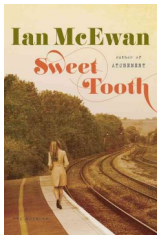


Of Spies and Literature



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Do you like spy novels? Ones that mix in politics and love? If so McEwan's *Sweet Tooth* is for you.

It's set in the rollicking early 70s in England - a time of drugs, rock and roll, miniskirts, and--on a more serious note--women's entry into careers en masse. It tells the story of Selena, a bright vicar's daughter who loves to read and read fast. Her mother, in the only moment of life-dissatisfaction she's ever expressed to her daughter, advises Selena to go to Cambridge and study math so she can have a challenging career. Selena, being the good older daughter, follows her mom's advice and gives up studying literature for something better career-wise. But Selena's real education begins the summer after college. An older tutor she meets through a boyfriend soon becomes her lover. In the process he teaches her about food, wine, politics, international relations, and how to read the newspapers for hidden facts and government policies. He's grooming her for a role in M15, the spy service. But then Tony leaves her abruptly after an argument so Selena goes to London and does find a job with M15.

But because she is a woman, her career starts in the lowly typing pool alongside the brightest women in England. One night she discovers that her room in a bedsit has been broken into and her things examined. The change is subtle, barely noticeable in her neatly arranged piles of 245 books - one bookmark has been set down out of place. Soon afterwards, Selena's reading comes in good stead for her job - she is offered a role in "Sweet Tooth" - a program funded by the government to pay writers to write. They assign her to the work of T.H. Haley, a new author only published in literary journals.

And of course Selena and T.H. or Tom fall in love. Every weekend Selena joins him in Brighton where they share long talks, beach walks, great seafood and sex. Even as they move closer emotionally, Selena cannot bring herself to tell Tom the truth about her job or their original connection.

McEwan spins his spy story around complicated human relationships. It's delightful how he weaves in international events: the 70s oil crises, the beginnings of individual terrorism, mostly in Northern Ireland, changes in East Germany and Russia. He also tells the story from a woman's point of view in a totally believable manner. Several of McEwan's novels have hit the big screen - I can see this one appearing soon with Selena played by a sultry Scarlett Johansson. But this is so much more than a spy novel, it's a novel about ideas, conversations, writing and knowing--architecturally crafted, and full of deep emotions that simmer underneath before bubbling to the surface. How magically McEwan has spun his web.

For a nonfiction book that McEwan used as a model for this one, try *Operation Mincemeat: How a Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured Victory* by Ben McIntyre. It tells the story of a very successful imaginative spy intervention designed by novelists and soon-to-be-novelist Ian Fleming during World War II.

Posted by Dory L. on March 4, 2013

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