

PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT

Raised in Alva, Oklahoma (population 5,000), **Alek Shrader**

grew up hiding under the makeup table in the wings while his parents—both opera singers—performed onstage. Of course, when your mother and father sing opera, you practically have an adolescent obligation to create a rock band, which is exactly what Shrader did, jamming from eighth grade until his junior year at Northwestern Oklahoma State University, at which point he finally embraced classical music. “I was getting more positive feedback when I sang opera than when I sang rock,” he explains. After graduating, Shrader went on to study at Oberlin College & Conservatory,

where he caught the attention of the director of the National Council Auditions, Gayletha Nichols, who suggested he try out for the Met’s prestigious annual competition. “He comes out onstage,” she says, “and you’re immediately drawn to him for the rest of the night.” Shrader ended up winning in New York (the contest is chronicled in the documentary *The Audition*, in which his one-liners regularly diffuse the tension), catapulting him to a year at Juilliard and then to a San Francisco Opera honors program. Then came his Cinderella story. While performing the role of Prince Charming in Rossini’s *La Cenerentola*, Shrader fell in love with the princess, played by Daniela Mack. “We had a ‘showmance,’” he says, letting the joke land. This season, the 30-year-old



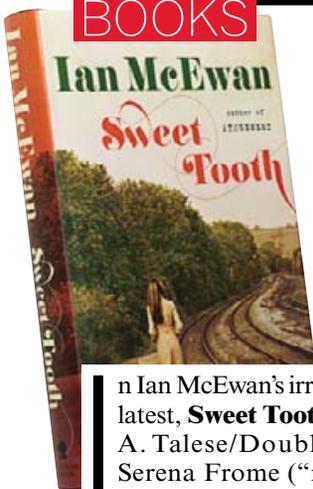
THE RIGHT NOTE
ALEK SHRADER (IN A MICHAEL KORS COAT) MAKES HIS MET DEBUT THIS MONTH.

OPERA CLASSIC APPEAL

tenor makes his official Met debut—first as Ferdinand, wooing Miranda (Isabel Leonard) in *The Tempest* (“That’s my voice type,” he says, laughing. “I’m usually the young lover—that’s what I do”), and then in the holiday run of *The Barber of Seville*, in which, as Count Almaviva, he’ll be on the lookout for love once again. Offstage,

when he’s not traveling to see Mack (married in 2011, the two don’t yet have a home base), he’s working on a screenplay or running to stay in shape. “There’s an athleticism now that’s required that goes beyond your voice,” says the strapping star. “Directors come and expect you to put on a gorilla suit.”—MOLLY CREEDEN

BOOKS



HOUSE OF GAMES

IAN McEWAN’S LATEST FOLLOWS THE TRAIL OF A YOUNG BRITISH AGENT.

In Ian McEwan’s irresistible latest, **Sweet Tooth** (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday), Serena Frome (“rhymes with plume”) looks back at her calamitous first mission for British Intelligence. It’s the early seventies, and the “rather gorgeous” vicar’s daughter has graduated from Cambridge with a degree in math—though she spends most of her time in her Camden bedsit, devouring paperback novels in search of her

“best self.” “Sometimes,” Serena recalls, “my alter ego . . . floated towards me like a friendly ghost from the pages of Doris Lessing, or Margaret Drabble or Iris Murdoch. Then she was gone—their versions were too educated or too clever, or not quite lonely enough in the world to be me.”

In fact, Serena’s education, literary and otherwise, has just begun. A brief affair with a married professor introduces her to Barolo wine and silk blouses from Liberty, as well as adultery’s requisite subterfuges—and leads to an entry-level job at MI5, where the Cold War glamour has

faded and her male colleagues are disappointingly fusty (less James Bond than Basil Fawley). Thanks in part to her blonde allure, Serena lands an assignment to masquerade as an emissary of a cultural institute and entice a promising young novelist, Tom Haley, to accept a generous stipend. When Serena succeeds all too well, falling for both Tom and his short stories—some of which bear a strong resemblance to McEwan’s early work—the question becomes, How long can she maintain her fictional cover?

The extent to which Serena—McEwan’s first

female narrator since Briony in 2001’s *Atonement*—is the creation of others is at the playful heart of this nostalgic tea cake of a novel, which is full of fond winks to the author’s own literary coming-of-age (Martin Amis makes a cameo, and there’s a dedication to Christopher Hitchens). In the end, *Sweet Tooth* is an ebulliently seductive tease, less interested in love or politics than in writerly forms of intrigue: the illusions and concealments that build intimacy and suspense, the pas de deux of trust and doubt. If all novelists are covert operatives, McEwan makes for a consummately charming double agent, lifting the narrative curtain just enough to reveal his scuffed brogues underneath.

—MEGAN O’GRADY