

Discussion Questions for The Sea by John Banville

1. The Sea is made up of three temporal layers: the distant past of Max's childhood, the recent past of his wife's illness and death, and the present of his return to Ballyless. Instead of keeping these layers distinctly separated, Banville segues among them or splices them together, sometimes within a single sentence. Why might he have chosen to do this, and what methods does he use to keep the reader oriented in his novel's time scheme?
2. Morden frequently refers to the Graces as gods, and of course the original Graces were figures in classical mythology. What about these people makes them godlike? Does each of them possess some attribute that corresponds, for instance, to Zeus's thunderbolt or Athena's wisdom? What distinguishes the Graces from Max's own unhappily human family? Are they still godlike at the novel's end?
3. When Max first encounters the Graces, he hears from the upstairs of their house the sound of a girl laughing while being chased. What other scenes in the book feature chases, some playful, some not? Is Morden being chased? Or is he a pursuer? If so, who or what might he be pursuing?
4. Morden is disappointed, even "appalled" [p. 4], to find the Cedars physically unchanged from what it was when the Graces stayed there. Yet he is also disappointed that it contains no trace of its former occupants [p. 29]. What might explain his ambivalence? Has he come to Ballyless to relive his past or to be free of it? Given the shame and sadness that suffuses so much of his memory, how is one to interpret his sense of the past as a retreat [pp. 44–45]?
5. "How is it," Max wonders, "that in childhood everything new that caught my interest had an aura of the uncanny, since according to all the authorities the uncanny is not some new thing but a thing known returning in a different form, a revenant?" [p. 8]. What might account for this sense of déjà vu? What episodes in this novel seem to echo earlier ones, and are there moments when the past seems to echo the future, as if time were running backward? In this light, consider Max's realization that his childhood visions of the future had "an oddly antique cast" [p. 70], as if "what I foresaw as the future was in fact . . . a picture of what could only be an imagined past" [p. 71].
6. How does Banville depict the other characters in this novel? To what extent are they, as Max suggests, partial constructs, as Connie Grace was "at once a wraith of my imagination and a woman of unavoidable flesh and blood" [p. 65]? Does Max's voice, wry, self-reflexive, and resplendently vivid, give these characters an independent life or partially obscure them? Are there moments when they seem to peek out from beneath its blanket and show themselves to the reader?
7. Throughout the novel Max suffers from an overpowering, all-pervasive sense of guilt. Is this guilt justified? What are his crimes, or using another moral language,

his sins? Has he managed to atone for any of his failures or redeem any of his spoiled relationships by the novel's end? Is such redemption possible in this novel's view of human nature?

8. On learning that she is fatally ill, both Max and Anna are overcome by something he recognizes as embarrassment, an embarrassment that extends even to the inanimate objects in their home. Why should death be embarrassing? Compare the grown Max's shame about death to his childhood feelings about sex, both his sexual fantasies about Connie Grace and their subsequent fulfillment with her daughter.

9. Significantly, Max's fantasies about Mrs. Grace reach a crescendo during an act of voyeurism. What role does watching play in Max's sense of others? Has observing people been his substitute for engaging with them? How does he feel about other people watching him? And what are we to make of the fact that Max is constantly watching himself—sometimes watching himself watching others, in an infinite regress of surveillance and alienation?

10. Max is a poor boy drawn to a succession of wealthy women, culminating in his very wealthy wife. Was his attraction to them really a screen for social climbing? In loving Connie and Chloe and Anna, was he betraying his origins? Are there moments in this novel when those origins reassert themselves?

11. Why might Max have chosen the painter Bonnard as the subject for a book? What episodes from the painter's life parallel his own or illuminate it metaphorically? Note the way the description of the Graces' picnic recalls Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*. What other scenes in the novel allude to works of art or literature, and what is the effect?

12. *The Sea* has a triple climax that features two deaths and very nearly a third. In what ways are these deaths linked, and to what extent is Max responsible for them? Do you interpret his drunken night walk on the beach as an attempt at suicide? How does your perception of Max change in light of Miss Vavasour's climactic revelation about the events that precipitated Chloe's drowning?

13. Just as the critical trauma of Max's life grew out of a misapprehension, so the entire novel is shrouded in a haze of unreliable narrative. Max's memories are at once fanatically detailed and riddled with lapses. He freely admits that the people in his past are half real and half made up. "From earliest days I wanted to be someone else," he tells us [p. 160], and a chance remark of his mother's suggests that even his name may be false [p. 156]. Can we accept any part of his account as true? Are there moments in this novel in which reality asserts itself absolutely? What effect do these ambiguities have on your experience of *The Sea*?