



John Banville's *The Untouchable* by Boyd Zenner

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, Boyd Zenner, Acquisitions Editor at the University Press of Virginia recommends *The Untouchable* by John Banville. Banville will be reading in Charlottesville during the Virginia Festival of the Book on Saturday, March 24 at 8 p.m. at the University of Virginia's Culbreth Theater. His newest novel is *Eclipse*, released this month from Knopf.

If something—or someone—is not what it seems, is it necessarily a fake?

In *The Untouchable*, this question is explored with ferocious wit and acuity by the brilliant Irish novelist John Banville. Banville is one of the great prose stylists writing in English today, and in Victor Maskell he has created a fascinatingly complex and enigmatic character. Modeled closely on Anthony Blunt, distinguished art historian and one of Britain's notorious "Cambridge spies," whose ranks included Kim Philby and Guy Burgess, Maskell is a man lacquered over by manner and subterfuge, polished to a high gloss and giving away nothing.

As the book opens, the elderly Sir Victor has just been exposed—very belatedly—as a traitor, and is in the process of losing all the honors he has accrued over the course of a long career. As a narrator Maskell is so cool, wry, and removed that he when relates these and other humiliations and catastrophes, it's as though they are minor irritations being visited upon someone else. However, because Banville has chosen to weave together alternating strands of past and present, we are gradually and with great delicacy brought to see what lies beneath Maskell's imperturbable façade. He is both art historian and work of art.

Like the real-life Blunt, Maskell is an expert on Poussin, and his most cherished possession is

a small painting by the seventeenth-century French master. Maskell stumbles across this work near the beginning of the story: it is a tremendous early discovery, and it surfaces glimmeringly at intervals throughout the book. Initially beside himself with delight at his prize, Maskell at length finds his conception of the little Poussin undergoing a transformation that in many ways parallels society's—and the reader's—changing view of Maskell himself.

The great themes of *The Untouchable* are secrecy, solitude, and loss. Maskell indeed becomes an "untouchable," but long before he is ever exposed he is established as an outsider: homosexual in a world where discovery means imprisonment, a husband and father without family affiliation, shamefacedly Irish in a social circle that views his nation with scorn, a spy who is also an illustrious member of the British establishment. Finally—and perhaps most awfully—

he is shown to be a marginal figure in the shadow world of spies, a betrayer who is himself profoundly betrayed.

Gloriously written and unexpectedly moving, *The Untouchable* is above all a sustained meditation on authenticity. Victor Maskell may not be a "real" Englishman, or husband, or spy, or supporter of the crown, but as a character he is the genuine and unforgettable article.

Virginia Festival of the Book

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