ELEGANT OBSESSIONS

The Children Act

Ian McEwan

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There are two reasons for a GP to read this novel. Firstly it's by Ian McEwan. Read anything by Ian McEwan! As GPs we are the naturalists of the human jungle and McEwan offers us a way into other peoples' lives and other peoples' heads, which I take it is what fiction is for. As GPs, we look into

so many lives, so many heads, at regular 10-minute intervals that the chance to gaze honestly at another while having one's feet up and a cup of tea to hand is always a pleasure. But also, if the author is expert enough, it is an occasion for learning and reflection.

The Children Act is a short novel, very simple in its construction and with a limited cast. It is, as one would expect, beautifully written. The protagonist is Fiona Maye, a late middle-aged High Court Judge on the Family Bench, who has to muddle through her own elegantly dysfunctional life while at the same time coping with the pressure and responsibility that a British GP knows only too well. One develops a sad sympathy for this professional who has worked so hard, and for whom the clichéd work-life balance has so failed to allow her own humanity to flourish. Let us hope the parable is not too close for comfort.

However, the book is also a brilliant short tutorial in child and family law, and in some of the ethical considerations surrounding the law. It gives a good picture of how flawed but well-intentioned human beings make the law happen. As well as the main

plot of the book (a typical McEwan tale of strange obsession and unnecessary suffering), we are presented with running vignettes of Fiona's other cases. She has to make complex high-stakes human judgements, often at short notice. Her decisions affect the lives and the happiness of many families. They often involve doctors and occasionally lead to life and death decisions that she herself then has to live with.

This is a lovely little novel that will teach you something about family law and its ambiguous relationship with doctors. Better still, by reflecting on the life, the work, the success, and the failures of another human being from a similar sort of profession, we may also learn a little more about ourselves.

David Misselbrook,

GP, Dean Emeritus of the Royal Society of Medicine, Past President FHPMP the Society of Apothecaries, Senior Lecturer in Family Medicine RCSI Medical University of Bahrain and *BJGP* Senior Ethics Advisor.

E-mail: DMisselbrook@rcsi-mub.com

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