



## **Mefisto**

*John Banville*

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## **Mefisto** John Banville

A work of dazzling imagination, *Mefisto*, like John Banville's other novels, takes as its theme the price the true scientist or artist must pay for his calling in terms of his own humanity, his ability to live fully. Like his *Copernicus*, *Kepler*, and the nameless narrator of *The Newton Letter*, the central character of Mr. Banville's *Mefisto*, Gabriel Swan, is caught in the dilemma of the divided man who must choose between life and work, thought and action, experience and creation. The solution he seeks to dissolve the dilemma lies in a perhaps discoverable formula that will reduce the disorder of common things to an equation the application of which will "show up the seemingly random for what it is."

Gabriel is guided in his quest by Felix, the mysterious fixer, and his strange companions: Sophie, the silent girl, and the doomed Mr. Kasperl. At the close of the quest, as the computer-borne pattern seems set to repeat itself endlessly, Gabriel uncovers a solution that fails to bring him the rigor and certainty he had sought but offers up other things entirely. His wages are neofaustian and his fate as chancy as the "seemingly random" he would subside.

## **Mefisto Details**

Date : Published May 1st 1999 by David R. Godine Publisher (first published 1986)

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## From Reader Review Mefisto for online ebook

### David Whittlestone says

Like most reviewers, I loved the language. It may be poetic but it is certainly most readable. It flows from the page seemingly without any effort in the physical act of reading it. But more than that, it seems to have been the language alone that encouraged me to read on, for the story is slight.

Indeed, the author himself is often unsure of the story, making Gabriel correct himself frequently. The scenery is unclear and vague. What people are doing is imprecise and vague. They just are; they just do. And I'm not sure what happened in the end. But I loved getting there. I loved the journey and I loved arriving. The reading was a pleasure.

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### Jim Leckband says

A Faust retelling with all the interesting bits taken out. It seems I have a Banville-resistant gene in my chromosomes. I've read all the glowing reviews of his writing and yet I have failed to see the reasons for the hoopla. The quality of the prose is supposed to be excellent but I get only a dull response to it. Like I said, probably my problem.

The story itself would not have jumped out at me as having any affinity with outside sources, such as Faust. Which is OK since that isn't a requirement of fiction by any means - but why illuminate the connection with a name like 'Mefisto' and then have a Faust character who really isn't interested in selling his soul (and not much of a soul at that) and for not really very much. The Mephistopheles character, Felix, was the best thing in the book (as always, from the Old Testament through Milton and beyond). He livened up the dreary pages every time.

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### Shambhavi says

Banville's language is an experience in itself. I am thoroughly impressed with his ability to put in words so many wordless and nameless occurrences that we live through. that being said, the story just didn't do it for me. I would definitely pick up more of Banville's works but they aren't exactly page turners. And I'd be better off reading them alone with no other distractions, not even a mosquito, if I want to stick to getting to the very last page.

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### Aba Mafalba says

Το καλ?τερο βιβλ?ο του Μπ?νβιλ, που ?χω διαβ?σει.

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## Kalliope says

This is a surreptitious Faust story.

For a start, how could one recognize another Doktor Johann Faustus in our Gabriel. No, not Gabriel the Archangel, nor the Gabriel of the Joyceans, but Gabriel Swan. No, not Charles Swann of the Proustians, but a birdy Swan, with just one “n”. A Cygnet, like Lada’s, with its enchanted and transmuted nature.

Additionally, there are some angels around and my favourite was D’Arcy, for who could be more heavenly, in particular to women, than someone who has a name as if out of a novel by Jane O’Stin?

Similarly, our Mephistopheles of Germanic extradition, or Mefisto as the title says, is our Felix, the happy one, happy because of his luck. He has no surname in the novel. There is nothing additional to indicate his origins. Except for his red hair, of course. With his devilish bristles, his high cheekbones and white face, this Felix is the most felicitous character Banville has created for this novel. So sharp and canny!

Unquestionably, the title of the novel is the main spoiler, as it is in Thomas Mann’s version.

But differently to Mann’s Faustian exercise, an intellectual meditation of the dangers that an artist, that a musician, that a nationalist can run into, this is a wider meditation of humanity and on the impossibility of attaining certainty, whether in knowledge or, most importantly, in our respective, individual lives. And Numbers don’t help.

One of the main attractions in reading this work was to detect the Faustian themes. For this one has to be an attentive reader. Nothing is freely given. One has to keep sniffing, catching, uncovering, but effort is rewarded. It is all there:

The being split into two; magic and incongruous objects like the hoof of an unicorn; sulphuric smoke coming up from god-knows-where; a black notebook with a wizard’s codex; shoulder-blades that twitch like wings; the opening setting in a place called Ashburn; the deep in the earth mining and other dark hollows; nuns with headdresses that allow them to wing away; the parody of Matrimony; feet with horny yellow nails; the view of the whole city from high above; and the continuous sprinkling, as if with unholy water, with continuous allusions to (Christian) dogma but converted literarily into godless expressions.

These are the Alleluias of his novel.

And then, as expected in any book by Banville, there is the writing. The gloriously divine language. How can Banville write so well, so very well? It just seems to me humanly impossible to be able to deploy such magic with words.

Did he engage in a pact with anyone?

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PD: Reading Joyce's Dubliners, I encounter in the story "The Dead", the character Bartell D'Arcy. So,

Banville's character is certainly an echo of Joyce's and, indirectly, then, of Austen's.

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### **Sandra Lawson says**

I first came to John Banville via *The Sea*. I've since read *The Infinities* and now *Mefisto* and confess that I have had to push myself to continue with the latter two. Banville's prose is very stylised and erudite, and sometimes a little Stoppardian in its cleverness and references. I found this first person narrative a little confusing to begin with but was gradually absorbed by the narrator, Gabriel Swan's, external and internal experiences, and his tendency to unreliable memories. Even at the end I was a little uncertain about what I had actually read, and would probably need to re-read the novel for a clearer perspective.

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### **Dustin Beach says**

I've seen a couple lower end reviews that seem to mirror my sentiment about the novel. I didn't like it, not at all actually, but this may due to my particular taste and not a reflection of the quality of this work itself.

It's undoubtably crafted with immense thought and often contains paragraphs of beautiful, striking prose.

I just found myself bored throughout almost the entire read, hoping that we could actually delve deeper into Gabriel's fascination with numbers and how this correlates to the theme of the book. Many times I had to remind himself that he was a gifted mathematician, as this only ever comes into play when he's doing obscure and tedious work for various angry overweight individuals. Swan finding the ultimate insight into the order in chaos doesn't seem like a rewarding conclusion after a bizarre journey that was riddled with much sadness and regret.

The structure of the book was very intriguing though, with both halves seeming to be a mirror of each other. Similar characters show up, with sometimes similar motives. It's clear that after a huge turning point halfway through that Swan has turned from a naive, shy individual to a greedy opportunist.

I can see why many people praise this book and want to delve deeper into it's complex storytelling. The question is; after such work to decode and unravel what this novel is truly talking about, are you going to be satisfied with the time you spent to do so?

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### **Hamish says**

I've read a lot of John Banville novels lately. I'll probably end up reading all of them. Mostly because I love his prose, but also because they're all short so there's not much of a time commitment and they move at this pleasingly laconic pace. They're kind of like candy to me. That beautiful prose goes down so smoothly that I could read it all day.

Like most Banville novels, *Mefisto* isn't very plot-oriented. His novels have plots, but they're so short and move so slowly that there's not really room for all that many events. And he tends to put equal emphasis on everything, whether it's a scene with a major twist or a scene that involves describing a bus ride, so even when something important happens it doesn't actually feel that way. Granted, I'm past the point in my life

where plot is a major draw when choosing what to read next. Remember when you were younger and you would read the teaser summary on the back of every book you were interested in and then picked the one that seemed the most interesting? Now my only real question is "how's the writing quality?" and I rarely even read those teasers. I also can't imagine describing a Banville novel in a way that would make it sound appealing without talking about the prose. Seriously, try it.

I guess this is kind of a shortcoming too. The whole novel feels somehow distant, like Banville kept you at arm's length the entire time. He describes the settings so vividly and yet never really lets you into the novel's heart. But the plus side is that it creates this kind of chilling, unearthly effect. I'm still trying to parse it all out and decide what Banville was getting at. There are so many pieces to the novel, but I'm still not sure how or why they go together. For example, Swan's math thing. It seems like it's going to be the emphasis of the entire novel, but ends up serving only a minor purpose (to set up his job in the second half, though that could have been easily accomplished in another way). Is the point to contrast the order of his thinking with the chaos of his life? Is that theme clear enough? I'm still not sure.

Mefisto almost feels like a beta version of *Ghosts and Athena*. You have a protagonist that's a broken man, a jaunty, funny, creepy evil that sort of functions as an antagonist, criminal activity, some kind of unknowable machinations, a love/sex interest who's also unknowable, and an ambiguous resolution.

So basically it's the archetypal Banville novel. You've got the amazing prose, the sordid dealings, and a minimalist plot. If you've liked his other novels, you'll like this one. If you think prose style is the #1 most important feature of a writer, you'll like this one too (and all his novels, for that matter). If you want action...well, you should probably steer clear. And for whatever flaws it has, I still enjoyed the hell out of it.

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### **Nancy Oakes says**

The wisest people I know are people who admit they don't know and that's the case with me in this book. This is one of the most challenging books I've ever read, to be sure. I spent tons of time online and in my own home library tracking down the numerous references to mythology, art, literature, philosophy etc that appear in this novel; even after a second reading I'm still not sure I will ever be fully comfortable with it in any sort of comprehensive way. I've read a number of reviews that cite its "intertextuality," and I've come to this conclusion: since I'm merely a casual reader sort of person and not a walking encyclopedia who is gifted with perfect knowledge of all things literary, philosophical, artistic and mythological, I'm sure I missed a lot of what lies underneath this novel.

However, unlike some people who take a negative attitude toward a novel because they didn't fully comprehend it, I thought that this was a stunning read. There are a number of reasons why that's so -- for example, while reading the last forty pages of part one, I was absolutely spellbound and could not have put this book down for anything. Then, after the second reading, I was taken in directions I hadn't even contemplated during the first time through -- focusing much more on the idea of twins and the dualities that are present throughout this story, and appreciating on an entirely different level the main character's brief flashes of insight that seemed to me to show him the truth of things, even during his search for some sort of knowledge that might order his world. And there's more that I can't say without making references that would end up becoming spoilers.

You can follow the link below to read what I have to say about this book, but it left me in awe of John Banville as a writer. I'll be reading his work throughout 2018, and if the rest are anything like this one, it's

going to be a damn good year.

[http://www.readingavidly.com/2018/02/...](http://www.readingavidly.com/2018/02/)

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### **J. says**

This reworking of the Faustian tale didn't really gel with me. As always John Banville has introduced us to a story inhabited by people who are outsiders and hungry but I felt it needed more direction. But I suppose as Andrew O'Hagen says- 'Language itself is a character in Banville's work. You see the words coming towards you, you know their faces, their literary provenance, and yet their action surprises you.' Perhaps like Japanese novels style is more important than plot as for the use of obscure vocabulary I'll let Banville answer that 'There are two reasons why I use rare or difficult words. The first is accuracy. The second is for the irony of high rhetoric'.

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### **Eamonn Barrett says**

Art or Science? In this playful, dark, beautiful work of art, Banville finally settles on the former. Super, pivotal work; in many ways, the key to unlocking Banville's world.

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### **sisterimapoet says**

The thing that always strikes me about Banville is his writing. It's like a crazy python that grabs you in its coils and threatens to squeeze you to death. You are left breathless but thrilled.

In the past I've found that the strength of his writing has been let down but the plots he has chosen. In 'Mefisto' the two seemed better suited. This was a peculiar and at times visionary novel. It felt a little Beckett to me - strange people doing strange actions without always understanding why.

I can't say I really know what this book was about but I found the reading experience a pleasing one.

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### **Cynthia Rosi says**

Banville's prose reads like poetry, but that doesn't make this an easy book. It's divided into two parts, and each section has its own narrative arc as the story follows Gabriel Swan, a mathematical genius, who isn't guided by morals but rather a thirst for understanding math. When he meets Felix, the Mephistopheles of the story, more traditional narrative structure appears and the work becomes more entertaining.

I don't think people read Banville for entertainment, but rather for his amazing descriptive passages which feed a love of language. This is literature; it is art. It's to be read for what it does to your mind. If you're looking for a page-turner, this isn't your book. But if you're looking for the delicate, honeyed drip of words

beautifully wrought Mefisto is a work to taste.

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### **European Douglas says**

Another really good one from John Banville. Odd and menacing from the start, really enjoyed it.

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### **Mel Bossa says**

I'm discovering this author. His command of language reminds me a little of James O'Neil. This is a very modern Gothic take on Doctor Faustus. Inspiring and quite brilliant. Why haven't they made a movie of this yet? I could almost see all of the characters so clearly in my mind.

Felix is especially chillingly rendered on the page.

The passage where Gabriel suffers--won't give away too much here--was so vividly described, it had me holding my breath and wishing for ice.

This is the type of little book you must read more than once to catch all of the details.

Very very well done.

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### **Jennifer says**

Banville is one of my sister's favorite authors. She's lent me a few of his books, but I never got around to reading them until a week or so ago when she started asking around about who had which of her books by him. So I dove into Mefisto. Although Banville has yet to make it to my list of favorite authors, this book was definitely enjoyable. There were several passages that were so metaphorical that I would have to read to the end of the section before I understood what it was he was talking about, then have to go back and read the whole thing over again to really get it. Normally this would annoy the poo out of me, but somehow it was worth it.

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### **Ryan says**

As much as I like Banville's dense style and unreliable narration, I still found this work unconvincing. The grotesque stylized language succeeded in the early sections about the narrator's childhood where the contrast between the intricate overwrought descriptions balance with the great dark absences surrounding them. It perfectly conveys a child's wonderment and ignorance. In the moments from the hospital to the end Banville seems to be flailing. There are still some remarkable passages but little holding it together unlike in the Book of Evidence where the narrator's eloquence and wit counter-balanced his amorality. Banville needed a character like this to give his bag of tricks purpose.

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## **David says**

It may have been Faust re-imagined, but made no sense as a standalone work. Characters as tropes, plot unexplained, math prodigy that connects to nothing (other than a realization of the order in chaos??).... it was a theme wrapped with bits of supporting story rather than a story that reveals a theme.

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## **Avd.Reader says**

One could say that this complex novel by Irish author John Banville is about the inadequacy of language to explain the world. The hero Gabriel Swann tries to account for and make sense of life's chaos in terms of numbers. This is also a Faustian tale of duality (two souls in one breast..etc.). Gabriel tells his story so that symmetries and parallelisms crop up everywhere. The hero is an artist and a scientist, the novel's two parts more or less correspond to each other in characters and events, the beginning is mirrored by the ending. Not an easy read, but totally fantastic.

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## **Quiver says**

Deep down, in the dark, an ember of awareness glowed and faded, glowed again. A word would enter, or a flash of light, and ramify for hours.

An extraordinary book: the writing is so lyrical you want to read on just to hear more of Banville's music. The plot (what little of it there is) is rendered almost meaningless, redundant. All writers should read a book like it at least once, to see how beautifully the English language can be moulded in skilful hands. All readers should read a book like it at least once, for the same reason.

It may be hard to get into, but well worth it.

It is an acquired taste.

(This is four stars compared to other Banville books.)

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