Postgraduate English
www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english
ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 22 September 2010

Editors: Amy Jordan and Eleanor Chatburn

Review of Ian McEwan. Solar. London: Jonathan Cape. March 2010. 285pp hb. £18.99. ISBN: 978-0-224-09049-0.

Matthew Griffiths *

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Ahead of publication, *Solar* was being billed as though it were the first 'event' book of climate change, the moment when environmental crisis would take its rightful place, albeit belatedly, in the canon of British fiction. [1] Press coverage hinted that Ian McEwan's status as a novelist would confer a literary merit and pertinence on the subject, and anticipation was such that it even prompted speculative criticism. [2] However, *Solar* is both a book about unfulfilled promises and a kind of broken promise in itself.

Its central character, Professor Michael Beard, is forever committing himself to tomorrow's diet, next week's domestic chore, his nth wife; but over the course of the decade in which the novel is set, he never manages to meet his pledges. Beard is also struggling with a profounder unfulfilled promise: in the three separate years that the book touches down, he manages to squander each professional sinecure that comes his way, despite having once devised the "Beard-Einstein Conflation", a tricky bit of physics that earned him his Nobel Prize.

This near-conflation of fictional and real names is demonstrative of McEwan's technique in *Solar*, in that it enables the non-scientific reader some idea of his lead's one-time importance without them having to comprehend the abstruse physics involved. Similar authorial sleight of hand is also central to the novel's McGuffin, artificial photosynthesis. The means by which Beard and his colleagues hope to generate clean energy on a large-scale is more problematic than the conflation, however; the process has to be feasible enough to warrant the attention of the novel's scientific community without having achieved so high a

profile in reality. If it had, it simply couldn't serve the function it does here, and the reader is left in an awkward state of ambivalence.

This is similarly evident in McEwan's strain of humour, making it difficult to determine which side of a joke – if either – he is taking. For instance, in the heat of the 2000 US presidential election campaign, Beard ponders "It could make no significant difference to the world at large if Bush rather than Gore was president for the first four or eight years of the twenty-first century" (39). Reading in 2010, we are invited to believe that Gore would have made a difference; but isn't that too easy a joke, even allowing for what it tells us about Beard's failure of judgement?

Whether it's the author's design or not, the deeper irony of Beard's observation is that Gore as president may well not have had the scope to talk about climate change in the way he does in his film *An Inconvenient Truth*. Even then, the former vice-president has to frame his climate slideshow with the narrative of his own experiences, much as McEwan writes climate change into Beard's personal story. This entails the 'novelising' of global warming, reducing it to a scale that is conducive to its literary form, which perversely pulls Beard out of the realm of the novelistic particular and into the general. He is, or in fact *has* to be, a slight character, a sketch of a complacent middle-aged man we never warm to, rendering his appeal to the numerous women in his life somewhat questionable. McEwan might be in danger here of breaking an implicit promise in the novel by having a lead who repeatedly threatens to engage but always squanders the reader's sympathy.

With these repeated fumblings, though, the professor's promises and his promise evolve into something more, becoming the stories he tells himself to convince him he's taking the best course of action. Beard himself knows the power of narrative and exploits it as a public speaker, but still fails to realise its full implications. Luckily, in the milieu of the celebrity academic he gets to mix with those as well-schooled in postmodernism and critical theory as he is in the physics of light, and

they put him, unwillingly, into his cultural context. In one memorable instance, he weaves into a conference speech an anecdote about inadvertently eating a fellow passenger's crisps while on a train. One helpful member of his elite audience afterwards points out that the story has circulated for years as an urban myth and even crops up in a Douglas Adams novel. Having already recounted Beard's actual encounter on the train, McEwan treads a fine line – he lets his character experience something that is considered fictional *within* his own fiction.

A generous reader will let McEwan get away with this convolution because it gives the narratives of self a central role in the novel, in a more problematic way than Gore presents his own tale in *An Inconvenient Truth*. Beard's failure to recognise the stories he tells about himself for what they are is also our own failure to fulfil the promises we make about saving the planet, or even the story we allude to when we talk of 'saving the planet'. This conclusion is never forced on us, but Beard's very flabbiness, his having traits but only meaningfully being rounded in respect of his girth, makes him into a kind of everyman, and McEwan's observational comedy helps us identify with him as such. Indeed, it makes an engaging read of a topic that is often afforded a depressing or alarmist tone.

Solar thus turns out to be an allegory in novel's clothing, an eminently entertaining narrative but one we've always already heard, about the failure of the greedy to resist self-destructive temptation. McEwan fits new concern to old form. A reader attentive to the novelist's interests in recent years would have known that he was likely to do so. McEwan's visited the Arctic with the Cape Farewell project, and the article he wrote in response to this, "Save the boot room, save the Earth"[3] scales from the problems of maintaining the expedition's kit room, "a social microcosm in the Arctic vastness", up to the global climate. McEwan is aware of the chain of causation, and the good intentions that connect it: "it is not evil that undoes the world, but small errors prompting tiny weaknesses – let's not call them dishonesty – gathering in rivulets, then cascades of consequences". While this episode is lightly reworked in *Solar*, there is no sense in the novel that

this difference of scale might make climate change a wholly different problem from keeping our own houses in order.

As the novel concludes and Beard's past catches up with him, at just the point he is supposed to be activating the first artificial photosynthesis demonstration project, there is only a sense of 'If we could only just …', as though climate change needed one heroic solution that Beard, *in loco humanitas*, is too flawed to see through. In that respect, McEwan risks appearing only slightly more literary than his central character "warming to his tale, convinced that it had a useful conclusion that he would discover in the telling" (155). *Solar* hints at what the great climate change novel might do, but we've still to be convinced that there might ever be one.

Endnotes

[1] *The Observer*, 29 December 2009; *The Guardian*, 2 January 2010.

[2] Garrard, Greg. "Ian McEwan's Next Novel and the Future of Ecocriticism." *Contemporary Literature*, Winter 2009; 50: 695–720.

[3] *The Guardian*, 19 March 2005.