

"enduring love" by ian mcewen essay sample

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Many people believe that when reading a book written in first person narrative, it is an unreliable source. This is because it is a biased account, as the narrator will only tell his or her own side of the story. This is partly true of the novel “ Enduring Love” by Ian McEwen. The narrator is Joe. Although he seems to be very controlled and sensible, it is clear from reading the first five chapters of the book, that he is not quite as controlled as first perceived. He has a very scientific brain and thinks about everything rationally but as the chapters progress, he begins to lose the clarity with which he first began. This can give the reader a feeling of uncertainty of the reliability of his narrative. Chapter one begins with such detail that it is impossible to believe that what was being described actually took place in the past. Joe describes everything with pinpoint precision and it is hard to imagine how he managed to remember everything with such accuracy. To reinforce the events he shifts the perspective of the narrator to that of a buzzard. McEwen wants the reader to see things without Joe’s biased opinion of the events.

This section is more reliable because, although it is Joe’s opinion of how the buzzard would see the event, it is detached and therefore would be believable. It is very difficult to believe all that Joe is saying, as the reader recognises that Joe already knows the ending. He is therefore able to use his knowledge of the ending within the rest of the account in order to add tension where he requires. By knowing the ending, he can embellish parts of the story where he feels it appropriate and also where he considers it would make the account more interesting for the reader. Knowing this, it is hard for

the reader to completely believe all that has been written. Joe makes many references to his link with Jed Parry before the reader fully understands the extent of the relationship. Joe describes them as “rushing towards each other like lovers,” when describing them and three other men, all running towards a hot air balloon in the middle of the field. When first reading this, one could see it merely as an elaborate sentence, which aimed to add further explanation about the way in which the men were running.

However, having read further into the book and then reflecting on that specific section, it becomes clear that Joe’s intention was for that particular sentence to be pre-empting in terms of the nature of Jed and Joe’s future relationship. Joe’s attempts to mislead the reader could make reading the rest of the novel problematic in terms of resisting the temptation of pre-empting the action through analysing the cryptic underlying messages in the narration. It is only on re-reading the novel that one realises the relevance of these pre-emptive passages. Joe uses two methods of narration in the novel. He either becomes an all-seeing, all-knowing narrator, or a present-time narrator. This adds uncertainty about the reliability of the narrator, as it is clear that in some parts of the novel, he wants to make the reader anticipate the events and have a false sense of security about the novel’s outcome; the reader is led to believe that they know what is going to happen. If one takes interest in reading the reviews on the first pages of the novel, one could get an impression of what the book is about. “...a stalker and his unfortunate victim.” This tells the reader the basic outline of the novel and therefore, the reader will be looking for the character who will play the two main parts, stalker, and victim.

Throughout the first few chapters, all the main events point to Joe being the stalker and Jed the victim. One could imagine that this was in fact Joe's intention. He wanted the reader to see it this way, which would explain some of his obscure references to his and Jed's relationship. When describing Jed's appearance, Joe says, "... tall and lean...looked fit...box-fresh trainers...his knuckles brushing against his leather belt were big and tight-knobbed...look of a pale Indian brave...his appearance was striking..." This description is very detailed. It would seem to the reader that Joe is in fact checking Jed out. From this, the reader could imagine that Joe fancies Jed, which adds to the idea that Joe is the stalker. Up to this point, Jed is presented as a normal person and one could presume that Joe has purposely described him in this way to manipulate the readers' first impressions of Jed as one of the main characters. Once the reader discovers that this is not in fact the case, that Jed is the stalker, he/she could begin to analyse that particular description. Why did Joe describe him like this? Does Joe have sexual feelings towards Jed? Once the reader has read further still and finished the book, he/she would begin to question further Joe's reasons. Why, if Joe dislikes Jed as he says, would he describe him like this?

The reader can determine that the reason for the description is to mislead the reader in terms of their initial assessments of Jed and Joe. This would therefore add tension and interest when the reader discovers the truth about the characters. It seems as if Joe wants to be perceived as an unreliable narrator. He seems to use it to his advantage. He toys with the reader, changing their opinions and feelings towards certain characters when he feels like it. Although one becomes gripped very quickly to the book, it is

almost impossible to take the information Joe narrates as the absolute truth. It is clear that Joe does not want everything to become clear immediately, but to gradually unveil itself. He makes himself someone that one does not instantly like and therefore it is not always easy to see him as the victim although one is certain that he is. One begins to come up with other suggestions; Joe is obsessed with Jed? One could also see this as something that Joe has imagined.

This is Clarissa's opinion through most of the novel, and could be true. The reader does not trust Joe's account of the events completely anyway, and it would be quite easy for he/she to think that Joe is in fact not talking about events that actually took place in real life, but ones that took place in his mind. This yet again puts an edge in the readers mind about the reliability of the narration. In terms of the novel "Enduring Love," my opinion is that within the first five chapters of the novel, the narrator is unreliable. I personally think that when one has finished the novel, it is possible to believe Joe and I think that it is Joe's intention to make the reader feel that he is unreliable. This gives Joe room to give information if and when he chooses instead of giving it at the perhaps, appropriate moments. It also means that Joe can skip from place to place within the story, not going in chronological order as expected. For these reasons, I feel that it is possible for narrators to be perceived as unreliable, but in some instances, that is in fact their intent.