INTERVIEWING
John Banville

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Contents

But then, to my surprise, he launched into a [became nothing short of garrulous] launched into an uninterruptible account of the [origins] family [origins] and its origins [and roots] in the [former] otherwise undistinguished corner of a parcel of earth in the sea washed corner of the county. The Mordaunts had been, and were, no mean people. They had fought in wars of conquest and rebellion; a hardy breed they were, men of the horse, cold steel and marketing; men of learning and civil energies, poets, painters; great builders, masters of craft and trade and husbandry; seafarers too, whose ships had ploughed the Spanish main, had dropped anchor off Venice, at Constantinople and the ports of Old Cathay; in all, a noble line. All this was delivered in a toneless drone, as if it had been learned by rote. I was alarmed, [I felt that burning shyness] the excesses of others always fills me with a burning, sweaty shyness] and I had that [burning] sweaty shyness]. I felt too that sense of sweaty shyness the excesses of others always provokes in me. If we hadn't been going at a good clip I would have leaped out of the car without even opening the door. I was obviously in the clutches of a [mad man] maniac. I tried to recall if he had greeted me by name. Perhaps he had been hanging about the station. It was his way to hang

Word upon World

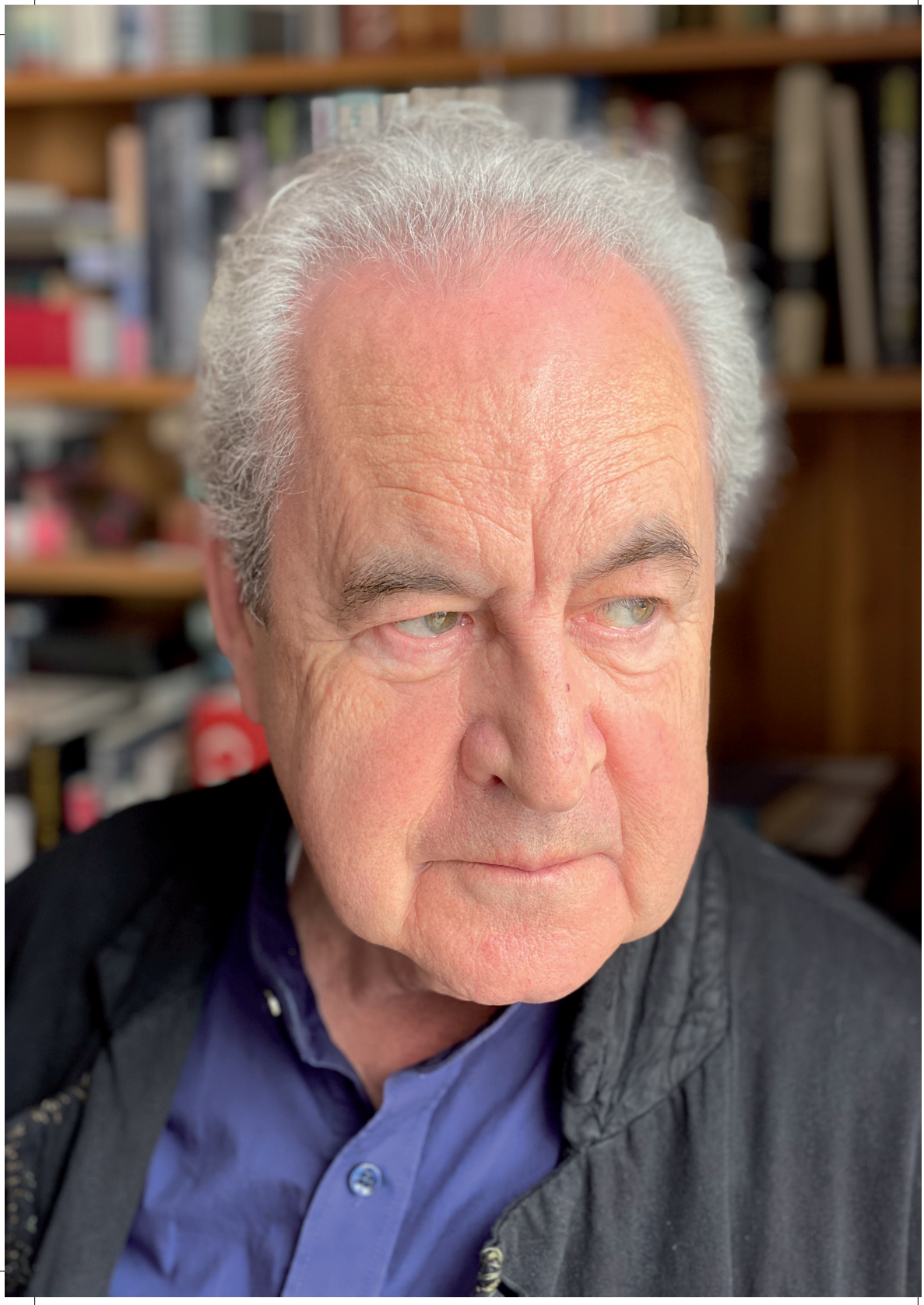
Laura P. Z. Izarra and Eda Nagayama

The following interview happened online on the 21 September 2020. It was our first year of living with covid-19, just six months after the lockdown measures were globally announced. If, on the one hand, the circumstances created another layer of tech challenge to a writer who is known for handwriting his books with an astonishingly beautiful calligraphy, on the other hand, the virtual gathering could count with the enriching participation of several collaborators – literary critics and writers – from around the world. Banville's opening words jokingly expressed this strangeness: "I don't believe that any of you exist, I think this is all done by Disney, right? And it's just me. It's a beautiful day here in Howth, absolutely exquisite, completely still. Sun is shining, blue sky, so I feel, again, completely unreal. I like rain, I like the Irish climate and it's not behaving itself today. So, I'm looking forward to this."

The event was part of the XV Symposium of Irish Studies in South America and launched the special number of the Brazilian Association of Irish Studies *Journal – Word Upon World: Half a Century of John Banville's Universes*, co-edited by Laura P.Z. Izarra, Hedwig Schwall and Nicholas Taylor-Collins under the general editor Mariana Bolfarine. It contains beautiful pictures of his handmade notebooks and pens – tools of the imagination carefully selected to softly carve his worlds – and two images of his neat manuscripts which were kindly sent by the writer for this special edition in his honor.[https://www.revistas.usp.br/abei/issue/view/11819]

From his home office in Howth, Ireland, John Banville discreetly then received the words of celebration and rejoice for 50 years of a life devoted to writing – translating worlds into words – and also offered thoughtful humorous comments on issues raised by his work: art and beauty, real-life and fiction, characters and non-ordinary people, the sentence as the greatest invention of humankind and the resistance to expression imposed by language. During almost two hours, the "person who's trying to give an alibi for the person who wrote the books" also shared insights on motivations and his wife's hints, some savory episodes around his "killed-off" dark brother Benjamin Black, and a few considerations on the one that may be the last of the "Banville books", the author's "ultimate change of direction": *The Singularities* (2022).

Along his career, John Banville was granted with various prestigious awards, including the 2005 Man Booker Prize for *The Sea,* the Franz Kafka Prize (2011), the Austrian State Prize for European Literature (2013), and the Prince of Asturias Award for Literature (2014). His work has been recognized and object of innumerable critical reviews, academic monographs, books, and articles, as well as two special issues of the *Irish University Review* (Spring 1981 and Spring 2006) and a world-wide EFACIS Translation Project [https://www.johnbanville.eu/].



Celebrating John Banville's Universe

Laura Izarra: *Long Lankin,* is your first publication and only collection of short stories which turns 50 years old this year. Thus, the year 2020 marks the half centenary of a master craftsman, who translated worlds into words, interlacing a whole range of emotions, genres, always with a touch of humor. You concentrate with your pen on a blank sheet of fine paper of your handmade copy books, carving universes that reflect an endless interior journey of a human being in search of the true self, either as the author John Banville or as your dark twin Benjamin Black. You said in an essay, *Fiction and the Dream:* "the writing of fiction is far more than the telling of stories, it is an ancient and elemental urge, which springs like the dream from a desperate imperative to encode and preserve things that are buried in us deep beyond words. This is the significance of fiction, its danger and its glory". So, John, I would like to start asking you what comes to your mind when you think of *Long Lankin*; which were your first fears and expectations, your failures and, mainly, your determination to become a writer?

John Banville: Well, I had spent my adolescence writing stories, all of them extremely bad. I was spurred into writing, I think, by my brother and my sister – biased, each of them – [who] gave me Joyce's *Dubliners,* but it was certainly why I started to write. Because in those stories of Joyce's I saw that fiction, art, could be my life, life as I knew it. It didn't have to be, to take place in a fantasy world, it didn't have to be a detective story, it didn't have to be happening in an English public school; it could be happening in the world that I knew. So, I immediately started writing extremely bad imitations of Joyce's stories and I kept plugging away at it even when, in the middle of my teens, I decided I wanted to be a painter. I couldn't draw – no sense of color, a terrible draftsman, all distinct disadvantages if you want to be a painter –, but even when I was trying that, desperately trying it, desperately failing, I kept writing. And I knew that it was all bad, it was all bad and it had to be put aside. And then, when I was about 17, I wrote a story called "The Party" – not a very good story – but what singled it out for me, what made it special, was that when I had finished it, it was no longer mine, it had drifted free of me. And I thought yes, I could be a writer, because I can make something that is not about myself, it's not expressing my deep thoughts, that's just making an object and putting it in the world. And I've held that through, God almighty, 50 years! I've held to that, and I don't think that writing needs to do with self-expression, it's not about me; it's making, as I say, repeating myself, to make an object and put it into the world. And that's what I'm still doing.

Hedwig Schwall: It's my task here to talk to John, which is always a pleasure. John gracefully sent us these beautiful pictures of his notebooks, and his pens, and of manuscripts which enhanced the edition of this special issue of *ABEI Journal* in his honor, and also to get all these contributions together was really a feat. John, your writing did make me violently questioning the world and words. I was very grateful for that, that was really great, and so I think that's why we all like your work, because it challenges us, and it challenges our questions about how do words and worlds relate. I'm very happy to hear you say that your writing is not about self-expression, it's about expressing that which you don't know. And there's several people in this issue who really focus on that, on the fact that you write about that which comes out, which you do not plan. But, so, we thought that it would be appropriate to have a few contributors who were writers themselves and who maybe feel more familiar with your predicament. So, it was really great to have three poets, and major poets like Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, who's with us, and also Jessica Traynor and Annemarie Ní Churreáin. And we had six, seven fiction writers and we had filmmakers, all these people linked to your work, because you're also writing for films and your books are turned into films so I hope we can discuss that later. But the idea is to introduce the writers who want to ask you a few questions, and I think Juan José Delaney is the first one.

Juan José Delaney: John, I worked on your collection of short stories, thanks to Billy O'Callaghan, who sent me a brand new copy, and I really enjoyed your collection of short stories. And my simple question is: do you still write short stories? I know you don't publish them, but do you write short stories?

J.B: No, I don't. It's a form that I can't manage anymore. I could no more write a short story nor a poem. Everything I write, I publish. I don't throw anything away. Benjamin Black wrote a novel set in Venice a few years ago, which didn't get published, and I'm determined to rewrite it. No, I don't do short stories, I would love to be able to do it, but I just can't. I can't do that gestural thing, Chekovian, that gesture. I always think of short stories like a Japanese form where, you know, you think about it for a long time, you think you brewed on it and then you just do the gesture. I couldn't do that anymore. At the same time, I detest the novel form, I just regard it as horrible, as vulgar. As Henry James used to say a loose, baggy monster. But it's the form I'm wedded to. I have a theory that all artists want to be other kinds of artists. I would really like to be a composer, and I don't really like being a novelist. Is that sufficient answer?

J.J.D: Thank you for that, John. I was only offered a minute, so that's my simple question. All the best.

H.S: Maybe you can come back in later. But Alan Gilsenan was the second person who wanted to ask you a question.

Alan Gilsenan: Hello from Wicklow. Actually, I haven't planned to ask a question, I think, but I'm intrigued to hear of John's dislike of the novel and the fact that he could never write a poem, because it seems to me that you could see his novels, in some ways, as long poems. So, I'd ask John, why not poetry?

J.B: Well, my friend, that wonderful novelist and short story author John McGahern, made a nice distinction. He said that there's prose, then there's verse and then there's poetry, and poetry can happen in either form. I wish I could do one of his accents for this, because he has a perfect Leitrim accent, as you know. McGahern says, "it happens more often in prose than it does in verse". I think that's true. Now, don't ask me what poetry is, but it seems to me a version of the world, a vision of the world that is complex and goes beyond the mere doings of human beings. I'm not interested in what people do, I'm interested in what people are. That seems to me the essence of poetry. Keeping to a minute, you see?

...poetry is a vision of the world that is complex and goes beyond the mere doings of human beings.

H.S: Thank you, John, it's all about essences there.

Rosemary Jenkinson: I wrote an essay about the parallels between you and Paul Auster's *New York* trilogy, his postmodern detective stories, and I suppose I saw a lot of parallels in the fact of the precariousness of language, the blurred lines between being dead and alive. And I just wondered, has your inspiration come in any way from Paul Auster? And I hope it's not a one word "no".

J.B: No, no. I sprang fully armed from my own head, I'm not influenced by anybody. I haven't read enough of Paul Auster to say. But, yes, I suppose my writing is concerned without a liminal sense of infection, one is not quite alive, not quite dead. It's strange to write fiction because a novel is nothing like life. We imagine that it is, but it's not. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Even *Finnegans Wake* has beginning, middle and end. It's not like life at all, because in life we don't experience our birth. Although Samuel Beckett says that he could remember being born. And Wittgenstein said death is not an experience in life, which I think is true. So all we have is this messy bit in the middle, and this is why we go to fiction, because we're discontent with the discontinuities of life; we want a shaped object and we find that in the work of art. As I say even a novel, even the loosest, baggiest monster is not like life at all, because you can hold it in your hand and say "this is begun and finished". We can't do that; and

yet, in a strange way, the novel feels very much like life. It's a mystery that I've never solved. Leopold Bloom and Madame Bovary can seem more real to us than the person sitting across the breakfast table. This is why I've been nagging away at this form for, as I'm told, 50 years. Because it does, in some way... I was going to say 'express', but of course it doesn't. The work of art expresses nothing, but it does capture some sense of being alive and I would argue for Henry James's Modernism against Joyce's or Elliot's or Picasso's Modernism, because Henry James catches that sense of what it is to be alive, be conscious. Because being conscious is a fuzzy, foggy state and I think the novel can do that.

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H.S: Well, actually quite a few people of the eleven writers, who reacted to, talked about that. How your style manages to get that fogginess which we all are. Like a nucleus of god knows what. So, yeah, it will strike a bell to many people, I guess.

J.B: You know what people used to say to me – they still do – until I invented Benjamin Black, they said "well, your novels have not any plots". And I would say, "well, has life got a plot?". Not that I've noticed. Life is loose and baggy, and monstrous. We drift. We imagine that we do things; we imagine we're deterministic creatures, but we don't. We drift. All that we do is done in retrospect because we don't know how to live in the present. What is the present? The present doesn't exist. It's not a state that one can live in. One can only either live in the past or in the future. The present is completely ungraspable. And this is why I should say I think [that] especially the late novels of Henry James, where you just don't know, you're never quite sure what's going on; that's what life is like. Somebody said to me once, "in your novels, nobody ever speaks to anybody else". I said, "that's what it is, that's what we do, we speak to ourselves and we speak to the world or to god, but we never speak to each other". James is wonderful. I love James's way with pronouns. When he talks about him and her and she, you're never quite sure whom he's speaking about. And that ambiguity or that ambiguousness, which I've tried to emulate. I discovered Henry James quite late in a way. I've started reading Henry James in the early 1970s. But a book that I wrote, a little book that I wrote in the late seventies or early eighties, *The Newton Letter,* in my manuscript, I noticed it's written *Monumentum pro H.J.* So, he was very important

Life is loose and baggy, and monstrous. We drift.

for me. But today, I've been reading Yeats and I've realized that Yeats is ... If there's an influence in it all, is Yeats. Not Beckett, not Joyce, not Nabokov; not all these people that people tell me I'm influenced by. It's that wonderful rhetorical...The daring of Yeats fascinates me. He dares to be stupid, he dares to be foolish, and dares to be ridiculous. He had to be silly of all he said. He was a wonderful inspiration, and he's never afraid of the rhetorical flourish.

H.S: Well, that's great! I was hoping you would mention Yeats, because it's the Yeats Chair who is organizing this online interview. So many people, yourself included, refer to Yeats so much and you were talking about poetry in verse now, he was one who could make verse.

J.B: Oh, I think the more I read Yeats – perhaps because I'm old, and Yeats, I think, is an old man's poet –, the more I think he's the one. You know, Joyce is great; Beckett is great; Wallace Stevens is great; Elliot, in his way, is great. But I think Yeats is the one because one of the great things Yeats had – a great misfortune of man – Yeats had no sense of humor. It's very hard to be great if you have no sense of humor, in the sense of the ridiculous. When I put down a line, you know, I've written a particular sentence, I think,

When I put down a line, I think, "maybe this is a good sentence, maybe this is beautiful". And I think, "I wonder how many people read this sentence sitting on the lavatory".

"maybe this is a good sentence, maybe this is beautiful". And I think, "I wonder how many people read this sentence sitting on the lavatory". Over and out.

H.S: No, no, no, I'm also glad you mentioned *The Newton Letter,* because Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, who we hope will link into us now, mentioned that is one of the books she really liked.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin: Hello to John, and other friends whom I see. Yes, that's where I started on John's work and I think, still, that it's an astonishing piece of work and a new start. I hadn't thought of Henry James, I'm afraid. I suppose though that you do talk about James. The people on their collision courses in your novels, I suppose, belong to that same stable as so many of James's characters. There is, of course, a feeling. I feel about Joyce, he almost exhausted human nature in *Ulysses* and people had to go on, and write about something else, about the human predicament. And I think that's what, John, you write so tellingly about. And I was thinking of some very clever things to say and then something came to me, which was actually a visual image of something that happens, it seems to me, when two people in your novel, or more than two people, are colliding. It's almost as if there was a green glowing barrier separating them, across which certain things will penetrate, across, I think, desire will penetrate. But there's something that

absolutely says "you can't communicate", whatever you say is going to be lost, it's going to be dissipated somehow in that act of communication. And, of course, I'm just repeating what you have just said yourself, so that's my comment. And I wonder, is it true that people never speak to each other? Or is it that their communication is somehow or other scrambled as they do it? If I'm going to put it as a question, like a parliamentary question which isn't a question at all.

J.B: Thank you, Eiléan. Emerson has a wonderful observation. He had been reading some scientists and he discovered that bodies never meet. There's never, you know, down at the atomic level, bodies do not meet. And I've always been fascinated by that, and it spoke to me very directly. We do not; we live in our solitudes. Quite gay solitudes. 'Gay' is the word I refuse to give up, it's a beautiful word. In the gaiety of our solitudes, as well as the despondencies of our solitudes. But it's always oneself. [chuckles] My wife the other day... We were talking about the book I'm writing at the moment. Unusually, I'm having slight difficulties with the title and she said, "why don't you just call it what all no one should be called? 'Me'", which I think it's a wonderful suggestion. Because... I don't believe there is communication, I think that we tolerate each other,

...down at the atomic level, bodies do not meet. And I've always been fascinated by that, and it spoke to me very directly. We do not; we live in our solitudes. Quite gay solitudes.

human beings tolerate each other, and they cannon like billiard balls. But I don't think that even in love, you know, when you fall in love... You're 17 and you fall in love for the first time, and you think, "this is not a human being that I've fallen in love with, this is a deity, this is a god, a goddess". And, then, the goddess says something and you realize that you know nothing about this person. And, after 50 years of marriage, the less-than-god and the less-than-goddess can still say something and you realize "I know nothing about this person". But, then, you think, "well, I don't know anything about myself either, I'm a complete enigma to myself. I've never understood anything about myself in the world". And I think that, if I have any urge to write, other than as I said making an object and put it in the world, it's that bafflement in the face of the world. The bafflement in face of my bafflement. I don't know how to live; I never learned how to live. And... [it's] a good thing too. If I did, I wouldn't write, I would live. Because I think that, and this is my old-fashioned unreconstructed nineteenth century notion, that the artist is a person who doesn't know how to live in the world and that the art is, in some ways, an effort to assuage the wound, the wound of not being able to live. But I'd rather write than live, you know, as who was living straight here as

...the artist is a person who doesn't know how to live in the world and that the art is, in some ways, an effort to assuage the wound, the wound of not being able to live.

omniscient, you know... They tell me "life's a thing, I prefer books". Over and out.

E.N.C: I will say there's a wonderful portrait of a marriage all the same in *The Sea*.

J.B: Oh, yes of course. But, you know... Is in *The Sea* the one where the wife dies? I guess I can't remember my books.

E.N.C: Yes!

J.B: Oh, yeah. Well, she says to him, "You know it's alright to hate me, I hated you a little. We're human after all". And that's a mission... You can't have... Human beings don't fit well together. Again, to go back to love, an early passion of love and you think that you are.... What is it? This image of the two spoons but we don't fit together. We don't. And, again, as I say, that's a good thing, a good thing too. I think it would be dreadful to know somebody absolutely. It would be dreadful not to have the sense that one could be surprised again, and again, and again. Even if the surprise is disappointment. That's not the point, the point is to be surprised. And maybe that is. People, especially in Ireland, they talk about the weather incessantly, it's always the bloody weather. And I say to them: "Why are you complaining about rain? Rain is an absolute miracle. You're walking on the road, sun is shining, the air darkens, and water falls on

you out of the sky". This to me is extraordinary... I never ever get used to it. I think it's still a miracle and I love it. And, you know, the sun shines... Again, as I say. I only ever express myself once in one little paragraph in *The Book of Evidence*, I think, where the narrator says, "I've never got used to being on this planet. I think that our presence here is a cosmic blunder". And then, he wonders about the people on the other side of the universe that were meant to be here. He says, "I wonder how they lived here". He says, "No, they've become extinct long ago. How could they, gentle earthlings, cope with the world that was meant for us?". And I think this is true, I feel a stranger here. But this is what spurs one into work. I'm not all alone in this, we all feel this, whether we acknowledge it or not, we're all baffled by the world. And it can always come up with something astonishing.... You know, rain is falling.

...."I've never got used to being on this planet. I think that our presence here is a cosmic blunder"...

John O'Donnell: John, firstly congratulations on making it this far. You have plenty of years left in you, I hope. And I'm really looking forward to the new book, to *Snow*. And it's a priest found in a country house and it has resonances for me of the killing of Father Niall Molloy, back in Co. Clare years ago, in 1985. And I'm fascinated by your attachment to real life, as we say, figures, such as Anthony Blunt. And, of course, in *The Book of Evidence,* which is, in my view, one

of the books of the century. And the resonances between Freddie Montgomery and Malcolm Macarthur. I heard a story that Macarthur turned up at a book launch of Mr. Hubert Butler's essays that you were at. I'm not sure if you ever met him, but I'd love to know what you said if you did meet him. But I'm interested in that moment when you realize that a real-life event is going to become the jumping-off point, or the starting point for one of your books. And can you tell us a little bit about that? And, also, tell us if you did meet Macarthur?

J.B: Yeah, Malcolm used to turn up at public events that I was doing and I used to see him standing in the back, sinister, but quite an elegant figure in his way. I was fascinated by him. And he and I came to look more and more like each other. I look like his smaller, less distinguished brother. I don't know if the rest of you know what we're talking about, but *The Book of Evidence* is based on a real-life murder case in Ireland, which of course was much more bizarre than any fiction could be. And Malcolm Macarthur was the longest-serving prisoner in Ireland. There are people in Northern Ireland who slaughtered scores of people who were walking the streets freely but Malcolm was kept in. I haven't met him, I have encountered him a few times. In fact, a friend of mine has a wonderful photograph of him standing at the crime section at Hodges & Figgis [book shop]. And the same friend, we were going through Hodges & Figgis one day – life seems much stranger than fiction –, my friend and

My friend said, "Imagine how much you'd make from this book if you had it signed by you and by Malcolm Macarthur". And we looked up and there was Malcolm...

I were walking through Hodges & Figgis and there was a small table with Irish books for sale and one of them was *The Book of Evidence*. My friend said, "Imagine how much you'd make from this book if you had it signed by you and by Malcolm Macarthur". And we looked up and there was Malcolm; there was Malcolm standing about three yards away.

J.O'D: Is he stalking you?

J.B: No, no, no. Look, Dublin is a small village, we move in the same areas. Somebody once told me that he would love to invite me to dinner and I said, "yeah, he'd like to *have me* for dinner I'm sure". Like Hannibal Lecter, you know. But you asked a question which I will answer. With Malcolm Macarthur – I worked in the newspapers for years, [it was] how I made my living –, I was working in the Irish press. I guess it was the late 70s, early 80s, I can't remember when he did his killings. But the news editor came to me and said – because Macarthur had been on the run for ten days, and the senator said they've cornered him – he's in the same apartment building that the attorney general lives in. About ten minutes later he came and said, "he's in the

fucking attorney general's apartment!". I thought "I have to write about this man".

You also mentioned Anthony Blunt, and that's an even better moment of epiphany. There was a television documentary about the painter Poussain and Blunt was the leading authority. And, before the program began, they showed footage of Blunt's press conference, after Margaret Thatcher had named him as one of the Cambridge spies. And it just shows how *Times* have changed. The press conference was held in *The Times* of London, the newspaper office, and Blunt was sitting there, and he was watching the journalists getting their notebooks ready, and so on, and he didn't realize that there was a camera on him from the side. And he was watching them, and just a small smile appeared on his face. You could see him saying, "these people think they're going to get the goods from me". And he was, you know, he was saying to himself "I've been interrogated by real people, these are not real people". And, in fact, that's when my wife turned to me and said, "you have to write about this guy". And I said, "yes, I have to invent this guy", which of course is a slightly different thing, because fiction fictionalizes the world, fictionalizes life. These real characters cease to be real when I write about them. When I finished *The Book of Evidence* – it was about two weeks before publication –, I had

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bound proofs, and as I was reading it, I thought I'd better contact my publishers, and say "look, you know this is based on a real case and you better check it for live books". And they said, "well, we don't know anything about it, so why don't you find a lawyer in Ireland?". So I gave the book to Adrian Hardyman, who was a leading barrister in Ireland at the time, and I always remember seeing him in a foggy, early autumn evening, and he said, "I enjoyed the book, you were back four major libels there", and, of course, I was horrified. He explained to me what the libels were, he said, "for instance, you know Malcolm Macarthur's common-law wife, as they used to call them", he said, "I met her the other evening at a party", and he said, "you accuse her of lesbian tendencies and she's in need of money". So, I said, "well, what should I do?", and he said, "don't publish". This is two weeks from publication. So, I changed a few things on the train back to Howth. For a half hour, I scribbled a few things, changed a few lines to make it less lively. And my publishers, to their great credits, said, "well, let's risk it, let's go ahead, and we kept our fingers crossed, and nobody sued. And the following year the book was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and I was in a pub in Dublin, much frequented by the legal fraternity, Doheny & Nesbit, and Paddy McEntee was very, in those days, very famous, very celebrated in

...by the time I had finished writing about Macarthur or Anthony Blunt or Copernicus or Kepler they ceased to be real people, they became fictionalized, they became my creatures.

Paris too; he said to me, "you're Banville, aren't you?". He said, "I enjoyed the book and I've decided not to sue you". So, I escaped, escaped by the skin of my teeth. But, the point I want to make is that I, by the time I had finished writing about, writing a book that was based on Macarthur or Anthony Blunt or Copernicus or Kepler they ceased to be real people, they became fictionalized, they became my creatures. So, hope that's an answer to your question.

J.O'D: Very, very interesting, intriguing answer. I remember the consternation in the law library when the book came out, but it's a fascinating insight into the creation of both books, so thank you very much.

J.B: And I did think of contacting him when writing the book, his story. You know, and since we look very alike, I would have his photograph as the photograph of the author. The reason I was put off was that a friend of mine said "you know, I was talking to the governor of the last prison he was in" – which was a wonderful oxymoron, 'open prison' –, and he said, "you know, you wouldn't want that man in your life", and even more than that, he said "besides, he's very boring". I can put up with almost anything, but not boredom. No, I won't do it.

J.O'D: Thank you very much, that is fascinating insight. Thank you, John.

H.S: Great! So, thank you, Neil and everybody else who's there without asking questions, but with moral support. So, thanks for being here and we hand over to Nick.

Nicholas Taylor-Collins: Thank you very much, Hedwig. And, also, I just would like to repeat my own thanks to Laura and Mariana for producing what is such an elegant edition, an elegant journal. Especially in the age of digital reading and digital publication, to have something that's still visually arresting is a real credit to ABEI, and what you do in Brazil and South America. I've been asked to introduce the critical dialogue section to the special issue; the first half, as Hedwig had explained, includes contributions from other "creative" writers – if there is such a distinction between the creative and the critical. I'm introducing the critical dialogue section, and it led me to think about why the title "critical dialogues" was given. I think it's, in part, because the way that we critics, we academics, engage with John's writing is particular or peculiar to John's writing. There's something, when we read, we feel like we're reading "our" vocabulary, a sort of critical vocabulary, vocabulary that – John, you've already cited Wittgenstein and referred to other high literary, high modernist writers – that speaks to the academic. And, of course, we then write in return, we write in response, and so the conversation proceeds. And I think that is borne out in the essays that are included here. And, if there are some kind of themes, which are touched on repeatedly, I guess in the first instance there's a sort of an interest in – an out-of-vogue

word now – the intertextuality, and the literary dialogues. And there are two essays, from Aurora Piñeiro and Catherine Toal both on John's engagement with Henry James in *Mrs. Osmond*. Joakim writes about your engagement with Wallace Stevens. Adel Cheong writes about Mike McCormack, the contemporary Irish writer who is gaining critical traction at the moment. And Cody Jarman, instead, turns back to the late nineteenth century, thinking about Emily Lawless as another inspiration, perhaps, or another interlocutor of your own writing. There's also a dialogue between your writing and theory and philosophy in the special issue. Hedda Friberg-Harnesk has written about Jean Baudrillard, the late French philosopher and theorist. And Hedwig writes about Jacques Lacan, the psychoanalyst, and perhaps the way that you engage with his writing. But also there's evidence in the issue of the way that we critics are in dialogue as well as with your writing and language. Lianghui Li has written about tense switching in your writing and about the use of time. And I also have written about the process of aging in your writing, thinking about different types of temporality or uses of time from Albert Einstein to Henri Bergson. And, actually, the idea of Einstein is picked up by Kersti Tarien Powell in her looking at your manuscripts, in the transition from the original Einstein title to what became *Mephisto*, part of the science tetralogy. And this interesting method and form is continued by Neil Murphy, in his exploration of the formal layers in your novel *Ghosts,* which he, like I, thinks is perhaps the best, the most rich, the densest, the most intriguing of

your novels. With all of that in mind, we have a few of our contributors ready and willing to leave a comment or ask you a question. To expedite things a little, instead of asking individually, I'll take them in three separate groups. And ask you all to come online at the same time and then ask your questions sequentially, consecutively, and then John can respond to them as a group. So, first I'd like to invite Cody Jarman and Lianghui Li and Aurora Piñeiro. And, then, perhaps John will be willing to respond to all of them at once.

Cody Jarman: Hello, everyone. And thank you, Nick. And, of course, thank you, John. My question really has to do with your relationship to genre in your writing. We've talked a lot about the novel as a kind of baggy monster and I'm curious, when it comes to generic form, is this something that you engage with intentionally? Say, if your works are drawing on traditions from the gothic, which is something that I've talked about in my contribution to the journal, but also has been talked about at length by people smarter than me, in works such as *Birchwood* in particular. So when you look at something like the gothic, the tropes and the forms of that genre, is this something that you are drawn to, to tame the baggy monster? Is it part of the baggy monster? Something that comes out as the writing is happening? So, what does genre do for you as you're crafting this literary object?

Lianghui Li: I didn't prepare a question, I just prepared a message to Mr. Banville. Mr. Banville, my name is Lianghui Li, a PhD student from NTU Singapore. I'm very, very honored to speak here. I met you in person in 2018 in the Writers' Festival at Westfall. I just want to say congratulations to the special achievements during the 50 years writing. All your works have greatly enriched my research, and your commitment to art through writing also helps [to] sustain my devotion to the study of literature. So, I just want to say: thank you!

Aurora Piñeiro: Good morning, Mr. Banville, and everyone in Brazil and the world. As we only live in either the past or the future, I'm going to talk about the future. My question has to do with *Snow,* your latest novel, which will be launched by the end of this month and which has been announced as the first crime novel published under John Banville's name. I would like you to, please, talk about the connection, if any, between your *Snow* and Georges Simenon's *Dirty Snow,* if possible, in relation to the theme of authenticity. And, also, to talk about how a noir fiction by Banville adds an extra layer to the already complex textual interweaving of your novels or multiple authorial identities associated to the name John Banville.

J.B: Well, I've taken notes. To the first question, I would say that I hope I just don't disappoint you by saying that I

don't like the notion of genre. I have an ambition, someday, realizable now, to own a bookshop, which is done purely by alphabetical order. There'd be no sections for Philosophy, Fiction, Poetry, just alphabetical. And there would certainly be no section devoted to Literary Fiction. I don't know if you have this in other languages, but in English it's always in a corner, it's a venereal disease clinic, you know. It's in the corner; it says "don't come here, you know what Literary Fiction is!" As with the notion of Gothic, *Birchwood,* which you mentioned. I had a lot of fun with *Birchwood* because I wanted to thumb my nose to Irish fiction, I wanted to write a parody, a pastiche of the big house novel. But, in general, people used to what's referred to by "righteous gothic", and I would say, "what kind of world do you live in? what? do you not live in my world?". The world is gothic; life is gothic. It's a very, very strange place. There's no norm, there's no ordinary. Everything's gothic.

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On *Snow*... I invented Benjamin Black because I started reading Simenon. I'd never read him before. This would be the early, around 2000. My friend, the English philosopher John Gray, recommended Simenon. He said, "you really should read it". And I had always fallen in with the popular notion – again, this is why I hate the notion of genre – the popular idea that Simenon is Paul Brunton. When I've read

Simenon, especially the *Romans Durs*, I realized that here, here was one of the great writers of the twentieth century, who worked by, rather like Jean Racine, with a very limited vocabulary, very limited. Simenon writes limits, he doesn't let himself go in the way that I do. So, I was fascinated by this and I thought I would try to do it, and I happened to have a television script that wasn't going to get made. It'd been commissioned and I've been paid for it, thank goodness, but it wasn't going to get made. I thought, "I hate to waste anything", so I thought I would turn it into a novel and I went to stay with a friend of mine in Tuscany. She gave me a room when I, one Monday morning, started to write this thing, and I didn't know if I could do it, but by lunchtime I'd written two thousand words, which Banville would be scandalized by. And I discovered I had a facility for this kind of fiction, and I thought this would be one off just to the screen, you know, that I was just having a frolic of my own. But, then, when I finished the book and it was published – it's funny –, I sent the book to my agent in the week that *The Sea* was shortlisted for The Booker Prize and my publishers didn't know I was doing this. So, my agent had lunch with my publisher and said, "by the way, here's a new novel by John Banville, but he's not called John

...my agent had lunch with my publisher and said, "by the way, here's a new novel by John Banville, but he's not called John Banville". I'd love to have been there to see my publisher's face when this strange thing arrived.

Banville". I'd love to have been there to see my publisher's face when this strange thing [*Christine Falls*, 2006] arrived. Anyway, I kept doing it because I was interested in people, interested in the characters and, you know, Banville was not interested in character dialogue. Psychology! One of those wonderful little lines of Kafka in *The Zürau Aphorisms:* "never again psychology". But Benjamin Black, I could allow, I could indulge in psychology in Benjamin Black. But, then... Last year, I decided to write a sequel to one of the Benjamin Black books, and I may as well tell you, one of them was called *Elegy for April*. And it was always my ambition to write a crime novel that didn't have a crime in it, and in *Elegy for April*, April Latimer is apparently killed, but her body is not found, there's no corpse. So, I decided I would write a sequel to that in which April comes back. So, in retrospect, I have written a crime novel in which there is no crime. In order to write the sequel, I had to go back and read some of these done things. I can't bear to read my own work; it just makes me physically sick. So, I decided, what I thought was very clever trick, to listen to them on audiobooks. And Timothy Dalton, who is always mocked for being the worst James Bond ever – which I would think is a mark of distinction –, he has read a few of these. I mean, read on

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audible, and he does a wonderful job. He doesn't try to mask his Welsh accent and so on, but he reads them beautifully. He understands. I was listening to these [books], especially late at night, when one's defenses are down, and I thought 'this stuff is not bad, you know, why should I keep up this Benjamin Black nonsense?'. So, I decided to kill off Benjamin Black. In the best tradition of crime genre, I've killed off my dark brother. I'm going to write these books under my own name. Why not? One of the things that happened is that two or three of my translators wrote and said, "what's going on here? This book reads very like a Benjamin Black book". So, I wrote to my agent and said "look, will you please attach a note with this book to all my translators saying Benjamin Black is dead? And this is Banville writing unashamedly". There's nothing to be ashamed of, I mean, these books are, I think, well-crafted; they're written honestly. They're not Agatha Christie's, they're not crossword puzzles, or they're as close to reality as I can get. The trouble with the crime though, and I suppose this is where a genre comes in, is you can't, unless you did what I just did, you can't have a crime novel that has no crime in it. So, immediately there is a restriction on one's freedom, and to restrict the freedom of the artist is the death of art, so I have to classify these books

...you can't have a crime novel that has no crime in it. So, immediately there is a restriction on one's freedom, and to restrict the freedom of the artist is the death of art, so I have to classify these books as craftwork, not works of art.

as craftwork, not works of art. And many people would say that! God... I remember my cousin, I was very, very fond of, a beautiful woman, she died young. When I was young, and growing up in Wexford, I was called Jack, my family called me Jack. When *Christine Falls* appeared, the first Benjamin Black book, my cousin said, "Jesus, Jack, at least, at last, you've written a book I can read and understand". So, you know, I like play. I mean, I wrote the Raymond Chandler book, *The Black-Eyed Blonde*. I remember when I was writing *Black-Eyed Blonde* thinking "if you had said to me 30 years ago, one day you would write a book called *Black-Eyed Blonde* I would have been horrified". *Black-Eyed Blonde* was one of Chandler's own titles which he rejected. I did that and it was fun. Writing is never fun, but it was; compared to writing Banville books; it was, it was great fun. And then I did *Mrs. Osmond,* the Henry James book. Again, my wife had said to me many years ago, "you really need to write a sequel to *The Portrait of a Lady*" and I thought, I said to her "no, I can't do that, I would be like a jackal feeding on the carcass of a great beast". But then I decided to become a jackal. And, again, I had great fun, and that was a very strange experience. I wrote a lot of it when I was in the

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University of Chicago during a seminar on Henry James at the wonderfully named Committee on Social Thought within the English department of the University of Chicago. I had an apartment on campus where there was nothing – no bars, no restaurants, no anything –, so I got to write all day. And it really was a strange experience. Sometimes I would lean back and watch my hand writing. I sometimes felt that I could get up, go and have lunch and come back, and there would be a couple of pages written. I'm not being mystical. I was not, you know, invaded by the spirit of Henry James. In fact, I suspect Henry would have deplored this invasion in his territory. But I enjoyed doing it. I don't know; perhaps it was a mistake, perhaps it was a waste of time, I think. I don't read reviews but I'm told that many of the reviewers were sort of saying, "why did you do this? why did you do this waste of time?". And I'd have answered, "exactly, it's a waste of time". Because I've been writing what I have to refer to as a Banville book, for the last three or four years. It's probably going to be my last one.

I'm thinking of calling it *The Circus Animals*. And it is so difficult, it is so, so difficult. And, so it should be. I mean, I'm not complaining.

Art is not easy; not easy to make it, it's not easy to receive.

This is how one works; this is how one makes art. Art is not easy; not easy to make it, it's not easy to receive. So, all these have been, in a way, distractions from the main problem. I was going to call my Banville book *The Singularities*, very catchy title, which I'm sure my publishers would be delighted

by, you know. So, I'll call it *The Singularities* or I'll call it *The Circus Animals*. Sorry, I'm rambling here. I've forgotten what your question was.

N.T-C: Oh, no, it's fascinating. Thank you, John. You've not only wetted their appetites for *Snow* at the end of the month, but also for the—

J.B: Well, no... *Snow* is quite a simple book, you know. Well, it's what I think it's simple, but, then, I can't remember. This is one of the wonderful things about old age, I remember Derek Mahon telling me of going to see Beckett when Beckett was in the big nursing home at the end of his life. Beckett was saying to him, "you know, I've come to a stage where I just.... my memory, I can't remember anything". And Derek started to sympathize, started saying, "it's wonderful, it's wonderful, it's wonderful, I can't remember!". Even my sins I'm beginning to forget now, which is good.

N.T-C: Great! Well, thank you very much. And thank you for your questions. If I can invite you to turn your cameras off and invite the next couple of contributors for theirs. I'd now like to ask Kersti Tarien Powell and Neil Murphy to join us and pose their questions and state their comments.

Kersti Tarien Powell: Hello and congratulations! It's an incredible moment as well, like you just said at the

beginning of this session that you don't quite believe that we exist. I don't think we quite believe that you exist either, that we've invented you in our writings as well. So, I have a question as well. I was wondering, throughout your literary career – as we all do, we study it and we look at it and, from an outsider's perspective, of course – we feel that there have been a few moments of change of direction or new beginnings. And, obviously, there are examples, like Benjamin Black or perhaps you switching from science to art. But I was wondering if there were any more, perhaps, subtle changes or new beginnings that you wouldn't mind telling us about, about those that you perhaps would care to share.

Neil Murphy: Greetings from Singapore, John. Nice to talk to you. I don't actually have any questions, I just want to sort of, I suppose, offer a few comments. I've been writing about and reading your work for well over 20 years, I've been sharing Banville novels with students and anybody else who would listen in three different continents. And, I mean, even a rapid summary of all of that would take far too long, and certainly longer than we have here, so I'll just share one particular moment that I suppose sort of sticks in my head. When I was completing my 2018 book, which was essentially devoted to the relationship between your work and art in various different senses, I distinctly remember one day asking myself a key slightly freaky question, freaky in the sense that I was halfway through a book and you shouldn't

be asking these kinds of questions when you're halfway through a book. The question was real: what, after all, is truly significant about this writer, about this work that I've spent so long thinking about? And this is after almost 20 years of reading your work, so it's a bit late in the day to ask the question. But here's a brief, very brief, approximation of what I said to myself. The novels, for me, all seem to represent the same impulse, that is, no matter what else is going on to create art, forms that both engage with and are themselves conditioned by the presence, or presences, of art, it's a body of work that conjures one of the most richly textured imaginative universes in all of post 1970's fiction. Banville's apparent insistence on the state of his own work as art as opposed to something else and on the pursuit of beauty, is the proper aim of the artists. [That] seems to lie at the heart of it all, so, it's all about beauty, the perpetual sense of an imaginatively transformed world, perhaps the most illuminating presence in the work. Everywhere one can sense the world being aestheticized, illuminated, sentence after sentence even as the novels themselves continually tackle the tricky question of what exactly all of this means. So, I suppose these qualities, always so often beautifully rendered, is what first led me to your work. These are the qualities that continue to convince me of the extraordinary quality of the work. After all these years, I'm still convinced. So, thank you for the gift of words.

J.B: Right, yeah. See, I remember sitting with a group of academics – Hedwig might have been there – and I said, "you all would prefer if I were dead, wouldn't you?". One of them said, "well, yeah, you wouldn't be springing any more surprises on us". I did sympathize.

I think there's only one book – I think every artist just has one work of art and he, or she, keeps plugging away, banging away, trying to get it right. There's a wonderful novella by Robert Coover, called *Spanking the Maid*. I don't know if you know it – if you don't, you should. It's about this man. Every morning, the maid comes in. He has his spank and they're both just so tired of this and that, but they're trying to get it right and it goes on and on, because he can't get it right. And it's, of course, deeply politically incorrect now, but it's a wonderful version of the artist trying to get it right, trying to get that sentence right, trying to spank the name, just the right way. And the maid keeps helping him, you know. This is the one criticism I would make of the book: that the language doesn't try to help us, it resists us. So, I don't see changes in direction, I just do what I do. You know, I just don't know, we don't know what we're doing. What is it Kafka says? "I don't write as I think, I don't think as I should, and so all goes on, in deepest darkness". And Henry James said... What is it? I wish I could remember that wonderful quote... "we do what we can, we

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give what we have" something, something, something, "the rest is the madness of art". It's a strange business. I'm sure in the caves, while the hunter-gatherers were going about their business, and the men were going out killing whatever they killed, and the women were having babies and trying to keep them alive, there were these strange people sitting at the back of the cave doing their thing. Which is, you know, a supreme waste of time, but it is supreme as well as a waste of time. And this is what I do. And I'm coming to the end of my life now, and, I suppose, I'm summing up. So, I think that perhaps *The Singularities* or *The Circus Animals* – whichever it's going to be called – will be the ultimate change of direction. It will be a farewell. The farewell to the wonderful adventure I've been on, I mean, it's a great privilege. In Spain, when they gave me the *Asturias Prize* and I had to give a little talk, I said, "the sentence is the greatest invention of humankind. There have been great civilizations that didn't have the wheel, but they had to have the sentence, because they wouldn't have been great, in a similar way, they wouldn't have been civilizations". And it's been my privilege to work with this essential invention that we made. Art is difficult; beauty is difficult, to address Neil's question. I haven't granted much

"the sentence is the greatest invention of humankind. There have been great civilizations that didn't have the wheel, but they had to have the sentence, because they wouldn't have been great, in a similar way, they wouldn't have been civilizations".

time for Ezra Pound but a little fragment in *The Cantos* where he says, "beauty, Yeats, beauty so difficult". It is the most beautiful, as a Freudian slip. It is the most difficult thing to do, to isolate beauty without being precious, without being pretentious, without being sentimental, without being self-absorbed... Giving. As John Updike said wonderfully, he said that his project was to give the ordinary its beautiful do, which I think was one of the most wonderful justifications for being a writer. It's always the ordinary, because, of course, there's no such thing as the ordinary. Joyce said, and he's right, he said, "I've never met an ordinary person". An ordinary person doesn't exist, all human beings, all dogs – I'm looking at seagulls here [from his window] – they're all absolutely unique and strange. There is nothing ordinary in the world. Many people have tried to make it ordinary. The world, at the moment, is engaged on the grand project, the *grand projet,* of reducing us to ordinariness, it won't succeed, it never succeeded. So, we keep – I used to hit the royal "we"? – keep plugging away, getting the sentence right, getting the sentence to express what one wants it to express. And, this is one of the great torments of being a writer, as we all know, we're all writers here, but it's also one of the great fascinations of writing is that language resists

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... one of the great torments of being a writer, as we all know, we're all writers here, but it's also one of the great fascinations of writing is that language resists us, language doesn't want to express, doesn't want us to express what we want to say. Language wants to express itself.

us, language doesn't want to express, doesn't want us to express what we want to say. Language wants to express itself. I've said this many times, I'm sure you've read it. Nothing new to say, of course. Nowadays, I've realized that everything I've ever said is on the internet. But, when you write a letter to – back in the days, when we wrote letters –, and you read it over and you think, "this is not what I meant to say, who speaks here?" Language is speaking. I often think that we do not speak, but we are spoken. Language resists us at every level. I was thinking of myself in biblical terms, Jacob wrestling with the angel, and the angel has a satanic aspect. Language is resistant; language wants to speak itself. Why shouldn't it? And this is great. This is one of the reasons that I think that being a novelist, being a poet, being a writer, these are the great callings, because we are wrestling with the absolute essence of

... we are wrestling with the absolute essence of what it is to be human. Language is what makes us human. It doesn't make us superior to the other animals, it makes us unique among the animals, and that is a great privilege and a great project, and I'll never get it right.

what it is to be human. Language is what makes us human. It doesn't make us superior to the other animals, it makes us unique among the animals, and that is a great privilege and a great project, and I'll never get it right. There's a nice anecdote. Henry James, he's in his deathbed, in a coma, but his hands are still moving across the sheets, he's still writing. I hope that would be me and I get the sentence right. Nobody would know it, nobody would ever read it, but I get the sentence right before I go.

N.T-C: Well, thank you very much. Extremely insightful and quite a consolation, or a consolatory view, given that a lot of people are thinking about the world in opposite terms at the moment. That nature's showing us just how indifferent it is to us, and how un-special and useless we are to the world, to the natural world anyway. But, also, thank you to Kersti and to Neil. And I'd like to invite our final two contributors to pose – Joakim will have a statement, and then a question from Catherine Toal.

Joakim Wrethed: This is more of a comment or a contemplation rather than a question, and it's also a big thank you to John for what he has done over these 50 years. I wanted to take this opportunity to thank John for teaching me to read. Reading, not in the obvious sense – if there is such a sense –, but in a more profound way, as is the case with first-year-university Literature students: one thinks one

knows how to read until one is obliged to actually read. Partly, it is about reading slowly, which is a craft and practice under heavy pressure in our time of tweets, text messages, film clips, instant images, and instant instances of instant gratification. To look at the words between the words on the lines and between the lines, when the text seems to halt and dwell on something, whatever it might be. As we, Banville readers, know very well, this phenomenon can be detected in the flow of the prose itself, which is that of a meandering river. For me, it has always been the pleasure and pain of reading Banville to dwell in movement, in the spiral of water that creates the bend of the river, drawn into meditation together with the text. Meandering rivers erode sediment from the outer curve of each meander bend and deposit it on an inner curve further downstream. We could stop and think about what that might mean in relation to Banville's writing, but alas there is no time. I have myself never understood the difference between philosophy and literature. I think that John might agree to a certain extent. Well, reading Hegel is not like reading Banville, that's for sure. Anyway, again, thank you, John, for teaching me to read.

Catherine Toal: Hello, everybody, from Berlin. Congratulations, first of all, to John Banville in this anniversary year, and to everybody who's been involved in organizing this wonderful event. My question is about a feature of your work, John, that has often been commented

on by literary critics, and that is the prevalence within it of narrators with a misanthropic kind of disposition. I wondered if it came as a surprise to you when this sort of voice first began to emerge and reappear in your fiction. One German language parallel that readers here often identify is Thomas Bernhard, and people find his relentless misanthropy very liberating. I wondered if it's also liberating to write from such a perspective, and what you think makes possible in the novel form.

J.B: I like the notion of proses and meandering river. I always think of symphonies as meandering, going nowhere, just going. It's a nice image. I like the notion of the bend in the river, that's where the writer... where there's this little moment of concentration. Because prose, as we all know, prose is a floppy medium, like in the old days when women wore corsets and they would come home in the evening and take their corsets off and... phew!... Prose is a bit like that. It's an uncorseted language. And I suppose I've always envied the poets to be laced up very tightly. Prose, for me, first and foremost, it's rhythm. I remember when I was reading Nabokov in my teens there was something about the prose, which I admired so much, but there was something

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about it I couldn't quite understand. But then I read an interview with him where he said that he was tone deaf, didn't know music at all. That's it. Nabokov's prose is absolutely pictorial, it has no rhythm. I mean, that's not a criticism, it's simply an observation. But, for me, rhythm, the music of a line, the music of a sentence, is paramount. And, of course, it can have disadvantages, because the rhythm and the music of the mind can become its own meaning. And I remember, a long time ago, I was in the midst of the afternoon, concentrated, trying to write — this was the 70s, remember fashions were different in those days. I was writing about a man who was running very quickly, and I said that his breath came in short hot pants. Luckily, I spotted what I had written and I suppressed it, but that was because of the music. Someone has to be aware of the music. A sentence to me always has to. I want my sentences to be capable of being read by a six-year-old. Now, a six-year-old may not get the nuances, they may not get the references. But a six-year-old would get the rhythm of it, they'd understand that this is what language sounds like in the head. And even, the Ambassador at the beginning of this event was talking about being sent to the dictionary. People always

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complain about this. The dictionary, perhaps second only to the sentences, the dictionary is a great, great invention of humankind. I mean, this marvelous thing. And, when you go to a dictionary in book form, if you're looking up a word, you'll always find at least six other words which you didn't know. It's like a wonderful, warm bath of language that one could dip into. But one has to have discipline as well; you can't just use a word because you like the sound of the word, because it fits into the rhythm; it has to mean, it has to mean what it means. (So, being disciplined — my dog keeps coming in and leaving in disgust... "oh, he's talking about his bloody books again!"). But, also, I wanted to go back to something that Kersti said about the notion of me not existing. And this is absolutely true. I don't exist. I'm not the person who wrote the books. The person you see is a person who's trying to give an alibi for the person who wrote the books. Because, when I sit down, and I'm sure we all have this experience: when you're really concentrating, when you sink down into that depth of concentration, you are not yourself, somebody else is there. When I stand up from my desk at the end of a day's writing, I become John Banville. But, when I'm writing, I'm not John Banville, I'm somebody else, I don't know who.

I think I'm rambling. I have to address Catherine's question. I don't think I'm a misanthrope. If you think that I'm a misanthrope,

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what world do you live in? You must live in a nicer world than the one that I know. I think I give a realistic description of – descriptions? That's ridiculous – I give realistic *depiction* of the world, as I know it. Human beings, as we know, are not very nice. They're nice when things are nice. When things cease to be nice, human beings are not nice. I remember giving a talk at the Tavistock Clinic in London years ago to an audience of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts – it was a series of talks on The Ten Commandments and, of course, I'd been given 'I shall not kill'. I was talking in terms of how vicious and how violent and how murderous species we are. We are the most successful virus the world has ever known; COVID-19 has nothing on us. I was talking this and all the psychiatrists saying, "oh, no, no, we've learned so much from the Holocaust", and I said – this is before the Bosnian – "watch the Balkans". I said, "watch it the next few years, see what happens, let me know what happens". We are a murderous species. And this world doesn't deserve us, deserve the punishment we're inflicting on it. And we don't deserve the world, this innocent beautiful world, which is murderous in itself, I mean, animals have not. Maybe this is the only thing we have been going for us as human beings: we have, now and then, a little bit of compassion, if it suits us. If it doesn't suit us, we have no compassion. But we don't deserve the world. And we are infuriated by the

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world's indifference to us, we always have been. Our project from the start was to destroy nature. We would call it "to subjugate nature" or "to use nature". In fact, our project was to destroy it, so that we could be supreme, with no wildlife, no vegetation. Just us, just the ego, standing there like a blasted tree in a plastic landscape. If that's misanthropy, you may interpret it as such, but I don't. I think that I see the world as it is. Also, the world – for every Hitler, there are two Beethovens, you know. We've done wonders considering what we are, considering how murderous, and how vicious, and violent, and how just generally horrible we are. We have done amazing things. I look at a painting by Pierre Bonnard and I think of what was happening in the world when he was painting that painting. It has survived. Little monsters, little beasts who wrote their vengeance on the world for their own inadequacies, they've gone, but that picture is still here. So we've done great things, but it would

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be foolish, I think, and self-deluding to lose sight of the fact that just how dreadful we are.

N.T-C: On which note, thank you very much to Joakim and Catherine, and thanks to you, John, for those answers. Just before I hand back to Laura, it may be worth me just adding that in the journal, in the issue that we've given, not only are there critical contributions part of that dialogue that I was talking about, but also reviews of books, both by John. *The Secret Guests i*s reviewed, and there's also a review of two of our contributors, recent monographs: Hedda Friberg-Harnesk's *John Banville through Jean Baudrillard,* and Neil Murphy, who spoke only a few moments ago, his book, *John Banville*, is also reviewed. So, there's a whole wealth of John Banville's universe contained in more than 200 pages or so. John, thank you very much!

J.B: Hang on! Hang on for a second! Remember that one story that I told about Cary Grant? You know that one? Cary Grant said, "Oh, Cary Grant, how I wish I were him". I wouldn't like to be John Banville.

Remember that one story that I told about Cary Grant? You know that one? Cary Grant said, 'Oh, Cary Grant, how I wish I were him'. I wouldn't like to be John Banville.

Laura Izarra: Thank you very much, Nick and Hedwig, for conducting all this dialogue with John. I think it takes longer than you expected, John, but we are reaching the end of this meeting, so there will be just a few last things as I would like to acknowledge Rüdiger Imhof, who is responsible for calling the academic attention to your work in 1981, editing the special issue of the *Irish University Review* followed by his well-known and pioneering book in 1982. So, our *ABEI Journal* contains in its last pages all these monographs and reviews, and, of course, innumerous articles on your work. I would like to invite Derek Hand, who is the editor of the second special issue of the *Irish University Review* on your work to say a few words before we close this session.

Derek Hand: I've been fascinated with the comments and the conversation and the discussion so far, and so I've just a few comments of my own to celebrate your work, John, and, indeed, celebrate everybody's work. Your life and writing have been remarkable in its variety, like Walt Whitman, and more recently Bob Dylan, your work contains multitudes. From the quite startling early brilliance of *Dr. Copernicus Kepler,* through the more accessible espionage genre of *The Untouchable* and the mad bad character that is Freddie Montgomery, to the more intimate Booker Prize winning *The Sea,* you've created a world or, rather, worlds of fiction without parallel in Irish writing. Those early science novels tracing the lives of those high cult heroes – Kepler and Copernicus –, offer us an image of the medieval world becoming modern, and, yet,

they can also be read as giving wonderful expression to the anxieties of an Ireland also moving into modernity. As your characters confront, as did Joyce's, the conflicting loyalties of being true to community or being true to the self. Your characters oscillate between the desire to be self-made and the recognition, as articulated in *Eclipse* that, and I quote, "the self-made man has no solid ground to stand on". The crisis of your characters is one of the imagination, which seems no longer capable of making a home in the here and now. Your protagonists are out of place at an angle to events and their narratives, the stories they tell, are failed attempts to heal the wounds of lives not lived well. And often in your novels there are self-conscious moments of stillness, when we as readers are offered a singular instance of luminosity, and this is when your prose is most magnificent, the rhythms matching perfectly the attention to detail of the human consciousness, both as a part of and apart from the world. We have characters who are writers, who are artists, they are historians – each allowing you to make the creative imagination a central element of your work. Words are essential, obviously, to your characters, what they can reveal, but also what they can conceal. And you said it earlier, your aesthetic pursuit of the well-made sentence becomes the keynote gesture of an art as a means of masking disorder. Silence is never too far away, but it's never fully embraced. And, you know, as did Samuel Beckett, that all too human failing is to be condemned to speak. So your work oscillates between the urgencies of expression, the burning necessity

to speak, to tell stories, and a resignation born out of the knowledge that perhaps, in the end, there is nothing to be said. So, all of your writing, your novels, your screenplays, your short stories, your essays, and plays are a testament to your undoubted artistic abilities. Your novels especially demonstrate the power to bring together the world of ideas, as you muse about the nature of art or science, and the everyday world of lived experience. And, like all the best Irish writers, you possess an anxiousness about language itself, its slipperiness and its power. Nevertheless, your concerns have a global reach and if you think again of your Copernicus and his discovery of a sun-centered universe, Copernicus looked at the world and imagined it in you. And that is what your art attempts to do and has done – and that is quite simply a singular achievement. I think we always know that there's something more to be said, that silence is not of this world, and your work, John, has prompted all of us into response and, I suppose, we thank you for that. The idea that you will finish writing... I don't know if that is of this world, John. And I look forward to your next novel, and supposedly your last, but who knows? And who knows what the future it may bring, so it's a little early here in Raheny, in Dublin 5, but cheers, John, and hopes! And cheers to lots of people I've met through your work, John! Cheers! Well done! Into another 50 years!

J.B: Thank you. Yes, I'm just beginning.

L.I: Thank you very much, Derek.

John, along these 50 years of writing and more to come, you have covered so many subjects and themes, would you kindly tell us in advance what is about the novel that you are working on now, entitled *The Singularities*?

J.B: Well, the book begins with Freddie Montgomery from *The Book of Evidence* being released from jail, and he finds himself wandering into the world of *The Infinities*. And I brought back all kinds of things possible, as the magic circus from *Birchwood*. So, this is my summing up. This is my circus animals coming home, rather than deserting.

L.I: Thank you, John! I would like to close this dialogue recalling your words, when you gave an interview to Rüdiger Imhof about *The Newton Letter*, the novella you were writing at that time. You said, "my readers, that small band, deserve a rest". So, today, as you have seen, we are that small band representing a much larger one, the global band of your readers. And I would like to thank you a lot for your kindness and time dedicated to us. We wish you a lot of success. And, borrowing your words from *The Infinities*, may this meeting be, "for good or for bad, yet fixed forever in a luminous, an unending instant".

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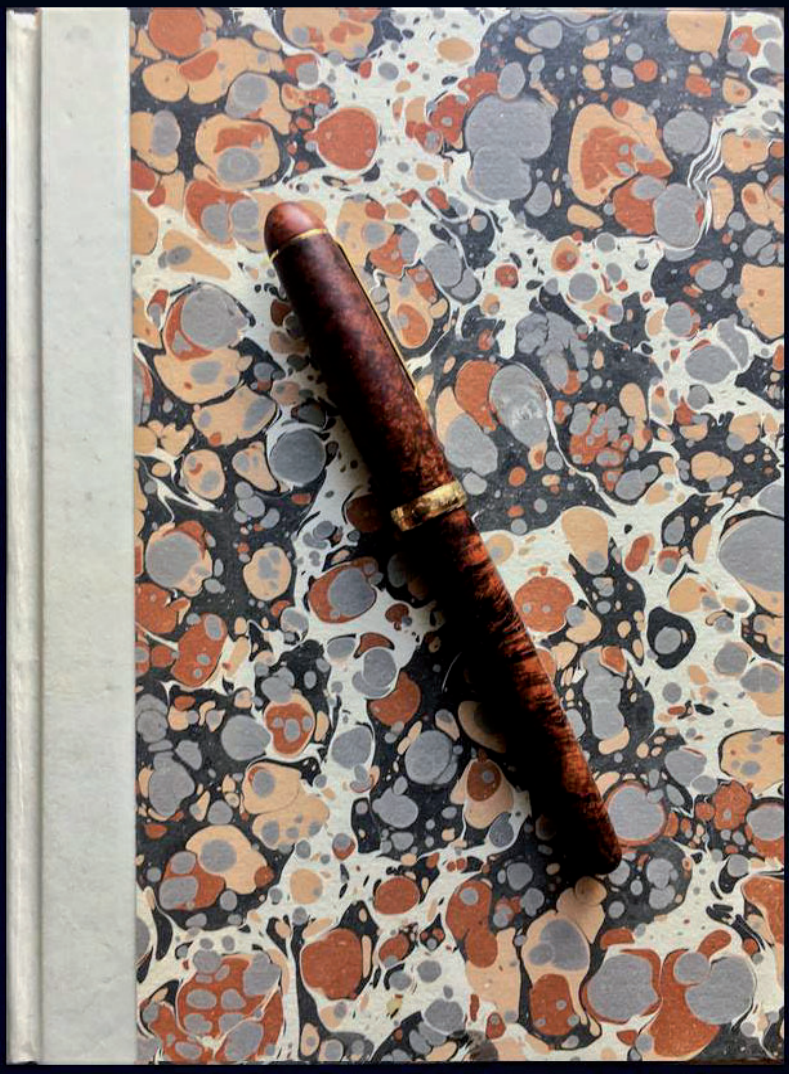

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John Banville's Works

Fiction

- *Long Lankin* (1970)
- *Nightspawn* (1971)
- *Birchwood* (1973)
- *Doctor Copernicus* (1976); PT: *Doutor Copérnico* (Dom Quixote, 1992)
- *Kepler* (1981)
- *The Newton Letter* (1982)
- *Mefisto* (1986); BR: *Mefisto* (Editora Globo, 1988)
- *The Book of Evidence* (1989); BR: *O Livro das Provas* (Record, 2002); *O Livro das Evidências* (Biblioteca Azul, 2018)
- *Ghosts* (1993); PT: *Fantasmas*(Dom Quixote, 1995)
- *Athena* (1995)
- *The Ark* (1996) (published 260 copies)
- *The Untouchable* (1997); BR: *O Intocável* (Record, 1999); PT: *O Intocável* (Dom Quixote, 1998)
- *Eclipse* (2000); BR: *Eclipse* (Biblioteca Azul, 2014); PT: *Eclipse* (Ulisseia, 2006)

- *Shroud* (2002); BR: *Sudário* (Biblioteca Azul, 2015) / PT: *O Impostor* (Verbo, 2006)
- *The Sea* (2005); BR: *O Mar* (Nova Fronteira, 2007) / PT: *O Mar* (Sextante, 2018)
- *The Infinities* (2009); BR: *Os Infinitos* (Nova Fronteira, 2011); PT: *Os Infinitos* (Edições Asa, 2011)
- *Ancient Light* (2012); BR: *Luz Antiga* (Biblioteca Azul, 2013); PT: *Luz Antiga* (Porto Editora, 2013)
- *The Blue Guitar* (2015); BR: *O Violão Azul* (Biblioteca Azul, 2016); PT: *A Guitarra Azul* (Porto Editora, 2016)
- *Mrs Osmond* (2017); PT: *Mrs. Osmond* (Relógio D'Água, 2018)
- *Snow* (2021)
- *April in Spain* (2021)
- *The Singularities* (2022)
- *The Lock-up* (2023)

Theatre

- *The Broken Jug: After Heinrich von Kleist* (1994)
- *Seachange* (performed in 1994 at *Focus Theatre*, Dublin; not published)
- *Dublin 1742* (performed in 2002 at *The Ark*, Dublin; a play for 9–14 years old; not published)

- *God's Gift: A Version of Amphitryon by Heinrich von Kleist* (2000)
- *Love in the Wars* (adaptation of *Penthesilea* de Heinrich von Kleist, 2005)
- *Conversation in the Mountains* (radio play, 2008)

Non-fiction

- *Prague Pictures: Portrait of a City* (2003); PT: *Imagens de Praga* (Edições Asa, 2005)
- *Time Pieces: A Dublin Memoir* (2016); PT: *Retalhos do Tempo* (Relógio D'Água, 2017)

"Benjamin Black"

- *Christine Falls* (2006); BR: *O Pecado de Christine* (Rocco Digital, 2011)
- *The Silver Swan* (2007); BR: *O Cisne de Prata* (Rocco Digital, 2013)
- *The Lemur* (2008, first published in episodes in *The New York Times*)
- *Elegy for April* (2010); BR: *Rastros na Neblina* (Rocco, 2015)
- *A Death in Summer* (2011); BR: *Morte no Verão* (Rocco Digital, 2020)
- *Vengeance* (2012)
- *Holy Orders* (2013)

- *The Black-Eyed Blonde:* A Philip Marlowe Novel (2014); BR: *A Loura de Olhos Negros* (Rocco Digital, 2014)
- *Even the Dead* (2016)
- *The Secret Guests* (2020; signed as "B. W. Black, so called")
- *Prague Nights* (2017)
- *Wolf on a String* (2018)

Film Scripts

- *Reflections* (adaptation of *The Newton Letter* for TV, 1984)
- *Seascapes* (1994, TV film)
- *The Last September* (1999)
- *Albert Nobbs* (2011)
- *The Sea* (2013)

Ficha técnica

Formato	15,0 x 21,0 cm
Mancha	10,6 x 17,8 cm
Tipologia	ITC Legacy Sans Std 12 e CaslonOldFace BT 14
Papel	miolo: Couché fosco 115 g/m2 capa: Couché fosco 220 g/m2

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