

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Atonement*]

Beating Swords Into Plotlines

By Steve Sailer

MANY SUCCESSFUL date movies, such as “Casablanca” and “Gone with the Wind,” combined a love story for the ladies and a war for the gentlemen. With his 2001 bestseller *Atonement*, the immensely clever Ian McEwan pulled off the novelistic equivalent, pasting together a scandalous country-house romance and the fall of France. The film version is a likely nominee for the Best Picture Oscar because it’s yet another purported attack on the English class system that actually revels in gorgeous Period Porn.

McEwan constructed his book not only for both sexes, but also for the middle and upper brows. For the book-buying masses, *Atonement* delivers a premodern melodramatic plot, and for the critics, a postmodern self-conscious commentary on the novelist’s privileges and responsibilities.

One dark night in 1935, Briony, a writing-obsessed 13-year-old rich girl, briefly glimpses a tuxedoed man ravishing her sultry 15-year-old cousin Lola. A budding novelist eager to connect the dots, Briony leaps to the conclusion that the statutory rapist is the housekeeper’s son, Robbie, the ardent new lover of her older sister Cecilia. (Robbie is played by James McAvoy, the callow doctor in

“The Last King of Scotland,” and Cecilia by the bony beauty Keira Knightley of “The Pirates of the Caribbean.”) The more often Briony tells her story to the police, the more she almost believes it.

Five years later, the wronged Robbie is out of prison and in the defeated British Expeditionary Force, trudging toward the beach at Dunkirk, hoping to return finally to the waiting Cecilia. Meanwhile, the 18-year-old Briony pens a novella about the 1935 incident in the style of Virginia Woolf, full of fine writing about “light and stone and water” but no action and sends it to the literary magazine *Horizon*. Its real-life editor, Cyril Connolly, whom Evelyn Waugh often skewered in his books, replies with a kind rejection note, advising that even her “most sophisticated readers ... retain a childlike desire to be told a story, to be held in suspense, to know what happens.” McEwan himself told an interviewer that *Atonement* is an attack on “modernism and its dereliction of duty in relation to what I have Cyril Connolly call ‘the backbone of the plot.’”

Briony struggles with this manuscript (and her guilt) for the rest of her life, completing it only in 1999. In the coda, a TV interview with the 77-year-old Briony (now played, majestically as always, by Vanessa Redgrave), we learn that the story we’ve just watched is her 21st but most autobiographical book. The elder Briony explains that the happy ending, however, in which her younger self confesses her perjury to the reunited lovers and to the world, is her invention, a respite for her readers from the truth that Robbie died at Dunkirk and Cecilia was soon killed in the Blitz. At the end, Briony wonders, “How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her

absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?”

“Atonement” the movie is such a faithful adaptation of the book that it never seems to occur to screenwriter Christopher Hampton and director Joe Wright that a film about a novelist playing God is an oxymoron. Authors can act like deities in their pages, but once they sell the film rights, they’re impotent demiurges.

These filmmakers, though, are too in awe of McEwan’s metafiction to notice that the storyline glass is both half-full and half-empty. It’s swell that a vaunted master of contempo lit-fic has gone slumming enough to offer us proles a dramatic plot; but projected 50-feet high on the screen, McEwan’s concoction doesn’t make all that much sense.

Briony’s lie is so shaky that we’re expecting to see next a lurid courtroom donnybrook, complete with, say, a jail-house wedding and witnesses breaking down in tears on the stand *à la* “Perry Mason.” McEwan, however, having ineptly plotted himself into a corner, simply skips ahead a half decade and ushers in World War II to distract us. (And all that McEwan has to say then is that war is a Dantean inferno, something that William Tecumseh Sherman said earlier and better.)

And if “Atonement” is about the power of fiction to harm and heal, what’s the point of having the lovers die in the war? Correct me if I’m wrong, but my impression has always been that WWII wasn’t actually the fault of a 13-year-old girl with an overactive imagination. It was Hitler’s fault. ■

Rated R for disturbing war images, language, and some sexuality.

BOOKS

[Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: How the Assassination of John F. Kennedy Shattered American Liberalism, James Piereson, Encounter Books, 176 pages]

What Jackie Did Next

By John O'Sullivan

ONE OF THE FOUNDING MYTHS of the American conservative movement is the Goldwater debacle. It tells of how a handful of embattled partisans recognized Senator Goldwater as the natural leader of their fledging movement; how they nominated him as presidential candidate of the GOP entirely against the will of the party establishment (and largely against the senator's wishes); how Goldwater, after a flawless performance in the primaries, squandered his chances with a campaign of gaffes and blunders; and how, almost miraculously, conservatism rose from the near-death of the anti-Goldwater landslide to defeat liberalism and gain power 16 years later in its more glamorous Reaganite form.

In short, the 1964 election was a pyrrhic defeat for conservatism—a necessary testing that introduced conservatives to each other and erected the first scaffolding of their future organizations.

As myths go, there is a good deal of truth in this account. Both friendly and hostile critics, however, have always pointed to the influence of external events in both the Goldwater debacle and the later recovery of the Right. Most significantly, President Kennedy was assassinated. The original thinking behind the Goldwater candidacy was that he would play the conservative insurgent from the West against a complacent governing liberalism symbolized

by an eastern establishment near-Brahmin from Massachusetts. Goldwater hoped that the campaign would be a series of civilized debates between their two philosophies. The two men liked each other. Kennedy might well have reckoned he could take the moderate risk of elevating his rival in order to ventilate his more eccentric views. If Lee Harvey Oswald had not intervened, the 1964 election might well have been just such a knightly tournament.

Kennedy's assassination and the succession of Lyndon Johnson to the presidency changed all that. Johnson exploited the assassination not only to push through a series of liberal reforms but also to stigmatize—unfairly, brutally, and effectively—Goldwater and the Right as carriers of the “extremism” that had killed Kennedy. Goldwater was destroyed politically by the same bullet that killed Kennedy physically.

By the usual rules of politics, Republican conservatives—however brilliantly they preached and organized—should have been doomed to opposition for a generation or two. Instead, they made impressive gains in the 1966 midterm elections, won the presidency in 1968 and, delayed only briefly by Watergate, placed Reagan in the White House a decade later. Why had the seemingly inevitable gone into reverse?

What happened, according to James Piereson in his closely reasoned, original, and stimulating new book, *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: How the Assassination of John F. Kennedy Shattered American Liberalism*, is that American liberals committed political suicide. They picked up Oswald's gun and turned it upon themselves. And in the mid-1960s, they made an unmissable target.

In the age of Reid and Pelosi, it's hard to remember that the liberalism of those days was the reigning public philosophy of American life. It dominated the universities, the media, the great foundations, business corporations, labor unions, and (until Goldwater) both political parties. This governing philosophy was very different from today's queru-

lous utopianism. Though it had already drunk deep of statism, it was also meliorist, pragmatic, patriotic, and problem-solving. It embodied the grand compromises of American politics. It believed in containing the Soviet Union but not in rolling it back. It advocated a moderate welfare state resting on a relatively free economy (relative, that is, to Western Europe). It supported the advance of civil rights through federal intervention, but was nervously ambivalent about the “freedom riders.” And because it dominated both parties—it was Eisenhower who had sent troops into Little Rock to enforce desegregation—liberalism seemed to be the immovable center of American politics.

Against this bland Leviathan, two small forces contended in the early days of the Kennedy presidency: the new conservatives clustering around William F. Buckley and *National Review*, founded in 1955, and the new radicalism of Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, and the “Beat” writers. Buckley's conservatives criticized liberalism in practical terms: its suffocating refusal to think clearly about moral and political choices undermined religion, free enterprise, patriotism, and any serious anti-communist foreign policy. The new radicals attacked it more daringly as a form of cultural conservatism. They saw liberalism as a surrender to the bourgeois blandness of the 1950s whereas what was needed was a revolution in consciousness, the family, sex, and education that would transform capitalism far more fundamentally than another welfare program.

In more immediate political terms, the great radical cause was the civil rights “revolution” of the freedom riders, just as the great conservative cause was the liberation of the nations held captive by Soviet communism.

In the early '60s, however, these movements scarcely mattered. Both new conservatives and new radicals were such fringe phenomena that complacent liberals began talking of the necessity of encouraging conservatism as a necessary (though naturally subordinate)