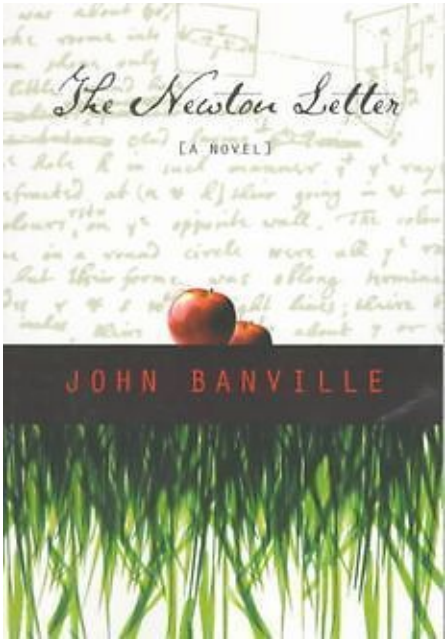

The Newton Letter

John Banville

The Newton Letter

John Banville

The Newton Letter John Banville
A historian, trying to finish a long-overdue book on Isaac Newton, rents a cottage not far by train from Dublin for the summer. All he needs, he thinks, is a few weeks of concentrated work. Why, he must unravel, did Newton break down in 1693? What possessed him to write that strange letter to his friend John Locke? But in the long seeping summer days, old sloth and present reality take over.

The Newton Letter Details

Date	:	Published May 1st 1999 by David R. Godine Publisher (first published 1982)
ISBN	:	9781567920963
Author	:	John Banville
Format	:	Paperback 96 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Cultural, Ireland, European Literature, Irish Literature

From Reader Review The Newton Letter for online ebook

Tony says

THE NEWTON LETTER. (U.S. ed. 1987). John Banville. ****.
This is Banville's third novel dealing with iconic astronomers, this time Isaac Newton. It is the story of a writer who has taken up residence at a cottage on a large farm in Ireland where he expects to find the quiet and solitude needed to finish his great novel on Newton. This short book is in the form of a letter to a friend of his explaining why he can no longer finish the book. The main reason for this is that he has gotten involved with the family that owns the cottage that he is renting. The family consists of four people: Charlotte and Edward Lawless, their adopted son Michael, and Charlotte's niece Ottilie. Charlotte, a woman about 40, runs the farm, which earns its money by growing greenhouse stock. Edward, her husband, is, apparently, a hopeless drunk. Ottilie is a younger woman who is the real mother of Michael. The father was a former itinerant worker on the farm. Our novelist/narrator eventually begins an affair with Ottilie that seems to take up most of his time. The affair is hot and heavy, although he eventually tires of it. Our writer is stuck in his story of Newton. He is at the point where he is trying to explain why Newton wrote a certain letter to John Locke in September of 1693. We get a sense of the letter, but it doesn't appear anywhere in the book. Searching the internet, I was able to find a copy of the letter in question (www.sheilaomalley.com), although there is no second letter as the author claims. The letter reads:

"Sir:
Being of opinion that you endeavoured to embroil me with woemen & by other means I was so much affected with it as that when one told me you were sickly and would not live I answered twere better you were dead. I desire you to forgive me this uncharitableness. For I am now satisfied that what you have done is just & I beg your pardon for my having hard thoughts of you for it & for representing that you struck at ye root of morality in a principle you laid down in your book of Ideas & designed to pursue in another book & that I took you for a Hobbist. I beg your pardon also for saying or thinkinng that there was a designe to sell me an ffice, or to embroile me. I am

your most humble & most
unfortunate Servant
Is. Newton"

Aside from referring to this letter, which our author believes holds the key to a change in Newton's personality, there is no other reference to the scientist. In spite of this small slip in the plot (!!), Banville is back on his true turf. It was relatively obvious to me that his previous two novels on Copernicus and Kepler led him to discomfort zone. Slim as this novel is, it represents the John Banville that we all look forward to reading. Recommended.

James says

The blurb on the jacket sums it up: this is a great Banville primer for those unfamiliar. The character quirks, the sardonic humor, the beautiful prose, it's all there in around 100 pages. Because it's around 100 pages, though, this is a piece that tends to skim through a lot of character development and narrative events, choosing instead to sum it up in tone and atmosphere. A fantastic read for style alone, but not as fulfilling as

some of Banville's lengthier efforts.

---

rr says

A novella that beguiles and keeps its distance, The Newton Letter reflects on (as well as enacts) the tension, slippage, and oscillation between intimacy and unknowability, things and thoughts, the world and words. (She hesitates, then adds: That sentence may have said nothing; or maybe it's said everything?)

Vishy says

Slim novella. Banville's prose is exquisite as always. Made me realize why I love Banville so much. Need to read all his books some day (this is my third book of his). Beautiful book by one of my favourite authors.

Taylor Lee says

Excellent, masterful, startlingly precise.

Banville's art, to speak superficially at first with reference to language and to style, which of course find their origin in the sentence, its structure, namely, which is shaped by punctuation on the one hand, a paucity lending a staccato-like rushedness and an abundance, on the other, tainting the writing baroque, overwrought, excessive-- Banville's prose is almost surgical, but warms to escape the frigid expanse that Nabokov's writing so often inhabits. He is precise here, and with such exactness manages a tone of almost indifference. The language, the word choice, often, is impeccable.

The Newton letter itself, the figure of Newton, in fact, both appear only briefly. But the occult and legendary scientist towers, and spills a shadow in his isolated and mad-tinged obsession over the narrator, a historian writing a Newtonian history.

How can this small story, placed gently in a rural year, weave and wind so effortlessly, and present a picture so humanly real? The Newton Letter is highly recommended.

Mark Joyce says

First of all, Amazon, six pounds forty is an absolute piss take for a Kindle novella of just over 100 pages. If it were anybody other than John Banville I'd say that was impossible to justify but as always with this writer there is more beautiful, lyrical prose crammed into those 100 pages than most authors manage in a lifetime. A concise, perfectly formed piece of brilliance.

Jan Cornelis says

Did you ever had the feeling that everything is different? Standing before this new experience where you realize that everything you know is just a smooth stone on a beach before an endless ocean.

If you know this feeling it won't be hard to sympathize with the nameless historian in John Banville's *Newtons Letter*. On the other hand, the author does a good job in showing this emotion of disengagement. We meet this historian who is renting a cottage to write the final chapter of his seven year study on Newton. But, here, on the countryside everything seems to be different. No quiet peace, but a shattering noise of birds that all look alike.

Even the historian himself is a stranger to himself. He makes love with a woman, but he thinks he is in love with her aunt. A women who is a kind, quiet, kind of mystical being. He doesn't recognize himself and there is no possibility for planned action anymore.

These confrontations with reality are contrasted with (made up) reflections on Newtons last letter to Locke. As a reader we are to believe that, also the great scientist saw that there is this abundance of 'being'.

This all very strongly done. We can ask why the protagonist is behaving this way, but we don't find a direct answer. He only is, without a plan. John Banville makes this all very convincing and shows us that the believes we have are not always the 'right' ones.

At the end I was a bit disappointed. The protagonist is not a hero. He doesn't get any further than accepting that he doesn't know. But maybe, that is for us, the readers, to find out in our own life.

Rob says

A nice, tidy little novel of ideas. This one had the deserves-to-be-savoured prose that has become my main reason for reading Banville, but also, unusually for Banville, had some moments of humor reminiscent of Amis.

"Outside the kitchen windows the chestnut tree murmured softly in its green dreaming. The afternoon had begun to wane."

"He carries his satchel like a hunchback's hump"

"He brooded a moment, frowning, and the blue of the Dardanelles bloomed briefly in his doomy eyes. I watched the hawk circling. What did I know?"

"It all has the air of a pastoral mime, with the shepherd's wife and the shepherd, and Cupid and the maid, and, scribbling within a crystal cave, myself, a haggard-eyed Damon."

With a judicious use of superlatives, Banville's slightly over-saturated imagery more effectively pulls one in, immerses in it's environments and achieves emotional resonance without ever feeling cloying.

Robert Knox says

I've read a number of novels by John Banville, a world-class Irish writer, whom I would nominate for a Novel Prize (though it was sweet to see Dylan get in this year), but I was wholly unaware of his early series of fictions based on central scientific and mathematical figures. "The Newton Letter" was published back in the 1980s, and since I am reading this so-called 'trilogy' out of order, I have no context in which to place. Standing completely on its own, it's another beautiful piece of writing but less completely mind-blowing than some of his later novels. It's short; almost more of a novella. And according to the criticism (which I would not otherwise know) is an updating of a famous novel from a couple centuries before by Goethe described as the paradigm demonstration of the relativity of point of view. Things, in this case relationships, look to be a certain way to the narrator, who involves himself in the lives of characters who all know about each other truths that escape the narrator. In Banville's treatment of this idea, his narrator -- a rather vain, self-absorbed scholar facing a problem in his current book project -- moves to the sticks for a quiet place to work, but does nothing but 'get involved' with the local family renting him his cottage. What he perceives to be the reality of their lives is a mere glimpse through a glass darkly. The demonstration-plot relates to Newton, the subject of our narrator's blocked book, because it suggests that time and space are not 'objective,' as Newton would have it, but 'relative.' I appreciate it, and I appreciate Banville's marvelous wielding of the English language here, as ever, but as a character the narrator is not only rather despicable but flat and rather uninteresting. He has no name --no doubt, a literary choice to make a point. He also has no heart. The central figures in other of Banville's novels -- and countless works by other authors that I care about -- are equally flawed and lack an appreciation of the harm they cause, but somehow they make me care about what I'm reading more this privileged cypher does.

Fabian says

Practically flawless, this taut tale is all about knowing that you actually know very little after all. And that some laws of nature are not fixed: the human element messes everything up. And elevates it.

Here, a master of beautiful, careful prose. Contender for my favorite novel of this year [2015].

Allison says

Such an odd, fleeting novel(la)... It reminds me of Coetzee's Disgrace or some sort of Ethan Frome- Gatsby hybrid... That is to say, I can't quite nail it down. So very strange a tale indeed. Ah! But the language! Oh the cauldron of words!

Trevor says

I'm very fond of Banville's writing, and I've liked many of his books, but this one is his best, I think. It is quite a short novel.

There are lovely little allusions to Newton's life in the book - for example, when the main character meets his love interest it is when she comes carrying a boy who has fallen out of a tree and landed on his head. Just

lovely. Banville often captures something terribly human about our relationships - one of the things I remember most from this book is the main character watching the female character absent-mindedly picking her nose.

And like Newton we are left wondering about how trustworthy our narrator is when it comes to relationships.

John says

I'd assumed this would be a historical novel following on from Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, but it proved to be a novella set in the modern day (well, the mid-1980s).

A historian is blocked towards the end of his chunky biography of Isaac Newton, the sticking point being the unexplained nervous breakdown that Newton suffered relatively late in life. Our hero rents a cottage for the summer in the grounds of a ramshackle house in the countryside in hopes that the solitude will force him to concentrate on finishing his book. Instead, he becomes slowly embroiled in the lives of the family living in the larger house, entering into an affair with the younger woman, believing himself to fall in love with the older, despising the husband of the latter, trying to form a relationship with the child.

What becomes apparent to us is that the historian is incapable of interpreting these people with whom he's interacting, and the relationships between them; just about every assumption he makes proves false. How then -- although he seems never to face directly this question himself -- can he hope to unravel the workings of one of the most complicated minds there has ever been, and one who's not alive and two hundred yards away but dead centuries ago?

I found a great deal to like in this short piece, but at the same time I'm uncertain how long it'll stay in my mind. If I'm still thinking about it in a month's time -- in other words, if on reflection I find it has greater depths than I can currently see -- I may come back and update these notes. For now, though, all I can say is that it gave me a very enjoyable couple of hours' reading.

Namitha Varma says

This book should have been longer. Such writing, it makes one greedy.

Rushyenka says

The review over at my blog: http://readingaroundtheglobe.tumblr.c...

To be utterly honest, I hadn’t heard of John Banville till I came across a tome of his books at a local bookstore that happened to be clearing out their stock at half-price. I grabbed an armful of books that day and picked two by Banville, going purely by the descriptions on the back. I got The Newton Letter and Mefisto, easily missing his most famous and award-winning title The Sea (of which I now recall, with the retrospective clarity of regret, seeing a billion copies that day).

The Newton Letter is a novella that centers around the absolute unknowability of others and to a great

degree, oneself. It's a story about love and our helplessness in face of curiosity regarding the person we are in love with. The narrator is untrustworthy but so is the object of his appraisal and we realize half-way through as we see the protagonist as someone on the outside, always looking in through a pane that we ourselves are on the outside.

The story begins when a historian rents a crumbling cottage in Southern Ireland to finish his grand book on Newton with the benefit of isolation. He hopes the book will win him favor at Cambridge and produce better prospects for him. But in the manner of all academic work, he finds himself more drawn to the new surroundings than to the book itself. This part is nicely littered with introspection on the ease with which procrastination becomes a regularity when you are simply avoiding finishing something you have labored relentlessly on, so much so that you feel completely severed from it. Reminded me of thesis days, it did.

His exploration of the country soon lapses into what will eventually be the remainder of the novel: a relentless search for the private details of the lives of his tenants. We are told early on of our protagonist's unusual fondness for speculating about the particulars of the lives of strangers. You'll relate to this if you have ever, like me and the protagonist, wondered about the life of people you've seen passing by or imagined the daily routines in houses on streets you've crossed. He is seeking ordinariness and that is what he hopes to find in the lives of his tenants. His tenants are an old (probably aristocratic/gentry) family that has now been stripped of everything but the refinement of their manner. This refinement is actually only possessed by one member the family who, for that very reason, becomes the focus of all of our protagonist's actions and arouses in him what he deems to be love.

There are complications as he engages in an affair with another member of the family, all the while obsessing with the unattainable, older, married woman he loves. The figure of Newton is looming but has very little significance in the narrative except to parallel the protagonists' declining faith in his work. He is striving to understand why Newton lost his senses and wrote an ignominious letter to Locke but this is not a preoccupation for him, it just crops up now and then. I'm not sure if his attempt to understand Newton's descent into madness is meant as a reflection of his own descent into a state he cannot make sense, especially since he believes Newton lost pride in his work as relativity emerged and he too is losing faith and hope in his manuscript.

What should really make you read this book is the prose. It has the beauty of precision daring to be indulgent. And while you will be doubtful about whether there is any love (what is 'love', though?) or warmth in the protagonist (you should know by now he doesn't have a name; damn tough it makes typing this thing), you will know that words have been as perfectly arranged as they can to convey the moment.

Consider this, for instance. Ruminating on Newton's later years and his disappointing (to some/ ok many but not me) turn to theology, the protagonist remembers (give me a medal already for not resorting to using "protag") the fire in Newton's office which destroyed much of his work, he writes:

You know the story of how his little dog Diamond overturned a candle in his rooms at Cambridge one early morning and started a fire which destroyed a bundle of his papers, and how the loss deranged his mind. All rubbish, of course, even the dog is a fiction, yet I find myself imagining him, a fifty-year old public man, standing aghast in the midst of the smoke and the flying smuts with the singed pug pressed in his arms. The joke is, its not the loss of the precious papers that will drive him crazy, but the simple fact that it doesn't matter. It might be his life's work gone, the Pricipia itself, the Opticks, the whole bang lot, and still it wouldn't mean a thing. Tears spring from his eyes, the dog licks them off his chin. A colleague comes running, shirt-tails out. The great man is pulled into a corridor, white with shock and stumping like a peg-leg. Someone beats out the flames. Someone else asks what has been lost. Newton's mouth opens and a word like

a stone falls out: Nothing. He notices details, early morning light through a window, his rescuer’s one unshod foot and yellow toenails, the velvet blackness of burnt paper. He smiles. His fellows look at one another.

It had needed no candle flame, it was already ashes.

Or his description of his beloved:

She made me think of someone standing on tiptoe behind a glass barrier, every part of her, eyes, lips, the gloves that she clutches, straining to become the radiant smile that awaits the beloved’s arrival.

Yep, that.
