

*Christine Falls* by Benjamin Black (Picador) R105.80

*The Silver Swan* by Benjamin Black (Picador) R135

9 March 2008

The publishers make no secret of the fact that Benjamin Black is the pen-name of John Banville, the distinguished Irish novelist and critic, winner of the Man Booker Prize for his chilly novel *The Sea*.

Benjamin Black, as distinct from John Banville, writes crime novels. The two novels under review would seem to be the first in a series featuring the pathologist Quirke (we are never given his first name; he is called Quirke by friends and family alike). The novels are set in a meticulously recreated Dublin of the 1950s, with, in *Christine Falls*, several excursions to the Boston of the period.

It's not altogether clear why Black should go to the trouble of recreating the period setting, other than because the fifties was the heyday of film noir, to which Black's adoptive name is surely a wry allusion. It is also possible that the near-Byzantine central intrigue of *Christine Falls*, about which more later, would simply not be possible or even plausible in modern Ireland. One certainly hopes not.

Quirke, then, is chief pathologist at the Holy Family Hospital in Dublin. As other crime writers have discovered, pathologists are useful central characters, in that their subjects are served up to them, as it were, on their slabs. Both novels are triggered by the appearance on Quirke's beat of a suspect corpse. In both instances, the corpse is that of a young woman, and in both instances Quirke is alerted to the possibility of foul play by somebody's effort to falsify the post mortem that Quirke conducts.

In *Christine Falls*, the would-be falsifier is one Malachy Griffin, Quirke's brother-in-law and, as it happens, obstetrician at the Holy Family Hospital. We gather through flash-backs that Quirke and Malachy courted two sisters in Boston years ago: Quirke wanted Sarah, but married Delia; Sarah married Malachy. Now Delia is dead, and Quirke, semi-alcoholic and morose, has remained in love with Sarah. To complicate matters, Quirke, an orphan, was adopted as a boy by Judge Griffin, Malachy's father – who made no secret of the fact that he preferred his adoptive to his biological son. Quirke has a close bond with Phoebe, the daughter of Malachy and Sarah.

This tangle sets the pattern for these novels, the criminal intrigue playing out in counterpoint to the highly-fraught affairs of the Quirke-Griffin family. The series seems set to be something of a family saga, each novel advancing the intrigue, but also unfolding in retrospect more of the convoluted back history of this troubled clan.

*Christine Falls*, indeed, is all about family. In the prologue a young woman, a nurse on her way to the US, is handed a baby for delivery to a convent in Boston. Thus is set in motion a mystery posited upon the archaic attitudes of the Roman Catholic Church to birth control, and its entirely ruthless traffic in human lives, which it sees as the preservation of human souls. As Quirke delves more deeply into the mystery of Christine Falls, he discovers that the trail leads him straight to his own family ...

That is about as much as a reviewer can reveal without spoiling the story. Suffice it to say that enough ends remain untied for Black to take up in the next novel, which continues some two years after the ending of *Christine Falls* left off, and gradually reveals what happened in the interval between the two novels.

Quirke, when we meet him again, has stopped drinking, but is in every other respect worse off than before: he seems to have no human ties to sustain him, being on the most strained of terms with Malachy and Phoebe (Sarah has died in the interval; the Judge has been paralysed by a stroke).

Benjamin Black lives up to his adoptive name by depicting a Dublin of almost unrelieved bleakness. Here is a representative slice from the life of Quirke: "Quirke sat with his assistant, Sinclair, in a café at a corner by the bridge. They drank dishwater coffee, and Sinclair ate a currant bun. They came down here sometimes from the hospital at lunchtime, though neither of them could remember how they had settled on this particular place, or why; it was a dismal establishment, especially in this weather, the windows fogged over and the air heavy with cigarette smoke and the stink of wet clothing."

Someone who chooses this kind of place as light relief from the dissecting slab is clearly not a relisher of life's choice offerings; Quirke's one animating principle seems to be the curiosity that drives him to investigate cases that would be better left uninvestigated.

Black departs from the detective-novel formula in giving the reader more information than the investigator has at his disposal. We are quite often granted access to the consciousness of the characters Quirke is investigating, even to the mind of the murdered woman. The effect is to decentre Quirke: he is not the omniscient Sherlock Holmes calmly in control. Indeed, it may not betray too much of the plot to reveal that these mysteries resolve themselves in spite of Quirke rather than because of him.

Both these novels offer gripping, gritty, gloomy reading. Banville is a superb stylist, and Benjamin Black no less. For readers who like plenty of black with their mysteries, this is required reading. The rest should stick to Miss Marple.