Who Cares?

The Terror of Dementia in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

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> Why aren't they screaming?
> Philip Larkin, "The Old Fools" (131)

> I fear being the elderly friend, a man of both refinement and squeamishness, whose eyes showed animal panic when the nurse in the residential home announced in front of visitors that it was time to change his nappy. I fear the nervous laugh I shall give when I don't quite get an allusion or have forgotten a shared memory, or a familiar face, and then begin to mistrust much of what I think I know, and finally mistrust all of it. I fear the catheter and the stairlift, the oozing body and the wasting brain.
> Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (140–41)

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) is typically read as a novel about the everyday fears and constant worries that entered many people's lives in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. The burning plane that opens the novel causes protagonist Henry Perowne to think of terrorism and to embody the pervasive sense of insecurity in the post-9/11 era. This is captured in his sense that "Now we breathe a different air" (32) and is emphasized throughout the novel, where we follow the ever-present news reporting both from the big anti-war demonstration that takes place on the day the novel is set, Saturday 15 February 2003, and from the story of the burning plane. This story turns out to have nothing to do with terror, but it still manages to accomplish the goal of modern terrorism: to spread feelings of fear, insecurity, and precariousness through a perceived sense of risk of seemingly arbitrary acts of aggression (Butler). In the novel, the big, abstract fear of terrorism is concretized when Perowne and his family become the victims of another kind of terrorism – domestic terror – when a thug, Baxter, with whom Perowne was involved in a

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seemingly innocent car accident earlier in the day, forces his way into Perowne's otherwise safe house and holds his family hostage, threatening to rape his daughter, Daisy, who is pregnant.

This critical emphasis on violent terrorism, which indeed calls our attention to what takes up most narrative space in the novel, however, has obfuscated an equally important aspect of this rich and multifaceted work: the way in which it captures the growing fears and constant worries of many people about ending up in a nursing home as a dementia patient. Fear of dementia, most often a fear of the most common disease to cause dementia, Alzheimer's disease, is the fear of ending up as "living dead" behind closed doors at the mercy of casual caregivers. As Megan-Jane Johnstone notes in her study of media representations of Alzheimer's disease, it

> has been controversially portrayed as "the disease of the century" that is poised to have a near catastrophic impact on the world's healthcare systems as its population ages. This representation has given rise to a profound terror of the disease and a range of individual and societal risks believed to be associated with it. This terror and related anxieties have been positioned as requiring a remedy. (xvii)

As Johnstone continues, the remedy for this kind of "terror" is often and increasingly – and problematically, from both moral and basic humanistic perspectives – "pre-emptive and beneficent euthanasia" (xvii). Among the many problems involved with this growing public discourse in favour of euthanasia is the culturally constructed image it promotes of the Alzheimer's patient as a non-human "other," as just a vegetable being or empty shell, when in fact there is increasing awareness among dementia researchers and carers that dementia patients live lives worth protecting and worth caring about and for (Kitwood; Leibing and Cohn; Hughes).

The risks of terrorism and dementia are curiously paralleled in *Saturday*. The novel offers, through an unobtrusive third-person narrator focalized entirely through Henry's intensely self-conscious and self-reflective mind, a finely detailed and psychologically realistic and engaging investigation of popular feelings about these contemporary life risks and the ways in which people try to deal with them: by containing one risk within a nursing facility with all the semblance of a private home; by trying to exclude the other by turning private homes almost into fortresses. In both instances, the novel suggests, such safety measures don't add up and people are intruded upon and made to feel unsafe and to vicariously experience victimhood: a terrorist forces his way into a private home and threatens a family; and in an eerily parallel manner, Henry feels obliged to visit his mother, Lily, who has Alzheimer's disease, in her nursing home, which makes him feel like a potential Alzheimer's victim himself. Both home visits/intrusions cause fear and anxiety and give those

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involved – and the reader – a sense of the precariousness of contemporary life even as the novel, by portraying only Henry's mind, also offers glimpses into and allows readers to imagine what life might feel like both for the terrorist and for the dementia patient, who readers are made to realize represent much more than their feared pathologies.

The Nursing Home in the Contemporary Cultural Imaginary

The house of fiction has many shapes and rooms. Houses and homes carry much metaphorical weight in fiction as symbolic of the state of mind of their inhabitants, and as physical, material "sites" (Alworth) they also function to shape and mould characters and plots. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan points out in *Space and Place*, "The built environment, like language, has the power to define and refine sensibility. It can sharpen and enlarge consciousness" (107). A growing number of Western literary fictions take place in and around nursing-home facilities, with the "home" playing a significant role in plot and character development as a shaper of consciousness. According to Tuan, "Unique to human beings as primates is the sense of the home as a place where the sick and the injured can recover under solicitous care" (137). In other words, to reflect on nursing homes and other spaces of assisted living is in a profound sense to reflect on what it means to be human and on what localities most deeply shape our sensibilities and consciousness as humans.

Authors and readers are attracted to this, for many, off-putting, both intimate and claustrophobic setting for a number of other reasons as well, of course. Among them, surely, is the basic fact that our societies are aging, and more and more such nursing facilities are needed to take care of a growing number of very old, frail, and dependent individuals, whose families have increasingly left behind traditional nuclear family structures where the generations lived together and the women typically stayed at home and took care of the children and the elderly. These demographic and family-related changes are again complexly connected to the accelerating individualization and consumer culture of free choice in the West, where we place great emphasis on self-realization and less emphasis on being attached to groups founded in solidarity and self-sacrifice. This goes a long way toward explaining the prevalent emotional coding of the nursing home in this fiction as a place of fear and terror, where people fear not just the death that concludes any nursing-home stay (you don't move out once you've moved in) but also the increasing loss of personal autonomy and dependency on the care of others on whom many lives come to depend. Feelings of fear are eloquently articulated by Philip Larkin and Julian Barnes in my epigraphs and are reproduced by historian of the nursing home Megan Davies, as quoted by literary gerontologist Sara Jamieson in her

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argument against such traditional understandings of the nursing home, when she argues that even though many nursing homes "may aspire to provide a 'warm, home-like ambience,' this inevitably conflicts with the reality of how life in residential care is shaped by 'rules and routine imposed from above'" (8). Combined with these feelings is a prevalent ugly sense of bad conscience and guilt on behalf of the relatives, partners, or adult children, who put their loved ones into nursing homes in order to live their own lives.

This fear of loss of control and self-determination in combination with guilt at not caring enough by one's own or others' judgement fuels many nursing-home narratives, whose vision is often based on somewhat old-fashioned notions of such institutions, derived from Victorian poor houses, as quasi-prison facilities and has led writers to imagine various alternatives. A number of such fictions have reached large audiences both as novels and through film adaptations. Deborah Moggach's *These Foolish Things* (adapted as *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and its sequel) and Jonas Jonasson's *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* (also adapted as a film) are both about handling the fear of the nursing home through escaping the traditional institution. In Moggach, a key character, the aged widow Norman, keeps getting thrown out of standard nursing homes because he is filthy and a pervert, so he has to stay with his adult daughter, Pauline, and her Indian husband, Ravi Kapoor. Norman terrorizes the household and jeopardizes the marriage, so Ravi and a cousin come up with a plan: outsource British elder care to India, build nursing homes in the former colony where there is cheap labour, and move the elderly out of sight to enable their relatives to go on with their lives as they choose.

The actual nursing home in *These Foolish Things* is hardly a nursing home per se but rather a kind of run-down Indian all-inclusive holiday resort where resourceful British old-age pensioners in the "Third Age" move for a number of reasons – none of them being because they can't take care of themselves any longer (note the film title's use of "hotel" as euphemism for nursing home). In Jonasson's phenomenally popular "geezer lit" novel, the centenarian protagonist Allan Karlsson escapes from a traditional nursing home and its regime, which is embodied in the Director, whose strict rules and regulations regarding hours, liquor intake, and smoking Allan will not submit to. Instead, he takes off on a fantastic trip around Sweden with a suitcase full of money, with criminals and police on his trail and a luxurious ending ahead of him, where he realizes that he was not, as he had thought, neutered and impotent but can in fact have sex with a Balinese beauty. Jonasson's nursing home does not take up much narrative space but is a crucial engine for the plot and action as well as a telling sounding board that reveals the character of the protagonist as someone preferably on the move. Yet it reads almost like a parody of an old-fashioned panoptic "total institution" (Goffman), where the will and freedom of the

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inhabitants are controlled and they experience degrading dehumanization as they are forced to develop docile, obedient, and fearful "institutional selves" (Gubrium and Holstein). The main character is a cartoon-like figure for the new, active, mobile, and empowered generations of elderly individuals who take matters into their own hands and aspire to deny the biology of aging through continuous activity. A common aspect of these two novels is that their main characters are not demented and do not really need the nursing home with its offer of care and protection.

This is not to say that all nursing-home fictions seem to misrepresent the realities of the nursing home, either through rendering them exotic, as in Moggach, or through painting a too stereotypically bleak and in many senses outdated picture of the nursing home, as in Jonasson. A number of contemporary Danish novels, for instance, depart from the otherwise dominant norm in Danish fiction set in nursing homes that the place is dehumanizing and informed by a reign of terror that denies individuality. Instead, some novels and short fictions provide more nuanced and sometimes even hopeful representations of the care work carried out in and by these institutions, which enable new forms of living for both the elderly and their adult children (Simonsen). As Sara Jamieson and Patricia Life have more recently argued in almost parallel readings of Alice Munro and other Canadian fictions, the nursing home in "The Bear Came over the Mountain" also abandons the stereotypical Victorian nursing-home/poor-house model and may provide much needed "shelter" from the outside world. Documenting a tendency in recent Canadian fictions toward "a more positive public perception of late-life housing" (243) where characters nonetheless must still resist the otherwise oppressive regime of the institution, Life even suggests that "some forgetting" (255) associated with dementia may be experienced as positive, to the extent that what is forgotten may be related to traumatic experiences in the past, such as a husband's adultery. The nursing home can be, and is increasingly being, imagined as a place for living and loving, to some extent, on one's own conditions; a place where, as Life puts it, characters "can find a safe haven and shake off the shackles of their former lives" (244) even as they may experience various forms of dementia. Surely we need such images and narratives (what Life calls "aging-as-opportunity narratives," 256) as our culture and societies age and our reality is transformed in this image.

McEwan's Saturday as Nursing-Home Narrative

McEwan's *Saturday* can be read as a nursing-home narrative, the genre that "presents fictional texts and films that are either set in nursing homes or deal with the complex array of problems and feelings associated with moving oneself

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or relatives into a caregiving institution" (Kriebernegg 190). Midway through the novel, Henry arrives at his mother's nursing home:

> By the standards of old people's homes, Suffolk Place is minute – three houses have been knocked through to make one, and an annexe has been added. Out front, privet hedges still mark the old garden boundaries and two laburnum trees survive. One of the three front gardens has been cemented over to make parking space for two cars. Two oversized dustbins behind a lattice fence are the only institutional clues. (158)

Far from a big, dehumanizing institution, this nursing home exudes homeliness and familiarity, though the focus on waste and the fence set the tone for the scene. While the visit takes up little narrative space in the novel, this space importantly constitutes the dead centre of the text and features its protagonist away from his comfort zone and with his guard down. The visit, in fact, is crucial to understanding the novel in the sense that the nursing home at its heart possesses an eerie kind of agency with respect to the main plot and characterization. Far more than a mere background, the setting alerts readers to what the novel is ultimately and most centrally about: Henry Perowne's own fear of death, change, and mutability, and his intense need, but ultimate failure, to be in full control as a self-determined, autonomous Cartesian Subject.

Titled from the day on which its action unfolds – Saturday 15 February 2003, which saw hundreds of thousands march against the allied intervention in Iraq – the novel provides a trenchant commentary on global politics in the twenty-first century while also alluding to such modernist forerunners as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, which also follow their protagonists during one day's movements through a city. It also, centrally, flags the subject matter of time and the experience of being in time. Indeed, at the end of the novel and a hectic day on which a complex plot has been resolved in a very dramatic climax, an exhausted protagonist Henry reflects:

> He feels himself turning on a giant wheel, like the Eye on the south bank of the Thames, just about to arrive at the highest point – he's poised on a hinge of perception, before the drop, and can see ahead calmly. Or it's the eastward turn of the earth he imagines, delivering him towards the dawn at a stately thousand miles an hour. If he counts on sleep rather than the clock to divide the days, then this is still his Saturday, dropping far below him, as deep as a lifetime. And from here, from the top of his day, he can see far ahead, before the descent begins. Sunday doesn't ring with the same promise and vigour as the day before. (272–73)

McEwan here alludes to the traditional iconographic representation of the "stages of man's life" in terms of a wheel as he masterfully uses both the London Eye and the spinning of the earth as micro-macro images (similarly

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to the way in which he deals with two kinds of terror) to capture the sense of time passing and life moving toward the end, which is what is on Henry's mind more than anything. He is indeed on top of everything: he has a great job as neurosurgeon, a perfect marriage to a successful woman, Rosalind, with whom he has great sex and two successful children (one a poet, Daisy, the other, Theo, a musician), a big townhouse in the heart of Bloomsbury, and a Mercedes. What more could he desire? Despite all this – or rather because of all that he has – he fears the death and decline that he cannot control ("Sunday doesn't ring with the same promise and vigour as the day before" [273]). And, because he is a control freak, this bothers him more than anything.

A telling instance of Henry's need to feel protected occurs on his way to visit his mother when he sits in his car, exhausted, and takes a nap: "Without looking, he finds the button that secures the car. The door locks are activated in rapid sequence, little resonating clunks, four semiquavers that lull him further. An ancient evolutionary dilemma: the need to sleep, the fear of being eaten. Resolved at last, by central locking" (121). Readers may sense a mocking implicit author setting Henry up for trouble for seeking this intense kind of protection, and indeed this passage refers back to a similar one involving locks earlier in the novel. Henry's townhouse, like his Mercedes, physically embodies and illustrates his need for control, shelter, and protection from the outside world. The outside is dangerous and hard to understand and intrudes upon him as he awakens during the night, opens a window, sees a plane on fire on its way to Heathrow, and instantly thinks terrorism. Having woken up, Henry goes to the kitchen and has a chat with his son, and on his way back to bed he notes the house's doors. Interspersed with the description of the doors is a muted mental note on aging as decline and physical space as a means of protection:

> He feels feeble in his knees, in the quadriceps, as he goes up the stairs, making use of the handrail. This is how it will be in his seventies. He crosses the hallway, soothed by the cool touch of the smooth stone flags under his bare feet. On his way to the main stairs, he pauses by the double front doors. They give straight on to the street that leads into the square, and in his exhaustion they suddenly loom before him strangely with their accretions – three stout Banham locks, two black iron bolts as old as the house, two tempered steel security chains, a spyhole with a brass cover, the box of electronics that works the Entryphone system, the red panic button, the alarm pad with its softly gleaming digits. Such defences, such mundane embattlement: beware of the city's poor, the drug-addicted, the downright bad. (36–37)

As the novel progresses toward its climax, we see this elaborate defensive system being broken as home intruders force Henry's wife to let them in and to recognize that it is not possible to protect oneself from "the downright bad." Yet it is Perowne's thoughts of growing old and frail ("This is how it will be

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in his seventies") that frame this elaborate, almost heavy-handed description of the physical defence system. Henry seeks protection not just from outside intruders; he also dreams of protecting himself from the biological process of aging even as he knows – as a medical doctor and brain surgeon – that there is no way of keeping the body safe from those cellular processes of decline.

This is most clear in Henry's visit to his mother, who lives in a nursing home close to his childhood home. This visit leads to his feelings of fear of death in the novel's central chapter. Henry aspires to a state of thoughtlessness that his Saturdays are meant to represent, yet this Saturday is different. Waking up, he saw the airplane on fire and immediately thought of terrorism and the attacks on the Twin Towers just eighteen months earlier. In addition to this reminder of his vulnerability, Henry has been involved in a minor car accident and barely escaped being beaten up. He made it away only because he used his skills as doctor to diagnose the thug, Baxter, with Huntington's Disease and lied about possible new treatment methods, something that deflated a pent-up situation and allowed him to escape. Yet the fear of Baxter, along with the worries about the new world order, war, and terror, inform his otherwise tranquil Saturday. Driving away from a lost game of squash to visit his mother, he reflects on the "gently tilting negative pitch of his mood":

> Saturdays he's accustomed to being thoughtlessly content, and here he is for the second time this morning sifting the elements of a darker mood. What's giving him the shivers? Not the lost game, or the scrape with Baxter, or even the broken night [when he awoke to see the plane on fire], though they all must have some effect. Perhaps it's merely the prospect of the afternoon when he'll head out towards the immensity of suburbs around Perivale. While there was a squash game posed between himself and this visit, he felt protected. Now there's only the purchase of fish. His mother no longer possesses the faculties to anticipate his arrival, recognize him when he's with her, or remember him after he's left. An empty visit. She doesn't expect him and she wouldn't be disappointed if he failed to show up. It's like taking flowers to a graveside – the true business is with the past. But she can raise a cup of tea to her mouth, and though she can't put a name to his face, or conjure any association, she's content with him sitting there, listening to her ramble. She's content with anyone. He hates going to see her, he despises himself if he stays away too long. (124–25)

In this crucial passage right in the middle of the novel, the ambivalent feelings of relatives toward nursing-home inhabitants are revealed as the son is torn between different emotions about his mother, and the narrator reveals how much emotional intensity is involved in his relationship with her. Laid bare in this passage are Henry's immense selfishness and need to feel protected: the emptiness of the visit concerns him, and he seems to feel sorry for himself both when he goes to see her and when he doesn't.

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At the rhetorical level, we note that the same adjective is used to capture his sense of a perfect Saturday and the mother's feeling when someone sits with her: "content." To be content for Henry is to be "thoughtless": not to be self-aware, reflective, self-conscious. This state of being is coded positive as far as Henry is concerned, close to bliss and the state of being happy, yet McEwan subtly links that sense of thoughtlessness with his mother, whose "thoughtlessness" Henry fears more than anything (more than terrorism, losing at sports or being beaten up by Baxter). Yet Henry knows what he has and would not know he had lost it if he were in his mother's shoes. He cherishes his life too much not to be terrified when he finally sees her. Driving toward her nursing home, he "finds he's feeling better about seeing his mother":

> He knows the routine well enough. Once they're established together, face to face, with their cups of dark brown tea, the tragedy of her situation will be obscured behind the banality of detail, of managing the suffocating minutes, of inattentive listening. Being with her isn't so difficult. The hard part is when he comes away, before this visit merges in memory with all the rest, when the woman she once was haunts him as he stands by the front door and leans down to kiss her goodbye. That's when he feels he's betraying her, leaving her behind in her shrunken life, sneaking away to the riches, the secret hoard of his own existence. (152–53)

It seems only natural that Henry should interpret his mother's situation as a "tragedy," given everything she has lost (which she doesn't know anymore). Yet, and despite the fact that a son will find his mother's failure to recognize him as her son hard to bear (which is what takes place during all these visits when she confuses him with an aunt), his interpretation that her situation is a "tragedy" is subtly put into doubt by the narrator.

This happens when the narrator begins to open up for a reading of the mother's state of mind and being that Henry hardly acknowledges but that McEwan's imagination dares to probe, as he suggests that maybe elderly people with dementia are indeed happy. Upon first seeing her, readers learn that it is hard to tell if she is "actually happy. Sometimes she laughs, at others she describes shadowy disputes and grievances, and her voice becomes indignant" (165). Knowing how to care for her, Henry steers her away from agitated subjects and prods her: "If she becomes too agitated by the story she's telling, Henry will cut in and laugh and say, 'Mum, that's really very funny!' Being suggestible, she'll laugh too and her mood will shift, and the story she tells him will be happier" (165). As they prepare to leave and walk together through the nursing home, they meet another inhabitant, Cyril: "He's the home's resident gent, sweet-mannered, marooned in one particular, well-defined fantasy: he believes he owns a large estate and is obliged to go around visiting his tenants and be scrupulously polite. Perowne has never seen him unhappy" (166). And

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finally, as they are about to split up: "Lily is happier now, and leans her head against his arm. As they come into the hall they see Jenny Lavin by the door, already raising her hand to the high double security lock and smiling in their direction. Just then his mother pats his hand with a feathery touch and says, 'Out here it only looks like a garden, Aunty, but it's the countryside really and you can go for miles'" (167).

On the one hand, the text suggests that the elderly nursing-home inhabitants with dementia are happy, or at least capable of experiencing happiness, and that they don't inhabit a "tragedy"; the true tragedy is felt by the relatives, in this fiction at least. On the other hand, they hardly have a clear idea of who they are and where they are. Cyril inhabits a fantasy, and Lily thinks Henry is her aunt and that she is outdoors. So does it make sense to think of them as happy? Indeed, the impression we get of the nursing-home inhabitants is in an eerie sense that of a perpetual bliss of forgetfulness and a lack of self-consciousness, in contrast to Henry's (tragic?) anxiety that "in thirty-five years or less it could be him, stripped of everything he does and owns, a shriveled figure meandering in front of Theo or Daisy [his children], while they wait to leave and return to a life of which he'll have no comprehension" (165). Henry fears his mother's fate, which he sums up as "[m]ental death" (165), becoming a ghost that haunts his relatives, more than anything: "He isn't ready to die, and nor is he ready to half die" (165). So he seeks to control his life and master the risk of dementia through diet and exercise: "No cheese then. He'll be ruthless with himself in his pursuit of boundless health to avoid his mother's fate. Mental death" (165). Yet prolonging life only increases the risk, and again: if these elderly individuals are happy, why fear their condition so much?

There is nothing scary or dehumanizing about the specific nursing home, whose staff is described sympathetically as attentive and as striking a familiar mode of interaction with Henry. Arriving for his visit, Henry is met by one of the caregivers, Jenny, who opens the door as usual: "'She's waiting for you,' Jenny says. They both know this is a neurological impossibility. Even boredom is beyond his mother's reach" (159). As a matter of fact, Henry knows the facts of the disease. His mother's Alzheimer's is slowly causing her cognitive decline: "The disease proceeds by tiny unnoticed strokes in small blood vessels in the brain. Cumulatively, the infarcts cause cognitive decline by disrupting the neural nets. She unravels in little steps" (162). Indeed, Henry's unease and anxiety are linked to his superior knowledge of the disease and the brain and the fact that, despite his talent and almost godlike sense of himself as a neurosurgeon, there is nothing he can do to alter his mother's situation and almost nothing he can do to minimize his own risk of ending up in her shoes. No matter how many locks and security systems he surrounds himself with, they will not keep him safe from this condition.

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The nursing-home visit can enable readers to understand the novel as contributing centrally to the cultural work of reimagining the nursing home as a place of continued living and even loving and happy forgetting. As mentioned above, *Saturday* has not yet been discussed as a nursing-home novel but rather as a post-9/11 novel. Dominic Head discusses it in connection with terrorism in his 2008 book on "the state of the novel" today, and similarly, in his 2013 study of twenty-first-century fiction, Peter Boxall considers the novel in terms of terrorism and radicalism rather than with "the disease of the century" at its heart. Most critics who focus on terror (and many who don't) have explored how McEwan negotiates an ethics of literature responding to the threat of terror in his novel, which has many intertextual references and metafictional elements. Henry, for instance, finds that he came to understand and appreciate his mother's intelligence only after she had lost it to dementia and from reading Jane Austen and George Eliot (prompted by his poet daughter). Reading fiction, he understood that "there was nothing small-minded about her interests" (156), which she revealed during gossip. This gossip was centrally about illnesses and operations and infidelities and the difficulties of telling good from bad people:

> Jane Austen and George Eliot shared them too. Lilian Perowne wasn't stupid or trivial, her life wasn't unfortunate, and he had no business as a young man being condescending towards her. But it's too late for apologies now. Unlike in Daisy's novels, moments of precise reckonings are rare in real life ... (156)

The question is this: if Henry learned from others' realistic fiction that his own mother was more than "just" his "small-minded" mother playing the role of the dutiful, self-sacrificing, stay-at-home housewife, that she was in fact a person with substantial inner life, thoughts, values and worth, what can we learn from reading Ian McEwan?

One perfectly timed reckoning and effective reading lesson comes when Henry's daughter Daisy performs Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" during the hostage situation, which has a transformative effect on Baxter and saves the day. Hearing the poem read out loud, believing Daisy had written it, Baxter reacts: "It's beautiful. You know that, don't you. It's beautiful. And you wrote it," and he goes on: "It makes me think about where I grew up" (222). An instance of instant bibliotherapy disarms the criminal, shows him as a person with a rich inner life, and puts him into contact with his feelings and childhood memories. This controversial episode in the novel exemplifies the potential humanizing and sensitizing good that literature might do in an otherwise hostile world (the poem is even reproduced at the end as an appendix, perhaps with the hope that the novel will make a similar difference): "Baxter fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live" (278).

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Yet even though the ethical dimension of this novel is the most critically examined and controversial element (see Winterhalter for an overview), no one has discussed what seems to be the limit of empathy for Henry: his own mother, into whose shoes he dare not imagine himself yet into whose shoes the text seems to suggest we should try to imagine *our*selves, if only to accept the fact that we are at much greater risk of getting Alzheimer's disease than of being killed in terrorist attacks. So even if the novel lends itself quite easily to being read as a commentary on life in what Ulrich Beck calls "the risk society" (qtd. in Jurecic, who – extraordinarily in a book on illness narratives – neglects to consider the illness at the centre of this novel in the context of "risk narratives"), it also, and just as easily, lends itself to being read as a commentary on life in what Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller* calls "the remission society": the society where we have to learn to live with the knowledge that we are all, or will sooner or later be, in remission from one disease or another, that due to modern medicine and health systems we might be kept "well" for a long period of time, but not "cured" (8). Though we feel at risk from terrorism and sudden death (even if the statistics suggest we are not), we are also (and statistically much more so) at risk from diseases (including Alzheimer's), from which we can't be cured, but which can be treated, enabling us to live longer and longer in the remission society. Indeed, the two kinds of risk run parallel in this novel, whose main point is to familiarize its reader – through its protagonist's stream of consciousness – with those new, troubling types of risk we are facing today: terrorism and Alzheimer's disease.

Inadvertently making the reader associate Alzheimer's disease contained in a feared site, the nursing home, with contentment and happiness can be understood as this novel's way of "familiarizing" us with the risk of the disease and perhaps decreasing our fear of the nursing home. Indeed, the seemingly unselfconscious, wobbly mode of being-in-the-present the novel ascribes to Lily is so very close to the sense of being and state of mind that Henry Perowne himself cherishes, pursues, and experiences when performing open brain surgery on Baxter, whom Henry and Theo pushed down some stairs, causing him to suffer a massive head injury when the hostage situation was resolved. Henry now saves Baxter's life on the operating table even as he simultaneously consignes him to a slow and painful death from Huntington's disease. McEwan masterfully describes over several pages how the surgeon and the artist merge when he has Henry listen to Bach's Goldberg Variations while beginning the operation:

> The tender, wistful Aria begins to unfold and spread, hesitantly at first, and makes the theatre seem even more spacious. At the very first stroke of sunflower yellow on pale skin, a familiar contentedness settles on Henry; it's the pleasure of knowing precisely

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what he's doing, of seeing the instruments arrayed on the trolley, of being with his firm in the muffled quiet of the theatre. (250)

We recognize the feeling of contentedness from earlier in the novel, where both Henry's usual mood on a Saturday and his mother's new state of mind are described. Now Henry re-enters that state of mind as he performs his "art of neurosurgery" (255), which he knows is limited but which, he has no doubt, will contribute to our coming to understand how the brain works. As he reflects, very little is known about "how this well-protected one kilogram or so of cells actually encodes information, how it holds experiences, memories, dreams and intentions" (254), all the stuff that make up "this bright inward cinema of thought, of sight and sound and touch bound into a vivid illusion of an instantaneous present, with a self, another brightly wrought illusion, hovering like a ghost at its centre" (254–55). At some point, Henry feels certain, we will know and maybe be able to prevent or cure diseases such as Huntington's or Alzheimer's, yet at the moment, "faced with these unknown codes, this dense and brilliant circuitry, he and his colleagues offer only brilliant plumbing" (255).

Having performed the operation successfully, Henry writes up his notes and the narrator sums up and connects Henry's state of mind to the happy elderly people's states of mind in the nursing home earlier:

For the past two hours, he's been in a dream of absorption that has dissolved all sense of time, and all awareness of the other parts of his life. Even his awareness of his own existence has vanished. He's been delivered into a pure present, free of the weight of the past or any anxieties about the future. In retrospect, though never at the time, it feels like profound happiness. It's a little like sex, in that he feels himself in another medium, but it's less obviously pleasurable, and clearly not sensual. This state of mind brings a contentment he never finds with any passive form of entertainment … It's a feeling of clarified emptiness, of deep, muted joy. Back at work, and lovemaking and Theo's music aside, he's happier than at any other point of his day off, his valuable Saturday. There must, he concludes as he stands to leave the theatre, be something wrong with him. (258)

As I have suggested, if there is something "wrong" with Henry – and with the many readers who may identify with and envy Henry his perhaps too perfect life, family, skills, accomplishments, and possessions, as well as his smug manner of celebrating himself and what he has accomplished – it may be related to his anxieties about physical and mental decay and to his inability to feel and comprehend this as part of his life rather than as alien forces that threaten and oppose it.

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Conclusion

Why read nursing-home fiction? One answer is that it provides a space in which we can imagine ourselves in situations that, due to demographic changes and the aging of societies, we must increasingly become used to. These imaginings and re-imaginings of aging are necessary, on the one hand, because our elderly grow older and many into deep frailty and dependence where they do not necessarily suffer from having to move into a nursing-home facility, and, on the other hand, because if we don't consider residential care for our frail and dependent elderly, we run the risk of abandoning decades of women's work for independence from various unpaid family roles and burdens. To have one's elderly mother put into a residential home is not necessarily to signal that one does not care for her; it is in fact to make sure that someone *does* care for her, ideally under proper working conditions and not at the cost of an experienced loss of autonomy on the caregiver's side. Although he gives a good sense of the special ambience of the nursing home on a few pages, McEwan is not offering an institutional critique or evaluation. Rather, his interest is to explore what the place does to his protagonist's state of mind and to show that Henry's understanding of the nursing home may not be adequate compared to how its inhabitants experience it, given their radically other state of mind to which Henry – and Henry's reader – despite his and our skill in "mind reading" (Zunshine), do not have access but which we sense is there and in need of care.

Saturday can be read as a story about letting go of this fear through embracing dementia as another state of being that – at least, and this is an important caveat, at least for a short while – is in other contexts associated with the richest "moments of being." Virginia Woolf thought of such moments of flow, where people transcend time, place, and self to experience genuine happiness. In the novel, this takes the form of what Henry thinks of as a kind of unconscious oblivion in a "biological hyperspace" (51), which informs the opening and closing scenes of the novel and frames the intense exploration of how one mind works its way through a day of extraordinary events, thoughts, and feelings. Just as Henry only learned to read his mother's mind after she got dementia by reading Jane Austen and George Eliot, who could show him what really passes through such a woman's mind, so do I suggest that we might learn to read Henry's mother's mind through reading his fearful failure to do so in this novel. And this reading lesson might make us better qualified to answer my title's question of who cares for some of our society's most precarious and vulnerable subjects.

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