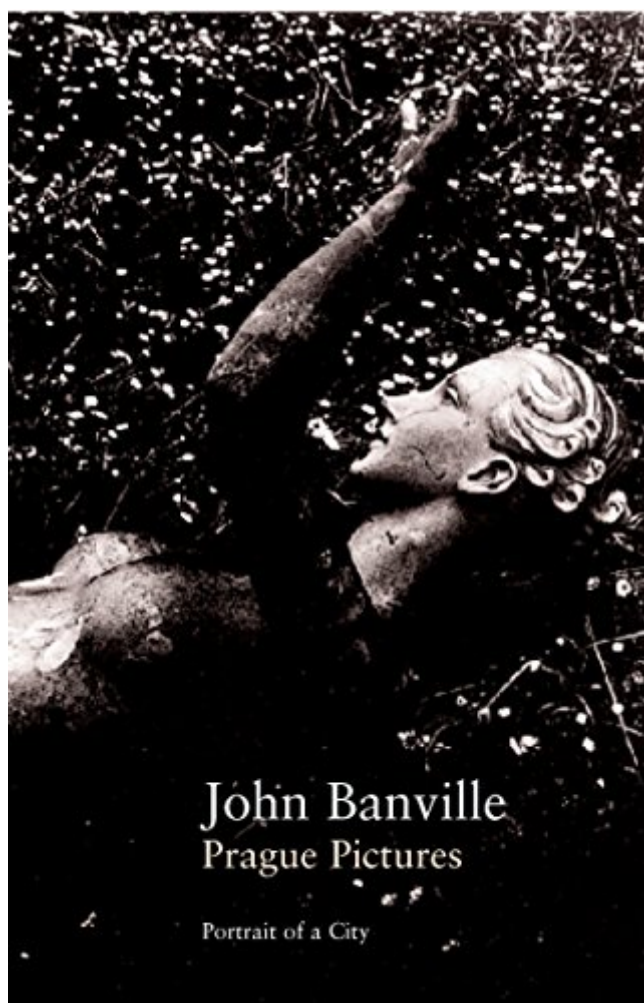


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# Prague Pictures: Portraits Of A City (Writer And The City)



## Synopsis

From one of the foremost chroniclers of the modern European experience, a panoramic view of a city that has seduced and bewitched visitors for centuries. The fourth book in Bloomsbury's *Writer and the City* series. Prague is the magic capital of Europe. Since the days of Emperor Rudolf II, "devotee of the stars and cultivator of the spagyric art", who in the late 1500s summoned alchemists and magicians from all over the world to his castle on Hradčany hill, it has been a place of mystery and intrigue. Wars, revolutions, floods, the imposition of Soviet communism, and even the depredations of the tourist boom after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 could not destroy the unique atmosphere of this beautiful, proud, and melancholy city on the Vltava. John Banville traces Prague's often tragic history and portrays the people who made it: the emperors and princes, geniuses and charlatans, heroes and scoundrels. He also paints a portrait of the Prague of today, reveling in its newfound freedoms, eager to join the European Community and at the same time suspicious of what many Praguers see as yet another totalitarian takeover. He writes of his first visit to the city, in the depths of the Cold War, and of subsequent trips there, of the people he met, the friends he made, the places he came to know.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

John Banville, in many of his novels, conjures up the alchemical and scientific wonders of early modern Europe: Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, Dr Faustus. His prose always has daunted me from taking on his dense, serious fiction, but perhaps, after this wonderfully self-deprecating, nimbly observed, and precisely rendered collection of thoughts inspired by events and people in Prague, I will try his novels! As Banville prefaces this small but pleasingly compacted assemblage of ruminations, it is not a guidebook but (my words) a *momento urbi*, a reminder of this city. He avoids post-Wall sightseeing (contrast Myla Goldberg's *Time's Magpie*), limits his Kafka citations wisely (compare nearly any other journalist!), and steers clear from tiresome dynastic recitals (unlike Peter Demetz' *City of Black & Gold*). Out of his travels there, starting in 1975, he instead opts to build slightly interrelated essays. The first, "Sudek's City," tells of the Professor and Marta, who show him and his companions prints by Josef Sudek, a photographer (two of which I presume grace this book's covers), who reveals tangibly yet tangentially the post-war era. Banville links the dislocation of the jet-lagged traveller in the hotel room with the wider struggle by a people to overcome alienation in their home city, yet such connections are left subtle, for us to tie together. The description in a page or so of the Professor, who himself threatens to become effaced after so many decades of having to blend in to such surroundings, is one of the most powerful depictions in print I have ever read of summing up another human in a few well-chosen words. "Threshold," from which the name for Prague was derived, merges the background on the city with its monuments, even as Banville insists that they do not make Prague what it is, this essence too elusive. Fittingly, such fluidity blends into an account of Rudolf and the intellectual climate that lured some of Europe's most creative minds in the later 16th c. to study magic, astronomy, the occult, and the rational, or mixes thereof. "The Prague Orgy", while never mentioning Philip Roth, starts with Banville's teenaged longing for a minor Czech actress, Eva Bartok, and his longing for such dark beauties, often with (sans makeup!) pale plum-hued shadows under their eyes. He segues into his friend Phil who boasts of "The Company," the Havel era, the "putative parents" of his hostess at a doomed dinner party, to conclude, paraphrasing another Philip (Larkin) that "nothing, like something, can happen anywhere. Banville again evokes psychological dislocation marvellously, keeping control of his shifting scenes while hiding from we his readers his manipulative strings. He's too good a writer to let his craft show so nakedly. From one who wrote a novel called "Kepler," the chapter "Great Dane, Little Dog" relates the long story of Tycho Brahe, his unfortunate death for the sake of royal

etiquette, and his somewhat unwilling apprentice Johannes Kepler. Prague itself fades a bit even more than in the rest of the book, but Banville keeps the tale engaging. I found this segment of the volume readable, but since I do not share Banville's obvious love of this period, its comparative detachment from the city itself made it too tangential. On a related note, he incorporates references to a far more obsessive text, Angelo Maria Ripellino's "Magic Prague," nicely into his volume, so you feel you get the gist of that admittedly appealing but immensely detailed study without all of its laborious asides. Their common concentration on the hermetic, the mathematical, and the malcontent does show why Prague thrived as an asylum and a laboratory for so many ambitious quacks, mad scientists, and rogues. "Snapshots" takes Banville out of Prague to Bratislava, but not for the sights. He conveys here being out of place as a modern intellectual at a conference where his ignorance (so he assumes, though we readers might disagree) is unmasked before the restless native audience. The tale of an old communist, Goldstucker, and the saga of the Golem and the Jewish ghetto is recounted to sum up the condition of the latter-day dreamers and thinkers in a more recent regime that reigned over the Castle. Finally, in two brief codas, "The Deluge" tells of the 2002 summer floods, with a marvelously apt quote from Eliot's "Four Quartets," and "After-Images" leaves us with Banville's fading scenes from his Prague travels. A short bibliography adds to the value of this short but elegant and never predictable meditation. Pg. 83 sums up his motif for this volume, except for its covers devoid of visual "pictures" that rather he brings out of his mind's eye into our receptive faculty: "These are the things we remember. It as if we were to focus our cameras on the great sights and the snaps when developed all came out with nothing in them save undistinguished but manically detailed foregrounds." The unreliable and capricious state of memory, then, is Banville's true souvenir that he shares with us from this city.

This sumptuously-written book evokes Prague with so much soul and intimacy that it leaves all rival Prague portraits in the dust. Not only does the author feel everyday experiences more acutely than most of us, but he is able to maintain the depth of his poetic explorations from the beginning to the end. Having been there myself before and after the Velvet Revolution, and having also witnessed the cultural highs and lows he so perfectly describes, I almost feel like I know him. (I wish I did). This is so special a book that I almost want to tuck it into a private place on my bookshelf where no one can find it, and snobbishly, I suppose, lend it only to those I feel are perceptive enough to understand.

The author knows Prague very well and writes with great affection and deep knowledge of it's

history. The interested reader will find exhaustive information on Prague and its culture. The author concentrates most on the high baroque, the achievements of emperor Rudolf's court and the architectural renewal of the city.

GREAT product, will buy from this seller again!

Excellent background detailing Prague. This is not a photographic book, but you may use your imagination to develop pictures of historical events of Prague.

Part memoir, part love song to Prague, John Banville entertains and charms the reader with his personal travels, his bevy of Czech friends, his unpredictable and digressive, occasionally overwritten descriptions often spiced by an undercurrent of wryness. One is not quite sure if some of these chapters are fact or fiction but that does not detract from this interesting book. His tribute to Josef Sudek, the photographer, the "Poet of Prague," is beautifully descriptive of his photos of St. Vitus Cathedral as only Banville can; perhaps even drawing on the wonderful book about Sudek by Aperture called "A Photographer's Life." Banville's word powers are remarkable; one woman has "a head of one of Modigliani's less dim-seeming models . . . [with] a pale hand...[with] the chill, slack feel of a small, exquisite, fine boned creature that had recently frozen to death." Regrettably, he stuffs in the middle a chapter about Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler which may fit in his other writings about astronomy but slows the book's focus and pace. Otherwise, an entertaining read in an superb binding by Bloomsbury.

Beautiful writing by one of my favorite novelists about my favorite city--the perfect book! Banville includes personal anecdotes, cold war stories, the Nazi occupation, and architectural detail, thus encompassing the complicated history of this city famous for its Art Deco buildings and its Jewish golem. A terrific read!

This is a delightful melange of personal narrative, Prague history, and biographical snippets on historic figures associated with Prague. Banville has an ongoing love affair with the city. He recounts various visits both during and after the Cold War. Interspersed are biographical sketches of Charles IV, Rudolph II, photographer Josef Sudek, Tycho Brahe and Kepler. Banville's style is warm, personal and erudite. He achieves what every travel writer strives for: he makes the city come to life and makes you want to go there.

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