since he was first locked away. They met once for half an hour between his release from prison and the start of training and Robbie had looked forward to spending two weeks alone with Cecilia between the end of training and his BEF assignment. Cecilia is now a maternity ward nurse and their conflicting schedules prevent that meeting.

After prison, Cecilia and Robbie's correspondence was freed of censorship and Cecilia can tell Robbie of her determination not to reconcile with her family and her hopes that a contrite Briony intends to recant her testimony, which could clear Robbie's name. Cecilia's last letter arrives before mail service is disrupted in the rush to Dunkirk. Robbie carries it and a magazine clipping in his breast pocket. The poem comes from Stanza 3 of W. H. Auden's poem, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats d. Jan. 1939." It is not the incipit as the text suggests. Cecilia's promise to wait is all that sustains Robbie.

A number of British military units are mentioned, including the Buffs or Royal East Kent Regiment, the Welsh Guard and the Coldstream Guards. Considerable animosity among British units is evident, as is mutual scorn between Britons and the French. The rout across Northern France toward the bombed and smoking beach is pictured graphically. A French cavalry officer shoots his horses to keep them out of German hands, diving Stuka fighters scream to generate a terrifying howl as they plunge straight downward, chaplains burn bibles and prayer books to keep them out of Nazi hands. Robbie's shrapnel wound is growing infected and a combination of thirst, fever and pain encourage him to think about life before prison and war. He hopes to pick up his life if Briony follows through on her intention to recant her testimony.

The final section of the novel will raise questions about whether Part 2 is part of an early draft of a work of fiction to which Briony, the world-famous author, dedicates her life as a measure of atonement for ruining Robbie's life. We will discuss this further below. In its light, however, it is worth noting Robbie's fevered rantings and promise to be silent.



## Part 3

### Part 3 Summary

The uneasy sense that something is coming to an end grips London and the whole of England in April of 1940. Within the hospital, every job is affected, from the self-important senior staff to the younger doctors and consultants to the elderly porters to the nurses and nurse trainees. Probationary Nurse Briony Tallis would like to be consoled once more by thoughts that it might not happen, but it is about to happen. The hospital has been emptying slowly and invisibly for days. Firefighting equipment has been installed. Only eight of the 20 beds in Briony's ward are occupied, but the work is harder. The trainees are calmer, more accepting.

The probationers live in constant fear of Sister Marjorie Drummond, who silently notes mistakes before exploding in fury. Briony is prone to errors of deportment and the list of picayune offenses is long. Lately, however, Sister has been preoccupied, hardly bothering with her charges. Earlier, Briony and her class learned to fear Sister after she dressed down kindly, slow-moving Susan Langland for revealing her given name to a patient. This broke a cardinal rule in the handbook that encapsulates the traditions of Nightingale nursing. Briony has not been reduced to tears like most of the probationers, but she goes to bed that night a little shivery and she rereads the handbook, looking for points of etiquette that she may have missed.

Probationers' days are spent sweeping and polishing floors and scrubbing, fumigating, polishing and washing down all surfaces with carbolic solution. They scour, wipe and dry bedpans and urine bottles until they shine like dinner plates. A dozen times a day, they scrub their cracked and bleeding hands under freezing water in the ceaseless war against germs. They are initiates in the cult of hygiene. All personal comfort is sacrificed for the badge of professional pride. Between shifts, the probationers attend lectures and demonstrations or study. Even meals and bedtimes are supervised to prevent frivolity.

The army delivers filthy old beds to scrub down and squeeze into the ward. Additional equipment, including "Bunyan Bags" that the trainees have never heard of, is brought in, inventoried and stowed. Briony notices bottles of morphine in the new, locked medicine cupboard. When sent on errands to other wards, Briony sees the same increased state of preparation. Speculation is officially prohibited. The top floors have been reinforced against bombing and the operating rooms relocated in the basement.

Fiona occupies the bed next to Briony and becomes her friend. Although ginger-haired and freckled, Fiona does not remind Briony of her cousin Lola. Fiona is loud and jolly, destined some day to be a ward sister. Fiona's large and prominent family lives in Chelsea. Most of the other girls in their class already have some medical experience. Teatime between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. is the only break in the probationers' busy day when they can chat. Briony finds it hard to make friends because she puts all her energy into making sure she is not on Sister Drummond's bad side. Briony sometimes



contemplates, as she falls asleep, a parallel life in college, reading Milton. Instead, she has chosen to follow Cecilia's path into nursing to support the war effort. On her first day of training, Briony had courteously pointed out a mistake on her name badge, which should have read "B. Tallis." She is informed that her Christian name does not matter and she is "Nurse Tallis." Looking around, humiliated, Briony sees everyone's initial is "N."

Following the military model established by Miss Nightingale, who is never referred to as Florence, the probationers quickly learn unthinking obedience. Physical discomfort closes down their mental horizons. Uniforms erode identity. In the wards, they submit to a daily routine "from bedpan to Bovril" with minds emptied and defenses down, under the ward sister's absolute authority. Second-year students assure them they will eventually take pleasure in achieving competence and Briony has already had a taste of this, taking pulses and temperatures and treating minor afflictions. Mostly she is a maid and crammer of simple facts and she is happy to have little time to think about uneasy life on the streets.

Briony finds her dormitory companions' homesickness theatrical and ridiculous. She keeps her letters home concise and positive as not to give her mother the satisfaction of seeing her predictions of misery fulfilled. She conceals her lowly work. Emily must know Briony is independent. Briony does not answer her mother's questions in letters that tell about how evacuees have been billeted on the Tallis family and how the grounds are being transformed by vandalism, requisition and fortification. Wretched Betty has dropped Uncle Clem's vase and shattered it to pieces. Betty claims pieces had simply come away in her hands, but Emily and Jack do not believe her. Overworked Jack actually yells at Betty, quite uncharacteristically. Briony feels a mild nostalgia for the life from which she has cut herself off. During the week's holiday between basic training and her probationary year, however, Briony refused even to visit her parents, staying instead with an aunt and uncle in Primrose Hill.

Briony keeps a secret journal in which every night before lights-out she records fantasies about her daily encounters. These writings reveal her true self. She is careful to disguise depictions of Sister Drummond, assuming the journal will be read. Briony also changes patients' names, to transform circumstances and to invent. Briony rambles, feeling no obligation to the truth. She builds unconvincing, overwritten little stories about the colorful people who surround her, like a medical Chaucer. In later years, Briony will regret not having been more factual to provide herself with a store of raw material. At the time, however, the journal serves primarily as a means of preserving Briony's dignity as an important writer forced to put up with the life of a trainee nurse. Writing provides continuity with the life from which Briony has cut herself off.

During her stay on Primrose Hill, Briony devotes an exhausting week to preparing a 103-page typescript, with carbon copy, which she drops off at the offices of *Horizon* magazine. Briony is satisfied with its modern sensibility, stripped of such quaint 19th-century devices as character and plot. Thought, perception and sensation is what must interest the modern novelist. The way Virginia Woolf enters the mind and shows it at



work or being worked upon in *The Waves* impresses and inspires Briony. Three months pass without a response from *Horizon*. Briony is more concerned, however, that she has received no reply to a letter she wrote to Cecilia.

In the last days of May, medical supplies increase and non-urgent patients are sent home, but still the probationers have little free time. The focus and bane of their existence is the sluice room, where twice a day they empty and clean bedpans. Those breaking rules, such as Briony running when there is no fire or hemorrhaging, are sent there as punishment. Cleaning the ward, Briony learns from newspapers that the war is going badly. The British army is "making strategic withdrawals to previously prepared positions," a journalistic euphemism for retreat. Briony may be the last person in the hospital to understand what is happening.

A letter arrives from Briony's father, announcing the upcoming marriage of Paul Marshall and Lola Quincy. Jack gives no reason for why he sends this news and offers no comment on the event. As she works, Briony pictures the 15-year-old Lola she once knew standing at the altar. They have not seen one another since the summer of 1935. Briony realizes that she made this union possible. Familiar guilt pursues her more vividly than usual as she goes about her routine duties. Briony realizes she can never undo the damage she has done. She is unforgivable. Wondering why her remote father sent the news, Briony ventures outside the hospital during teatime to phone his office, but she doesn't get past the switchboard. Fresh spring weather stands in contrast to the disinfectant-rich atmosphere indoors. Two young army medics smile at Briony as they brush by on the bridge, but to her dismay they are otherwise oblivious. Running back to the hospital gives Briony a brief taste of freedom.

Only a handful of jaundiced sailors remain in the ward and an air of waiting settles over the hospital. For no apparent reason, the probationers receive a half-day off, but they must remain in uniform. Briony and Fiona stroll across the river to St. James' Park, where they settle into rented deck chairs, drink tea and listen to a Salvation Army brass band play badly. London is prepared for a bombing that has not yet begun. While Fiona talks about her clever little brother, Briony thinks about Robbie, fighting in France, perhaps captured. How would Cecilia survive such news? War might compound Briony's crime. The crowd sings along with the Salvation Army's renditions of popular songs, but Briony resists joining in. Fiona draws her into hospital gossip and they begin giggling loudly. People turn their heads and shush them mildly, but the girls realize wartime nurses are as irreproachable as nuns. Fiona skillfully mimics colleagues and patients with just the right touch of cruelty. Briony's worries are momentarily masked in laughter.

Returning from their break, the Briony and Fiona see a line of army trucks outside the hospital's main entrance. At first, they groan at the thought of more supplies to unpack and stow. Then they notice field ambulances discharging stretchers. Dazed, bloodied soldiers stand in groups or lie on the ground. Porters, nurses and doctors race about. The girls look at each other and break into a run. With blackened, stubbly faces, the patients look identical. Rough triage is established and Briony is ordered to grab one end of a stretcher to rush an urgent case to treatment. The man's weight surprises



Briony and she worries about her strength failing in the dash. Her fingers slip as they reach the ward, but she catches the stretcher with her leg. The wounded sergeant blows through his lips at her incompetence, which causes him pain greater than he imagined possible. A doctor mutters at her.

Watching the skilled doctor and nurse begin work, Briony does not know what to do next. She feels humiliated and hollow inside. A voice orders her downstairs again. Briony knows her arms will fail if she tries to carry another stretcher, but she dare not refuse. She considers disappearing to Scotland to work on a farm. She passes sturdy Fiona, who is doing a better job of moving a patient whose face has been blown away. They exchange glances of shock and shame for having been laughing in the park so recently.

Briony is relieved to see the last of the stretchers have been taken care of and that a dozen qualified nurses are on duty. At least 200 walking wounded require attention. Briony is ordered to lead 15 of them upstairs, single-file, to another ward. The elevators are backed up, so Briony safely parks those too weak to climb the stairs and continues with the rest. Following the strict discipline she has learned, Briony tries to keep order among the soldiers she leads, who fan out and fall into beds unassigned and unsanitized. An experienced Irish nurse gently sends Briony back to her own ward where she is undoubtedly needed. Briony feels like an idiot, following rules that would keep the wounded from sleep, the one thing they need. How was she to know that the rules dinned into her are now meaningless? Remembering the men she left downstairs, Briony rushes back, but they are gone. Not wanting to expose her ineptitude, she does not ask anyone where they went. She never sees them again.

In her own ward, designated overflow to acute surgical care, Briony finds the senior nursing staff and doctors, all with sleeves improperly rolled up, attending to the most urgent cases. Two padres minister to the dying. Morphine is being administered and transfusions set up. Probationers are distributing hot water bottles. Hushed medical voices are punctuated by groans and cries of pain. Every bed is occupied and the spaces between are filled with stretchers. Orderlies swiftly remove the dead. The ward reeks of blood, sweat, oil, disinfectant and, worst of all, gangrene. A nurse orders Briony to remove a corporal's bloody dressing and clean his leg wound. He tells Briony to ignore his screams. He does not want to lose his leg. As she removes the gauze, Briony tries to be chirpy. She remembers a childhood tablecloth trick as she rips off the gluey dressing. The corporal retches. Briony examines the wound, clumsily stitched on the battlefield. The leg looks like an overripe banana. She orders the corporal to hold still while she cleans it. She presses the alcohol-soaked cotton wool harder and harder until he flinches, eventually reaching white skin. Her gasp of relief that there are no signs of gangrene frightens the corporal until she delivers the good news. A passing nurse tells Briony that she is doing well but has to work faster. The corporal falls asleep before Briony reaches the stitches and a doctor arrives to examine him. Briony is dismissed, having achieved one small task.

Briony is next ordered to distribute water to the soldiers because it is vital that they not dehydrate and she cradles their filthy heads like giant babies. Next, she makes a



bedpan round. Then she is told to clean the face of a man whose nose had been shot away. Morphine has calmed him. Briony thinks about whether one of these patients might be Robbie. Certainly, he will forgive her after she ministers to him.

Briony's responsibilities increase. She is given forceps and a kidney bowl to remove shrapnel from an airman's legs. He is wary and tries to put her off, declaring the fragments are not bothering him. He believes Briony when she tells him that the wounds are growing infected and the eight fragments could enter his bloodstream and go to his heart or brain. She advises him to relax and breathe. Knowing it is forbidden to sit on a patient's bed, Briony makes do with an awkward posture and she selects the smallest fragment first. She pulls it firmly out and the airman's loud "Fuck!" echoes through the quiet ward, earning Sister Drummond's strict reprimand. Briony is ordered to carry on. She promises some brandy when they are done. The airman suffers soundlessly as six more pieces come out. The last one is very large and takes three pulls to extract. The airman asks Briony to clean it off for him to take home as a souvenir, then he sobs into his pillow. Briony throws up in the sluice room before delivering the promised brandy.

Briony attends to several superficial wounds before receiving the dreaded order to dress Private Latimer's face. He pushed her hand away earlier when she tried to feed him because swallowing was too painful. Briony bucks up and approaches him, proclaiming, "It's me again." Latimer looks at her without recognition. From experience, Briony can now say there is always someone worse off. She removes the bloody bandages to reveal something faintly resembling the anatomical cutaway models they study in class. Briony can barely look at the monster that Latimer has become, as he must surely realize he is. Does he have a girlfriend? Will she love him now? Briony lies to Latimer as she repacks his face. She offers him water and watches as pain and thirst battle in him. Briony would have sat with him, but she is sent to other duties.

Displaying a touch of rapport in adversity, Sister Drummond sends Briony to help apply Bunyan bags to Corporal MacIntyre's burned arms and legs. MacIntyre has no veins remaining to administer morphine or saline and he has spent two hours screaming at every touch and whimpering for water that his mouth is too badly burned to receive. The bags are designed to cushion damaged limbs in perfectly heated saline solution. The nurse in charge does not want to treat him until he can be hydrated. MacIntyre dies before Briony returns.

Probationers and second-year students work twelve hours without rest before they are relieved and Briony realizes that time has made her understand that impersonal tenderness makes nursing possible. All the earlier training, particularly the obedience, is but useful preparation. Briony had never seen a man cry before. Now she is used to it. Stoicism is amazing and appalling. She has seen every secret of the human body and realizes it can be easily torn but not easily mended. Briony yearns to qualify for a nurse's badge and she can even imagine abandoning writing to dedicate herself to the professions.

At 2:30 a.m., Briony is summoned to Sister Drummond, who seems to be everywhere doing jobs at every level. Drummond has heard that Briony speaks French a bit and





sends her to talk with a patient. Briony is exhausted and finds this assignment offensive, but she is ordered to obey. The patient is 18, like Briony, but looks 15 and he is watching the commotion around him with childlike wonder. He has a delicate face with an unusual sheen and his eyes are unhealthily radiant. His head is heavily bandaged. Briony pulls up a chair and holds his cold, greasy hand.

Briony understands the patient's French with difficulty. He is eager to engage her and apologizes that his memory is poor because he has been injured. He identifies himself as Luc Corner and asks Briony her name. She hesitates before responding, "Tallis." Luc believes he is in Paris and has memories of time spent with Briony in Millau. Briony tries to make him understand where he is, but to no avail and she tries to escape. Luc asks her to loosen his uncomfortable bandages. They are tied for quick release and she obliges as he rambles on about his musical youngest sister. Briony is shocked to discover half of Luc's head is missing and she realizes how foolish and unprofessional it is to have unwrapped him. She reties the bandaging, nauseous and unsteady. Luc rambles on. Briony enters Luc's fantasy world of Millau and watches rapture cross his face. Briony understands why Drummond sent her here. Luc asks, "Do you love me?" Briony hesitates, but then says honestly, "Yes." As Luc grows agitated, she whispers, "It's not Tallis. You should call me Briony." Sister Drummond orders Briony to her feet as another nurse draws a sheet over Luc's face. "There's a good girl," Sister Drummond says and she sends Briony off to wash up.

At 4:30 a.m. the probationers are dismissed to get some sleep. Briony and Fiona walk, arms linked, in silence, a lifetime of experience removed from Westminster Bridge. Briony finds an envelope slipped under her door. She undresses for bed and lies down, remembering Luc's voice. She wants to cry for him, but she is empty. Exhausted but still not sleepy, Briony opens the envelope. It acknowledges receipt of her novella, *Two Figures by a Fountain* and apologizes for the slow response. C.C. (Cyril Connolly) and his colleagues, including Elizabeth Bowen, find it greatly interesting but not right for *Horizon*.

Still, the letter says that Briony shows promise and C.C. hopes some criticism may help her develop her talent. He suspects too great an influence from Virginia Woolf and while experimentation has its place, he holds that narrative development is required. Too little happens at the fountain. Greater mystery would help. There are too many random impressions. Everything is too static. Perhaps the baffled girl at the window can be shown coming between the couple she observes, or perhaps somehow bring them closer together. Even sophisticated modern readers retain a childlike desire to be told a story, to know what happens. Briony's story needs a backbone. C.C. hopes she will not be discouraged and prepare another draft. Most rejection letters are, after all, under three sentences long. Her war duty is to cultivate her writing talent. Does she, C.C. wonders, have an older sister who attended Girton?

The floating timelessness of that first thrilling day of true nursing quickly reverts to a strict shift system. A German invasion and occupation seem likely. If this happens, Briony will not be able to carry out her plans. She must not delay. Fresh cases arrive every day but no more deluges. Turnover is high in the ward, either by transfer to



outlying convalescent hospitals or by death. Drama gives way to routine. Faces and names merge. Attention is given to rehearsing evacuations and donning gas masks. Sister Drummond no longer treats the blooded trainees as schoolgirls and they are flattered to receive cool, professional instructions. Briony swaps her day off with Fiona.

Briony leaves the hospital at 8 a.m. on Saturday, determined to walk. Street signs have been removed to confound German invaders and maps have been confiscated. Briony worries about being taken for a spy. She feels inept and unnerved being on her own and freed from timetable and orders. She has not had time to think about herself since the week on Primrose Hill. Briony tells herself that, like her fiction, she needs a backbone. Might she come between them somehow and send off to a magazine a barely clever fiction about the event to satisfy her own vanity? Briony makes her way through a park and past a small factory and corner pub, where men whistle at her and into a confluence of shabby streets in Stockwell. An elderly Home Guardsman demands to see her identity card and he tells her Clapham Road is two miles ahead. A truck convoy passes and Briony is relieved it carries crates instead of wounded soldiers.

Reaching Clapham Commons station, Briony pulls out her father's letter. She does not at first see the church he names. She sees a polished black Rolls Royce, driver's door ajar and radiator still warm. She climbs the steps and enters, breathing in the smell of churches everywhere. The marriage ceremony is already underway. Sitting in a rear pew, Briony is surprised to see a lankier Pierrot and Jackson wedged between their estranged parents across the aisle from just three members of the Marshall family. It is a far cry from the grand affair in Liverpool Cathedral that she always imagined had united Uncle Cecil and Aunt Hermione years before. Aware that she is not meant to be there, Briony listens to the vicar intone about marriage being ordained as a remedy against sin and to provide mutual help and comfort. Briony remembers Lola's tears and wounded wrists and the scratch on Marshall's face. How lucky Lola had been to have a talkative younger cousin to give her true attacker a way out. Now, she gets to marry her rapist.

The vicar intones, "If any many can show just cause," and Briony imagines herself coming forward to confess how she had conspired with the bride and groom to deliver an innocent man to jail. The couple realizes that on the "dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts will be disclosed," their secret will be walled up within the mausoleum of their marriage. Birdlike Cecil gives his daughter away. Marshall and Lola repeat their vows, she sweetly and surely, he booming in defiance. The prayers drone on and are followed by organ music as the couple and wedding guests walk down the aisle and out of church. Briony, who has been pretending to pray, turns to face the procession, wanting to be seen. Lola gives a tiny frown of displeasure. Marshall does not recognize her, nor do her aunt or uncle. The twins are delighted to see her. Briony remains in the church until she begins to feel foolish about not wanting to face family small talk and perhaps an invitation to an excruciating breakfast. Finally, she steps out into the sunlight. The vicar is walking away, the couple is settling into the Rolls and the tiny congregation has vanished.





Briony does not want to arrive too early at her next stop and feeling hungry, she stops into a drab little place for tea and toast. She uses the reeking, seatless lavatory, immune now to any stench. She wedges toilet paper into her shoe to cushion her blistered heel. After tidying herself, Briony sets off to interview for the post of beloved younger sister.

Briony finds 43 Dudley Villas in a block of Edwardian terraces, unique only for the old Ford 8 up on blocks in the yard. She lets the knocker fall twice and waits. She hears an angry female voice and irritated sigh. "What do you want?" demands a woman, furious at being interrupted. Briony asks for Miss Cecilia Tallis and she is told she looks like her. The woman hollers "Tallis!" up the stairs and stalks away. A door opens upstairs and the stairs creak. Cecilia, in a blue silk dressing gown, is slow to recognize her sister. "Oh my God," Cecilia says and sits on the steps, arms folded before her. Briony mumbles that she needs to talk to her and has come unannounced only because Cecilia refuses to answer letters. Cecilia makes small talk by asking Briony about being a probationer, but Cecilia makes it clear that a professional bond will not help. Hardness in Cecilia's voice warns Briony not to ask about Robbie. Cecilia asks about any news from their parents. Mention of Betty's breaking Uncle Clem's vase perks Cecilia's interest.

The interrogation continues but is interrupted when the landlady, Mrs. Jarvis, demands that Briony either come or go. Close the door, she says. Cecilia introduces her sister and rebukes Mrs. Jarvis' rudeness. Leading Briony upstairs, Cecilia silences Mrs. Jarvis with a ward sister's tone. Cecilia's flat is small and cluttered. She lights a cigarette and offers her grown sister one. They smoke in silence, standing in the kitchen. There are two chairs and Briony aches to sit down, but she will not ask and Cecilia will not offer. Finally, Cecilia speaks. She has seen a lawyer and the matter will not easily be resolved. Briony's recanting introduces no new evidence. Lola will continue claiming ignorance. Old Hardman might have offered hope, but now he is dead. Briony is confused to hear Hardman mentioned. What might he have to do with this? Cecilia is amazed that Emily did not mention that before he died, Hardman got the fear of God and was about to reveal something that was too inconvenient for everyone at this stage.

Briony uses Cecilia's childhood nickname and is ordered not to call her that. The interview is at an end. Cecilia states she has paid two guineas to learn that no court will believe an unreliable witness's change of heart. Briony feels sick. She hates herself and all she has ever been, but she has never before thought of herself as a liar. It is obvious and irrefutable. She had not intended to mislead or acted out of malice. Who would not believe that?

Briony cannot meet Cecilia's eye. She does not expect to be forgiven. "I won't ever forgive you," Cecilia confirms. Still, Briony intends to tell everyone what she did. This draws a frightening, wild little laugh from Cecilia. Briony presses on with the monolog she has rehearsed. She will tell Emily and Jack. Cecilia asks what has been stopping Briony for five years. Briony wanted to see Cecilia first. Cecilia corrects her, reminding Briony that their parents do not want to hear any more about the unpleasantness. What's done is done. Cecilia again mentions Hardman and Briony asks what she is talking about.



They are interrupted when Robbie emerges from the bedroom and reminds Cecilia they have to get moving. He does not see Briony, who is obscured behind her sister. He nods at the visitor and heads off to shave. Cecilia says she had thought it better they not meet like this. Briony's knees shake. She is amazed at how quickly relief that Robbie was alive is replaced by dread at confronting him. Anything she might say would sound banal.

Cecilia cooks powdered eggs and sets three places. Briony's foreboding increases. Robbie emerges from the bathroom, whistling. He looks much older, especially around the eyes. Seeing Briony, he does a double take. Cecilia provides a sarcastic summary of the reason for the visit. Briony struggles not to cry. The room seems to shrink as Robbie begins shifting positions, pacing and ranting. Briony knows from the ward that it is foolish to respond and she silently lets Robbie deliver her due. Briony has often pictured this conversation, like a naughty child anticipating a beating. She is numb, but she knows Robbie's words will hurt later.

Robbie demands to know whether Briony believes he assaulted her cousin. Did she ever? Briony is convinced now he did not but cannot say whether she always believed him. Robbie demands to know what makes her certain now. "Growing up," she says. Robbie stares at Briony with new hardness. Briony is struck by his handsomeness and recalls the morning she had declared her crush on him. He rages that at 18 soldiers are dying. How much more growing up does Briony need? Briony feels a need now to withstand Robbie or face annihilation. Robbie grows rigid and savagery sets on his face as he fights off an emotion he wants no one to witness. This trainee nurse dares think she knows about death, but she will never experience things he cannot get out of his mind. One more step and Briony will be within arm's length, but Cecilia steps between them, grips Robbie tightly like a wrestler, forces him to look her in the face and tenderly utters words she used to use on Briony. "Come back ... Robbie, come back," she tells him.

It works and the couple share a long, deep kiss, oblivious to their visitor. Relieved, Briony drinks a glass of water. Embarrassed by the kiss and wishing she could escape, Briony watches scenes on a street that show no sign of war except blackout blinds and a tireless Ford.

Cecilia announces with the voice of a ward sister that Robbie must report for duty and there are things Briony is going to do for them. With a voice purged of emotion, Robbie delivers the orders. First, they must exchange addresses and tell Jack and Emily that Cecilia is waiting to hear from them. Tomorrow they will go to the Commissioner of Oaths, retract Briony's evidence and send copies of her sworn statement to Jack and Emily. Then Briony will write Robbie in great detail about absolutely everything she thinks relevant, about all that led up to her saying that she saw him at the lake, why she stuck to her story before the trial, including any pressure from her parents or the police. Cecilia adds that Briony should try to recall anything she can about Danny Hardman that might put his alibi in question.



Briony tries to speak, but Robbie interrupts. He and Cecilia want to spend their last hour alone together. They will walk Briony to the train. Finally, Briony gets out that she believes the Hardmans' story because the culprit is Marshall. Robbie cannot imagine Marshall with Lola. Briony takes calm pleasure in delivering the clinching news that she has just come from their wedding. Robbie wants to find and kill Marshall, but Cecilia forbids it. It is time to go. Cecilia voices the conclusion: "He's immune. She'll always cover for him."

On the street, the three walk in silence. Small talk is impossible. Briony has no right to ask about their lives. They share only one subject and that is fixed in the unchangeable past. Their farewells are cool. Briony hears how foolish and inadequate her apology is. "Just do all the things we've asked," Robbie replies softly. Riding back to her hospital, Briony is sad but surprisingly serene. She feels homesick and sad to leave her sister and Robbie and their love that neither she nor war has destroyed. This realization soothes Briony. Cecilia used to speak to her when she was 6 and things were impossibly wrong just as she had to calm Robbie. Briony vows she will spend the rest of her day off beginning not just a letter but a new draft, an atonement.

## Part 3 Analysis

Part 3 details Briony's probationary period as a nurse. The first portion provides a vivid depiction of Florence Nightingale's training method, summarized in her 1873 *Advice to Nursing Students*:

Nursing is most truly said to be a high calling, an honourable calling. But what does the honour lie in? In working hard during your training to learn and to do all things perfectly. The honour does not lie in putting on Nursing like your uniform. Honour lies in loving perfection, consistency and in working hard for it: in being ready to work patiently: ready to say not "How clever I am!" but "I am not yet worthy; and I will live to deserve to be called a Trained Nurse.

Between two days off, Briony learns hands-on what it takes to be a nurse as she cares for the first casualties to arrive from Dunkirk. At the end of those twelve hours, Briony believes she has seen every horror a person can see. She also knows, from a lengthy rejection note from *Horizon* magazine, that she has writing talent but her story about a girl's visions of a fountain meeting needs development. It needs a backbone.

The next Saturday, Briony walks across London on a mission. First, she attends, uninvited, the wedding of cousin Lola to her true rapist, Paul Marshall. Briony made this wedding possible by fingering Robbie, ruining his life and Cecilia's. She wants the culprits to see her there. Next, she walks to her sister's building to try to make amends. Cecilia refuses to be engaged. Robbie, it turns out, is sleeping in the bedroom and a tense confrontation develops. It reveals how little Briony has seen of war and how terribly the experience has effected Robbie. Cecilia calms Robbie with techniques she used on Briony when childhood nightmares terrified her. There is little hope that Briony's



recanting can clear Robbie's name, but Briony is ordered to go through the motions. Among these is writing a long letter to Robbie describing and explaining everything.

Part 3 is signed, "BT / London, 1999." Part 3 and perhaps Part 2, have been the young nurse trainee's end-of-life account of the evacuation of Dunkirk and Robbie's safe return to London. It is, as her closing words disclose, "Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement," that Briony began writing in May 1940. The final part of *Atonement*, "London, 1999," will help clarify this, but it raises unanswered questions about whether anything in Part 3 actually happened.

Embedded in C.C.'s rejection letter to Briony is a bit of literary criticism that is more critical to understanding the novel than might appear if read casually. C.C. is Cyril Connolly (1903-74), co-editor of the literary magazine *Horizon* that was quite influential in 1939-50. In 1938, C.C.'s autobiography, *Enemies of Promise*, discusses why he never wrote anything that attained the levels others believed him capable. He must have been on the alert for young talent to encourage. C.C. tells Briony that among his colleagues, special interest was shown by Elizabeth Dorothea Cole Bowen (1899-1973), an Irish-born writer of short stories and novels who was destined to spend World War II recording her countrymen's reaction to the conflict. This is interesting in the context of C.C.'s comments about Briony's wartime vocation.

Bowen was a member of the Bloomsbury Group, a writers' circle in which Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was active. Woolf, whose unorthodox approach to literature C.C. tries to accept, but whose influence he finds too strong on Briony, was at the time of *Atonement* riding high in popularity. *The Waves*, Woolf's most experimental novel that Briony admits she read three times and imitated, consists of stream-of-consciousness monologs by the six characters, through which the author explores individuality set amidst descriptions of the sky in various telling moods. C.C. claims Briony has gone too far in abandoning character and plot like Woolf, who concentrated on trivial, self-centered, obsessed individuals. Woolf's suicide note to her husband in 1941 confessed fear she was going "mad again." Facing the approach of loss of mental facilities awaits Briony at the end of the novel. Woolf's reputation declined after World War II but resurged with the rise of feminist criticism in the 1970s. Woolf is now considered one of the 20th century's finest authors.



# London, 1999

## London, 1999 Summary

Briony is writing about her 77th birthday. It begins with a last visit to the Imperial War Museum library in Lambeth, whose reading room formerly served as the chapel of the Royal Bethlehem Hospital, old Bedlam. Briony has always liked tidy endings. Because it is cold and wet, Briony takes a taxi, pondering how she will soon join the ranks of Bedlam's crazies. A scan has shown her headaches are being caused by tiny strokes that are slowly closing down her brain. Eventually she will comprehend nothing at all and require continuous care. Her doctor emphasizes that vascular dementia is slow and not as bad as Alzheimer's, with its mood swings and aggression. The doctor is busy and hurries her out.

Briony spends an hour on the phone telling close friends, who are devastated. Her taxi passes the house in Bloomsbury where her father lived after his second marriage and where Briony lived and worked through the 1950s. She passes the square where Leon heroically nursed his wife and raised his children. Briony still feels physically and mentally that she is the same person she has always been. She catches a glimpse of St. Thomas' Hospital, one of three institutions she worked in during World War II and which she has merged, forgivably, in her fiction.

It is raining hard as the taxi pulls up to the museum. A black Rolls is parked outside. These always make Briony think of the Marshalls, whose pictures she sees sometimes in the newspapers in conjunction with their foundation and other humanitarian causes. Briony is shocked to see Lord and Lady Marshall coming down the steps toward her, surrounded by many officials. Briony avoids a head-on encounter. Lord Paul is a somewhat reduced, cruelly handsome plutocrat. Bone loss in his chin has improved his looks. He walks well for a man of 88, using his trademark walking stick, but he has to be lifted into the Rolls. Lady Lola is lean, fit and still faithful. Close to 80, she dresses bold and vulgar, still daring high heels. With a cigarette holder and lapdog, she would be Cruella De Vil. She folds herself into the Rolls agilely. Seeing the Marshalls lays something heavy of Briony's heart. She might outlive Paul, but Lola is certain to outlive her.

Briony spends a while chatting with the keeper of documents and hands over a bundle of letters that Mr. Nettle wrote about Dunkirk. The keeper has put Briony in touch with an old colonel of the Buffs, an amateur historian who has passed along notes on her typescript. They are irascible and helpful in pointing out things British troops would never say or do. Briony intends to write him a thank-you. Briony learns the Marshall Foundation is about to make a grant to the museum.

On the ride back north, Briony thinks about the colonel's suggestions, but she knows her work is done. There will be no more drafts. Her typescript contains the thoughts she began at Aldwych station. In her flat, Briony files her papers, makes a sandwich and



packs an overnight case. She looks around, knowing her years of independence will soon be over. A photograph of her late husband, Thierry, stands on her desk. Choosing a dress for the evening's birthday dinner is rejuvenating. Briony writes instructions for her secretary, who will come tomorrow. Briony knows she ought to be depressed, but she has always been good at not thinking about things that are troubling her. Today that is called denial. Briony wonders if she is somehow still competing with gaunt old Lola, as she had in their 50s. Briony will not publish her story in her lifetime.

Michael, a cheerful West Indian driver, picks Briony up in a dusty minicab. He is a little sulky when she demands he turn off his thumping music, but they eventually converse about families. Michael never knew his father, but his mother was a doctor. He has a law degree and is writing a doctoral thesis on law and poverty in the Third World. Briony is certain Michael thinks her profoundly stupid and she muses that it is safest to treat everyone you meet as a distinguished intellectual. Briony sleeps briefly and awakes with a headache. She takes three aspirin and wonders what portion of her mind was lost while she slept. Feeling confined and shrinking, she asks Michael to turn up his music and enjoys the Caribbean patois but doesn't ask for a translation.

The cab pulls up to Tilney's Hotel, the former Tallis estate. It has been more than 25 years since Briony's last visit, which was for Emily's funeral. The elms have given way to a golf course. Briony is not nostalgic about changes to the ugly old house, but she is sad to see the lake and island with its temple gone. Michael carries her case into the reception area and departs. The old library has been booked for the family's exclusive use. The plan is for them to gather for drinks at 6 p.m. Briony is relieved that no one is there to greet her. Charles, Pierrot's grandson and the event's organizing spirit, has reserved for Briony Auntie Venus' old room rather than her own former bedroom. The eldest son of Leon's second marriage has removed the old bedroom suite to his Scottish castle, but the new furnishings are very nice. The building seems to embrace more human happiness as a hotel than it had as a family home. Charles phones to say he will pick her up for her entrance.

Fifty relatives raise their glasses and applaud as Briony walks in on Charles' arm. Leon manages a smile as he slumps in his wheelchair, incapacitated by a stroke. Leon married four times and fathered many children. Pierrot is unmistakable, despite growing shriveled and bald. He is very much the *paterfamilias*. It is accepted that they never mention his sister. Jackson died 15 years ago. Charles prompts Briony with the forgotten names. Many guests compliment Briony on her books and tell her the teenagers are studying them in school. Briony makes many promises, shakes many hands, kisses many cheeks and lips and admires many babies before chairs are arranged and Charles asks everyone to be seated for an entertainment in Briony's honor.

Briony notices the books and shelves have been removed from the library, making it bigger. A boy in a black cloak stands before them, pale, freckled and ginger-haired, a true Quincey and he confidently begins to recite the prelude to *The Trials of Arabella*. The production is over in ten minutes, much shorter than the Shakespearean play Briony remembers having written. Not her best work, Briony must admit. Pierrot is





dabbing his eyes and Briony suspects this was his idea. The twins had so wanted to be in this play.

Briony is helped out of her comfortable chair to thank the cast and admits it was her fault that rehearsals fell apart in the summer of 1935 because halfway through she decided to become a novelist. There is indulgent laughter and applause before Charles announces dinner and the pleasant evening unravels into a noisy meal. Briony is relieved when she is escorted to her room.

At 5 a.m. Briony is still at her writing desk, thinking about her last novel, which ought to have been her first. The earliest version was dated January 1940 and the latest March 1999. In between there have been half a dozen drafts. Briony's 59-year assignment is over. Since the second draft in June 1947, it has been a confession of Lola's, Marshall's and Briony's joint crime, with nothing disguised and everything on the record. Editors have told Briony one may libel only oneself and the dead and the Marshalls have been busy in court defending their good names since the late 1940s. No publishing house will take the risk of issuing Briony's novel unless she displaces, transmutes and dissembles. That is, after all, what novelists do. Briony accepts that her book will only be published after she and Lola are dead.

Besides the crime, there are lovers. Their happy endings are on Briony's mind. Briony considers that she has not traveled very far from her little play and that she has made a huge digression and doubled back to her starting point. Only in this last version does the lovers' story end well. Earlier drafts were pitiless: Robbie died of septicemia at Dunkirk and Cecilia perished in the Nazi bombings, so Briony never met them in 1940. Or, after attending the wedding, Briony was too cowardly to face her recently bereaved sister and returned quietly to the hospital. Who will want such an ending now, such bleak realism? Briony is too old, too frightened and too much in love with the shred of life remaining her to permit such an ending. When it is posthumously published, no one will care if Briony has misrepresented events and individuals. As long as a single copy of her final draft survives in its present form, Briony's spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince will survive to love.

If a novelist has absolute, God-like, power to decide outcomes, how can Briony achieve atonement? There is nothing outside herself and only making the attempt matters. Briony is weary, looking out at the driveway down which they drove Robbie at this same time of day. Briony looks on the happy ending as a final act of kindness rather than weakness or evasion. She has not been so self-serving as to have Robbie and Cecilia forgive her, even though she might have liked to conjure them at her birthday celebration, still in love, smiling at *the Trials of Arabella*. It is not impossible, but now Briony must sleep.

## London, 1999 Analysis

This postscript, written in the first person by Briony close to dawn after her 77th birthday celebration, clarifies that Part 3 is her attempt at atonement for the crime she, Lola and



Marshall committed in 1935, a project to which she committed herself to in 1940 and has labored over for 59 years. The powerful Marshalls will see to it that the typescript is not published in their lifetime and Briony's diagnosis guarantees she will predecease them. Readers will some day want Robbie and Cecilia to survive and reunite, so that is how she has written final draft. Earlier, Briony had Robbie die of blood poisoning, which Part 2 certainly suggests was likely as the trio reached Dunkirk beach. Corporal Nettle had been Briony's source of information about that terrible trek, told in Part 2 of McEwan's novel. The corrections suggested by a retired army officer, sent to help Briony to minimize civilian errors in telling about the retreat, appear in Part 2 to have been made, so one wonders whether Part 2 is Briony's work. Perhaps McEwan is Briony's meticulous posthumous editor. He has not, at any rate, changed the outcome our tired, old, greatly-flawed heroine intended. What is written is written.





# Characters

## Briony Tallis

One of the novel's two protagonists, Briony, is introduced in the summer of 1935 as a precocious 13-year-old aspiring writer with a penchant for order and secrecy. She is the baby of the family, virtually an only child. She begins writing clumsy, imaginative short stories at age 11. On the day of her older brother Leon's homecoming, Briony happens to see her sister Cecilia strip down to her underwear and disappear into a fountain in front of Robbie, the household gardener and long-time friend. Briony chooses to interpret this as an action done under duress. *The Trials of Arabella*, Briony's play, is called off, disappointing her cousins. Briony has decided to be a novelist.

After taking out her frustration on a field of nettles, Briony takes a stand on the bridge, waiting for something grown-up and important to happen. Robbie sees her there and asks her to deliver a sealed envelope to Cecilia. Briony cannot resist opening and reading it and she becomes convinced that Robbie is a maniac, stalking her innocent sister. Discovering them in the back corner of the darkened library reinforces this certitude. She interprets their lovemaking, which she could not yet understand, as a physical assault.

When the twins make good their threat to run away, Briony goes her own way to search for them rather than teaming up with partners like the others. She comes upon someone attacking Lola and despite the darkness, Briony is convinced the assailant is Robbie, which she tells the police. She lacks the courage to modify her evidence or recant and Robbie is sentenced to prison in November 1935. In 1940, Briony enters nurse's training at Cecilia's old hospital rather than enrolling in Cambridge. It is a form of penance.

Briony asks her sister to meet, but Cecilia adamantly refuses. Learning that Lola intends to marry Marshall convinces Briony of the truth and she attends the wedding to make certain they know she knows the truth, then confronts Cecilia and Robbie. They demand she reveal the whole truth. At some point, Briony marries and is widowed. She apparently keeps her resolution not to bear children. In 1999, as a famous writer, Briony's family gathers to fete her 77th birthday. Facing gradual mental deterioration, she faces the truth that her novel about Robbie and Cecilia will appear only after she dies. Briony has told their story fully, but she provides the happy ending future readers will demand.

## Robbie Turner

The second of the novel's two protagonists, Robbie is introduced as the Tallises' 23-year-old gardener. Robbie is the only son of the family cleaning lady, Grace and Ernest, a landscaper who abandoned them without a word when Robbie was 6. Jack Tallis has subsidized Robbie's education. Robbie grew up with Leon and Cecilia and knew Cecilia



casually at Cambridge University. Recently graduated with distinction, Robbie intends to attend medical school, funded by Jack Tallis. After seeing Cecilia jump into the fountain to retrieve pieces of a broken vase, Robbie realizes his true feelings for her. Preparing for dinner that night, Robbie types an obscene note to Cecilia before handwriting a proper version. The wrong version falls into Briony's hands and the contents, coupled with Briony interrupting Robbie and Cecilia confronting one another in the darkened library, convinces Briony that Robbie is intent on harming her sister.

When Briony surprises a mystery figure attacking Lola by the lake, the previous evidence convinces her the culprit is Robbie and her testimony lands him in Wandsworth Prison as a "morbidly oversexed" inmate. Cecilia does not abandon him. After three and a half years, Robbie is released on provision he enlists in the army. Denied an officer's commission, Robbie is sent to France. As Panzers move in to destroy the British Expeditionary Force, Robbie is wounded by shrapnel and with two RASC corporals, Nettle and Mace, he makes his way to Dunkirk. There, burning with fever, Robbie thinks about Cecilia's loving desire that he return to her and he apparently dies of septicemia. In Briony's fictional depiction of the tragic story, however, Robbie survives and is reunited with Cecilia and confronts his false accuser to demand full disclosure of his innocence.

## **Cecilia (Cee) Tallis Turner**

Introduced as Briony's condescending, intrusive, nicotine-addicted 23-year-old sister, Cecilia is on summer vacation from Cambridge, bored and ready to get on with her life but reluctant to make the effort. When Briony was very young and subject to frequent nightmares, Cecilia enjoyed comforting her and taking her into her bed. College life liberates Cecilia's attitudes, but she remains reticent to contradict her strict father and naturally falls into a family leadership position in his absence. Cecilia scuffles with childhood friend Robbie while fetching water and she strips to her underwear to retrieve broken pieces of the antique vase. She does not know that Briony has seen them and imagined what was going on.

That evening, before dinner, Briony delivers to Cecilia a loving, albeit obscene, note from Robbie and, in the darkened library Cecilia initiates lovemaking. Briony interrupts them and infers that that Robbie is menacing her sister, who needs her help. That night, after Briony accuses Robbie of attacking Lola, Cecilia is belligerent toward the investigators and by the time she comes forth to reveal the shocking truth of what went on in the library, Robbie's fate is sealed.

Cecilia remains loyal to Robbie during the three and a half years Robbie spends in prison, writing regularly and she continues writing when he joins the army. She cuts herself off from her family and enrolls in nursing school. By 1940, Cecilia is a ward sister. She informs Robbie in the last letter that gets through to him before the withdrawal to Dunkirk that Briony intends to recant. Cecilia learns from a lawyer that this will probably do little good. It is unclear whether Cecilia dies in the London bombings



and never sees her baby sister again, but she loses Robbie to septicemia. In Briony's novel, the sisters meet a final time, tensely and Cecilia and Robbie are together again.

## Lola Quincey Marshall

Lola, Briony's 15-year-old cousin from the distant north, comes to stay with the Tallises during her parents' divorce proceedings. Lola has green eyes, sharp facial contours, a brittle personality, a strong will and a quick temper. After the collapse of Briony's play, Lola sits with her brothers, homesick and bored, when Paul Marshall comes in, introduces himself, talks with her like an adult and offers them a sample Amo bar. Lola is physically tormented by her brothers and in an attempt to keep them in place, inspires them to run away. Like her mother Hermione, Lola likes to steal the scene. After dinner, the twins run away, announcing in their note that they are escaping the Tallis house and their sister's tyranny. While everyone searches for the twins, Lola is attacked by the lake by an unseen assailant who is scared off by Briony's approach. All of the day's events have combined to convince Briony that Robbie Turner is the attacker and Lola cannot believe her good fortune in having the wrong person go to prison for rape. All Lola has to do is maintain it was too dark for her to be sure.

In 1940, Lola marries her rapist in a small ceremony that Briony attends. By 1999, Lola and her husband have been ennobled and are fabulously wealthy and philanthropic. With a cigarette holder and lapdog, Lady Lola would be Cruella De Vil, the antagonist in Disney's *1001 Dalmatians*. The Marshalls are protective of their good name, so the true story, which Briony has written as a novel, will appear only after their death.

## Paul Marshall

Paul Marshall is Leon Tallis' almost-handsome, ill-barbered and unfathomably stupid friend who accompanies him home for a summertime visit in 1935. Paul makes millions selling Amo chocolate to the British army as it prepares for World War II. After several gin cocktails with Leon and Cecilia, Marshall finds Lola Quincey and her younger twin brothers in the nursery, bored and homesick. Lola rebukes Marshall for talking to the twins about their parents and the unmentionable subject of divorce. He chats with Lola as an adult and offers them an Amo bar. Later, Briony notices a scratch on Marshall's face, but is surprisingly not suspicious. During the hot and awkward dinner party, Marshall works hard to keep the conversation moving and helps organize the search for the twins. His absence when the other searchers return, dirty and worried, is not noted. When questioned, he treats the police with condescension. In 1940, he and Lola marry, sealing forever the secret that he was her attacker. By 1999, the couple have been ennobled and are prominent philanthropists, zealously guarding their good name against Briony's attempts to publish the truth.



## Emily Tallis

Emily Tallis is Briony's encouraging mother, who remembers her lastborn, unexpected daughter's childhood fondly but allows herself to be incapacitated by fear of migraines. Her children address her by her first name. She knows that her husband is a philanderer, but she ignores reality for fear of what confrontation will cost her. She resents her sister Hermione's abandonment of her children to run off to France with a lover, worries about her son Leon's dwindling possibilities and resents her daughter Cecilia's college-learned pretensions, having herself had her education cut short. Hermione had consistently upstaged her as a child and now Jack cheats on her in London. Emily refuses to confront Jack to keep her marriage together until he retires and gives up his ways. Emily dies around 1974.

## Betty

Betty is the Tallis family cook, broad-backed and quick-tempered. She is angry to have to prepare a special roast dinner in the summer heat. As the Tallis home is readied to house evacuees, Betty drops and shatters Uncle Clem's vase, claiming pieces simply gave way in her hands. Emily and Jack do not believe her story and Jack shouts at her, quite uncharacteristically.

## Henri and Jean-Marie Bonnet

Henri and Jean-Marie Bonnet are two French partisan brothers, in their 50s, who feed Robbie Turner and his RASC companions and report heavy losses on both sides in battles around Arras. Their elder brother Paul died near Verdun in 1915 and their 83-year-old mother, who is losing her mind, hates all soldiers without distinction.

## Luc Corner

Luc Corner is an 18-year-old French soldier who Briony ministers to during his dying hours in the hospital. His half-destroyed brain imagines they have long been in love and Briony confesses her love for him and breaks the rules to reveal her given name as Luc draws his last breath.

## Doll

Doll is the Tallis family cook's aide, a thin girl from the village who broods over Betty's tyranny.



## Marjorie Drummond

Marjorie Drummond is the head nurse on nurse-trainee Briony Tallis' hospital ward. She is motherly plump and kind-faced outwardly, but she is renowned for the fury with which she reacts to a sufficient number of minor mistakes made by her charges. Drummond never dispenses praise. Indifference is the best probationers can hope for. The approach of war distracts even her, however. During the crisis as the first casualties pour in from Dunkirk, Drummond gradually assigns her students more responsibilities and begins treating them as true nurses. She appears even to approve of Briony's breaking the rules to reveal her given name to a dying soldier.

## Fiona

Fiona is Briony's jolly friend in 1940 while in nurse's training. Fiona looks outwardly like a portly version of cousin Lola, but she is a skilled mimic and comes from a large, prominent family in Chelsea. Just before the first evacuees from Dunkirk arrive, Fiona and Briony share time off in the park.

## Danny Hardman

Danny Hardman is the 16-year-old, acre-faced, cruel-lipped son of a Tallis chauffeur. He is the family baggage handler. Cecilia suspects he may be interested in Lola. After the attack on Lola, Cecilia suggests the police look at Danny rather than Robbie, but his father provides an alibi. Danny joins the navy when World War II begins rather than the army like the other village boys. Cecilia and Robbie suspect he was Lola's attacker and Danny's father appears ready to reveal something on his deathbed. Briony knows the truth, however and she never suspects Danny.

## Susan Langland

Susan Langland is a large, kindly, slow-moving nurse trainee in Briony's class in 1940. She incurs Sister Drummond's wrath by breaking the cardinal rule of nursing and revealing her given name to a patient.

## Private Latimer

Private Latimer is a soldier whose face has been half shot away. Briony tends to him, lying that all will be well.

## Corporal Mace

Corporal Mace is Robbie Turner's powerfully built Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) companion in the retreat to Dunkirk. His assignment before the rout was to cook. In a



café bar in the seaside resort town of Bray on the Dunkirk beach, hollering like Tarzan, Mace barges into a circle of Tommies intent on killing an RAF man. Mace hoists the terrified victim off the ground in a great bear hug and declares he is going to drown him in the bloody sea. It is a bold ploy to save the victim's life and Robbie and Nettle run interference to make their escape possible.

## **Corporal MacIntyre**

Corporal MacIntyre is the first burn victim Briony attends to.

## **Dr. McLaren**

Dr. McLaren is the Tallis family physician who attends Lola after the attack.

## **Molly**

Molly is the widow who visits Grace Turner and is likely to marry within five years to someone from the north.

## **Corporal Nettle**

Corporal Nettle is Robbie Turner's small, friendly, rodent-faced Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) companion in the retreat to Dunkirk. His assignment before the rout was truck driver. After running interference with Robbie for Mace's rescue of an RAF man from an enraged bar crowd, Nettle helps Robbie capture a gypsy's pig, earning badly-needed water, washing and provisions for the night.

## **Cecil Quincey**

Cecil Quincey is Briony's uncle by marriage. He is a meek, evasive man who fled an unhappy marriage to the safety of All Souls College, Oxford.

## **Hermione Quincey**

Hermione Quincey is Briony's aunt, the younger sister of Emily Tallis and wife of Cecil. Emily still resents Hermione's childhood preening and histrionics, which always upstaged her. Hermione abandons her children to the Tallises' care in 1935 to shelter them from divorce proceedings as she flees to France with an unnamed lover who delivers weekly fireside sermons by radio.



## Jackson Quincey

Jackson Quincey is Briony's freckled 9-year old cousin from the distant north who comes to stay with the Tallises during his parents' divorce proceedings. Jackson is the identical twin of Pierrot. On his first night in the Tallis home, Jackson wets the bed and misses play rehearsal as he is made to launder his bedding. He and his brother run away after the dinner party, leading to an all-night search of the grounds. After fathering many children, Jackson dies around 1984.

## Pierrot Quincey

Pierrot Quincey is Briony's freckled 9-year old cousin from the distant north who comes to stay with the Tallises during his parents' divorce proceedings. Pierrot is the identical twin of Jackson, distinguished by a missing triangle of flesh on his left earlobe. Pierrot consistently takes the lead. The family joke is that he is the more pleasant of the twins. He and his brother run away after the dinner party, leading to an all-night search of the grounds. In 1999, as the *paterfamilias*, he is responsible for the staging of cousin Briony's childhood drama, *The Trials of Arabella*.

## Clem Tallis

Clem Tallis is a paternal uncle and indistinctly remembered as a World War I hero at Verdun who rescued a Meissen porcelain vase from a destroyed museum. It is delivered to the Tallises' home soon after Clem's funeral.

## Harry Tallis

Harry Tallis is Briony's grandfather, who made his fortune manufacturing locks and built the original magnificent house in the 1880s.

## Jack Tallis

Jack Tallis is Briony's strict but often-absent father, a minister in the Home Office who works on eventuality planning. When Robbie Turner won a grammar school scholarship, Jack paid for his uniform and textbooks. Although Jack does little more than sit in his library when at home, his presence brings calm and order to the household. Jack prepares estimates of the number of casualties to be expected per ton of explosives in the event of war. He hides behind his receptionist when Emily calls and he calls her nightly to make excuses for spending nights at his club. She knows he is carousing but does not confront him. With the coming of World War II, Jack works even harder and becomes uncharacteristically furious at Betty when she breaks Uncle Clem's vase. Without explanation, Jack informs Briony of the upcoming marriage of Lola Quincey and





Paul Marshall, allowing her to attend the event. Jack remarried after Emily's death, around 1974.

## Leon Tallis

Leon Tallis is Briony's brother, the oldest of the three siblings and a London banker. As preteenagers, Leon and Cecilia got in trouble for giving each other "the look" at family gatherings, transgressing Victorian sensibilities. Leon has a good-natured face, attracting many girlfriends, but he has not married, to Briony's consternation. Leon is adept at shirking responsibilities. Life at the bank is pleasant but dull and Leon and his friends live for evenings and weekends. Leon helps organize the search for the missing twins. Leon marries four times, fathers many children and is confined to a wheelchair in 1999 when the family gathers to celebrate Briony's 77th birthday.

## Ernest Turner

Ernest Turner is the Tallises' gardener who abandons his wife Grace and son Robbie without a word when Robbie is 6, leaving Robbie to wonder about him for the rest of his life.

## Grace Turner

Grace Turner is the Tallises' good-natured cleaning lady, hired a week after her husband Ernest disappeared. Leon and Cecilia Tallis adore Grace and her son Robbie grows up them. Grace's helpfulness to Emily after Briony's difficult birth earned Grace the legal title to the bungalow where she and Robbie live. When Robbie is arrested for the attack on Lola, Grace storms out to assault the police car with an umbrella and shouts "Liars!" as they retreat. After Robbie is convicted in November of 1935, she sells the bungalow and moves to another village. She is the only visitor her "morbidly oversexed" son is allowed.

## P.C.Vockins

P.C. Vockins is the kindly village constable with a waxed mustache and a gossipy wife.



# Objects/Places

## The Tallis Estate

The Tallis Estate is the scene of the novel's first part, located in the Surrey Hills in southeast England. It was built grandly in the 1880s and more prosaically after a fire in 1930. Two bridges lead over a lake, where a dilapidated decorative temple stands in the center that young Briony considers her domain. A fountain, visible from Briony's upstairs window, is the site of an encounter between Cecilia and Robbie that Briony misinterprets, leading to the tragedy of Robbie's arrest for rape. By 1999, the estate has been sold and converted into a hotel and golf course. It is the site of the Tallis family's celebration of Briony's 77th birthday.

## The Vase

The vase is an authenticated Meissen piece, painted by Höroldt in 1726 and almost certainly owned by King August. The vase stands apart from the worthless pieces in the Tallis home. Uncle Clem rescued it from a destroyed museum in the battle of Verdun and it was sent to the Tallises after his death. Emily finds it too fussy and oppressive and she wonders how much it might be sold for. Cecilia puts flowers in it to decorate the guest room and she then takes it out to the fountain to fill it with water. Cecilia and Robbie struggle over who will fill it and the lip snaps off in two pieces. Cecilia retrieves them from the water and glues the vase back together. In 1940, the vase disintegrates and only Cecilia knows it was already weakened.

## Dunkirk

Dunkirk is the terminus on the British Channel to which the British Expeditionary Forces flee in disarray as the Nazi Blitzkrieg comes to Western Europe in 1940. Northern France and Belgium are the setting of Part 2 of the novel. Robbie Turner and two army comrades are the focus of McEwan's depiction of the trek out of France in one of the greatest events of the war. German bombers have the beach in perpetual flames, black smoke visible for miles inland while terrifying Stuka fighters menace the refugees with bombs and machine guns. The human breakwater of soldiers looking for rescue boats is among the most graphic images in this novel.

## The Hospital

The hospital is the scene of Part 3 of the novel. During World War II, Briony serves as a nurse in Alder Hey, the Royal East Sussex and St. Thomas hospitals. She admits to consolidating experiences from each in her fictional writings. The unnamed hospital in which she trained has its roof fortified against Nazi bombings and its surgical theaters

relocated to the basement. The wards, cleared of non-emergent patients and filled with trauma equipment and supplies, are filled with the first wave of evacuees from Dunkirk.



# Themes

## Comprehending

Most of the action in *Atonement* is seen through physical windows, which allow viewers to see but not necessarily hear or understand. Briony oversees Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain and is confused when their actions do not fit her preconceived, romantic idea of what ought to be going on. From a window Lola sees Briony stalking off to the island, not realizing her cousin dislikes her enough to behead her in effigy. Reading Robbie's unintended note and reflecting on the fountain scene, Briony is ready to misread the scene of passion she comes upon in the library as an assault on her sister and Briony prepares to indict Robbie. Although it is too dark to make out faces and though Briony has seen physical evidence on the true attacker, Briony makes what she "knows" become what she has seen and Robbie is wrongly sent to jail. When Briony later understands what she has done and determines to atone for it, it is a matter of too little, too late and she must turn to her fiction writing to tell the full, unvarnished story. Still, as a novelist, Briony comprehends that readers will want a happy ending and she fabricates a modest rapprochement. Looking out a window on the driveway where Robbie was arrested, as she had decades earlier, Briony comprehends that an author holds her characters' fates in her hands, but nothing can be done for her own peace of mind.

## Passing of Life

Emily Tallis, bed-bound by migraine headaches, has the time to ponder the question of how quickly life passes, think about the little events that later memory cherishes and distorts by idealization, wonder at the untold truths that must be borne stoically so not to face an even bleaker future, at how children grow up and move on along paths that one cannot change by suggestion, plotting, or fretting, that in the end there is death and being forgotten. Robbie Turner, wrongly imprisoned for rape, lies on his narrow cot and thinks about how his promising life has been destroyed and how his partial reprieve by enlisting in the army will still not return to him any measure of his old hopes. He lives only to be again with Cecilia, who lives a nurse's life, cut off on her own accord from her family, only to see Robbie again. Briony sees the path of destruction she has cut through Robbie's and Cecilia's lives and yearns to make amends only to be told her lie has made this improbable, if not impossible.

Some life events are permanent and immutable. At the very end, facing the reality that her mental powers will degrade until she recognizes and remembers nothing, Briony does the one thing she has the power to do and creates a fictional happy ending to replace the reality that her words and war conspired to bring about. Having reunited with the generations of her siblings' and cousins' families and reflected on their life paths and her own highly successful career, Briony is tired and needs to sleep.



## Creativity

Briony is introduced as a budding young writer who is fanciful, imaginative, dedicated to creating happy fictional worlds free of the conflicts and tragedies she knows exist in the world, but from which she has been largely sheltered. She exalts in the creative process, in watching the words appear on the page, knowing they will meet and engage the reader's mind. She reads her compositions to her family with animation and pleasure and binds the compositions for preservation in the library. Observation of complex adult behaviors challenge her rosy views and Briony struggles to understand and find means of recording unclear events. She discovers Virginia Woolf's method of minimizing character and plot and looks at one misunderstood event, Cecilia and Robbie meeting at the fountain and submits a typescript to a leading literary magazine, *Horizon*. A long rejection urges Briony to find a backbone for her promising story and seek somehow to create tension between the characters and with herself as viewer/narrator. Briony realizes she has done precisely that, as her partial views combined with determination that she knows what she only thinks she sees destroys two lives and Briony seeks to atone for her mistake by telling the full truth to the world. At the end of a successful writing career, she falsifies the tragic ending, knowing readers will want everything to end well. It is the author's prerogative to determine her characters' fates and the author's duty not to compromise to the point of selling-out to publisher's fears of litigation. In the end, a tired old woman leaves to posterity the best telling she can of her own life story.

# Style

## Point of View

*Atonement* is written in the third person, apparently by a neutral but sympathetic observer. The end of Part 3, however, bears the initials of the protagonist and a date six decades after the earliest events described. "BT" is Briony Tallis, whose future as a noted author is often hinted in the text but as an objective fact and with no emphasis. The signing of Part 3 leads to the conclusion that parts 1 and 3 of *Atonement* are a fictional autobiography cast in the third person. Part 2, set in Northern France and Belgium fleeing towards Dunkirk, is event- and character-driven narrative interspersed with inner thoughts of an increasingly feverish mind.

Assuming BT wrote this portion supposes she applied standard techniques of fiction writing. A brief postscript is cast in the first person singular. In it, Briony talks about her 77th birthday. She makes clear that the project of atoning for the crime described in Part 1 has occupied much of her life since 1940. She has written and rewritten the story many times, making it increasingly honest until in the latest version, which this book must be, she gave it as happy an ending as possible. The fact that the antagonists are portrayed as highly litigious, important individuals helps maintain the mystery because Briony has to cast her typescript to the winds of fate and the pencils of posthumous editors. In the end, without a word, Ian McEwan casts himself as that editor.

## Setting

*Atonement* has four distinct settings. The first part is set on the grounds and inside the Tallis estate in the Surrey Hills near London, England. It takes place in a single day in June 1935, with flashbacks providing background. The second part is set in the countryside of northern France and Belgium, May 31-June 1, 1940, as three British soldiers try to reach Dunkirk and evacuate home. The third part is set in a London hospital at the same time as the action of Part 2, but with flashbacks to three months' worth of nursing training in the same facility. The action then shifts to an empty church in Clapham and a tiny apartment in Balham visited by Briony on a single Saturday in 1940. The final section finds the protagonist in 1999 riding in taxis around London and revisiting the old estate, now a hotel/golf course, for a final tying up of loose ends.

## Language and Meaning

*Atonement* is written in rich, flowing British English. It captures the flavor of life among upper class, Cambridge-educated young people who only vaguely realize their way of life is being threatened by Hitler's rise to power. They are sexually repressed but curious, in contrast to their parents' generation that preaches about but don't practice fidelity. The protagonist, Briony Tallis, is a budding author, too young to handle the material to which she is drawn. Briony is reflective about her craft, so *Atonement* often



deals directly with the challenge of writing. A two-page letter in Part 3 examines the pros and cons of Briony's typescript novella about a scene at a fountain depicted early on in *Atonement*. It begins the process of making the reader rethink what has gone before in terms of Virginia Woolf's new approach to literature. At the very end of Part 3, even more reconsideration is called forth. The horror of war, shown both from the soldier's perspective and from that of the medical personnel who must try to repair the damage, is dealt with from an "I've-seen-everything, nothing-can-shock-me" point of view. The scenes are understated but gut wrenching, particularly when one remembers that these characters would not have seen thousands of hours of graphic television violence.

## Structure

*Atonement* has four parts. Part 1 is divided into 14 untitled chapters. These concentrate on the major characters, gradually preparing all of the elements necessary for the climax, including the false arrest of Robbie Turner for the rape of Lola Quincey on testimony presented by 13-year-old Briony Tallis, an imaginative and creative girl who is not sophisticated enough to evaluate properly the various things she has seen and heard throughout the day. Part 2 follows Robbie Turner, paroled to join the British Expeditionary Force in France, fleeing for his life with two companions toward Dunkirk. It reveals that Robbie has not lost contact with his true love, Cecilia Tallis, his accuser's older sister, now estranged from her.

Part 3 watches Briony's nurse training in a London hospital put on war footing. In one horrid 12-hour period, the first wave of wounded evacuees from Dunkirk arrive and are processed. Briony then drops in on the marriage of Lola to her true rapist, Paul Marshall, then continues on to confront her sister and explain that she wants to set the record straight. She is unaware Robbie will be there. Part 4, entitled "London, 1999," jumps forward six decades to Briony's 77th birthday. It changes perception on the earlier three parts, which are Briony's composition, an attempt at atoning for her 1935 sin with the happy ending of Robbie and Cecilia's reunion in 1940 composed fiction.





## Quotes

"Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face? Did everybody, including her father, Betty, Hardman? If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated." Part 1, Chapter 3, pg. 34.

"Watching him during the first several minutes of his delivery, Cecilia felt a pleasant sinking sensation in her stomach as she contemplated how deliciously self-destructive it would be, almost erotic, to be married to a man so nearly handsome, so hugely rich, so unfathomably stupid. He would fill her with his big-faced children, all of them loud, boneheaded boys with a passion for guns and football and aeroplanes." Part 1, Chapter 4, pg. 47.

"Habitual fretting about her children, her husband, her sister, the help, had rubbed her senses raw; migraine, mother love and, over the years, many hours of lying still on her bed, had distilled from this sensitivity a sixth sense, a tentacular awareness that reached out from the dimness and moved through the house, unseen and all-knowing. Only the truth came back to her, for what she knew, she knew." Part 1, Chapter 6, pg. 63.

"What might Freud say? How about: she hid the unconscious desire to expose herself to him behind a show of temper. Pathetic hope! It was an emasculation, a sentence and this - what he was feeling now - this torture was his punishment for breaking her ridiculous vase. He should never see her again. He had to see her tonight. He had no choice anyway - he was going." Part 1, Chapter 8, pg. 76.

"But there was no mistake. The handwritten letter he had rested on the open copy of *Gray's Anatomy*, Splanchnology section, page 1546, the vagina. The typed page, left by him near the typewriter, was the one he had taken and folded into the envelope. No need for Freudian smart-aleckry - the explanation was simple and mechanical - the innocuous letter was lying across figure 1236, with its bold spread and rakish crown of pubic hair, while his obscene draft was on the table, within easy reach. He bellowed Briony's name again, though he knew she must be by the front entrance by now." Part 1, Chapter 9, pg. 89.

"She knew it was self-pity, this mellow expansiveness as she contemplated what looked like her own ruin: Briony would surely go off to her sister's college, Girton and she, Emily, would grow stiffer in the limbs and more irrelevant by the day; age and weariness would return Jack to her and nothing would be said, or needed to be said. And here was the ghost of her childhood, diffused throughout the room, to remind her of the limited arc of existence. How quickly the story was over. Not massive and empty at all, but headlong. Ruthless." Part 1, Chapter 12, pgs. 141-142.



"But there was a maniac trading through the night with a dark, unfulfilled heart - she had frustrated him once already - and she needed to be earthbound to describe him too. She must first protect her sister against him and then find ways of conjuring him safely on paper. Briony slowed to a walking pace and thought how he must hate her for interrupting him in the library. And though it horrified her, it was another entry, a moment of coming into being, another first: to be hated by an adult. Children hated generously, capriciously. It hardly mattered. But to be the object of adult hatred was an initiation into a solemn new world. It was promotion." Part 1, Chapter 13, pg. 147.

"'Oh Lola.' Briony put out her hand to touch her cousin's face and found her cheek. It was dry, but it wouldn't be, she knew it wouldn't be for long. 'Listen to me. I couldn't mistake him. I've known him all my life. I saw him.' "'Because I couldn't say for sure. I mean, I thought it might be him by his voice.' "'What did he say?' "'Nothing. I mean, it was the sound of his voice, breathing, noises. But I couldn't see. I couldn't say for sure.' "'Well I can. And I will.'" Part 1, Chapter 13, pg. 157.

"Three and a half years of nights like these, unable to sleep, thinking of another vanished boy, another vanished life that was once his own and waiting for dawn and slop-out and another wasted day. He did not know how he survived the daily stupidity of it. The stupidity and claustrophobia. The hand squeezing on his throat. Being here, sheltering in a barn, with an army in rout, where a child's limb in a tree was something that ordinary men could ignore, where a whole country, a whole civilization was about to fall, was better than being there, on a narrow bed under a dim electric light, waiting for nothing." Part 2, pg. 190.

"A woman screamed and then fire was upon them just as Turner threw himself into the shadow of the upended lorry. The steel frame trembled as rounds hit it with the wild rapidity of a drumroll. Then the cannon fire swept on, hurtling down the column, chased by the fighter's roar and the flicker of its shadow. He pressed himself into the darkness of the chassis by the front wheel. Never had sump oil smelled sweeter. Waiting for another plane, he crouched fetally, his arms cradling his head and eyes tight shut and thought only of survival." Part 2, pg. 209.

"Briony knew she had recently accumulated a string of errors. Four days ago, despite careful instruction, a patient in her care had quaffed her carbolic garble - according to the porter who saw it, down in one like a pint of Guinness - and was violently sick across her blankets. Briony was also aware that she had been observed by Sister Drummond carrying only three bedpans at a time, when by now they were expected to go the length of the ward reliably with a pile of six, like a busy waiter in La Coupole." Part 3, pg. 254.

"Between tasks, perhaps a dozen times a day, the students scrubbed their cracked and bleeding chilblained hands under freezing water. The war against germs never ceased. The probationers were initiated into the cult of hygiene." Part 3, pg. 256.

"'Uniforms, posters warning against fifth columnists, two big air-raid shelters dug into the park lawns and everywhere, surely officialdom. While the girls were sitting on their



deck chairs, a man in armband and cap came over and demanded to see Fiona's gas mask - it was partially obscured by her cape. Otherwise, it was still an innocent time. The anxieties about the situation in France that had been absorbing the country had for the moment dissipated in the afternoon's sunshine. The dead were not yet present, the absent were presumed alive. The scene was dreamlike in its normalcy." Part 3, pg. 271.

"She had come to see that, without intending to, it delivered a significant personal indictment. *Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion?* Yes, indeed. And having done so, might she obscure the fact by concocting a slight, barely clever fiction and satisfy her vanity by sending it off to a magazine?" Part 3, pg. 302.

"'I don't know why you let her in.' Then to Briony, 'I'll be quite honest with you. I'm torn between breaking your stupid neck here and taking you outside and throwing you down the stairs.' 'If it had not been for her recent experience, she would have been terrified. Sometimes she heard soldiers on the war raging against their helplessness. At the height of their passion, it was foolish to reason with them or try to reassure them. It had to come out and it was best to stand and listen. She knew that even offering to leave now could be provocative. So she faced Robbie and waited for the rest, her due. But she was not frightened of him, not physically.'" Part 3, pg. 322.

"If I'm lucky it might turn out to be somewhat benign. I might not be unhappy - just a dim old biddy in a chair, knowing nothing, expecting nothing. I had asked him to be frank, so I could not complain. Now he was hurrying me out. There were twelve people in his waiting room wanting their turn. In summary, as he helped me into my coat, he gave me the route map: loss of memory, short- and long-term, the disappearance of single words - simple nouns might be the first to go - then language itself, along with balance and soon after, all motor control and finally the autonomous nervous system. Bon voyage!" London, 1999, pgs.. 334-335.



## Topics for Discussion

How does Paul Marshall escape blame as Lola's attacker? What signs point to his guilt?

What evidence is there to suppose or vindicate Danny Hardman?

What is the function of Emily Tallis in the story?

What is the function of Jack Tallis in the story?

What is the function of the Quincey twins in the story?

What is the function of the vase in the story?

Could Cecilia have saved Robbie by testifying immediately?

What most sealed Robbie's fate?

Why might Robbie not have sought medical attention for his wound?

Would you, as a reader, have accepted the factual ending to Robbie's and Cecilia's lives without the fictional cushioning provided?

Do Lord and Lady Marshall prove might makes right?

How does Cecilia use her "ward sister" voice and how does she use natural compassion?

Does anyone die happy in this novel?