



Ghosts

John Banville

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In this brilliantly haunting new novel, John Banville forges an unforgettable amalgam of enchantment and menace that suggests both *The Tempest* and his own acclaimed *The Book of Evidence*. "A surreal and exquisitely lyrical new novel by one of the great stylists writing in English today."--*Boston Globe*.

Ghosts Details

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Lyn says

Confusingly, This guy gets a lot of grief on here for being pretentious. But, to me it is an authentic pretentiousness, like art is. Very unlike David Foster Wallace who tries to sound cooler than you or Michael Chabon who tries to sound smarter (and who prolly are.).

?Laura says

Ratings (1 to 5)

Writing: 4

Plot: 2

Characters: 2

Emotional impact: 2

Overall rating: 2.5

Notes

Favorite character(s):

Favorite quotes: "...the wind of something that was almost happiness wafted through them all." p.7

"He had a disjointed, improvised air, as if he had been put together in haste from disparate bits and pieces of other people." p.12

"...fear always holds at its throbbing centre that little, thin, unquenchable flame of pleasure." p.114

Other notes: I was really impressed by this book initially. I loved the author's way of describing the characters and setting and was intrigued by the premise. As the book progressed, though, the plot began to feel very disjointed to me and I could never quite get a hold of it somehow.

Bruce says

A very intriguing, beautifully written novel, but not what I ever thought I'd like. There's no plot, it's rambling, emotionally diffuse and self-indulgent . . . so why did I like it so well that I'm going to start the sequel, *Athena*, immediately? The wit, wrenching self-exploration, and poetical expression of the narrator, Freddie Montgomery, are enormously affecting, both aesthetically and empathetically.

In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie committed murder, and *Ghosts* can be likened to *Crime and Punishment* if it had continued after Raskalnikov went to jail. Freddie's struggle with his own guilt and all its ramifications is very powerful. I'm wondering if Banville will locate Freddie's redemption (if, indeed, he ever finds it) in religion, as did Dostoevsky. For, as Freddie realizes he cannot atone for his crime, it seems the only solution is grace, a forgiveness not based on his merits. And isn't Freddie an everyman in this respect? As Hamlet affirms, "use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?"

Vit Babenco says

Everything in this world resembles something else so *Ghosts* vaguely echoes *The Tempest* by **William Shakespeare**. And the island is something between Aeaea – Circe's home isle, and the *Land of Nod* – the place of Cain's exile.

Extraordinary the look of things at dusk then, it might have been another planet, with that pale vault of sky, those crouched and hesitant, dreamy distances. I wandered about the house, going softly through the stillness and shadows, and sometimes I would lose myself, I mean I would flow out of myself somehow and be as a phantom, a patch of moving dark against the lighter darkness all around me.

Those shipwrecked are personages descended from *Harlequin and Columbine* – the painting by **Jean-Antoine Watteau**: the disagreeable characters with their disagreeable past, except the children, of course, – the children are bound for their disagreeable future. Professor Silas Kreutznaer is a kind of Prospero and Freddie Montgomery is a sort of Caliban.

This lovely world, and we the only blot on the landscape. We, or just me? Sometimes I think I can feel the world recoiling from me, as if from the touch of some uncanny, cold and sticky thing.

The ghosts of his past are still tormenting Freddie and he still keeps wondering how he could fall so low and turn into such a beast: “What statue of myself did I erect long ago, I wonder? Must have been a gargoyle.”

Diderot developed a theory of ethics based on the idea of the statue: if we would be good, he said, we must become sculptors of the self. Virtue is not natural to us; we achieve it, if at all, through a kind of artistic striving, cutting and shaping the material of which we are made, the intransigent stone of selfhood, and erecting an idealised effigy of ourselves in our own minds and in the minds of those around us and living as best we can according to its sublime example.

When we all learn to sculpt our own virtues then, at last, we'll become true human beings...

Bart says

One doesn't read Banville for stories but prose. There is little story here, but there is rich prose.

To wit:

And so, quite empty, weightless as a paper skiff, I make my voyage out, far, far out, to the very brim, where a disc of water shimmers like molten coin against a coin-colored sky, and everything lifts, and sky and waters merge invisibly. (p. 20)

and

The professor stood and listened to the unsteady beating of his heart, thinking how fear always holds at its throbbing centre that little, thin, unquenchable flame of pleasure. (p. 114)

and

The years had worn his skin to a thin, translucent stuff, clammy and smooth, like waxed paper, a loose hide within which his big old carcass slipped and slid. He would not need a shroud, they could just truss him up in himself like a turkey and fold over the flaps and tie a final knot. (p. 119)

and finally

He sends off for things advertised in the newspapers, kitchen utensils, hiking boots, patented remedies for this or that deficiency of the blood or brain; he possesses books and manuals on all sorts of matters - how to set up a windmill or grow mushrooms commercially, how to draw and paint or do wickerwork; he has piles of pamphlets on bee-keeping, wine-making, home accountancy, all of them eagerly thumb-marked for the first few pages and in pristine condition thereafter. (p. 217)

One is better entertained to read Banville as poetry, not fiction.

Sandra says

Un amico mi ha fatto notare un mio limite nello scrivere i commenti ai libri che leggo, consistente nel fatto che quando scrivo un commento positivo mi dilungo e sono prolissa, al contrario quando scrivo che un libro non mi è piaciuto sono concisa, troppo breve.

Ha ragione.

Quando un libro mi è piaciuto mi perdo nel commento quasi con voluttà, come per prolungare il piacere che ho provato nella lettura; quando non mi è piaciuto sono sbrigativa, quasi per spicciarmi a toglierlo dalla mente, “non mi piace perché...”.

Ciò premesso, scrivo ora il breve commento a questo libro appena terminato. E' chiaro quindi che non l'ho amato.

Non mi è piaciuto perché :

-non ha una trama. Si tratta di un romanzo senza accadimenti, dalla prima all'ultima pagina non accade assolutamente nulla. C'è solo un perenne flusso di pensieri della voce narrante, di cui non si conosce il nome, si sa solo che è un ex galeotto che vive, insieme al professor Kreutznaer, esperto di storia dell'arte, e a un altro enigmatico personaggio, tale Licht, in un'isola disabitata, dove un giorno sbarca un gruppo di naufraghi. Così inizia la storia e il libro termina il giorno dopo, quando i naufraghi se ne ripartono dall'isola (meno una, Flora, una ragazza che rimane perché dice di essere ammalata). La presenza di questi naufraghi provoca negli abitanti dell'isola appunto un flusso di ricordi, di riflessioni e di pensieri, ben scritti, anzi benissimo, ma tutto finisce lì.

Siamo in un mondo immobile e immerso in un'atmosfera ovattata e impalpabile, che non si capisce se è sogno o realtà.

Nei prossimi giorni lascerò il libro in una panchina, magari troverà un lettore che lo saprà apprezzare, a differenza di me.

Hamish says

On some level I guess I get the complaint that *Ghosts* doesn't really have a plot and that it sets up a premise and then mostly ignores it, though I think that's missing the point. For one, it seems pretty clear that most of the plot points will be picked up in the next book (*Athena*), but more importantly it's a book that isn't really terribly concerned with plot anyway. Like Nabokov's *Glory* or *The Gift* (there I go comparing Banville to N again), it's a slow meditation, and the enjoyment comes from the writing itself (which is masterly) and from becoming immersed in Freddie Montgomery's thoughts on life after jail. Sure it moves slowly, but it allows you to savor the prose and the details, and I can't stress enough how good Banville is at those things. What did surprise me was just how emotionally effecting Freddie's meditations are. I didn't mind watching what appeared to be the main plot fade to the background as the first person narration came to the fore, as the latter interested me far more.

As with other Banville novels, his style isn't particularly original, but it doesn't change the fact that he still executes it perfectly, and this type of writing requires a novelist of the highest talent to pull off without sounding self-indulgent or masturbatory. Regardless of what some might argue, I don't think Banville is ever either of those things.

David says

Banville's command of language is second to none, but he's put his talents to work on far greater novels than this. It's a slight, slightly experimental sour-dream of a novel; a brief flirtation with conscience and consciousness is all that occurs before the reader is left adrift as adrift as the protagonists. A huge cast of characters are thrown at you, Dickensian stereotypes lurk in the corners, but there's never the effort shown to breathe life into any of them, and the lack of resolution (or even beginning) becomes increasingly apparent as the number of remaining pages become fewer.

A wasted opportunity.

David says

here is the thing about banville. about the perfection of his prose. you can be 38 pages into this book and read "I too was eager already for change, for disorder, for the mess and confusion that people make of things...Company, that was what we wanted, the brute warmth of the presence of others to tell us we were alive after all, despite appearances" and you will close the book and run your hand over the cover and stare off into the distance at a tree. the way the light hits it in a square, illuminating it there. you will be reminded of your mother, one thousand miles away, on a couch drifting in and out of sleep after chemotherapy. you will be remembering her at niagara falls and how she lifted you up on the railing to get a better view when you were four. and one thousand miles away, you will see that great cataract, but more importantly, you will see the rail and feel her hands on you, holding you secure. it's the railing. the railing that was put there one hundred years ago by some lost hand and the connotations of that railing. not the falls. but your mother. holding you and though you never saw her face, looking intently instead at the rush of water, know that she was smiling at your blonde hair and feeling your chest rise and fall with the wonder of it all.

Yeemay says

I have no idea what this book is about. It may be about the construction of self, death, alienation or the imagination. The writing though is undoubtedly tremendous. I remember reading someone describing Austen's writing and saying it was impossible to point to one specific moment of genius. It seems so here too. I can't remember the last time I read anything quite so otherworldly, disorienting or troubling, as though there was a stream of some imminent catastrophe bubbling calmly beneath everything.

Perry Whitford says

Freddy Montgomery, the Nabokovian killer from Banville's comic riot of a novel, *The Book of Evidence*, has been released after just ten years of incarceration, for "exemplary" behaviour.

He is living out the first weeks of his probated freedom on a rocky Irish island as an assistant to a professor compiling a study about an obscure (and fictional) painter.

Soon after his arrival some unexpected visitors are ship-wrecked near their house, all of whom seem to mirror characters from the painter's masterpiece, entitled "Le Monde D'or".

After really enjoying *The Book of Evidence*, I was looking forward to reading this sequel, which I bought half way through reading that first episode and have had sitting comfortably in my "to read" pile ever since.

Sadly, though still good, *Ghosts* is a little bit of a disappointment.

Freddy himself (no doubt intentionally given the title) feels somewhat like a ghost in three of the four parts, only really stealing the show in the second part, where he describes his first day out of the clink and we get to enjoy his ridiculous inner meanderings to the full.

Freddy says that he feels "required" somehow, so I was expecting a fulfilling climax, yet the story ended with a whimper where he is hardly needed at all from a dramatic stand-point, despite several overtures of coming atonement.

As for the rest of the characters, they do little more than bring the painting to life, but like a painting they only offer a frozen moment, some speculations, no resolutions.

Ghosts is still a good read because I fancy that Banville is incapable of writing a bad novel considering his great command of language and winning way with esoteric vocabulary (favourites here included "borborygmic", "glossolalia" and "popliteal").

Knowing that there is a third novel in the series I can only imagine that this is very much a "middle" book in a trilogy, which I will confirm one way or the other by reading the third and final part at some stage.

That said, the first volume would have stood alone fine, but this book seemed incomplete to me, or if complete then more than a little obtuse.

Quiver says

Worlds within worlds. They bleed into each other. I am at once here and there, then and now, as if by magic. I think of the stillness that lives in the depths of mirrors. It is not our world that is reflected there. It is another place entirely, another universe, cunningly made to mimic ours. Anything is possible there, even the dead may come back to life. Flaws develop in the glass, patches of silverying fall away and reveal the inhabitants of that parallel, inverted world going about their lives all unawares. And sometimes the glass turns to air and they step through it without a sound and walk into my world.

This is Banville at his rather strange. I expected a somewhat conventional sequel to *The Book of Evidence*, and was caught unawares like an inhabitant of the mirror. The narrative switches between an omniscient, god, fly-on-the-wall point of view and first person, and it is only during the paragraph above—which I called, aptly enough, the mirror moment—that the two perspectives twine and vaguely connect. That happens about a fifth of the way through, but the feeling of disjointedness persists to the end. Deliberately, I would say, though perhaps not entirely necessarily.

If I was not convinced by the story, I was in awe of the prose. Sentence for sentence, Banville is nothing short of brilliant and I have lavished the margins with copious commentary. I continue to be a devoted fan.

Paolo Gianoglio says

Non capito. Troppa nebbia, troppo non detto, niente storia; non fa per me.

Patrizia says

L'isola è il mio elemento naturale, un mondo a sé, in cui tutto acquista un valore diverso, forse per via dell'acqua che fa da confine e da limite allo stesso tempo. Anche la luce e il cielo ne sono condizionati, e di conseguenza il modo in cui vediamo gli oggetti e percepiamo il tempo.

L'isola di Banville è un luogo aspro, quasi dimenticato, a cui si approda volontariamente per sfuggire al passato, cambiare vita, cancellare ricordi, nascondersi. Ma ci si approda anche per caso, come accade ai naufraghi della storia.

A questo punto iniziano le tante suggestioni. I tre abitanti della casa: il professore, Licht e la voce narrante, assassino senza nome che va sull'isola una volta scontata la pena quasi per lavare i propri peccati o per espiare (si è ergastolani a vita...).

L'esistenza che vivono è scandita dalla luce. La luce del quadro che studiano, una luce dorata in cui le figure umane sembrano bloccate, colte in un attimo al di fuori del tempo.

La luce fisica che filtra dalle finestre o attraverso i vetri. Si tratta comunque sempre di una luce esterna, dentro di loro coltivano un buio fatto di passato apparentemente svanito e di speranza molto fioca, quasi inesistente.

I naufraghi sono reali? Sono un'improvvisa irruzione del mondo esterno? Sono i personaggi del quadro? Qualunque cosa siano, risvegliano ricordi e sconvolgono le esistenze dei tre che fino al loro arrivo si sono concentrati sulla sopravvivenza, relegando il proprio essere umani nell'ombra della notte, fuori dalla casa, negli angoli più disparati dell'isola, stanchi fantasmi privi di ombra...

È un libro denso, intenso e ostico, con una scrittura incisiva e difficile, sospesa in un tempo che respira e si ferma al ritmo della prosa stessa, si avvolge su se stesso con balzi cronologici che rallentano e diluiscono la storia. E ci troviamo proiettati ora nel quadro, immobilizzati nella luce delle pennellate, sagome vaghe e confuse; ora in frammenti di vita reale, messi a confronto con le nostre paure, i nostri desideri e i nostri demoni; per ripiombare in una fusione con la natura dell'isola, fuoco e roccia, acqua e ombre sagomate dalla luce.

Asghar Abbas says

Some people are ghosts, even when they are alive. This is what makes this a horror story; people. When it is the usual stream of consciousness fare that it is. Who writes more beautiful prose than Banville? Absolutely no one.

This isn't actually a ghost story, of course. But if you love rare words and unique writing, and Ireland as I do, then this is the book for you, as it was for me.
