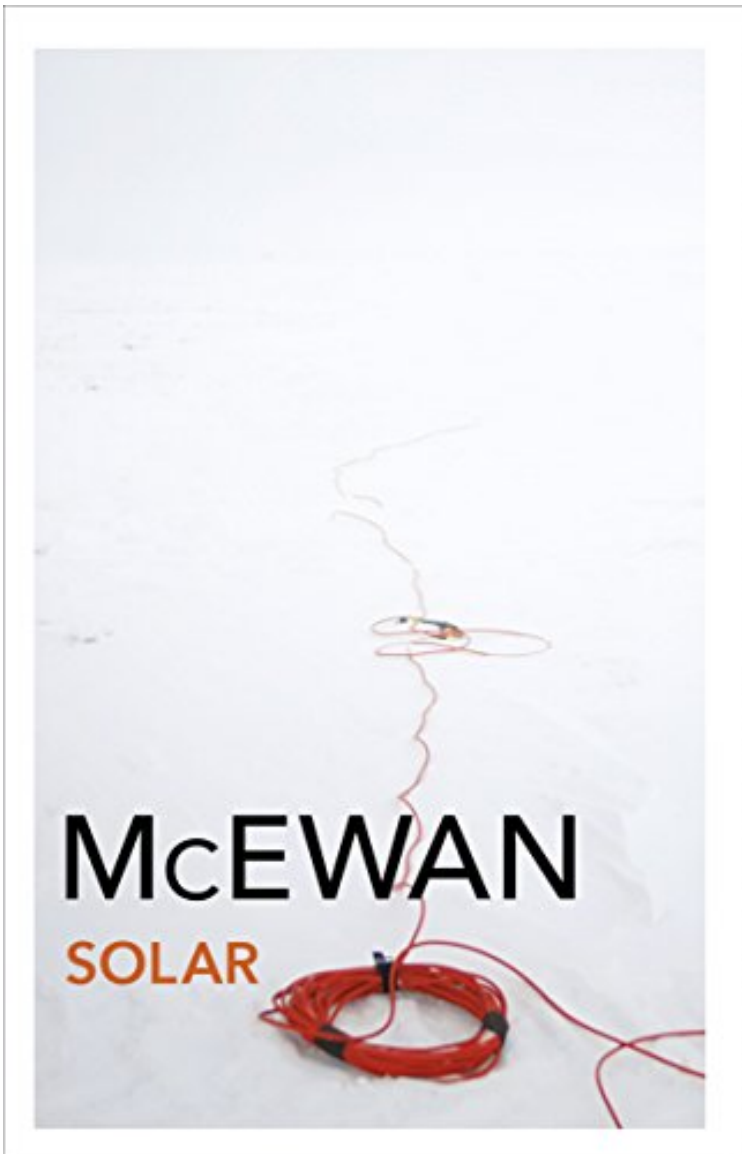


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Solar



Par Ian McEwan
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMichael Beard is a Nobel prize-winning physicist whose best work is behind him. A compulsive womaniser, Beard finds his fifth marriage floundering. But this time it is different: his wife is having the affair, and he is still in love with her. When Beard's professional and personal worlds collide in a freak accident, an opportunity presents itself for Beard to extricate himself from his marital mess, reinvigorate his career and save the world from environmental disaster.ExtraitHe belonged to that class of men vaguely unprepossessing, often bald, short, fat, clever who were unaccountably attractive to certain beautiful women. Or he believed he was, and thinking seemed to make it so. And it helped that some women believed he was a genius in need of rescue. But the Michael Beard of this time was a man of narrowed

mental condition, anhedonic, monothematic, stricken. His fifth marriage was disintegrating and he should have known how to behave, how to take the long view, how to take the blame. Werent marriages, his marriages, tidal, with one rolling out just before another rolled in? But this one was different. He did not know how to behave, long views pained him, and for once there was no blame for him to assume, as he saw it. It was his wife who was having the affair, and having it flagrantly, punitively, certainly without remorse. He was discovering in himself, among an array of emotions, intense moments of shame and longing. Patrice was seeing a builder, their builder, the one who had repointed their house, fitted their kitchen, retiled their bathroom, the very same heavy-set fellow who in a tea break had once shown Michael a photo of his mock-Tudor house, renovated and tudorised by his own hand, with a boat on a trailer under a Victorian-style lamp post on the concreted front driveway, and space on which to erect a decommissioned red phone box. Beard was surprised to find how complicated it was to be the cuckold. Misery was not simple. Let no one say that this late in life he was immune to fresh experience. He had it coming. His four previous wives, Maisie, Ruth, Eleanor, Karen, who all still took a distant interest in his life, would have been exultant, and he hoped they would not be told. None of his marriages had lasted more than six years and it was an achievement of sorts to have remained childless. His wives had discovered early on what a poor or frightening prospect of a father

he presented and they had protected themselves and got out. He liked to think that if he had caused unhappiness, it was never for long, and it counted for something that he was still on speaking terms with all his exes. But not with his current wife. In better times, he might have predicted for himself a manly embrace of double standards, with bouts of dangerous fury, perhaps an episode of drunken roaring in the back garden late at night, or writing off her car, and the calculated pursuit of a younger woman, a Samson-like toppling of the marital temple. Instead, he was paralysed by shame, by the extent of his humiliation. Even worse, he amazed himself with his inconvenient longing for her. These days, desire for Patrice came on him out of nowhere, like an attack of stomach cramp. He would have to sit somewhere alone and wait for it to pass.

Apparently, there was a certain kind of husband who thrilled at the notion of his wife with other men. Such a man might arrange to have himself bound and gagged and locked in the bedroom wardrobe while ten feet away his better half went at it. Had Beard at last located within himself a capacity for sexual masochism? No woman had ever looked or sounded so desirable as the wife he suddenly could not have. Conspicuously, he went to Lisbon to look up an old friend, but it was a joyless three nights. He had to have his wife back, and dared not drive her away with shouting or threats or brilliant moments of unreason. Nor was it in his nature to plead. He was frozen, he was abject, he could think of nothing else. The first time she left him a note

Staying over at Rs tonight. xx P did he go round to the mock-Tudor ex-council semi with the shrouded speedboat on the hard standing and a hot tub in the pint-sized back yard to mash the mans brains with his own monkey wrench? No, he watched television for five hours in his overcoat, drank two bottles of wine and tried not to think. And failed. But thinking was all he had. When his other wives had found out about his affairs, they raged, coldly or tearfully, they insisted on long sessions into the early hours to deliver their thoughts on broken trust, and eventually their demands for a separation and all that followed. But when Patrice happened across some emails from Suzanne Reuben, a mathematician at the Humboldt University in Berlin, she became unnaturally elated. That same afternoon she moved her clothes into the guest bedroom. It

was a shock when he slid the wardrobe doors open to confirm the fact. Those rows of silk and cotton dresses, he realised now, had been a luxury and a comfort, versions of herself lining up to please him. No longer. Even the hangers were gone. She smiled through dinner that night as she explained that she too intended to be free and within the week she had started her affair. What was a man to do? He apologised one breakfast, told her his lapse meant nothing, made grand promises he sincerely believed he might keep. This was the closest he came to pleading. She said she did not mind what he did. This was what she was doing

and this was when she revealed the identity of her lover, the builder with the sinister name of Rodney Tarpin, seven inches taller and twenty years younger than the cuckold, whose sole reading, according to his boast, back when he was humbly grouting and bevelling for the Beards, was the sports section of a tabloid newspaper. An early sign of Beards distress was dysmorphia, or perhaps it was dysmorphia he was suddenly cured of. At last, he knew himself for what he was. Catching sight of a conical pink mess in the misted full-length mirror as he came out of the shower, he wiped down the glass, stood full on and took a disbelieving

look. What engines of self-persuasion had let him think for so many years that looking like this was seductive? That foolish thatch of earlobe-level hair that buttressed his baldness, the new curtain-swag of fat that hung below his armpits, the innocent stupidity of swelling in gut and rear. Once, he had been able to improve on his mirror-self by pinning back his shoulders, standing erect, tightening his abs. Now, human

blubber draped his efforts. How could he possibly keep hold of a young woman as beautiful as she was? Had he honestly thought that status was enough, that his Nobel Prize would keep her in his bed? Naked, he was a disgrace, an idiot, a weakling. Even eight consecutive press-ups were beyond him. Whereas Tarpin could run up the stairs to the Beards master bedroom holding under one arm a fifty-kilo cement sack. Fifty kilos? That was roughly Patrice's weight. She kept him at a distance with lethal cheerfulness. These were additional insults, her sing-song hellos, the maternal recital of domestic detail and her evening whereabouts, and none of it would have mattered if he had been able to despise her a little and plan to be shot of her. Then they could have settled down to the brief, grisly dismantling of a five-year childless marriage. Of course she was punishing him, but when he suggested that, she shrugged and said that she could just as easily have said the same of him. She had merely been waiting for this opportunity, he said, and she laughed and said in that case she was grateful to him. In his delusional state he was convinced that just as he was about to lose her he had found the perfect wife. That summer of 2000 she was wearing different clothes, she had a different look around the house faded tight jeans, flipflops, a ragged pink cardigan over a T-shirt, her blonde hair cut short, her pale eyes a deeper agitated blue. Her build was slight, and now she looked like a teenager. From the empty rope-handled glossy carrier bags and tissue paper left strewn on the kitchen table for his inspection, he gathered she was buying herself new underwear for Tarpin to remove. She was thirty-four, and still kept the strawberries-and-cream look of her twenties. She did not tease or taunt or flirt with him, that at least would have been communication of a sort, but steadily perfected the bright indifference with which she intended to obliterate him. He needed to cease needing her, but desire was not like that. He wanted to want her. One sultry night he lay uncovered on the bed and tried masturbating himself towards freedom. It bothered him that he could not see his genitalia unless his head was propped up on two pillows, and his fantasy was continually interrupted by Tarpin, who, like some ignorant stagehand with ladder and bucket, kept wandering onto the set. Was there another man on the planet apart from Beard attempting at this moment to pleasure himself with thoughts of his own wife just thirty feet away across the landing? The question emptied him of purpose. And it was too hot. Friends used to tell him that Patrice resembled Marilyn Monroe, at least, from certain angles and in a certain light. He had been happy to accept this status-enhancing comparison, but he never really saw it. Now he did. She had changed. There was a new fullness in her lower lip, a promise of trouble when she lowered her gaze, and her shortened hair lay curled on her nape in a compelling, old-fashioned way. Surely, she was more beautiful than Monroe, drifting about the house and garden at weekends in a haze of blonde and pink and pale blue. What an adolescent colour scheme he had fallen for, and at his age. He turned fifty-three that July, and naturally she ignored his birthday, then pretended in her jolly new style to remember it three days later. She gave him a kipper tie in Day-Glo mint green, telling him the style was being revived. Yes, the weekends were the worst. She would come into a room where he was, not wishing to talk, but perhaps wanting to be seen, and she would look about in mild surprise before wandering off. She was evaluating everything afresh, not only him. He would see her at the bottom of the garden under the horse chestnut, lying on the grass with the newspapers, waiting in deep shade for her evening to begin. Then she would retire to the guest room...*Revue de presse*"Scarcely a page fails to dazzle with some wittily caught perception about contemporary life. Blazing with imagination and intellectual energy, *Solar* is a stellar performance."--Peter Kemp, *The Sunday Times*"McEwan at his best. Intelligent, funny, and full of insights." --*The Guardian*"A stunningly accomplished work, possibly his best yet." --*Financial Times*"*Solar* burns with wit and energy. It demonstrates why McEwan is among the language's most popular literary novelists." --*Winnipeg Free Press*"In *Atonement* or *Enduring Love* or *Amsterdam* or *Saturday* or pretty much any of his novels, *Solar* has many adept competitors for best of breed, and those competitors are beloved. But this may be his best work yet." --*The Star Phoenix*From the Trade Paperback edition.