

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Untouchable (1997)

John Banville

OVERVIEW

The Untouchable tells the story of a world-renowned art critic and historian, Victor Maskell, who, it has recently been discovered, led a double life as a war-time spy for the Russians. Maskell was also in possession of a knighthood and was the curator of the Queen's pictures. He was also director of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. The discovery causes a major scandal for the British government and an announcement is made on the matter by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons. Maskell's knighthood is revoked, he loses all his honours, and his position as curator of the royal collection is terminated.

SYNOPSIS

The plot begins with the scandal unfolding. The story has only just broken and Maskell is trying to deal with the aftermath. An old man now in his seventies, he accepts that the scandal will put an end to a way of life he has become accustomed to. He even contemplates suicide. He is contacted by a young writer, Serena Vandeleur, who tells him that she wants to write a book about him. Maskell's ego is stroked by the idea and he accepts Vandeleur's offer. The plot then revolves around the interviews with Serena Vandeleur. The events of Maskell's life are relayed to us by way of these interviews and also by the fact that Maskell decides to record everything in a journal. We don't get the interviews directly but instead Maskell's internal rehearsals for the interviews, his journaling, and his own memories about the events he will talk to Vandeleur about. The story is told by way of Maskell's reflections on interviews that are being conducted by Vandeleur with him on his life. Maskell keeps a journal of these reflections once the scandal has broke. In his journal he also reminisces on his life as he thinks over his interviews.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

The plot is based on the real-life story of Anthony Blunt, the knighted curator of the Queen's pictures who publicly admitted in 1979 that he had been a Soviet spy for decades. The novel is therefore a roman-a-clef in that it is a novel in which real people appear under invented names. The events and characters of the novel follow closely many of the real-life events although Banville uses his artistic licence to embellish the plot and to include cameos under pseudonyms for characters most likely supposed to be the writers Graham Greene and Louis MacNeice. The character of Boy Bannister is also most likely based on the life of the spy Guy Burgess (1911-1963).

MAIN CHARACTERS

Victor Maskell	The protagonist of the story, the former spy who is outed in his seventies.
Serena Vandeleur	The young woman who interviews Victor and wants to write a book on him
Nick Brevoort	A friend of Victor and the brother of Victor's wife. It turns out that Nick is the one to betray Victor. He is also known as Beaver in the book.
Vivienne Brevoort	Nick's sister who marries Victor. Also known as Baby in the group
Max Brevoort	A publisher and the father of Nick. He will publish some of Victor's early work.
Boy Bannister Querrell	Another fellow spy. He is known for his drinking and his wild side. He is a kind of ringleader of the British spies who are working for the Soviet Union. He is also a novelist. The character is most likely based on the novelist Graham Greene.
Alastair Sykes	A senior fellow at Cambridge University where Victor and Nick also study. He is the organiser of the Marxist group at the university.

Leo Rothenstein
Felix Hartmann
Freddie

A wealthy businessman also linked to the spying operation
Victor's contact as a spy with the Soviet Union
Victor's brother. It is suggested he has Down syndrome.

PLOT

[Note: The novel is told through a journal that Victor has decided to keep following the revelation of the scandal. The journal entries seem to be Victor's memories of his life and of his reflections on his interviews with Serena Vandeleur.]

Part I Scandal Exposed

The Shame of Scandal It's London 1979 and Victor Maskell, a former spy in his seventies, wakes up to find that he is in all the newspapers. His secret life working as a spy for the Soviet Union has been made public and Victor is trying to come to terms with how his world has been turned on its head. Once a respected member of British society with a knighthood, now he is despised and the target of abuse. He decides to keep a journal, which he calls his "last testament". Since he had kept secrets all his life now he wants to tell all.

The Prime Minister acknowledges the scandal The Prime Minister – most likely a fictional Margaret Thatcher – stands up in the House of Commons and announces the scandal to the general public. Victor feels as if she is talking about someone else. He thinks he has been betrayed by his old colleague Querrell.

Flashback to when Victor meets Nick Victor recalls his first meeting with his closest friend, Nick. We learn that Victor is in love with Nick even though he has married Nick's sister Vivienne. A homosexual, Victor never felt he could come out in public about his sexual orientation.

Reporters at Victor's family home Victor sees photographs of his old family home in Carrickdrum and his old parish church in the *Telegraph* newspaper. Victor remembers the day he met his stepmother for the first time, aged 6, when his father remarried.

Victor meets Serena Vandeleur Serena phones Victor and he remembers her voice from a previous call. He decides to allow her to come to his house. She tells him that she does not want to write a newspaper piece on him. She wants to write a book explaining why he was a spy for the Russians.

Flashback to his purchase of The Death of Seneca painting Victor is an expert on the artist Poussin. While a young man at a party in London, he spots what he believes to be an original Poussin, the *Death of Seneca*. He only has 100 pounds and the painting is selling for 300. The painting is his most prized possession. Art is the one thing he feels has enabled him to survive and this painting becomes a symbol for all he holds dear. Wally believes it is a copy but Victor is convinced it's authentic. In the end Nick and Victor persuade Leo Rosenthein to buy it for Victor.

Nick is hired as advisor to Leo Rosenthein Nick tells Victor that Leo Rosenthein has hired him as a political and financial adviser. Nick tells Victor that Leo's family is worried about the rise of Hitler as they have a lot of money tied up in Germany.

Schoolboys on a trip to a Hitler Youth Camp Victor discovers that his Marxist colleague Boy has taken a group of English school boys from the East End of London to a Hitler Youth Camp. It was funded by the Foreign Relations Council of the Church of England

Vivienne and Victor get married In what feels very much like an arranged marriage, Vivienne (aka Baby) and Victor agree to get married. It seems it is recommended by the Marxist group to settle him down as a key member. Victor may also feel he needs to get married so there will no longer be any suspicion about his sexual orientation. They make a vow never to have children and then they discover that Vivienne is pregnant.

Part II The life of a spy

Victor is recruited as a Russian spy Victor is introduced to Alex Hartmann and is recruited as a Russian spy. We learn that Victor felt he fell in love with Hartmann, who asks Victor to accompany Boy on a trip to Moscow. We also discover – as he tells Serena – that he was never a member of the Communist Party despite his staunch Marxism.

Victor sets out for Russia Victor finds Stalin's Russia to be a horrible place. The whole trip is mired in mystery and Victor fears for his safety. He is taken into the grand maze of rooms that makes up the Kremlin and he meets many dignitaries such as the Commissar of Soviet Culture. He is taken down a long corridor which ends at a huge, panelled door. He feels he is going to meet Stalin himself. Instead, he meets another official, who takes out a bottle of vodka and 3 glasses. Together they toast "King George Six" of Britain. He has been recruited as a spy.

Victor as a Russian agent in the British Secret Service Victor is approached by his Russian contacts in London. They tell him they need him in Military Intelligence and tell him who to approach in Cambridge University who has contacts with Military Intelligence. The Russians need help with code-breaking. Because he is a good mathematician, the British Secret Service take him as an adviser. This position allows Maskell to gather military intelligence for the Russians, something he does for many years.

Hartmann is called back to Russia Hartmann is ordered back to Russia and, no matter how hard he tries to find information on him, Victor can never again trace his whereabouts. Initially Victor is unwilling to work as a spy with anyone else, but, in the end, he continues on.

War is declared The Second World War begins and there is general mobilisation. Victor is asked to join Field Security. Because he speaks French, he is sent to France to "stiffen the morale" of the French soldiers fighting alongside the British. Almost immediately he is promoted to the rank of Captain and he can't find out why.

Victor is interrogated over his ties to Communism The London War Office discover in his files that Victor was a "Bolshie" during his days as a student at Cambridge. They quiz him over the nature of his involvement but Victor manages to persuade them that he is a Royalist and a patriot as well as being interested in Marxism.

Victor escapes the war During the Second World War, Nick and Victor are stationed near Dunkirk. One day they get orders to evacuate. The only vessel they can find to escape on is an old trawler. As the shells are landing about them, they realise the boat is carrying four tons of high explosives. On looking back, Victor believes that the terror of that journey is the cause of his tremor in old age.

Freddie is put in a Home Freddie, Victor's brother, is a young man with Down syndrome. After his father's death Victor and his stepmother Hettie decide to put Freddie in a special Home. However, when they arrive Freddie starts to cry. He pretends he will be okay in the home, but we discover at the end that Freddie died 6 months after moving to the Home.

Victor combines lecturing with code-breaking Victor's life takes on a daily schedule where he lectures on art at the Courtauld Institute in the morning and then works with the cryptanalysts at Bletchley Park on code-breaking in the afternoons. All the time he is passing on information to the Russians.

Victor details what information he passed to the Russians He passed on to his new Russian contact, Oleg, anything from the diplomatic pouches that he thought was useful. He gave updates on the different forces ranged along Russia's borders. He also supplied the names and whereabouts of foreign agents working in Russia. He knew they would all most likely be killed.

Victor is honoured for his services to Russia Victor is presented with the Order of the Red Banner by Oleg for his services to the Soviet Union. He is not allowed to keep the medal.

Part III On His Majesty's Secret Service

Victor's personal assistant jumps to his death Victor writes in his journal that his personal assistant, general housekeeper and cook, Patrick Quilly, jumped to his death in an apparent suicide after they had a big argument. Patrick also used to arrange to have young men sent to Victor's apartment. They were also lovers. Victor disclosed everything to him about his secret life on the night they argued. After the argument, Patrick gets drunk, stays up all night brooding and then walks to the balcony and falls.

Victor on a special mission for King George VI Victor has a personal audience with King George VI. The King asks him to go to Germany to retrieve some family papers that might cause embarrassment if they ever came out. They are in the possession of his cousin Willi in Regensburg. The documents he wants retrieved pertain to his brother's meetings with Hitler. Victor meets Prince Willi but he does not get the papers from him. In the end, it is the Prince's mother who leads Victor to the box of papers. They also have some help from her granddaughter.

Victor gives up being a spy After Victor is awarded the title and role of Keeper of the King's [later Queen's] Pictures, he feels it is the right time to end his career as a spy. In the end, in order to get his freedom from the Russians he has Oleg tell them that in his new role he will be working alongside the King himself. He presumably tells them this so he will not be recalled to Moscow like many of the other spies who have retired.

Victor gets one final mission Many years later Oleg arranges to meet Victor one last time. He tells him the other spies Boy and Castor are under suspicion and that both of them must go to Moscow immediately. Oleg asks Victor for help in getting them out of the country. Querrell is also leaving for Africa. Victor gets a car and drives Boy and Castor to the docks on the south coast where they are shipped off by night in a small boat.

Victor is taken in for questioning When Victor gets back to Boy's old house, some officers from the British Secret Service call and take him away for questioning. Victor breathes a sigh of relief as he knows the game is finally up. However, the Secret Service agrees to keep his identity secret if he will pass on whatever information he has on the Russians.

His wife's funeral and infidelity Towards the end of the story, Victor reflects on his last meeting with Serena. We learn that his wife has died in the nursing home. Victor meets Querrell at the funeral and Querrell tells him that Vivienne and he had an affair when they were first married. Querrell also tells Victor that he had given his name to the Home Office after Boy and Castor left for Moscow. Victor feels ill and wonders if his children are actually his. Victor still does not know who betrayed him by giving his name to Serena and the newspapers. Querrell tells him it wasn't him.

Betrayer revealed Victor pays a visit to his old friend Nick and discovers that it was Nick who had betrayed him. Nick tells Victor that he had to do it because the authorities were after him. As Nick is in the Government and is regarded as more important than Victor, they can't blow his cover. Nick tells him that he betrayed him because he realised during the war that Victor did not take the Marxist cause seriously. Victor leaves his most treasured possession, the Poussin painting, with Nick.

THEMES

Espionage Many of us know of famous spies but might know very little about how they are recruited, the kind of work they do, and what happens if it is revealed that they are spies. *The Untouchable* is a novel which gives a very believable account of the lives of a group of spies working for the Soviet Union in the 1940s and 50s in the UK. The novel suggests that it takes a certain kind of person to be a spy. We also learn that spies can sometimes have quite superficial reasons for wanting to sign up. Very often it might simply be the life of duplicity and adventure that attracts men and women to the life of espionage. The novel also reveals clearly that espionage requires you to be prepared to cut all ties with those you love since there is always the possibility that you will have to

disappear or go into exile. Victor Maskell was a person who didn't seem to be able to form lasting friendships with people.

Betrayal The novel tells the story of a former spy whose former identity has been revealed to the general public by a fellow spy who has betrayed him. We therefore hear the story of a man in his seventies who has to deal with the repercussions of this betrayal. It is no wonder that he contemplates suicide once he has been outed! Victor Maskell does not find out who betrayed him until the end of the story when he is an old man and after a doctor informs him that he is dying. He has to put up with all the repercussions of the betrayal – such as losing his job, losing all his titles, losing the respect of his community – while also not knowing until the very end who has betrayed him. The novel therefore reminds us that the life of a spy is built on falsity and deception. The spy has to be prepared to put himself in danger despite the fact that he can be betrayed at any moment. While there is honour among thieves, the same might not be the case for spies.

Deception The novel is all about deception. Spies inhabit a world built on subterfuge and deception. We learn early in the novel that Victor had been a good amateur dramatic at Cambridge. He tells us that he misses the stage. However, becoming a spy enabled him to live his life by playing a part. In his daily life he was a respectable director of an art Institute, a knighted member of the general public and also an honoured war veteran and subject of the King and Queen. However, at the same time he was also a spy passing on state secrets and military intelligence to the Russians. Perhaps the novel is telling us that acting is an important skill for those interested in espionage. However, at a deeper level the novel also leaves us with a protagonist who has lost everything by the end of the story. His life of deception has meant he can trust no one and no one can trust him. He has played the part of a spy so well that in the end Victor Maskell does not really know who he is.

There is also a great deal of sexual deception in the novel. Victor may have fathered two children with his wife but most of his romantic encounters in the novel are homosexual. He obviously tries very hard to keep this quiet as it was illegal at the time. One of the minor characters in the novel is supposedly based on the mathematician Alan Turing who was prosecuted for homosexual acts in 1952.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Victor Victor Maskell is a fictional spy. However, his life follows extremely closely the real life of Anthony Blunt, a former spy and the knighted curator of the Queen's pictures who publicly admitted in 1979 that he had been a Soviet spy for decades. Victor is a man who admits to Vandeleur that he was never entirely certain why he became a spy. All he can tell his interviewer is that he was attracted to the life of "mind-numbing" adventure. Even though Victor is a committed Marxist, he appears more interested in the theory than in its application. He is therefore not a supporter of Stalin or of the government/dictatorship in Moscow. And yet he continues to act as a Russian spy for decades. Victor therefore has a great deal of contradictions and most of them do not get resolved. He is also unable to come clean on his sexuality and this leads to a great deal of heartache for his wife.

Selfish Victor marries Vivienne (Nick's sister) even though he appears to know from very early on – possibly even before they get married – that he will not be spending most of the time with her and his family. In fact, the references to his family life are almost non-existent in his long journal. Vivienne, it seems, has to raise their two children by herself and she also doesn't appear to have lived with Victor even when the children were grown up. We learn that Victor lived alone most of the time with his personal assistant and general housekeeper Patrick Quilly. Victor and Patrick were also lovers and his wife must have been aware of this. This life of separation and deception must have been extremely painful for his wife and children and yet we hear very little about his emotions towards his family in his lengthy journal. This leaves us with the impression that Victor is obsessed with his own work – his art, his spying, and his socialising – and that he has little time for his family. This also becomes clear when, after his father's death, he decides to put his brother Freddie in a home. Tragically, Freddie will die 6 months after being separated from his mother.

Art-lover

Victor spends his life working on Poussin and he keeps with him a painting by Poussin called *Death of Seneca*. He tells us in his journal that art is all that he regards as pure in life and yet he also reveals in his journal after one of the interview sessions that he had never really reflected on the roots of his

love for art. Art is the one thing that gives him a sense of himself. Victor takes nearly twenty years to write his defining monograph on the artist Poussin. He believes that he has “invented Poussin”. He also sees Poussin as a paradigm of himself, as someone who believes in the transformative power of art. In his book he argues that art has no meaning, that it simply is. He believes that the whole purpose of artistic creation is to put in place something where otherwise there would be nothing. He says he despises the Marxist readings of art that are always looking for the meaning in art. The tragedy for Victor is that he seems not to have been able to believe in the power of art above all else. He was not content to simply be a Director of one of the premier art institutions in the world. He longed for the “mind-numbing” excitement that the world of espionage offered him. This might lead us to believe that what he says about art is not entirely true. If it is the only thing he truly finds absorbing then we are left with the question why he risked everything as a Russian spy?

Vivienne Vivienne is a member of the Cambridge Marxist group. She is the brother of Nick and comes from a respected Jewish family. Her father is an important book publisher who publishes some of Victor’s early work. Everything we hear about her is of course from the perspective of the seventy-two-year-old Victor as he reflects on his life in his journal.

Lonely We learn at the end of the novel that Querrell and Vivienne had an affair early in the marriage of Victor and Vivienne. Victor had no idea this was going on until he is outed by his fellow spies in the group. Victor and Vivienne get married in their twenties and they have two children together, Julian and Blanche. Victor seems to spend very little time with his family and when Querrell tells Victor after Vivienne’s funeral that they had an affair, Querrell tells him it is because Vivienne was lonely. Victor felt he had to keep his homosexuality a secret at the time. Vivienne therefore had to continue playing the part of dutiful wife even though she knew her husband was not really interested in being with her. We are therefore mindful of the loneliness of Vivienne throughout the novel but also of Victor’s loneliness. Society did not allow him to be himself and this led him to a life of deception. Despite this, Vivienne remains loyal to Victor and she is there for him when he has no one else to turn to.

Nick Nick is a character with big ambitions. He is a spy who is working in the government and is able to make decisions that literally destroy the lives of his accomplices. He therefore considers many of those around him as expendable.

Mercenary Nick is a much more mercenary spy than Victor. While Victor is consistently bogged down in contradictions over how to embrace the practice as well as the theory of Marxism, it would appear that Nick is committed to all aspects of the ideology. Nick has no qualms about outing fellow spies such as Victor if he believes it will benefit the universal dictatorship of the proletariat. The key moment is at the end of the novel when Victor has been told he does not have long to live and he pays a visit to his old friend. Victor is so ill that he arrives in his slippers, carrying a gun in his bag. When Victor asks him why he outed him, Nick simply repeats that he needed to be protected. Whenever the authorities seemed to be coming for him, Nick would simply throw another fellow spy in their path to distract them. The end of the novel is therefore quite poignant as we learn that Victor’s dearest friend, someone he has known for 50 years and someone he was once in love with, has betrayed him. Victor has nothing left to cling on to at this point.

Felix Hartmann Felix Hartmann is a Russian agent in London and the first Russian agent Victor works with. He is a war veteran of the Russian Civil War. He is the contact point for all the information Victor passes on to the Soviet Union. He comes across as a committed yet understanding communist agent. Victor becomes close to Hartmann and seriously considers giving up his work as a spy when Hartmann is called away from London.

Committed Victor likes to think that it is common for those committed to a particular ideology to be able to entertain contradictory beliefs. He tells himself in his journal that the believer’s conscious mind can “separate itself into many compartments containing many, conflicting dogmas”. The key moment that demonstrates this occurs when Hartmann asks Victor if he would like to travel to Russia. Victor makes the throwaway and facetious comment that he would love to visit “great Mother Rus”. Hartmann appears a little offended. He recounts the story of having to shoot a White Russian in the head in the Crimea during the Russian Civil War. Victor realises his mistake and he has to acknowledge that Hartmann’s commitment to the Russian state and the principles of communism is

far more deep-seated as he has had to fight for them in mortal combat on the battlefield. Victor is therefore someone who, unlike Hartmann, is spying for the Soviet Union without being truly committed to the cause of Russian communism.