

Sweet Tooth Study Guide

Sweet Tooth by Ian McEwan

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Contents

Sweet Tooth Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	9
Chapter 4.....	12
Chapter 5.....	15
Chapter 6.....	17
Chapter 7.....	19
Chapter 8.....	21
Chapter 9.....	23
Chapter 10.....	25
Chapter 11.....	27
Chapter 12.....	29
Chapter 13.....	31
Chapter 14.....	33
Chapter 15.....	35
Chapter 16.....	37
Chapter 17.....	39
Chapter 18.....	41
Chapter 19.....	43
Chapter 20.....	45
Chapter 21.....	48
Chapter 22.....	51



<u>Characters.....</u>	<u>54</u>
<u>Symbols and Symbolism.....</u>	<u>57</u>
<u>Settings.....</u>	<u>59</u>
<u>Themes and Motifs.....</u>	<u>60</u>
<u>Styles.....</u>	<u>62</u>
<u>Quotes.....</u>	<u>64</u>

Plot Summary

“Sweet Tooth” by Ian McEwan is the story of Serena Frome (rhymes with plume) and her brief tenure with Britain’s famous MI5 – Military Intelligence, Section 5. The story begins in present day as Serena tells the reader about her experience some forty years before when she was a young woman. She reflects on her life beginning with her childhood in an upscale community in Camden. Her father was an Anglican Bishop and her mother the perfect Bishop’s wife. Serena displayed an aptitude for math at a young age. When her thoughts turned to college, she figured she’d take the easy way out that most girls opted to and major in English. But her mother – a feminist before her time – insisted that she major in math. She didn’t want to see Serena abandon her natural abilities in math just because she was a girl. Serena was accepted into the math program at Cambridge.

In her last year of school, Serena had a boyfriend named Jeremy, but their relationship was dysfunctional. He didn’t seem to be attracted to her. Jeremy introduced Serena to his history professor, Tony Canning. Jeremy left for Edinburgh to pursue an advanced degree, and Serena fell into the older man’s arms. Jeremy wrote later that he had fallen in love with a male musician which explained the dysfunction in their relationship.

Tony completely dominated his relationship with Serena relationship in part because he was old enough to be her father. She fell head over heels in love with him even though he was married. In the end, he accused her of trying to break up his marriage by leaving behind a piece of her clothing. She was innocent of the charge, but he ended the affair and broke her heart. Before the breakup he had arranged for her to have an interview with MI5. She didn’t know exactly what it was. If she had to guess, it had something to do with social security.

Serena was offered the position of junior desk officer and reluctantly accepted it. Never before in her life had she had any aspirations to be a spy, but there she was. She had a brief dalliance with Max, another young spy, but that relationship ended when he announced he was engaged. Serena was a beautiful blond and was chosen for a new covert operation. She had to convince a young writer to join a front group that would disseminate anti-Marxism propaganda. The young writer, Tom Haley, was immediately taken with Serena who represented herself as a literary agent. Tom was drawn into the project by the stipend he would receive and especially by the beautiful Serena.

Serena and Tom eventually become involved and fall in love. But, Serena is in a quandary. She has deceived and lied to the man she loves from the minute she first met him. How does she ever tell him who she is and whom she works for? As soon as she does, she will surely lose him. In the end, she learns a lot of lessons. The most important one is that spies are not the only ones who are skilled at deception.

Chapter 1

Summary

Serena Frome looks back on her stint with the British Security Service forty years before in 1972. She only worked for the Service for eighteen months. She was relieved of her duties having disgraced herself and ruined her lover. Serena is the daughter of an Anglican bishop. She had an idyllic childhood living with her parents and one sister. She was a good student and figured she would seek an English degree in college. Although she loved English and reading, she was a freak of nature in that she did well at math even though it wasn't a pursuit of hers. In her senior year, she was the captain of the chess club – another role usually reserved for males.

Serena's mother had the perfect social skills and the proper image of a bishop's wife. However, deep down she was a feminist though she would never confess to it. Her mother encouraged Serena to study math at Cambridge, something at the time that was almost unheard of for a female. Her mother didn't want her to waste her natural abilities. Her mother recruited her father, the Bishop, to support her.

Serena was accepted into the math program at Cambridge. She did struggle in her math much to the joy of most of the boys in the class. At one point she tried to transfer out, but no one would take her from the math program that had accepted her. She had lots of boyfriends and read lots of books that first year even though it wasn't her major. She enjoyed reading more than anything and began writing in her last year contributing articles to a college newspaper. She gained attention and positive feedback which unfortunately made her take herself a little too seriously. Instead of natural organic writing, she began to labor over every word. Reviewing a Russian book, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," she became too political. She was unceremoniously dumped by the paper. They never carried her byline again.

Serena had a boyfriend named Jeremy who suffered from sexual dysfunction. She didn't know if it was her fault, his fault, or a combination. It was around this time that she met Tony Canning. She and Jeremy were walking across the campus when they ran into Canning who was tutoring Jeremy. He was around fifty years old and a history professor at the university. Serena found him very attractive. He was impressed with her writing in the school paper and suggested that she go into journalism. Canning invited the couple for tea, and they spent several hours talking politics. She didn't realize that the professor was interested in her and not in the student he was tutoring. Eventually, they had an affair, and Canning recruited Serena for MI5. He changed her life in the most unexpected way.



Analysis

Serena's younger years through her university studies went as would be expected of a bishop's daughter. She was pretty and popular with the boys and loved to read. She had no great ambitions or great expectations for herself. She would have been happy to be lazy and major in English. Reading was her favorite pastime. But her mother saw her natural skills in math and insisted that she push herself further. Had her mother not insisted that Serena aim for something more than a simple and ordinary life, Serena probably would have never tried to achieve more. Even though Serena's mother is the perfect bishop's wife, a vein of feminism runs deep within her which is what compelled her to encourage Serena to pursue more. Although they didn't openly talk about feminism, it was there within her mother. It probably influenced Serena more than she knew.

Discussion Question 1

What was Serena's favorite pursuit?

Discussion Question 2

How much older is Canning than Serena?

Discussion Question 3

Who encouraged Serena to pursue a degree in mathematics?

Vocabulary

genial, provincial, condescending, quintessence, formidable, egalitarian

Chapter 2

Summary

Serena's affair with Canning lasted several months. For part of that time, she was still seeing Jeremy. Then, Jeremy left for Edinburgh to pursue his PhD. Just a few weeks later, he wrote that he'd fallen in love with a male violinist named Manfred which explained his sexual dysfunction with Serena. There were no hard feelings over the break-up. She saw Canning every weekend. His wife, Frieda, was an art dealer who traveled all the time and didn't like the weather at home.

Serena was only twenty-one and Canning was in his fifties. Sometimes she would steal a look at his flabby stomach and underarms with distaste. She couldn't help but notice his scars and yellowish skin and compare it to her perfect twenty-year old skin. Beyond his physical flaws, she found him self-centered and overly obsessed with her body. He did kiss beautifully; but, all things considered, she liked him in his clothes better than out of them.

They read together and drank wine. They never saw any of Canning's friends, of course, because he was married. Once when two men stopped by, he asked Serena to take a long walk in the woods. After final exams, Canning insisted that Serena stop reading novels and start reading and studying subjects with substance. He tutored her but often napped after lunch while she read. Actually, unbeknownst to Serena, with her study of history and politics he was grooming her for her first interview with the government which he had arranged. To be up on current affairs, he insisted that she read the Times every day. She found the news to be filled with strife, decadence, decay, and decline.

Serena expected that she would be considering a respectable position with the Department of Health and Social Security. Perhaps, her mother could have had more of an influence on Serena's future. However, the mother's time was taken up by Serena's sister Lucy, who had become a wild child. Her mother was devoted to keeping Lucy out of jail and the family's name out of the paper. Her mother was there for Lucy who underwent an abortion that was more upsetting for the young girl than she had thought it would be.

Trouble brewed when Serena hand-washed a silk blouse that Tony had given her and left it behind at Tony's cottage. His wife found it, and they had the worst row of their marriage. Tony accused Serena of leaving it behind in an attempt to break up his marriage. Serena denied it; but, Tony was furious and wouldn't listen. The more she tried to deny it, the more the tears came and the guiltier she looked. It was the end of the affair.



Analysis

Serena may have been successful in most aspects of her life; but, where affairs of the heart were concerned, she was striking out. Beautiful and smart she drew many men to her. Perhaps, her image promised them something that they felt lacking in themselves. Jeremy was gay and in the 1960s, it was something to hide and deny. Their sexual dysfunction was a clue to his true orientation, but Serena was young and naïve and somehow figured it was her fault. It was probably a relief when Serene learned that he had fallen in love with a man.. She could finally excuse herself from blame for their flawed affair.

Serena's youth and immaturity were no match for a fifty-year-old professor. Coming from an unsatisfactory relationship with a man who was secretly homosexual, Serena was vulnerable to the charming older man. But, he was married and called all the shots in their affair. They saw no one else and did not go out publicly. When his wife caught on to the affair, he blamed Serena. Serena wasn't mature enough to turn it around on him and tell him that it was his fault for having an affair in the first place.

The book hints that the governmental position that Serena planned to apply for would not turn out as she expected.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Serena blame herself for the failed relationship with Jeremy?

Discussion Question 2

What indications were there that Professor Canning didn't think Serena was his intellectual match?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Canning blame Serena for his wife's discovery of their affair? Why was it unfair?

Vocabulary

fraught, tryst, burnished, nostalgia, conjured

Chapter 3

Summary

Although she considered it, Serena did not cancel her appointment with MI5. Her first interview was with Joan who was friendly and asked for just basic information. Later they were joined by Harry Tapp. The three of them devised a cover for her. Basically, she would be a mathematician with varied interests. They discussed history, Russian issues, and current affairs. Sometimes she felt she was speaking through Tony's voice after the intense summer of his tutoring. Even though she felt she was brilliant during the interview, when Harry Tapp offered her the position of junior assistant officer, she was stunned. But, she realized that she wouldn't necessarily be a spy. She would do simple office work – filing and library indexing work. It was a big mistake. Was this Tony's way of punishing her from afar? Joan confirmed that men and women in MI5 were on different career paths. Woman rarely rose in the rank to full officer.

Although she smiled and thanked Joan and Harry, when she left she was depressed. What an insult to be offered a secretarial position at such a lowly rate. She planned to write a note and decline the position. Tony was back with his wife, and she was alone and jobless. She would have no choice but to return home. Walking around for an hour after the interview, Serena decided to take the job after all. In a sense it was a form of self-punishment. She was a rejected lover and deserved no more than to be an office clerk. Three weeks later she reported for her first day on the job.

After her tenure with MI5 when she could finally talk about it, she would often be asked about Millie Trimmingham. She was a single mother who rose to Director General with MI5. The subtext when asked about Millie was why hadn't she risen as high. When Serena joined the spy agency, Millie was already a legend. She had quickly mastered the intricacies of the Registry. She dressed flamboyantly and felt she was an equal to the male agents and acted like it. She had trained in Islamabad and had confronted IRA terrorism in her first few years with the service.

Serena's first few months were spent working in the Registry which took up the entire ground floor of MI5 HQ and was the vast memory bank of the agency. She did the mundane work of opening new files on individuals suspected of having Communist ties. She and the eleven other young women who had been recruited were learning the basic protocols of what the accepted material was for opening a file on someone. Her measly paycheck did nothing to increase her enthusiasm for the job. She became friendly with another recruit, Shirley Shilling, with whom she spent her lunch breaks. Shirley was fun-loving and stretched the rules nearly to the breaking point. She took too long in the lavatory and had the nerve to run out on her break and shop. Shirley was exotic and represented a new world. She had a slightly Cockney accent and was from a working-class family. She was overweight and loud. It was a sign of MI5's attempt to modernize and broaden its recruitment opportunities. But, Shirley had value; she typed faster than

anyone and her memory for detail was astounding. She had also been around and had more street smarts than the other girls.

Most of the girls came from “good” families,” and some looked down on Shirley. Many of the girls were just looking for husbands. Shirley frequented bawdy pubs, and one night she took Serena. Serena saw her first bar fight that night. It was brutal and not banal like the fights depicted in films. They left before the police came because they’d want witnesses. They talked about their past. Serena told Shirley about Jeremy but didn’t mention Tony. They didn’t talk about the office because such gossip was strictly forbidden. From that night on, Serena often accompanied Shirley to the pubs. It was a way to pass otherwise dull evenings. She grew to love the rock ‘n roll that blared in the clubs. She’d often think how shocked the other patrons would be if they knew she and Shirley were MI5 agents.

Analysis

Serena was reeling from her failed relationship with an older married man who had completely exploited her and then blamed her for his wife finding out. Had she not been in such a desolate and hopeless state, she probably would not have taken the job with MI5. But, she had nothing going for herself and didn’t want to live at home. Besides, she felt like a loser; and, perhaps, she felt she deserved nothing better. She had no hopes of advancing in the agency because it was the early 1970s and, with few exceptions, only male agents advanced. Her future was bleak.

Perhaps, it was because Serena had lived a rather isolated and sheltered existence that she was drawn to the bawdy Shirley who was loud and pushed the rules to the their perimeter. Shirley’s independence and rebellious comportment were appealing to the girl who followed the rules. She had been raised by an overly organized mother and a bishop father and had been taught to adhere to rules and decorum.

Serena saw her first bar fight on her very first evening out with Shirley. The brutality of it was a shock to her system. Shirley showed her street smarts by telling Serena they had to leave. The cops would want witnesses. Having MI5 agents involved in a bar fight was not the image that the agency wanted to portray. Serena feels the impact of leading a double-life wondering what the pub crawlers would think if they knew she was a spy.

Discussion Question 1

What female MI5 agents could present role models for Serena?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Serena’s relationship with Shirley positive?

Discussion Question 3

What possible problems and conflicts with MI5 could arise from Serena's night life?

Vocabulary

colluded, desolate, masochism, intricacies, protocols

Chapter 4

Summary

At the end of 1973, Serena received a letter from Jeremy. His letter contained news about Tony. He had divorced after over thirty years of marriage. There had been a rumor that he'd been seeing a younger woman. Tony was on a downward spiral after his marriage ended. He resigned his position and moved to a small cottage on an island in the Baltic. He fell ill and died. Jeremy wrote about what a good person Tony was and a hero in the conflict in Bulgaria, and he lauded the four years he served in MI5. Serena assumed that cancer had ended Tony's life.

It was the early seventies, and people were just beginning to treat cancer as nothing to be ashamed of. Serena assumed that Tony had been ill when they were together and had orchestrated the break-up of their relationship and of his marriage. He wanted to be alone in his last year on earth. Despite her anger at Tony, Serena felt great sadness upon news of his death. Over the next few weeks, she recalled the good times she had with Tony. Her duties at MI5 didn't change, but her attitude did. She began to complete every mundane duty she was given with great perfection in honor of the man she loved.

Maximilian Greatorrex was one of a few young, unmarried men assigned to the Registry. Serena began to take an interest in him. The young recruits would be "invited" to attend lectures quite often. Although the lectures were tedious and boring, no one dared not attend. As it turned out Maximilian and Serena had an unexpected commonality. They were the only two junior officers who stayed alert and enjoyed the lectures. Serena particularly enjoyed a lecture on dialectical materialism, a safely enclosed system that reminded Serena of an equation that could have been devised by Leibniz or Hilbert. She found it stimulating as did Max. The lecture ended with a stern warning from the ex-flight commander lecturer that Marxism only worked if it seduced intelligent men and women. After class, Max and Serena shared a brief exchange about the lecture.

Serena and Max became friends. Physically, he reminded Serena of Jeremy. Therefore, she thought he might prefer men; although, she hoped she was wrong. Her attraction to Max told her that she was leaving thoughts of Tony in the past where they belonged. He came from a family of academics. He had earned a law degree and had tried his hand at journalism; but, he wasn't satisfied. That was when he joined the Service. Serena, Max, and Shirley were not destined to be friends. He didn't like pubs and the smoke and the noise that were part of them. Shirley thought Max was creepy.

Max had heard of Serena's college newspaper writing. Serena was pleased that he had heard that she had read everything worth reading. He also had heard of Tony. Serena's relationship with Max grew. When she wasn't with him she missed him. One of Max's favorite subjects was communism. He viewed it as a tragedy of good intentions mixed with human nature that caused the unhappiness of the millions of people of the Russian

empire. She made the first pass at him which he reluctantly followed through on but did not initially pursue beyond that first deep and passionate kiss.

Serena enjoyed frequent debates with Max about communism which was his favorite topic. In one conversation, Max talked about the Baltic Island where Tony had gone after his retirement. Max knew that the name of the island was Kumlinge. Serena thought it was strange that he knew the name of the island among the tens of thousands of islands in the Baltic. During one of their discussions, it was Max who became affectionate. However, once again he put the stops on at a certain point. He told her he was becoming very attached to her. There was a very interesting project coming through, and it would be perfect for her. He recommended her for it. He called her Sweet Tooth.

Analysis

Serena does not have a final resolution about her affair with Tony. When she hears of his death it saddens her, but she feels partially vindicated. She was sure that he knew he was dying and concluded that he devised the entire “blouse” caper in order to break up with her and to end his marriage. He must have felt the need to be alone during his final days. It was a romantic and dramatic interpretation of her former lover’s ending. It gave her some resolution and returned to her a measure of dignity. He cared enough for her that he didn’t want to put her through the agony of watching him die. Her scenario was probably a fantasy, but it gave her some peace.

Serena really knows that she is over Tony when she becomes attracted to Max. But because he resembles Jeremy, she is initially afraid that he is gay. But, she’s drawn to him. They share common interests, especially debating the perils of communism. They are the only two of the group of young officers who enjoy the long-winded lectures. One lecture in particular appeals to Serena because the structure and discipline discussed by the speaker harkens back to her natural affinity for math.

The chapter ends with some loose ends. Does the relationship between Serena and Max develop further? What is Max referring to when he tells her that there is a future project that is perfect for her?

Discussion Question 1

How are Jeremy and Max alike? How are they different?

Discussion Question 2

What unexpected thing do Max and Serena have in common?



Discussion Question 3

What does Max love to discuss? How did Tony's influence on Serena play into Max's favorite subject?

Vocabulary

posthumous, imperious, caste, soporific, fetid

Chapter 5

Summary

Serena lived on St. Augustine's Road in an old apartment that smelled of residents of the past. She could never quite get the odor out of her room. She had three housemates – Pauline, Bridget and Tricia – who were working girls, were rather boring and had no semblance of a viable social life. Away from the Registry, Serena read as voraciously as ever usually consuming three to four books a week. She did most of her reading in a comfortable easy chair she bought new. Still a bit lost, she searched for herself in the characters she read about. She couldn't help but think of Tony as she read. She used a green leather bookmark he gave her when he complained about her ruining the spines of her books by leaving them face down to mark her place.

Serena earned a black mark from MI5 with the help of Shirley. They were at the afternoon lecture, sitting in the back row that was designated for their rank. The speaker was discussing the politics of war and how the soldiers fought a war but the politicians didn't have the intellectual courage to call it a war. He discussed the IRA and terrorism in Northern Ireland. He blamed British failure in their conflicts with the IRA on the lack of coordinated intelligence gathering. He laid the failure at the feet of MI5 and asserted that MI6 was operating where it had no authority to be.

During the question and answer session, the Director General defended the Service. Some asked a hypothetical question as to what would happen if the Labour party gained power and made common cause with radical union elements. Would it not be a direct threat to democracy? That was when Shirley shouted out, "These berks want to stage a coup!" There was a gasp and all heads snapped toward the back. She had violated decorum and protocol and in front of a visitor. And she was a woman, a lowly woman at that. But it was Serena who was blushing and averting her eyes. Everyone in the room was certain it was Serena who spoke out of turn. Shirley laughed it off. But Serena knew that it wouldn't bode well for her. It would be the first black mark of many more to come.

Analysis

Serena's association with Shirley was bound to get her into trouble and it did in a very big and public way. Although Shirley had no intention of allowing the blame for her inappropriate comment to fall on Serena, she had no control over what those at the meeting had assumed. Besides, Shirley is uninhibited and feels she did nothing wrong by speaking out. For her, it was natural. But, if Serena does get a black mark for the incident, it will be her own fault. She has not learned to speak up for herself. She needs to learn to speak up and tell them that it was Shirley who spoke out. But Serena was raised to be a nice girl and ratting on a friend is probably something she was taught not to do. If Serena wants a career with the Service, she needs to speak up for herself and

consider distancing herself from Shirley. But, is she too nice and loyal for that kind of action?

Discussion Question 1

What does Serena's obsession with reading and her fascination with the characters tell about her?

Discussion Question 2

What was insulting about Shirley's comment at the lecture?

Discussion Question 3

What should Serena do if she is blamed for making Shirley's inappropriate remark?

Vocabulary

ferociously, vestiges, viscerally, ambiguity, manifestation

Chapter 6

Summary

Instead of a reprimand, Serena got an assignment. She and Shirley were sent on a secret mission outside the building. They were given the address of a safe house and cleaning crew uniforms. The place was a mess from the rotting food in the fridge to the filled ashtrays and dirty linens on the beds. They had to turn a bloody mattress. They were also instructed to purchase four bottles of Johnnie Walker Red Label for the house. They had to make sure to secure the house when they left. They had been instructed by desk officer Tim Le Prevost to never mention the house to anyone at the office.

It was a rather insulting assignment. As Shirley put it, “Cleaning ladies pretending to be cleaning ladies” (72). But Serena was more pragmatic. The Service couldn’t call in an outside cleaning agency to clean a safe house and, of course, they wouldn’t ask the male officers to do such menial work. Shirley talked about her time as an exchange student with German students. She found the Germans more caring than the English. Shirley claimed that the British government was a one-party country and the press was a joke. Serena recalled Tony making similar comments. Serena asked why Shirley had joined the service. Shirley responded that one of the reasons was to please her father.

Shirley implied that England was implicit in the spread of Communism and had allowed the Americans to become imperialists. If they wanted to wipe out the Russians and put a stop to American imperialism, they could do it. When Serena defended the government, Shirley told her she had soaked up the propaganda. Serena remained silent but she was angry. She found Shirley’s comments intolerable and condescending. They went into separate rooms to complete their cleaning assignment.

As Serena was winding up, she found a scrap of paper affixed to a table leg. The initials “tc” were written faintly in the crease. The lettering “umlinge” was unmistakable. She was sure the letter that preceded it was “K” – Tony’s island. But, what did it mean? She immediately recalled that Max knew the name of his island. Did the note have anything to do with the bloody mattress? Serena put the scrap of paper in her pocket. Shirley came back in the room and apologized for their little spat.

Analysis

They didn’t get a reprimand, but Serena and Shirley were sent on a cleaning detail. Sexism rears its ugly head in this episode because the male officers would never be asked to clean a safe house. Shirley is obviously anti-government. It’s surprising that she would be working for the government and that she had passed their rigid screening process. If they were aware of her real feelings, surely she would be dismissed from her

from the Service. Shirley could still prove to be a factor in Serena's career. Serena is associated with Shirley who has a volatile nature and strong anti-government leanings.

Serena finds a tantalizing tidbit from Tony's stay at the safe house. The nature of the information will surely be revealed as the story unfolds. There are more unresolved issues at the conclusion of this chapter. Did the blood on the mattress belong to Tony? Was he tortured? If so, why? What message was he trying to leave and for whom?

Discussion Question 1

Why do Shirley's statements about the government anger Serena?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Serena think of Max when she finds the note from "tc"?

Discussion Question 3

Why doesn't Serena tell Shirley about the note she found?

Vocabulary

enunciated, stoicism, cosseted, ludicrously

Chapter 7

Summary

When Harry Tapp required Serena's presence in his office, she thought she'd be getting a reprimand. Instead she faced Tapp and four other men one of whom was Max. Tapp asked how she was settling in. He assured Serena that they had not called her in to reproach her about her performance. Small talk was followed by a discussion of the Prime Minister's problems with labor, in particular the miners. They discussed other topical issues such as the Common Market which Serena endorsed and the Channel Tunnel which she enthused about. Serena concluded that the entire discussion was being held for the edification of a silver-haired man who listened intently but remained silent.

Tapp said that Max had informed him that Serena read a great deal and asked her about specific authors – William Golding, Kingsley Amis and David Storey. He asked if she would know how to talk to them and how she'd rank them. She would know how to talk to each of them and ranked them as follows: Amis, Golding and Storey. Tapp pressed her about any associations with writers she might have but she responded that she had none. The silver-haired man was finally introduced. He was Peter Nutting. He spoke about a center-left magazine called "Encounter". There was speculation that it was funded by the CIA. The Service's plan was to start a new magazine that would concentrate on new writers at the start of their careers when they needed financial support.

Specifically the goal would be to focus on novelists who were also journalists and political activists who advocated freedom of speech. The Service would provide the right people with stipends. The goal was to identify ten such individuals but Serena was to concentrate on one writer first – T. H. Haley. They wanted Serena to review the file they had on him which included some of his works and then visit him in person in Brighton. They would take her recommendation about whether to bring him on or not. The important thing was to recruit the right people because it would not work to try to control what they write. The writers would have to feel free. Benjamin who was part of the meeting would be Serena's contact man. Serena asked for a promotion to take the position to which Nutting immediately agreed. She would become an assistant desk officer.

Analysis

Serena's skills in math may have gotten her into the secret service but her love of literature and reading has snagged a promotion for her. In what seems to be an unusual function for the Service, Serena will be in charge of recruiting young writers who speak out for human rights and freedom of speech. It is the tactic of MI5 to effect change using a soft approach. Through the young writers that they plan to recruit, they hope to

convince the youth of England and the rest of the free world that Marxism is not the answer and that democracy is. Buoyed by being offered such an important assignment, Serena asserts herself and asks for a promotion.

Discussion Question 1

What did Serena think when she was called to Tapp's office?

Discussion Question 2

How did Serena's love of reading pay off for her?

Discussion Question 3

What sign is there that Serena is feeling more confident about her abilities?

Vocabulary

indiscretion, counterculture, frothy, orthodox

Chapter 8

Summary

Serena felt like a privileged character because she'd been allowed to take a Registry file home. She was enjoying her assignment which largely involved reading the works of Haley. She first focused on the story with a character named Edmund Alfredus, who was an academic and atheist. He was left of center politically and had been elected to Parliament. His twin brother, Giles, was an Anglican vicar. Despite their differences, the brothers were close. When Edmund has one affair too many, his wife throws him out. He goes to stay with his brother who is quite ill. An important Bishop will be visiting during that Sunday's liturgy, but Giles is too ill to give the sermon. The brothers together decide that Edmund will pose as Giles and give the liturgy.

At the service, Edmund posing as Giles, gives an impassioned sermon about love and the pain of betrayal – Edmund's own current circumstance. His words and presentation moved the congregation and the Bishop. When he completed his sermon, some nearly applauded. The story excited Serena. She hoped that Edmund would be inspired by his own words and repair his marriage. She feared that Giles would be disillusioned that an atheist was so convincing and well-received by his congregation.

Edmund's sermon had moved another member of the congregation, the wealthy and beautiful widow named Jean Alise who suffers from psychological problems. She "fell in love" with Giles (Edmund) and was determined to wreck his marriage. When she meets with the real Giles, she knows that he is not the man who gave the sermon. She tracks down Edmund in London and romance begins. She learns that he's an atheist and makes it her mission to bring him to God although she keeps it to herself. In the meantime, his wife, Molly, is reaching out to him for a reconciliation. When he tells Jean that he's returning to his wife, it sets off a psychotic episode in her. Jean has a screaming fit and begins writing nasty letters to Edmund's wife and causes a horrific scene in front of his kids. Molly can't endure the onslaught and decides that the marriage won't work and asks Edmund to leave.

Jean forces herself back into Edmund's life. They are together, and, at times, Jean seems sane. However, she is jealous of any woman Edmund encounters. In fact, anything sets her off – even when he has a few drinks with his male friends. They marry, and Edmund loses his seat in Parliament when his party is voted out of power. Edmund becomes totally dependent on Jean and regularly attends church with her. She feels victorious. Although the road was rough, she realized her vow of bringing Edmund to God.

Serena was amazed that a twenty-seven year-old could write so effectively about obsessive and destructive love. The story made her feel close to Haley.



Analysis

As stated earlier, Serena searches for herself in the books she reads. She feels an affinity for the character, Edmund, in the story she reads by Haley, the author she is to evaluate for the Service.

Instead of finding herself in the story, Serena has found a love interest. She is drawn to Edmund in the story and wonders if the character was inspired by the author himself. Was she drawn to Edmund because he, like Tony, was unfaithful to his wife? She even comments that she feels close to Haley after reading the story – closer than she does to anyone at the Registry. That comment is an indication that she is like a duck out of water in her current position. Her love is literature and reading. Her former lover, Tony, set her up for a career that wasn't suited to her. It was suited to him at one time because he was a historian and political scientist; she loves literature and the written word. Will sparks fly when Serena travels to meet Haley in person?

Discussion Question 1

How might Edmund's great success in delivering the sermon impact Giles?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the character Jean feel triumphant in the end?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Serena feel close to Haley after reading the story about Edmund?

Vocabulary

fetish, transgression, clandestine, qualms, blasphemous

Chapter 9

Summary

Serena and Shirley remained friends after their spat, but Serena felt a wedge had been driven between them. Serena hoped that through further exposure at the Service Shirley's harsh opinions of the government would soften. One night soon after their cleaning assignment, they met at a pub where Shirley revealed that she had been "sacked". Shirley told Serena to smile and act normal and that she was being watched – not Shirley. They'd probably been in her room.

Shirley confessed that Nutting had called her upstairs and asked her about Serena. He wanted to know what they talked about. They convinced her to start an argument about politics with Serena to learn her true political leanings. Although Serena had showed her support for the government at the last minute Shirley pulled out of the deal. She didn't want to report back on her friend. That's why they fired her. Shirley said they knew she'd tell Serena; they were sending a message. Shirley warned Serena that those in charge at the Service seem like a bunch of stuffed shirts but they were mean. Shirley asked what Serena what mission she'd been given but Serena refused to tell her. Shirley left without a good-bye. Serena recalled that her green bookmark had been on the floor one day and had wondered how it got there. Perhaps she had an answer now.

Serena read another Haley story. It was about a dull man named Neil Carder, a civil service worker who had inherited a fortune. He owned a large mansion and a showy Bentley. The only person he saw on a constant basis was Abeje, his Nigerian housekeeper. There were rumors about an affair between them but it was groundless. The woman had a husband and children who she was devoted to. He was lonely but too shy to approach anyone at clubs or bars that he only stopped by occasionally. But one day walking alone on Oxford Street he became intrigued by a display of fashion mannequins posed in a store window. The mannequins appeared to be enjoying themselves at a cocktail party. But Neil was drawn to a mannequin who stood apart from them. She was looking at a painting, lost in thought, showing her independence. To Neil, this mannequin loved freedom.

Neil became obsessed with the mannequin. He returned to the store and purchased the mannequin and the clothes and every accessory she was wearing in addition to other dresses that would fit the mannequin. She was delivered to him later in the week. He made a place for her clothes in his closet and would set the dining room table for two. Her name was Hermione, the name of his ex-wife who lasted less than a year in the marriage. Hermione, the mannequin, slept in Neil's bed. He was fascinated with her stillness and was obsessed with sensuous love for her.

But eventually Neil saw a change in Hermione. He suspected that she was thinking of someone else. He concluded that Hermione and Abeje must be having an affair since Abeje was the only person who had been with her. That night after making love to



Hermione he tore into her with a knife and dismembered her. He concealed her parts in plastic bags and disposed of them. He left Abeje a note on the kitchen table that she was being terminated. He lived alone the rest of his life and never with as much intensity.

Analysis

Nutting tried to use Shirley to delve into Serena's real feelings about the government. Although Serena passed the test, Shirley told Serena she decided not to play ball with Nutting and told him nothing. Shirley wanted Serena to tell her what mission she had taken on but Serena wouldn't tell her. She had to wonder if she was being set up a second time by Shirley. If Serena divulged her mission to Shirley it would indicate that Serena couldn't keep a secret. Perhaps Shirley hadn't even been fired and she was working undercover for them. Were Shirley's warnings to Serena about how "mean" Nutting and the others were just a ploy to try to make her divulge the details of her mission? The thought may have occurred to Serena that Shirley could even be working for enemies of the government. Serena did the wise thing by not telling Shirley about her current assignment. Shirley left without saying good-bye. Was she angry that she had failed in her mission? Or, was she just truly upset that she lost her job?

Serena reads another story by Haley about a strange man who is obsessed by a mannequin. One of the underlying themes of the story was the love of freedom.

Discussion Question 1

What is plausible about Shirley's confession to Serena?

Discussion Question 2

Why should Serena not trust Shirley?

Discussion Question 3

What did the mannequin represent to Neil?

Vocabulary

subcutaneous, plausible, divulge, languorously

Chapter 10

Summary

Serena and Max met to discuss Freedom International which would be the front for Serena's mission. She asked Max why Shirley was fired. He didn't know; he thought she might know. She asked if Shirley's dismissal involved her. Max said that unexpected dismissals were a natural part of the Service. Serena didn't believe him. She confronted him about his apparent lack of knowledge about the Service's Information Research Department, or IRD. It wasn't working like it was intended to and had become an arm of MI6. She heard that it could be cut entirely.

The goal of Operation Sweet Tooth was to bring in writers who showed skepticism about a utopian East and a catastrophic West. They didn't have to be radicals or Cold War fanatics. She commented that the writers would be enraged to learn that the Service was actually behind Freedom International and that it was paying their rent. Max assured Serena that it would be next to impossible for anyone to make a connection to the Service.

Serena was to use her own name and visit the Foundation staff representing herself as a member of Word Unpenned, a fund that was donating money to FI for distribution to recommended writers. After hearing more details about the operation, Serena pulled the scrap of paper she found at the safe house and showed Max. He seemed to link the scrap of paper to Shirley's dismissal. He wanted to keep it but Serena grabbed it back.

Max surprised Serena with the news that he was engaged to be married. He claimed he knew nothing about Shirley's dismissal or about the scrap of paper that Serena showed him. She told Max she was being followed. He told her to be careful and not to pretend she knows more than she does. It could be dangerous. He also cautioned her to not let her imagination run away with her which can easily happen in this line of work. She felt angry when he told her to just do her job and keep things simple.

Analysis

Serena's relationship with Max comes to a head. She thinks he's lying about Shirley, that he knows why she was let go. She also doesn't believe he knows nothing about the note from "tc" that she found at the safe house. Max had come up with the name of the island in their conversation. Why would he know that?! She is somewhat dismayed that Max is engaged. She had a mild interest in him although it was beginning to wane. She feels unloved – a pretty girl like her shouldn't be having so much trouble with love. Serena is forging ahead with Operation Sweet Tooth despite the fact that danger seems to be lurking. She is naïve and trusting and is happy to blend her dull job with the literature that she loves. The mission is exciting to her. When she parts with Max after



their meeting, she is angry with his dismissive attitude toward her concern about being followed. But she is also angry that he is engaged.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Serena think Max is lying when he says he doesn't know why Shirley was fired?

Discussion Question 2

What is the front for Operation Sweet Tooth and Serena's role in it?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Serena angry with Max at the conclusion of their meeting?

Vocabulary

apex, pompous, ubiquitous

Chapter 11

Summary

After five drafts, Serena's letter to Haley was approved. She posted it but didn't hear back for over a month. He had been away doing research. He wrote that he'd be interested in hearing more. He was a part-time professor and would rather meet at his campus office than in his cramped flat. Serena traveled by train to Brighton on an unseasonably hot October day. She walked across the large campus to Haley's office. On the train ride down she had read up on Haley's journalistic works which were more pragmatic and sensible than his fiction. One piece asserted that West German novelists were cowardly for not speaking out about the Berlin Wall. Surely English writers would have spoken out about a London Wall.

Serena had built Tom Haley up in her mind to such a point that she was positive she'd set herself up for disappointment once meeting him in the flesh. Serena was surprised that Tom was thin, almost girlish, and slightly stooped for his young age. He was pale, and his dark hair was cut in a bob. They sat down and she got right to business pitching the narrative that she had practiced. He had the expression of someone waiting for a punch line. She felt uncomfortable and sure that he knew she was a fraud. When she felt that he was losing interest in her proposal she provided examples of how FI had helped writers who had been imprisoned for their words. He asked about her education and she told two small lies that he could track down. Why hadn't Max provided a foolproof personal scenario for her?!

Tom wanted to know what she thought of his work. She responded that her opinion didn't matter, but he disagreed. She told him she thought his writing was brilliant. Her favorite story was "This Is Love" about the twin brothers. Tom would think about the offer and let her know. He took her hand in his, and he seemed to be moving toward her when two girls, students of his, knocked on the door and interrupted.

Analysis

After reading and being impressed with Tom Haley's writing, Serena feared that she would be disappointed to meet him after building him up in her mind. But she is not disappointed and there seems to be an immediate attraction between Serena and Tom. Serena does her best to convince Tom to come on board. Serena knows that her first mission is a test. If she fails, she may be "sacked" just like Shirley was. When Tom asked her an unexpected question, she handled it well and showed that she could think on her feet.

The chapter ends with Tom almost making a pass at Serena; or, at least she thought so.



Discussion Question 1

Why did Serena think she'd be disappointed when she met Haley in person?

Discussion Question 2

How did Haley almost trip Serena up during the interview? Why was Serena upset with Max over it?

Discussion Question 3

How does Haley explain the dilemma that a new writer, a starving artist, faces when pursuing a writing career?

Vocabulary

bureaucracy, insouciant, excoriated, unsavory

Chapter 12

Summary

Serena second-guessed herself on her trip back to London. Had she screwed it up? Should she had been more aggressive and make him commit right then and there? She thought about his lingering handshake.

Back home, Serena read another of Haley's stories. It was about Sebastian Morel, a French teacher, who lived with his wife and two children in north London. Sebastian teaches poor children who are insolent and unruly. His job is thankless and his pay unsatisfactory. He and his wife argue about money. Sebastian withdraws seventy pounds to buy Christmas gifts for the children. He is accosted by a young man with a knife who takes his money. What strikes Sebastian isn't the robber but what he had read about crime – that the main cause for crime is social injustice. To maintain his own self-respect, he concludes that he should not mind being mugged. He reports the crime to the police but winds up feeling guilty for revealing that the robber had wielded a knife. The young boy, if apprehended, could be sent up for life.

Sebastian's wife, Monica, doesn't believe he was mugged. She thinks he squandered the money in a bar. They have to borrow for Christmas and hold it together for the kids. But after Christmas he confronts her again about whether she believes that he was mugged. She won't answer directly. She hates her life and suggests that she go to work and he stay home with the kids. When he returns to school after Christmas break, nothing is better. His marriage is fundamentally over. Monica's distrust in him has broken it. Money problems continue and another tragedy strikes. Their house was burglarized and many personal items from his youth were taken. He is particularly disturbed that his mountaineering equipment was stolen.

Sebastian is contacted at school and asked to stop by the police station after work. At the police department, he is shown a film of a sting operation. He is shocked to see his wife carting in the items that were allegedly stolen into a pawnshop where she sells them. That evening, Sebastian avoids contact with Monica but at one point she gives him that come hither look. Instead of being repulsed, he is excited. Monica is like someone he doesn't know and it arouses him. His marriage is over but he could have a mad affair with this unknown creature.

Monica sets up the living room with music and wine. Sebastian hates her but wants her. They discuss the downfall of parliament but don't talk about the downfall of their marriage. They make passionate love that night. She is a liar and an actress making love with another liar and an actor.

Analysis

Serena did well in her first attempt to snag someone for the Service's new venture but she feels like a failure because she didn't get him to commit to the program. But she had dismissed some positive signals: he loved when he called her brilliant which she did quite often; he indicated that he might travel to London and wanted to stop by her office; he is broke and wants to write more than he wants to teach. He will probably agree to her offer. She is just feeling a natural disappointment because she didn't achieve her goal at her first try. She is paranoid about getting fired after Shirley's termination.

Serena reads Haley's story called "Pawnography." It's a dismal story about an unhappy couple. It touches on a few political views that the Service would find positive: crime is caused mainly by political injustice and economic issues drive the decline of marriage and society.

Discussion Question 1

What is Sebastian's reaction when he gets mugged?

Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Monica believe Sebastian's story about being mugged?

Discussion Question 3

Why doesn't Sebastian confront Monica about the police film?

Vocabulary

whorl, insolent, rudimentary, bourgeois

Chapter 13

Summary

Serena hadn't heard from Tom directly, but she got a letter from a secretary at FI saying that he'd been by with a lot of questions. He seemed very impressed with the program. Everyone at MI5 was worried about tensions in the Middle East. A conflict in which the United States backed Israel and the Soviets lined up behind Egypt could be the precursor of nuclear war.

Serena was occupied with thoughts of Tom but also of Shirley. It had been weeks since she had left, and Serena's anger at her was beginning to soften. Serena stopped by Shirley's apartment, but she'd moved. Serena didn't have her parents' address so she found the address of her father's shop and sent a post card there. She really didn't expect a reply. Max had been away for a few days with his fiancé. Serena met with him when he returned. Max told Serena to give Tom another week and then write and tell him that he must decide or the offer will be withdrawn.

Max shared some news. A Soviet spy by the name of Oleg Lyalin defected. He confirmed that scores of Soviet intelligence officers were in London working under diplomatic immunity. The government immediately threw them out. The Service felt confident that there were no longer any moles of great consequence working on British soil. Another matter that Lyalin revealed was that an Englishman codenamed "Volt" had been working with the Soviets on the information about the nuclear bomb. There were indications that this man was Canning. Serena was upset. She thought back to some conversations she had with Tony about nuclear weapons. He had believed that the threat of nuclear destruction wouldn't dissipate until there was a balance of power.

Serena remembered when two men came to the cottage and he had asked her to take a long walk. She told Max that Tony was definitely not a Communist, although she had some doubts herself. Serena was deeply disturbed by what Max had told her. She locked herself in a stall in the ladies room, cried, and recalled more of Tony's conversations. If the implications were true, he had let down friends and family. Everything else he achieved would be irrelevant. Serena was angry at Max for telling her about his suspicions and angry at Tony for being dead and not there to explain or defend himself.

Later that day, Serena received a letter postmarked from Brighton. It was from Tom. He was accepting the position and had enjoyed meeting with her. But there was an added condition. He wanted to meet with her on a regular basis and wanted her to read his writing. He asked her to meet him at the National Portrait Gallery on Saturday morning.



Analysis

Serena is not able to track Shirley down. Has she possibly gone into hiding? If she is still working for the Service, she might have been transferred to another location. Shirley may still be part of this story. Serena is a kind person and apparently wants to renew her friendship with Shirley.

Serena is faced with Tony's mysterious past when the possibility that he was a Soviet spy is revealed to her by Max. Apparently, Max must think that Tony was more to Serena than just a passing acquaintance. It hurts Serena that Tony who can't defend himself or at least explain himself is accused of basically being a traitor, of betraying his country. Serena does not want to believe that about him.

Serena is relieved when she finally gets a letter of acceptance from Tom. His caveat that they meet on a regular basis might be more personally than professionally inspired.

Discussion Question 1

What is a mole?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Serena upset at Max's revelation about "Volt"?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it difficult for Serena to find Shirley?

Vocabulary

embargoed, cryptonym, preemptive, expulsion

Chapter 14

Summary

After spending an hour viewing the art, Serena and Tom had lunch at the gallery café. He talked about poetry which was something that did not interest Serena. She felt embarrassed that she knew so little poetry, especially with her love of writing.

Serena confessed that her degree wasn't in English; it was in mathematics. He was impressed and told her she should be proud of that. They went by a book shop where he found a poem he wanted her to read. He thought she read it too fast to understand it, but she recited it back to him almost word for word. He asked her what her feelings were when she read the poem.

On their walk to her place, they talked about their families. His sister was quite accomplished and had a brilliant future. There was no comparing Serena's sister with his. Lucy was still trying to recover from the abortion and had dropped out of school and was living at home. As they walked around a park, she was feeling some flashes of guilt about her deception. It wasn't long before they were holding each other and kissing. After the park, they headed for her apartment. They went to her room and shared more information about themselves. He received his MA in international relations and had done his PhD thesis on "The Faerie Queen." Finally, they began kissing and were soon in bed. They went to dinner, and he stayed the night. The spark of love was growing.

Analysis

Serena has not imagined the attraction that Tom had for her during their first meeting. The two have a long day together. It begins at the gallery, followed by lunch and a long walk in the park. They finally return to her apartment. They grew close over that time getting to know a lot about each other. Serena has some flashes of guilt about her deception. But she is attracted to Tom and doesn't assess the ramifications of getting involved with him. If the Service finds out – which they probably will – they would probably conclude that a relationship between Serena and Tom could compromise the entire mission. Additionally, if they fall in love, how will he feel to someday learn that she had deceived him about the program and that he was actually doing the bidding of the Secret Service?

Discussion Question 1

Why wouldn't Serena want to compare her sister with Tom's sister?

Discussion Question 2

What did Serena divulge about her education? Why could it be risky?

Discussion Question 3

What risks is Serena taking by her involvement with Tom?

Vocabulary

aesthetics, repertoire, soporific, agoraphobic

Chapter 15

Summary

Thoughts of Tony were beginning to fade. Serena had a lover and was allowing her anger at Tony to be tempered by the guilt she had for condemning him. Serena resumed a habit that was formed during her time with Tony. She began reading the daily news again although it was depressing and chronicled the decline of society and the threats to world peace. The miners' strike was impacting the daily lives of ordinary people. She traveled on the weekends to Brighton and stayed with Tom. She began to think of his flat as home. She loved her weekends with Tom.

During November and December, Tom was winding up his position at the university and was working on two stories. The stipend money was coming through which they spent on eating out and stocking the fridge with Chablis. They read and discussed current events, politics and literature. When Tom was out doing research at the library, Serena would often peek at his writing in progress. He didn't like her to read his writing until he completed it. She read a completed short novel entitled, "From the Somerset Levels" which was a story about a man and his young daughter who lived in a London that had been ravaged and destroyed. The collapse of civilization began with injustice, conflicts and contradictions of the twentieth century. The man is searching for his wife but in the end, he and his daughter die alone in each other's arms.

Serena knew that Nutting and the others would find the story undesirable. It was not what they hoped would be offered up by the writers. It was a tale of the apocalypse, the failure of modern society. On the plus side it would irritate Max and would confirm that the writers were definitely not being guided by the Service. Serena didn't like the story. She felt it wasn't Tom. She would not give up on him just because of a bad story or two. She still believed in him.

Soaking in the tub later, the story still dominated her thoughts. Tom was making a mistake with the story. She hoped that his editor friend, Ian Hamilton, would turn it down. At dinner that evening, he told her he had a surprise for her. He had been working on a short novel that he planned to give to Ian Hamilton. In fact, he had finished the first draft and sent a photocopy to Ian. Ian sent the draft to Tom Mischler, the publisher. He loved it and wanted a final draft by Christmas. Tom was jubilant. She congratulated him and he gave her a brief synopsis of the story. She asked if it might have a happier ending. Of course not, he told her.

Serena figured that her job would be on the line with the publishing of this story. They spent the rest of their time at the restaurant drinking too much and trying to figure out a counterintuitive math problem that Serena posed at Tom's request. The problem was modeled after the American Game show, "Let's Make a Deal" in which contestants were asked to pick between three doors. The contestants would win the prize behind the door they selected. Serena knew that Tom was really drunk when he left a twenty pound tip.

They were never able to agree on the logic problem. Serena was tearful when Tom walked her to the train station Sunday night.

Analysis

Serena is facing an ironic dilemma that could be right out of one of Tom's stories. She doesn't like the story that Tom is writing and she knows that the Service won't either. She fears she might lose her job over it. But Tom has a big surprise for her. His editor and publisher love it and want to publish it by the end of the year. Serena feels the nails being hammered down on her coffin. If the book is published and is a blockbuster, the Service will be in a rage. The story is the exact opposite of the propaganda that the Service wants to spread. And they are funding a story that is anti-message. She is tempted to interfere but that would blow her cover. She has painted herself in a corner in more than one way.

Discussion Question 1

Why will Tom's new story not be considered desirable by the Service?

Discussion Question 2

What is ironic about Serena's dilemma?

Discussion Question 3

What did Serena find positive about Tom's story?

Vocabulary

idyll, carnage, truculent, fetish, dystopia

Chapter 16

Summary

Tom sent Serena a new story entitled, “Probable Adultery” which was based on the “Let’s Make a Deal” game show scenario. A man, Terry Mole, works seventy-hour weeks while his wife stays home. He catches on that his wife is a serial adulterer. Terry follows her to a hotel and goes to the fourth floor where he knew she and her lover went. He faces three doors, 401, 402 and 403, and has to decide which door his wife is behind. Terry is a mathematician and architect and tries to figure out the most logical choice. He picks a door and breaks it down. His calculations were right and he catches his wife with her lover. He leaves to return to London where he plans to begin divorce proceedings.

Serena thought the story was flawed. But how could she tell him that his story didn’t work since she had inspired it? In fact when she figured out the math that she was spewing after that drunken dinner when they were trying to figure out the game show scenario, she had totally misled him. She ran into Max who wanted to talk. They agreed to have a drink the next Monday after work. Back in her office, she typed up three pages of notes for Tom including a better ending.

Serena woke up the next morning to the knocking on her front door. She ran downstairs and was surprised to see Max standing on her doorstep wearing a fedora and raincoat. He had been drinking. He said it was urgent that he talk to her. He was sure she knew what he was going to say – but she didn’t. He broke his engagement because whenever he looked at Serena he always thought of what might have been. He couldn’t stop thinking about her. It was inevitable that they be together. She told him that she’d met someone else. Max felt she always flirted with him and had been leading him on. He guessed that it was Tom. He told her it was unprofessional of her. Tom was bound to find out who she was. She would ruin the Sweet Tooth operation.

Max was angry; he insulted Serena and called her a foul name. A second later he was sorry and apologized. But it was time for him to leave. He asked her to at least think it over. She was making a big mistake with Tom Haley.

Analysis

Serena made a mistake by getting involved with one of the writers in the program. She is not supposed to be privy to the writing before it’s published. She is getting too involved in the stories and wants to correct them; but, that isn’t her role. She is sabotaging the program and Tom at the same time. And she is putting herself in an impossible position.

Serena has a bit of satisfaction when Max confesses his feelings for her. However, his timing is bad. She may have made a big mistake in telling him that she was involved with Tom. If Max is bitter over ending his engagement for her and then being rejected,



he could get her in a world of trouble by telling the higher ups that she has a personal relationship with Tom.

Discussion Question 1

What didn't Serena like about Tom's newest story?

Discussion Question 2

What was Max's reaction to Serena's relationship with Tom?

Discussion Question 3

How could Max get back at Serena for rejecting him?

Vocabulary

assignments, desolation, specious, exultation

Chapter 17

Summary

One weekend in Brighton, Tom asked Serena to read his short novel. She read it and noticed only slight alterations from the draft she had read. She spoke of the novel's coldness over the fate of father and daughter. Although she meant her words as criticism, he took them as positive feedback. He finished a final draft and asked Serena to accompany him to his editor in London when he turned it in. Serena had to go home for Christmas which Tom completely understood. He submitted "Probable Adultery" to Ian but he rejected it but he did like another story he wrote about an ape. Before she left for Christmas break, they delivered the novel to Maschler.

Before they parted for the holidays, Tom told Serena that his future was in academics and teaching. Writing fiction wasn't for him. He planned to write an academic paper on poetry's relation to London. He wrote one novella, but he didn't have another one in him. Serena, of course, remarked about his brilliance in writing fiction. She reminded him that he was receiving the stipend from FI to write stories.

Serena took the late train home and was late for Christmas Eve dinner. Her father opened the door and embraced her. She became emotional and began to cry like a child. She didn't understand her emotions. Perhaps it was too much wine at her lunch with Tom. But she was also glad to be home. There were five for dinner. Lucy had brought her long-haired Irish boyfriend, Luke. Serena's mother wasn't upset that Serena came late. It worked out fine and she was glad to have Serena home. Serena, whose family still thought she worked for the health department, shared her views on reforming the social security system. Everyone was bored with her comments except her mother who kept asking more questions.

The Bishop left to officiate over the Christmas Eve sermon. Serena felt blessed that he didn't require his family to attend his services. Serena's mother went upstairs to finish present wrapping. Serena, Lucy, and Luke went for a walk. Luke produced a joint which he lit as they walked along. Serena was still unsettled from her emotional reunion with her father. Then she felt the scrap of paper in her pocket that she'd found at the safe house. It reminded her of Tony and Shirley's disappearance. She thought of her last contact with Max.

Analysis

Serena is trying to be happy for Tom, but she detests his novella. She realizes there is nothing she can do about it. She is a little upset when Tom tells her that his future is in academics and teaching. After all she recruited him to write, and the Service wouldn't be very pleased if he suddenly veers off in a different direction. She pointed out that he was receiving his stipend to write stories. Serena goes home for Christmas and is



unexpectedly very emotional when she reunites with her father. She doesn't understand her feelings, but she is a young woman with a lot of pressure and responsibility. What is difficult is that she can't talk about it. Perhaps, she was venting that frustration by crying and clinging to her father almost wishing she were a child again. Christmas is a time for reflection, and Serena thinks back on many things that have happened in her young life.

Discussion Question 1

What is Serena's reaction when Tom tells her that his future is in teaching and academics?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Serena so emotional when she sees her father again?

Discussion Question 3

What issues are unresolved in Serena's life as she reflects on her past?

Vocabulary

squalor, depravity, nostalgia, benign

Chapter 18

Summary

The miners' strike had impacted the Service. There was no heat, and the girls worked in their overcoats and put government-issued felt squares under their feet for warmth. When Serena returned from Camden, there was a letter from Tom waiting for her. He was renting a car to take his sister back to Bristol. She had developed a drinking problem. She wanted to take her children back with her but the family thought better of it. After the New Year's break, Serena was called to Harry Tapp's office. There were twenty people at the meeting including several girls from her group. She figured it was a Sweet Tooth meeting. An American named Pierre, presumably from the CIA, was introduced.

Pierre spoke of pre-war Manhattan and Japan and China in ruins in the 1950s. He then spoke of his experience in Normandy in 1949. He told of a conference held at the Waldorf Astoria on Park Avenue in New York. In short, the entire event served as a propaganda coup for the Kremlin. It had a global stage in the heart of capitalism to appear as the voice of peace with scores of Americans on its side. But a group of intellectuals planned to disrupt the meeting and ask awkward questions during the sessions that would take place at the conference. This counter-conference group won the day as well as the headlines the next day.

Pierre was part of the group of intellectuals and he made contacts who changed his life. He was encouraged to leave his teaching job and become an officer with the CIA. He described his early career in Europe where he joined campaigns into newly liberated countries. He had twenty-years on the job. He told the group that the Cold War was not over. He drew some laughter when he said that the US is the only country on earth that doesn't understand that some things work better when they're small. His point being that the CIA's program had grown too large and too unwieldy and there were too many programs. The programs were difficult to control and their administrators had lost their original focus. Max was at the meeting but totally ignored Serena. She realized how much she had hurt him.

Finally, after eleven days apart, Serena reunited with Tom in Brighton. Serena felt there was something slightly different about Tom. His novel would be distributed in late March. The publisher was already pitching it. It had made its way into several articles in the paper. He'd been invited to Cambridge to give a reading to new young writers. He had an idea for a new story and wanted to model one of his characters after her sister, Lucy. She agreed with the caveat that he didn't talk about her. She'd write and tell her sister that he was a good friend who was broke and needed a place to stay for a night. They walked on the beach that night and had a romantic tryst. Tom told Serena that he loved her. She confessed her love for him, too. She would have to tell him the truth about herself; but, once she did, she was sure their relationship would be over.



Analysis

Perhaps it was the eleven days apart that convinced Tom that he was desperately in love with Serena. She confessed her love for him as well. Since their relationship has gone from casual and fun to serious, Serena faces a huge problem. If they're love begins to lead to marriage, she will have to reveal that she works for MI5. Since he thinks she works for a literary agency, she will have to explain why she lied about her identity. He will realize that he is being paid by the Secret Service and will feel like a pawn of the government. And she is the instrument who lured him in. His trust in her would surely be shaken. Their love for one another is only in the infant stages. Is it strong enough to endure the revelation that she lied to him and was deceptive about her true identity?

Tom asks what seems to be a strange favor of her. He wants to base a character in a story on her sister even though he's never met her. Serena doesn't seem to think too much of it, although she doesn't want him to talk about her when he meets with her sister. It seems that Serena would want to introduce him to her family.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Max avoid contact with Serena at the meeting?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Serena dread the publishing and distribution of Toms' book?

Discussion Question 3

Why must Serena tell Tom the truth about herself?

Vocabulary

squalid, patrician, luminaries, denunciation

Chapter 19

Summary

A depression had settled over the Service. There was union strife and unrest in the city. The Prime Minister called a special election. The Leader of the Opposition was showing signs of mental illness. Serena wouldn't be going to Brighton that weekend. He was in Cambridge and then would go on to interview her sister. Tom sent Serena a letter. His reading at Cambridge hadn't gone well. He was upstaged by the other reader whose material contained some humorous passages. Tom went last and some people left during his reading. She had to meet with Max because Nutting wanted an update on Sweet Tooth. Max tried to get her to talk about her personal relationship with Tom, but she refused. She boasted about what a great novella he had written. Max said it sounded like something Nutting would not like. He became very insulting about Haley's writing which angered Serena. She stood to leave, but he asked her to stay. Serena didn't turn back and walked on.

The FI magazine was to be launched in April, and Tom had high hopes about how his ape story would be received. Tom was coming to London that Saturday and Serena straightened her room and did her laundry early. She left early to meet him. She had time to kill and walked around the shops. Suddenly, she spotted Tom sitting in a pub talking with someone sitting across from him at a table. She couldn't see who the other person was. She figured it was someone important he had to meet with. Later, she entered the pub and saw Ian standing at the bar watching her. She looked across and saw that Tom was talking to a woman. Her back was to Serena, but she looked vaguely familiar. Tom was holding her hand across the table.

Ian told Serena that the woman was another writer who had just lost her father. Serena didn't believe him. Serena watched Tom all the time thinking about leaving and being unavailable all weekend. The woman stood to leave. Serena recognized her as soon as she turned. She was thinner and her hair was straighter, but it was Shirley. She recognized Serena at the same moment. Tom joined Serena and Ian. Serena kept her cool and didn't let on that she was upset.

After the pub closed, they went to another drinking club. Serena just listened as Tom and Ian talked. She felt like a fool. If they broke up, she wouldn't be burdened with having to tell him the truth. Ian left them alone and it finally occurred to Tom that Serena was upset. She accused him of having an affair with Shirley. He denied it. He had just met her at the reading at Cambridge. He told her that Shirley's father had died recently. He didn't realize that they had worked in the same office somewhere. He apologized and assured her of his love for her.

Analysis

When Serena catches Tom holding hands with another woman in a pub, she is shocked when she sees that it is Shirley. Tom convinces her that it was innocent. He was comforting her because her father just died. Serena's tendency was not to believe it. It is rather incredible that in all of London that he would encounter an old friend of Serena's. Why was he comforting her? If he had just met her at the reading, how were they close enough that she would seek comfort from him?

Serena is in love and wants to believe Tom. He convinces her that he is madly in love with her and that there's no one else. But, Serena is a smart and sensitive person. The image of Tom with the slimmed down Shirley must linger in her mind.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Max still bitter over Serena's relationship with Tom?

Discussion Question 2

Is it plausible that Tom and Shirley happen to know each other?

Discussion Question 3

In what way did Serena think breaking up with Tom would be positive?

Vocabulary

banished, unflappable, forfeited, tableau

Chapter 20

Summary

In February, the Austen Prize judges included an unknown writer among their finalists – T. H. Haley. It didn't get much notice because of political and labor issues. After the dust settled on these more pressing matters, there was more media focus on the Austen Prize. No first-time novelist had ever won the prize before. The shortest novel in the hundred year's history of the award to be honored was twice as long "The Levels". Tom was profiled in the Sunday Times.

Tom inexplicably changed his mind about writing fiction. He was writing a new novel, and it was coming along at quite a good pace. Max came by Serena's desk and placed a small brown envelope on it. He told her in a quiet tone to look at it as soon as possible. The letter was from Max to Serena with copies to Nutting, Tapp, and others. It advised her that one of her writers was receiving a lot of publicity and that she should avoid being photographed with him. She was advised not to attend the Austen Prize ceremony. She had planned to attend the event. She'd have to lie to Tom again and feign illness or a family problem. She had been looking for the right time to tell him the truth. Was this it? But, she'd lose him even if she'd resign her position first.

Serena sent Tom a telegram the night of the reception saying she was sick. She drifted off in bed and was awakened by Tom standing over her holding his check and a copy of his book. He won the award. Serena forgot about being "ill" and jumped up to hug and congratulate him. They went to dinner to celebrate. Tom returned to Brighton and that weekend Serena came down with no less than seven positive reviews in her bag. One critic wrote, "This small book bears the promise and burden of genius." (258) On the ride down, Serena read the book again this time with different eyes. Consensus has a way of being very convincing. However, there was not total agreement and some critics did not agree with the majority. One critic panned "The Levels" remarking that the Austen judges had "opted for an adolescent dystopia, a pimply celebration of disorder and beastliness, thankfully not much longer than a short story." (258)

Tom was now obsessed with his writing. He wouldn't even stop to dine with Serena opting instead to eat his fish and chips at his typewriter. It seemed his hunger for sex paralleled his new obsession for writing fiction. The next morning, Tom was at his typewriter when Serena woke. She went to the market for breakfast and picked up more reviews, mostly positive. Then she spotted a headline that turned her stomach: "Austen Prize – winning Author Funded by MI5". A reliable source had confirmed the story to the paper. She quickly scanned the article. There was no mention of Sweet Tooth or of other writers. The summary of Tom's monthly stipend was accurate. The article suggested that the Austen judges might second-guess themselves about honoring a right-wing writer who was meddling in culture.

Serena read and reread the article as her coffee went cold. She had the intuition that if she didn't tell Tom the truth someone else would. There it was in black and white. Tom was naturally upset when he read the article. He had been duped into working for MI5. Just when Serena was heading for the bedroom to pack her suitcase, it was obvious that Tom thought they had both been duped. Tom was angry; everyone was going to think that he was being directed to write by the Secret Service.

Tom planned to go to his bank first thing Monday and stop the stipend payments. He could live off his prize money for a while. Tom asked Serena to help him draft a statement for release to the press. He dictated the letter while Serena typed it. When he finished he told Serena to add that he had never had contact with any member of MI5. She convinced him that he didn't need to add the last line. He trusted her and told her to leave it off. He phoned his statement into the press while she was in the other room. She heard him add that he'd never had contact with any MI5 member. Serena was have an internal debate about whether to tell him the truth and when.

Later, Tom wanted to go for a walk. He hadn't been out in days. They walked along the channel. Tom whispered to Serena that he thought they were being followed. Later when they left a restaurant, Tom was sure he saw the man again. Serena knew that everything was coming to a head and that she'd soon have to face MI5 and Tom and most of all the truth.

Analysis

Had Tom not won the Austen award and gained the resultant notoriety, perhaps Serena's deception could have remained in the shadows at least a bit longer. But unexpectedly Tom won the award – an honor that had never been awarded to a first time writer before. It was Tom's good fortune but it was indeed Serena's bad luck. Max was coming dangerously close to exposing her. He wrote a memo and copied in the bosses suggesting that she not attend the Austen award ceremony. Was he trying to plant a seed of suspicion in the minds of his superiors? She could have taken the opportunity to tell Tom the truth but she was fearful of losing him.

When Tom won the award, all worries of exposure and confrontation were banished from her thoughts – at least for a short time. When Serena saw the article in the paper connecting Tom to MI5 her world began to crash around her. She was sure that her romance was doomed and she was prepared to leave Tom and return home with a broken heart. The article was sourced by a reliable individual. Was Max or perhaps even Shirley behind it? They both have their issues with Serena. But at that point it didn't matter. What mattered was that the truth was coming out and Serena was going to look bad no matter what; if she tells Tom the truth now it will be obvious that she did so only because she was forced to.

Time is running out on Serena. She knows that she must return to London and face MI5 and that she must resolve the issue with Tom once and for all. And she must do both immediately and face the consequences.



Discussion Question 1

What was unusual about Tom being nominated and winning the Austen Prize?

Discussion Question 2

Who might have been the reliable source that tipped the newspaper off about the MI5 connection?

Discussion Question 3

Why hasn't it dawned on Tom that Serena could be involved especially since she was the person who recruited him?

Vocabulary

vertiginous, internment, dossier, boisterous

Chapter 21

Summary

Back in London, Serena reflected on her dilemma. Had she not joined MI5, she would have never met Tom. If she'd told him she was with MI5 when they met, he would have shown her the door. As she grew to love him, she couldn't bring herself to tell him for fear of losing him. She had been trapped. She wished she had enough nerve and money to just disappear. Awake at 4 a.m., she envisioned newspapers carrying Tom's statement being delivered all over London. Tom's integrity would be destroyed before he really got started. She pictured the powers that be at the Service trying to salvage the rest of the program.

As Serena left the house, she saw a stack of mail that had been set aside for her. In the pile was a postcard from Jeremy with a reference to a "mystery rendezvous the other week and much talk of you!" She was in no mood for games. She bought some newspapers and found Tom's statement in each of them. Each article included his claim that he knew no one from MI5. As soon as she arrived at the office, she was summoned upstairs.

Tapp, Nutting, Max, and other officers were waiting for her. Tapp tossed Tom's book across the conference table to her and asked why MI5 was being splashed all over the paper. Serena responded that the leak didn't come from her. Tapp asked if she was seeing this man. She confirmed that she had been seeing him since October. He didn't know about her true identity and did not suspect her. Tapp told her that she was in serious trouble. Nutting reminded her that they brought him into the program on her recommendation. She emphasized that she had not been involved with him at that time. Max said he thought Haley was never right for the project but took him on anyway. He added that he thought Serena had her sights on him from the beginning. Serena said she made her recommendation based on his writing abilities and that he was a brilliant writer.

They planned to cut Tom out of the program. The entire program was in jeopardy. The book he wrote was utter drivel and sent the exact opposite message that they wanted disseminated. They all hated it. They were evidently sorry they took Serena on. She asked them point blank why they did – was it because of Tony? They agreed that it was based on his recommendation and the fact that they were trying to bring more women into the Service. Tapp mentioned that Tony had been in a safe house for a few days before moving to the Baltics. Tapp handed an envelope that Tony had left her to get.

Surprisingly, Serena did not lose her job but was placed on probation. If she kept herself out of trouble, she might make it through. She was ordered to travel to Brighton and tell Tom he was out of the project. She had to maintain her cover. She could make up the reason – she could tell him that he was cut because of his atrocious book. She would also have to end their relationship. She agreed to everything.

After she left, she opened the envelope from Tony. He wrote that he had to push her away. He couldn't let her see him die. He had to be alone. It was obvious that he loved her and wished her the best. He was ever grateful for the wonderful memories of their time together. She cried for a while and then gathered herself and returned to the office. One of their agents was considered a problem. There was always speculation that when an agent was no longer useful to the Service, they abandoned him and even allowed their enemies to kill him. She planned to travel to Brighton the next day.

Chas Mount, one of Serena's supervisors, wrote a recommendation to his superiors that agents should be treated well when their time was up. He argued that recruiting would be improved if it was thought that former agents wouldn't be abandoned or mistreated by the Service. Serena finished her shift and left. Waiting a short distance down from the office was Shirley who greeted her warmly. She'd seen the articles about Tom but she didn't probe further. Shirley urged Serena to quit and work with her at her bed shop in Ilford. Shirley was having great success with her writing. Someone bought the film rights for her novel. Shirley had lots to tell her but Serena didn't have time.

Serena kept trying to call Tom all evening but there was no answer. The next day she left for Brighton. At the station she went to the newsstand only to see a photograph of herself on the front page with the caption, "Haley's Sexy Spy." (280) She took the paper and read it in the lavatory. There were other photos of her and Tom together, one of them kissing. The story contained every detail of the entire project. There was a quote from the Home Secretary that the matter was of great concern. Tom had been contacted but had no comment. Serena understood now why he wasn't answering his phone.

The headlines meant that Serena's career with the Service was over and that her relationship with Tom was over as well. But, she followed orders and traveled to Brighton to face Tom. Tom was not at his flat. Serena entered with her key. There was an envelope on the kitchen table with her name on it.

Analysis

The pressure to end at least one part of Serena's deception with Tom was building. The big bosses were very angry with her. Surprisingly, she wasn't fired for her behavior, but she was put on probation. Agents who were no longer useful were abandoned. Therefore, they could still use Serena. Her singular purpose was to tell Tom he was through – with the writing project and with her. She was not to reveal her true identity to him. She had to make a clean-cut with Tom. It was obvious that Max was still bitter and did everything he could do to make himself look good and Serena look bad. He is still a number one suspect in the leaking of the story to the media.

Serena was finally able to find resolution about her relationship with Tony. He left her a note explaining that he had to push her away because he was dying. Tapp confirmed that he had been at the safe house just as she suspected. Tony obviously loved Serena and wanted the best for her. Serena would now be able to close that chapter of her life once and for all without doubts and questions.



Discussion Question 1

Why did Serena cry after reading Tony's letter?

Discussion Question 2

Why didn't MI5 fire Serena rather than put her on probation?

Discussion Question 3

What happens to agents who are no longer considered useful?

Vocabulary

divested, fatalistic, atrocious, taciturn

Chapter 22

Summary

Tom wrote that he scrubbed the flat of her presence there. He was erasing her from his life. He hadn't answered her phone calls because he was avoiding the press and he wasn't ready to talk to her. When he drove his sister back to Bristol after Christmas, he was approached by a stranger. The man didn't seem threatening and knew Tom's name. He had something to tell him about Serena. It was Max, and they agreed to have coffee together.

Max told Tom his and Serena's employer's name. He produced some internal memos with Serena's name on them as proof. He told him about the entire Sweet Tooth project. He defended the Secret Service for initiating the project. Max claimed to be telling him everything for his own good. If it ever came out, it could ruin Tom's career. Tom didn't know at the time that he had ulterior motives. Serena was chosen for the job for her beauty and sex appeal. Tom wanted to punch him, but Max assured him that it pained him to have to tell him about Serena's deception.

Max claimed that Serena had been in love with him to the point of obsession. His fiancé left him over Serena's behavior. Alone that night in the hotel, Tom got drunk and thought of their time together. He even thought that he could kill her. He hated her and despised himself for being duped. He wondered how long it would take her to tell him. He wrote a savage letter to her on hotel stationery. He drifted off to sleep. When he woke up he saw the entire matter as a gift. What a delicious scenario for a novel! That was when he began working on his second novel – he was telling their story. He decided not to send the letter he'd written to Serena and to not confront her about Project Sweet Tooth.

But, Tom wasn't telling the story, Serena was. He depended on her doing her job – being with him and reporting back. He had to get into her skin to tell it accurately. He had to reconstruct himself in her eyes. He was afraid he wouldn't be good enough an actor to pull it off. But when they reunited after Christmas, he knew he could do it. He could want her and watch her – the two weren't mutually exclusive. The entire affair aroused him. They would have sealed-off compartments of deceit which they would keep from each other and not let them invade their love. Their relationship inspired his story, "Pawnography" which was about a man who lusted after his wife after she stole his personal treasures.

Tom met with Max a second time and was annoyed that he was still seeing Serena. He gave him Shirley's contact information. When he met with Shirley, she told him that Max revealed everything to Tom to break up their relationship. He visited Jeremy and Lucy and got more information on Serena's earlier years. He even attended one of her father's services. He shook hands with the Bishop after the service. Despite all his research and everything he knew, there was a secret part of Serena that he had to invent for his story.



Tom had been taken with Serena from the first moment he saw her. He was impressed with her Cambridge education, maybe even a bit envious. He had so much within him for the story that it literally poured out of him – 15,000 words a day at times. The story continued when Serena helped him write a statement to the press denying his association with MI5. He thought correctly that the endgame was near. A reporter came to his door the day before the article with their photos was to run. He offered no comment but made it part of his story.

Tom was headed for public humiliation. He was a liar who took money from an inappropriate source and a writer who sold his soul. MI5 was dabbling where they didn't belong. Project Sweet Tooth was doomed. As for Serena, she would be looking for a new job. He was going to ask her to make an important decision, but first he would tell her the scenario of a new story he had imagined. It was about spies and deception during WWII. In his story, invention drove the intelligence. In the case of Sweet Tooth, it was the opposite – intelligence was trying to drive invention and that was why it failed.

Tom thought he could write Serena out of his system. But that wasn't the case. He still loved her – in fact, he loved her more. He was hoping that they were too intertwined to let go of each other. He was sure that he and the world were in agreement – he needed to get a job. He had plans to apply at University College in London. He was sure that teaching wouldn't stop him from writing. He asked Serena to stay with him and help him finish his book and finish the final chapter on Sweet Tooth.

Analysis

Serena was not alone in her deception. In fact, Tom was better at it than she was. Strangely, it was the revelation that she was a spy and that he had been duped that inspired him to write and at the same time arouse him and fall more deeply in love with her. Serena can only be surprised by this news; she can't be angry at him for doing exactly what she was doing.

Max was the antagonist in this story. It was fairly obvious that he was involved in leaking the story but the surprise was the "who" he leaked it to. The story about the man who was aroused by his deceptive wife who stole his personal belongings is a metaphor for Serena's deception in stealing his "talent."

While there is finality in Tom's letter to Serena, there is also a metamorphosis and a new beginning. Tom physically scrubbed the apartment of her. Initially, he wanted to erase her and his memories of her from his life. But that wasn't possible. After he got drunk and wrote an angry letter to her that he wound up not sending, he realized that the scandal was a gift. After writing his first novel, he was out of ideas. Now the story of a spy, deception, love and sex had been laid at his feet. There was still anger and he decided to use Serena just as she had used him. It inspired him to write his second novel and at record speed because there was so much spilling out of him. But that wasn't enough either. He finally had to admit to himself that he still loved Serena.



Asking her to be with him and to help him finish his book was the offer of a life together and a book that would take decades to complete.

Discussion Question 1

How did Tom try to rid his apartment and mind of Serena?

Discussion Question 2

Why did it suddenly occur to Tom that the entire Sweet Tooth mess was actually a gift?

Discussion Question 3

At the story's conclusion, what is Tom offering Serena?

Vocabulary

whimsical, extraterrestrial, oblivion, calamitous

Characters

Serena Frome

Serena Frome is the young protagonist of “Sweet Tooth” by Ian McEwan. The story is told in flashback style with Serena telling the story of her brief association with MI5 when she was young forty years after the fact. Serena lived with her mother and father and younger sister. Her father was an Anglican Bishop and her mother was the dutiful Bishop’s wife. Serena loved literature and reading – she typically read three to four books a week. But she had a natural aptitude for math and her mother encouraged her to pursue a degree in engineering or mathematics. She has a boyfriend in college but it was a dysfunctional relationship that puzzled Serena a beautiful girl with long blond hair and big blue eyes. Her boyfriend, Jeremy, didn’t seem attracted to her.

When Jeremy leaves for Edinburgh to pursue an advanced degree, Serena becomes involved with an older professor. A short time after Jeremy leaves, he writes to tell her that he fell in love with a male musician which explained their dysfunction. The affair with the professor ends with the summer when he angrily pushes her away.

Distraught over her failed love affairs, she turns to her career. She is offered a position with the famous British secret service known as MI5. She is not thrilled with the position when she learns that her duties will be more like those of a secretary than those of a spy. But she eventually is given a covert assignment. She lures a young writer, Tom Haley, into earning a stipend by contributing to a magazine that is actually funded by MI5. Of course, the writer doesn’t know MI5’s involvement and doesn’t know that Serena is a spy.

Serena and Tom fall in love. When their relationship turns serious, Serena is faced with the lies and deception on which their relationship was first established. Serena fears she will lose her job but worse that she will lose Tom. She copes as best she can. In the end, she learns that spies aren’t the only ones who are adept at deception.

Tom Haley

Tom Haley is a young academic and professor who writes as an avocation. But he’s quite good and his work has drawn attention. He is sent a letter from Serena who represents herself as a literary agent asking if he’d be interested in contributing to a monthly publication that focuses on current events. He returns the letter saying that he would like to know more about it. When Serena comes to pitch the program to him, he is as taken with her as much as he is with the stipend that he will receive for his contributions.

Tom ultimately accepts the position and travels to London to meet with Serena. There is an instant attraction between them and they soon become romantically involved. He, of course, has no idea that MI5 is behind the program and pays him the stipend and has



not a clue that Serena is an intelligence officer. Around Christmas time, he writes a novella that a publisher latches onto. Serena goes home for Christmas and they are separated for almost two weeks. During that time, Max contacts him and tells him the truth – that Serena has deceived him and that he is involved in MI5 operation. His winning an important literary award ultimately exposes the entire operation.

At first he is angry but the anger dissipates when he realizes that the entire matter is a gift – a story of spies, lies, sex and deception has been laid at his feet. In the end, he cannot give up Serena. He has truly fallen in love with her. He asks her to make a decision: stay with him and finish their story and write the final chapter of “Operation Sweet Tooth”.

The Bishop

Serena’s father was an Anglican Bishop in Camden. He was a good father and cared for his daughters but was emotionally remote from them.

Jeremy Mott

Jeremy Mott was Serena’s boyfriend in her last year of college. Their relationship was dysfunctional. She didn’t know at the time but later learned that he was gay when he wrote and said he fell in love with a male musician named Manfred.

Tony Canning

Tony Canning was a history professor who was in his middle fifties when he had an affair with twenty-one year-old Serena. Their relationship lasted through the summer until he angrily ended it. Later she found out that he had been dying at the time and didn’t want her to see him in decline.

Maximilian Greateorex

Max was a young intelligence officer at MI5. He broke his engagement because he couldn’t stop thinking of Serena. She rejected him and he became very bitter and vengeful.

Shirley Shilling

Shirley was a junior officer at MI5. She was fired when she failed to “rat” on Serena. Shirley told Tom the truth about Max and Serena.

Lucy

Lucy was Serena's younger sister. She was more rebellious than Serena. She had an abortion which affected her much worse than she thought it would.

Harry Tapp

Harry Tapp was a senior officer with MI5. He hired Serena and then created an identity for her for Operation Sweet Tooth.

Peter Nutting

Peter Nutting spearheaded the Sweet Tooth operation. He was quite angry with Serena when she fouled up the program by getting romantically involved with one of the soft targets.



Symbols and Symbolism

Anglican Church

Serena's father was an Anglican Bishop. Her father was a remote figure who was emotionally unavailable to Serena. The image of the pious minister who stands alone at the altar is symbolic of the unattainable figure that her father was to her.

Reading/Literature

Real life was difficult for Serena. She lost herself in books and even said that she searched for herself in the characters in books. Her reading represented her need to find herself.

Math

Mathematics represented Serena's passive rejection of the superiority of men. She was talented in math at a time when it was only men who could do well in the discipline. A beautiful blonde girl being a math whiz had to be confounding to others, especially men.

Shirley

Serena's friend, Shirley, was everything that Serena was not. She was bold and savvy and opinionated and not afraid to speak her mind and willing to face the consequences of her actions. Serena aspired to be a strong woman as represented by Shirley.

MI5

MI5 was the epitome of man's power to impact, influence, watch, follow apprehend and punish. Serena entered that world for a brief time. It wasn't for her and she lasted just a short time. As Shirley told her those men who run MI5 look like stuffed shirts but are really mean!

Sweet Tooth

Sweet Tooth is the name of the book and the name of the MI5 project that was Serena's assignment. Sweet Tooth is also a metaphor for craving the sweet life or happiness which is what Serena was seeking throughout the story.



Scrap of Paper

When Serena finds a tiny scrap of paper, she is astounded to see that it contains a cryptic message and the initials of her former lover who died. The scrap of paper is symbolic of Serena's struggle to hold onto the man she loved who was gone forever.

Mountain Climbing Equipment

In one of Tom's story, a philandering wife takes her husband's favorite personal items – including his beloved mounting climbing equipment – and sells it at a pawn shop. It was a trope that represented to Tom how Serena stole his most precious possessions from him, his writing talent and professional integrity.

Mannequin

In one of Tom's story, a reclusive lonely man finds love with a mannequin. He adores her "stillness". The story represents Tom's fantasy of having a woman who would love him without condition and not interfere in his life.

Austen Award

Tom won the Austen Award for fiction for his novella. While it catapulted him to fame overnight, ironically it was his new found celebrity that ruined his career because it exposed his connection with MI5.

Settings

Cambridge

Serena went to Cambridge University where she majored in mathematics. She was the only girl in her math class.

Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk.

Tony Canning had a cottage in Bury St. Edmunds. Serena spent most of the summer of their affair there while Mrs. Canning was away.

MI5 Offices, London

Many of the scenes take place in the MI5 offices where Serena works.

Brighton, England.

Tom Haley, a writer and Serena's love interest, lived in a small flat in Brighton. Serena spent most weekends there with him.

St. Augustine's Road

As a working girl, Serena lived in an old house on St. Augustine's Road with three other housemates who were all studying to be solicitors.

Themes and Motifs

Abandonment

As beautiful and alluring as Serena was always told that she was, she suffered from abandonment issues and a feeling of worthlessness. While ostensibly her home life was nothing short of idyllic, her parents were not there for her emotionally. They certainly loved their two daughters but they didn't give them what they needed. Serena's mother was controlling and obsessed with organization and propriety. Her father, a respected Anglican Bishop, was remote and unapproachable.

The obvious pain she felt from her father's emotional distance is best illustrated when she returns home for Christmas. He surprises her when for once he appears genuinely happy to see her and embraces her. Instead of returning the hug in kind, Serena cries like a child and clings to him. She doesn't want to let go – she is making up for so many times when she didn't get that warmth and that hug. She cried like a baby because the child in her was still hurting. The Bishop was not equipped to handle his daughter's emotions. When her sobbing didn't stop, he quickly suggested he call his wife to tend to her. Denying emotion and love and attention to a child is a form of abandonment. A child needs affection and when it's not forthcoming; the child is emotionally abandoned and feels lost and unloved.

The abandonment that Serena felt undoubtedly factored into her choice of men several of whom were not good choices. She fell for a man who was old enough to be her father. Her feelings for this man were probably conflicted because he represented both a lover and the father figure that she felt had been lacking in her childhood. When Tony pushed her away, she was abandoned by an older man (a father) for the second time. This break-up confirmed what she already knew. She was not worthy of love and deserved to be abandoned and alone. Tony's harsh break-up lingered in her thoughts and caused her anguish long after it was over and after she had fallen in love with another man. Coping with abandonment issues is often a life-long battle.

Sexism

Like many girls who grew up with Serena did, she was taught to be proper and polite to everyone and to defer to men. A beautiful girl like Serena was adored by men but was also exploited by them. Serena grew up learning that men were superior to women or at least they were treated deferentially. Serena saw her own mother behaving subserviently to her father. Serena's father was a Anglican Bishop, a field where women were not welcomed.

Serena had a natural aptitude for math. But she figured that she, like most girls, would major in English and literature. But somewhere within her mother a hidden strain of



feminism ran deep. She insisted that Serena not abandon her god-given abilities and pursue a degree in engineering or in mathematics.

Serena was accepted into the Cambridge math program and found herself in all male classes. The young men in her classes gloated when she struggled with her assignments. One often lives up to the lowest of expectations. Part of her struggle was probably tied to the overriding attitude in her class that she would be a failure. She was a pretty girl with long blond hair and big blue eyes. She shouldn't be a mathematics major!

An older male professor took advantage of her lack of sophistication and vulnerability and lured her into an affair with him. But their relationship was secret. When two men came to the cottage where they were staying, he had her take a long walk in the woods. She accepted a position with MI5, another nearly all-male establishment. She was told immediately that she should not expect to get promoted. Promotions were usually reserved for the young male junior officers. She was selected for one of her assignments because of her beauty and sexual appeal.

Serena had everything going for her in terms of intelligence, talent, and ability. However, she was held back and exploited in ways that boys her age were not.

Deception

The story of "Sweet Tooth" by Ian McEwan is wrought with deception from beginning to end and there are many levels and categories of deception contained in the tale. Some acts of deception are just annoying while others are hurtful and cause long-term damage. Jeremy Mott pretends to be Serena's boyfriend in college but he is gay but doesn't come out of the closet until he leaves town telling her in a letter that he fell in love with a male musician. The next man Serena becomes involved with is Tony Canning who is married and much older than the twenty-one year-old.

The pure embodiment of deception is the shadowy organization that looms throughout the story. MI5 is a spy organization whose very goal is to be deceptive. Even within the organization, it is difficult for the super spies to figure out who they can trust. The simple answer is that they probably really can't trust anyone. There is talk of moles and dangerous double-agents and agents who no longer are of any use to the organization. There are rumors that agents who have fallen into disfavor are often abandoned and left to their own defenses against enemies of the state.

The protagonist engages in an act of deception that ultimately ends her career and her relationship with the man she loves – or at least it seems so. In the end, it is her lover who out-deceives her. Learning of Serena's lies and deception, Tom outdoes her at every turn. For a writer, he feels the deception and lies and the spies are all fodder for great storytelling. And the stories he writes depict man at his lowest – deceitful and dishonest and without honor.

Styles

Point of View

“Sweet Tooth” by Ian McEwan is told in the first person from the perspective of the protagonist, Serena Frome (rhymes with plume). The book starts out in 2012 when the now elderly Serena reflects back to her youth when she was hired by the British Secret Service also known as MI5. Serena is a twenty-two year-old recent graduate from Cambridge where she majored in mathematics, an unusual choice for girls in the early 1970s. She had become involved with an older man who recommended her for the service.

The reader is privy to the thoughts and motivations of the young girl who unwittingly finds herself in a world of spies and, at that time, mainly male spies. Her reactions to the veteran security officers she encounters are through the young and unsophisticated eyes of a young girl who was more interested in finding a boyfriend than uncovering an espionage plot.

Serena gets herself in a twisted plot which involves duping a young writer into a MI5 action that he hasn't a clue about. When she falls in love with the writer, the plot definitely thickens. The reader is able to follow and understand the ebb and flow of her emotions and the great pressures that burden this young girl who really hadn't planned to be a spy.

The clever use of the young writer's works in the story serves to provide another dimension of perspective that magically becomes entwined in the plot adding interest and engaging the reader on another level.

Language and Meaning

“Sweet Tooth” by Ian McEwan is the story of a young English girl who unwittingly lands in MI5, the nation's super secret spy service. The names of towns and streets quite naturally have an English flair. Serena becomes involved with an older professor who lives in Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk. When he retires, he moves to an island in the Baltics. Serena lives in a house on St. Augustine Street. Her lover, Tom, lives in a flat in a Brighton. Serena becomes fast friends with another MI5 recruit and they spend many nights drinking and partying in the pubs of London.

The English speak their “own form” of English which is a bit different than American English. The currency is in pounds and not dollars. Their mass transit system is called “the tube”. Their bedrooms are referred to as “bedsits”. When making a reference to the restroom or bathroom, the term “lavatory” is used. The main English news organization is called the BBC. The British spy organization is called MI5 which stands for Military Intelligence, Section 5. There is also MI6 which is another division of the British intelligence operation that is also referred to.

Serena is a voracious reader and loves literature. Tom Haley, the young man she falls in love with, is a writer. There are many references to works of literature in the story. Tom wins an award, the Austen Award, for outstanding literature. It is named for English novelist Jane Austen. Once engaged in several chapters of this book, it is obvious from the language and the ambiance that is portrayed in “Sweet Tooth” is decidedly British.

Several works of the character Tom are described in the book. There is a distinct and heavy use of metaphor and irony in these stories. These short stories by Tom often mimic or parallel what is happening in Serena’s story. The main story has quite a surprise ending that is rife with irony.

Structure

“Sweet Tooth” by Ian McEwan is separated into twenty-two medium-sized chapters. The story is structured as a flashback and begins in current day with an elderly Serena Frome looking back on her brief tenure with Britain’s famed MI5 spy agency. She was only twenty-two at the time she accepted a position with the Service.

The book has an interesting and complex structure in that the works of one of the characters, Tom Haley who is a writer, are interwoven into the story. The tales of fiction that he writes often mimic or parallel the real life story that is being told by Serena. For example, when a philandering wife steals and sells her husband’s prized possessions, Tom is really expressing his anger over Serena “stealing” his writing and his professional integrity. Another story in which twin brothers trade places parallels the deception that is rife throughout the story of “Sweet Tooth”.

Although the entire story up through the penultimate chapter is narrated by Serena – it is her story. However the entire last chapter is a letter from Tom to Serena which cleverly resolves all of Serena’s questions and doubts as well as those of the reader. The letter serves to get into the mind of Tom and learn his feelings and motivations once he caught on to the web of deception that Serena had lured him into.

Quotes

I was on a secret mission for the British Security Service. . . within eighteen months of joining I was sacked, having disgraced myself and ruined my lover.

-- Serena (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 1)

Importance: This sets the premise for the story.

To me, the old were a separate species, like sparrows or foxes.

-- Serena (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 18)

Importance: Serena was involved with an older man and recognized the differences between old bodies and young bodies.

Whenever I took extra care in turning some desk officer's scrawl into an error-free typed memo in triplicate, it was because it was my duty to honor the memory of the man I had loved.

-- Serena (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 49)

Importance: After hearing news of Tony's death, she was resolved to do the best job she could to honor his memory.

Just do as I say. We're being watched. Put on a smile. We're having a happy conversation. Okay?

-- Shirley (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 106)

Importance: Serena and Shirley were being watched after Shirley's dismissal from the Service.

Max. You're the only one I could say this to. I think I'm being followed.' 'Really? Quite an achievement at your level.

-- Serena & Max (Chapter 10 paragraph Page 125)

Importance: This back and forth shows the difference of interpretation about being under surveillance by the Service.

Always the same four steps. One, I want to write a novel. Two, I'm broke. Three, I've got to get a job. Four, the job will kill the writing.

-- Tom (Chapter 11 paragraph Page 138)

Importance: Tom is telling Serena the conundrum that a new writer faces. He is considering her offer to take a stipend and write.

These terrifying new weapons can only be restrained by a balance of power, by mutual fear, mutual respect.

-- Serena (Chapter 13 paragraph Page 160)



Importance: When Max informs Serena that Tony may have been spying for the Soviets with a particular focus on the nuclear bomb, she recalled his words.

Tony may have betrayed his country, but he'd given me my start in life.
-- Serena (Chapter 15 paragraph Page 179)

Importance: This is an example of youthful narcissism and a reason that Serena was too immature to be an intelligence officer.

The United States was the only country on the planet that didn't understand that some things work better when they're small.
-- Pierre (Chapter 18 paragraph Page 230)

Importance: Pierre was making the point that CIA programs had grown too large and too many making them difficult to control.

I knew that before this love began to take its course, I would have to tell him about myself. And then the love would end. So I couldn't tell him. But I had to.
-- Serena (Chapter 18 paragraph Page 236)

Importance: Serena's relationship with Tom has turned serious. Her words show the dilemma that she has gotten herself into.

I continued to lie there on the unmade bed, devoid of motive, oppressed by the certainty that the week ahead would be disastrous.
-- Serena (Chapter 20 paragraph Page 263)

Importance: The connection between Tom and MI5 has been exposed in the paper by an anonymous source. Serena knew that her deception had run its course.

We reached the glorious summit at least and traded our 'I love you's' even as we reserved our secrets. I saw how we could do it, live with these sealed compartments side by side, never letting the dank stench of one invade the sweetness of the other.
-- Tom (Chapter 22 paragraph Page 292)

Importance: Tom is revealing to Serena that he has known her true identity for quite a while. He knew she was deceiving him, but she didn't know that he was deceiving her.