

Ian McEwan

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In *Solar*, British novelist Ian McEwan's newest novel, Nobel Prize-winning climate-change researcher Michael Beard, an intellectual fraud resting on his past laurels, descends into personal and professional chaos.

As in the literary giant's other works, fate and crisis direct the course of events that precipitate such disarray for Beard. "In different ways," writes critic James Wood, "most of Ian McEwan's novels and stories are about trauma and contingency, and he is now best known as the great contemporary stager of traumatic contingency as it strikes ordinary lives" (*London Review of Books*, 4/09). In his almost two dozen novels, short story collections, plays, screenplays, and children's fiction, McEwan, one of Britain's most prominent postwar novelists, manufactures disasters from the ordinary that lead his everyman characters—many unsavory, but few unsympathetic—into extraordinary situations.

But McEwan is not all gloom and doom, despite being labeled "Ian Macabre" and "Britain's nasty boy of literature, a writer of horror tales for adults" for his early exploration of sadomasochism and gothic themes (*Washington Post*, 9/11/88). In his first novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978), a group of orphaned children hide their mother's corpse in

their cellar and revert to a feral state; in *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), tourists fall prey to a sadist. Yet the author's more recent novels reveal a greater humanity, introspection, and literary range. *The Child in Time* (1987), in which a young child disappears from a supermarket, incorporates larger social and political possibilities; *Black Dogs* (1992), set in Berlin, probes the impact of the Cold War; and the Booker Prize-winning *Amsterdam* (1998) asks questions about revenge and moral responsibility. But if pedophilia, incest, and crime remain familiar territory, larger messages about memory, time, and truth lurk just beneath the surface. "I feel that I'm involved in a long-term investigation of human nature," McEwan said. "I've wanted to locate things specifically and also to merge invented worlds with real worlds" (Interview with Dave Weich, *Powells.com*, 4/1/04).

"Ideally," McEwan said of his creative process, "I hope to surprise myself. For me writing a novel is like beginning an investigation, and you don't quite know where that investigation will take you. I might have a clear idea of

where I might end up even, but along the way, I hope to be surprised. One thing leads to another" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 3/10/02). McEwan, who has been nominated for the Man Booker Prize six times and has earned many other honors—including a CBE (Commander of the British Empire)—remains peerless in his inquiries into human nature. And, in book after book, he continues to surprise.

SELECTED WORKS

THE FIRST SHORT STORY COLLECTION

First Love, Last Rites (1975)

♦ SOMERSET MAUGHAM AWARD

McEwan regarded this debut work, a collection of short stories, as an experiment in writing, a chance to discover himself as an author. Written when he was 27, the collection brought him wide recognition in England.

THE STORIES: Themes of adolescence, sex, loneliness, and perversity dominate these eight stories. In “Homemade,” an adolescent boy initiates a sexual encounter with his younger sister. “Butterflies” features a lonely man who torments a young girl, while “Conversation with a Cupboard Man” reveals an overprotected man’s inability to cope on his own. And in “Disguises,” an adopted orphan has a surreal experience with a cross-dressing caregiver. All of the tales, horrifying in their intensity and pathologies, explore the loss of innocence as their characters tread the fine line between childhood and adulthood.

“What sounds lurid and macabre in summary comes across on the page as poignant and often appealing. ... With understatement and honesty he defuses what might seem salacious, and with consummate style he staves off any suspicion of tawdry intentions. ... Of McEwan it should be said, ‘Read *First Love, Last Rites* now.’” MICHAEL MEWSHAW, *NEW YORK*

TIMES, 9/28/75

THE MOVIE: 1997, starring Natasha Gregson Wagner and Giovanni Ribisi, and directed by Jesse Peretz

A NOVELISTIC TURNING POINT ...

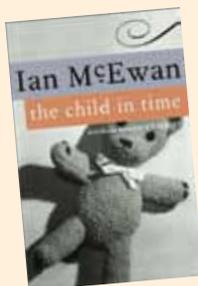
The Child in Time (1987)

- ♦ WHITBREAD AWARD
- ♦ PRIX FÉMINA ÉTRANGER

In 1999, McEwan’s first wife, Penny Allen, kidnapped their teenage son and took him to France after a bitter court battle that awarded custody of the couple’s two boys to McEwan. This experience of loss, which made the author’s own life grist for the British tabloids, is ironically reflected in McEwan’s earlier novel, which was first serialized in *Esquire*. (McEwan and his second wife, journalist Annalena McAfee, now live in Oxford.)

THE STORY: On a mundane Saturday morning trip to the supermarket, a three-year-old girl disappears under her father’s nose—perhaps abducted, perhaps dead or alive. Stephen Lewis—the father and a successful children’s book author—and Julie, his wife, descend into grief. But it is Stephen who spirals downward into the extreme limits of alienation and solitude, which affects his marital relationship, his attempt to come to terms with his loss, his concept of time’s continuum and relativity, his very psyche, and the “child in time”—Stephen himself.

“In his novels and stories, adolescents in the throes of coming to terms with sexuality and adults consumed by sexual aberrations commit acts of violence and otherwise defy the rules of civilized conduct. Now, with *The Child in Time*, he has written a less sensational—but all the more affecting—novel,



about a child-snatching in a supermarket and its effects on the grieving parents.” *WASHINGTON POST*, 9/11/88

THE BOOKER PRIZE—WINNING NOVEL

Amsterdam (1998)

- ♦ BOOKER PRIZE

This morality tale and psychological thriller, which raises thorny ethical issues about revenge, moral decisions, and the life worth living, earned McEwan a wide U.S. following. It also marked a new direction for the author as a social satire of sorts, influenced by Evelyn Waugh.

THE STORY: Two old friends—Clive Linley, a famous composer, and Vernon Halliday, an egotistical newspaper editor—consider their own mortality when a shared former lover, restaurant critic Molly Lane, dies of a humiliating degenerative illness. Vernon persuades Clive to enter into a mutual euthanasia pact should either man similarly fall ill, just as Molly’s liaison with Julian Garmony, the right-wing Foreign Secretary and would-be prime minister, surfaces. But soon, circumstance turns Clive and Vernon into vicious enemies—and it is just a matter of time before one must die.



“[McEwan’s] greatest skill lies in the subtle nuances of characterisation—how friendship is fuelled by power and competition, how the meaningless victories and defeats of office politics take place in an atmosphere of cheerful hypocrisy and how love affairs, friendships and marriages, never really come to an end, even following the most final of closures. It is in the exact rendition of these small details that this brief novel delivers its considerable delights.” JOHN KEENAN,

GUARDIAN [UK], 9/5/98

ANOTHER MASTERPIECE

Atonement (2001)

- ♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS’ CIRCLE FICTION AWARD, *TIME* MAGAZINE BEST NOVEL OF 2002, *LOS ANGELES TIMES* PRIZE FOR FICTION, SAN-TIAGO PRIZE FOR THE EUROPEAN NOVEL, BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST

This haunting story of guilt and forgiveness—a love story, a war story, and a story about how imagination can tragically misfire—is one of McEwan’s major novels to date. McEwan has said that he identifies with Briony, the aspiring writer at the heart of the novel, and was influenced by *The Go-Between* by L. P. Hartley, which takes place in a country house.



THE STORY: The imaginative 13-year-old Briony Tallis, from an upper-middle class home in the Surrey countryside, witnesses her older sister Cecilia's tryst with their cleaning lady's son, Robbie Turner, on a hot summer day in 1935. She misinterprets and then lies about the event when a younger cousin is sexually assaulted at the family's estate. Her lie sends Robbie to jail and has far-reaching consequences for everyone: in 1940, as Robbie joins the British retreat to Dunkirk and Briony becomes a nurse in London, and in 1999, when Briony, now an elderly novelist, pens a literary confession of past events, called *Atonement*. (★★★★★ Summer 2002)

"It is novel that attests not only to Mr. McEwan's mastery of craft and virtuosic control of narrative suspense, but also to his knowledge of the human heart and its rage for symmetry and order." MICHIKO KAKUTANI, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 3/7/02

THE MOVIE: 2007, starring James McAvoy and Keira Knightley, and directed by Joe Wright.

THE POST-9/11 NOVEL

Saturday (2005)

♦ JAMES TAIT BLACK MEMORIAL PRIZE

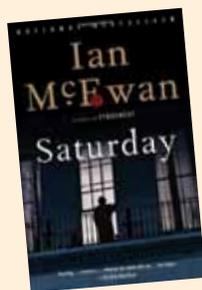
Mr. McEwan shadowed a brain surgeon while writing this novel, which unfolds in a single day.

THE STORY: On February 15, 2003, after the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil and a month before the war against Iraq, 48-year-old neurosurgeon Henry Perowne—contented, successful, devoted to his wife and children, and ensconced in his blessed life—awakens to a burning plane in London's predawn sky. He immediately imagines the worst. Although it's not a terrorist attack, Henry feels anxious. And readers will learn that there is a more immediate threat of violence in the novel as a typical Saturday—a chat with his teenage son, a squash game, a mild fender-bender, a welcome-home dinner party for his daughter—runs its course. (★★★★★ May/June 2005)

"This is a stunning novel, its subtle depth surprisingly affecting, its voice both warm and troubled as events cause Henry to reconsider their meanings. *Saturday*, in many ways, is a whole life compressed into the metaphor of a single day: birth at dawn, midlife at midday, and death at night." RANDY

MICHAEL SIGNOR, *CHICAGO SUN-TIMES*, 3/13/05

"[McEwan] wields his pen as if it were a scalpel, creating precision sentences, carving out graceful passages of transcendent prose, and, upon occasion, endowing his characters with razor-sharp intelligence. ... Perowne's politics will not please many readers either—he delivers an impassioned argument in favor of war—but then again, they aren't meant to." ANITA SHREVE, *BOSTON GLOBE*, 3/20/05



THE 1960s NOVEL

On Chesil Beach (2007)

♦ BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST, BRITISH BOOK AWARDS BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD

The first sentence of this tragedy of manners stands, more or less, as McEwan wrote it in his notebook when he was first inspired: "They were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible."

McEwan's tenth novel illuminates the repression of postwar Britain as deeply as it chronicles a newly married couple's shaky start.

THE STORY: It is July 1962, and Edward and Florence Mayhew, both virgins in their early 20s, have arrived with very different fears and expectations at a Dorset inn where they will spend their honeymoon. Although deeply in love with Edward, Florence is repulsed by the idea of sex; Edward, completely unaware of Florence's dismay, knows that he is supposed to take the lead but is unsure of how to proceed. Jumping back and forth in time, McEwan explores their courtship against the social constraints of a repressive era, culminating in a night that will have far-reaching consequences for them both. (★★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007)

"Not only is it full of meaningful, organically significant details, but its narrative ebbs and flows in a way that demonstrates the most masterly narrative control. The story unfolds in a perfect manner, withholding now and then for effect, even omitting sometimes, with the result that *On Chesil Beach* is not only a wonderful read but also perhaps that rarest of things: a perfect novel." MARTIN RUBIN, *SAN FRANCISCO*

CHRONICLE, 6/3/07

"It's not that *On Chesil Beach* isn't elegantly and precisely rendered; it's just that the purposely hermetic approach isn't quite as exciting or, frankly, fun to read as more sweeping novels such as *Atonement*." YVONNE ZIPP, *CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR*, 6/5/07



SELECTED CHILDREN'S FICTION

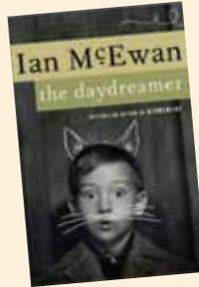
McEwan has also written two children's books, which reflect his imaginative powers just as much as his adult novels.

Rose Blanche (1985)

At the start of World War II, a young German schoolgirl, observing changes around her that others choose to ignore, discovers a concentration camp hidden at the edge of her village. Putting herself at risk, she starts to smuggle food to the children prisoners until they—and Rose—disappear. Grades 5 and up.

The Daydreamer (1994)

Peter, although he looks like just a quiet ten-year-old, really lives quite the fantastic life. Each story features a different daydream. In one, Peter exchanges bodies with the old family cat; in others, he enters the mind and body of a hysterical baby, a doll, and a grown-up. The daydreams allow Peter to better understand his relationships and the larger world around him. Grades 3 and up.



McEwan can move from comedy, a paean to the crisp ('this particular chemical feast could not be found in Paris, Berlin or Tokyo') to real menace." TIBOR FISCHER

Guardian (UK)

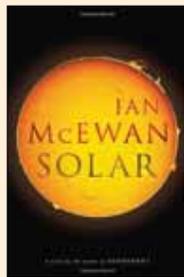


"Once it became clear that the book's world is comic, I also found myself wondering if it wouldn't have benefited from being more loosely assembled, with shorter, discontinuous episodes and Beard functioning along the lines of Updike's *Bech*, Nabokov's *Pnin* or the consciousness in *Calvino's Cosmicomics*. ... When [Beard] gets his comeuppance, it's a powerful reminder that reality isn't a comic novel, and in its deepest implications, this book isn't one either." CHRISTOPHER TAYLER



Solar

By Ian McEwan



THE STORY: Corpulent, middle-aged, socially inept, and philandering physicist Michael Beard, now in his fifth unhappy marriage, has been resting on his Nobel Prize-winning reputation the past few years. Though chief of the Centre for Renewable Energy, he is not exactly dedicated to fighting climate change, but he commands hefty speaking fees none-

theless. To distract himself from his romantic woes, Beard travels to the Arctic to witness global warming for himself. Upon his return, Aldous, an assistant who has been wooing his wife, meets an untimely end. Framing it as a murder, Beard—as un-PC and promiscuous as ever—decides to profit from Aldous's work on sustainable energy, which just might save humanity and make him very, very rich.

Nan A. Talese/Doubleday. 287 pages. \$26.95. ISBN: 9780385533416

Sunday Times (UK)



"Easily the brightest fictional mind we have, he has done the formidable research necessary to bring credibility not only to Beard's schemes to tap solar energy through artificial photosynthesis but to the novel's depiction of the world of physics and physicists in which he moves. ... Blazing with imaginative and intellectual energy, *Solar* is a stellar performance." PETER KEMP

Los Angeles Times



"*Solar* offers both high-minded amusement in its skewering of environmentalist, postmodern and objectivist pieties, and, in the North Pole scenes in which Beard braves subzero cold and a hungry polar bear, something awfully close to slapstick. A comic global warming novel? Well ... why not?" TAYLOR ANTRIM

Telegraph (UK)



"*Solar* is chiefly a mash-up of the Hampstead adultery novel and a conflation of the Bradbury/Lodge academic satire, with the merest dash of politics (George W, New Labour spin), and a side order of the trusty McEwan standby of violence. ...

Slate



"The larger meanings of *Solar* are no more straightforward. Is science really so divorced from the humanities, or intelligence from goodness, as McEwan provokingly suggests? It is not clear that he wants us to think so, or that he intends *Solar* to feel as misanthropic as it often does." ADAM KIRSCH

New York Times



"Despite the book's somber, scientific backdrop (and global warming here is little but that), *Solar* is Mr. McEwan's funniest novel yet—a novel that in tone and affect often reads more like something by Zoë Heller or David Lodge. ... The last two thirds of this novel, however, are oddly static, as Mr. McEwan repetitiously harps on Beard's gluttonous habits and growing waistline, his sexual promiscuity and his opportunistic efforts to cash in on global warming." MICHIKO KAKUTANI

Washington Post



"While *Solar* contains plenty of references to dwindling polar ice caps and rising CO2 levels, its real subject is the slippery nature of truth and the very fallible people who claim to pursue it. ... The plot seems allergic to itself, constantly arresting its own progress with not terribly pertinent flashbacks or abrupt jumps forward." RON CHARLES

CRITICAL SUMMARY

Critics expressed decidedly mixed opinions about McEwan's latest work—and perhaps it's no surprise that he was better-reviewed on his UK home front. While most critics on either side of the pond praised the author's intelligent plot (especially his command of science) and ample storytelling gifts, the majority agreed that *Solar* is not his best novel to date. A few commented that the several narrative strands, which take place over more than a decade, do not cohere; Beard's jaunt to the North Pole, for example is interesting but tangential. Tired jokes, a rushed climax, and Beard's own piggish character felt claustrophobic to others. But most contentious of all was the satirical, comic tone superimposed on the very serious subject of climate change. Though *Solar* is a worthy inquiry into truth, morality, and the future of humanity, some critics could not get past McEwan's approach. ■