

‘saint maybe’ and
‘atonement’:
childhood,
compensation, and
characters’ fates



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What does atonement mean to you? Each individual person will have to make up for something they have done at some point in their lifetime. Are you seeking atonement to be free from the burden of your sin in your everyday life? Maybe, you are seeking atonement to ensure your freedom in the afterlife. In either case, atonement is a personal journey to ultimately right a wrong. Just as every sin is different, so is everyone's way of making up for them. Even though humans are very different in this sense, the reasons for what makes someone sin may not be so different from the next person. However, where people start the same, does not always mean they will end in the same place. One might be feeling more at peace than the other, even though their stories may have seen similar. This is demonstrated in the novels *Atonement* and *Saint Maybe*. Anne Tyler's Ian Bedloe and Ian McEwan's Briony Tallis directly feel the weight of their sins on their shoulders as each character sets out to atone for what they have done. In the novels *Atonement* by Ian McEwan and *Saint Maybe* by Anne Tyler, the main characters stories are connected through their similar mentalities, limited understanding of the adult world, and their atonement methods. However, differences prevail in each novel such as the precise methods of atonement and the drastically different endings for both main characters.

Both *Atonement* and *Saint Maybe* featured two young children who obviously were confused on the concepts of the adult world around them. Briony Tallis and Ian Bedloe were very similar in the fact that they were the only ones of their kind. They each had older siblings, however, both of the age differences were too vast, Ian and Briony could not relate to or understand their sibling. These misunderstandings would ultimately lead to their sins which they

would spend the rest of their lives atoning for. Saint Maybe's main character, Ian Bedloe, was the perfect all American teenager: "...Ian was seventeen and...large-boned, handsome and easy-going, quick to make friends, fond of a good time..."(Tyler 13), a popular senior in high school, on track to go to college, with a pretty blonde girlfriend, and very tight-knit family. His older brother Danny marries Lucy, mother of two young children from a previous marriage, Thomas and Agatha, very early on in the novel. Soon, Danny and Lucy have a child named Daphne. Ian often babysits for his brother and sister-in-law, picking up on some small mannerisms of Lucy's such as staying out much later than expected, coming home with new and expensive items, and never being able to be reached by phone when out. All of these things lead to Ian believing that Lucy had been cheating on his brother. Angry at his brother for being so painfully stupid that he could not recognize this, Ian decides it is his place to tell his brother that he knows for a fact that Lucy is cheating on him. However, Ian's mentality and limited understanding of the adult world leads him to believe this under false pretenses and tell his brother what he believes in the worst way possible: " Ian impulsively releases " a handful of tossed-off words" (96), which cause his older brother Danny to commit suicide..." (Durham). Ian immediately blames himself for his brother's suicide. Things get worse when Lucy purposely overdoses on sleeping pills, leaving the three children as orphans and in the Bedloe's care, with Ian wondering where to go from here and how he could possibly atone for the mess he has created.

Thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis came from a very rich family, with a somewhat absent mother and father, an older sister, and older brother. Her

older sister, Cecelia, has fallen in love with the family maid's son, Robbie Turner. After Briony reads an X-rated letter meant for Cecelia from Robbie, she believes her sister is in immediate danger and that Robbie is some sort of psycho and talks to her cousin Lola about how she feels: "' How appalling for you. The man's a maniac.' A maniac. The word had refinement and the weight of medical diagnosis. All these years she had known him and that was what he had been." (McEwan 34). After walking in on a very intimate moment of Robbie and Cecelia's, Briony is even more convinced that Cecelia is not consenting to any of this. Briony is given the perfect opportunity to ruin Robbie's life and she takes it. After dinner, during a late night search party for the Tallis's twin cousins, Briony finds her cousin Lola laying on the ground, alone and afraid. She has just been raped. Lola, unsure of who her rapist is, allows Briony to convince her that it was Robbie. The girls immediately take the matter to the police with no solid evidence, except for Briony claiming she saw Robbie in the woods that night, fleeing the scene of the crime. Robbie ends up being sent to jail and being torn apart from his love, Cecelia. Briony is held accountable for this throughout the whole novel by both her sister and Robbie. As she grows older, she starts to realize that she must atone for the terrible thing she has done. Briony's childish mindset and limited understandings of the adult world are a direct cause of the lies told which ruined an innocent man's life. Literary critics agree as it is obvious that if she had been older, she would have understood more complex topics such as human sexual desire and how actions affect not just one's self but also everyone around them. According to Novels for Students Briony's age, mindset, and limited understanding of the adult world directly correlate with her actions which sent Robbie Turner to jail:

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Briony is thirteen when the story opens. She is on the verge of adulthood—curious about the ways of adults but having no experience with which to compare them. In the first part of the story, it is obvious that Briony overreacts, misinterprets, and twists events to make them match her beliefs. For example, her judgment of Robbie as being a monster because of his lust for Cecilia is typical of a child who does not understand human sexual desires. Briony's misguided observations and interpretations go awry. They become seriously consequential, deeply affecting the lives of the people around her. (Constantakis) Briony's age of thirteen is very important. She is still young enough to have a very creative imagination and to not fully understand the adults in her life. Had she been three or four years older, she may have understood her sister better. However, her childishness is the reason she had to spend the rest of her life atoning for Robbie's jail sentence. Briony also had trouble with understanding the lust between her sister and Robbie. She did not think of her sister in that way, she believed Robbie was attacking her, it did not even cross Briony's mind that her sister may be initiating the sexual encounters. So, she made the rash decision to blame Robbie for Lola's rape, all because of the way she viewed the adult world.

The next step in each character's life differs. Although they were very similar in their mentalities and causes for sin, the way in which they both begin their atonement process is very different. Although very different, they each have a major life-altering quality. In Saint Maybe Ian meets and becomes a part of the Church of the Second Chance. He talks to Reverend Emmet and is told that the way to achieve forgiveness from God is to something concrete: “

Why raise them I suppose'...'Wait,' Ian said. ' You're saying God would want me to give up my education. Change all my parents' plans for me and give up my education.' ' Yes, if that's what's required,' Reverend Emmett said" (Tyler 124). Ian, thinking Reverend Emmett is crazy, takes the time to truly think about what is required of him to atone for his sin. He decides that dropping out of school to take care of his brother's children was the best idea, " he accepts the ' burden' of caring for Danny's children to assuage his own terrible guilt feelings for the part he played in his brother's suicide" (Nollen). This way of atonement continues throughout the novel and proves to change Ian's life dramatically. He becomes a father figure in the children's life, raising them to be children of the Church of the Second Chance. Some critics even believe him to have taken on a more maternal role, as he was all the children truly had left: " Ian drives the children to church camp, supervises their homework, and takes on all the traditional maternal duties" (Durham). He went from being the most popular boy in high school with the prettiest girlfriend to the college drop out with three children and no wife.

Briony Tallis' story was quite different from Ian's, resulting in a different way of atonement for her. However, her life is completely changed once she realized the severity of her lies. It took her years to truly realize what exactly she had done and how she wanted to atone for her sin. Her whole life, she thought she would go to Cambridge just like Cecelia had and pleased her parents as this was expected of her. The first step Briony takes is choosing to become a nurse in the midst of World War II. Cecelia, after cutting off all communication with her family, became a nurse while awaiting Robbie's return to her: "...readers find Briony working hard as a student nurse and

later as a compassionate woman who attends mortally wounded soldiers. She has forsaken her college education in order to serve her fellow citizens. She has followed in the footsteps of her sister” (Constantakis). Briony writes to her sister, explaining that she plans to atone for sending Robbie to jail by telling her parents she lied and taking back her legal statements, accusing Robbie of rape. Cecelia is starting to understand her sisters actions as she expresses to Robbie in a letter: “ But I get the impression she’s taken on nursing as a sort of penance. She wants to come and see me and talk. I might have this wrong...but I think she wants to recant. I think she wants to change her evidence and do it officially or legally” (McEwan 199) After a planned meeting with both Robbie and Cecelia, they ask her to tell her parents about the lies, take back her legal statement, and write an explanation to Robbie telling him exactly why she felt the way she did at the time of her sin. She works on these requests. Readers later find out that the novel itself is her explanation of why she lied about Robbie. Briony’s main way of atonement was her devotion to giving back to the soldiers during World War II as a nurse, as well as attempting to apologize to and rekindle a relationship with her sister and Robbie. Literary critics agree that her choices do seem to move along her process of atonement, “ And Briony’s decision does seem to function in this manner; the training of a nightingale nurse, as described in the novel, seems like the ultimate act of self-abnegation. For Briony it is the sacrifice of self” (Pastoor). She had her whole life set out for her, a life similar to that she grew up in after attending Cambridge. However, she chose to sacrifice herself in attempt to make up for what she had done, completely altering her life’s path.

The main difference between the novels (which may make or break the experience for the reader) is how each character and storyline is left. Ian ends up seeing the three children off into their own successful lives: “ Thomas, Agatha, and Daphne have turned out well, and Ian claims that ‘ You could never call it a penance to have to take care of these three. They were all that gave [my] life color, and energy, and ... well, life’ ” (Nollen). He finds a lovely woman named Rita and decides to marry and start a family with her. Readers feel a sense of restfulness, especially in the last scene of the novel: “ At the end of Saint Maybe, the reader is left with a touching picture of Ian holding his new son... Tyler leads the reader to believe that Ian, Rita, and Joshua will have the happy family life that so tragically eluded Danny and Lucy ” (Nollen). Ian seems to be content with where his life is and how he has atoned for his sin. He turns down an offer from his Reverend to become the next leader of the Church of the Second Chance in order to focus on his family. He still stays involved, as this church essentially saved him. Ian is confident now in his skills as a father as he expresses in a phone call with Reverend Emmett: “ ‘ I know absolutely that you’ll be a good father...’ I believe I will,’ Ian said.” (Tyler 334). This gives the reader a sense of peace, knowing Ian is comfortable now and in a much better place compared to the previous parts of the novel. He was able to feel more at peace with Danny’s death while still accepting that he could never bring back his brother or Lucy. There is definite hope for Ian, Rita, his new son, and the three children. Readers leave Ian in a much better place compared to Briony.

Briony’s ending is tragic. In the epilogue, readers discover that this novel itself was her explanation to Robbie. However, the novel was not entirely

true. It is stated that Cecilia and Robbie were never able to meet again, they both died at separate times during the war: “ Cecilia and Robbie do not survive to love and to live happily ever after. They remain separated throughout the war... and they die apart–Robbie at Dunkirk, Cecilia in London.” (Cahill). Their tragic love story was not one that Briony wanted to tell in her novel, so she decided to keep them alive and let them live out their love story, again as part of her atonement for sending Robbie to jail on false pretenses. This means that she was never able to truly apologize to Robbie and her sister, leaving Briony feeling empty. In many literary criticisms, writers feel as though *Atonement* did not end in the best way, “ *Atonement* does not make a tidy finish. Briony reveals Cecilia and Robbie, retrospectively, to be phantoms–the fantasies of Briony’s guilty consciousness” (Cahill). Readers also learn that the novel cannot be published until Lola and her husband die because they were specifically named throughout the book. She refuses to change the names because she wanted to tell the story from start to finish, free of lies, in order to atone for what she had done. So, Briony accepts that she may never see her work in publication (as she is very old and sick at this point in the novel) because she believes Lola will outlive her. Briony acknowledges that when the novel is finally published, it will not do what is it intended to do as they will simply be characters to everyone who reads it, not real people who suffered through this storyline: “ When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions” (McEwan 350). Readers do not get a sense of restfulness from Briony Tallis. They are left wondering, feeling as though she has not completely made up for ruining Robbie’s life. The novel does not fulfill its title: “ The seeking for atonement

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in the novel all comes to nothing–Briony’s self-sacrifice, her penance, her attempts to make right what she has done wrong–are all illusory and insufficient...” (Pastoor). Briony’s ending can be described as insufficient. She has not atoned for what she has done.

The novels *Saint Maybe* and *Atonement* both told the stories of young children who made rash decisions which then changed life as they knew it. Leaving them feeling more than guilty, they were forced to make life-altering decisions to atone for what they had done. Not completely understanding the adult world and possessing very close-minded, childish mindsets was both Ian’s and Briony’s downfall and direct cause for their actions. Their way of atonement, while very different, were both similar in their life-altering qualities. Both characters were forced to give up their lives and completely change the paths laid out for them by their families, even though they did not necessarily want to. However, the main difference was each novel’s ending, with *Saint Maybe* providing a more closed, enjoyable ending and *Atonement* giving readers the true story of a tragedy. Ian Bedloe and Briony Tallis can teach readers a lot about atonement, although it is truly specific to every one person and every sin. It is important that people recognize the weight of sins and how atonement can be the way to help one feel more at peace with what they have done. However, some may have a similar experience to Briony in which they never feel completely okay again. Everyone’s atonement is an individual experience, as supported by both the story of Ian Bedloe and Briony Tallis.

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