

Happy Bloomsday!

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



June 16th is approaching and for certain people, that can only mean one thing: Bloomsday. Contrary to what you might think, this has nothing to do with Spring and flowers. Bloomsday is an annual celebration of the life and work of Ireland's most famous author, James Joyce. Every year the events of his best known novel, *Ulysses*, are recreated in their exact locations and many literary events are held around the country and the world. Nowadays, tens of thousands of Dubliners and tourists take part in the week long event, ranging from lectures, readings, walking tours, pub crawls, costume contests in which participants dress like their favorite characters, and an interactive screening of the 1967 film adaptation of *Ulysses* (think *Rocky Horror Picture Show*). Some people even eat the same meals, which includes liver and kidneys alongside the typical ingredients of an Irish fried breakfast, as the novel's protagonist for the entire day.

The particular date of Bloomsday, June 16, 1904, was chosen by Joyce to be the date the events of his novel takes place. It was when he and his eventual wife Nora Barnacle had their first date. Its name comes from the main character of the novel, who is called Leopold Bloom. Hence, Bloomsday. The very first Bloomsday dates back to 1924 and caught the attention of Joyce himself. In a letter to an acquaintance, he mentioned that 'there is a group of people who observe



what they call Bloom's Day – June 16th.' It wasn't until the 50th anniversary of the events detailed in *Ulysses* that things really got started. John Ryan, Brian O'Nolan, Joyce's cousin poet Patrick Kavanagh and a few other highly esteemed guests took through the streets of Dublin tracing the novels steps. The party didn't get very far however, they stopped halfway along the route in John Ryan's pub and that was the end of that!

James Joyce was born February 2, 1882, in Dublin where he lived until he was 22 years old. His parents recognized his aptitude and intelligence and despite their troubled finances, sent him to a Jesuit boarding school. He went on to college to study English, French, and Italian at University College Dublin. He graduated in 1902 and then immediately left Ireland for France. Joyce had begun writing regularly by the time he graduated and attempted to publish an essay-story called *A Portrait of the Artist* in 1904. It was rejected and he tried to rework the novel but abandoned the novel halfway through. But decades later he rewrote it into one of his best works, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Back in Ireland, he then met his future wife Nora Barnacle at Finn's Hotel on Nassau Street. He had a complex relationship with his native country and decided to emigrate permanently from Ireland. He spent the rest of his life between Trieste, Zurich and Paris.

The year 1914 was when Joyce published his first book, *Dubliners*. On the success of this, he was able to begin writing *Ulysses*. Considered his greatest work, *Ulysses* was finally published in Paris in 1922 but on its release, critics were sharply divided over its innovative style. This only made the book more successful, although the controversy over the obscenity of some of the events lead to it being banned in several countries including the United States. His new found success came with a price however, and he suffered from eyesight problems for much of the latter half of his life, undergoing over 25 eye surgeries.

His next major publication was *Finnegan's Wake* in 1939, coinciding with the outbreak of the Second World War. The family moved to the south of France to avoid the Nazi invasion of Paris, and eventually made their way to neutral Switzerland, settling in Zurich. Sadly, Joyce's health took a turn for the worst in coming years, and he died at the age of 59 after an intestinal operation on January 13, 1941.

Ulysses is notoriously difficult to read and understand – many people need a dictionary on hand when reading it, and even more people give up before the end. It is divided into eighteen episodes and tells the story of an ordinary day in the life of Leopold Bloom, an advertising salesman living in Dublin in 1904. Bloom spends his day wandering the streets of Dublin encountering a variety of different characters, and not a whole lot happens. The book isn't famous for its plot. What the book is famous for is its writing style and context. It is classified as a 'modernist' novel and considered one of, if not the most important pieces of modernist literature. It is said *Ulysses* is written mostly as a 'stream of consciousness' of Bloom, something which had never been done successfully at the time and was highly innovative. The thoughts and actions of the characters are written simultaneously in a fragmented way, just like how thoughts, memories, and details appear in our minds. By incorporating real people and real places, the novel also achieves a high level of realism. With each new chapter, the narrative style and voice shifts dramatically filling story lines with puns and parodies of various writing styles popular at the time. In short, it's nothing like an average beginning, middle, and end type of book.

This year is the novel's 100th anniversary. The festival is no longer just one day but takes up an entire week, and most events are run by the James Joyce Centre in Dublin. The focus of events may change from year to year, such as the 2014 festivities centered on Joyce's second most famous book *Dubliners*. Recently some unusual events taking place include James Joyce meets Rocky Horror night! All this in the name of fun. So, two days from now – June 16th – Happy Bloomsday!