

## BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN BANVILLE

Preface: Without the elegance of Mr. Saunder's prose—let alone his presence, I ask the Club's indulgence for the following biographic sketch of John Banville.

Overview. Born in 1945, William John Banville is an Irish novelist, short story writer, adaptor of dramas and screenplays. He published his first novel, *Nightspawn*, in 1971. A second, *Birchwood*, followed two years later. John Banville was born to Agnes and Martin, a garage clerk, in Wexford, Ireland. He is the youngest of three siblings; his older brother is also a novelist and has written under the name Vincent Lawrence. His sister Anne Veronica has written both a children's novel and a memoir of growing up in Wexford. Hearsay tells us that Banville stole a collection of Dylan Thomas's poetry from the county library while in his teens.

Early Life: Banville was educated at a Christian Brothers school and at St. Peter's College, Wexford. Despite having intended to be a

painter and an architect, he did not attend university. Banville has described this as a great mistake. "I should have gone. I regret not taking those four years of getting drunk and falling in love. But I wanted to get away from my family. I wanted to be free." Alternately he has stated that college would have had little benefit for him: "I don't think I would have learned much more, and I don't think I would have had the nerve to tackle some of the things I tackled as a young writer if I had gone to university—I would have been beaten into submission by my lecturers."

After finishing school, he worked as a clerk at Aer Lingus, which allowed him to travel at deeply discounted rates. He took advantage of these rates to travel to Greece and Italy. On his return to Ireland, he became a sub-editor at *The Irish Press* eventually becoming chief sub-editor before the paper collapsed in 1995. Sometime afterward, Banville became a sub-editor at *The Irish Times*, where he was appointed literary editor in 1998. This paper, too, endured financial troubles, and Banville was offered the choice of taking 'redundancy package' or working as a feature department sub-editor. He left shortly after.

Banville has two sons from a marriage to the American textile artist Janet Dunham, whom he met in the United States during the 1960's. Asked in 2012 about the breakup of that marriage, Banville's immediate thoughts focused on the effect it had on his children. He said, "It was hard on them." Later, he had two daughters from another relationship.

Writing as a Life Calling: Banville published his first book, a collection of short stories in 1970. As an unknown writer in the 1980's he roamed Dublin bookshops around the time of the publication of his novel *Kepler* and "there wasn't a single one of any of my books anywhere." But, he noted in 2012, "I did not feel badly about it because I was writing the kinds of books I wanted to write. And I had no one but myself to blame if I was not making money – that wasn't anybody's fault. Nobody was obliged to buy my books."

Since 1990, Banville has been a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*. Banville has written three trilogies: the first, *The Revolutions Trilogy*, focused on great men of science and consisted of *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) and

*The Newton Letter* (1982). He said he became interested in Kepler and other men of science after reading Arthur Koestler. He realized that, like him, scientist were trying to impose order in their work.

The second trilogy was named *Shroud and Ancient Light*. The third trilogy concerns the characters of Alexander and Cass Cleave.

He contributed to *Sons & Fathers*, a book published in 2015 to provide funds for the Irish Hospice Foundation's efforts to give care to terminally ill patient within their own homes.

Beginning with *Christine Falls*, published in 2006, Banville has written crime fiction under the pen name, Benjamin Black. He writes in this genre much more quickly than he writes his literary novels. He appreciated his work as Black as a craft, while as Banville he is an artist. He considers 'crime writing' as being cheap fiction.

On the craft of writing, Banville says, "You have to crank yourself up every morning and think about all the awful stuff you did yesterday, and how you can compensate for that by doing better today." He does not read

reviews of his work as he already knows, “better than any reviewer”—the places in which its faults lie.

His typical writing day begins with a drive from his home in Dublin to his office. He writes from 9:00 a.m. until lunch. He writes on two desks: one facing a wall and the other facing a window through which he has no view and never cleans. He advises young writers approaching him for advice: “I remind them as gently as I can, that they are on their own, with no help available anywhere.” He has compared writing to the life of an athlete: “It is asking an awful lot of one’s self. Every day you have to do your absolute best—it is like being a sportsman. You have to perform at the absolute top of your game -- that’s very, very wearing.”

*A Bit of Wisdom:* “To hurt other people is the worst thing you can do. To be hurt oneself is bad enough, but hurting others is unforgivable. Failure in art, or failure in making a living or being successful – none of these compares, everything pales beside hurting others.

*Literary Influences:* Banville says that as a boy he imitated James Joyce. “After I read *The Dubliners*, and was struck at the way Joyce wrote about life, I immediately started writing inferior imitations. Banville acknowledges that all Irish writers are followers of Joyce or Beckett—and that he places himself in the Beckett camp. In 2012, he cited W.B. Yeats and Henry James as the two real influences on his work

*Awards & Honors:* Banville has won the 1970 James Tait Memorial Prize, the 2005 Booker Prize, the 2011 Kafka Prize, the 2013 Austrian State Prize for European Literature, and the 2014 Prince of Asturias Award for Literature. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2007, Italy made him a *Cavaliere* of the Ordine della Stella d’Italia (a knighthood) in 2017. He is a former member of the *Aosdana*, having voluntarily relinquished the financial stipend in 2001 to another, more impoverished writer.

Scribe: C.J. Henry, *emeritus*

Author: Wikipedia

C.H. Jr.