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Why I Love : The Tunnel (1948) by Ernesto Sábato

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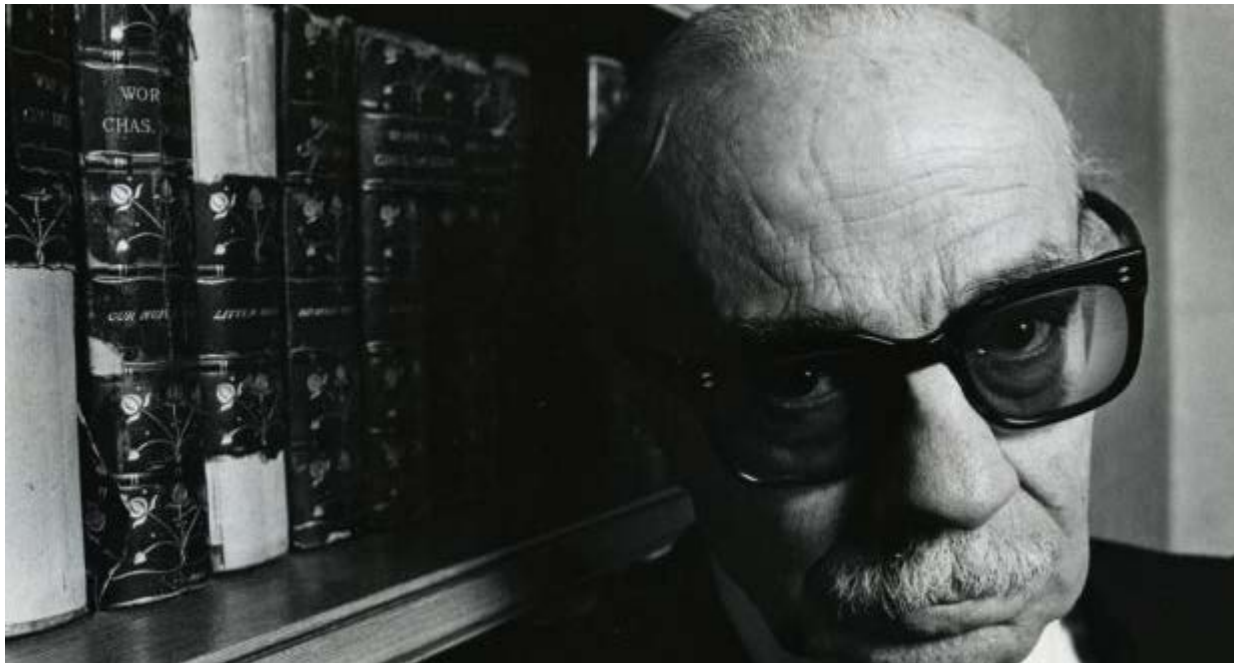
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Why I love: The Tunnel (1948), by Ernesto Sábato

An existentialist classic not unlike Camus' *The Outsider*, this compelling read drills ever deeper into the dark recesses of a tortured artist's unrepentant soul. What's your favourite book? Send us your review of a title you love to books@irishtimes.com and each week, we will publish one.



Argentine writer Ernesto Sábato (1911-2011): in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Tunnel*, Colm Tóibín sees Sábato as someone clearly influenced by Dostoyevsky and Kafka, most evident in the dark canvas he sketched of the human condition. Photograph: Gary Cameron/The Washington Post via Getty Images

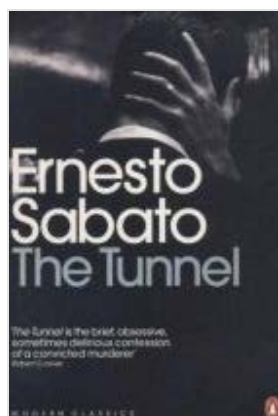
Eamon Maher

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Book Title:
The Tunnel

ISBN-13:
978-0141194547

Author:
Ernesto Sabato

Publisher:
Penguin Classics

Guideline Price:
£8.99

On the recommendation of my son, I recently read the classic Argentine novel, *The Tunnel*, by Ernesto Sábato (1911-2011). As a self-confessed fan of Camus, it was always likely that I would respond positively to what *The New York Times Book Review* described as “an existentialist classic”.

Published initially in the literary magazine *Sur* in 1948, *The Tunnel* shares a certain number of traits with Camus’ *The Outsider*. Both have a first-person narrator who ends up incarcerated after being convicted of murder and from their prison cells they review the incidents and chance encounters that led to their present impasse.

In his introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Tunnel*, Colm Tóibín sees Sábato as someone who was clearly influenced by writers such as Dostoyevsky and Kafka, an influence that is most evident in the dark canvas he sketched of the human condition. Tóibín notes: “[...] there are moments when the rules governing despair are so closely undermined or re-examined or dramatised that the entire enterprise of living or thinking seems deeply absurd”.

The novel recounts the complex relationship between the artist Juan Pablo Castel and Maria Iribarne Hunter, whom he first observes staring raptly at one of his paintings. He has the impression that this woman can see into his soul, that she is somehow capable of understanding the emotion behind his artistic creation. He is smitten immediately and does everything in his power to become Maria’s lover.

But sex, once achieved, does not have the desired effect: “All we accomplished was to confirm the impossibility of prolonging or strengthening oneness through a physical act.” Castel is an obsessive individual whose disdain for others leads to a haughty aloofness. Like Camus’ Meursault, the anti-hero of *The Outsider*, he does possess an impressive lucidity when it comes to self-analysis, as is clear from the following lines: “Usually that feeling of being alone in the world is accompanied by a condescending sense of superiority. I scorn all humankind; people around me seem vile, sordid, stupid, greedy, gross, niggardly. I do not fear solitude; it is almost Olympian.”

A person who extols the virtues of solitude in this way, who constantly sees faults in the people he meets or observes walking along the streets of the city, whose distrust of human nature is evident in the jealousy and insecurity that characterise his dealings with Maria, is far from being an ideal lover or companion. As expected therefore, the darkness soon takes control and, clinging desperately to the misplaced suspicion that Maria is deceiving him with other men, he drives in a mad rage to the estancia where she is staying with her cousin, arrives in her bedroom and plunges a knife several times into her breast and stomach.

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