

2005

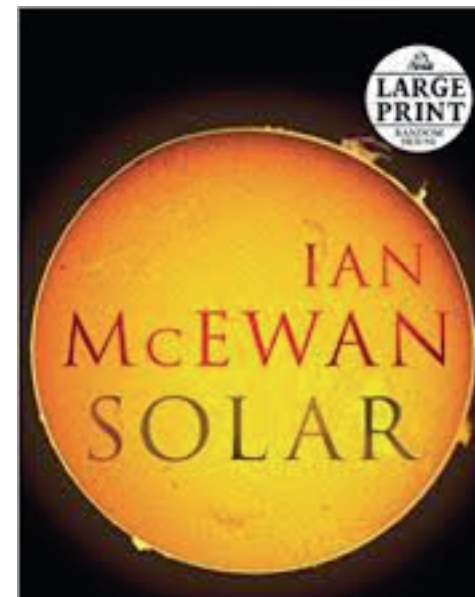
By 2005 Beard is experiencing a career resurgence due to his research into solar energy which in actuality was the research of Tom Aldous. Beard no longer works for the government having been fired after giving a press conference in which he stated that the lack of women in science was due to the natural limitations of their gender. The ensuing anger into his comments caused a media storm and resulted in his womanizing past being scrutinized in the press.

He has a sexual relationship with a younger woman named Melissa who owns a string of dance supply shops whom he deliberately refuses to marry despite her desire for a child. Returning home from a trip Melissa informs Beard that she is currently pregnant having stopped taking birth control pills. Beard is angry and tries to think of ways to convince Melissa to have an abortion.

2009

Beard is now a father, and sixty-two years old. He is not in the best of health, and is worried about a suspicious-looking lesion on his wrist. His solar power plant is in the final stages of construction in Lordsburg, New Mexico, where he has acquired another girlfriend, Darlene, a waitress. Darlene wants to marry him, but he has a very comfortable set-up with Melissa and his three-year-old daughter, Catriona. All his problems culminate on the eve of the opening ceremony for his solar power plant. Tarpin is out of jail and turns up looking for work, Melissa flies to New Mexico with his daughter to try and win him over from Darlene, a patent lawyer arrives with proof that he stole his ideas from the now-dead Aldous, his doctor confirms the lesion on his hand is cancerous, his business partner abandons him to multimillion-dollar debts, and then he learns that somebody (presumably Tarpin) has sabotaged his power plant by smashing the solar panels. In the final scene Beard gets an "unfamiliar, swelling sensation" in his heart which he interprets as love for his daughter, but may well be the onset of a heart attack.

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*Solar* de Ian McEwan

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Ian Russell McEwan, CBE, FRSA, FRSL (born 21 June 1948) is an English novelist and screenwriter. In 2008, The Times featured him on its list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945" and The Daily Telegraph ranked him number 19 in its list of the "100 most powerful people in British culture".[1]

McEwan began his career writing sparse, Gothic short stories. His first two novels, The Cement Garden and The Comfort of Strangers, earned him the nickname "Ian Macabre". These were followed by three novels of some success in the 1980s and early 1990s. His novel Enduring Love was adapted into a film of the same name. He won the Man Booker Prize with Amsterdam. His following novel, Atonement, garnered acclaim and was adapted into an Oscar-winning film starring Keira Knightley and James McAvoy. His later novels have included The Children Act, Nutshell, and Machines Like Me.

## **Solar**

### Summary

Michael Beard – professor , “ a genius in need of rescuing”

Patrice - 5th wife

Rodney Tarpin – builder and lover of Patrice

Tom Aldous – post – doc , lover of Patrice , works at the Centre

Jock Brady (Sir) – head of the Centre

Melissa Browne (39) Beard’s lover and gets pregnant and has their daughter Catriona

Toby Hammar – US contact

Darlene – Beard’s lover in the US

Layout

Part 1 – 2000

Part 2 - 2005

Part 3 – 2009

### Summary

Michael Beard is an eminent, Nobel Prize–winning physicist whose own life is chaotic and complicated. The novel takes the reader chronologically through three significant periods in Beard's life: 2000, 2005 and 2009, interspersed with some recollections of his student days in Oxford.

2000

Middle-aged, balding and slightly overweight womanizer Beard falls into a depression after learning that his fifth wife, Patrice, has begun an affair with their builder, a man called Tarpin. Despite being a Nobel award-winning physicist Beard realizes all his best work was done as a young man and now coasts on his reputation heading a research centre in Reading that seeks to harness wind energy. One of the younger researchers at the centre, Tom Aldous, tries to speak to Beard about the potential of solar energy but Beard shuts him down.

After seeing Patrice with a bruise on her face Beard goes to confront Tarpin, but finds himself no match for the man and leaves after causing a scene in front of Tarpin's neighbours. Depressed over his marriage Beard accepts an invitation to go to the Arctic as part of a retreat on climate change. While there he realizes he is the only scientist among groups of artists who believe passionately in climate change (which he remains skeptical of) though they treat him with respect, believing his research in wind-based energy constitutes concrete steps towards combatting global warming.

Beard returns home from his trip deciding to divorce Patrice. Arriving early however he encounters Tom Aldous in his bathrobe. After Beard tells him he will ruin his career Aldous begs him not to imploring him that his research into photosynthesis and solar energy is more important than the feud between the two of them. While pleading for his career Aldous trips on a rug and strikes his head against a coffee table. Beard realizes that if he calls the police he could be blamed for Aldous's death and instead plants evidence of Tarpin's presence.

Tarpin is indeed arrested and convicted of Aldous's murder and Beard is painted in the media as a sympathetic figure who had been cuckolded by his wife. Aldous's research on solar energy is given to Beard as it had been labelled with his name.

## Discussion Questions

1-Do you think you would like Beard if you met him?

2-How does Beard treat women? Do you believe that Beard is a misogynist? (Boys vs girls pg 134)

3-Does Beard actually really care about the environment?

4-Beard loves physics in part because he believes that it is "free of human taint" (p. 10). In what ways does the novel complicate this belief? In what sense is Beard's own work "tainted" by human entanglements?5-The narrative structure of Solar is mostly chronological. What effects does McEwan achieve by occasionally departing from a straightforward chronological progression?

5-Beard claims he does not believe in the possibility of "profound inner change" (p. 77). Does he remain unchanged over the course of the novel?

6-How does McEwan manage to make Beard such a sympathetic character despite his many foibles? What are his most salient character flaws?

7-Why is Beard so attached to preserving what he calls his "unshareable core"? (p. 307). Why does he find it impossible to tell Melissa that he loves her? Why do his marriages keep falling apart?

8-In what ways is Solar a satirical novel? What are its main satirical targets? How, for example, do postmodernists come off in the book?

9-What are some of the funniest moments in Solar? How does McEwan create such brilliant comedic effects?

10-Look at the encounters between art and science in the novel, those occasions when Beard squares off with people from the humanities—novelists, folklorists, postmodern feminists, etc. Who gets the better of these confrontations? Is the book as a whole making a point through its depiction of these encounters?

11-What is the significance of the entropy in the boot room on board the ship that is holding the conference on climate change? What does this chaos and carelessness suggest about humanity's ability to stop global warming?

12-Beard has a remarkably clear conscience; he is largely untroubled by his affairs and deceits, his theft of Aldous's ideas, his framing of Tarpin, etc. Why is he so free of the guilt that might afflict most other men? getting out of the mess he's created at the very end of the book?

13-Several times during the course of the novel it appears that public infamy—born of journalists' insatiable desire for controversy and Beard's own willingness to step into it—will doom Beard's career. What enables him to emerge from these disasters relatively unscathed? Will he be as lucky getting out of the mess he's created at the very end of the book?

14-How surprising is the ending of the novel, particularly the final sentence? What is the swelling sensation that Beard feels in his heart as his daughter approaches him? What is likely to happen to Beard next?

15-How does the appendix containing the presentation speech for Beard's Nobel Prize alter the way Beard is finally viewed? Why would McEwan choose to attach this appendix to the body of the novel?

16-Solar is in many ways a picaresque and at times farcical novel, and yet it also engages a theme of major importance—global warming. What is the connection between personal and planetary catastrophe in the novel, between the meltdown of Beard's personal and professional life and the kind of greed, dishonesty, rationalization, and failure to face facts that has resulted in the climate crisis? What is the significance, in this context, of Beard's inability to moderate his eating habits and his sexual pursuits?

17-What does Solar contribute to our understanding of climate change?

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