

## ***The Drowned*, by John Banville**

### ***Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy***

John Banville's novels featuring Irish pathologist Dr. Quirke are a fine blend of literary and mystery fiction. *The Drowned*, his latest book in the series, is set on the rugged eastern coast of Ireland during the 1950s.

*The Drowned* begins on a late October evening at Kilpatrick beach. Denton Wymes, a lone fisherman walking home with his catch, makes a startling discovery: a sleek Mercedes is left running in the middle of an overgrown field. As Wymes approaches the vehicle, a frantic man rushes toward him, shouting "I think my wife has drowned herself!" Spotting a light in the window of a nearby farmhouse, the two men race over to ask for help.

The occupants of the house, Charles and Charlotte Ruddock, patiently listen to the distraught man, who identifies himself as Ronald Armitage, a history professor at Trinity College. Armitage tearfully explains that he and his wife Deirdre were out for a drive when she inexplicably jumped out of their car and ran toward the sea. A subsequent search fails to turn up the missing woman.

Detective Inspector St. John Strafford, a rare Protestant officer in Ireland's predominately Catholic police force, is summoned from Dublin to take on the case. Interviewing the Ruddocks, Strafford quickly discerns from their accent and manner that they too are from the Protestant land-owner class. In fact, Charles Ruddock and Strafford had been classmates at an exclusive preparatory school.

Questioning Armitage, Strafford immediately recognizes him from another cold case. Rosa Jacobs, Armitage's assistant at Trinity College, had been found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning in a garage lockup the year before. The official ruling—suicide or murder—was inconclusive.

Dr. Quirke had been the medical examiner on the Rosa Jacobs case. Reluctantly, Strafford sought the counsel of Quirke, his former mentor and sometimes nemesis. Now estranged, the two men have opposite personalities: Strafford, aloof and reserved; Quirke, moody and mercurial. They shared a "deep dread of boredom. In another life they might have been friends. They had in common that they both dealt with human beings at their furthest extremes, as criminals, as corpses." To complicate matters, Strafford is having an affair with Quirke's daughter Phoebe.

As Strafford continues his investigation, it remains to be seen whether Deirdre Armitage's disappearance is a missing-person case or a homicide. John Banville masterfully keeps his readers guessing until the very end.