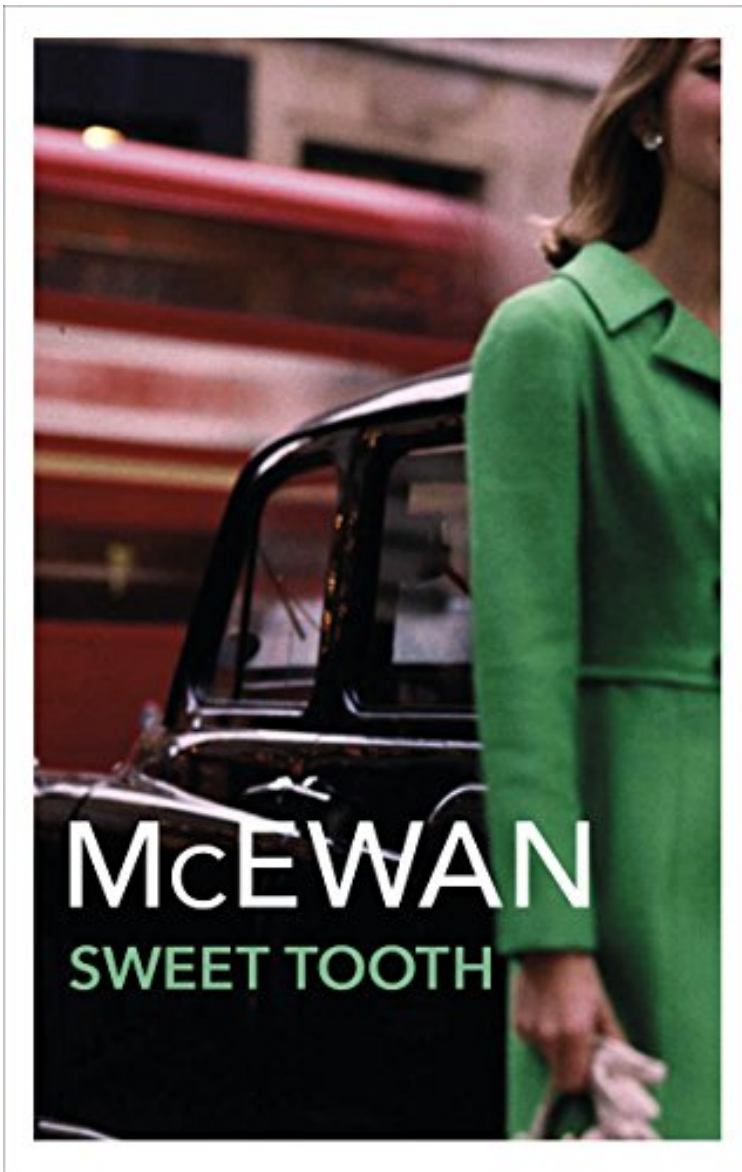


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# Sweet Tooth



*Par Ian McEwan*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe year is 1972, the Cold War is far from over and Serena Frome, in her final year at Cambridge, is being groomed for MI5. Sent on Operation Sweet Tooth a highly secret undercover mission she meets Tom Haley, a promising young writer. First she loves his stories, then she begins to love the man.

Can she maintain the fiction of her undercover life? And who is inventing whom? To answer these questions, Serena must abandon the first rule of espionage trust no one.Extrait1My name is Serena Frome (rhymes with plume) and almost forty years ago I was sent on a secret mission for the British Security Service. I didnt return safely. Within eighteen months of joining I was sacked, having disgraced myself and ruined my lover, though he certainly had a hand in his own undoing.I wont waste much time on my

childhood and teenage years. I'm the daughter of an Anglican bishop and grew up with a sister in the cathedral precinct of a charming small city in the east of England. My home was genial, polished, orderly, book-filled. My parents liked each other well enough and loved me, and I them. My sister Lucy and I were a year and a half apart and though we fought shrilly during our adolescence, there was no lasting harm and we became closer in adult life. Our father's belief in God was muted and reasonable, did not intrude much on our lives and was just sufficient to raise him smoothly through the Church hierarchy and install us in a comfortable Queen Anne house. It overlooked an enclosed garden with ancient herbaceous borders that were well known, and still are, to those who know about plants. So, all stable, enviable, idyllic even. We grew up inside a walled garden, with all the pleasures and limitations that implies. The late sixties lightened but did not disrupt our existence. I never missed a day at my local grammar school unless I was ill. In my late teens there slipped over the garden wall some heavy petting, as they used to call it, experiments with tobacco, alcohol and a little hashish, rock and roll records, brighter colors and warmer relations all round. At seventeen my friends and I were timidly and delightedly rebellious, but we did our schoolwork, we memorized and disgorged the irregular verbs, the equations, the motives of fictional characters. We liked to think of ourselves as bad girls, but actually we were rather good. It pleased us, the general excitement in the air in 1969. It was inseparable from the expectation that soon it would be time to leave home for another education elsewhere. Nothing strange or terrible happened to me during my first eighteen years and that is why I'll skip them. Left to myself I would have chosen to do a lazy English degree at a provincial university far to the north or west of my home. I enjoyed reading novels. I went fast--I could get through two or three a week--and doing that for three years would have suited me just fine. But at the time I was considered something of a freak of nature--a girl who happened to have a talent for mathematics. I wasn't interested in the subject, I took little pleasure in it, but I enjoyed being top, and getting there without much work. I knew the answers to questions before I even knew how I had got to them. While my friends struggled and calculated, I reached a solution by a set of floating steps that were partly visual, partly just a feeling for what was right. It was hard to explain how I knew what I knew. Obviously, an exam in maths was far less effort than one in English literature. And in my final year I was captain of the school chess team. You must exercise some historical imagination to understand what it meant for a girl in those times to travel to a neighboring school and knock from his perch some condescending smirking squirt of a boy. However, maths and chess, along with hockey, pleated skirts and hymn-singing, I considered mere school stuff. I reckoned it was time to put away these childish things when I began to think about applying to university. But I reckoned without my mother. She was the quintessence, or parody, of a vicar's then a bishop's wife--a formidable memory for parishioners names and faces and gripes, a way of sailing down a street in her Hermes scarf, a kindly but unbending manner with the daily and the gardener. Faultless charm on any social scale, in any key. How knowingly she could level with the tight-faced, chain-smoking women from the housing estates when they came for the Mothers and Babies Club in the crypt. How compellingly she read the Christmas Eve story to the Barnardos children gathered at her feet in our drawing room. With what natural authority she put the Archbishop of Canterbury at his ease when he came through once for tea and Jaffa cakes after blessing the restored cathedral font. Lucy and I were banished upstairs for the duration of his visit. All this--and here is the difficult part--combined with utter devotion and subordination to my father's cause. She promoted him, served him, eased his way at every turn. From boxed socks and ironed surplice hanging in the wardrobe, to his dustless study, to the profoundest Saturday silence in the house when he wrote his sermon. All she demanded in return--my guess, of course--was that he love her or, at least, never leave her. But what I hadn't understood about my mother was that buried deep beneath this conventional exterior was the hardy little seed of a feminist. I'm sure that word never passed her lips, but it made no difference. Her certainty frightened me. She said it was my duty as a woman to go to Cambridge to study maths. As a woman? In those days, in our milieu, no one ever spoke like that. No woman did anything as a woman. She told me she would not permit me to waste my talent. I was to excel and become extraordinary. I must have a proper career in science or engineering or economics. She allowed herself the world-oyster cliché. It was unfair on my sister that I was both clever and beautiful when she was neither. It would compound the injustice if I failed to aim high. I didn't follow the logic of this, but I said nothing. My mother told me she would never forgive me and she would never forgive herself if I went off to read English and became no more than a slightly better educated housewife than she was. I was in danger of wasting my life. Those were her words, and they represented an admission. This was the only time she expressed or implied dissatisfaction with her lot. Then she enlisted my father--the Bishop was what my sister and I called

him. When I came in from school one afternoon my mother told me he was waiting for me in his study. In my green blazer with its heraldic crest and emblazoned motto--Nisi Dominus Vanum (Without the Lord All Is in Vain)--I sulkily lolled in his clubbish leather armchair while he presided at his desk, shuffling papers, humming to himself as he ordered his thoughts. I thought he was about to rehearse for me the parable of the talents, but he took a surprising and practical line. He had made some inquiries. Cambridge was anxious to be seen to be opening its gates to the modern egalitarian world. With my burden of triple misfortune--a grammar school, a girl, an all-male subject--I was certain to get in. If, however, I applied to do English there (never my intention; the Bishop was always poor on detail) I would have a far harder time. Within a week my mother had spoken to my headmaster. Certain subject teachers were deployed and used all my parents arguments as well as some of their own, and of course I had to give way. So I abandoned my ambition to read English at Durham or Aberystwyth, where I am sure I would have been happy, and went instead to Newnham College, Cambridge, to learn at my first tutorial, which took place at Trinity, what a mediocrity I was in mathematics. My Michaelmas term depressed me and I almost left. Gawky boys, unblessed by charm or other human attributes like empathy and generative grammar, cleverer cousins of the fools I had smashed at chess, leered as I struggled with concepts they took for granted. Ah, the serene Miss Frome, one tutor would exclaim sarcastically as I entered his room each Tuesday morning. Serenissima. Blue-eyed one! Come and enlighten us! It was obvious to my tutors and fellow students that I could not succeed precisely because I was a good-looking girl in a miniskirt, with blond hair curling past her shoulder blades. The truth was that I couldnt succeed because I was like nearly all the rest of humanity--not much good at maths, not at this level. I did my best to transfer out to English or French or even anthropology, but no one wanted me. In those days the rules were tightly observed. To shorten a long, unhappy story, I stuck it out and by the end managed a third. If Ive rushed through my childhood and teenage years, then Ill certainly condense my time as an undergraduate. I never went in a punt, with or without a windup gramophone, or visited the Footlights--theater embarrasses me--or got myself arrested at the Garden House riots. But I lost my virginity in my first term, several times over it seemed, the general style being so wordless and clumsy, and had a pleasant succession of boyfriends, six or seven or eight over the nine terms, depending on your definitions of carnality. I made a handful of good friends from among the Newnham women. I played tennis and I read books. All thanks to my mother, I was studying the wrong subject, but I didnt stop reading. Id never read much poetry or any plays at school, but I think I had more pleasure out of novels than my university friends, who were obliged to sweat over weekly essays on Middlemarch or Vanity Fair. I raced through the same books, chatted about them perhaps, if there was someone around who could tolerate my base level of discourse, then I moved on. Reading was my way of not thinking about maths. More than that (or do I mean less?), it was my way of not thinking. Ive said I was fast. The Way We Live Now in four afternoons lying on my bed! I could take in a block of text or a whole paragraph in one visual gulp. It was a matter of letting my eyes and thoughts go soft, like wax, to take the impression fresh off the page. To the irritation of those around me, Id turn a page every few seconds with an impatient snap of the wrist. My needs were simple. I didnt bother much with themes or felicitous phrases and skipped fine descriptions of weather, landscapes and interiors. I wanted characters I could believe in, and I wanted to be made curious about what was to happen to them. Generally, I preferred people to be falling in and out of love, but I didnt mind so much if they tried their hand at something else. It was vulgar to want it, but I liked someone to say Marry me by the end. Novels without female characters were a lifeless desert. Conrad was beyond my consideration, as were most stories by Kipling and Hemingway. Nor was I impressed by reputations. I read anything I saw lying around. Pulp fiction, great literature and everything in between--I gave them all the same rough treatment. What famous novel pithily begins like this? The temperature hit ninety degrees the day she arrived. Isnt it punchy? Dont you know it? I caused amusement among my Newnham friends studying English when I told them that Valley of the Dolls was as good as anything Jane Austen ever wrote. They laughed, they teased me for months. And they hadnt read a line of Susanns work. But who cared? Who really minded about the unformed opinions of a failing mathematician? Not me, not my friends. To this extent at least I was free. The matter of my undergraduate reading habits is not a digression. Those books delivered me to my career in intelligence. In my final year my friend Rona Kemp started up a weekly magazine called Quis?. Such projects rose and fell by the dozen, but hers was ahead of its time with its highlow mix. Poetry and pop music, political theory and gossip, string quartets and student fashion, nouvelle vague and football. Ten years later the formula was everywhere. Rona may not have invented it but she was among the first to see its attractions. She went on to Vogue by way of the TLS and then to an incendiary rise

and fall, starting new magazines in Manhattan and Rio. The double question marks in this, her first title, were an innovation that helped ensure a run of eleven issues. Remembering my Susann moment, she asked me to write a regular column, What I Read Last Week. My brief was to be chatty and omnivorous. Easy! I wrote as I talked, usually doing little more than summarizing the plots of the books I had just raced through, and, in conscious self-parody, I heightened the occasional verdict with a row of exclamation marks. My light-headed alliterative prose went down well. On a couple of occasions strangers approached me in the street to tell me so. Even my facetious maths tutor made a complimentary remark. It was the closest I ever came to a taste of that sweet and heady elixir, student fame. I had written half a dozen jaunty pieces when something went wrong. Like many writers who come by a little success, I began to take myself too seriously. I was a girl with untutored tastes, I was an empty mind, ripe for a takeover. I was waiting, as they said in some of the novels I was reading, for Mr. Right to come along and sweep me off my feet. My Mr. Right was a stern Russian. I discovered an author and a subject and became an enthusiast. Suddenly I had a theme, and a mission to persuade. I began to indulge myself with lengthy rewrites. Instead of talking straight onto the page, I was doing second and then third drafts. In my modest view, my column had become a vital public service. I got up in the night to delete whole paragraphs and draw arrows and balloons across the pages. I went for important walks. I knew my popular appeal would dwindle, but I didnt care. The dwindling proved my point, it was the heroic price I knew I must pay. The wrong people had been reading me. I didnt care when Rona remonstrated. In fact, I felt vindicated. This isnt exactly chatty, she said coolly as she handed back my copy in the Copper Kettle one afternoon. This isnt what we agreed. She was right. My breeziness and exclamation marks had dissolved as anger and urgency narrowed my interests and destroyed my style. My decline was initiated by the fifty minutes I spent with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyns One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich in the new translation by Gillon Aitken. I picked it up straight after finishing Ian Flemings Octopussy. The transition was harsh. I knew nothing of the Soviet labor camps and had never heard the word gulag. Growing up in a cathedral precinct, what did I know of the cruel absurdities of communism, of how brave men and women in bleak and remote penal colonies were reduced to thinking day by day of nothing else beyond their own survival? Hundreds of thousands transported to the Siberian wastes for fighting for their country in a foreign land, for having been a prisoner of war, for upsetting a party official, for being a party official, for wearing glasses, for being a Jew, a homosexual, a peasant who owned a cow, a poet. Who was speaking out for all this lost humanity? I had never troubled myself with politics before. I knew nothing of the arguments and disillusionment of an older generation. Nor had I heard of the left opposition. Beyond school, my education had been confined to some extra maths and piles of paperback novels. I was an innocent and my outrage was moral. I didnt use, and hadnt even heard, the word totalitarianism. I probably would have thought it had something to do with refusing a drink. I believed I was seeing through a veil, that I was breaking new ground as I filed dispatches from an obscure front. Within a week Id read Solzhenitsyns The First Circle. The title came from Dante. His first circle of hell was reserved for Greek philosophers and consisted, as it happened, of a pleasant walled garden surrounded by hellish suffering, a garden from which escape and access to paradise was forbidden. I made the enthusiasts mistake of assuming that everyone shared my previous ignorance. My column became a harangue. Did smug Cambridge not know what had gone on, was still going on, three thousand miles to the east, had it not noticed the damage this failed utopia of food queues, awful clothes and restricted travel was doing to the human spirit? What was to be done? Quis? tolerated four rounds of my anticommunism. My interests extended to Koestlers Darkness at Noon, Nabokovs Bend Sinister and that fine treatise by Milosz, The Captive Mind. I was also the first person in the world to understand Orwells Nineteen Eighty-four. But my heart was always with my first love, Aleksandr. The forehead that rose like an Orthodox dome, the hillbilly pastors wedge of beard, the grim, gulag-conferred authority, his stubborn immunity to politicians. Even his religious convictions could not deter me. I forgave him when he said that men had forgotten God. He was God. Who could match him? Who could deny him his Nobel Prize? Gazing at his photograph, I wanted to be his lover. I would have served him as my mother did my father. Box his socks? I would have knelt to wash his feet. With my tongue! In those days, dwelling on the iniquities of the Soviet system was routine for Western politicians and editorials in most newspapers. In the context of student life and politics, it was just a little distasteful. If the CIA was against communism, there must be something to be said for it. Sections of the Labour Party still held a candle for the aging, square-jawed Kremlin brutes and their grisly project, still sang the Internationale at the annual conference, still dispatched students on goodwill exchanges. In the Cold War years of binary thinking, it would not do to find yourself agreeing about the Soviet Union with an

American president waging war in Vietnam. But at that teatime rendezvous in the Copper Kettle, Rona, even then so polished, perfumed, precise, said it was not the politics of my column that troubled her. My sin was to be earnest. The next issue of her magazine didn't carry my byline. My space was taken up by an interview with the Incredible String Band. And then *Quis?* folded. *Revue de presse* "Enthralling, beguiling and totally addictive from the first page to the last McEwan's sense of time and place is authentic with his trademark attention to details of the social history of the period" (*Bristol Magazine*) "A brilliant portrayal of 1970s Britain at its absolute worst But it's also a gripping spy novel with some characteristic McEwan twists toward the end" (*Mail on Sunday*) "No contemporary novelist is more enthralled by what goes on inside the human skull than Ian McEwan... Doubling back and forth across genre boundaries, *Sweet Tooth* takes risks...this acute, witty novel is a winningly cunning addition to McEwan's fictional surveys of intelligence." (Peter Kemp *Sunday Times*) "Playful, comic... This is a great big Russian doll of a novel, and in its construction deft, tight, exhilaratingly immaculate is a huge part of its pleasure." (Julie Myerson *Observer*) "A thoroughly clever novel...a sublime novel about novels, about writing them and reading them and the spying that goes on in doing both...very impressive...rich and enjoyable." (Lucy Kellaway *Financial Times*)