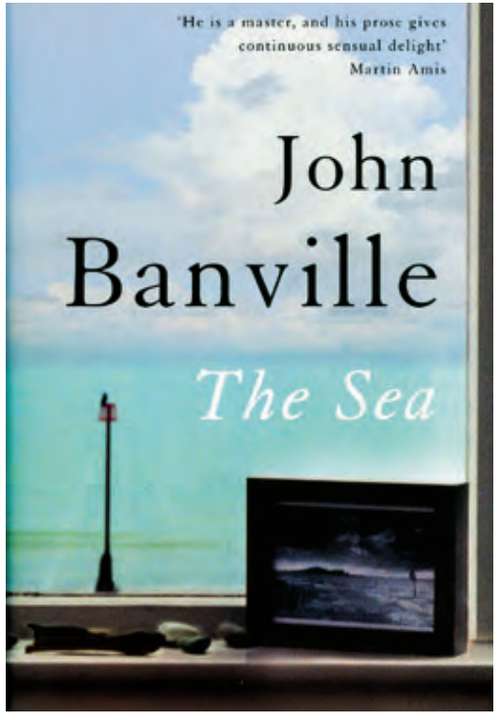
The Sea

John Banville

Lifespan | *b.* 1945 (Ireland)
First Published | 2005
First Published by | Picador (London)
Man Booker Prize | 2005



"Happiness was different in childhood."

The Sea was seen to be returning literary credibility to a prize often awarded to populist works when it won the Man Booker in 2005.

"Memory dislikes motion, preferring to hold things still." This poignant realization lies at the heart of John Banville's latest novel, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2005 in one of the tightest contests in years, narrowly beating out Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* only when the chairman of the judging panel cast his deciding vote in Banville's favor.

The Sea tells the story of Max Morden's grief after the death of his wife, and his subsequent journey to the mysterious scene of a childhood romance. This trip is an attempt by Morden, an art historian, to reclaim the past as a work of art. His bereavement compels him to search for some early scene of love and loss, some original drama that remains proof against the tidal, erosive work of time.

Banville's prose often seems to have something of the miraculous to it, and the miracle in this novel is its capacity to use words to produce vivid images—to find beneath the constant movement of the everyday an attitude, or glance, or shape that seems suddenly, magically present. The novel depicts the ugliness of death and of bodily decrepitude, as it conjures the experience of loss with an uncanny intensity. But if this novel discusses death and the steady humiliation of dying, its greater concern is with the preservative power of memory, and of art, to catch something that does not die, something that is as immune to death as innocence. This novel is soaked in images and phrases drawn from works of art—from Bonnard, Whistler, and Vermeer; from Shakespeare, Proust, and Beckett. Morden's journey to early childhood is woven into this homage to art, seamlessly and exquisitely. Reading the novel is at once to feel what it is to die and to find oneself lifted from the choppy motion of time, into the quiet midst of an unmoving image. **PB**

The Elegance of the Hedgehog

Muriel Barbery

Lifespan | *b.* 1969 (Morocco)
First Published | 2006
First Published by | Gallimard (Paris)
Original Title | *L'Élégance du hérisson*

"Concierges do not read The German Ideology . . ."

Muriel Barbery's novel captured the hearts of French readers, selling over a million copies in its first year.

Renée Michel is not who she appears to be. For the rich inhabitants of 7 Rue de Grenelle, the concierge who has been there for years is a good woman, the archetypal building caretaker: there is nothing particularly striking about her appearance, and she can be both helpful and gruff. But behind her slightly tough exterior, the fifty-four-year-old Renée hides some surprising habits. At the back of her concierge's room, she indulges her passions for Russian literature (her cat is named Leo, in homage to the author of *Anna Karenina*), Japanese cinema, and Dutch painting and wonders about the nature of phenomenology. She is fascinated by those pure moments of grace when everything hangs in perfect but precarious balance.

Paloma Josse hides herself, too. She is twelve years old and lives with her parents in one of the very chic apartments in the building. An exceptionally gifted and rebellious child, she plans to kill herself and burn the family apartment on her thirteenth birthday. With wit and humor, she scrupulously records her deepest thoughts in a journal and tries to discover the secret of "still movement." For Paloma, adult life is a goldfish bowl, an empty and absurd place where false impressions reign.

The rest of the building is filled mainly with narrow-minded, bourgeois tenants who are rooted in their prejudices. However, the arrival of a wealthy Japanese widower, sophisticated and refined, upsets this world of deceptive appearances. Following the alternating points of view of the two protagonists, the novel is a philosophical journey, a reflection on the meaning of life that offers the reader multiple and unexpected sensations. Written in an elegant and lively style, it brings us spiritedly into a world that is rich, subtle, and funny. **SL**

Things

Georges Perec

Lifespan | *b.* 1936 (France), *d.* 1982
First Published | 1965, by Julliard (Paris)
Original Title | *Les Choses: Une Histoire des années soixante*

Already the author of four unfinished and rejected novels when he erupted onto the literary scene in 1965, Georges Perec won the Renaudot prize for *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, his first published novel. The book recounts the intellectual decline of a young and likable couple of sociologists, Jerôme and Sylvie. Their search for happiness, promoted and stimulated by an affluent society, imperceptibly transforms them into a frustrated and resigned middle-class couple.

The story shocked the public, who saw in the novel a purely sociological representation of the so-called "consumer" society—not an appropriate subject for a work of literature. By his own admission, Perec wanted to describe the evolution of his own social milieu—that of the students who had fiercely opposed France's vicious war with Algeria and had become disillusioned and indifferent to politics by the war's end. He also wanted to bring literary theorist Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), in which Barthes used semiological concepts in the analysis of myths and signs in contemporary culture, to bear on his writing.

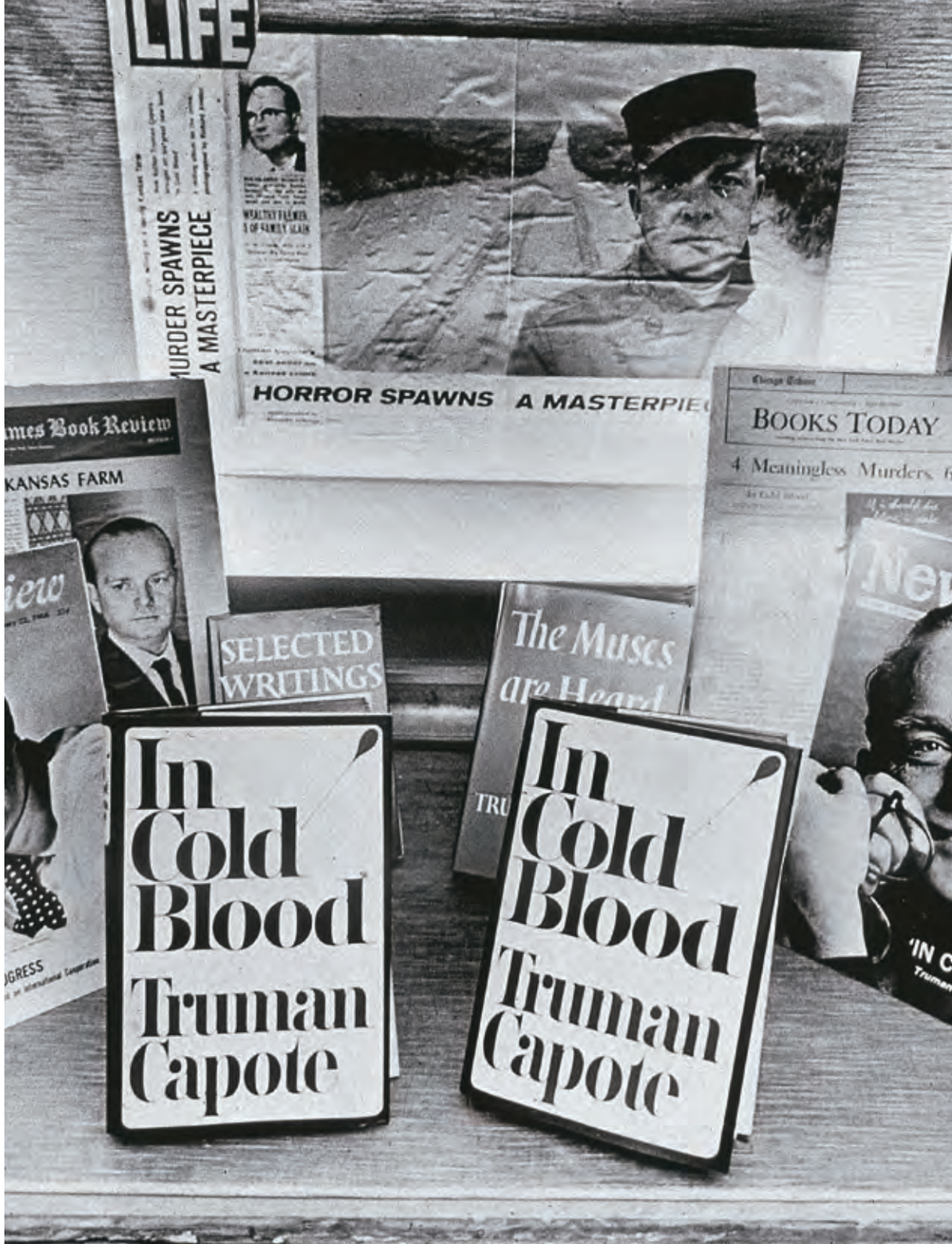
The unusual character of *Things* is due in great part to the coldness of the narrator-witness, who refuses to criticize, to judge, and to interpret the attitude of the protagonists. He merely records the things that they covet and accumulate in their apartment, describing them like "signs" or "images," by means of advertising formulas. **JD**

In Cold Blood

Truman Capote

Lifespan | *b.* 1924 (U.S.), *d.* 1984
First Published | 1966
First Published by | Random House (New York)
Full Name | Truman Streckfus Persons

Capote's most famous work is a pioneering example of both the "nonfiction novel" and the modern "true crime" story. It retells the story of the 1959 murders of the Clutter family in Kansas by a pair of drifting misfits, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, and of the subsequent trial and execution of the killers. Capote also uses the polarities of this particular case as the starting point for a larger examination of the values of late 1950s and early 1960s America; the respectable Clutters are so wholesomely all-American that they could almost have been invented, while Smith and Hickock come over as brutal real life versions of the James Dean "rebel" culture. The world of the victims is painstakingly and sympathetically reconstructed, but Capote's real interest is in the emotional lives of Perry and Dick, and what might have led them into such murderous excess. Indeed, some argue that Capote was so fascinated by Perry Smith because he saw in him a possible alternative version of himself. Given that Capote wrote about the crime throughout the trial, it has even been suggested that the final verdicts were conditioned by the way in which his journalism had portrayed the killers. In this light, *In Cold Blood* offers a larger, more disturbing insight. Like Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979), it embodies a debate about fact, fiction, and the overlaps and differences between their ethical responsibilities. **BT**



A window display set up by Random House, Capote's publisher, in 1966 reflects the scale of the media interest his book aroused.