



Benjamin Black. *The Secret Guests*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020. ISBN-10: 1250133017.

Not everyone was surprised when, over thirty years after the publication of his first works, John Banville started writing crime fiction under the pseudonym of Benjamin Black. For Neil Murphy (2013), Banville’s works had “always been infused with criminality”, and are “built around a variety of the detective genre” (19). For Carol Dell’Amico (2014) this is in many ways a result of his “career-long interest in evil”, which can be seen as “the force that thwarts human wishes” and which “guarantees that human beings are frequently an abomination, and are unable to steward life’s beauties” (116). Crime has been a frequent theme in Banville’s writing, from the short stories in his first published work, *Lankin* (1970) and including *The Book of Evidence* (1989) where Freddie Montgomery appears as a sophisticated and highly unlikely murderer. This would seem to correspond with the common critical belief that Banville’s work can be divided into two clearly delineated and differentiated groups, which, on the one hand, consists of the “literary” novels published under the Banville name, and on the other the lighter detective fiction released using the Benjamin Black tag. Banville (2011) himself admits that he approaches the task of writing the Black novels in a different way to that he uses while creating the Banville works. Wendy Werris (2012) notes that Banville ‘s office contains a separate desk for writing the Benjamin Black on computer, while another desk “is reserved for writing as Banville with pen and paper”.

For Murphy, however, the supposed distinction between the literary works and the thrillers is “an extremely reductive experiment” (22). Rather both groups of novels use a striking web of interconnectivity which characterises the author’s work in both its facets. Characters from the Banville novels often appear in a slightly modified version in the Black mysteries, and Black’s characters “inhabit an intertextually framed universe just as their near relatives do in Banville’s novels” (Murphy 29). Detection, and all this implies, is present throughout the Banville oeuvre, and the Benjamin Black novels form part of a “self-conscious game, itself modelled on the genre of the crime novel, with mysterious clues, echoes, and a central figure, Quirke, who transforms and yet remains the same across the complex dimensions of the Banville-Black fictive world” (*ibid.* 22).

Now, fourteen years after the publication of the first Benjamin Black novel, the writer reinvents himself again, in a way, by signing his latest novel *The Secret Guests* (2020) with the name of B.W. Black. The Benjamin Black name had been used for eleven works, seven of which were set in the Ireland of the 1950s and centred around the figure of the Dublin pathologist, Quirke. Of the other four, one was a story set in the world of contemporary North American finance, another was an interesting attempt at writing a classic hard-boiled novel, *The Black-Eyed Blonde*, one of a number of novels using Raymond Chandler’s character Philip Marlowe, with the sanction of the Chandler estate, while *Prague Nights* (retitled *Wolf on a String* for the US public) was set in sixteenth-century Prague. The other was a book, *Pecado*

(*Sin*), which, to date, has only been published in a Spanish language edition. *Pecado* was awarded the prestigious – and financially attractive – “Premio RBA de Novela Policiaca”, the RBA Crime Novel Award, and was published by the editorial which awarded the prize. Set mainly in Banville’s native county of Wexford in 1957, shortly after the events in the Quirke novels, *Pecado* introduces a tee-total Protestant Irish police officer, Inspector Strafford, a protégé, it is suggested, of Inspector Hackett, of Quirke fame. Indeed, Strafford – who continually has to inform his interlocutors that his name is written with an “r” between the “t” and the “a”, that it is not “Stafford” – is an acquaintance of the pathologist, who is apparently on his honeymoon and whose name is mentioned in passing four times.

*Pecado* is a slight novel, but it is here where, perhaps, we can discover the genesis of *The Secret Guests*. Although set during the early 1940s, this new work also features Strafford, younger but essentially the same character, and whose name other characters continue to mispronounce. The guests of the title are two sisters, Elizabeth and Margaret, daughters to the King of England and heiress to the throne and princess royal respectively. During the Blitz, and fearing for their safety, they are shipped to Ireland under the care of Celia Nashe, a special agent posing as their nanny, to stay in an ascendancy Big House in Tipperary, under the care of a distant cousin, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat the Duke of Edenmore. The house, reminiscent of those so common in Irish literature, and which Banville himself had drawn with such sensibility in his early novel *Birchwood*, is also guarded by Irish army troops, led by Vivion De Valera, eldest son of the Taoiseach. It soon becomes apparent that the secret of the girls’ identity has become common knowledge in the surrounding area, not least to local members of the IRA. Although the plot is stronger than that of *Pecado*, the most interesting feature, once again, is the strength of Black’s characterisation. Strafford is fascinating as a self-doubting, modestly charming police officer – a Protestant in a force which is overwhelmingly Catholic, and an intriguing anomaly throughout the novel. Aware of his privileged heritage as “a descendant of the land-grabbers who had flooded over from England three centuries before”, Strafford feels pity for his “poor divided little country, gnawing away at immemorial grievances, like a fox caught in a snare trying to bite off its trapped leg” (*TSG* 151). Strafford is under the orders of Quirke’s yet-to-become friend and collaborator, Inspector Hackett, who makes a brief appearance in the work.

Celia Nashe is, to all intents and purposes, an advanced woman for her age, one of the few female members of Special Branch who, when “the possibility of war turned to certainty”, had “succeeded in wangling a transfer to MI5” (*TSG* 24). Her merits, however, are diluted somewhat by the knowledge that she had used her influential father’s high-ranking friends to bring about this transfer. Celia’s earnest good sense is countered by the unscrupulous flippancy of Lascelles, the brash, opportunistic British Embassy representative with whom Celia initiates a brief, and seemingly ill-advised, sexual relationship. It is typical of Banville/ Black to provide inter-and intra-textual references in his works, and in *The Secret Guests* this is apparent in the figure of Isabel Galloway, with whom Quirke is briefly romantically involved in *Elegy for April*. Here we learn that Lascelles is delayed from coming to Tipperary because of a squabble with his girlfriend in Dublin, “a fledgling actress Isabel Galloway” (*TSG* 36). Later we learn that Strafford had also fallen for Ms Galloway. After being presented to Isabel by “his friend the pathologist”, – Quirke, although he is not named – the detective and the actress begin a relationship, severely hampered by Strafford’s chronic shyness (*TSG* 107). After “their first edgy date” at the Shelbourne Hotel, the police officer hears that Isabel “has taken up with someone else, some Englishman, apparently” (*ibid. ibidem*). Nowhere is it mentioned that this

Englishman is, in fact, Lascelles, but this information, even though neither Strafford nor Lascelles is apparently aware of this circumstance, provides the reader with a delightful snippet of information which reflects the character of both men and which somehow corroborates the ill will they feel toward each other.

The IRA volunteers portrayed in the novel are divided into two distinct groups, the locals and the outsiders. The latter are faceless – in the case of one of these, quite literally – and nameless, in that they go under the names of Smith and Jones. These men are the cold-blooded, hackneyed gunmen of the Troubles thriller, and they are sketched by Black using broad and unsubtle strokes. The local IRA men are more carefully drawn, however. Joey Harte, the young man who initially reveals the presence and identity of the sisters on the estate, is a troubled young man whose past could almost reflect that of Quirke before the pathologist was accepted into his adoptive family. Harte “had passed his teenage years in various foster homes and so-called industrial schools, and in every one of them had been bullied, and interfered with by the priests and Christian Brothers, and generally kicked around” (*TSG* 129). Joey, it would seem, joined “the Lads” early, his militancy a means of escaping the harsh life he had lived and of securing a sense of belonging, of being a part of something. Clancy, on the other hand, a local businessman, is the head of the IRA in the area, and his bombastic declarations are at odds with his intrinsic cowardliness. At the end of the novel, and following the tragic events, he realises that he has wasted his life in unrealistic dreams of running a flying squad and helping the revolution when, in reality, his position had been simply “a way of spicing up his life and looking important, to himself and to the town” (*TSG* 243).

The two royal sisters conform, largely, to the accepted opinions widely held regarding their characters. Elizabeth, the future queen, is of few words, but when she does speak she reveals the determination which is often attributed to her. She is against, for example, their exile in Ireland, believing that rather than an act of bravery this seems more like running away from events. Much more interesting is the younger of the sisters, Margaret – in Ireland under the pseudonym of Mary. Mary is a precocious ten-year old who is, headstrong, meddlesome and constantly at loggerheads with her prim and respectable sister. She is also haughty, telling one employee that her sister is *the* Queen, not *a* queen.

Although the first thing readers are likely to miss from *The Secret Guests* is the figure of Quirke, whose presence would seem to differentiate the great Benjamin Black novels – effectively the seven which feature the pathologist – from the rest. The plot in this novel is, in common with those of the later Quirke novels, deliberately underplayed, apparently slight, but full of resonance for the discerning reader. Although an unkind critic might question the author’s need to milk the commercially attractive cow that is the British royal family, particularly, perhaps, in the wake of the success of a television serial like *The Crown*, *The Secret Guests* never descends to the level of popular melodrama. The underlying violence which erupts towards the novel’s closure provides a terrifying contrast with the apparent tranquillity of the Irish countryside, evoking other Big House dramas such as Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September*. Despite the laid-back simplicity of the plot, *The Secret Guests* stands one level above thrillers written in a similar vein, if only for the strength of the characterisation and the occasional glimpse of the tensions that haunted Anglo-Irish relations during much of the twentieth-century in general and during the war that the Irish called the Emergency in particular.

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