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**The Sea**

John Banville

Picador, £7.99

Leave new fame and finance their day - the real prize for this Man Booker-winning novel is that it will expand the oeuvre's long-term readership, thereby setting the odds against the misguided who still stand back akimbo tapping toes impatiently for Banville to write something more conventionally novelistic with more in it of something called "life". Far from intellectualising the world from a pale and icy distance, even in its single bursts of metaphor and image this seamlessly arranged monologue about a childhood remembered, a wife mourned and an old-age pondered brings closer to the surface than any number of dialogue-driven or plotted novels a precise and almost physical sense of what it is like to be an individual consciousness. In confronting the tender puzzle of remembered youth and the outrageous mystery of death, Banville's stylistic skills give of their very best: emotional honesty, philosophical depth, comic poise, sentences with the wrought yearning of prayer. *The Sea* is the novel as both superior art form and higher human testament.

**John Kenny**