

# James Joyce

BY ROB Tocalino

"I am tomorrow, or some future day,  
what I establish today.  
I am today what I established yesterday or some previous day."

—James Joyce (1882–1941)

**F**OR OVER 50 YEARS, June 16 has marked a curious mix of celebrations. Revelers pack into Dublin for a breakfast of kidneys and Guinness stout. Tour groups course through the streets, looking for buildings that no longer exist. Perhaps most significantly, ordinary people gather in pubs and on street corners to read from James Joyce's infamously difficult, highly experimental, and stream-of-consciousness novel *Ulysses* (1922). More familiarly known as Bloomsday, June 16 marks the day in 1904 that James Joyce—one of the most influential writers of the 20th century—set his fictional protagonist Leopold Bloom, a Jewish advertising canvasser and a contemporary Odysseus, on a daylong walkabout of Dublin. Equal parts challenging and rewarding, *Ulysses* is generally regarded as the seminal work of literary modernism, which reached its height between 1900 and 1940.

Joyce, along with Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, and others, pioneered the modernist novel of the post-World War I era. Melding his Irish experiences with his wanderlust, Joyce rejected realist sensibilities and broke with the ordered Victorian worldview. He heralded a modern, experimental technique that included interior monologue, the disruption of linear narrative flow, a moral relativism, and the use of symbolic parallels with other periods in

history, as well as with literature and mythology. In *Dubliners* (1914), he delved into human consciousness with characters who experienced epiphanies and thereby achieved a deeper understanding of their lives. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) used interior monologue to depict a character's personal reality. *Ulysses*, which appeared the same year as T. S. Eliot's modernist poem, *The Waste Land*, explored Dublin life through stream of consciousness and presented each chapter in a different literary style. *Finnegans Wake* (1939) forsook all plot for literary allusion, free association, extravagant wordplay, and a dreamlike logic. Not easy reading, Joyce's stories and novels are worth pondering for their fractured sense of modern life.

Although most authors would be delighted by such a lasting legacy of merrymaking in their hometown each year, Joyce had a healthy distaste for Dublin. Like so much in

his work, there was ever a battle between opposites. His fiction is charged with finely fligreed sensory details of Dublin; yet throughout his life he lobbed insults—"old sow that eats her farrow," "center of paralysis," and "afterthought of Europe"—to express his aversion to Dublin and Ireland. One might assume his loathing of his mother country had its genesis in a horrific childhood. In fact, but for the profligacy of his father and

## Where to Start

**DUBLINERS**, an interconnected collection of short stories, wrested epiphanies out of the Church and into literature for good. **ULYSSES** raised controversy from its first publication in 1922, but this narration of a single day in Dublin remains one of the world's most widely acclaimed—and widely misunderstood—novels. Heavily autobiographical, **A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN** is a classic bildungsroman that tracks the literary, emotional, and spiritual awakening of young Stephen Dedalus.

some strict Jesuit priests, Joyce's upbringing was unexceptional.

Born in 1882, James Augustine Aloysius Joyce was the eldest of ten siblings. Educated in the Catholic tradition at Clongowes Wood and, later, Belvedere College (the source for much of 1916's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*), he was an excellent student, particularly in the literary arts. His first poem, "Et Tu Healy," which celebrated the life of Irish nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell, was published when Joyce was just nine. He continued to excel in school, prompting hope in his mother and the Jesuit priests that taught him that he might find his calling as a man of the cloth. Instead, as his father suffered the first of many severe financial reversals, Joyce renounced Catholicism at the age of 16 and found a deeper devotion in literature.

## Joyce's "Nicely Polished Looking-Glass"

Though many early 20th-century authors took to expatriate life, none did so with as much conviction as Joyce. Nor did any author remain so steadfastly fascinated with the homeland he had left behind. With hopes of studying medicine and continuing his writing, Joyce moved to Paris in 1902 after completing his studies at University College, Dublin. He quickly abandoned medical school, preferring the Parisian bohemian life. For the next decade, he returned to Dublin occasionally, drawn back by familial, financial, and literary obligations. In 1904 he visited his ailing mother's bedside, and, true to his staunch anti-Catholicism, he refused her request that he pray for her before she died. He made



Statue of James Joyce on North Earl Street, Dublin.

subsequent visits to argue over the publication of his short story collection *Dubliners*, which had been accepted by publisher Grant Richards but almost immediately became the subject of controversy for its realism and "indecentcy." Joyce marked his haughty obsession with his birthplace in this letter to Richards:

"It is not my fault that the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal hangs around my stories. I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass."

Spending the bulk of his early life abroad, Joyce supported himself with odd jobs as an English tutor and a book reviewer for Dublin's *Daily Express*. Promised a job in Trieste with the Berlitz Language School, Joyce arrived in the Adriatic port city in 1905 with Nora Barnacle, a chambermaid he had met in Dublin. (Lifelong companions, the two would not marry until 1931 because of Joyce's strong opposition to the sacraments of the Church). Soon after, their first son Giorgio was born and Joyce's brother Stanislaus came to live with the family. In Trieste Joyce crossed paths with the Italian writer Ettore Schmitz, better known by his pseudonym, Italo Svevo. Aside from their friendship, Schmitz would also become important in Joyce's life as one of the models for Leopold Bloom.

Adept at languages, Joyce followed a nomadic path through Europe. Forced to move by the onset of World War I, he left Trieste (then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) for Zurich, where he struggled in relative poverty while working on *Ulysses*, a book about another wandering Irishman and one that would cement his reputation.

## Joyce's Many Patrons

By the 1920s Joyce had settled into quiet domesticity with Nora, Giorgio, and his daughter Lucia. His work never made the family much money, but it drew the attention of many notable contemporaries, each of whom was eager to help Joyce continue his writing. A long correspondence with W. B. Yeats led to an introduction to American poet Ezra Pound. Impressed by Joyce's work, Pound arranged to have stories from *Dubliners* printed in England and America and facilitated the serialization of *Portrait of an Artist* in *The Egoist*, a literary magazine edited by Harriet Weaver. (Weaver would later become Joyce's main patron.)

Following World War I, Joyce and his family moved to Paris, where Sylvia Beach, proprietor of the famed bookshop Shakespeare & Co, published 1,000 copies of *Ulysses* in 1922. As described by his biographer Brenda Maddox, the bookstore became Joyce's "bank, post office, coffee shop, library, and home away from home."

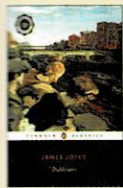
He began work on *Finnegans Wake* the following year, but his eyesight, a long-standing problem (he had undergone 10 operations on his eyes by 1925), continued to deteriorate. As he struggled with near blindness and the

complexities of composing *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce dealt with a raft of personal problems: his daughter Lucia had been diagnosed as schizophrenic; his relationship with his brother Stanislaus was crumbling; and his literary allies held serious reservations about his work on *Finnegans Wake* (then called *Work in Progress*). Even the steadfast Harriet Weaver scolded him in a letter: "I am made in such a way that I do not care much for the output from your Wholesale Safety Pun Factory nor for the darkness and intelligibilities of your deliberately-entangled language system. It seems to me you are wasting your genius."

Faber & Faber published *Finnegans Wake* in 1939, 16 years after Joyce had started it. Joyce passed away two years later in Zurich.

## MAJOR WORKS

### Dubliners (1914)



Though the battle to publish *Ulysses* is well known, publication struggles plagued Joyce throughout his career. His first book, *Dubliners*, was no exception. These 15 short stories, written mostly in Trieste around 1905, didn't see book form until almost a decade later—and only after one set of page proofs was deliberately destroyed before publication. Though the material hardly seems racy by today's standards, the book's insistent naturalism scared off many publishers. Some of the characters introduced in *Dubliners* are walk-ons in *Ulysses*.

**THE STORY:** In *Dubliners* Joyce introduced a key literary technique—the *epiphany*—while exploring the limits of naturalism, a literary philosophy which embraced the idea that fate and environment govern human life and death. Organized around the stages of life (childhood, adolescence, maturity, and public life), the stories feature ordinary people from the Irish middle classes: the young man in "Araby" racing to a carnival to fulfill a pledge, only to find it closed; Jimmy incurring heavy gambling losses to his wealthy European peers in "After the Race," and the socially awkward Gabriel Conroy of "The Dead," one of Joyce's masterpieces, who becomes painfully aware of his limitations.

"Frankly, we think it a pity (perhaps we betray a narrow Puritanism in so thinking) that a man who can write like this should insist as constantly as Mr. Joyce insists upon aspects of life which are ordinarily not mentioned. To do him justice, we do not think it is a pose with him: he simply includes the 'unmentionable' in his persistent regard." GERALD GOULD, NEW STATESMAN, 6/27/1914

"Joyce's power to disentangle a single thread from the confusion of life and let you run briefly back upon it until you encounter the confusion and are left to think about it yourself—that is a power rare enough in any literature." JOHN MACY, THE CRITICAL GAME, 1922

## Reading Companions

Just as a traveler dropped into a foreign city needs a good guidebook, acclimating to Joyce's masterpieces can be challenging without thoughtful direction. Before launching into *Ulysses*, try picking up **THE NEW BLOOMSDAY BOOK** by Harry Blamires. Though Blamires explains that "Joyce's symbolism cannot be explained mechanically in terms of one-for-one parallels," the book does reveal important aspects of Joyce's master plan. *The New Bloomsday Book* cuts through the thicket of literary allusions to deliver a running paraphrase for each chapter. Especially for new readers, it is an essential tool for enjoying Joyce's masterpiece.

*Finnegans Wake* is an even trickier proposition. Notoriously gnomic, with prose that compresses words and delivers multilinguistic puns at a dizzying pace, it's no one's definition of a light summer read. But for the stalwarts that wish to venture in, there's hope. William York Tindall's **A READER'S GUIDE TO FINNEGANS WAKE** follows a similar pattern to Blamires's work, paraphrasing its way through Joyce's novel as it attempts to clarify Joyce's themes and many symbols. Or try Eric Rosenbloom's self-published **A WORD IN YOUR EAR**, which offers this summation of Joyce's language:

Imagine an absurdly precocious infant in a family whose every member and acquaintance speaks a different language and sings different songs. Joyce's book is what that child, told to speak English, might say to give form to her Irish soul.

Then again, the pleasure of reading Joyce is engaging with his prose on its own terms. As Anthony Burgess said in **REJOICE**: "The appearance of difficulty is part of Joyce's big joke; the profundities are always expressed in good round Dublin terms; Joyce's heroes are humble men. If ever there was a writer for the people, Joyce was that writer." ■

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Joyce's sole collection of short stories is an essential introduction to his themes and a stepping-stone for modern world literature.

**THE MOVIE:** 1987, *The Dead*, starring Anjelica Huston and Donal McCann and directed by John Huston.

### A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916)

◆ #3, THE MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS



Begun as a short story-cum-essay on the emergence of an individual aesthetic sensibility, the story was rejected by a Dublin literary magazine, which prompted Joyce to merge the idea with his abandoned manuscript *Stephen Hero*. *Portrait* is a highly autobiographical work that fictionalizes Joyce's march away from home, faith, and

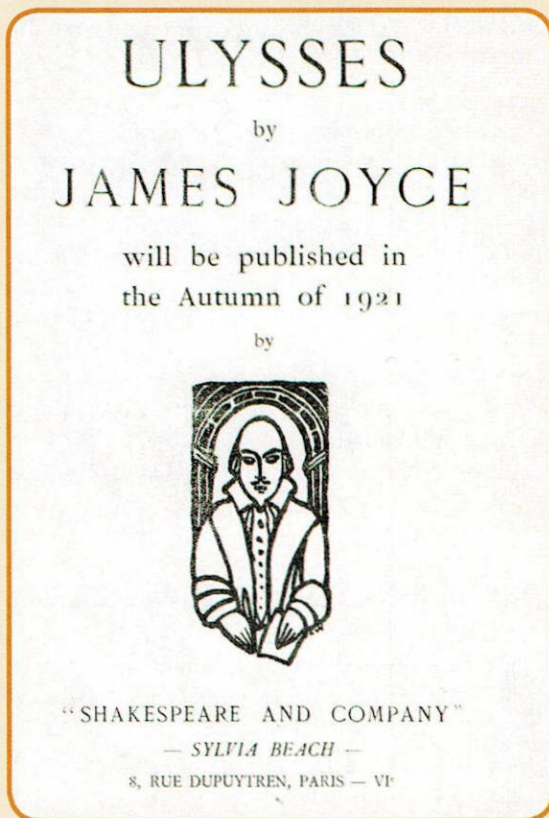
country. From the first page, where young Stephen Dedalus remembers the feeling of wetting the bed, we see Joyce toying with the stream-of-consciousness technique that would stir up such a revolution in *Ulysses*. Incidentally, Stephen Dedalus also appears in *Ulysses*.

**THE STORY:** Like so much of Joyce's work, the plot of *Portrait* is deceptively simple. Stephen Dedalus is born, is unjustly punished at grade school for stepping on his glasses, is transfixed by a vision of a girl standing near the beach, develops a theory of aesthetics at the university, and, finally, abandons the church and Ireland for a life as a poet. Joyce's genius is matching the prose style to the consciousness of his protagonist—from the naïve sensory impressions of Stephen's infancy to the full-throated epiphany that precedes his exile.

**"The interest of the book depends entirely on its quintessential and unflinching reality. One believes in Stephen Dedalus as one believes in few characters in fiction."** H. G. WELLS, THE NEW REPUBLIC, 3/10/1917

**"There is no omission; there is nothing in life so beautiful that Joyce cannot touch it without profanation—without, above all, the profanations of sentiment and sentimentality—and there is nothing so sordid that he cannot treat it with his metallic exactitude."** EZRA POUND, THE FUTURE, 5/1918

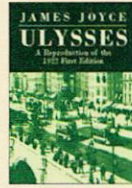
**THE BOTTOM LINE:** An impassioned coming-of-age story made exceptional by Joyce's newfound narrative technique.



Announcement of the initial publication of *Ulysses*.

## Ulysses (1922)

♦ #1, THE MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS



Set on the anniversary of Joyce's first date with his wife Nora, the novel was a watershed moment in the history of literature. If *Portrait* toyed with style, *Ulysses* was a full-scale reimaging of narrative technique. The book's serialization in the *Little Review* was stopped in 1920 because of charges of obscenity. Considered blasphemous in its depictions of sexual activity, it remained banned in the United States until 1933. The characters represent Homer's modern-day counterparts of Telemachus, Ulysses, and Penelope.

**THE STORY:** *Ulysses* follows three characters on a late-spring day in Dublin. Stephen Dedalus, fancied a poet, is caught up in aesthetic debates about art and literature; Leopold Bloom follows a leisurely morning breakfast with an afternoon of work and an evening prowling Dublin's red-light district; and Leopold's wife, Molly, entertains her music director at their home. Despite the deceptively simple plot, there's so much more than meets the eye. *Ulysses* is organized by a highly codified system: each episode of a section corresponds with an episode from Homer's *Odyssey*, and most of the episodes each bear a color, an organ, a symbol, an art form, and a literary technique. Complex? Yes. But Joyce's masterpiece is considered one of the greatest—and most influential—works in literature.

**"If it is not a novel, that is simply because the novel is a form which will no longer serve; it is because the novel, instead of being a form, was simply the expression of an age which had not sufficiently lost all form to feel the need of something stricter."** T. S. ELIOT, DIAL, 11/1923

**"The amount of stuff—unorganized brute material—that the more active principal of drama has to wade through, under the circumstances, slows it down to the pace at which, inevitably, the sluggish tide of the author's bric-a-brac passes the observer, at the saluting post, or in this case, the reader. It is a suffocating, moeotic expanse of objects, all of them lifeless, the sewage of a Past twenty years old, all neatly arranged in a meticulous sequence."** WYNDHAM LEWIS, "AN ANALYSIS OF THE MIND OF JAMES JOYCE," FROM TIME AND WESTERN MAN, 1928

**"[The] more we read *Ulysses*, the more we are convinced of its psychological truth, and the more we are amazed at Joyce's genius in mastering and in presenting, not through analysis or generalization, but by the complete recreation of life in the process of being lived."** EDMUND WILSON, AXEL'S CASTLE: A STUDY IN THE IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE OF 1827–1930, 1931

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A groundbreaking literary experiment that is still considered by many to be the greatest 20th-century novel.

**THE MOVIES:** 1967, starring Barbara Jefford, Milo O'Shea, and Maurice Roëves and directed by Joseph Strick; 2003,

## The Highly Codified System of *Ulysses*

(Adapted from Don Gifford, with Robert J. Seidman, *Notes for Joyce: An Annotation of James Joyce's Ulysses*)

Each section of *Ulysses* contains distinct symbols, references and techniques. Here are a few examples:

### EPISODE 1: [TELEMACHUS]

Colors: white, gold; Organ: none; Symbol: heir; Art Form: theology; Literary Technique: narrative (young).

### EPISODE 4: [CALYPSO]

Color: orange; Organ: kidney; Symbol: nymph; Art Form: economics (the useful art of household management); Literary Technique: narrative (mature).

### EPISODE 18: [PENELOPE]:

Color: none; Organ: flesh; Symbol: earth; Art Form: none; Literary Technique: monologue (female). ■

*Bloom*, starring Stephen Rea, Angeline Ball, and Hugh O'Connor and directed by Sean Walsh.

## Finnegans Wake (1939)

◆ #77, THE MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS



Serpentine from its elliptical introduction, “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s,” *Finnegans Wake* is as breathlessly forward-rushing as it is carefully organized. Based in part on Giambattista Vico’s view of history as an endless spiral of four stages, Joyce’s final novel took 17 years to compose and is awash in words, characters, and settings that merge into one another in a dreamlike haze. The language is a complex concoction of puns and double entendres, where a single word radiates a handful of perfectly accurate meanings.

**THE STORY:** Oh, if it were only that simple. Yes, there are characters in *Finnegans Wake*, like Finn McCool (the modern-day mythical hunter-warrior), Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (a tavern keeper and also a hero), and Humphrey’s wife Anna Livia Plurabelle (mother of three and the symbol of the life-giving River Liffey); and things certainly do happen throughout. But writing a plot summary is nigh impossible—and even if it were, it would miss the point of Joyce’s grand experiment. In some ways, *Finnegans Wake* is a conglomeration of every story ever told, with its characters shape-shifting into mythic and historic figures throughout the book. In fact, Joseph Campbell writes of Joyce’s work: “If our society should go to smash tomorrow ... one could find all the pieces, together with the forces that broke them, in *Finnegans Wake*. The book is a kind of terminal moraine in which lie buried all the myths, programmes, slogans, hopes, prayers, tools, educational theories, and theological bric-a-brac of the past millennium.”

“Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read—or rather it is only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; it *is that something itself*. ... Here words are not the polite contortions of 20th century printer’s ink. They are alive. They elbow their way on to the page, and glow and blaze and fade and disappear.” SAMUEL BECKETT, OUR EXAGMINATION ROUND HIS FACTIFICATION FOR INCAMINATION OF WORK IN PROGRESS, 1929

“In his extraordinary richness and variety of musical effect in his writing, Joyce is simply pushing to a high degree of development qualities that we all find in authentic poetry.”

WILLIAM TROY, PARTISAN REVIEW, SUMMER 1939

“I believe the miscarriage of *Finnegans Wake*, in so far as it does miscarry, is due primarily to two tendencies of Joyce’s which were already in evidence in *Ulysses*: the impulse, in the absence of dramatic power, to work up an epic impressiveness by multiplying and complicating detail, by filling in abstract diagrams and laying on intellectual conceits, till the organic effort at which he aims has been spoiled by too much that is synthetic; and a curious shrinking solicitude to conceal from the reader his real subjects. ... The more daring Joyce’s subjects become, the more he tends to swathe them about with the fancywork of his literary virtuosity.” EDMUND WILSON, THE WOUND AND THE BOW: SEVEN STUDIES IN LITERATURE, 1941

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Whether it is the end of modernism or the precursor to metatexts, *Finnegans Wake* is an academic’s paradise and a thrilling literary exploration—for the intrepid. ■

## Joyce’s Other Works

### CHAMBER MUSIC (1907)

Joyce was a gifted Irish tenor, and this collection of 36 poems bears that lyrical imprint. Largely autobiographical, the poems track a love affair that mirrors James’s and Nora’s.

### EXILES (1918)

Joyce’s first mature published work was a play influenced by one of Henrik Ibsen’s; indeed, Joyce pays tribute to the master in this dramatic work. Not essential reading, but an interesting window into Joyce’s psyche.

### POMES PENYEACH (1927)

This later collection of poems, written while he composed *Ulysses*, shows Joyce’s maturing voice as a writer.

### STEPHEN HERO (1944, POSTHUMOUS)

This incomplete, intensely personal manuscript is a more straightforward telling of the events that make up the masterful *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. ■