



Joyce's Dublin to mark 100 years of "Bloomsday"

By Gideon Long

DUBLIN, June 10 (Reuters) - In the summer of 1924, Irish writer James Joyce sat alone in Paris, took out his notebook and gloomily wrote in it: "Today 16 of June 1924 twenty years after. Will anyone remember this date".

Two years had passed since Joyce had published his epic novel "Ulysses" and things were not going well.

Despite attracting a small core of devotees, the book had been denounced by the Irish as un-Christian filth, banned in Britain and burned by U.S. censors due to its "indecency".

To Joyce it seemed that June 16, 1904, the day on which the novel is set, was slipping unnoticed into history.

He need not have worried.

Next week, Dublin and the world will celebrate the 100th anniversary of what is now known universally as "Bloomsday" in honour of the central character of Ulysses, Leopold Bloom.

Thousands of Joyceans - academics, writers and tourists - will descend on his native city to pay homage to a book which many consider to be the greatest novel in the English language and a landmark in Western art.

Some 10,000 people will sit down to an outdoor breakfast on one of Dublin's main streets to recall the pork kidney, fried in "sizzling butter sauce" and sprinkled with pepper, which Bloom cooks for himself near the start of the novel.

Scores of cyclists in Edwardian costume will ride ramshackle bikes along the route walked by Joyce's fictional characters and 800 academics will attend a week-long symposium on every imaginable aspect of the writer's work.

"Bloomsday 100" will be one of the biggest literary parties Ireland has ever staged and will be mirrored in around 80 countries worldwide, including in Italy, Switzerland and France, the three countries where Joyce spent most of his adult life.

The week will end with a black-tie "Bloomsday Ball", costing 250 euros (\$300) a head, at a swish Dublin hotel.

Ulysses has long since shaken off its early reputation as "a book you can read on all the lavatory walls of Dublin" and is recognised as one of the most ambitious and inventive - if daunting - novels ever written.

But just what is it about the book that persuades grown men and women to don straw hats and blazers each June and wander around Dublin, celebrating the lives of people who never lived and events that never happened?

"Its appeal is that its themes are universal - birth, death love, marriage, angst and all things human," says Laura Weldon, a Joycean scholar and coordinator of next week's celebrations.

"Whatever language you read it in and whatever city you're sitting in, this book resonates."

Joyce did a good deal to nurture his reputation.

"I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles (in Ulysses) that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant," he once wrote. "That's the only way of insuring one's immortality."

But Ulysses is more than just a clever joke.

It is above all a towering tribute to human warmth and kindness, personified by Joyce's unlikely hero Bloom.

Joyce chose to end the novel with what he described as the most affirmative word in the English language - "Yes" - and set it on June 16, 1904, because that was the day he first courted the woman who later became his wife.

The irony of next week's carnival is that Joyce hated his home city as much as he loved it. He left Dublin in 1904 and seldom returned before his death in 1941.

Dublin is a "paralysis which many consider a city", he once wrote, dismissing Dubliners as "the most hopeless, useless and inconsistent race of charlatans I have ever come across".

And yet he remained obsessed by the city and the country of his birth.

Asked, late in life, if he would ever go back to Ireland, Joyce paused for thought.

"Have I ever left it?" he replied.

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