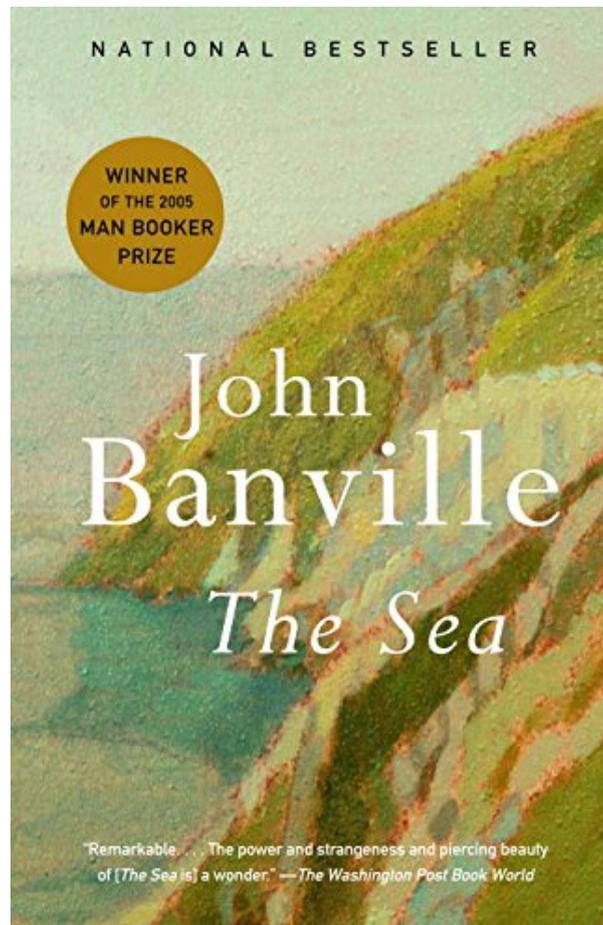


# THE SEA BY JOHN BANVILLE



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WINNER  
OF THE 2005  
MAN BOOKER  
PRIZE

John  
Banville  
*The Sea*

"Remarkable. . . The power and strangeness and piercing beauty  
of [*The Sea*] is a wonder." —*The Washington Post Book World*

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The fashion in which John Banville draws the reader into this hypnotic and disturbing world is non pareil, and the very complex relationships between his brilliantly delineated cast of characters are orchestrated with a master's skill. As in such books as *Shroud* and *The Book of Evidence*, the author eschews the obvious at all times, and the narrative is delivered with subtlety and understatement. The genuine moments of drama, when they do occur, are commensurately more powerful. --Barry Forshaw

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In this luminous new novel about love, loss, and the unpredictable power of memory, John Banville introduces us to Max Morden, a middle-aged Irishman who has gone back to the seaside town where he spent his summer holidays as a child to cope with the recent loss of his wife. It is also a return to the place where he met the Graces, the well-heeled family with whom he experienced the strange suddenness of both love and death for the first time. What Max comes to understand about the past, and about its indelible effects on him, is at the center of this elegiac, gorgeously written novel — among the finest we have had from this masterful writer.

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### Features

- Great product!

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Most helpful customer reviews

59 of 60 people found the following review helpful.

Typical Banville, so buyer beware

By Steven Reynolds

Grieving for his dead wife, Anna, the recently widowed - widowed? - art critic Max Morden returns to the seaside village where he passed the summers of his childhood. He doesn't move into the old family chalet, but rather into a room of the large holiday house once occupied by the wealthy family of his childhood friend, Chloe Grace. There he's supposed to be writing about the artist Bonnard, but instead - or perhaps as well - pens a meditation on the past, exploring the nature of memory and loss... Sounds depressing, but this novel actually made me laugh out loud several times. Banville virgins coming to this direct from the Man Booker winners list might find the absence of a compelling plot off-putting, not to mention the knowingly unreliable narration and the lurking sense that the reader is being elaborately toyed with - especially in the final pages where melodramatic revelations are self-consciously, almost wryly, deployed. It isn't you. It's Banville. As David Mehegan reported recently in the Sydney Sun Herald, most of Banville's novels are like this: relatively thin in terms of plot, scene and dialogue, and virtually all of them are told in the first person by a more or less dislikeable male narrator in an overwrought, lyrical style. His tormented men see everything, and what they see and think unrolls in dazzling verbal pyrotechnics, thick with arcane words and startling metaphors (you'd best keep a dictionary handy). Mehegan quotes other critics as saying that Banville does stretch the reader at times, looking for exactitude and precision, always searching for the mot juste. At its most intense, there is a kind of preciousness in his work. When it's most liberating it reveals the resources of the language and how much is going on in things that look like still life: the light coming in the window, someone sitting in a chair. For some readers, it's not the style that's a problem but the want of

traditional novelistic elements. Banville's response to this complaint: "I'm not really interested in fiction. I don't regard the novel as a very interesting art form." Asked if that means that his books aren't novels or aren't interesting, he says, "If I had the choice of what kind of artist I would be, it would be a composer or a painter, but I have no skill whatsoever." That's perhaps the best way to think of "The Sea" and most other Banville novels: as something akin to a painting or a piece of music. The thrill isn't in the tale, but in the exquisitely rendered details. It takes some getting used to, but once you know what to expect - once you work out that the artful pomposity is a deliberate function of the character-narrator, and not a failing of the author - then Banville's work is amazing. Lovers of language will adore it. Lovers of plot will be dozing. Lovers of Dan Brown will be furious - which is a nice change, considering they're usually so infuriating.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

A writer's writer.

By Roger Brunyate

This is a book that grows on you after you have put it down. Like many other winners of the Man Booker Prize (this being the most recent), John Banville's novel is long on atmosphere and style, but short on story; think of a male Anita Brookner, or a Proust writing at scarcely more than novella length. Following the death of his wife, writer and art historian Max Morden returns to the Irish seaside town of Ballyless, where he used to spend summer holidays as a child. Reminiscences of his friendship with another family, the Graces, shot through with tinges of prepubescent eroticism, intertwine with reflections on grief, aging, and personal identity.

Banville's style is extraordinary, his insights ring true, and his feeling for place and period is remarkable. I also found this book spoke to me on a number of coincidental personal levels, having grown up in just such a seaside town in Ireland, pursued a brief career in art history, and now being of a similar age to the leading character. But I can imagine that even people with less similar backgrounds, especially those of an older generation, might feel the same hypnotic magic, such is Banville's power to draw the reader into his world.

And yet I have two cavils that originally made me question the fifth star (which I ultimately awarded). One is that the long-ago story just seems too slim to support all this rumination; or rather, the connection between those events and the narrator's later life is not entirely clear -- less so than in Jane Gardam's *OLD FILTH*, for instance, another recent novel which excavates the past as a key to the present. However, the last twenty pages of the book deliver a couple of interesting plot twists which suddenly shine a new light on the faded memories, akin to cleaning off the varnish from an old picture and seeing it for the first time as it always was.

Then there is that style, praised by everybody, and rightly so. There is at least one unusual word on every page, or words converted surprisingly from one part of speech to another, in Joycean fashion. This creates a surprised tingle in the reader, and often enough triggers the delighted recognition that the writer has got the description exactly right. But when this happens too many times, it begins to seem an affectation, overly self-conscious. Two passages in particular gave me pause: "sitting up in my ornate bed as on a catafalque, if that is the word I want" and "I pictured her in bombazine, whatever that is." Now an author who can use words like revenant, mephitic, flocculent, pharaonic, and prelapsarian without a quiver can certainly handle catafalque and bombazine. But of course it is not the author that is hesitating here, but the CHARACTER, the writer Max Morden himself . . . .

I can see now that Max refers self-deprecatingly to his own abilities as a writer throughout the book: mediocre, with occasional flashes of brilliance. And he is clearly conscious not only of the story he is telling, but of how he is telling it. Just before the final developments, he writes: "After all, why should I be less susceptible than the next melodramatist to the tale's demand for a neat closing twist?" Much of his life seems

to have been centered on a desire to define himself, whether through others or through his writing, and he recognizes that he turned to the Graces at least partly for such definition. Children often construct stories around themselves, and act out scenarios of their own imagining; but when their imagined dramas intersect and conflict with real-life events, the result can be devastating.

I am finding myself thinking more and more highly of this book as I write about it; it acts like a time-release capsule. Good writing can do that. But I still can't help feeling that it would have been better if, over the first fifty pages or so, I hadn't found myself thinking "How exquisitely Banville writes!" but instead "Who is this interesting character? Why does he use language in such a manner? I would like to know more . . ."

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Poetry in prose

By Jose Sotolongo

When this book won the Man Booker prize in England late last year, there were dissenting opinions among the panel of judges. In fact, after the announcement that 'The Sea' had won, one of the disagreeing judges was quoted in the press that the choice by the majority of the panel had been "perverse."

John Banville, in an oblique response to that slur, stated during his acceptance speech that he congratulated the committee for having the courage to select a novel with good writing this year (I paraphrase). This may have been a comment also on the other nominees last year, among them 'Saturday' and 'Never Let Me Go' (I happen to agree with that assessment).

There may be a bit of truth to both sides of that prize skirmish. This novel is a narrative with a weak story line. It is more a stream of consciousness reminiscence and pondering of the past than a novel with a plot. As such, it is a bit static, since nothing much happens outside of the first person singular main character's thought process. However, the observations that he makes about his life are so touching and so profound that one becomes as involved in his life as with an engaging memoirist. The sentences are constructed as carefully as lines of poetry, the words conveying beauty as well as emotional insights.

Approach this book as you would a gourmet meal--ingest it slowly and savor every sentence. And if you go back for seconds and read it again, you'll pick up scents and textures you missed the first time.

Go for it. The calories are worth it here.

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