



# ‘Corporatism is the new colonialism and Catholicism’

Karl Geary’s new novel set in recession-hit Dublin explores a repetitive cycle that fails young people

**Niamh Donnelly**

**I**t’s a blustery January afternoon, and Karl Geary is sitting across from me in the Clarence Hotel in Dublin. The author and former actor is visiting from Glasgow in Scotland to talk about his forthcoming novel, *Juno Loves Legs*, but it’s not long before we’re on the topic of hotels and housing.

“I walked here, we’re in a five-star hotel, and Dublin is awash with five-star hotels and it’s awash with homeless people,” he remarks. “I’m writing about the 1980s, and it’s not out of nostalgia ... it’s looking at this repetitive cycle that we’re in [where] things aren’t changing.”

The recession-hit Dublin of the 1980s has provided the setting for Geary’s fiction. His 2017 Costa-shortlisted debut,

*Montpelier Parade*, told of the unlikely relationship between a butcher’s apprentice and an older woman. His luminous and heartbreaking second novel, *Juno Loves Legs*, tells of two misfits (Juno and “Legs”) who grow up on the same housing estate. Their friendship is their only safeguard against a world that constantly lets them down.

“I didn’t want to tell that story at all,” Geary says. “I was really far along with an entirely different book. And it was funny, I’ve a little studio in Glasgow, and on my way to work, I would stop and have a little coffee, and just take these notes on my phone. And then I would get to the studio and do the real work.”

Of course, the notes were the “real work”, and the headstrong and misunderstood Juno “elbowed and kneed her way” into his psyche and on to the page.

The book paints a picture of a penniless,

church-fearing society that in some ways is leaning towards modernity, but more often is hamstrung by old habits, ideas and institutions. The way in which individuals are failed by the structures around them, and the repetitive nature of these failures throughout history, is something that interests Geary.

“We can look at Ireland and go: 800 years of colonial rule. And then we had 100 years of Catholicism that’s now starting to recede. And [in] the 1980s ... there was a shift and this kind of move towards modernity and a sweet spot in there where I felt people could take a breath. And then we immediately went back into a new oppressor, and corporatism comes into play, and it becomes the new Catholicism for us.”

Geary is one of many who left Ireland in the 1980s for more opportunities and a better quality of life. “We call ourselves expats, but the reality was that Ireland was





**Karl Geary: 'In the 1980s, people were fleeing Ireland. We're coming back to that now.'** Photograph: Ollie Grove

to go get money, you don't get to think, you don't get to look around and go: is the system working?"

Soon after moving to New York, Geary's life took off on an astonishing trajectory. His friend, Shane Doyle, invited him to help run Sin-é, a music venue that would soon become legendary in music circles. Known for giving Jeff Buckley his start, it was the kind of spot where you might stumble upon a performance by the likes of Paul Brady and Marianne Faithful, the Hothouse Flowers or U2. Through this work, Geary got to know the photo editor of Rolling Stone, which led him to "one of the least interesting things I get asked about most", posing beside a topless Madonna in her infamous Sex book. His acting career also began to grow legs, and he would eventually go on to write his own screenplays (readers might remember Geary as Coffey in the 2008 horror, *The Burrowers*, the Irish doorman in *Sex and the City*, or Billy Hayes in the 2003 comedy drama, *Coney Island Baby*, for which he also wrote the screenplay).

"You know, it's interesting. I've spoken a lot over the years [about] things like Sin-é and, various films and stuff. And I think there's a sense [of] wasn't it great? You go off and you have these experiences, and look at that, you've pulled yourself up by your bootstraps... [But] that's not the whole story. That's just not true," he says.

"The truth is nobody pulls themselves up by their bootstraps. That can't happen unless you have help, and I had help. People helped me. And I think that narrative is a way to pummel people from the same class base as I come from; to go, well he did well, why didn't you? ... And instead of a problem with the system we live in, it becomes a personal moral failing. So, the onus of guilt is put back on the person."

Class is a big theme in *Juno Loves Legs*, and is brought to life through subtle yet significant behaviours, such as the way certain customers of Juno's mother (a dressmaker) refuse to touch off anything in their house. "[A]s soon as they got inside they swept a look from floor to ceiling and their bodies stiffened."

The things the characters long for, and are so often denied, are basic—love, care, education, housing. As such, their suffering is heightened because it feels so unnecessary.

"I honestly believe people want basic things," Geary says. "They want to be educated. They want to feel safe. They want to have medical assistance if needed. Basic stuff. And if you look at the disparity of wealth, particularly in Ireland, but all over the world now, it's unprecedented. And unless your conversation includes that it's a middle-class project, and it weaponises people against their own best interests."

Alongside class, the book manages to touch on a range of issues such as homelessness, the Aids crisis, corporal punishment, the abuses of the Catholic church, and more. "I specifically didn't want to talk about sexual abuse, because then it be-

in such a state at that time, people were fleeing the country in incredible ways. I think, probably, we're close to coming back to that stage."

The difference now, however, is that the country has been developed extensively and should be able to accommodate its citizens. "At least when I was leaving the country was all, kind of, in ruins. People now are leaving... everything's glossy, and shiny, and five-star hotels, and Google, and Facebook, and Apple, and people are driving around in expensive cars."

Geary was just 16 when he left for New York, having grown up in Blackrock, Co Dublin, the youngest of eight siblings. He left school before doing his Inter Cert, worked for a brief stint in a wallpaper shop, then packed his bags. In the East Village he found what "in retrospect, you called a scene, but we didn't know it was a scene". It was a creatively fertile, if gritty, place where he could fill in the gaps in his education by reading, and exchanging books and ideas with friends.

"There was this kind of concentrated... community, where there was a lot of people trying to figure stuff out. And you could live there and only work two, three days a week, as a waiter or in a video shop, or in a bookshop. You could do that stuff and still live. And so, you had time. And that commodity of time is what's stolen, particularly now, I think, from young people. You come out of college, you have



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comes a sexual abuse story. And that's all anyone reads," he says. "I think there's an array of other abuses."

Geary is careful and constrained writer, whose self-editing is "really dogmatic—I'm probably too quick to throw things away". As a person, meanwhile, he seems openhearted. He talks to interest on just about any topic I throw his way, offering deep but unpretentious answers.

Day to day, his life has calmed down somewhat, compared with his heady New York days. He lives in Glasgow and is married to the actor Laura Fraser (*A Knight's Tale*, *Breaking Bad*). His own

acting career is dormant—"I never settled in well. It doesn't suit me as a person... I was always in a perpetual state of panic."

He has written a screenplay for *Montpelier Parade*. "It was really good, interesting, to go and do that again," he says.

But it is the relationship between reader and writer that interests him most. "I love cinema, I really do. But cinema now has been transformed and it's become a kind of a spectacle. There's very little independent film gets made and if it does get made it usually has to have a star attached, which is less interesting to me... The relationship between the reader and the writer—that place where they meet... where the reader has to show up with their imagination, and they have to do a little bit of work, and you hopefully have done enough work that they can have that experience. It's kind of alchemy, isn't it?"

Having spent four years at work on *Juno Loves Legs*, he finds himself "at a loss" in some ways.

"If you're invested in [a writing project], you're seeing on a different level. You're taking in the world in a way that you feel more alive." Without that, "you're waiting for a voice to show up. You can't force it".

The only way to proceed, he believes, is to show up at the desk every day.

"I think the 'everyday-ness' is really important. Because it's like anything. It's like a boxer... You've got to stay in shape, so that if something happens, you can identify it." ●

*Juno Loves Legs* by Karl Geary is published by Penguin on March 9th

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# THE MYTHS WILL HAVE TO UNRAVEL

The blackly comic, gothic world of Paul Murray's latest novel is filled with characters living a lie, adolescent and ecological angst, economic and marital collapse, doomsday preppers and middle-aged disenchantment

NIAMH DONNELLY

In the Fitzwilliam hotel in Dublin, over flat whites and glasses of water with lime, the author Paul Murray is telling me a fairy story.

"So, the traveller falls asleep on the hillside," he begins. "It's a hillside he's not supposed to be on, because it's a fairy mound. And he hears music, and goes into the hill, and everybody's dancing and having an amazing time. He knows it's the fairies, and he knows the fairies are these strange, amoral creatures who will destroy you for fun. But they're like, oh, come on in, we've been waiting for you, join your party. And he joins in. And he parties."

We've been talking about Ireland, and its boom-and-bust cycles. We've also touched on the Iraq war, the dot-com crash, indie cinema . . . Like his novels, Murray's conversations have an expansive tendency. A single thread can lead him outwards in a web of connections, metaphors, jokes, before he lands smoothly back on the point.

He invokes the infamous Brian Lenihan line, "we all partied", before telling me what happened to the traveller.

"He wakes up and he's destroyed. And how is he destroyed? He's still alive and walking around. But it's 100 years later, and he's taken out of time. He's removed from his family. He's alone. And he's devastated."

The idea of being swept up and spat out by falsehoods runs through much of Murray's work. His Whitbread-shortlisted debut, *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, told of a wealthy toff trying to live a gentlemanly life while the bank threatened to repossess his home. The Booker-longlisted *Skippy Dies* was set in a suburban boarding school and steeped in yearning and disillusion. And his Wodehouse Prize-winning *The Mark and The Void* satirised post-crash Dublin through the story of a French banker and a writer named Paul.

When it came to writing his latest novel, the fable about the traveller seemed to speak to the idea of community.

"I thought it was really, really, powerful in that in Ireland, what we have, is a really strong sense of community [. . .] If you stay in Ireland and you don't leave, you can be my age [48] and have friends from school and that's great. But there's a flipside to that, which is that if the community doesn't like what you're doing, you can be kicked out."

The Bee Sting is set in an unnamed midlands town during the 2008 recession. The Barnes family, who rode a high during the Celtic Tiger with a thriving car dealership, are now trying to keep up appearances while the business goes under; and looked upon with suspicion by their neighbours. As we delve into the backstory of each character, it becomes clear they've staked their identities on fragile myths, and that those myths will have to unravel.

On the one hand, the book is a family saga and state-of-the-nation novel. There is adolescent angst and middle-age disenchantment. There are storylines about doomsday preppers and local GAA teams; themes of class, economic collapse, ecological catastrophe. (Murray's maximalist style means the book comes in at an impressive 650-pages). But there is also an eerie fairy-tale quality to the novel. Ghosts of the past haunt the town. A clairvoyant older woman predicts what will come to pass. The vocabulary is laced with trolls, monsters, goblins, witches.

"Yeah, it's a gothic," agrees Murray. "I mean, terrible things happen in Ireland, and we are so good as a people at masking ourselves and disguising ourselves [. . .] So, I guess in the book, I wanted to write about people who were trying to be the good people that everyone approved of, while knowing or feeling, sensing, that they weren't – something about them wasn't quite right."

The small-town setting was important,

because "I wanted it to be a place where there's a sense that the townsfolk are one entity. And they're always watching. They're always judging you. And if they turn against you, you kind of stop being a person."

Being alienated from community – and, for that matter, stopping being a person – are ideas Murray describes in a different context in his recent essay *Who is Still Inside the Metaverse?* Searching for Friends in Mark Zuckerberg's Deserted Fantasyland. While on a fellowship in Boston College, he was asked to write a fish-out-of-water style piece on the Metaverse (the virtual universe created by Mark Zuckerberg), for *New York Magazine*. He donned his VR headset and, from his office, visited virtual bars and comedy clubs and socialised with the avatars of people who were also wearing headsets in their own homes, across America. The resulting article is as unsettling as it is hilarious.

"I'm really interested in tech. I think it's



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mostly awful – apart from Google Maps. I've never used Facebook or Twitter or any of those things. They just give me the creeps. And from the get-go, this was like: what is this for?"

Murray has numerous funny anecdotes about his experience. "One thing I didn't put in the piece was that people were drinking a lot, which I didn't realise [at first]," he says. "Sometimes I'd hear people going: I'm drinkin', who's drinkin'? [. . .] When I clocked it, I was like, oh, this is why I feel at such a distance from people."

But of course, the feeling was more than sobriety. The overriding sense, both from the essay, and Murray's in-person account, is that the Metaverse is an uncanny, lonely place.

"Technology's mostly about getting us to be working all the time. And then the social element is mostly a sop you're given, or a way to sell you stuff," he says. "The Metaverse was Zuckerberg's attempt to put the lid on that and just completely close it off. So: I now own friendship. As literal as that."

But the Metaverse hasn't caught on, most likely because it hasn't accounted for the complexity of exchange that occurs when human beings are in close physical proximity. Murray describes the experience of being at a funeral – people standing in a room and being present together. "Being human, there's all kinds of stuff attached to that, that your phone is not going to give you."

The son of a drama professor father and stay-at-home mother (who had been a teacher before she got married), Murray grew up in the south Dublin suburb of Killiney. As a child, he read a lot, and saw writing as "a continuation of reading".

"I used to write adventures of animals in space, that kind of thing. I did that from pretty early on. My son's the same. Just as soon as he could write, he would start making adventures."

He went to school in Blackrock College





Paul Murray: 'I'm really interested in tech. I think it's mostly awful – apart from Google Maps.' Photograph: Barry Cronin

and dreamed of writing screenplays as a profession. This dream was realised when his screenplay was developed into the film *Metal Heart* (2018), directed by Hugh O'Connor. But novel writing is a more natural mode for Murray. "As soon as I finished, and I started writing a book, I was like oh my God, it's just so free."

His undergraduate alma mater, Trinity College Dublin, appears in *The Bee Sting*, as "this glittering world of difference", and his own experience was likewise like stepping into another world.

"It was this wonderful place full of brilliant people, all trying to find out who they were, and making a mess of it," he says.

He studied English Literature and philosophy, an endeavour he thinks is being eroded of late.

"The education that I was lucky enough to get, it's under siege. Like, humanities at the moment – just being able to kind of look at things and go 'hmmm, this seems like they're not telling me the truth' – people are losing the opportunity to get that."

In his final year, a friend died tragically by suicide. "That was really tough. And so, we got very tight. Very close. And then when we left, I lived out in Killiney, and I just didn't see anybody. [...] I guess that's the thing. At some point, the magic wings are going to stop working. Or the coach turns into a pumpkin."

Or you take off your VR headset?

"Yeah, exactly. Because the charge only lasts for two hours. [...] It's goggles off, literally. You're back with your folks. And I didn't know what to do. I was really lonely."

An application for a green card was unsuccessful, so he ticked off a boom-time rite of passage, and worked in a bank. "In Dublin, at that point, it was like, now it's time to get a job in a bank. And that's what I did."

For a time, he taught English in Barcelona, and wrote a novel that an agent vehemently rejected. "He wrote this really f\*\*king tough letter [...] Basically, we hate it. And then he closed saying: you've got real talent, show us your next book."

It was while working in Waterstones in Dublin that his colleague – author John Boyne – suggested he apply to study Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. There, Murray was taught by the author Ali Smith, who would go on to show his work to her publisher. The rest is history.

"I wasn't back that long, and I got an email from Hamish Hamilton saying: send us your chapters. So, it was serendipitous. It was very, very lucky."

Do serendipitous moments, such that email, or being longlisted for the Booker Prize with *Skippy Dies*, for example, ever set him off kilter?

"With *Skippy Dies*, a lot of great things happened that might have knocked me off kilter if I was younger," he says. "I found it hard to start a new book after *Skippy*, but it's always hard to start a new book. [...] If the book does really well, it's hard because: how do you top that? If the book doesn't do well, then it's like oh s\*\*t, I need to f\*\*king change direction. So, if you've got that cast of mind – which I do – of things are basically f\*\*ked, [you think] what am I going to do to dig myself out of this hole? And all you can do is write." ●



# ‘Nobody would notice the publication of *Ulysses* if it was published tomorrow’

John Banville reflects on life and death, millennial culture and ‘craft’ verses ‘art’ novels and wonders whether anyone will buy his new novel. The novelist and Booker prize winner also questions the emergence of the youth vote for Sinn Féin

Interview: **Niamh Donnelly**

**S**omeone is sitting in John Banville’s seat. The renowned novelist, Booker winner, and Nobel prize hopeful (or unhelpful, more on this anon) has to settle for the table beside his usual spot, when we meet in Dunne and Crescenzi on South Frederick Street in Dublin, on a busy Friday afternoon. He’s been frequenting this upmarket Italian for years, and gets the odd nod from a member of staff, or regular, who seem to know him. Do they know John Banville the man, I wonder, or John Banville the towering literary figure? Is there a difference?

“Irish author John Banville has said he ‘despises the woke movement’ and likened it to a religious cult,” goes the opening line of one article. “John Banville’s generalisation . . . that all writers make bad parents provoked an almighty backlash on social media over the weekend,” goes another. Perhaps the most famous of his remarks was made after he won the Booker Prize for his 2005 novel, *The Sea*: “It’s nice to see a work of art winning the Booker Prize,” he said. Mischievous at every turn?

But it’s not always clear whether Banville courts this attention, or whether it courts him. He has more than once been on the end of a peculiar phone call. In 2006, when the bad news – “John Banville is dead” – came down the receiver, the very much sentient Banville had to deduce it was his friend, author John McGahern, who had passed away. On another, now infamous, occasion, a call came through from Sweden, telling him he had won the Nobel Prize. For 40 minutes, Banville

thought it was true, but then his daughter phoned and said she was watching the ceremony and had heard no mention of his name.

The whole thing was a cruel joke. (When I ask if he thinks he might win in the future, he says “Not now. My name is tainted because of the hoax.” Of course, his name has also become part of the prize’s folklore, perhaps little consolation in comparison to the award’s one million kroner – over €900,000 – prize money.)

So, his life sounds turbulent, but endlessly interesting. (“It is interesting!” he says). But has he consciously built a public persona, or is the John Banville sitting across from me the same one I’ve read about?

“This is me. This isn’t a persona. I regard myself as transparent. If somebody [comes] up to me and says I love your books, I’m astonished, mainly because I don’t read anything about myself.”

The Banville sitting across from me wears a grey blazer, white shirt and dark tie. He orders a glass of friulano (no need to consult the menu) and bruschetta to share. “It wouldn’t kill you, you know,” he says, when I decline his offer of a glass of wine.

We talk about Italy – his favourite country, though he couldn’t live there because he feels it is too corrupt – and a favourite café in Turin where Nietzsche used to have breakfast, and a drink they serve with “enough caffeine for the year”. When he learns I work freelance, he wants to tell me his “Amazon story”.

“Many years ago, at the beginning of the 1990s, I was on a book tour in America,” he says. “I was in Seattle being interviewed by a young woman – freelance. And I said to her before the interview started, can ▶▶



John Banville: ‘One of the great forces in human life is the fear of boredom. We are so bored that we have to invent wars, pestilence, destroy the world’  
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you make a living freelance? And she said, well, I also work for Amazon."

He assumed this was a women's group, which amused her. She agreed to show him the Amazon of which she spoke, and the next day brought him to a small office above a dry cleaner's. "There was a room up there about a quarter of the size of this room, a square table in the middle, four of those big cream computers, four guys sitting at them. One of them was probably Jeff Bezos," he says.

He asked about the business, and someone explained the concept of ordering things online and receiving them by post.

"I said: that'll never catch on," he laughs. "I've spoken to one of these tech billionaires and he said to me, if you'd bought \$100 worth of shares that day, you'd be a millionaire now. I said no, I wouldn't, because when it went up to \$200, I would have sold them. And he looked at me, and said: yeah, you would [have]."

Unsurprisingly, Banville knows how to spin a yarn. At times he comes across as morbidly serious, at others, roguishly tongue-in-cheek. It's hard to know what to make of him. He speaks slowly, at a low register, and can be to the point, or jauntily talkative, depending on the question.

The youngest of three siblings, he was born in Wexford in 1945. The town, "bored me sideways" he says, though he now realises "I missed a great deal. Wexford is delightful, fascinating."

When he was 12, his sister gave him a copy of Joyce's *Dubliners*, and "I immediately began to write bad imitations of [it]. I'm still practising."

It may come as a surprise to some that the erudite man of letters never went to university. Instead, he worked for Aer Lingus, before becoming a newspaper sub editor. Working at night in this post allowed him to write during the day.

His first published story, *The Party*, appeared in the *Kilkenny Magazine* in 1966. Back then, he says, a writer's "greatest ambition was to have a short story published in a small magazine. Everybody now wants to be a screenwriter or a bestselling author. In those days, our ambitions were very low."

Including his crime novels (he wrote 11 under the now defunct moniker of Benjamin Black), he's written 32 novels, and one short story collection. However, he has always maintained that the crime novels are "craft" whereas the others are "art".

"You must never confuse craft with art. Art is an entirely different thing."

What is art, I ask, half in jest, but he plays along.

"Well, art consumes its material. If a craftsman makes a table like this" – he gestures at the table between us – "it's still a piece of wood standing on [metal]. A painter paints a picture, it's no longer oil paints on canvas. It's a work of art. It has transcended – it's consumed – its material."

His latest novel, *The Singularities* – "art", of course – opens as the character formerly known as Freddie Montgomery (the Malcolm MacArthur-like serial killer of the *Frames* trilogy), is released from prison. He has assumed a different name, Felix Mordaunt, and finds himself in a new "static universe", where there is "no past, present or future, only a smooth sort of timeless non-time . . . furnished with a whole new cast of characters".

Among these characters is the Godley family, who first appeared in Banville's 2006 novel, *The Infinities*. Fusing elements of his previous work, and drawing on the likes of Joyce, Nabokov, Milton, and so on, the book is a wide-ranging exploit, with a secret in its first and last lines.

"Yes, he has come to the end of his sentence, but does that mean he has nothing more to say?" goes the opening.

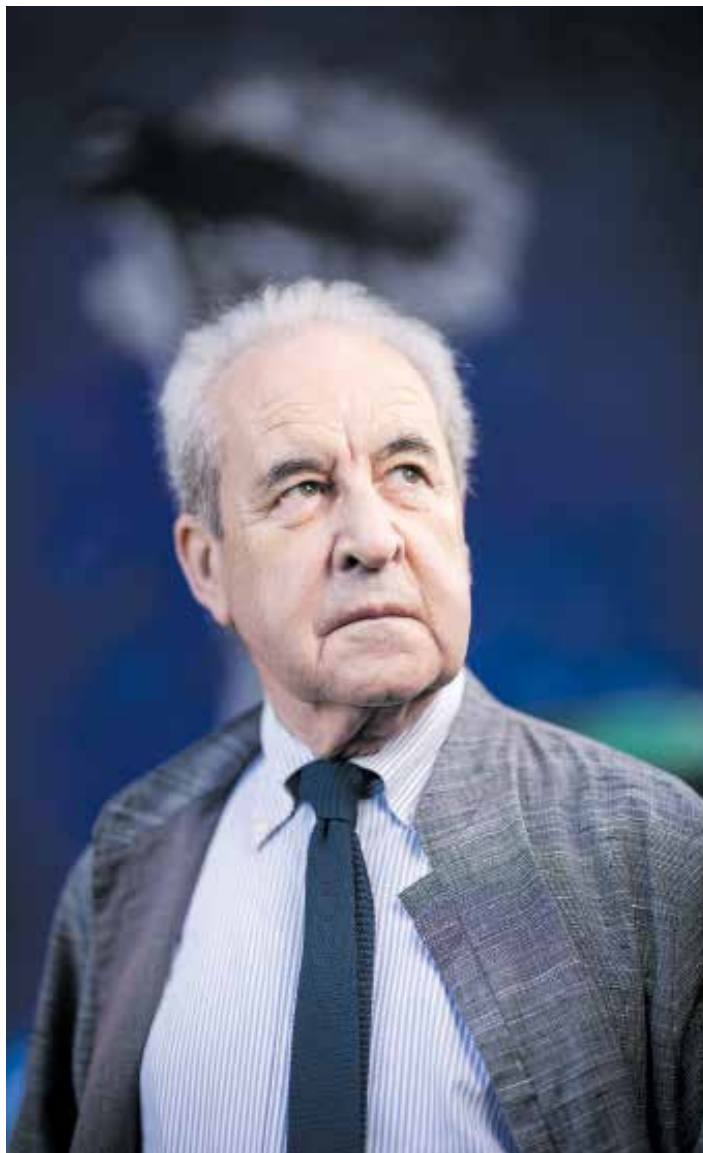
"I wanted to get the words 'the end' into the first line," says Banville. "This is my last book of this kind. I'll never write another book like that."

Really?

"When it says it's the end, full stop, that's it."

He'll continue to write the crime novels – "my dependants will insist on eating" – but not high-brow literary fiction. "I've done my work and I can do other things."

Banville has written about the negative impact his devotion to art had on his relationship with his children. He has two sons, Colm and Douglas, with his late former wife, Janet Dunham Banville, and two daughters, Ellen and Alice, with his partner, Patricia Quinn. Would he do anything differently, looking back?



"No. Of course not. Nor would you. We would all do exactly the same thing."

Dunham Banville, a textile artist, died last year, and the book is dedicated to her. References to death are laced throughout *The Singularities*, but "real death" is different to the "metaphorical notion of death", Banville says.

The metaphorical notion of death – the consciousness that we are going to die, brings "colour to our lives".

Real death, on the other hand "is just death. The person is gone. Someone was here and then suddenly is not here. It's one of the things I find incomprehensible about this world. Death, in its way, is far stranger than life. Because we didn't have to get born. Every birth is an accident . . . but we all have to die."

Does he believe in the afterlife?

He shakes his head.

The end is the end?

"I would hope so. Wouldn't you? I don't mind the idea of not being. I wasn't here for a very long time."

Which isn't to say he dislikes living.

"I love the world and I love this life. I mean, look at the sun shining on this beautiful street. Exquisite world, exquisite. Cruel, disastrous, in many ways, but also exquisitely beautiful. For every Hitler there are two Beethovens. You know, we probably will destroy the world. But enough of it will be left. I have a vision of when we're gone, the grasses coming up, the trees coming up, the flowers growing, and nature saying to itself, we got rid of the virus."

On the subject of ecology, I tell him that before our interview I read about two women who, in protest against climate inaction, had thrown soup at Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*.

"We're going through a period – we do it every now and then – a period of absolute madness," he says. "One of the great forces in human life is the fear of boredom. We are so bored that we have to invent wars, pestilence, destroy the world. Anything, rather than be bored. So . . . people are throwing things at Van Gogh paintings, and shouting about all the things I'm not supposed to mention, or I'll get cancelled."

Surely John Banville isn't afraid of being cancelled?

"Oh no, I'm trying to devise a way of being can-

John Banville:  
'My biggest  
fear is that the  
Shinners will  
get in'  
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celled. What's the best way [that will] get the most publicity?" he laughs.

But then, more seriously, he says: "I don't envy you [young people] your world. My generation, we had the best of it. I was born in '45, the end of the war. The world was full of hope, determined that what had happened in the war would not happen again. Now, we've forgotten that. We're slouching towards totalitarianism again. [There's a] far-right government in Sweden. We'll have a far-right government in France very soon. The world is playing with fire. But that's what human beings do."

How does he feel about the government in Ireland?

"If you'd asked me 30 years ago what kind of government we'd have I'd have said we'd be infinitely worse off. This is a good government. I have friends in government and I think they're good people."

Like who?

"I'm not telling you that, but they're good people. Yeah, I'm very hopeful. My biggest fear is that the Shinners will get in."

Who's getting behind them?

"The young, because they forget . . . There's such a thing as history. You can read what happened from 1969 up to the 1990s."

But there must be a reason why the young don't want what the current government is offering.

"[Because] they're stupid. I was stupid when I was young. This is the nature of being young. You know, good on them. But if they put the Shinners in, we're all in trouble."

I had been meaning to ask had Banville mellowed with age, but the question suddenly feels redundant.

We talk about the Basic Income for Artists scheme that's being piloted by the current government. He thinks it's a great initiative.

He doesn't, however, see himself as part of any Irish literary scene. "I don't know any writers. I mean, I know a couple, but they're friends, not friends because they're writers."

He maintains that the world has lost interest in high culture. "It's all to do with these phones," he strikes my phone with his index finger. "[They] change everything. Nobody would notice the publication of *Ulysses* if it was published tomorrow."

Is there still a place for the novel in our culture?

"Yes, because the novel requires you to exercise your imagination . . . and imagination is our greatest faculty."

But what he sees as "high culture" is dead. "It may never come back, the world that I came in at the end of, the 1960s, which is a great interwar period, the great European writers, the great poets, great novelists. Who would care about a Thomas Mann now, or a Paul Celan, or a WB Yeats?"

Some would say there's been a changing of the literary guard – that the white, middle-class European man is giving way for writers and poets of different races, classes, genders.

"I'm sure it's true. I'm sure it's a wonderful thing. A great new culture will spring forth," he says with a glint in his eye.

"Do you read contemporary stuff?" he asks, after a beat.

I do.

"I tried to read a few things." He lowers his voice. "It's childish nonsense. But then, the people who are being written for, or painted for, or composed for, they're children. We live in a childish age."

But contemporary fiction is what he writes.

"Yeah, but –" he gestures towards the book on the table "watch how far that gets."

The last in Banville's oeuvre? Time will surely tell.

In the meantime, he thinks he might write an autobiography in which, as on Wikipedia, every fact is slightly off. "I won't have had a brother and a sister, I'll have had two brothers. And people will come to me and say, well, Wikipedia said you have a brother and sister. And I'll say, well Wikipedia's wrong. Believe my book."

It's certainly hard to know what to believe, when it comes to Banville.

When it's time to wrap up, he thanks me for "listening to an old guy rattling on". I make to leave, but he calls me back. He wants to tell me what his autobiography will be called. Sinatra's *Last Track*.

I nod.

"That's a joke," he warns.

I laugh, politely. ■

*The Singularities* is published by Random House