



BOOKER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR

JOHN
BANVILLE

The
Drowned

A NOVEL

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Praise for John Banville

“The Irish master.”

—*New Yorker*

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—*The Guardian*

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John Banville

The Drowned

A Novel



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John Banville was born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. He is the author of numerous novels, including *The Sea*, which won the 2005 Booker Prize, and the DI Quirke novels written under the pseudonym Benjamin Black. In 2011, he was awarded the Franz Kafka Prize; in 2013, he was awarded the Irish PEN Award for Outstanding Achievement in Irish Literature; and in 2014, he won the Prince of Asturias Award, Spain's most important literary prize. He lives in Dublin.

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Molly's Letter

1

He had lived alone for so long, so far away from the world and its endless swarms of people, that when he saw the strange thing standing at a slight list in the middle of the field below the house, for a second he didn't know what it was. In the gloaming, two red lights glared at him out of the long grass like the eyes of a wild animal crouched and ready to spring. His heart gave three dull slow thumps; he felt them in his ears, like the beating of a distant drum.

But it wasn't an animal. It was a motorcar, low-slung, sleek and expensive looking, painted a burnished shade of dark gold. In the gathering shadows it gave off a muted, sinister glow. The engine was running, and thick gray-white smoke was trickling slowly out of the exhaust pipe at the back and dispersing in ghostly wisps.

The door on the right-hand side, the driver's door, stood wide-open on its hinges. Again he thought of an animal, jaws agape, bellowing in pain and fury. But there was no sound to be heard, except that of the faint breeze rustling through the bowed grasses and the leaning brambles still loaded with overripe blackberries.

A car sitting in a field below someone's house. So what? No concern of his. The wise thing to do would be to walk on, past the gateway, as if he had seen nothing, and go home and mind his own business. Yet something held him there. Later, of course, he would regret that he should have paused even for a second. But by then it was too late, and he was caught up among people, again.

People, the bane of his life.

It was bound to have happened, sooner or later. The one thing the world would not do was leave you alone, in peace, by yourself. Always it had to draw you in, insisting you take part in the fun and games like everyone else. Children: the world was full to bursting with children. Not real children,

those magical, achingly precious creatures, but stunted, ill-developed homunculi all marching up and down stamping their feet and gesticulating. He had been frightened of them when he was little and they were all still children or pretending to be, and they frightened him now more than ever, when they were pretending to be grown-ups.

Yes, life, so-called, was a birthday party gone wild, with shouting and squabbling, and games he didn't know the rules of, and one lot ganging up on the other, and knocking each other down and dancing in a ring like savages, the whole mad rampage going on in a haze of dust and noise and horrible, hot stinks.

That was the world for you, all right. Their world.

He put his things down behind the gatepost, his fishing rod and his old floppy shoulder bag—not much of an afternoon's catch, three medium-sized bass, and a pollock he would fry for the dog—and the old tin cashbox that he kept his sandwiches in. He hesitated a moment, but then, even though his heart was still going like a tom-tom, he went in at the gate. *You fool*, he told himself, even as he advanced, *why can't you mind your own business?*

He walked along the grassy hump that ran between the twin ruts of the driveway, his legs moving as if by themselves, leading him toward—what?

The house was some way off, at the top of the rise, and he could see only the roof and part of a gable end.

He came to the spot where the car had abruptly veered left and plunged deep into the field, and he turned and followed in its twin zigzag tracks through the tall grass.

It was a sports car, a Mercedes SL, so it said in raised letters on the lid of the trunk, with a retractable roof of stiff black canvas. He knew little about cars, but enough to know this was no run-of-the-mill model. Who would have left such a costly machine sitting in the middle of an overgrown field, with the lights on and the engine running? There was a mingled smell of exhaust fumes, hot metal and leather upholstery. Also a trace of a woman's perfume, musky, slightly rank—or was he imagining it? He leaned down and looked inside.

A silver key ring dangled from the ignition, and on the ring was a leather tab bearing a small round metal shield stamped with the three-pointed Mercedes logo. The little thing struck the one intimate note among so much steel and chrome and glass. Someone owned that ring and its key, someone kept it in a pocket, or in a purse, someone twirled it on a finger, and sat in behind the steering wheel and leaned forward with it pressed between a finger and a thumb and inserted it in its groove and turned it and made the engine roar into life. Someone.

He found the switch for the lights and turned them off, then turned off the engine too, leaving the key in its slot. When he swung the door to, he used too much force and it slammed shut with a thud that seemed to him as loud as a thunderclap. Then the silence crowded in around him once more. There was the sense of everything pressing forward eagerly, like bystanders at the scene of an accident, or a crime.

Yes, there must have been an argument, that must be what happened. A person would have to have lost the run of himself, or herself, to leave a Mercedes SL sports car standing here like this, with the key in the ignition, even on this lonely stretch of coast. There were some wild fellows going about here, real yahoos, half-wild farmers' sons, day laborers, now and then an IRA man down from the North to lie low after yet another botched bomb attempt or an inept raid on a customs post. Those boyos wouldn't hesitate to hop in and take this gilded beauty for a spin, and more than likely leave it wrapped around a tree trunk along the road somewhere, steaming and smoking, or nosedown in six feet of water in some hidden rocky inlet.

The field, or meadow as he supposed it should be called, rose at a shallow angle in the direction of the house. He made his way to the top of the slope, and stopped and looked about him. The late-October evening was fading fast, yet in the sky in the west a long bar of cloud was whitely aglow, so bright that he had to put up a hand to shade his eyes. It had been an uncommonly fine month so far, and the weather seemed set to last for a good while yet. He dearly hoped it would. Not that he had much time for summer and sunshine and games and all that nonsense, but the thought of

the winter coming on made his heart shrink. Would he be able to hold out, living like an outcast—but wasn't he an outcast?—seeing not a soul and hearing from no one?

He would have to manage somehow. There was no going back. He couldn't be trusted, in the world, among people, among—

Stop! He shut his eyes and struck a fist against his forehead.

Take a deep breath. Another. And another. Now.

He opened his eyes.

To his left, the surface of the evening sea was chopped, metallic, faintly aglitter. Not a thing to be seen out there, no ship or sail, nothing between here and the Welsh coast, invisible beyond the horizon. He turned his gaze inland. The house stood at the end of the grassy track leading up from the gate. It was a fair-sized, two-story farmhouse, built of granite, with a steep slate roof ashine now in the light from the west, two tall chimneys, and a wrought iron weather vane in the shape of a cock crowing.

Why was he hanging about here? What business was it of his, he asked himself again, what had he to do with this abandoned car and whoever had abandoned it? He told himself again that if he had any sense at all he should go, should turn on his heel this very second, walk back down to the gate and gather up his rod and his bag and his sandwich box, and take himself off smartly, before the owners of the car returned from wherever they had gone to and drew him inexorably into some ghastly, complicated mess of their own making.

At that moment, as if the thought had conjured the thing, he heard a voice call out behind him. He spun round to see a figure wading toward him up through the meadow, from the direction of the sea. It was a man, lanky-looking, with unsteady legs and rubbery knees. He was waving an arm above his head, urgently, like someone drowning and coming up for the second time. Again came that call, but the words were lost in the immensities of land and sky and sea.

What to do? Oh, God, what to do? Turn and run, as he should have done already? The bag and the fishing tackle he could come back for another time,

no one would think the stuff worth the taking. He could pretend he hadn't seen the man, with the light fading, and hadn't heard him either.

But it was already too late.

Trapped!

"Listen, listen—you've got to help me," the man gasped, stumbling up the last few yards of the slope with a long pale hand pressed to his heaving chest. "I think my wife has drowned herself."

* * *

His name, he said, was Armitage. He was tall and very thin, with bony shoulders and a concave chest and a high narrow head and small dark eyes set too close together. His oiled hair was combed straight back from his forehead: it looked, to Wymes's eye, like a Channel swimmer's tight black rubber cap. Under a gabardine raincoat he wore a navy-blue blazer with brass buttons, and wide, cream-colored trousers that flapped loosely around his skinny shins. The sharp-pointed collar of his shirt was open. His narrow patent-leather shoes, dainty as dancing pumps, damp from the dew and stuck with sand, were as black and shiny as his hair. His white socks were streaked with grass stains.

He stopped, out of breath, leaned forward from the waist and braced his hands on his knees with his head hanging and made a kind of mewling sound. Was he weeping? After a moment, he straightened up. No sign of tears. Oddly, he seemed more excited than distressed.

"And you are—?" he asked.

His fruity accent sounded put-on.

"Wymes. Denton Wymes. I—"

"Weems?"

"Yes. Spelled W-y-m-e-s, pronounced Weems."

It annoyed him that he always felt obliged to offer this trivial clarification, even to strangers. Armitage stared at him in silence for a moment, then stepped forward and grasped him by the upper arms.

“You’re not a Paddy, then,” he said, with a sort of laugh. “Thank Christ for that.”

“Actually, I am Irish, if that’s what you mean,” Wymes said stiffly. “But not —”

“Not bog Irish. That’s the point. Good man!”

Wymes blinked. This all felt unreal. Had the fellow really said that about his wife having drowned herself? Maybe it was intended as some kind of grotesque joke.

Suddenly, the fellow twisted his face to one side and gave a sort of strangled howl, as if for a moment he had forgotten about his wife and had just now remembered her again. He was still holding Wymes by his upper arms, but now he let go of him and wiped the back of a hand across his mouth.

“She’s gone!” he keened. “She’s gone in the sea, I’m sure she is.”

It seemed a piece of bad acting, but then, Wymes told himself, that’s mostly how people behave when there’s a crisis and they’re distraught.

“Look, calm down,” he said, with a mounting sense of desperation. “I’m sure there’s been some—”

“*She’s gone!*” It was almost a scream. “I’m telling you, she threw herself off the rocks down there.”

“Did you see her? I mean, did you actually see her throw herself into the water?”

At this Armitage paused, and took a half step back, narrowing his little, crafty eyes.

“You’re right,” he said, grown thoughtful suddenly. “I didn’t see her jump, there is that.”

“You mean she fell? It was an accident?”

“No no no no!” Armitage said, shaking his head violently. “She got out of the car and ran—” he gestured behind him with a vaguely flapping hand “—and ran down to the sea, and—” He stopped, and tilted his head to one side, as if attending to a voice speaking softly just beside his ear. “I suppose,” he said slowly, “I suppose she could have hid behind the rocks, to make me

think she had jumped.” He smiled, almost wistfully. “It’s the kind of thing she’d do, you know.”

He seemed to consider this possibility for a moment, then to Wymes’s horror he reached out and took him by the hand, actually grasped him tightly palm to palm, and turned and set off in the direction of the sea, drawing him along behind him.

Once, as a boy, Wymes’s parents had taken him to the circus. He had found the whole thing terrifying—the squeals and farts of the three-piece band, the whooping shouts of the acrobats, the lights glaring through the talcum-laden darkness—but then came the worst of all, when a clown singled him out. He was tall and gangly, a bit like Armitage, in fact, with a face painted stark white and a carrot wig on which was stuck at a crooked angle a bright red porkpie hat. He came barging up long-legged through the first four rows of benches, pushing people aside and even stepping on one or two of them, and seized young Wymes by the hand and dragged him down into the ring.

He had never forgotten the experience, the hot fingers clutching his, the smell of greasepaint and sweat, the crazed laughter.

Armitage, he thought, would make a good clown, skeletal, mocking and maniacal.

“Come on,” he said now, pulling harder at Wymes’s hand. “If she’s hiding, we’ll soon find her, the little minx. She’ll show herself eventually—she was always afraid of being on her own in the dark.”

Yes, the man was mad, Wymes decided, mad, or drunk, or both. He snatched his hand away and stepped back and stopped, planting his feet wide, determined to stand his ground.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m afraid I can’t help you. I have to—” He searched for a plausible excuse. “I have to let my dog out.”

Armitage stopped too, and turned and looked at him, frowning.

“Your dog?”

“Yes. He’s locked in the caravan, he’ll think I’ve abandoned him. He’s a Border collie. They’re very highly strung, you know, Border collies. The

trouble is, he barks and barks and frightens the fish.”

“He what?”

“He frightens off the fish, with his barking. That’s why I don’t bring him with me.”

“Because he frightens the fish.” Armitage nodded slowly. “I see. So you’re a fisherman.”

“Not really. It’s to eat. The fish. I mean I fish for food, not sport.” Stop babbling, for God’s sake. “I live on my own, away from—away from shops, and so on.”

Armitage pursed his lips and squinted at the sky.

“My wife,” he said with studied calm, nodding again, more slowly still, “my wife has either drowned herself, or has run off and come to some mishap, probably fatal, but your dog has to be let out for a piss. I see.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“No no, don’t apologize. I quite understand. You’re in a predicament. Lassie of the Bulging Bladder will be fretting while you stand here wasting your precious time listening to me speculating on the sad fate of my lady wife. Perfectly reasonable, perfectly. Off you go. Don’t mind about me—don’t mind about *us*.”

Cracked in the head, definitely, Wymes thought. I’m trapped with a lunatic out here on this bleak shore.

“Look, Mr.—Mr. Armitage,” he said gently, “why don’t you go up to the house—you see the house, up there?—and ask them to phone for help.”

“I could do that, yes,” Armitage said, stroking his chin and looking at the ground and frowning. “That is a thing I could do.”

Wymes began to say something more, but all at once Armitage wheeled about and marched off up the slope, his knees pumping and his arms swinging. He looked like nothing so much as a life-size mechanical doll.

“Wait!” Wymes called, but not as loudly, or with as much force, as he might have. Here, after all, was his chance to escape.

And yet.

What if the fellow's wife really had fallen into the sea, or had thrown herself in, or had run off into the night, furious, or drunk, or whatever? She might have slipped on the slimed rocks and broken something, an arm, a leg. And Armitage, however unappealing he might be—there was something of the slacker about him, despite the clipped vowels and the fancy shoes—was a human being, after all, a man, like Wymes himself, a man in desperate need of assistance. One couldn't just walk off and leave him on his own, out here, in the gathering dark. Could one?

Armitage had stopped, and stood looking about him wildly. The grass came almost up to his knees.

There was a wind now, and they could hear the sound of the waves breaking on the rocks at the shoreline. If she really had gone into the water, Wymes told himself grimly, she would be well drowned by now, her body broken, her face smashed, her clothes ripped and half torn-off. He had seen drowned people. A sight not to be forgotten.

Behind them a light went on, making the air around them seem abruptly darker. A window in the gable end of the house glowed yellow. That meant there was someone at home, a farmer, probably, and his family. Surely they wouldn't refuse aid to a man searching for his lost wife. He would ask them to phone the Guards, or the lifeboat, and while they were doing that, he could slip away unnoticed. Scamp would be glad to see him. They would go for a walk together, man and dog, down the lane through the dunes and off along the beach.

Or no, not the beach. The woman's body might be washed up there already. Imagine stumbling on it, the pulpy, phosphorescent flesh, the face swollen and cut, the hair twisted like seaweed, the eyes blindly staring.

He set off determinedly up the slope, toward that lighted window. He must get help. He heard the man call out again behind him.

"You! Weemess! Wait!"

It was always the same. No matter how clearly he spelled it out and explained it, everyone always got his name wrong.

“Come on!” he called back, beckoning with his arm. “There’s no time to lose!”

How banal a thing life is, he thought, even at its most dramatic, its most melodramatic. Now he seemed to be the actor, making exaggerated gestures and spouting bad lines.