



The Ecliptic

Benjamin Wood

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On a forested island off the coast of Istanbul stands Portmantle, a gated refuge for beleaguered artists. There, a curious assembly of painters, architects, writers and musicians strive to restore their faded talents. Elspeth 'Knell' Conroy is a celebrated painter who has lost faith in her ability and fled the dizzying art scene of 1960s London. On the island, she spends her nights locked in her blacked-out studio, testing a strange new pigment for her elusive masterpiece.

But when a disaffected teenager named Fullerton arrives at the refuge, he disrupts its established routines. He is plagued by a recurring nightmare that steers him into danger, and Knell is left to pick apart the chilling mystery. Where did the boy come from, what is 'The Ecliptic', and how does it relate to their abandoned lives in England?

The Ecliptic Details

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From Reader Review *The Ecliptic* for online ebook

Issicratea says

I read this and Benjamin Wood's first novel, *The Bellwether Revivals*, in close succession and in reverse order. It was an instructive experience. *The Bellwether Revivals* is not at all bad as a pageturning first novel, but I thought *The Eleptic* far superior. Reading the two back to back gave me a chance to observe at close quarters the intriguing spectacle of a talented young novelist refining his art.

The Ecliptic is structured in an intricate manner, through flashback; and it ends with a twist that has to remain off-limits in a review. Its (self-referential) subject is art and the creative process and its psychological wellsprings. The protagonist, a young Scottish painter, Elspeth Conroy, spends much of the novel in a state of depression and creative blockage, despite her precocious commercial success; yet the complex time frame of Wood's narrative also allows us to experience the moment when she breaks free and finds her artistic voice within a new and quite magical experimental medium.

The scenes describing this artistic quest are immensely absorbing, and I was convinced by them as a study of the rhythms and the emotional trajectory of artistic creation. If Elspeth's journey, when summarized, can sound close to romantic stereotypes of the tormented genius, Wood is too canny and skilled a writer to fall into that kind of trap. Rather, the novel places clichés about the agony and ecstasy of creativity under the microscope. Wood surrounds the tortured, reclusive, pill-popping Ellie with characters who try to protect her from her self-destructive tendencies and to question her assumption that pain and loneliness are the taxes that must be paid for artistic fulfilment: her loyal, semi-despised agent Dulcie; her sympathetic, self-appointed shrink Victor; her fellow-painter, sometime lover, and recovering alcoholic Jim, who has been through the same mill himself.

More wonderfully, beyond these figures within the straight, realist segment of the novel, Wood takes us to the strange, dreamy world of the artists' retreat Portmantle, off the Turkish coast: an island refuge for writers, visual artists, and musicians who find themselves in a state of creative stagnancy or crisis. This curious, timeless, placeless heterotopia is where the novel begins, and I found it quite compelling as a setting: reminiscent of the boarding school in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* in its ostensibly benign but coercive institutional structure and its odd, tangential relationship with the "real world." Elspeth's cronies at Portmantle, with their evocative borrowed names—Quickman, Pettifer, MacKinney—constitute a splendidly diverse portrait gallery of potential shipwrecked artistic careers, enriched further by the arrival of the mysterious troubled youth known as Fullerton, with which *The Ecliptic's* narrative begins.

We are left in some doubt throughout the course of the novel of the relationship between the Portmantle segment and the more realist narrative told in flashback. By the last pages of the novel it becomes clear. The resolution struck me as a little over-neat as I read it, but the novel sedimented down very nicely in my mind later, as I processed its various thematic and narrative convolutions. Wood's writing is quite beautiful, as well: pared-down and not overly striving for effect, but full of sharp and sometimes startling descriptive details ("He seemed to be fixing a curtain pole; one of the velvet drapes was slung over his shoulder like a lamb for butchering;" "He slept on his front, as though strapped to a knife-thrower's wheel.")

Donna says

This book is beautifully written. I enjoyed the descriptive strokes. I also appreciated the premise of this book, and overall I liked it, but it really isn't my thing. Even though this was slow to start for me, I liked the journey.

Some reviewers used the word "intelligent" to describe this and I'm not disputing that, but maybe it was a little too much so for my liking. I liked the exploration of disappointment and crippling fear, but I think I didn't fall for the characters. I wish I had.

David Reviews says

The first thing that struck me about this book was how beautifully the writing flows. The storytelling is delightful and engaging. The premise that there exists a mysterious island retreat where great artists who suffer artistic-block can go sponsored to recover and produce one more masterpiece is intriguing. The main character is a likeable painter Ms Elspeth 'Knell' Convoy who provides us with a fascinating story in her development as an artist. Benjamin Wood has produced an exceptionally wonderfully written book in *The Ecliptic* that is an absolute pleasure to read and one I'm happy to recommend to you.

We begin in the 1970's when Knell is in her thirties. She has lived at Pormantle on the island of Heybeliada off the Turkish coast for a decade. It's here, along with her three close friends being artists of various other creative disciplines, that she encounters a new arrival in seventeen year old Fullerton who disrupts their settled existence. Knell experiments with pigments in an attempt to create her next great painting, but Fullerton is a distraction and an enigma. Then again maybe he is a key to unlock her eventual release and return of her creativity.

The author explores Knells early life with an absorbing portrait of her study, apprenticeship, first paintings and exhibition. Superbly drawn scenes and conversation pieces are sharp and seductively described. Her love life and emotions brought to life believable and real. We discover how Knell arrived at the artists retreat and what becomes of Fullerton. From there to the end of the book things become a little shrouded in madness that maybe we associate with such creative genius. This is a compulsive and beautiful novel that will indeed leave you much to ponder over.

Helen Stanton says

I would have given this 5 stars but thought the ending was a bit of a cop outno spoilers !

Set largely on an artists colony on a remote island in Turkey , the *Ecliptic* has many echoes of Fowles' *The Magus* .

' How could I represent things that were themselves just representations of other people's representations?And how could I make them fit the themes of my design without contriving them?' ponders Knell, the narrator, a painter suffering from a block in her creative process.

The world Wood has created is entirely believable and totally absorbing . This is a real page-turning read .

Figgy says

Review to come.

Blair says

Review originally published at Learn This Phrase.

The Ecliptic: I had a good feeling about this book. The first time I heard about it was, unsurprisingly, on Twitter, when those with early review copies began talking about it in reverent tones, implying it would be one of the best novels of the year. Naturally, this excited me, and naturally, it made me nervous. But the excitement won out enough that I squandered a whole Waterstones gift voucher on the hardback edition, thinking as I did so, *this had better be worth it*. Thankfully, it was.

In the first part of the book, Elspeth Conroy, a painter, is a resident at Portmantle, a refuge for artists housed on a sylvan island off the coast of Turkey. Presided over by the severe provost, it's a place for those who have lost touch with their muse, with a strict set of rules designed - in what might be seen as a contradictory fashion - to remove all barriers to creative freedom. This includes the creation of a new identity, so Elspeth is known as 'Knell', and her closest friends - MacKinney, Quickman and Pettifer, a playwright, author and architect respectively - are similarly pseudonymous. One joins Portmantle only by invitation, and must keep every detail of its nature, even its existence, secret. The opening scene depicts the arrival of a new member of the community, Fullerton, a teenage boy - just a child, a disruptive but very obviously fragile presence who Elspeth immediately feels maternal towards.

The second part spools back through Elspeth's history. From her childhood in Clydebanks to an attic in London, the beginnings of success and fame, and a fateful boat journey to New York, her life is mapped out in scenes that flesh out her character so successfully she becomes painfully real. Being disconnected from Portmantle is initially upsetting - as a setting it has an irresistible pull, and I'd hoped the whole story would be set there. But I quickly realised our heroine's past would be just as absorbing and affecting as her present. This is particularly the case when it comes to Elspeth's relationship with her erstwhile mentor, Jim Culvers, with whom she falls in love. (Architects of unconvincing romances everywhere, take note - *this* is how you do a love story. It's absolutely heartbreaking.)

The third part takes us back to Portmantle.

And that's all I can say about the plot. Anything more is going to spoil major revelations that come in several bursts, upending each other, in the final quarter of the book, and while telling you what they are might not actually spoil your enjoyment - because it's all so beautifully written and beautifully crafted regardless, and this is a story that *has* twists rather than *relying* on them - I think it's better if you don't know.

The Ecliptic is first and foremost a book about the hard, exhausting, consuming work of creating art. It's a force that engulfs Elspeth's life, moulds her relationships, and manifests in occasional bursts of obsession and extreme fatigue that skew close to madness. Portmantle purports to offer a respite from all the

distractions that might divert an artist from achieving their true purpose, but in the end it's those 'distractions' that make a life, and Elspeth and co's time there keeps them trapped in a loop of *not* creating. Rather than a shelter, it becomes a kind of stasis. Like addicts who can't leave rehab, Elspeth and her friends remain on the island for years - for so long they've lost track of the years - despite failing to complete any of their planned masterworks. The story in *The Ecliptic* is constantly provoking questions about how inspiration is lost and found, and what that means for the artist.

If I had to compare it to something? *Station Eleven*, and not just because a comic book plays a pivotal part. While reading both books I really savoured the style - yet again I want to use the words 'elegant' and 'restrained'; the characters are centre stage, their development the most important thing in the novel despite the often-dramatic, potentially complicated story in which they are placed; style-wise there is nothing over the top here, nothing that really plays with conventional language, but it's intelligent, powerful, and always has that odd little edge of implied strangeness that suggests there's something more to all of this than meets the eye - something just out of reach. (Though I should mention that *The Ecliptic* is definitely not dystopian or sci-fi or post-apocalyptic.)

The Ecliptic itself unfolds like the process of creating a painting, specifically one of Elspeth's works. Layers of paint are overlaid by a magic ingredient, the lustrous pigment she creates from an unusual species of mushrooms, with the end result being something that can only be properly appreciated and understood in certain conditions - from the correct angle, in the correct light, or lack of. In Wood's book, this moment comes in the fourth and final section, when the reader can finally step back and understand how everything not only fits together, but creates a glorious effect, a beautifully synchronised whole.

Zena says

When I first started this book I was worried it would be too similar to Wood's first novel because it covers very similar themes. In saying that, I think Wood pulled it off brilliantly. The story flows well despite the depth of the plot. I wasn't sure if I liked the ending because at first it felt like the generic '...and then he/she woke up and realised it was all just a dream'. But looking back I actually think it was a great ending. It made other details in the novel more substantial and gave the overall theme of the 'tormented artist' more weight. Her fabrications of Portmantle and the residents all tied in as a muse for her mural.

I really enjoyed this novel. Despite having a similar premise to 'The bellwether Revivals' I think it really held its own weight. Original and executed very well.

Jill says

First, let's get this out of the way: what is the ecliptic? Briefly, it's the way we imagine the stars attached to a giant invisible sphere surrounding the earth. "It's a total fiction, really – just a construction we came up with to help us get our heads around the complexity of it all."

The same might be said about Benjamin Wood's amazing novel. The construction is the isolated and exclusive artists' colony at the Turkish island of Portmantle. There, artists eschew all ties to the outside world, even giving up their names. Time stands still and egos are held in check as the artists concentrate on one thing only: creating their next masterwork.

That is the world that creatively-blocked Scottish painter Elspeth Conroy (known as Knell) voluntarily enters. Indeed, the entire first book (there are four books at all) and the third book are set in Portmantle. There is a patina of surrealism in these sections, which at first called to mind John Fowles' *The Magus* – a postmodern novel of a young British graduate who arrives on an exotic Greek island and is drawn into its psychological underpinnings. I had already pigeon-holed this novel as a somewhat fantastical yet reality-based glimpse into the creative process when left alone to feed itself.

How wrong I was! In the entire 200-page second section, we get flashbacks of Elspeth – her life so far, the cultivating of her talent, the price extracted to serve that talent. I have read many books in which the topic of the artist's creativity is explored – Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World*, Deirdre Madden's *Authenticity*, Sue Miller's *Lake Shore Limited* among others. And I can comfortably say that this is the very best exploration of the artistic muse and artistic process I have read in fiction.

With a vaster understanding of Elspeth, we then find ourselves back at Portmantle. Mysteries that surfaced right from the start become more profound. Elspeth herself seems far more complicated. I will steer away from specific plot twists. But I will say this: the last 40 pages of this book blew me away. It revealed an author who is totally in command of his craft. Is anything truly as it seems? Is art itself the most real of things on this earth? Can we accept the truth and still be grateful for our artful fabrications? Read it and be amazed.

Judy says

I don't know how I heard about this book. It was just published in the United States in May (Benjamin Wood is British) and as I recall, I read a review or two and instantly requested it at the library. I loved it completely.

It is about the lives of contemporary artists, a painter, a novelist, a playwright, and an architect. These four characters reside in an artist colony on a Turkish island. Becoming a resident involves a torturous path to acceptance but one requirement is that the artist must have had success and then somehow lost the muse of inspiration.

Artists at Portmantle live there all expenses paid, though not in luxury, until they finish a new work. It is an insular existence framed by strict rules while putting no time limit on any given artist to produce something he or she feels good about sending out into the world. But when that happens, the artist must leave.

The main character, Elspeth Conroy, who also narrates the tale, is a painter. (Painters are springing up all over in the fiction I have been reading lately.) She is the only one at Portmantle who rails against the rules and when an obviously disturbed 17 year old boy arrives she finds herself compulsively drawn to him and risks much to help him.

Eventually we learn her history, a study in the uncertain life of a painter and the pressures of commercial success. As much as I was enthralled with the whole setup at Portmantle, I became even more invested in Elspeth's life story.

Then came the most outlandish twist at the end and I was in awe of the talent displayed by this fairly young author. If you or someone you know has ever toiled in the trenches of any of the arts, you will love *The Ecliptic*.

Imi says

Excellent! A crossover between a mystery and historical fiction, an exploration of the the all-consuming nature of artistic work, *The Ecliptic* was an easy sell, a seemingly perfect fit to my personal tastes. The novel explores the power of imagination and the mind, the boundary between the real and the illusory, the mysteries of identity, and the relationship between madness and creativity.

The story begins on a private island, named Portmantle, a retreat for troubled artists. I was immediately taken in by the mysterious setting and found it wonderfully atmospheric. I also loved the musings on inspiration, the artistic process, and the descriptions of paintings throughout, among other kinds of art, which I feel can be tricky to handle in fiction.

A lengthy flashback composes the core of the book, and, if I had one complaint, it's that this part of the novel felt like too much of a digression. While at times as engrossing as the Portmantle portion of the novel, it also seemed as if Wood was taking an absurdly long time to get all the way back to the heart of the book, to Portmantle. Its length makes a lot more sense after reading the conclusion, but I do think it was a little self-indulgent, not uncommon in fiction that explores the self-critical and desperate nature of an artist character, but a little tedious at times all the same. If you feel the same reading this part of the novel, I guess your overall opinion on *The Ecliptic* will depend on whether you think the pay-off was worth it, which I certainly did.

Sidenote, to those who have yet to read this, be careful when reading the reviews on Goodreads, because I've noticed a few seem to give the ending away, without spoiler tags, which I'd be annoyed about if I'd read them before finishing! I'd actually pretty much guessed the book's conclusion before it was revealed, because I think Wood leaves enough clues along the way. I can see how the ending divides opinion, but I personally really loved it and think it perfectly intertwines the novels' themes with its intricate, strange, but intimate atmosphere.

To those who have read this before, the one question I am left with: (view spoiler)

Rebecca says

(3.75) Portmantle is a mysterious artists' retreat center on a Turkish island. Our narrator, Elspeth Conroy (aka Knell), is a Scottish painter who came to Portmantle in 1962 after some struggles with mental illness. The first third of the novel is tremendously gripping and Gothic. The core of the book, nearly 200 pages, is a flashback to Elspeth's life before. At last, after what feels like too long a digression, we come full circle back to Portmantle. I didn't warm to *The Ecliptic* quite as much as I did to Wood's debut, *The Bellwether Revivals*. Still, it's really interesting to see how he alternates between realism and surrealism here. The parts that feel most real and immediate and the parts that are illusory are difficult to distinguish between. An odd, melancholy, shape-shifting novel.

switterbug (Betsey) says

For the first quarter of this book, I sensed a mystery tugging at the periphery, but I couldn't identify it, because of the hazy and sometimes dreamlike quality of the narrative, and the withholding of the book's central focus. We are introduced to quite a few characters early on, in a secret, sequestered art colony on a Turkish island. Even getting there is fraught with secret code, from burning your passport, getting a Mission Impossible-ish direction to the island, and changing your name before you arrive.

On the island, we are introduced primarily to a novelist, a playwright, an architect, and a painter, each with their own quirky dispositions. They have been here in Portmantle for ten years, and are awaiting arrival of a new resident, a 17-year-old boy whose presence clearly intrigues and also shakes up the artists' lassitude.

Although this is a story that starts in the 60s London art scene, it soon adopts a timeless quality as we read about the various artists on Portmantle. Subsequently, at least one prominent character began emerging above the others, the narrator, Elspeth Conroy, a Scottish artist in crisis (like the rest of them on that island) with a creative block. The exceptional prose kept me going forward, as I tried to figure out the center of the narrative. If you can just relieve yourself of expectation, and go with the flow, you will find yourself immersed in a unique, haunting, and complex psychological tale that continues to wrap itself around you, all the while keeping you off-balance.

"I sort of get trapped in my own head." All the artists are not unlike what you may have gathered over the years regarding creative types' hang-ups or neuroses. There's a certain eccentricity to their natures and also a pitfall of woolgathering for so long that they get buried in inertia. However, this art colony has an eerie quality to it—they seem as trapped on the island just as much as they are locked in their creative standstills.

"Something else you will not learn at art school: real inspiration only turns up when your inspiration has expired... There is no finer company than inspiration, but its very goodness will leave you heartsick when it goes. So do not waste time asking it to wipe its feet. Embrace it at the threshold." There is also the question of trying to reconcile artistic loyalty to the "art" with the financial rewards of recognition and success.

Also, what is the ecliptic? Well, as described in the book, it is the plane of the earth's orbit around the sun. But, from earth's eyes, we perceive it as the sun moving along this plane instead. Furthermore, this orbit is an imaginary circle, where the sun moves through the constellations along a line, known as the ecliptic. "It's a total fiction, really—just a construction we came up with to help us get our heads around the complexity of it all." And how does this relate to the book? Well, I'd tell you, but then I'd have to spoil it. So, read the book, keep spinning in its orbit, stretch your senses to the upper limits of your imagination, and be prepared for an astonishing climax.

Eric Anderson says

Being an artist isn't like other professions. It's not a livelihood where the primary motivation for devoting one's labour to it is for money or status or the simple satisfaction of a job well done or even making the world a better place. Certainly these factors influence artists during their careers, but the act of creating art is

about realizing a vision and making something meaningful. The path to inspiration is elusive. Benjamin Wood's novel "The Ecliptic" questions what drives, galvanizes and motivates artists. The narrator Elspeth Conroy is stuck. She's a painter who has received acclaim for her work, but the majority of her output feels like it falls short of saying anything profound. On a small island off the coast of Turkey there is an artists' retreat for those who have lost their way in whatever discipline they pursue. It has a rigid code and rules designed to support them in finding their way back to inspiration. Elspeth has spent many years here, but does retreating from the world encourage the creation of real art or only drive her irretrievably further into herself?

Read my full review on LonesomeReader review of The Ecliptic by Benjamin Wood

Bonnie Brody says

What is an ecliptic? That is the first thing I wanted to know when I started this novel but, rather than look it up, I let its meaning take shape as the book progressed. It is "an imaginary great circle on the celestial sphere along which the sun appears to move over the course of the year. (In actuality, it is the earth's orbit around the sun that causes the change in the sun's apparent direction.)" This definition, by the way, comes 262 pages into the novel.

The novel is about artists and the art they create. It is also about their muses and what happens when their muses desert them. Some of these artists end up on an island off the coast of Turkey in an artist's colony for those artists who have become stuck and are no longer sure that they have what it takes for greatness. This colony is known as Portmantle and it was there "to rescue the depleted minds of artists", On it were writers, painters, poets, actors, etc. All of them are supposedly working on their next great piece. However, there are the long-termers and the short-termers. The short-termers finish what they set out to do and leave the island. The long-termers continue working for god knows how long, hoping that their muse reappears.

The story is told in the first person by Knell, a sobriquet for the artist Elspeth Conroy who is so famous that she's had a retrospective at the Tate Museum in London. She is now on Portmantle hanging out with Quickman, a writer of great renown, Pettifer, an architect who thinks day and night of the great cathedral he has yet to create, and MacKinney, a playwright. All of them have been assigned sobriquets once they arrive on the island and it is considered bad form to refer to their real names or acknowledge their prior achievements. Add to this mixture an adolescent boy named Fullerton and the dynamic gets drawn off course.

It is not really possible to describe this novel without spoilers so I'll leave it with the above except for some thoughts about its title. The ecliptic is, in my opinion, a metaphor for the way artists need to see the world from within their creative perspective, It is an anthropomorphic sense of reality that drives creativity and leads some artists to greatness - or Portmantle.

This novel is many things at many levels. It is a story of art and artists, love and friendship, and a description of the creative process. It is, above all, an homage to art and artists. It opened my eyes to a world of beauty and epiphany that soared in its words.

Kasa Cotugno says

Inspection of the cover, at least in my edition, is the first indication that this will be intriguing. An exploration into the artistic muse must have relevance, and craquelure upon closer look reveals pentimento underneath. Layers upon layers. Elspeth Conroy, a Scottish painter of terrifying genius and seemingly limitless vision, finds herself stymied, both inspirationally and on a personal level. Along with others of high reputation representing many artistic disciplines who are similarly blocked, she has been at Portmantle, an asylum on an island off the coast of Turkey.

Portmantle is a refuge for artists living out their days to only focus on producing the masterpieces they know is inside them. The story spools out at a steady pace, but the writing, which reminded me mostly of David Mitchell and Marisha Pessl is rich, densely plotted, extraordinarily crafted. This is a book to savor on many levels.
