

JOHAN Banville is lamenting the fact that he can't work for ten hours every day like he used to. If he makes it to four hours, he says, he's thinking about clocking off and having a glass of wine.

At 78, no one would blame him for downing tools but for the Booker prize-winning author, working is as important as breathing. 'What else would I be doing?' he asks when I suggest taking it easy. 'Many's a novel and poem was drunk away in McDaid's and Neary's back in the day. Not by me but the old guys like Flann O'Brien and people like that. I don't know how they got any work done. I mean, if I have half a sip of wine, the concentration would be gone. And they worked with hangovers - I couldn't imagine that.'

Banville's latest novel, *The Drowned*, is another tale of his protagonists, the pathologist Quirke and Detective Inspector St John Strafford, which he initially penned under the nom de plume of Benjamin Black.

I wrote the first one of these back in 2004 and I thought it would be a one-off, he says.

'But then I got interested in the characters, especially the character around Quirke, then I got tired of Quirke's life so I invented Strafford.'

The thing I liked about Strafford is his complete impossibility. You could not have had a Protestant down at the big house as a policeman in the 1950s, it wouldn't have happened, so I like writing about complete impossibilities. It's one of the nice things about writing, you know? You're a little god and you can do anything with these little creatures that you have invented.'

Banville said in 2022 that *The Singularities* would be his last non-crime novel and he is sticking to his word so far, though he dislikes placing books into genres like crime.

There is another Quirke mystery already in train, despite the fact that Banville confesses he tires of the complex pathologist.

Quirke is always moaning and groaning, always going on about his awful childhood, he says. 'I tried to lighten him up - in the previous novel, *The Lock Up*, I gave him a girlfriend. She was an interesting girlfriend, a Jewish girl from Cork and everything, but... he says with a tut, 'he let her go. But she's going to come back in the next one.'

One of the reasons we are blessed with another Quirke book is that Banville is driven to write.

'What else would I do with my time?' he reaffirms.

I was talking about this to Neil Jordan the other day and we were saying if you get your work done by lunchtime, what on earth are you going to do with the rest of the day?

I get panicky. I can't take holidays - I loathe holidays because I wake at eight in the morning and think, what am I going to do with my day? I can't do nothing.'

He used to travel from his home in Howth into Bachelors Walk to an apartment where he worked for ten hours at a time.

I had to get rid of it because there were these young women that I used to give money to who were begging in the streets who were so sad, he says. 'I hadn't seen one of them in a few months and I met her one day and she looked dreadful.'

I said to her, 'I will give you some money but can I get you something to eat? Would you like a sandwich or something?' She said, 'Would you get me some bread and some milk for the children?' So I went down to the local supermarket and got her two big bags of groceries.

When I brought them back she burst into tears and I thought at that point, I can't do this any more. I have to get out of it.

So I sold the place. The sadness in the central city now is

by Maeve Quigley

just... the poor people on drugs and the poor themselves. 'One of those girls I used to give money to, she can't have been more than 17 or 18 and I asked her one day, "Does your father know you are out here on the streets?" and she said, "Yeah, he knows" so I thought, right let's not go any further with that conversation. It's heartbreaking what's happened and what is happening to Dublin - the poverty and the drugs.'

It's a tough world and one in which he has grown-up children whose lives are more difficult than his was at their age.

But still Banville would not want to go back to the Ireland of his childhood.

'When I look back at my childhood in the 1950s,

'The Ireland of today is infinitely better'

I would not want my children or anybody's children to live through that period, he says. 'It was poverty-stricken - the money was only half of it; there was a poverty of the spirit as you were absolutely controlled by the Church.'

I remember when I went to Eastern Europe first in the late 1970s and early 1980s I just thought, it's Ireland. They had the Communist Party running things at all levels and we had the Church. The Church and the Communist Party are just two sides to the same coin.

I would not want my children or anybody's children to have to live through that again.

'Of course, freedom brings all kinds of problems with it but I would not want to go back to those days.

'One of 13 who got pregnant, and they didn't even know what they were doing, sent to workhouses and put into slave labour. Young men all got away with it. The cruelty.'

It's estimated 56,000 women were put into those Mother and Baby homes and 57,000 children were starved to death. I wouldn't want to go back to that. The Ireland of today, for all its faults, is infinitely better than those days.'

He hasn't yet seen his friend

Workaholic: John Banville at his home in Howth this week. Right, with his dog

PICTURE: FRANK VEALE

Dublin Book Festival
Celebrating Ireland's Writers and Publishers

Cillian Murphy's new film *Small Things Like These* but like the same way the Rwandans did, the same way the Bosnians did.'

In the Irish system, both sexes were treated cruelly in different ways.

'Kids would disappear,' says Banville. 'Some poor family's son would disappear from the back of the class and nobody would ever mention him and he would be

gone to Letterfrack or one of those gulags, those torture chambers over in the west. Nobody would question it because we were brainwashed.'

One memory sticks in his mind of walking along a narrow passage in Wexford, where a pregnant woman with a pram and a toddler stepped off the path to allow a priest to pass. He was around ten but has never forgotten the moment.

'But it's very minor compared to the horrors envisaged on those poor girls in the Mother and Baby Homes and the boys who wound up in labour camps,' he says.

Banville believes the establishment in Ireland now still doesn't like to hear these things but insists it must happen.

'These things have to be said,' he says. 'This was a terrible terrible country from the 1930s right up to the 1990s.'

As a youth in Wexford, he was bored and unsettled, dreaming of Moscow and the wider world that awaited him but only managing to get to Dublin.

I loved being in Dublin in my

Acclaimed author John Banville on the demise of Dublin, the horrors of the Church during his childhood, his love for fellow humans and his inability to do nothing, as he cheekily admits...

I didn't think I'd live this long - I'm surprised



probably said that about me when I was young. I am probably just an old codger. 'An the youth of today ah...'

He did an interview recently in Spain, during which he told the interviewer that Steve Jobs had destroyed the world as he gave people the notion that the self is the most important thing. He still feels this is true.

We are, he says, just tiny cogs in an extraordinary place and this is the most important thing.

'We're an amazing species for all our awfulness'

He feels the obsession is a dangerous one, just as cancel culture is dangerous.

'It's what in the old days we used to call censorship,' he says. 'People don't seem to use that word nowadays but that's what it is, it is a totalitarianism of the young.'

Someone recently told him that he doesn't like being with people, he just likes people to be around and he admits that's probably the case.

I spend too much time by myself, he says. 'I really don't like myself and I don't like my own company. I find myself boring.'

'Though he separated from Janet and had two younger children with another partner, her death in 2021 deeply affected him. He still worries about his children - who range in age from 51 down to 27 - and the gig economy of them struggle with.'

'My worrying about it is not going to change the world, but I am interested in the world, and I seem to be just interested in themselves. But then my parents

be found in the world, and he will discuss it today at 12pm in the Botanic Gardens as part of the Dublin Book Festival. Banville will join Orii Gat, Sara Baume and Paddy Woodworth in conversation with Luke Slattery for Lyne PM's Culture File Debate on Winged Muses, the role that birds play in literature.

'The world is an exquisite place,' he says. 'I will be talking about swifits, which are the most extraordinary creatures. They fly 28,000km from here to South Africa and they never stop once. A swift can fly for six months, sleep on the wing over land and feed in the air - and we boast of our observable thumbs.'

'Looking at the skills and the endurance capacity of a little creature like that is the kind of thing that delights me.'

'All kinds of human beings [delight me too]. I was in Spain at the Asturias Awards and saw my friends the King and Queen of Spain. I was very proud of how they conducted themselves when they were attacked in Valencia the other day.'

'We are an amazing species for all our awfulness and all our cruelty. Endlessly interesting and entertaining.'

One of the few consolations of old age, he says, is the comedy of it. But being here is a prize in itself. I didn't think I would live this long, he says. 'I am surprised to be healthy - as far as I know. There may be something lurking that I don't know about yet. Life is wonderful. What else is there? There is a great darkness behind us and a great darkness facing us, so the moment in the light is exquisite.'

■ JOHN Banville will be taking part in The Culture File Debate: Winged Muses at 12pm today in the National Botanic Gardens as part of the Dublin Book Festival, see dublinbookfestival.ie