



## Mrs. Osmond

*John Banville*

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**Mrs. Osmond** John Banville

**A rich historical novel about the aftermath of betrayal, from the Booker prize-winning author.**

*What was freedom, she thought, other than the right to exercise one's choices?*

Isabel Osmond, a spirited, intelligent young heiress, flees to London after being betrayed by her husband, to be with her beloved cousin Ralph on his deathbed. After a somber, silent existence at her husband's Roman palazzo, Isabel's daring departure to London reawakens her youthful quest for freedom and independence, as old suitors resurface and loyal friends remind her of happier times.

But soon Isabel must decide whether to return to Rome to face up to the web of deceit in which she has become entangled or to strike out on her own once more.

## Mrs. Osmond Details

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Author : John Banville

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## From Reader Review Mrs. Osmond for online ebook

### SueLucie says

With thanks to Penguin UK Viking via NetGalley for the opportunity to read this book.

It is 40 years since I read 'A Portrait of a Lady' as a student and I remembered little of it apart from the basic plot. It was a delight to me to revisit it in the first part of this sequel by John Banville, mostly through Isabel's memories and conversations with friends, though I appreciate that others more familiar with Henry James' novel may think there is too much rehashing of the original before we move on to Isabel's next moves. Once I settled into the wordy style of writing, I was hooked. I was interested from beginning to end to see how Isabel would cope with the events that led her to leave her husband and her home in Italy.

Gorgeous images - a few examples:

'That he had it in his power to fund her fearless ascent of the sheer rock-face of her - of his! - ambitions must have seemed to him the justification, the compensation, for his having to bide below, in the shadowed valley, while she scaled the radiant heights. And what a drab disappointment it must have been for him that instead of pressing onwards to the peak she had lost her footing and plunged headlong down the sheer cliff....'

'What she saw was that it had not been Osmond she had fallen in love with, when she was young, but herself, through him. That was why he was no more to her now than a mirror, from the back of which so much of the paint had flaked and fallen away that it afforded only fragments of a reflection, indistinct and disjointed.'

'He still had that strange appearance of being somehow reduced, yet the effect seemed to her now not one of diminishment, but rather of concentration, as if he had drawn the belts and buckles of his armour tight the better to do battle with her.'

So you can see I loved the writing. I also very much enjoyed the way the action unfolded, with one exception - I hated what the author did with Pansy and since that comes near the end of the novel it slightly soured my whole experience.

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### Marcos says

John Banville has written a wry, wonderful sequel to Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, where our spirited heroine Isabel Archer Osmond picks up where his book left us- hanging over whether or not she is actually going to return to her cold, depressing marriage to Gilbert Osmond.

Mr. Banville's prose is exquisite Jamesian language at its best, with dollops of dry humor and the beautiful sentences that made Mr James' original such a masterpiece. Old favorite characters such as best friend, the spinster Henrietta Stackpole, stepdaughter, Pansy Osmond, former suitors Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton all reappear in perfect Jamesian form.

Isabel, older and wiser, schemes to get even with Gilbert Osmond; buy her freedom back, and provides a deliciously devious comeback towards Osmond and his accomplice, the scheming and gorgeous Madame Merle that is at once irresistible, and appropriate. Pansy's fate of being locked away at a convent also proves to be a true possibility of what could happen if love is denied.

What a gorgeous and languid book.

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### **Tony says**

MRS. OSMOND. (2017). John Banville. \*\*.

Banville is one of the best writers working today. That being said, there's always a chance of a less than spectacular book resulting from even the best of authors. This is one of those books where nothing seems to happen. I have a personal criterion: If nothing happens within the first fifty pages, nothing is going to happen, and the experience is terminated. With a writer of Banville's stature, I had to provide some more wiggle room, so I read up to page sixty. Nothing happened. It's likely that this happened because his latest book was a proposed sequel to Henry James' novel, "The Portrait of a Lady." James was never one of my favorite writers. He had the ability to put even the most hyperactive readers asleep. Honest. If this novel was Banville's attempt to emulate James' style, I think he did it pretty well. Anyway, if you asked me what happened on page sixty-one, I'd probably have to say, "Nothing."

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### **Jenny says**

I gave up on John Banville years ago. He seemed to be writing the same novel, over and over again; I haven't picked up a new book by him in a decade. This new novel intrigued me enough to try him again. (Thank you to Edelweiss and Knopf for the ARC).

The word that best comes to mind in reviewing this book is; ambitious. I never expected to find myself describing a Banville novel as ambitious, but there it is. This is a good book. No, this is a great book. Banville takes a beloved literary classic, Portrait of a Lady, and creates a sequel that feels so authentic to the original that it seems like he is channeling Henry James at times. Isabel Osmond (nee Archer) was a complicated and fascinating character in the original novel. Here, we see her dealing with the immediate aftermath of the conclusory events in the original novel. As she navigates her new path, Banville's vision of her stays so true to the character readers have loved for generations!

I'm a casual reviewer. I imagine critics will wet themselves over this book. I'm already picturing it, at the very least, making the Booker longlist in 2018.

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### **Eric Anderson says**

I first read Henry James' "The Portrait of a Lady" when I was in college, but reread it several years ago (one of the only "classics" I've ever reread) for a book club I was in. Part of me has always dreaded picking up a novel by Henry James because his style is so dry with complicated (albeit beautiful) sentences that demand a lot of concentration. On my second reading I thoroughly enjoyed revisiting James' story about Isabel Archer who travels to Europe while batting away suitors, becomes an unexpected heiress and marries the wrong man. So I was fascinated to hear that one of Ireland's greatest living writers John Banville wrote a sequel to James' influential novel. "Mrs Osmond" picks up on Isabel's story immediately after the end of "The Portrait of a Lady" where she's gone to England to be beside her beloved dying cousin even though it's against her husband Gilbert Osmond's wishes. It's entirely ambiguous in James' novel whether she'll return to her domineering husband, but Banville gives the answer in this story. But, more than resolving a plot point, this novel is a moving meditation on the meaning of personal independence.

Read my full review of Mrs Osmond by John Banville on LonesomeReader

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### **Eleanor says**

Completely brilliant. Banville's technical skill in the language he chooses, and his command thereof, is never less than astonishing. It's not necessary to have read *The Portrait of a Lady* before this, though I certainly will do now, and suspect I'll find that Banville's reimagining of Isabel Archer illuminates the original.

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### **Annelies says**

I like the book. The writing really is in the style of Henry James. You got many elaborated sentences although sometimes maybe they are a bit overdone. At the beginning I got to get used to them because there is so much of them. But once you did it opened a beautiful world of language. Banville, like James, uses A lot of descriptive adjectives too, often very original and well chosen. They tell a lot in one word.

The content is a 'possible' sequel to 'a Portrait of a Lady'. It tells the story of Mrs Osmond from the time she had left her husband in Italy.

Although it's a sequel on the original 'Mrs Osmond' obviously is a product of the present time. It could never be written by Henry James himself. Certain ideas opinionated in them are too modern, or one should better say, too explicit formulated to be written back then. I can't deny that they certainly were acting under the surface in James' time. I like this modern touch but I still prefer the subtlety of Henry James.

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### **Marita says**

What happens to Mrs Osmond (Isabel Archer) after the ambiguous ending of *The Portrait of a Lady*? Who knows? In this charming novel John Banville presents a possibility of her life after the death of Ralph Touchet, but the ending is similarly ambiguous. Indeed, could there be any but an ambiguous 'ending' for Isabel Archer/Mrs Osmond? John Banville's beautiful writing is certainly reminiscent of that of Henry James, and he has done that author proud.

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### **Roman Clodia says**

John Banville returning to Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* seems like an ideal match - the result, though, is more puzzling, less satisfying that I expected.

Firstly, Banville's style never matches the cool elegance and precision of James, and there are jarring colloquialisms that ensure we're only partially in James' territory: 'Even yet she felt, did Mrs Osmond' or 'Staines' devotion to her mistress had not wavered a jot'. The very presence of named servants and detailed menus (at one point Isabel nibbles at a slice of toast) is profoundly unJamesian and it's not completely clear whether the former is drawing attention to the class-ridden assumptions of the original, making the invisible

servants visible.

More pressingly, the characters are \*not\* James': they become exaggerated and almost one-dimensional - evil Osmond, foolish and vengeful Mme Gemini, a newly-corrupt Pansy (and the nature that her 'corruption' takes is strangely anachronistic). Even Isabel herself is diminished, reduced to being a woman both self-forgiving and looking for revenge. The wonderfully dense and complicated characterisations and moral debates of the original, especially issues about decisions and consequences, are erased, and this is a far simpler tale. The introduction of a suffragette feels too pointed and the plot-point about Isabel leaving her briefcase of money lying around is just absurd.

There are long discussions which have characters telling each other what already happened in the original text and these sections feel almost like a crib for anyone who didn't 'get' what happened - almost a kind of SparksNotes for GCSE!

For all my criticisms, there is a sense of Banville re-opening in 2017 a book which was written in the 1880s - questions of money, morality, gender and marriage are still troublesome and deserving of writers' attentions. Overall, though, I felt that James' prior text stultifies rather than feeds Banville's imagination. An interesting project but not one which worked overwell for me.

Thanks to Penguin for an ARC via NetGalley.

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## **Carmen says**

Una novela actual ambientada en el siglo XIX y que parece haber sido escrita contemporánea a la historia. Precisamente ahí radica la fuerza de la narración, como si de un clásico moderno se tratara. El autor, supongo que a modo de homenaje a Retrato de una dama, de Henry James, crea el después o, mejor dicho, recrea lo que podría haber sido un "cómo continúa" o "y ahora qué". Soy consciente de que mi falta de conocimiento de Isabel Osmond y Gilbert Osmond hace que me pierda ciertos matices, guiños o recuerdos pero como lectora "virgen" he disfrutado de la prosa, del hilo argumental, englobado en ese viaje que hace la protagonista hacia sí misma, y de los tiempos narrativos, por muy lentos que sean. Me gusta este tipo de lectura, me gusta que las palabras se usen de forma inteligente, de forma útil, de forma descriptiva y, en cierta manera, pesada. Es verdad que este tipo de lectura me agota pero la disfruto muchísimo. Me quedo con la heroína imperfecta, con sus decisiones erróneas y sus pensamientos. He deseado que las cosas fueran por otro camino y me ha despistado cuando ha puesto algo de pasión en el camino de Isabel aunque sea casi de forma testimonial. Creo que refleja justo la realidad de una sociedad encorsetada, errónea, cínica, engañosa y llena de formalismos.

Pronto opinión completa en el blog

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## **Sue says**

The best book I have read in a long time.

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## **Always Pink says**

First of all, I have to admit that I have not (as yet) read Henry James' "Portrait of a Lady". Thus I cannot compare John Banville's style - unfavourably - to that of his predecessor, as most critics seem to do. What I can say, though, is that Banville succeeds in (re)creating a modern version of a kind of writing that I feared to be lost: Feathery weightless and wonderfully elegant descriptions; sharp and witty dialogues; interspersed with short penetrating observations dissecting human frailties – all this Banville delivers seemingly effortlessly. The deliberately and in the best sense entertaining, playful proof of the sheer mastery of his writing reminded me a lot of Virginia Woolf's "Flush" and E.M. Forster's "A Room with a View" (probably also due to the perhaps not accidentally shared Florentine setting). I found this delicious 'sponge cake' of a novel to be perfectly well executed indeed and would love to read another sequel, as its open ending might give hope for.

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### **Stephen says**

felt this book just didn't do anything for me and struggled to the end with it

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### **Mandy says**

I don't enjoy reading either Henry James or John Banville so it seemed unlikely that reading Banville's sequel to James' The Portrait of a Lady would do it for me. But much to my surprise it did – up to a point. I really enjoyed most of the book. Banville managed to channel James in a way that seemed true to both of them and it was interesting to enter into Banville's imaginative foray into "what happened next" after Isabel Archer discovered her husband had been deceiving her with her close friend Madame Merle. However, Banville lost control, I felt, in the latter part of the book. Apart from some anachronisms, particularly to do with Isabel's fortune, revelations about Osmond's sheer nastiness (he sort of becomes a stage villain) and the more than unlikely revelation about Pansy's personality, which apart from anything else was quite unnecessary and is probably making James turn in his grave, turned what had been until then a measured and quite convincing novel of social mores with some deft characterisations into a gothic pantomime with some very unconvincing plot twists. Started well, but ended badly.

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### **Fionnuala says**

#### **Altered Ending**

In my experience, John Banville creates memorable characters and interesting plot elements, and his craft is such that he can mould them all cleverly together so that when I reach the end of one of his books, I can only admire the overall shape of the complete work.

When I reached the end of Mrs Osmond, in which Banville sets out to alter the ending of a Henry James story, I certainly admired his craft, and appreciated how he marshalled his story elements and made them fit his conclusion, but I was a little bemused. His conclusion seemed quite vague to me, almost as ambiguous as the ending Henry James' had designed for Isabel Osmond's story in The Portrait of a Lady over a hundred years before, and which John Banville was so keen to alter. And I wondered, what if, sometime in the future, a writer comes along who feels Banville's ending isn't a fitting ending, and who begins to redirect the story towards a third conclusion. And then another writer has a similar urge, and another, and another, until the series of 'endings' of the narrative becomes never ending!

Ok, I'm being a little nonsensical, but perhaps you see my point: I'm simply wondering about Banville's surprising desire to alter the ending of Henry James' famous story, and in the process, to leave Isabel's future, if not quite as ambiguous as Henry James had intended, then almost.

But, you ask, in the course of the three hundred and seventy-five pages of this book, John Banville must surely have moved Isabel Archer's story on considerably, and thereby created some definitive outcome? Well no, he hasn't. What he's done is to put in place one possible path she might take after he has allowed her to deal with some issues arising from James' story. But it's difficult for the reader to accept that Isabel will stick to the path Banville has picked for her because he has given us only a couple of months of her future, eight or ten weeks at most, and we wonder how can she be expected to arrive at any certainty in so short a time. Banville is very vague about Time in this book in any case, not only the time that passes in his own narrative but the time that had passed in Henry James' story; Banville leaves the reader with the impression that Isabel had been married to Gilbert Osmond for decades instead of only four or five years. She is still under thirty at the end of this book.

But even if his story doesn't cover a long period, a reader might expect, in the course of so many pages, that Banville would introduce a lot of new story elements at the very least. Well no, surprisingly few. And, on reflection, most of the new elements aren't really new at all. They feel like they were already present in *The Portrait of a Lady*, where they had been purposefully left undeveloped by Henry James. I had wondered, for instance, when reading 'The Portrait', what had happened within the marriage of Isabel's aunt and uncle to make them so estranged from each other, and my imagination had offered a fairly obvious reason, as yours would. John Banville thought of the same reason, and spelled it out. It filled several pages but fulfilled no other purpose.

Another new/old plot element concerned Gilbert Osmond's first marriage, which was only sketchily presented by Henry James. I'd had my own thoughts on that marriage too, and on the timing of certain events related to it, suggested by other things Henry James deliberately left unsaid. For his part, John Banville felt the need to fully investigate those unsaid things, but since he worked them into his narrative quite well, the spelling-out at least served some purpose in the end.

But there was altogether too much spelling-out and retelling of Henry James' story in this novel, which made me wonder about Banville's target audience. If he was aiming at people who haven't read *The Portrait of a Lady*, there was some sense to the constant reference to the back story. But even for such readers, I feel there must have been too much of the past and not enough of the present, too much history, not enough story. And too many repetitions and restatements of everything - as in the previous sentence!

On the other hand, Banville may be writing for people who've read and loved this most popular of Henry James' novels. But if that was his intention, why the need to spend so much time recalling the original story in such detail? However, the writing style certainly makes me think he was aiming at those who are familiar with 'The Portrait' - and perhaps even at those who are familiar with all of Henry James. Otherwise how could he expect the reader to appreciate the impressive efforts he's made to echo James' style at every turn? Yes, Banville is able to compose long sentences built from successive clauses and parentheses quite well - though at times they felt more like exaggerations of the style rather than imitations. But Banville is careful to use some rare words that I, for one, have only come across in Henry James, such as 'plash' and 'integument'.

There are also frequent echoes of other James books, references which can only be appreciated if we've read those books ourselves; the few new characters Banville introduces recall characters we may have met before in the James world. An English suffragist called Miss Janeway reminded me immediately of a combination of Olive Chancellor from *The Bostonians* and her reformist colleague, Miss Birdseye. And Miss Janeway's destiny echoes almost exactly the destiny Henry James gave the admirable Miss Birdseye in that book. There were other character parallels too, and little mirrorings of all sorts, so much so that I suspected John Banville of having read every single word Henry James wrote.

But perhaps he hadn't read every word.

In the 1906 Preface to the revised edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James discusses the shape of his novel (originally written in 1880). He speaks in terms of architecture and proportions, and he says that of all his novels, including those he wrote much later, he considers 'The Portrait' to be one of the best proportioned. I can't imagine that he would have wished anyone to alter its shape.

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**Edit**

Further thoughts on alterations of masterpieces arose in the comments section and offered me a new light in which to view John Banville's *Mrs Osmond*.

In particular, the mention of a famous painting by Velasquez, 'Las Meninas', which has inspired many artists to create their own versions, caused me to think a little more about what John Banville has done in this book. Here's the original of *Las Meninas* (you'll find images of various retakes of it in the comments posted by Kalliope - who reminded me of how artists have always paid tribute by reworking a revered master's subject):

As I looked at the many versions of 'Las Meninas', I thought about how John Banville has reworked Henry James' portrait of Isabel Archer, and I concluded that Banville has altered it only very slightly. I now imagine Banville's Isabel as a new version of 'Las Meninas' which mirrors the original but for one tiny detail. In my imagined version, the main focus of Velasquez's painting, the Infanta/daughter of the King, would no longer be gazing at her own reflection (as Isabel is constantly encouraged to do by her entourage in 'Portrait of a Lady') but would have turned her head, and for the first time in her life, looked at the kneeling lady-in-waiting and seen a real person with real needs and real feelings.

Such a version of "Las Meninas" would be the perfect artistic correspondence for Banville's book; there is a moment in *Mrs Osmond* when Isabel turns her eyes to her maid's face and truly sees her as a person for the very first time, and that moment provides the main rationale for Banville's revised ending. I was very struck by that scene as I read, and I'm glad I've now found a way to insert it - without interfering too much with the conclusion of the review as it originally stood :-)

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