

# The Daydreamer

Ian McEwan

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## About the Book

'Looking down through the fur, and parting it with the tips of his fingers, he saw that he had opened up a small slit in the cat's skin. It was as if he were holding the handle of a zip. Again he pulled, and now there was a dark opening two inches long. William Cat's purr was coming from in there. Perhaps, Peter thought, I'll see his heart beating. A paw was gently pushing against his fingers again. William Cat wanted him to go on.'

Step into the extraordinary world of ten-year-old Peter Fortune in Ian McEwan's first book for children.

# The Daydreamer

Ian McEwan

**RHCP DIGITAL**

To Polly, Alice, William and Gregory, with thanks

*My purpose is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes  
of a different kind.*

*Ovid, Metamorphoses, Book One*

## Preface

AS EACH CHAPTER of *The Daydreamer* was completed, I read it aloud to my children. The arrangement was simple. They got the latest of what we called the 'Peter stories', and I took away some useful editorial comment. This pleasant, almost ritualistic exchange in turn affected the writing itself, in that I became more than usually attentive to the sound of an adult voice speaking each sentence. This adult was not, or not simply, me. Alone in my study, I read aloud passages to an imaginary child (not quite, or not only, one of mine) on behalf of this imaginary adult. Ear and tongue, I wanted to please them both.

The child's needs I thought I knew instinctively: a good tale above all, a sympathetic hero, villains yes, but not all the time because they are too simplifying, clarity in the openings, twists in the middle, and satisfying outcomes that were not always happy. For the adult I felt little more than vague sympathy. We all love the *idea* of bedtime stories - the freshly minted breath, the wide and trustful eyes, the hot water bottle baking down among the clean linen, the sleepy glowing covenant - and who would not have the scene carved upon his headstone? But do adults really like children's literature? I've always thought the enthusiasm was a little overstated, even desperate. '*Swallows and Amazons*? Beatrix Potter? *Marvellous* books!' Do we really mean it, do we really still enjoy them, or are we speaking up for, and keeping the lines open to, our lost, nearly forgotten selves? When exactly did you last curl up alone with *The Swiss Family Robinson*?

What we like about children's books is our children's pleasure in them, and this is less to do with literature and more to do with love. Early on in writing and reading aloud *The Daydreamer* I began to think it might be better to forget about our mighty tradition of children's literature and to write a book for adults about a child in a language that children could understand. In the century of Hemingway and Calvino simple prose need not deter the sophisticated reader. I hoped the subject matter – the imagination itself – was one in which anyone who picks up a book has a stake. Similarly, transformation has been a theme, almost an obsession, in all literatures. *The Daydreamer* was published in an illustrated edition for children in Britain and the United States, and in a more sober adult form in various other countries. There was once a tradition by which authors dedicated their books to the fates, rather in the manner of a parent sending a child out into the world. 'Goe littel booke . . .' This one may well settle down after all for a quiet life in a corner of the children's library, or die in oblivion, but for the moment I'm still hoping it might give some pleasure all round.

*Ian McEwan*  
1995



## Introducing Peter

WHEN PETER FORTUNE was ten years old grown-up people sometimes used to tell him he was a 'difficult' child. He never understood what they meant. He didn't feel difficult at all. He didn't throw milk bottles at the garden wall, or tip tomato ketchup over his head and pretend it was blood, or slash at his granny's ankle with his sword, though he occasionally thought of these things. Apart from all vegetables except potatoes, and fish, eggs and cheese, there was nothing he would not eat. He wasn't noisier or dirtier or more stupid than anyone he knew. His name was easy to say and spell. His face, which was pale and freckled, was easy enough to remember. He went to school every day like all other children and never made that much fuss about it. He was only as horrid to his sister as she was to him. Policemen never came knocking at the front door wanting to arrest him. Doctors in white coats never offered to take him away to the madhouse. As far as Peter was concerned, he was really quite easy. What was difficult about him?

It was not until he had been a grown-up himself for many years that Peter finally understood. They thought he was difficult because he was so silent. That seemed to bother people. The other problem was he liked being by himself. Not all the time, of course. Not even every day. But most days he liked to go off somewhere for an hour to his bedroom, or the park. He liked to be alone and think his thoughts.

Now, grown-ups like to think they know what's going on inside a ten-year-old's head. And it's impossible to know what someone is thinking if they keep quiet about it. People