

Out of Hours

BJGP Library:

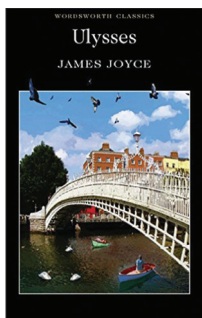
Ulysses

THE GENIUS OF JOYCE

Ulysses

James Joyce

Wordsworth Editions, 2013, PB, 736pp, £1.99
978-1840226355



I first started reading *Ulysses* when I was about 13. While exploring along my parents' bookshelf one day, I picked out a large green hard-backed book and flicked through its pages idly, looking for some naughty bits. Almost at once, my eye was caught by some very explicit descriptions of sex from the female point of view. Naturally I read on and didn't let the apparent absence of any punctuation bother me. There were also some very rude words that I had never seen in print before. What were my parents doing reading stuff like this? As I continued browsing, I came across other passages that were less sensational but very entertaining. So I kept on reading, just skipping about at random, ignoring anything I couldn't understand. After a while, I found myself reading this:

'Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick gible soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencod's roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.'

We are in Dublin. The year is 1904 and Mr Bloom is thinking about breakfast. He will shortly go out to buy a kidney for fourpence. A little later on we meet his cat:

'O, there you are, Mr Bloom said, turning from the fire.'

- Mkgnao!

The cat mewed in answer and stalked again stiffly round a leg of the table, mewing. Prr. Scratch my head. Prr.'



I liked the cat and I liked Mr Bloom, instantly. As I got to know *Ulysses* better he became a life-long friend and companion. Let me tell you more about him: he is mild, inoffensive, and 38 years old. He is Jewish (well, partly), married to Molly who is Irish, Spanish, beautiful, and adulterous. Mr Bloom seems unremarkable and his acquaintances treat him with amused condescension. He is a bit of an outsider, yet he has a lot of sterling qualities. He is generous, kind-hearted, interested in everything and everybody, always curious about how the world works.

But the best thing of all about Leopold Bloom is that, thanks to Joyce's genius, we are able to share all his thoughts, his feelings, and his fantasies as he goes about Dublin observing, wondering, questioning, speculating — and trying not to think about his wife's forthcoming 4 o'clock tryst with her new lover, the raffish concert-promoter 'Blazes' Boylan.

The third character in *Ulysses* is Stephen Dedalus, an aspiring young writer. Stephen is a bit self-obsessed but quite endearing. He and Bloom are both wandering round the city, their paths crossing several times until they finally meet in an amazingly lurid brothel where all Bloom's strange fantasies

"The delights include the way Joyce uses the English language in a variety of styles and parodies ... the humour and the pathos ..."

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

John Salinsky

32 Wentworth Hill, Wembley HA9 9SG, UK.

E-mail: jvsalinsky@aol.com

come to life. Stephen gets hopelessly drunk and is rescued by Bloom, who takes him home for a cup of cocoa and a chat.

Over the years I dipped into more chapters of *Ulysses* and found that with Mr Bloom as my guide I could gradually make some sense out of the more difficult bits. There was still a lot that I couldn't really understand but it didn't matter, because there was so much to enjoy as well. The delights include the way Joyce uses the English language in a variety of styles and parodies, the jokes and absurdities, the humour and the pathos, the wonderful poetic phrases that suddenly appear; and, of course, the ongoing story. The 18 episodes also echo or reference the Ancient Greek epic of Homer's *Odyssey*. But discovering these can be left till later.

So may I recommend, if you are not already a fan, that you get to know *Ulysses* too? You may already have tried to read it and given up. Please, consider trying again, but, this time, don't start at the beginning.

Begin with Leopold Bloom at the fourth chapter on page 48 in the Wordsworth paperback edition, which only costs £1.99 and has an excellent introduction. You can go back to the first three chapters later. And don't feel you have to read them in the right order.

Just keep the book by your bedside and let it slowly soak into your life.

John Salinsky,

Training Programme Director, Whittington GP VTS,
Whittington Education Centre, London.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp15X687505