



THE UNTOUCHABLE

'This is the book John Banville was born to write'
Catherine Lockerbie, *Scotsman*

JOHN
BANVILLE

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John Banville

The Untouchable

PICADOR



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THE UNTOUCHABLE

'This great novel can be approached from many angles: as an impeccable act of ventriloquism, as a treatise on art history, as a socio-political novel with fine sections on wartime London and Ulster childhood, as a thesis on camp and stoicism'

Chris Petit, *Guardian*, Books of the Year

'In many ways a comic masterpiece, the novel culls the best from the modernist tradition of retrospective, ironic narrative, and with breathtaking, cutting humour renders Victor Maskell's private and public worlds – his marriage and his homosexuality, his professionalism, his royalism and Marxism, the Second World War and the Cold War, Cambridge and Ireland – with rare intensity. Banville is a physical pleasure to read'

Edward W. Said, *Times Literary Supplement*, Books of the Year

'Banville's evocation of pre-war debauchery is deft and sensational, tricked out in the fastidious prose of his deeply unreliable narrator'

David Profumo, *Daily Telegraph*

'In *The Untouchable*, his novel of espionage, sacrifice and betrayal, he was unerring'

Ruth Rendell, *Sunday Times*, Books of the Year

'Critics who condemned *The Untouchable* as exploitative failed to see that it is no more about Anthony Blunt or Louis MacNeice than *Henry V* is about Henry V. A brilliant study of fakery, deceptions and conspiracy, with an entirely appropriate Irish twist, it was easily top of my Booker list'

Stella Tillyard, *Guardian*, Books of the Year

‘From the contradictions of a flawed life, Banville has fashioned a work of dry poetic beauty’

David Robson, *Sunday Telegraph*

‘Banville’s novel is inspired, intelligent, literary. *The Untouchable* is compelling. The narrative of Burgess and Maclean’s defection particularly so in its pathos, humour, excitement’

Brian Martin, *Financial Times*

‘His newest work represents both a broadening and an apotheosis: his habitual high aesthetics and shimmering sensuousness of language now leaving the realm of enigmatic dream for observable historical fact, earthed in the familiar and endlessly tantalising story of Anthony Blunt. *The Untouchable* has exquisite humour, aching irony, swooningly luscious sentences’

Catherine Lockerbie, *Scotsman*

‘John Banville’s prose is clear, fluent and possessed of authentic energy – the real thing, in fact’

Anita Brookner, *Spectator*

‘His books are brilliant, glowing objects, intricate puzzles, exquisitely written’

Tom Adair, *Scotland on Sunday*

‘*The Untouchable* moves with seamless ease between the recent past and the formative decades of this century which produces men like Maskell–Blunt: boozy, ideologically

charged afternoons in Trinity or evenings in pre-war
Soho; crackling characterisations of the main and minor
players'

Steve Grant, *Time Out*

'Banville's achievement is to show the tragic consequences of
Maskell's detachment while naming him an appealingly
human, even noble, figure . . . His narrative voice is a
marvellous invention by turns caustic, wistful, lush, self-
mocking and filled with regret. In some ways *The Untouchable*
is an elegy for espionage as it once was. But then you can never
quite pin down this marvellous novel'

Katy Emck, *New Statesman*

'Banville spies everything. And, at best, his prose is transfixing.
Like Virginia Woolf, he can unwrap an unseen world. You
recognise something which you have never before seen put
into words. It is a rare gift. Banville has long been a master of
the most seductive prose, a writer of the most extraordinary
and exquisite powers . . . frequently on each page one does
have to stop and sigh with pleasure over Banville's swoon-
making sentences'

Kate Kellaway, *Punch*

'Banville has written a coolly intelligent novel in which art and
other kinds of understanding are inextricably linked'

Brian Morton, *Times Educational Supplement*

'To have grasped a man of such complexity – spy and aesthete
of rude Irish origin – and to demonstrate how those rivulets of

personality flow into the wider currents of 20th-century
history is Banville's rare achievement'

Esquire

'Banville is a faultless conjuror with aspects of authenticity,
teasing, probing, and possessing what is perhaps the novelist's
most precious gift: the courage to endlessly take risks'

Irish Times

'This is a book of surprises. Fluent and articulate, it also carries
a remarkable narrative strength . . . This is a fable for our times
that deserves to be a bestseller'

Hayden Murphy, *Herald*

'The prose is stunning; every sentence is perfectly judged in
length and weight, every simile is piercingly apposite . . . The
language is formal and dense, intoxicating in its precision'

Elsbeth Barker, *Independent on Sunday*

'In the grace of its style and the vividness of its parts
it shows that John Banville is one of the most compelling
novelists on earth'

Sydney Morning Herald

'Victor Maskell is one of the most fascinating fictional
characters I have encountered in years'

Australian Bookseller and Publisher

JOHN BANVILLE was born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. His first book, *Long Lankin*, was published in 1970. His other books are *Nightspawn*, *Birchwood*, *Doctor Copernicus* (which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1976), *Kepler* (which was awarded the *Guardian* Fiction Prize in 1981), *The Newton Letter* (which was filmed for Channel 4), *Mefisto*, *The Book of Evidence* (which was shortlisted for the 1989 Booker Prize and won the 1989 Guinness Peat Aviation Award), *Ghosts*, *Athena*, *Eclipse*, *Shroud* and *The Sea* (which won the Man Booker Prize 2005). He lives in Dublin.

Also by John Banville

Long Lankin

Nightspawn

Birchwood

Doctor Copernicus

Kepler

The Newton Letter

Mefisto

The Book of Evidence

Ghosts

Athena

Eclipse

The Revolutions Trilogy

Frames Trilogy

Shroud

The Sea

to Colm and Douglas

ONE

FIRST DAY of the new life. Very strange. Feeling almost skittish all day. Exhausted now yet feverish also, like a child at the end of a party. Like a child, yes: as if I had suffered a grotesque form of rebirth. Yet this morning I realised for the first time that I am an old man. I was crossing Gower Street, my former stamping ground. I stepped off the path and something hindered me. Odd sensation, as if the air at my ankles had developed a flaw, seemed to turn – what is the word: viscid? – and resisted me and I almost stumbled. Bus thundering past with a grinning blackamoor at the wheel. What did he see? Sandals, mac, my inveterate string bag, old rheumy eye wild with fright. If I had been run over they would have said it was suicide, with relief all round. But I will not give them that satisfaction. I shall be seventy-two this year. Impossible to believe. Inside, an eternal twenty-two. I suppose that is how it is for everybody old. Brr.

Never kept a journal before. Fear of incrimination. Leave nothing in writing, Boy always said. Why have I started now? I just sat down and began to write, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, which of course it is not. My last testament. It is twilight, everything very still and poignant. The trees in the square are dripping. Tiny sound of birdsong. April. I do not like the spring, its antics and agitations; I fear that anguished seething in the heart, what it might make me do. What it might *have made* me do: one has to be scrupulous with tenses, at my age. I miss my children. Goodness, where did that come from? They are hardly what you could call children any more. Julian must be – well, he must be forty this year, which makes

Blanche thirty-eight, is it? Compared to them I seem to myself hardly grown-up at all. Auden wrote somewhere that no matter what the age of the company, he was always convinced he was the youngest in the room; me, too. All the same, I thought they might have called. *Sorry to hear about your treachery, Daddums.* Yet I am not at all sure I would want to hear Blanche sniffing and Julian tightening his lips at me down the line. His mother's son. I suppose all fathers say that.

I mustn't ramble.

Public disgrace is a strange thing. Fluttery feeling in the region of the diaphragm and a sort of racing sensation all over, as of the blood like mercury slithering along heavily just under the skin. Excitement mixed with fright makes for a heady brew. At first I could not think what this state reminded me of, then it came to me: those first nights on the prow after I had finally admitted to myself it was my own kind that I wanted. The same hot shiver of mingled anticipation and fear, the same desperate grin trying not to break out. Wanting to be caught. To be set upon. To be manhandled. Well, past all that now. Past everything, really. There is a particular bit of blue sky in *Et in Arcadia Ego*, where the clouds are broken in the shape of a bird in swift flight, which is the true, clandestine centre-point, the pinnacle of the picture, for me. When I contemplate death, and I contemplate it with an ever-diminishing sense of implausibility in these latter days, I see myself swaddled in zinc-white cerements, more a figure out of El Greco than Poussin, ascending in a transport of erotic agony amid alleluias and lip-farts through a swirl of clouds the colour of golden tea head-first into just such a patch of pellucid bleu céleste.

Switch on the lamp. My steady, little light. How neatly it defines this narrow bourn of desk and page in which I have always found my deepest joy, this lighted tent wherein I crouch in happy hiding from the world. For even the pictures were more a matter of mind than eye. Here there is everything that—

That was a call from Querell. Well, he certainly has nerve,

I'll say that for him. The telephone ringing gave me a dreadful start. I have never got used to this machine, the way it crouches so malevolently, ready to start clamouring for attention when you least expect it, like a mad baby. My poor heart is still thudding in the most alarming way. Who did I think it would be? He was calling from Antibes. I thought I could hear the sea in the background and I felt envious and annoyed, but more likely it was just the noise of traffic passing by outside his flat, along the Corniche, is it? – or is that somewhere else? Heard the news on the World Service, so he said. 'Dreadful, old man, dreadful; what can I say?' He could not keep the eagerness out of his voice. Wanted all the dirty details. 'Was it sex they got you on?' How disingenuous – and yet how little he realises, after all. Should I have challenged him, told him I know him for his perfidy? What would have been the point. Skryne reads his books, he is a real fan. 'That Querell, now,' he says, doing that peculiar whistle with his dentures, 'he has the measure of us all.' Not of me, he hasn't, my friend; not of me. At least, I hope not.

No one else has called. Well, I hardly expected that he would . . .

I shall miss old Skryne. No question now of having to deal with him any more; that is all over, along with so much else. I should feel relieved but, oddly, I do not. We had become a kind of double act at the end, he and I, a music hall routine. *I say I say I say, Mr Skryne! Well, bless my soul, Mr Bones!* He was hardly the popular image of an interrogator. Hardy little fellow with a narrow head and miniature features and a neat thatch of very dry, stone-coloured hair. He reminds me of the fierce father of the madcap bride in those Hollywood comedies of the thirties. Blue eyes, not piercing, even a little fogged (incipient cataracts?). The buffed brogues, the pipe he plays with, the old tweed jacket with elbow patches. Ageless. Might be anything from fifty to seventy-five. Nimble mind, though, you could practically hear the cogs whirring. And an amazing memory.

'Hold on a sec,' he would say, stabbing at me with his pipet-stem, 'let's run over that bit once more,' and I would have to unpack the delicate tissue of lies I had been spinning him, searching with frantic calmness as I did so for the flaw he had detected in the fabric. By now I was only lying for fun, for recreation, you might say, like a retired tennis pro knocking up with an old opponent. I had no fear that he would discover some new enormity – I have confessed to everything by now, or almost everything – but it seemed imperative to maintain consistency, for aesthetic reasons, I suppose, and in order to be consistent it was necessary to invent. Ironic, I know. He has the tenacity of the ferret: never let go. He is straight out of Dickens; I picture a crooked little house in Stepney or Hackney or wherever it is he lives, complete with termagant wife and a brood of cheeky nippers. It is another of my besetting weaknesses, to see people always as caricatures. Including myself.

Not that I recognise myself in the public version of me that is being put about now. I was listening on the wireless when our dear PM (I really do admire her; such firmness, such fixity of purpose, and so handsome, too, in a fascinatingly mannish way) stood up in the Commons and made the announcement, and for a moment I did not register my own name. I mean I thought she was speaking of someone else, someone whom I knew, but not well, and whom I had not seen for a long time. It was a very peculiar sensation. The Department had already alerted me of what was to come – terribly rude, the people they have in there now, not at all the easygoing types of my day – but it was still a shock. Then on the television news at midday they had some extraordinary blurred photographs of me, I do not know how or where they got them, and cannot even remember them being taken – apt verb, that, applied to photography: the savages are right, it is a part of one's soul that is being taken away. I looked like one of those preserved bodies they dig up from Scandinavian bogs, all jaw and sinewy throat

and hooded eyeballs. Some writer fellow, I have forgotten or suppressed his name – a ‘contemporary historian’, whatever that may be – was about to identify me, but the government got in first, in what I must say was a clumsy attempt to save face; I was embarrassed for the PM, really I was. Now here I am, exposed again, and after all this time. Exposed! – what a shiversome, naked-sounding word. Oh, Querrell, Querrell. I *know* it was you. It is the kind of thing you would do, to settle an old score. Is there no end to life’s turbulences? Except the obvious one, I mean.

What is my purpose here? I may say, *I just sat down to write*, but I am not deceived. I have never done anything in my life that did not have a purpose, usually hidden, sometimes even from myself. Am I, like Querrell, out to settle old scores? Or is it perhaps my intention to justify my deeds, to offer extenuations? I hope not. On the other hand, neither do I want to fashion for myself yet another burnished mask ... Having pondered for a moment, I realise that the metaphor is obvious: attribution, verification, restoration. I shall strip away layer after layer of grime – the toffee-coloured varnish and caked soot left by a lifetime of dissembling – until I come to the very thing itself and know it for what it is. My soul. My self. (When I laugh out loud like this the room seems to start back in surprise and dismay, with hand to lip. I have lived decorously here, I must not now turn into a shrieking hysteric.)

I kept my nerve in face of that pack of jackals from the newspapers today. *Did men die because of you?* Yes, dearie, swooned quite away. But no, no, I was superb, if I do say so myself. Cool, dry, balanced, every inch the Stoic: Coriolanus to the general. I am a great actor, that is the secret of my success (*Must not anyone who wants to move the crowd be an actor who impersonates himself?* – Nietzsche). I dressed the part to perfection: old but good houndstooth jacket, Jermyn Street shirt and Charvet tie – red, just to be mischievous – corduroy slacks, socks the colour and texture of porridge, that pair of scuffed