



Festival Bloomsday Montréal
celebrates the life of James Joyce

Description

Past president David Schurman speaks about the man and author, and his literary legacy

By Irwin Rapoport

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The 11th annual **Festival Bloomsday Montréal** wrapped up on June 16, a celebration of renowned Irish writer [James Joyce](#) and his novel *Ulysses*.



Joyce by Djuna Barnes

Montreal, which has a very rich literary history and tradition, hosts the **largest Bloomsday Festival outside of Dublin**. For this year's edition, Westmount Magazine published this article, [Festival Bloomsday Montréal 11th edition starts June 11](#).

Joyce, during his career, wrote novels, short stories, and poetry, and was a literary critic, as well as an English teacher in Trieste and other European cities. His novels are standards in the English literary canon and many consider him, and other Irish writers, the finest in the English-speaking world.

Joyce, although passionate about Ireland, lived most of his adult life outside the country. Some of his most honoured novels are difficult to read, but as an author, he lived for art, which explored many universal themes.

This year's festival was very well attended and much appreciated.

To learn more about Joyce and why he is celebrated throughout the world, I spoke with **David Schurman**, the past president and founder of Festival Bloomsday.

WM: *How would you describe Joyce the man and his sense of being Irish, having lived outside of Ireland for most of his life. Why did he choose to not reside in Ireland?*

Schurman: Joyce would certainly say he was Irish to the core and, of course, only wrote about Irish themes, people and places in all of his work. However, he clearly felt that Ireland was a parochial place with inward-looking people. They were focused on the culture of their land and people, and many writers and members of the intelligentsia, like Yeats, wanted to revive Irish myths, language and culture.

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Joyce was most interested in what was happening on the Continent and embraced many of the new ideas,



especially in the literary world. So his choice to leave Ireland was likely based on this idea of living with more avant-garde people and so ended up soaking up their influences.

WM: *Was Joyce more of a private man or did he appreciate the celebrity status that he achieved?*

Schurman: I would have to say his life was mostly private and that he did not seek out any advanced status or even consider himself a major celebrity during his life. He would have been thrilled to know that now he is “adored” the world over and celebrated during Bloomsday Festivals on a yearly basis. He may have anticipated the literary criticism that developed around his work and even predicted it.

WM: *Many have read **The Dubliners** and **A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man**, but have not taken his larger and more complicated novels. What can readers do to prepare for tackling novels such as **Ulysses**?*

Schurman: *Ulysses*, IMHO his greatest work, achieved a high level of importance because of the approach Joyce took to the novel form. It is episodic and has no clear and simple narrative line like most novels. The 18 episodes are each written in a different style and Joyce simply plunks the reader into the middle of things and without guidance, he gives you the job of figuring it out. If you don’t understand inferences or allusions, then you are on your own.

Joyce himself acted in an aloof manner in the book and did not provide any real commentary that could be attributed to him directly. He was a linguist and scattered samples of foreign languages throughout the book like Italian, Spanish, and of course Latin. And of great importance is his educational background in the Catholic Church (he was Jesuit taught.) He left the church early, but never forgot the precepts of the church and its influence on Irish society.

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Reading *Ulysses* is definitely a challenge, but it can be accomplished by using study guides, listening to the audio version and perhaps of greatest help, joining a reading group about the book. Here is a [link](#) to the full audio version of the book, and in 2014, Kevin Birmingham wrote a superb book on the novel, ***The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce’s Ulysses*** (Random-Penguin Press, 2014).

WM: *Ulysses* faced some major legal hurdles. What happened and how did it help with the success of the book?

Schurman: Yes, it certainly did. One major reason is that Joyce gives you a set of characters that go about their day as normal people do and have always done. Everyday activities such as eating (with details on how this happens in often great and not too pleasant detail!), defecating, urinating, masturbating, having sex outside of marriage, going to a brothel, etc., are all included in the day-long wanderings of Bloom and his fellow travellers on June 16, 1904. And not only that, there are many scenes where the church is mocked (as on the very first page!) and disrespected.

This did not help with sales initially, but in the end, did not hurt as many people were interested in reading about the life of an ordinary Jewish man (Bloom) and how he was living as an outsider in Dublin.

The trial involving *Ulysses* as a pornographic work was also pivotal in ensuring it would eventually be better accepted. From Wikipedia: *Ulysses* was not legally published in the United States until 1934 after Judge John M. Woolsey ruled in *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses* that the book was not obscene.

WM: *How would you describe Joyce’s writing style or did he have several styles?*



Schurman: See above re: different styles. Some examples of these styles are the “Sirens” episode where Joyce makes a solid attempt to put the narrative into a musical fugue; the “Lotus-Eaters” episode where he gives an account of the development of the English language from very early times to modern-day; the play-like phantasmagorical brothel scene, “Circe”, and the enormous soliloquy of **Molly Bloom** that ends the book with no punctuation at all! And, of course, he uses the stream of consciousness technique also known as the internal monologue. So we often jump from Bloom (for example) speaking to another character but then, at the same time, thinking about that person or another topic completely! This can cause initial challenges to the reader.

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WM: *Joyce’s novels were very character-driven and he had an excellent ability to capture the details of everyday life and motivations. What inspired his choice of subjects and characters?*

Schurman: Yes indeed. The characters are mostly drawn from people he knew in Dublin and in some cases, this caused a few rather unhappy folks at the time when they recognized themselves. Also was a problem with *The Dubliners* and probably caused it to be delayed in publishing.

WM: *In terms of his poetry, how would you describe it and what themes did he explore?*

Schurman: He was an indifferent poet I would say, but his prose is often laced with some beautiful poetic passages. One of the greatest is the whole last two pages of the final episode, *Penelope*. Here are a few others:

“Wavewhite wedded words shimmering on the dim tide.”

“White horses with white frontlet plumes came round the Rotunda corner, galloping. A tiny coffin flashed by. In a hurry to bury. A mourning coach. Unmarried. Black for the married. Piebald for bachelors. Dun for a nun.”

“Listen: a fourworded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, oos. Vehement breath of waters amid seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks. In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. And, spent, its speech ceases. It flows purling, widely flowing, floating foampool, flower unfurling.”

“Quick warm sunlight came running from Berkeley Road, swiftly, in slim sandals, along the brightening footpath. Runs, she runs to meet me, a girl with gold hair on the wind.”

“A warm human plumpness settled down on his brain. His brain yielded. Perfume of embraces all him assailed. With hungered flesh obscurely, he mutely craved to adore.”

“The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit.”

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WM: *What was the impact of Joyce’s novels and poetry in his lifetime and how would you describe the impact of his literary legacy today?*

Schurman: In his lifetime he had influenced many contemporary writers and since 1922, I would say he was read by most writers and has had a significant impact on all writers alive today.

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Here are some links about James Joyce.

Two documentaries on his life:

A TedEd video:

Frank Delany on *The Dubliners*:

James Joyce reading *Ulysses*:

James Joyce reading *Finnegans Wake*:

To learn more about Festival Bloomsday Montréal, visit bloomsdaymontreal.com

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