

John Banville's 'fan fiction' homage to *The Portrait of a Lady*

What Isabel knew

PHILIP HORNE

John Banville

MRS OSMOND
376pp. Viking. £14.99.
978 0 241 26017 3

Nicole Kidman as Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1996

Henry James contemplated writing a follow-up to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), and was urged to do so in 1898 by A. C. Benson, but he declared that he would not: “It’s all too faint and far away – too ghostly and ghastly – and I have bloodier things *en tête*. I can do better than that!”

Not all readers will agree that in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) James necessarily did better – though many have found those elaborate masterpieces “bloody” in another sense. The closest James ever got to writing any kind of sequel was adopting the mercurial, enigmatic femme fatale Christina Light from *Roderick Hudson* (1875) as the heroine of *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). Even in simply revising the texts of his earlier novels for his New York Edition (1907–09), James brought on himself the resentment of readers who felt he was defacing works they had long loved in their first form.

By undertaking a sequel to James’s best-loved novel, then, John Banville is going against the odds – if he isn’t indeed on a hiding to nothing. Many readers have a profound investment in the story of the American heiress Isabel Archer’s affronting of her destiny in Europe – an engagement often deepened by repeated readings – and may resist another writer’s co-option of her. On the other hand, the novel has an open ending, with the high-minded Isabel going back to Rome for no revealed reason, perhaps to her arid marriage with the cruelly manipulative fortune hunter Gilbert Osmond (though the *Spectator*’s reviewer R. H. Hutton inexplicably assumed that she was about to elope adulterously with her old admirer Caspar Goodwood). James’s notebook shows that he knew in advance that this conclusion would be controversial, and might impel readers to acts of imaginative completion:

The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished – that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation – that I have left her *en l’air*. – This is both true and false. The whole of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together. What I have done has that unity – it groups together. It is complete in itself – and the rest may be taken up or not, later.

When in 2014 Banville wrote a sequel of a different sort, his own Raymond Chandler novel, *The Black-Eyed Blonde*, he declared, “I have sought not to parrot Chandler, but to honour the spirit, vigorous, valiant and melancholy, of this master of English prose”. And his decision to do the same to *Portrait* brings to mind what James himself once said to

H. G. Wells: “I rewrite you, much, as I read – which is the highest tribute my damned impertinence can pay an author”. *Mrs Osmond* is a tribute to James in all sorts of ways – through allusions to James’s own life, for a start. After Isabel lunches with a newly invented feminist character, Miss Janeway, her hostess looks forward to that evening’s dinner with the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson, James’s real-life friend; Gilbert Osmond goes at one point to visit the real American composer Francis Boott – Boott being one of James’s models for Osmond’s own character; and James himself, unnamed but identifiable, appears early on across a London hotel dining room, mysteriously watching Isabel. Reference to “an obscure hurt” glances at James’s much-discussed youthful injury, sustained while putting out a fire.

Banville’s novel also nods to various James works, beginning with *Portrait* itself. It offers a nicely curt Mrs Touchett telegram of its own. Isabel’s stepdaughter, Pansy, is sent on a visit to English country houses, one of which is Fawns, the Ververs’ rented house in *The Golden Bowl*. Isabel is haunted by an image of predators and prey in the Colosseum, recalling *Daisy Miller*. There is the appearance of a “pink parasol”, recalling the boat scene in *The Ambassadors*. It is also worth noting that *Mrs*

Osmond might be called a sequel to the revised (1908) edition of *Portrait* – the style pastiches James’s later idiosyncrasies at times, and when a phrase from a scene of dialogue is cited (“innocent ignorance”), it is from the revised phrasing.

A fundamental problem with sequels arises in this superior piece of “fan fiction”: Banville has evidently struggled with the problem of whether to assume his readers will or won’t have a recent sense of *Portrait*, and he has played it rather safe. There is much recapping and overlapping. Isabel, who ends in James’s novel by setting off for Rome, though we only hear of her departure, is given in Banville’s version a whole to-do list: she takes the train, arrives at Paddington, goes to a hotel, has dinner, goes to a bank, has her lunch with Miss Janeway, tells her friend Henrietta about the conspiracy against her by Osmond and her false friend Madame Merle, and about Caspar Goodwood’s kiss “like white lightning”. We don’t actually breach the chronological border of James’s novel until page 134 – and Banville’s entire action only extends a few months beyond that of the original. Isabel pauses in Paris, dropping in on a new character and coincidentally meeting two others from *Portrait*, and she starts to shake things up. Only after a couple of months of travel, which

signal a new independence, does she return to Rome to face Osmond – intent, as the blurb says, on “outwitting him, and securing her revenge”.

A sequel like this, which doesn’t overtly set out to deconstruct or parody, and which doesn’t take some great jump forwards or backwards in chronology, is constrained by its contracts of consistency and continuity. One senses the lack of freedom, and senses, too, Banville escaping most successfully when he lets his imagination rip – often in a gothic key (an element present in James’s original). Isabel’s early “ideal of happiness” from the original, with its “coach-and-four of a pitch-dark night rattling over unseen roads”, is here twisted into an image of postmarital dread seemingly drawn from F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu*: “up on the driving seat, in the darkness of the rushing night, a wordless fiend rattled the reins and mercilessly plied the whip”.

Sequels may tempt authors to resolve mysteries, settle scores, impose their own world view; they give an *hors-texte* chance to air the kind of questions about speculative or interpretative issues that animate reading groups. Banville’s Madame Merle asks Isabel about the central secret in *Portrait* (the fact that Pansy is Merle’s daughter): “Did you not know, all along? Surely you must have, if only at some unreachable level”. It is no said in James’s novel that Isabel has contemplated this possibility, but Banville’s version of her does – only to reject the idea.

Though it hews pretty close to *Portrait*, *Mrs Osmond* inevitably deviates – sometimes arrestingly. If for James’s Isabel at the end “There was a very straight path”, that sense of purpose doesn’t characterize the kaleidoscope of moods, impulses, confusions, fevers and fuzziness traversed by Banville’s heroine. If the task of bringing together the convent-trained, doll-like ingénue Pansy and her sweet lover Ned Rosier, whose match has been forbidden by her authoritarian father Osmond, might seem to allow Isabel the chance to strike an idealistic blow for romance, a couple of violent wrenches darken the picture here, in a way that some will doubt can tally with James. And some inventions seem to conflict with the narrative drive of the original: if Osmond has a well-connected old collector friend with English estates, “Lord Lanchester”, why was he so dazzled by Lord Warburton (who doesn’t reappear here)?

Banville’s grasp of historical and cultural fact, though often impressive, can slip. James’s action, we can work out, ends in June 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare at the time, known as the New Woman” doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1894; “suffragettes” did not exist by that name until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that the *OED* records the first heterosexual use of “boyfriend”, which Banville also uses. An Italian hotel concierge addresses Isabel as “tu” – which would have been unimaginably familiar. Ralph Touchett is said to have

enjoyed “the fiery glare of the Roman sun” – in his mother’s house in Florence. Workmen take Osmond’s desk from Bellosguardo “down the hill to the Palazzo Roccanera” – as if that dismal pile has somehow moved to Florence from Rome, where it is correctly situated 210 pages earlier.

One might take issue, too, with Banville’s apparent challenge to James’s premiss about the importance of respectability in Anglo-American society in Italy. A newly cynical Mrs Touchett asks, “how many of Serena Merle’s acquaintances . . . do you imagine, would be shocked or even surprised to learn she had been your husband’s mistress and mother to his child?” But Madame Merle and Osmond worship appearances: this is the same social world in which Daisy Miller is ostracized merely for flirting, and the penalties are real. They have transgressed in a way that endangers their social status. Our historical imagination perhaps needs to register this as a taboo comparable to those of today regarding sexual abuse or racist behaviour.

For the purposes of the “reckoning” towards which Banville’s Isabel moves in a veiled revenge plot, she still seems to have, surprisingly, full control of the fortune for which the scheming Osmond married her. They apparently have a joint account, and it conveniently transpires (quite late) that Isabel’s astute lawyer has drawn up an advantageous pre-nup. This feels rather wishful. Would the manipulative, mercenary, patriarchal Osmond have let Isabel get off so lightly? James, with his modicum of legal training, was always aware of money. Banville’s Osmond worries that his wife will “abandon him and take her fortune with her” – as if it were that easy. The break for freedom seems very straightforward: “Now our marriage is at an end, and I am taking the money back”. If his position is so weak, isn’t Osmond’s offensive behaviour here insanely self-defeating?

But such quibbles perhaps miss the point – that *Mrs Osmond*, in all its realism, is a knowing fantasy. Banville’s highly self-reflexive novel knows that it is in some sense a shadow of another; and his Isabel, in entering the sequel, has become a kind of ghost: “she had . . . the sense of having herself passed over an ultimate boundary, into some other bourne [*sic*], and that her presence here in the world was as a phantom, a sort of ghostly revenant”. This is a shrunken world, even literally: Isabel senses that the Osmond she faces, blurting out crude insults and stupidly giving himself away, is now “smaller by an inch or so than he should have been”. And Banville knows his revisions won’t carry conviction with all readers. Isabel wonders about Pansy, “Had the sweet and docile child she had thought she knew been not docile or sweet at all, but a dissembling little schemer . . . ? It was not to be credited, really it was not”.

There is a melancholy sense of the belated, discredited world here, whose creator has long since departed. When the James figure who watches Isabel at dinner early on disappears, she feels a mysterious sense of loss – as Banville does, as we readers do.

Definitely, mysteriously, she did miss him, now that he was gone. It was as if she were an invalid making her feeble way over difficult terrain, who had found suddenly that a hand that had been sustaining her for so long she had ceased to notice its support had suddenly been withdrawn, leaving her to totter on alone.

Vanishing into radiance

Traces of the cosmic in the mundane

JULIET MACKENZIE

Helen Phillips

SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

224pp. Paperback, £9.99.
978 1 78227 342 4

THE BEAUTIFUL BUREAUCRAT

192pp. Paperback, £10.99.
978 1 78227 332 5
Pushkin Press

For Ray Bradbury, science fiction is “always the art of the possible, never the impossible”. In her new book, *Some Possible Solutions*, Helen Phillips selects a handful of those neat little science fiction tropes that serve to make the ordinary strange – from a world without wind to a version of humanity without flesh – and collates them in a series of short stories, with varying degrees of success. What is remarkable is the way in which these lo-fi tales acquire emotional thickness when layered together.

Without the weight of the rest behind them, the first few stories suffer. In “The Knowers” a slight slant on reality is provided by a new – but hackneyed in science-fiction terms – technology that allows people to discover the date on which they will die. “Some Possible Solutions” opens with a *Black Mirror*-style future of sex-bots, in which a blasé narrator walks the reader through the various features of her “MyMan” with his “hard blue penis” and annoying malfunction that means his responses to her always lag one statement behind. “If I said ‘Do you love fucking me?’ he’d reply, ‘You have to go to the bathroom?’” While amusing, there is an empty frivolousness to these initial future visions.

Then the themes begin to build. Recurring ideas of splintered female identity, sisterhood, doppelgängers, suburban living, relationships and motherhood refract through the various frames of reality constructed in each story with surprising and often illuminating results. At the end of “Life Care Centre” what at first glance appears to be “an incredible creature. As large

as a baby elephant, with tan fur like a woolly mammoth” reveals itself, on closer inspection, as just “two people, a man and a woman, walking several paces apart in a darkening world”. In the following story, “The Joined”, humans sent to a new planet suddenly find themselves permanently bonded to its alien population: viewers watch from their televisions on Earth as some great force lifts individual astronauts and aliens from the ground and causes them to smash into each other, creating a single hermaphrodite body. A poetic trick of the eye in one story is reworked to form the main conceit in the next. Returning to Earth, these conjoined figures encourage the rest of the population to enter into similar partnerships, promising an end to human loneliness. “The Joined” is one of the most unsettling tales in the collection, its dreamlike mood reminiscent of Italo Calvino’s “The Daughters of the Moon”, which imagines naked “lunar girls” appearing in New York to chase the final moments of a dying moon before a vast crane wrenches it out of the sky.

Where the exposition lies at the surface

of the stories in *Some Possible Solutions*, the uncanny centre of Phillips’s first novel *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* (which first appeared in the US in 2015) remains submerged for much of the book beneath a bleak corporate narrative. Josephine and Joseph – Phillips delights in wordplay – are a young couple newly moved from the suburbs to the city and hoping to start a family. Instead, they find themselves increasingly entrenched in a stultifying cityscape of furniture-less subtleties and brain-numbing deskwork in their respective high-rise office jobs.

The wordplay that patterns the novel is not just decorative. The plot almost hinges on the frightening proximity of the words FILE and LIFE, and the slippage that occurs between them as the couple’s lives are gradually reduced to a bureaucratic nightmare of bloodshot-eyed workers in “pinkish ill-colored” offices. The narrative then unfurls into a chaotic, Charlie Kaufmann-esque meditation on what would happen if death could be avoided, or life created, by shifting a few numbers on a computer spreadsheet.

In an interview Phillips has claimed that the final paragraph of *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* took her longer to get right than a single one of her short stories. The corporate landscape that has kept Josephine tethered for so much of the novel becomes “vaster than her imagination. The metal shelves endless in the light, their relentless geometry expanding upward and outward, vanishing into radiance” – supporting Phillips’s belief that the “cosmic is implicit in mundane”.

Art and disappointment

DAVID HOBBS

Eugene Lim

DEAR CYBORGS

163pp. FSG Originals. £10.95 (US \$14).
978 0 374 53711 1

Dear Mr. Hsieh,

Thank you for sending me notices of your performances, but may I ask you a completely serious (not meant negatively) question: why do you do such performances? They do not seem self-fulfilling or such as to give much pleasure or insight to audiences, but there must be much more to them than is apparent. Please try to let me know. This is a sympathetic question & not meant to offend. Yours . . .

The poet Jackson Mac Low sent this note to Tehching Hsieh, a Taiwanese performance artist who was then in the midst of his most celebrated work, “One Year Performance 1980–1981 (Time Clock Piece)”. In it, Hsieh punched a time card every hour for an entire year, taking a photograph of himself as he did so. As with all of Hsieh’s work, it was truly experimental – a simple constraint that forced a complete reorientation of lived experience: Hsieh was unable to sleep or be away from his small apartment for more than a few minutes. And as Mac Low’s letter suggests, it was not easily understood, even by the avant-garde. It is, however, an inspiration for one of the various artists in Eugene Lim’s *Dear Cyborgs*, the basis for a restricted body of work in which each new painting requires the oldest to be burned. The artist in question

does this to undermine the intrusion of finance into her art. “The purchaser of these works had to sign a contract that obligated them to return, in order for Sonny to destroy it, her oldest painting in exchange for her newest work.”

Dear Cyborgs is a novel about art and resistance, and how they may spur each other on, or frustrate their respective goals. In structure it resembles the great mid-century metafiction – especially *The Conversions* (1962) by Harry Mathews, who wrote a blurb for Lim’s previous book, *Fog & Car* (2008) – with each chapter incorporating a different perspective or stylistic quirk in the service of juxtaposing the novel’s two narrative threads. One details the episodic friendship of two Asian American men from the Midwest; the other, set in an alternative universe, is a series of conversations about art and disappointment between a diverse group of superheroes known collectively as Team Chaos. In tone, Lim probably

has most in common with Édouard Levé (1965–2007), whose conceptual novels are at once hilarious, dissonant and ferociously personal. Lim never defines his novel’s relationship to our shared present, but it is often punctured by references to real-life artists and their work, with characters elsewhere telling stories about Richard Aoki or the Frick Collection through a veil of nth-hand description.

These stories chiefly turn on moments of political demonstration. At Zuccotti Park two peripheral figures from the art world reunite accidentally. Another superhero engages in a tryst in the light of a burning Silicon Valley bus. The “villain” of this story is Ms Mistleto, a hacker who holds America for ransom for a socialist policy platform (a revamped health-care system, nuclear disarmament); she also demands a \$65 million Robert Rauschenberg artwork “as a token of good faith”.

While none of these stories is necessarily uplifting, they aren’t about futility either. Instead, Lim is describing productive collisions between the individual and the many. He also seeks to shake our assumptions about the banality of superheroes and to demonstrate that lurking in traditional versions of superhero stories is a distaste for the impotent many, a sense that the powerful understand power better. Eugene Lim’s super-comrades, with their cultural disaffection and nuanced political opinions, offer a rather more compelling version of a collective consciousness.