

“ULYSSES” – JUST FOR FUN

James Joyce’s difficult novel spawns annual Bloomsday

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, June 3, 2007

BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

DUBLIN — Every year on June 16, people around the world celebrate a day in the life of Leopold Bloom.

They eat what he ate. They walk the path he walked. They even say what he said.

Not a bad tribute for a guy who never existed.

Bloom is the hero of James Joyce’s legendary — and intimidating — novel *Ulysses*, a difficult book hailed by many as the best of the 20th century. It is a tale of a man’s ordinary day in Dublin, and this city has happily become the epicenter of an annual celebration of the book, known as Bloomsday.

For more than 50 years, people have gathered here for festive readings and breakfasts, lectures, and performances. And in case you thought the fun was only for former English majors, don’t fret: there’s plenty of alcohol and general merriment for all.

The holiday has become so noteworthy that attending Bloomsday in Dublin is considered a must in the book, *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* by Patricia Schultz.

I found myself in town on June 16 last year and couldn’t pass up the opportunity to retrace Bloom’s steps, at least some of them. The fictional advertising salesman’s meandering odyssey from 1904 (set on the same day Joyce went on his first outing with his future wife) spans 18 hours.

MULTIMEDIA

[Watch Ryan Smith’s guide to celebrating Bloomsday in Dublin](#)



A carriage with people dressed in Edwardian garb arrives at Davy Byrnes pub on Bloomsday. (RYAN E. SMITH)

A surprising number of places mentioned in *Ulysses* remain intact today, but not all of them. The city’s red-light district featured in one of the book’s episodes has been leveled, for example.

A good place to begin any Bloomsday adventure is — where else? — the beginning. The book’s action starts without Bloom,

just eight miles south of Dublin in Sandycove at the James Joyce Tower. It’s a short train ride away. The circular Martello tower, a stout, stone guardian at the edge of the sea, was part of a series of structures built to withstand an invasion by Napoleon.

Joyce stayed six nights here in 1904, and turned that episode into the opening pages of *Ulysses*. The tower has since been transformed into a small museum to the author’s life and works.

The windy view from the top is invigorating, and at the base I had a chance encounter with a man dressed as Joyce, who was pulling up in a horse-drawn carriage carrying other characters in Edwardian garb.

Nearby is the Forty Foot, a well-known bathing place named for the 40th Regiment of British foot soldiers who made the area their swimming hole more than 200 years ago. It’s little more than a rocky outcropping jutting into Dublin Bay with some steps carved into the frigid waters. (Let’s be honest: freezing waters. I’ve taken the plunge here, and even in mid-June, be prepared for the cold to take your breath away.)

Amazingly, men — and these days, women — swim here all year long. For those visitors brave enough to take a dip — it’s definitely worth it — there are no changing rooms on-site; just some jauntily painted benches and a wall.

From here, my traveling companion and I took a leisurely walk to Dalkey, a small town nearby where a character in *Ulysses* was a schoolteacher. It's a gorgeous stroll past so many of the neat Irish homes you see on postcards, full of emerald greenery and brightly painted doors.

Then it was back to Dublin's city center by train. Our goal was to make a literary walking tour of the Temple Bar, a neighborhood bustling with pubs and activity and home to a legendary nightlife, but we just missed it.

Small matter, since there are dozens of activities going on every year for Bloomsday, many of them through the James Joyce Centre. This year's offerings include a Bloomsday breakfast of sausages and Guinness, a recital covering the music of Joyce's Dublin, numerous film screenings and themed walking tours, and a one-night-only performance of the musical, *Himself and Nora*, referring to Joyce and his wife.

We chose to console ourselves by heading straight for Davy Byrnes, a pub dating back more than 100 years that Joyce used to frequent. Its pre-World War II decor is pleasing to the eye, especially the murals of Joycean Dublin, but most people are drawn here to appease their bellies.

This is the pub where Leopold Bloom arrived for lunch in *Ulysses* for a gorgonzola sandwich and a glass of Burgundy. Most of the people crammed in here ordered the same. (Not knowing this, we followed the example of the man in front of us and ordered pints of Guinness. Fortunately, no one noticed our faux pas.)

It's hard not to get swept up in the spirit of things at a place like this, even if you've never picked up a copy of the 700-plus-page book. A back room was full of revelers in costume, singing songs and cheering one another — many of them with one finger tucked carefully into their copy of *Ulysses*.



People take a dip on Bloomsday at the Forty Foot bathing place in Sandycove, Ireland. (RYAN E. SMITH)



A bronze plaque in the street marking the character Leopold Bloom's route in Dublin. (RYAN E. SMITH)

Drawn onward, we peeked back out into the Irish sunshine and the activity of nearby Grafton Street, a lively stretch of shops where cars are off limits, street performers are commonplace, and signs advertising beer offer you ready-made excuses, like "The leprechauns made me drink it!"

Other sites mentioned in the book wrestled for our attention, from the National Library to Dublin Castle, the seat of English power here for centuries whose additions over time create an unexpected architectural hodgepodge. Ultimately, we settled on a walk across the River Liffey to St. Mary's Abbey, passing along the way a few bronze plaques in the pavement marking the lunchtime portion of Bloom's route through the city.

At the abbey, under the vaulted ceiling and Gothic windows of a simple room dating back to the 12th century, a group of actors played out scenes from *Ulysses*. While reading the book had been torture back in college, hearing the novel's difficult language read out loud and seeing the action played out, it suddenly made sense. Somehow, it wasn't hard anymore.

What's more, it was actually funny. Everyone was laughing. At *Ulysses*. Amazing.

We attempted to make one last stop at Bloom's house at 7 Eccles St. It seemed only right. With aching feet we roamed the blue collar neighborhood where it was located, but without success.

Much later, I discovered that the site of the house is gone now, the door removed to the Joyce Center. Even if we had found it, I'm sure we would have found that nobody was home. That Bloom is such a wanderer.

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

