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Star of the Sea

Joseph O'Connor

Vintage, £6.99

Regarding popular narrative accounts at the time and since, the question is often asked: Was there silence about the Famine? After the documentary fiction of William Carleton and Liam O'Flaherty, John Banville addressed the question philosophically in *Birchwood*; but the most startling reply has come with this widely hailed novel, described by O'Connor as a "big, noisy book" about an eponymous coffin ship. Authentic and concocted histories are mixed in a grand entertainment of modes and forms, while complex characterisations encourage nuance in our potential attitudes to nineteenth-century Britain. The authorial work quotient is striking, and even those readers dissuaded by the shallowness of much of O'Connor's previous fiction will acknowledge that here he is stylistically as well as thematically out on the deep.

John Kenny**Shroud**

John Banville

Picador, £7.99

Narrated in the late eighties by the aging intellectual, Axel Vander, this novel demonstrates the historical specificity of Banville's ostensibly cerebral sense of moral collapse. Banville has always regarded WWII as mankind's definitive horror, and he has Vander report, obliquely, on the rise and fallout of Nazism while recounting a visit to Turin to meet with a mysterious interlocutor, the suicidal young Irish woman, Cass Cleave. Along with the expected literary and philosophical allusions, the secrets uncovered by Vander's developing relationship with Cass defer to eyewitness accounts of 1930s Europe and the problematic biographies of Paul de Man and Louis Althusser. Lamentations for the public world are brilliantly mixed with privacies: Human contact here is as shady as ever in Banville, but *Shroud* might in the end almost be called a love story.

John Kenny