

Humor flares throughout portrait of icy scientist

By **Todd Glasscock**

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Nobel Prize-winning physicist Michael Beard is not a funny man. As the protagonist of Ian McEwan's new novel, "Solar," Beard comes off as almost humorless, self-absorbed to the point of callousness — a stereotypical scientist figure more detached and less conflicted than "Star Trek's" Mr. Spock. McEwan describes Beard as "a man of narrowed mental condition, anhedonic, monothematic, stricken." Yet Beard isn't wholly lifeless. While on a plane reading Scientific American magazine, he experiences a "cool little leap of the heart" when an article mentions his prize-winning theory.

Still, it's only a cold leap, the best a self-absorbed type like Beard can offer. In effect, Beard acts as if he were a manifestation of a process in physics in which material soaks up its own heat: He absorbs any heat he radiates. His narcissism becomes so consuming he traps himself in self-deception. He never, for instance, quite lets go of the notion that his fifth wife, Patrice, might still love him, despite two affairs, divorce

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and remarriage.

McEwan relentlessly pursues his characterization of Beard, unveiling a character convinced of his greatness, his infallibility, and who is almost wholly unconcerned for others. McEwan's focus on one character, however, makes "Solar" uneven: The darkly comic character study overshadows the novel's story. The story feels pieced together simply to serve McEwan's portrait of Beard; it's part domestic drama, part intellectual thriller with some interesting tidbits on physics, global warming and even linguistics thrown in, and all the parts are loosely tied together.

The novel opens shortly after Beard, a serial philanderer, discovers his wife's infidelity. While his marriage dissolves, he seeks revenge on his wife's lover by framing him for the murder — actually an accidental death — of colleague and intellectual rival Tom Aldous.

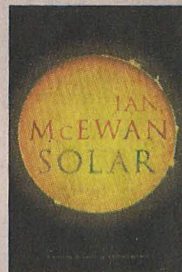
Always out for himself, Beard then steals the dead man's ideas for a solar-powered artificial photosynthesis device. (Beard's career needs a boost after he's ridden on his Nobel reputation for almost 20 years.) He also rides on deception — he almost convinces himself that Aldous' designs are his, and though a longtime skeptic of global warming, he feigns devout belief when he

sees that Aldous' designs will boost his career and pocketbook.

As odious as Beard seems, McEwan turns Beard into a comic figure. He braids the narrative with light moments, some as funny as a Monty Python sketch, as when Beard, on an Arctic cruise to investigate global warming, stops to relieve himself on the glacial ice, and after zipping up, fears the worst: "Something cold and hard had dropped from Beard's groin and fallen down inside the leg of his dungarees and was lodged just above his knee-cap. He put his hand between his legs and there was nothing."

Beard spirals into an anxious frenzy to the punch line, the revelation of the true nature of the object that has dropped from his trousers — a tube of lip salve — which a fellow passenger recovers from the cruise ship's floor. Readers

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Solar

Ian McEwan, Nan A. Talese, \$26.95

SOLAR: Comedy slips from mannered to morbid as scientist's life unravels

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might think McEwan has departed from his usual dark perspective to write a comedy of manners about a dallying, self-absorbed scientist. But McEwan doesn't maintain the light tone for long. Though Beard himself isn't a rollicking comedy act, "Solar" quickly shifts to a thorny black comedy.



Ian McEwan

When McEwan hairpins the novel from a comedy of manners to a black comedy, Beard's life disintegrates further. And that disintegration begins shortly after Beard returns from his Arctic expedition and discovers Aldous is sleeping with Patrice. McEwan sketches the scene as if it were a twisted Warner Brothers cartoon. Beard bullies Aldous with the best "authority a cuckold could command" by threatening his

career. As Aldous pleads with Beard, his foot snags on a bear skin rug. He falls — the description reads like a man slipping on a banana peel — bashing his head on the edge of a glass table, and dies.

Though the novel works as a dark comedy, it falters as a narrative. McEwan's a deft storyteller, but he slips in "Solar" because of the singular focus on Beard. No one else matters. At no point does Beard have any genuine conflicts. He worries about nothing, not even his reputation after his fraud is discovered. "Was he really going to deal with this now, along with everything else?" he thinks. "He thought it unlikely. It would take care of itself."

For a novel with a title that implies heat, "Solar" sinks the reader into a cold consciousness. At best you get, like Beard, cool little leaps of the heart in the novel's comic moments, as on the Arctic trip when a lost part of himself turns out to be a tube of lip salve.