



***Nutshell*, by Ian McEwan**
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, April 2017

Nutshell, Ian McEwan's latest novel, displays a master storyteller at the height of his powers. Equal parts parody and satire, *Nutshell* is completely original. Set in contemporary London, McEwan's witty and acerbic tale recasts Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from the viewpoint of a most unlikely character.

The novel gets its title from the Shakespearean quote, "I could be bound in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams." Our Hamlet-like hero—would you believe—is a near-term baby in utero who overhears his mother Trudy and uncle Claude plot to murder his clueless father John. Baby-to-be gets his inquisitiveness and vast vocabulary from listening to his mother's podcast lectures and self-improvement audio books. He's also somewhat of a wine snob, reveling in a "joyous, blushful Pinot Noir, or gooseberried Sauvignon" that comes his way during his mother's imbibing.

John, a middling poet, as the elder brother had inherited the family manse in a posh section of St. John's Wood. Claude, who lacks John's charm and easy grace, covets John's wife Trudy as well as his townhouse, which is now worth a cool eight million pounds. Claude and Trudy embark on an affair and talk a lot about what to do with John. (Leave it to a male writer to have the temerity to script an adulterous woman in her third-trimester.)

The upending of the British class system is a frequent theme of McEwan. When the police come to interview the suspicious lovers, our budding narrator observes, "Chief Inspector Allison is light-boned, even bird-like, for all her seniority.... Her mild cockney is the very register of urban poise and won't be challenged. Not by my mother's expensively constrained vowels. No pulling that old trick. History has moved on. One day most British statesmen will speak like the chief inspector."

Our nascent Hamlet, like his Shakespearean counterpart, muses "to be or not to be" and if/how to avenge his father. I'll leave it to readers of *Nutshell* to figure out

the neatly tied up details. McEwan's preposterous novel is so cleverly plotted and wickedly entertaining that I reread the slim tome through a second time. In a nutshell, it is outstanding.