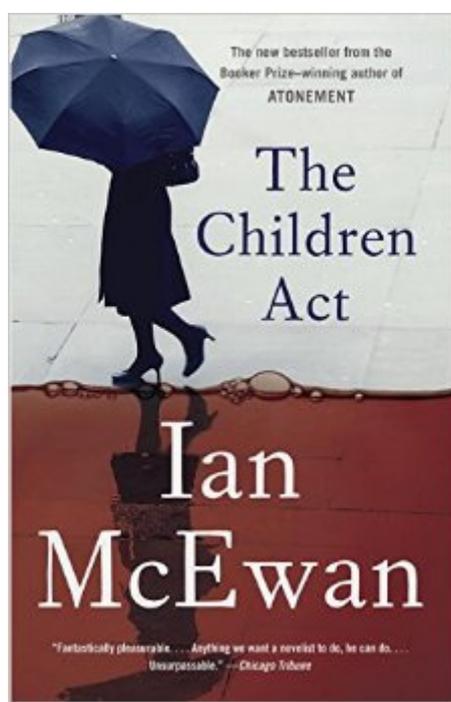


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The Children Act



Synopsis

One of the Best Books of the Year: The Washington Post, NPR, Vogue, BookRiot Fiona Maye is a leading High Court judge who presides over cases in the family division. She is renowned for her fierce intelligence, exactitude, and sensitivity. But her professional success belies private sorrow and domestic strife. There is the lingering regret of her childlessness, and now her marriage of thirty years is in crisis. At the same time, she is called on to try an urgent case: Adam, a beautiful seventeen-year-old boy, is refusing for religious reasons the medical treatment that could save his life, and his devout parents echo his wishes. Time is running out. Should the secular court overrule sincerely expressed faith? In the course of reaching a decision, Fiona visits Adam in the hospital—an encounter that stirs long-buried feelings in her and powerful new emotions in the boy. Her judgment has momentous consequences for them both.

Book Information

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: Anchor; Reprint edition (April 28, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 110187287X

ISBN-13: 978-1101872871

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars See all reviews (1,520 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #9,081 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #92 in Books > Mystery, Thriller & Suspense > Thrillers & Suspense > Legal #327 in Books > Mystery, Thriller & Suspense > Thrillers & Suspense > Psychological Thrillers #1414 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Literary

Customer Reviews

I am a long-time fan of Ian McEwan and always look forward to his new books. This one is sterling and lives up to his best works. Fiona Maye is a judge in London's family court. She oversees cases that deal primarily with children though she also handles divorce cases. As the book opens, Fiona is returning from a day at work and has just had a horrifying conversation with her husband Jack, a professor of ancient history. They have been married for 35 years and Jack has decided that he wants to have an affair though he still loves Fiona. He feels like his sexual needs have not been met by Fiona and there is a woman he is interested in. For him, it will be a last-ditch effort to find passion at the age of 60. For Fiona, age 59, if he goes through with this, it will be the end of their

marriage. The novel examines the family court system and Fiona's role in it. She is especially involved in a particular case where a 17 year-old boy (almost 18) is refusing a blood transfusion that is essential to save his life. He and his family are Jehovah Witnesses and transfusing blood goes against their religion. The boy, Adam Henry, says that he agrees with his parents and the church elders - he does not want a transfusion. The doctors say that the transfusion is necessary because Adam has leukemia and without this transfusion he will die a very painful death. Fiona is to decide this case. The reader goes through time with Fiona as she works on her cases and worries about her marriage with Jack. Will it survive or will it be like some of the miserable divorce cases that she proceeds over? She believes that she can do her job well despite her personal concerns.

In this taut, meticulously assembled novel, there is a guaranteed central theme of our fragility and an absence of triumph if we disrupt the truths of someone else. We meet Fiona Maye on the first page; she is a British High Court Judge in the Family Division. At fifty-nine years old, she has worked hard to attain her stature and her decisions are painstakingly analyzed; she reviews her prose countless times before presenting final decisions. She is fully aware she is changing lives, hopefully resolving violent or prosaic problems with her artful talent. She is childless, never seemed to fit in the time to start a family although she is married to Jack for 35 years. Ironically, Fiona is blindsided at the onset of the novel when Jack tells her that he wants a passionate affair before he "drops dead" and yet wants to stay married to Fiona. Enraged, Fiona tells him she would never accept the situation. Her anger is immediate and yet she tries to compose herself to meet the next few days in Court with her usual precision and deference to the law. Fiona goes about the business at hand. Her emotions run the gamut from anger to heart breaking. She checks her e-mail looking for some communication from Jack but immediately changes the locks on their home. She must concentrate and act as if nothing is wrong. She is a composed, thoughtful intellectual who commands respect and appreciates the beauty of England's environment. She is scheduled to make a decision on life or death for Adam Henry, who is just shy of 18 years old. He is in the late stage of leukemia, needing blood transfusions as advised by the doctors. He and his parents are Jehovah's Witnesses and religious principles forbid transfusions. The hospital has petitioned to the Court to save the child.

This novel focuses on some decisions (and the repercussions) made by a High Court judge while she is also experiencing some major turmoil in her own domestic life. The "welfare" of children is always a moral and lofty goal, but who knows best how that might be achieved? The people of

London bring forth their marital and family woes to be adjudicated by the highest court. One judge, Fiona Maye, is also mandated to arbitrate cases involving medical issues such as the separation of conjoined twins and the question of whether or not a boy with leukemia should be forced to receive a blood transfusion even though he and his parents are avowed Jehovah Witness who abhor the therapy. To my mind, Fiona is a cold fish and I could not understand her personality nor her reaction to the dilemmas in her life -- not to say I didn't feel empathy for her, it's just that her responses weren't anything like my own would likely have been. When confronted by her husband wanting an "open marriage" because their sex life is nonexistent, her reaction is to run away from any meaningful discussion with him and passive aggressively deal with the situation by changing the locks. Meanwhile, her attention is focused on the case of Adam Henry -- a nearly 18 year old boy who needs a blood transfusion. I confess, as a nurse, that this prohibition makes me want to lead the charge to court. On the other hand, I totally support freedom of religion and personal choice. Fiona decides to meet with the boy before making her ruling. The legal arguments described herein were brilliant. Unfortunately, she sets in motion a chain of events that result in an outcome that was not entirely anticipated.

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