

The Writings of James Joyce

Albert Einstein once observed: "The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it's so comprehensible." It's obvious he never read Joyce. Irish novelist James Joyce was born in Dublin in 1882, the oldest of ten children. After graduating from Dublin's University College -- where he displayed exceptional academic promise -- he went to Paris to study medicine. Instead, he wrote poems and prose sketches. (Paris has that effect on one.) On a return visit to Ireland, he fell in love with an uneducated lass from Galway with the tenacious name of Nora Barnacle. They traveled throughout Europe before settling in Trieste. In World War I James and Nora moved with their two children to Paris. When World War II began they migrated to Zurich where he died in 1941.

Most literati consider Joyce's *Ulysses* -- first published in 1922 -- to be the finest novel written in the 20th century. Don't ask me why. Although its theme is simple (love) the complex book incorporates unprecedented idiosyncracies and introduces new devices, stances and verbal antics. It also makes June 16, 1904 one of the most famous days in literature. On its anniversary, hundreds of people -- apparently with nothing to do -- gather in Dublin to re-trace the steps of Joyce's protagonist, the Jewish bookie Leopold Bloom. 'Poldy' skulks about the city encountering numerous characters including Stephen Dedalus, whom we met in Joyce's autobiographical *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The plot's a bit of a downer, but *Ulysses* does end on a positive note as Molly, Bloom's two-timing wife, mentally re-affirms their marriage.

But if you find *Ulysses* a tough read, try *Finnegans Wake*. Although harassed by eye troubles (necessitating several operations) and deeply concerned about his daughter's schizophrenia, Joyce soldiered on to finish the book in 1939. It's filled with puns, riddles, word games, bits of cultural trivia, and linguistic curiosities; and begins with a sentence that starts on the final page. Critics still can't agree as to what it's all about. Any reader, however, can find something in it -- even if it's scrambled or appears on different pages. What's not to like about an author who cautions 'Look before you leak, dears,' and refers to the biblical characters Jacob and Esau as 'Jerk Off' and 'Eat Soup.' Nuclear physicists favor *Finnegan's Wake*: the seagull cries of "quark" gave them a name for the tiny building blocks that make up protons and neutrons.

Joyce meticulously shaped his writings. As if they weren't difficult enough, you have to read between the lines to truly appreciate them. For example, one interpretation of the above novels is that they represent life's inward journey from substance (*Portrait*) to consciousness (*Ulysses*) to dreams (*Finnegans Wake*). Personally, I prefer Joyce's collection of short stories, *The Dubliners* (which at least are intelligible, and feature his masterpiece *The Dead*). What you're not told is that each tale moves along until the protagonist has an epiphany (sudden insight) then the tale stops.

--Essay by Bill Lounsbury

What About Your Great Summer Reads??

Captain Flinn and the Pirate Dinosaurs. Pirates, dinosaurs, and one adventurous young boy with friends to help; this book has it all. Great for boys up to seven, entertaining enough for a little sister, and it even has a sequel. Young Flinn and his friends set out to help a pirate who has lost his ship and crew to the hungry tyrannosaurus rex and his crew of pirate dinosaurs. Plenty of swashbuckling family-friendly sword fights (if there is such a thing) and a good lesson in helping others. This book would only be better if Thomas the Train showed up. The Picasso-esque illustrations are remarkable and may be one reason adults enjoy it as well. Pick up the sequel, *Captain Flinn and the Missing Treasure* as well for the bonus game of snakes and ladders at the end.

- Andrea Miner

The Man from Beijing. After getting hooked on Swedish author Henning Mankell -- who writes the Kurt Wallander books, which PBS made into a television series, I expected great things from his new book, *The Man from Beijing*. After opening with a compelling, apparently senseless crime and introduction of great characters, Mankell takes readers on an international journey from Sweden to the 19th century American West and then to present-day China and Africa. Unfortunately he fails to make a compelling case for the grudge of the main protagonist and the allegiance of his principle cut-throat. This and a chapter-long political diversion led to a disappointing read.

-- Ray Pardo

The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo & The Girl Who Played with Fire. Several of the Friends enjoyed both of these books and then watched the movies at the historic Orchard Theater ! It was great to see Lisbeth Salander so wonderfully portrayed on the silver screen. The screenplays stayed remarkably true to the plot of the books. Norma Brady tells us that you have to read the 3rd book - *The Girl Who Kicked Over the Hornet's Nest*.