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BOOK REVIEW

On Chesil Beach. I McEwan. London, UK: Vintage Books, 2007. ISBN: 0-09951-279-0. Price: £6.99. Pages: 176 (paperback)

Research has demonstrated that many people have sexual problems they are unable to talk about. In *On Chesil Beach* Ian McEwan gives us a compelling story about 'doing nothing'. He chooses a different time and he chooses Florence and Edward with their separate narratives. But it could be now. It could be anyone.

The early part of the book affords us a growing intimacy with these people. It hints at their lack of knowledge of each other. The narrative brings them separately to the moment of truth: their wedding night, both the semen and the beach. They struggle with it, step back from it, consider it, and hesitate over the opportunity and then retreat. The author allows us to experience this moment, feel their frustration,

desire and silence – and to feel powerless. We know from the beginning how it will end but we wish it otherwise. We feel the pain and loss of their saying nothing. As they retreat from their marriage we lose our intimacy with them.

As readers, Ian McEwan allows us to be very skilled listeners. As doctors we too are asked to be very skilled listeners and to do more besides: to reflect with our patients, and to develop a shared understanding. Does their narrative give us any understanding? There were hints in Florence's recorded relationship with her father. Even Edward had concerns about this. We know that Florence identified a need to communicate with Edward but couldn't overcome her barrier to this. Could we have helped her understand that? Possibly, however, there is a danger that in attempting these tasks of reflection and achieving a shared understanding we lose our (therapeutic) listening skills.

This book takes hours not days. It is an

insight into non-consummation; not every case, just this one. It is an insight into people; not all people, just these people. And it gives a glimpse of the consultation, the reader-character or doctor-patient relationship and its impact on the health of our patients. And the significance of Chesil Beach? I don't know. It reminds me that solutions may not be easily accessible. Perhaps the most important message is that not knowing the answer for Florence and Edward, we listen to our patients and reflect with them.

Reading a novel is something wonderfully personal. There is always something more immediate to read. Not this time. It is difficult to think that anyone reading this Journal would not benefit from reading this book. It could even be evidence of learning for next year's appraisal.

Reviewed by **Alex Connan**, MRCP, MIPM
General Practitioner, Edinburgh, UK

Starting in this issue with *On Chesil Beach* by Ian McEwan, the journal will review a work of modern fiction that has as a core theme a topic likely to be of interest and relevance to health care professionals working in the fields of sexual and reproductive health care.

The journal will announce the title to be reviewed in the next issue so that interested readers may choose to 'read along' with the reviewer and thus see whether their view of the book mirrors that of the guest reviewer. The title to be reviewed in the July issue is *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver (500 pages, Serpent's Tail, 2006, ISBN: 1-85242-467-2).

Finally, if any journal readers would like to offer to review an appropriate fiction title of their own choosing then they should contact the Journal Editorial Office by e-mail (journal@fsrh.org) in the first instance with details of their nominated title.