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that ethereal nineteenth-century concoction, frightfully difficult to prepare, that was supposed to nourish even the most gravely ill. Confected of nothing but almond water, isinglass, and precise chilling, the blancmange surely embodies heaven: no communion, however, for the lost souls of this novel, so bewitchingly damned, so brilliantly sin-pricked, so *very* much more fascinating than angels.

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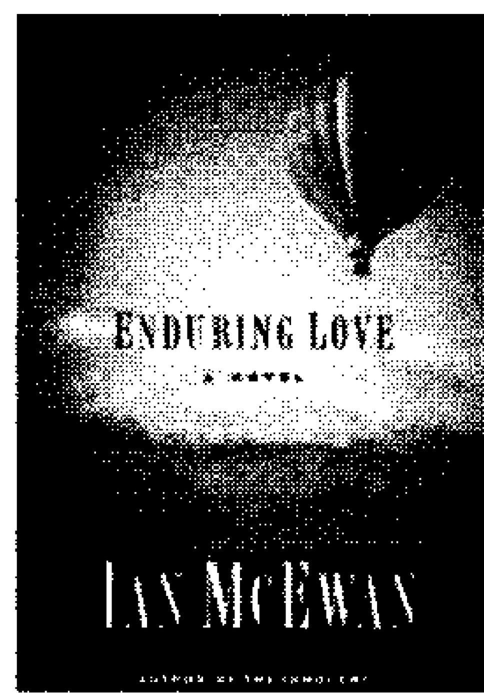
Jonathan Taylor

"The pathological extensions of love not only touch upon but overlap with normal experience," goes the neatly summarizing thesis of *Enduring Love* (quoted, apparently, from an actual *British Journal of Psychiatry* article), a statement that evokes the irritatingly schematic quality Ian McEwan's books sometimes have. It's fair to say that he intends, as the cover of *First Love, Last Rites* nicely synopsized, to "compel us to confront our secret kinship with the horrifying." Yet in execution this mission has often seemed overdetermined, making the rounds of the taboo: incest (*The Cement Garden*), sexual murder and sadism ("Pornography," *The Comfort of Strangers*).

Enduring Love replaces the specter of taboo sexual practice with a menace whose creepiness is not titillatingly transgressive. It's just crazy, or, more to the point, delusional; it even has an interesting medical literature. Less predisposed to the superficially risqué, the novel taps a deeper undercurrent where love and insanity do flow together. Joe, the narrator, and his girlfriend, Clarissa, are, respectively, a science journalist and a Keats specialist. Love's pathological extension takes the form of Jed, a loner Jesus-freak who begins stalking Joe. The overlap, these characters' abundantly fertile common ground, is "how dishonestly," as Joe learns, "we can hold things together for ourselves."

A freak ballooning accident in the countryside brings Joe and Jed together in an effort to rescue a child, an attempt in which another man falls to his death. In the dazed aftermath, Jed locks onto Joe instantly, almost randomly, it seems. His particular insanity, Joe later finds, is known as de Clerambault's syndrome, which features a belief that the object of obsession has initiated a love affair and is cruelly toying with the subject by sending secret signals of encouragement while overtly denying the shared passion. Jed's fervor is especially disturbing because, in a '90s kind of way (Jed speaks with the young American habit of intoning statements as questions), it is so unconvincing either as religion or sexual attraction. His Christianity is vague; asked what he really wishes to do with Joe, he squeaks, "I want to see you?" In fact, his letters and phone calls, which turn rapidly from jubilant gratitude to mocking threats, bear no connection to any actual quality pertaining to Joe, who notes, "If I had written him a letter declaring passionate love, it would have made no difference."

Meanwhile, Clarissa, who has her own worries to deal with, believes that Joe is inventing the whole thing. Joe, stunned by this, diagnoses her "self-persuasion," a handy bit of evolutionary psychology from his files. And as if immediately catching it, he ransacks the letters in her study for an ulterior motive—"some hot little bearded fuck-goat of a post-graduate," perhaps—while acting out the lame pretext, even though he's alone in the house, of locating his stapler.



It's all downhill from there. McEwan's grasp of how strange people will always be to each other, in "love's prison of self-reference," seems to undermine the postulate that Joe and Clarissa's relationship had been, before Jed's intrusion, "without a trace of complication." The stalemate of two intimate but still alien mentalities becomes the meticu- *continued on page 23*

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lously observed drama, as facilitated by McEwan's talents in the narration of consciousness: a clinical ability to evoke "the usual flotsam" of thought, to supply the banal details of contemporary living in just the way one's eye ridiculously falls on them in moments of crisis.

"Our love," Joe and Jed both repeat throughout, like a mantra, for their divergent, desperate purposes. This meaningless repetition gradually corrodes the tender noun; by the end, it seems little more than a proxy for wishful thinking. And it is Jed, safely ensconced forever in his prison of self-reference, who uses the word last: "Thank you for loving me, thank you for accepting me, thank you for recognizing what I am doing for our love."

Jonathan Taylor lives in New York and has reviewed books for *The Nation* and *The Stranger*.

New York: Harcourt Brace. 179 pp. $21.

Fanny Howe

This is not a comic novel, though the dust jacket applies the word "hilarity." It is, instead, a brilliant evocation of a world that can no longer generate the political fury of absurdist literature or the religious memory of salvific fiction. This may be what the new sequence of narrative fiction will deliver in this millennial time—destabilized "takes" and an accounting of repeated unpleasantries. Dickens covered the same territory in his day, but his heroes participated in a series of gestures designed to alter the reality around them. They had social hope.

Why did the moron cross the street? To get to the other side. This old moron joke from the '50s captures the ironic tone and vision of Lynne Tillman's powerful novel covering twenty-four hours in the day of a woman living near Avenue B in New York City. A secular fiction set in reality, almost a documentary, but bristling with feeling, *No Lease on Life* depicts judgment without a judge—the most awful condition imaginable. Each of the heroine's—Elizabeth