

Book Review. Ian McEwan's *Solar*. New York: Nan A. Talese, 2010. 287 Pages. (Hardback, \$26.95). ISBN 978-0-385-53341-6.

By Mimosa Stephenson

In *Solar* Ian McEwan has created another intellectual antihero following in the footsteps of Kingsley Amis in *Lucky Jim* (1954). Indeed McEwan shows a fondness for the outrageously human, fallible cultural icon as in the black comedy *Amsterdam* (winner of the 1998 Man Booker Prize) he created an acclaimed musical genius, a composer who puts his creativity ahead of saving a woman in peril from a murderous rapist, and in the tragic *Atonement* (2002), in which the successful novelist admits that at thirteen she falsely accused of rape the man her sister loved, a crime resulting in the separation of the lovers and the young man's incarceration and death. *Solar* tells of Michael Beard, a Nobel Laureate who has coasted for twenty years on the breakthrough he accomplished in physics as a young man. Our antihero returns home early from a trip to discover a brilliant, creative young physicist wrapped in Beard's robe in Beard's house dripping from a bath. After admitting that he has been sexually involved with Beard's wife for years, the young man slips on a loose tiger rug, hits his head on an ugly glass table, and dies. Fearing that he will be accused of the young man's murder, Beard frames another of his wife's lovers and is then free to steal the dead man's work in solar energy.

McEwan's touch is light and often humorous at the expense of his overweight-drunken protagonist in this well-told story dealing with global warming and the necessity of finding cheap, sustainable, and environment-friendly energy. For example, finding that he must relieve himself on a snowmobile ride of several hours and minus twenty-six degrees, Beard allows his plumbing to stick frozen to his zipper. As Robert Langbaum says in *The Poetry of Experience*, normally the reader sympathizes with the character from whose side the story is told. In *Lucky*

Jim the antihero is surrounded by such obnoxious types that Jim Dixon seems a welcome relief and the reader delights in the poetic justice of the hero's success, but in *Solar* the reader rejoices in the hero's disaster. The protagonists in McEwan's novels don't commit rape and murder, but they believe themselves to be making the world a better place even while they are plagues on the terrain.

On the novel's last, open-ended page, Beard's daughter, the girl's mother, and Beard's current sexual partner come walking together into the restaurant where Beard sits eating, and a confrontation looms. He considers flight to Brazil, though from his recent doctor's report it looks as if he will soon die of natural causes anyway. However, one fine glimmer of hope gives a positive note to the end: when Beard sees Catriona, his three-year-old daughter, Beard feels "in his heart an unfamiliar swelling sensation" (283). If this self-centered, unfeeling, egocentric man can love someone, there is hope in his weary world, and maybe in ours too.