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BOOKS

Mysteries of Identity

John Banville's alter ego.

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

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GIFT STORY

Benjamin Black's debut thriller is, as its genre demands, littered with clues. But the most revealing pieces of evidence are not the ones that point toward the dark crimes in *Christine Falls*, but the ones that help unmask Mr. Black. Early in the novel, for example, two characters meet in the sort of seedy taproom where genre characters often consort. "The evening sun had found a chink somewhere at the top of the painted-over window at the front of the bar and was depositing a fat, trembling gold lozenge of light on the floor carpet beside where they sat." There's a striking similarity here to, say, "the open doorway from which a fat slab of sunlight lay fallen at our feet" in *The Sea* or "the thick drop of sunlight [that] seethed in a glass paperweight" in *The Untouchable*. Even if the flap copy of *Christine Falls* didn't, the sunlight—and the sky and the water—would have given John Banville away instantly.

Two years ago, Banville taunted the London literary world in his acceptance speech for the Booker Prize for *The Sea*, remarking that "it was nice to see a work of art" win the prize ("for a change" was the obvious implication). He has said repeatedly in interviews that *Christine Falls*, his first effort since then, is not such a work of art but a matter of mere craftsmanship. *Christine Falls*, a noir exercise set mostly in 1950s Dublin, introduces Dr. Quirke, a massively built and brusquely amiable pathologist in a Catholic hospital. Orphaned at birth, he grew up in a boys' home until the wealthy and prominent Judge Garret Griffin took him in and raised him as a brother to his son, Malachy. Quirke and Malachy, an obstetrician, spent a year of their medical training in Boston in the early '30s, where they met and married the well-heeled Crawford sisters. Quirke had been in love with Sarah Crawford but ended up, for reasons we eventually discover, with her sister, Delia. Delia died in childbirth soon after returning to Ireland, and she continues to haunt the tortured Quirke.

As the story opens, Quirke totters out of a party to find Malachy falsifying a death record for a poor domestic named Christine Falls, who died under mysterious circumstances. In the manner of all vexed, yet ambivalently duty-bound, bystanders in novels like these, Quirke begins to stick his nose where he is nastily assured it does not belong. He eventually uncovers the usual sort of vast criminal conspiracy: powerful men, hired goons, trans-Atlantic baby-smuggling, and so on. The rafters and joists of this novel have been picked up ready-made, but the filigreed ironwork of the sentences betrays Banville's precision. In a stock bar-

fight scene, one character smashes a beer bottle. He refrains from “brandishing” it, however, and instead he thrusts “the crown of jagged spikes against the side of the fat man’s fat soft throat. The quiet spread outward from the table like fast, running ripples.”

Despite sentences like those, in the signature style of his previous novels, Banville has decided to dramatize the difference between this book and its predecessors with a halfhearted nom de plume. But what is the point of taking on a pseudonym only to identify it as such immediately? And what are we to make of the simplistic art/craft distinction he has used to defend this noir effort? One suspects that Banville, like the archly unreliable poet-madmen who have narrated his previous novels for almost 20 years, is playing games with us.

Banville has invoked, by way of explanation, late Belgian novelist Georges Simenon, who divided his few-hundred books into two categories: those starring the clever Inspector Maigret, and those he called the *romans durs*, the hard novels, which tend to feature stolid petit-bourgeois protagonists thrown into demimondes of violent intrigue. The difference between a Maigret novel and a *romans durs*, as Luc Sante has pointed out, is between the moral consolations of solved crime and the blank injustice of existentialism. Banville has mentioned that *Christine Falls* is an attempt to write such a *romans durs* himself.

But it would be more accurate to say that Banville has done almost the opposite: The violent, pared-down (by Banville’s standards) *Christine Falls* not only allows for a possibility of justice, but has room for a much-wider range of emotion than both a *roman durs* and his own previous books. The psychopath-stylists who narrated those books are all descendants of Humbert Humbert: Narcissistic wrongdoers, they lack the imagination required for sympathy or guilt. Their silver-tongued testimony tries to seduce our forgiveness. Morrow, the narrator of *Athena*, even calls our attention to that “orotund quality that sets in when I begin consciously to dissemble.” Freddie Montgomery, the lovable lunatic on trial for murder in *The Book of Evidence*, freely loses himself “in a welter of words.” Words, he writes, “are a form of luxury, of sensuousness, they are all we have been allowed to keep of the rich, wasteful world from which we are shut away.” He is being both literal—he writes from prison—and figurative: He tries to insulate himself from reality in a thick wadding of prose. At the same time—it is a formal requirement of this unreliable-narrator genre—his elaborate rhetoric is designed (not entirely successfully, of course) to conceal truths from both himself and the reader. These narrators of Banville’s fear that if they stopped talking for even one moment—if they listened to the sounds of the “rich, wasteful world”—they might succumb to feelings of remorse and terror. They might, that is to say, more closely resemble the tormented characters in *Christine Falls*.

Enter Benjamin Black. Moving on into genre fiction, and half-changing his identity in doing so, was a brilliant strategy for an author whose last book tried to include a wider emotional range than his familiar narcissistic-poet was capable of experiencing: The narrator of *The Sea*, try as he might, could not escape from his own coils of language. The scaffolds of genre have considerably lightened Banville’s burden and given him new ways to write about regret and sadness. In *The Sea,* for example, Max Morden can’t quite make his guilt about his wife’s death feel real. He even goes so far as to beg for a ghost: “Torment me, if you like. Rattle your chains, drag your cerements across the floor, keen like a banshee, anything.” But authentic desperation eludes him. What truly sad or guilty person pauses long enough to reach for a word like “cerements”? Black, by contrast, has a much more relaxed grip on language, going so far as to repeat words: “Chinks” of light appear twice, two different characters “sidle” up to something, some conversation and then some rain are both “desultory,” and that rain “stipples” at least three things.

The linguistic differences between the “two” writers herald more important atmospheric ones. The minatory ambience of a noir novel just won’t permit Max Morden’s kind of evasive nonsense: There are no ghosts, but there is plenty of earthly torment. This was the great insight of Eric Ambler, who invented this genre in its modern form: You discover a lot about the conscience of ordinary people when you subject them to ominous climates. As Black, Banville uses this convention of vague menace to externalize his characters’ fear and shame, and thus frees them up to experience a broader range of emotion. We get the sense, early in *Christine Falls*, that Quirke, who has also lost his wife, is as haunted as Morden was. But Quirke, unlike Morden, is forced into feelings of vulnerability by his encounter with crime. Christine Falls is dead and Quirke finds himself compelled to investigate why. Once he has an unpleasant run-in with some hired goons, Quirke can no longer avoid asking himself where, exactly, this vague sense of duty comes from. This line of inquiry leads back to Delia and finally allows him to begin working through long-delayed reactions to her death.

The result is a different kind of case study than Banville is used to, and Quirke in turn seems more alive than any of his protagonists since *The Untouchable*’s Victor Maskell. *Christine Falls*, despite an ultimately less-than-believable resolution, is a delight in itself, and it’s also a promising experiment. The book fuels the best kind of suspense, not just about Quirke’s future adventures but about the effects of the crafty Benjamin Black on John Banville’s art.

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