Ripples of sin

by Gordon Houser in the May 22, 2002 issue

Atonement.
By Ian McEwan. Doubleday,
351 pp., $26.00.

The title of Ian McEwan's novel sounds like a theology text. But few if any books of theology will grab readers by the lapels and pull them into their world like this novel, which was a finalist for the Booker Prize.

Known for his fine use of language and his ability to draw out suspense from spare plots, McEwan spins a gripping tale that weaves together themes of English manners, romance and war with a metafictional self-consciousness. But Mc-Ewan's primary theme is how we try to deal with the consequences of our behavior. Can we atone for our sins? Or do the ripples from the stones we drop spread beyond our control?

The story begins in 1935 on an English country estate belonging to the Tallis family. An unfortunate series of events leads to a claim by 13-year-old Briony Tallis that Robbie Turner, a college student supported by the family, raped Briony's 15-year-old cousin Lola. Everyone turns against Robbie except Cecelia Tallis, to whom Robbie has just declared his love. The reverberations of this mistaken claim are lifelong, leaving the people involved trying to piece together some healing from the brokenness.

McEwan's emulation of Virginia Woolf shows in the sparkling prose: "Across his brow a constellation of acne had a new-minted look, its garishness softened by the sepia light." He also honors Jane Austen's humorous observations of manners: "Cecelia felt a pleasant sinking sensation in her stomach as she contemplated how deliciously self-destructive it would be, almost erotic, to be married to a man so nearly handsome, so hugely rich, so unfathomably stupid."

The novel's middle section follows Robbie as he tries to survive the Battle of Dunkirk in 1940. McEwan captures the details, the crazy episodes that occur in wartime,

such as catching a pig for a gypsy woman in order to get a drink of water. He also describes vividly the terror and craziness of war and the psychology of soldiers facing death: "It was common enough, to see so much death and want a child. Common, therefore human, and he wanted it all the more."
When she turns 18, Briony leaves school and trains to be a nurse. She writes Cecelia, who has cut off all contact with her family, and says she was wrong in accusing Robbie. She wants to set the record straight, but she can't atone for the years Robbie spent in prison and his separation from Cecelia. And they can't forgive her.

In the end, this world we enter and feel so deeply is revealed for what it is, a story. The narrator asks, "How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" All that is left is the attempt, the writing.

Still, Christians believe that atonement is possible, that wholeness will come, not of our making but of God's. While *Atonement* may leave a taste of sadness, felt all the more because of the novel's vividness, it also leaves readers hungering for that true atonement, in which all the loose threads of our lives will be woven into a beautiful, mysterious tapestry.