

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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John Banville (1945 -)

LIFE

William John Banville is an Irish novelist, short story writer, adapter of dramas and screenwriter. He has also written a number of recent crime novels under the pseudonym Benjamin Black. Banville was born in Wexford, Ireland in 1945, where he was educated at Christian Brothers Schools and at St. Peter’s College.

After school, he worked as a clerk at Aer Lingus, Ireland’s only airline company at the time. This job allowed Banville to travel at discount rates to Greece and Italy, two countries who have been important for many of his novels. He also has a great fondness for the city of Prague and he has written a book about the city.

Although he was interested in studying architecture, he did not go to university after secondary school and instead opted for a career in journalism. He worked as a sub-editor with *The Irish Press* from 1969 until 1986, when he joined *The Irish Times*, where he served as Literary Editor from 1988 to 1999.

His father was a garage clerk. His older brother Vincent is also a novelist and has also written under his own name and under a pseudonym. Banville’s older sister, Anne Veronica “Vonnice” Banville-Evans, has written a children’s novel and a memoir about growing up in Wexford.

Banville says he has some regrets about not going to college or university after secondary school. However, he felt at the time that he wanted to get away from his family and to be free. He also has stated that university may not have benefitted him in terms of his writing career. He says that he would have been less courageous as a writer if he had studied literature in university as he would have been “beaten into submission by his lecturers”.

Banville has two sons by his first marriage and two daughters by his second marriage. He met his first wife in the US in the 1960s. He has lived in Dublin for over 50 years. He once told a reporter that he feels like a smalltown boy in Dublin having moved there from Wexford. He does most of his writing in a small apartment at the top of a narrow building on Bachelor’s Walk, in the center of Dublin. He does not own a car.



(Banville in 2019)

ACHIEVEMENTS AND LEGACY

Banville has won, or been considered for, many of the top international literature awards. He won the 1976 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for his novel *Doctor Copernicus*, and *The Sea* won the Man Booker Prize in 2005. The chair of the judging panel Prof. John Sutherland described the novel as “beautifully written and a masterly study of grief, memory and love recollected”. He also won the 2011 Franz Kafka Prize for international literature, the 2014 Prince of Asturias Award for Literature and the 2013 Austrian State Prize for European Literature. Banville was elected to the London-based Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2007. Italy also made him a *Cavaliere* of the Ordine della Stella d’Italia (essentially a knighthood) in 2017. Banville is a former member of the Irish society of artists known as Aosdana.

Banville has been described as the “heir to Proust via Nabokov” even though he has said the following of Nabokov: “Nabokov was a great love of my youth, but I find his artistic self-absorption and tone of self-satisfaction increasingly irritating”. His work has also been compared to the work of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky and the Algerian novelist Albert Camus. However, Banville describes both as bad writers. Whereas both Banville and Proust are deeply concerned with memory, memory is never in Banville so completely absorbing as it is in Proust. Banville is also not a modernist novelist in the way that Proust is. Banville recognises that the lengthy reflections on time and memory that were so much a part of the modernist novel are no longer possible in the much shorter novels of today. Banville is more of a postmodern novelist, especially in the way he has brought his different authorial identities together in recent years.

Banville tends to divide critics. “Difficult”, “heavyweight” and “tough-going” are common reactions to Banville’s work both from critics and the public. His style has been described as “baroque” and “allusive”. His stories are also often quite difficult to follow as Banville likes to use unreliable narrators who reminisce, digress and reflect on events in the past which they themselves often can’t recall in all their detail. The stories are also often heavily reliant on symbolism and philosophical digressions that many readers might not know the context of or fully recognise. His narrators are also nearly always middle-aged white men, many of whom – such as Oliver Orme and Max Morden – are dealing with trauma and tragedy and might also be regarded as dealing with mid-life crises. However, Banville’s earlier work was rather unique in trying to deal with complex scientific ideas and discoveries in three major novels. His Revolutions Trilogy (*Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler* and *The Newton Letter*) brings together deliberations on some of the most complex scientific problems of their time with engaging human stories about the lives of some of our most famous scientists. Banville’s work is unique in the way it brings to life this mix of scientific investigation and human storytelling.

Critics also note that the reward for persevering with Banville’s work is “stunning, lyrical prose”. His writing is described as “perfectly crafted, inventive and poetic”. More surprising, perhaps, given the often sombre tone of the work, is the fact that his work has been described as “extremely funny, with a dark humour and disparaging wit”.

Banville is also something of a writer’s writer. The acclaimed Irish novelist Colm Tóibín has described his novel *Birchwood* as representing a “watershed in contemporary Irish writing. It is a novel in which history becomes rich black comedy full of land agitation and Gothic characters”.

MAJOR WORKS

Banville has published 20 novels under his own name, 10 novels under the pseudonym Benjamin Black, one collection of short stories, one children's novel, two works of non-fiction, 5 screenplays, and 6 adaptations of dramas. Here is a list of the major works:

Novels

- *Nightspawn*, 1971
- *Birchwood*, 1973
- *Doctor Copernicus*, 1976
- *Kepler*, 1981
- *The Newton Letter*, 1982
- *Mefisto*, 1986
- *The Book of Evidence*, 1989
- *Ghosts*, 1993
- *Athena*, 1995
- *The Untouchable*, 1997
- *Eclipse*, 2000
- *Shroud*, 2002
- *The Sea*, 2005
- *The Infinities*, 2009
- *Ancient Light*, 2012
- *The Blue Guitar*, 2015
- *Mrs. Osmond*, 2017
- *Snow*, 2020
- *April in Spain*, 2021
- *The Singularities*, 2022
- *The Lock-up*, 2023

Short stories

- *Long Lankin*, 1970

Books For children

- *The Ark*, 1996

Pseudonymous works, published as Benjamin Black:

- *Christine Falls*, 2006
- *The Silver Swan*, 2007
- *The Lemur*, 2008
- *Elegy for April*, 2011
- *A Death in Summer*, 2011
- *Vengeance*, 2012
- *Holy Orders*, 2013
- *The Black-Eyed Blonde*, 2014
- *Even the Dead*, 2016
- *Prague Nights*, 2017
- *The Secret Guests*, 2020

THEMES

Memory

There are a number of important themes that recur in Banville's work. Chief amongst these are the themes of memory, the spirit of discovery, and love between men and women. The majority of Banville's characters, in such novels as *The Untouchable*, *The Blue Guitar*, *The Sea* and even the early novel *Birchwood*, are middle-aged men looking back on tragic or traumatic events that have shaped them as individuals. In many ways, the recollection of these events through memory serves a therapeutic function for the characters. By writing about these events and trying to come to terms with them, they leave the reader with the suggestion that this process has given them a new sense of direction or at the very least that the motivation to write it down helped them enter into a state of reflection.

Memory is an important theme, for example, in Banville's *The Blue Guitar*. In this novel, the plot is revealed to us through a series of recollections on different moments from Oliver Orme's life. Oliver uses memory to better understand how events have led him to his current sorry state. He has clearly not come to terms with the death of his infant child and this is one traumatic moment from his past that he uses memory to work out. There is also a suggestion in the novel that even Oliver's stealing might be related to his devotion to the past. Stealing things from others might be a kind of substitute for the things he feels time has taken from him. It is only throughout his week of reflection after the discovery of his affair with Polly that he is able to find the time to go back to these moments and take the meaning from them that had eluded him for so long.

Memory is also an important theme in *Birchwood*. In this novel, Gabriel is trying to come to terms with all that has happened to him and his family through writing out the details of the story. However, in the end he realises that writing out the memories of the events only offers him "echoes and coincidences". This is also a meta-textual moment in the novel; in the same way that Gabriel discovers that no form of writing can capture the horrors of his experiences, no literature can capture fully the horrors of the Irish Great Famine. Memory simply becomes a form of documentation and even of bearing witness to tragedy and trauma. The kind of memory being described in the novel is also a commemorative memory that can be used to support different political readings of the time. Even after almost two hundred years, the events of the Great Famine and how they are recalled can depend on a person's political persuasions. Gabriel's story and the history of the Lawless and Godkin families at the centre of the story can be retold in many different ways to support different political views.

Finally, in his Booker prize-winning novel *The Sea*, memory is again a major theme. In fact, the whole story is revealed to us through memories of different times. As the narrator admits, and as his daughter says of him, he lives in the past. But the narrator also wants to remind the reader that it is the gap between reality and how we remember things that causes us the most surprise. For example, Max finds it disorientating when he returns to the Cedars and sees that everything in the house, even its dimensions, seem wrong, or at least completely different to how he had remembered them. However, even though he recognises this disparity between memory and reality, he still spends the entire novel reflecting on different memories from his past.

There is also a suggestion that the sea becomes a symbol for how memory encompasses us in our lives. At the end of the novel, as Max recalls a moment from the day when his wife died, he is also then sent back to another day, spent with Chloe and Myles when he had gone off to play on his own. However, in order to strengthen the connection between the work of memory and the work of the sea, the narrator immediately shifts to a memory of a moment, when the sea literally lifted him up and transported him backwards. Perhaps Banville is telling us that memory works a little bit like the sea and that both can drown us if we give up too much of our lives to them.

The Spirit of Discovery

Many of Banville's early novels, especially the Revolutions Trilogy (*Doctor Copernicus*, 1976; *Kepler*, 198; *The Newton Letter*, 1982) take us into the lives and the minds of some of the greatest scientists to have lived. These are characters – Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton - who devoted their lives to

finding solutions to seemingly impossible scientific questions. These characters were obsessed with a spirit of discovery despite very difficult personal circumstances. It is sometimes difficult for us as readers in the twenty-first century to understand the dedication with which these scientists pursued these scientific truths. Banville's novels give us the most poignantly imagined biographies of these scientists. However, these imagined biographies are the result of a great deal of research on Banville's part. Banville's own devotion to describing the spirit of discovery in the lives of these scientists points to his own interest as an author in what motivates people to pursue such truths. An author of fiction must also be motivated by a spirit of discovery. An author must be willing to make his or her story believable and doing so requires a great deal of research, redrafting and editing on the author's part. The other genre of novel that Banville has been most interested in in recent years is crime fiction. This is also a genre in which a spirit of discovery is an important theme; there is usually a sleuth or a detective in such stories who devotes all his time to finding clues and to interpreting these clues. One can therefore see that a spirit of discovery has always been one of the themes that is important to Banville.

Kepler gives us a realistic account of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, that is, of 'The Scientific Revolution'. The world was still reeling from the Copernican revolution and people and religious movements were still desperately trying to come to terms with how these changes affected them and their place in the world. *Kepler* recreates this world of change brilliantly while also demonstrating how these changes impinged on the daily lives of ordinary and extraordinary people. Kepler's mother, for example, is slow to give up on her belief in occult remedies. Due to the changes taking place in society her practises were regarded as a form of witchcraft and she narrowly escapes with her life.

In *Doctor Copernicus*, Banville presents us with a richly imagined life of Copernicus. Copernicus is devoted to trying to establish a theory to describe the orbits of the planets around the sun. He is possessed by a spirit of discovery and is conscious of how science has become mired in political and religious disputes that have stalled its progress. He wants science to be less about explaining events and more about pursuing what is possible. Copernicus is frustrated that the world of science is still beholden to the work of Ptolemy, the ancient Greek mathematician and astronomer. The novel sets up a contrast between Copernicus and his brother Andreas, two brilliant young men.

In *The Newton Letter* we meet an unnamed narrator who is an academic researching the life of Isaac Newton. The narrator is committed to his work. He is an academic who has applied for a big academic job at the University of Cambridge. He is hopeful that once he finishes and publishes the book on Newton he will be offered an important job from the university. In a sense, this novel marks a kind of metafictional shift in these novels about scientists. *The Newton Letter* describes the life of a researcher who possesses a spirit of discovery who is researching Newton, a scientist who was himself also possessed with a strong spirit of discovery. One might suggest that Banville is trying to work out how the work of a researcher and imaginative writer (like himself) is related to the imaginative work of a great scientist engaged in scientific discovery. Another related theme that both Newton and the narrator discover in their lives is that it is impossible to disconnect completely from the world of everyday life. No matter how hard Newton tried to base all his calculations and scientific discoveries on absolutes, in the end, he came to realise that everyday life intervened in fundamental ways. This made him realise that something like relativity also had a part to play. The narrator comes to realise that Newton most likely had his mental breakdown in 1693 because he had remained too strongly committed to his notion of absolutes. The narrator also realises something similar. No matter how hard he tries to focus on his book on Newton, he cannot shut out his feelings and emotions for two women. In the end, his feelings for them become so strong that he abandons his book altogether. Real life intervened between him and his scholarly work and he comes to accept that this was for the best.

Love

Love is an enduring theme in Banville's novels, but it is usually presented as a kind of riddle or problem that can never be solved. Banville's narrators rarely experience enduring love, or if they do, it is most likely unrecognised as they tend to be too concerned with personal crises. So, while his protagonists recognise the importance of love between men and women and spend a great deal of time deliberating on their passions for women (his narrators are mainly heterosexual men), they fail to

appreciate the value of enduring love. If they do acknowledge and appreciate this kind of love, they are slow to admit it to the reader. For example, in *The Newton Letter* the unnamed narrator is clearly driven by his passions for Charlotte and Otilie. Not only does it only take a few days in the company of Otilie for him to give himself up completely to their affair, but it is also only a few weeks into the relationship with Otilie that he begins to have even stronger feelings for her aunt Charlotte. His feelings for the two women become so powerful that at one stage he imagines their two forms blended into one. On top of all this, his feelings also become so powerful that they blind him to how he might be hurting the people around him. These affairs do also not endure in the novel.

In *Eclipse* there is a description of what appears to be an enduring and loving relationship between the main characters, Lydia and Alex, but the foundations of the relationship are shaken when tragedy hits with the death of their daughter Cass. Alex (the protagonist of *Eclipse*) is a middle-aged actor who has just had an embarrassing experience on stage during a performance when he went “dry” and forgot his lines. In the end, he had to walk off stage to jeers. Alex seems to connect this with his role as a father. He feels guilt for how he has treated his daughter and his wife, and he can’t cope with the flood of emotions. In the end, he decides to run away from everything and to disappear back to his former family home.

A final aspect of love in Banville’s novels is that his male protagonists find it very difficult to reconcile the physical and emotional aspects of love. While Alex and even Gabriel (in *Birchwood*) recall fondly their passionate encounters with women, they appear unable to balance these feelings with other characteristics that are also important for a loving relationship, such as responsibility and commitment. To sum up, love in Banville’s novels is a difficult emotion that causes great tension and often feelings of hurt and guilt.

CHARACTERS

The most memorable characters in Banville’s novels include scientists as well as other intellectuals, such as an art critic.

Kepler

Kepler is a gifted and dedicated scientist, astronomer and cosmologist. He is also a visionary. He appears somewhat delusional and eccentric to those with little understanding of the value of scientific discovery. They fail to understand how something as abstract as planetary motion can shape the direction of one’s entire life. However, Kepler is also a great negotiator, a spirited defender of reason and rational argument, and a pragmatist. Kepler is also a compassionate person. When his mother’s life is at risk for alleged witchcraft, he does all in his power to defend her.

Pragmatist After Kepler has received repeated letters from his daughter Regina demanding that he send her all that she is due from her mother’s estate, Kepler gives a clear explanation for why his wife’s estate has greatly diminished. He reminds Regina that her mother was accustomed to a certain quality of life and that this required money. He also reminds Regina that her grandfather, Jobst Muller, had promised Kepler 70 florins a year for her upkeep when he married Jobst’s daughter. It turns out Jobst had never paid any of this allowance. Kepler’s reminds Regina that he is fully justified in deducting from the inheritance a “just and suitable recompense”.

Driven Kepler is a man driven to achieve his ambitions. Nothing will prevent him from conducting his research and getting his books printed and published. A good illustration of his determination occurs towards the end of the novel, when Kepler’s hopes are raised that he might finally win a regular position and salary with the new emperor. However, it all comes to nothing. Or so Kepler thinks until the day he sees some workmen with a cart trundling up to his house. They dump a printing press at his door! Despite not having the stipend, having a large family to feed, and growing older, Kepler persuades himself that he is a fortunate man. Weathering all the hardships and the numerous humiliations and disappointments, Kepler decides that he will return to printing almanacs and navigational calendars for sailors and to teaching what he calls “brats” simply so that he can earn a living to support him in his research.

Vain Kepler can often appear somewhat eccentric and even arrogant to those around him. For example, when he comes to the court of Tycho Brahe, he is unwilling to beg for a position and he is perhaps a little too demanding of the old, respected royal mathematician. Kepler refuses to relent and instead he travels with his family to the residence of Baron Hoffmann to request that he intercede on his behalf with Tycho Brahe. While speaking to the Baron and his wife, Kepler criticises the mathematical work of the great Tycho Brahe. When Hoffmann makes Kepler aware that Brahe has been a little insulted by his disrespectful treatment of him, Kepler is incredulous. His vanity had blinded him to how he might be offending others who had offered to help him. Hoffmann tells Kepler that Brahe will only accept Kepler and his family back in his home – the Castle of Benatek – if he writes a written apology and a declaration of secrecy.

Inspired Kepler is often described as inhabiting a kind of dream-like state when he is most inspired. Not only does he have visions, he also keeps recalling the memories of important teachers and mentors and their words about the nature of experimentation and discovery. For example, he frequently recalls the words and the advice of Baron Hoffmann, the nobleman who mediated between him and Tycho Brahe. Hoffmann advised him not to neglect the mysteriousness of the commonplace or the magic of the ordinary, and that is something that Kepler keeps in mind. He likes to focus on the simplest details in nature. When he was a boy, Kepler was in awe of the movement of a small snail across a pane of glass in a window. Staring at the underside of the shell, Kepler was amazed at how the different parts of the snail worked in harmony to produce such a fluid movement. It was a moment that inspired him to look for the harmony in objects around him even in the cosmos itself.

Newton

Character We are not told much about Newton in *The Newton Letter*. Everything we learn about him is from the perspective of the rather unreliable and unnamed narrator. Along with Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton is probably the most famous scientist who ever lived. Even though Newton does not make an appearance in this novel, the narrator of the story is obsessed by the life of Newton and he even seems to be trying to imitate Newton in much of what he does.

Moody Newton is obviously a gifted and dedicated scientist and mathematician. However, we learn from the narrator that the two letters he wrote to John Locke in 1693 reveal that he also had a deep emotional life. We learn that he struggled to sometimes balance his scientific and religious beliefs. His strong belief in absolutes for his discoveries in gravity, motion and optics was ultimately challenged when he realised he had no language for describing the world of everyday events and communications. Perhaps the fact that he turned to biblical interpretations and theological questions in his later life (as well as alchemy) suggests that he was not wholly willing to give up on his belief in absolutes.

Sensitive Newton is supposed to have suffered a mental breakdown in 1693 after he took more time to reflect on everyday experiences around him. This suggests Newton is a sensitive person. He takes the emotions that new experiences elicit in him very seriously. He becomes deeply troubled by how these new experiences make him feel. (It is unclear whether they are experiences with women or simply moments of self-discovery experienced having spent more time in society away from his scientific research). He then writes to his long-time friend John Locke about how these experiences make him feel and it is clear from the letter that he is deeply troubled and even unhinged. Even though he blames Locke for having led him astray, he is unwilling to give up on their friendship. Newton then comes across as a thoughtful and sensitive person.

Copernicus

Copernicus is a gifted and talented individual who is also uneasy with his fame and the expectations that come with being a famous scientist and public figure. In the end, he becomes something of a recluse. He barely ever leaves his town and he refuses to have any of his ideas published right up until the end.

Conflicted Copernicus is driven to pursue his scientific ideas and theories. He is a precocious and fiercely intelligent student at university, where he challenges the teachings of his professors. At the same time, he spends the whole novel debating whether he should publish his theories for the general public, theories that he knows will change science forever. He finds it difficult to accept the

responsibility his talent asks of him. He understands that the general public must learn of his ideas, but he struggles to accept that he must publish the work in his lifetime. He fears publication not only for religious and political reasons but also because he believes his ideas are incomplete and therefore are not suitable for public consumption. For this reason, he is a deeply conflicted character.

Reclusive The last two books of the novel demonstrate clearly how reclusive Copernicus becomes. He lives on his own with his housekeeper, Anna Schilling, and 15 other canons in a remote castle in the small town of Frauenburg. He could easily have worked for an emperor or a king, but he chose to live in Frauenburg and to withhold his ideas from the public for almost the duration of his life. It is only on his deathbed that he finally sees his work published in book form.

Max Morden

Max Morden is the narrator and chief protagonist of Banville's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Sea*. He is a retired art critic who is trying to finish a book on the French artist Pierre Bonnard. His wife has recently died and he has moved to the Cedars as he wants to sell the house he lived in with Anna. One summer, he meets the Grace family while on holiday and he never truly recovers from the events of that tragic summer. He is a man who lives in the past and also a man who finds it difficult to open up to others.

Pensive Max is described by his daughter as someone who lives in the past. As he reflects on his daughter's words, he comes to realise his daughter is right. In some sense, Max tries to work out why he is living in the past throughout the novel by returning to the events that led to the two most dramatic events of his life – the death of Chloe and Myles when he was an 11-year-old boy and the death of his wife about a year ago. The entire plot of the novel is revealed to us through a series of recollections that flit back and forth between the different times of the novel.

Anxious Max is obviously traumatised and haunted by the drownings of Chloe and Myles. Chloe was his first love and he watched from the beach as she walked into the sea and drowned. It is hard to imagine how any boy would cope with such a tragedy. Max has obviously not come to terms with this event throughout his life. It is only when his wife dies 50 years later that he feels he can immerse himself in the different memories from these moments – the life with Chloe and the life with Anna – in order to try to make some sense of it all. He devotes himself to the work of memory in an attempt to understand more about the events. In the end, the process is helpful as it allows the narrator – Max – to come up with an elaborate comparison between the sea and memory itself. In writing about this comparison, he is able to use art and writing to come to a fuller understanding of these traumatic events in his life.

Self-obsessed Max is self-obsessed and for this reason he fails to understand why people close to him have acted in certain ways. For example, he is very dismissive of Claire's boyfriend and he is unwilling to accept him as a son-in-law. The reader feels that if he took the time to listen to his daughter about why she gave up art history for the education of "backward" children from the "slums", he would have a better understanding of her intentions. He also misunderstands the intentions of Rose, the governess of Chloe and Myles. He believes that Rose is besotted by Carlo Grace as he sees her weeping when Carlo leaves and believes they are having an affair. However, it is only very late in the novel that Rose tells him that she had always been much closer to Chloe than to Carlo. Once again, if he were less focused on himself and taken the time to get to know Rose, he might have understood better why she acted as she did.

Unreliable In many ways, Max is representative of a type of unreliable narrator that Banville has used throughout his career. This type of narrator allows Banville to reveal the plot gradually to the reader through the narrator's reflections. For example, in the early novel *Birchwood*, we have a version of this unreliable narrator and it means that Banville does not reveal to us one of the biggest parts of the plot until right at the end of the novel. In many ways, this structure is somewhat similar to the classic whodunit novel where the detective might not reveal who the murderer is until the very end. It is perhaps no surprise then that the crime fiction genre is the other favourite genre of Banville.