

DOOMSDAY

BLOOMSDAY

BLOOMSDAY

BLOOMSDAY

BLOOMSDAY

## On Bloomsday: all this because of a book!

KADEMUL ISLAM

**B**loomsday's origin lies in James Joyce's master-piece *Ulysses*. It is an account of a single day, June 16, 1904 in the lives of the citizens of Dublin. It has two main characters, Leopold Bloom, and Stephen Dedalus, the father-to-be and his surrogate son. The plot--if so conventional a term can be used to describe a book that broke so many conventions in its day, which, in the words of another author, gave such a violent evolutionary lurch' to the form of the novel--revolves around these two, who wander about in Dublin during the whole day missing each other, narrowly, here and there. But fate is at hand, they are destined to meet, they finally do, get drunk, have hallucinations, recover in a cabman's shelter, then stumble on to Leopold Bloom's home. Where Leopold's wife Molly Bloom is in bed awake with her thoughts, and from whence Stephen soon departs, leaving Leopold and go to sleep exactly as Joyce himself used to, with his feet towards the head of the bed--('reclined laterally, left, with right and left legs flexed, the indexfinger and thumb of the right hand resting on the bridge of the nose, in the attitude depicted on a snapshot photograph made by Percy Apjohn, the childman weary, the manchild in the womb.')

But Molly will still be awake--and will be for about twenty-five thousand words more, all without punctuation--for throughout the whole day, till these last pages, we readers have essentially been in male company, have walked and

rooted and rutted and belched and burped and relieved ourselves in a man's book, in a man's world, and now it is time for the woman to speak. Woman, who in the book is the underpinning for the world, the giver of life and repository of the true creative urge. Molly now has her say and her famous soliloquy closes this book of books, which seeks to encapsulate all of human experience, with a 'yes', as an affirmation of marriage, community, Man and life:

*God of heavens there is nothing like nature the wild mountains then sea and the waves rushing then the beautiful country with field of oats and wheat and all kinds of things and all the fine cattle going about that would do your heart good to see rivers and lakes...yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will yes.*

It is Stephen Dedalus's and Leopold Bloom's wandering through the city's streets and pubs and shops and hospital and brothel--their separate, modern-day Homeric odysseys-- that the Bloomsday festival recreates. And in doing so, it celebrates Dublin and Joyce's life, for he put his life in the book: Martello watchtower, where the book begins, was actually a place where he stayed, and which is now the Joyce Museum, complete with his guitar and walking stick; June 16 was also the day when he fell in love with his future wife, Nora Barnacle; 7 Eccles Street, which is Bloom's home in the book, is now an actual street, though now the original door has been taken off--since it is a doctor's office now--and put on

display a few blocks away. And so on.

Over the years --the first Bloomsday was held in 1954-- the festival, paralleling the growth of what has been called the Joyce industry, has evolved from the small pilgrimage made by avid Joyceans and academics into a huge, noisy cavalcade of tourists, a cultural jamboree, a festival held not only in Dublin but replicated, in lesser ways, globally, in places such as Shanghai and Costa Rica. Hordes of tourists, a huge mix of plain gawkers and tourists, amateur Joyceans, book lovers, literary and academic types start from George's Street in the morning and end up at O'Connell Street at late at night. And throughout the day, as befits this gargantuan, bawdy, rambunctious, roistering novel, there is plenty to eat and drink and see: barmaids and Edwardian boaters and yellow gloves and pints of Guinness and men in stilts and street theater and mimes and Joyce readings. And then there are seminars and discussions, the Joyce specialists and academics in cloistered rooms wrangling over commas in the Kidd versus the Habler editions. Entire doctoral theses have been generated from disputed passages in *Ulysses*. The Joyce industry keeps on getting fatter and sleeker.

And this year was the centenary Bloomsday, when the festival will last till the end of August. When this time the revelry is particularly high-octane, when Bloomsday began with a free breakfast for 10,000 people in Edwardian dress and went on from there. Bloomsday is now officially, in the words of one journalist surveying the scene, "the world's biggest simultaneous celebration of a single piece of art."

All this because of one book!

*Ulysses* is about language. The English language. Which can make it inordinately difficult for the reader whose mother tongue is not English. Faced with the problem of writing a modern epic within the confines of a single day--the universe in a microcosm--Joyce ran into technical problems. For example, one concerned the interior monologue, the much-discussed 'stream of consciousness': how would readers differentiate the interior thoughts of the different characters. Who is who?

Joyce solved the problem by assigning a characteristic rhythm to the thought-stream of each of his three main



characters. Stephen's, as befits the poet-Jesuit, is lyrical, subtle, somewhat clotted, much more conscious of words--not as signs for images but its more meditative aspects--than the other two. Bloom's own rhythm is quick, jaunty, darting, clipped--a fit vehicle for an intelligent, but not over-educated, as salesman. Molly Bloom's is different, more like a prose poem, short words fitted into long phrases, where we have to grasp her mind all in one piece.

It was these aspects of the language that threw me, somebody whose native language was not English, off from *Ulysses* when I first opened it. *Rhythm?* I had no ear then for English rhythms. Rhythms are internalized as an infant within the culture--any Bengali will automatically respond to *chol ray chol, urdo gogonay bajay madol*, for example--or else it is acquired over a lifetime's involvement with the language. A paragraph like the one below, when Bloom is falling asleep beside his wife, defeated me then: *With?*

*Sindbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer and Whinbad the Whaler and Ninbad the Nailor and Finbad the Failer and*

*Binbad the Bailer and Pinbad the Pailler and Minbad the Mailer and Hinbad the Hailer and Rinbad the Railer and Dinbad the Kailer and Vinbad the Quailer and Linbad the Yailer and Xinbad the Phthailler.*

What the hell was this, I thought?

The answer (the short answer, in fact, for in Joyce, one thing ineluctably leads to another): it is the language mimicking the rhythm of steady breathing. Bloom is falling asleep. This gradual fading of his waking self is itself reflected late in the passage when the phrase loses its previous consistency of similar sounds and instead of 'Dinbad the Dailer' becomes 'Dinbad the Kailer.' Bloom's consciousness is beginning to fragment.

I can hear it today. I couldn't hear it then. And this is just one tiny part of a weave so dense and bewildering that I left the book unread.

What got me back into *Ulysses*, this time for good, was Vladimir Nabokov's (the author of *Lolita*) *Lectures on Literature*, the collection of his classroom lectures at Cornell University. He was amazingly brisk about *Ulysses*, approaching the book with a no-nonsense, schoolmaster's air. Nabokov dis-

dained symbols, focused instead on the physical detail and the structure. So he took his students through the streets of Dublin, even made a map of Bloom's walk, made them see the waters of the Liffey river, smell the garbage, read the labels, feel the cloth of Bloom's pants. He laid bare, in Updike's words, 'the ticking watch.'

It galvanized me. For the first time in my life, I saw the pattern of *Ulysses*, looked at it from above, could feel Dublin, and therefore could feel Bloom. I no longer feared the book. Now I picked up the damn thing, read it from end to end. What I didn't understand, I ignored. I skipped parts. I bought guidebooks, and slowly, at leisure, feeling very much the gentleman-scholar, began to chase down all those allusions, the tics, Homeric organization, the Catholic theology, the classical references, the father-son theme, the subject of usurpation, exile, Irish history, Dublin accents, literary parades. Et cetera, et cetera. Slowly, over time, sure as taxes, *Ulysses* came around.

*Ulysses* is everywhere. Wherever there exist writers and books. In Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*, for example, that exact moment when a break in centuries-old taboos occurs, when Ammu looks at low-caste Velutha: 'The man standing in the shade of the rubber trees with coins of sunshine dancing on his body...'

And which is a direct descendant of the line in *Ulysses* which goes: '...through the checkerwork of leaves the sun flung spangles, dancing coins...'

Its images and phrases have entered modern consciousness: the bat which is 'like a little man in a cloak he is with tiny hands.' The dairywoman: 'Crouching by a patient cow at daybreak in the lush field, a witch on a toadstool, her wrinkled fingers quick at the squirming dugs. They lowed about her whom they knew, dewsilky cattle.' And of course, *Ulysses*'s most famous sentence: 'The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit.'

But why read it? It is a question Martin Amis has asked: 'Ulysses is thoroughly studied, it is exhaustively unzipped and unseamed, it is much deconstructed. But who reads (it) for the hell of it?' Practically nobody nowadays. Too much work. Which is a pity, really, because it is about

sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes. He bent down to her, his hands on his knees.

--Milk for the pussens, he said.

--Mrkgnao! the cat cried.

And it should be read so that should you find yourself, through the mysterious patterning of fate, in Dublin on Bloomsday, you'd know exactly what was going on. And so that you can have the mostest fun. If the centenary shindig is such a blast, can you imagine the party they are going to throw on June 16, 2022, when it's going to be the centenary of the publication of *Ulysses* itself.

And all this because of a book! Mrkgnao!

Kademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.



### Bloomsday Centenary Poem In Free Verse and Prose

KAISER HUQ

16 June 2004--  
Imagine!  
A hundred years  
since Stephen Dedalus and Leopold  
(Polidy) Bloom stepped out  
of their respective homes  
in Dublin...fair city  
where girls are so pretty...

Imagine the day  
in another city (town rather)  
with the same initial--  
Dhaka.  
Let  
two of its denizens,  
separated

like the Hibernian anti-heroes  
by age and religious heritage  
enact the Odyssean perambulations  
through fetid, waterlogged lanes,  
clutching dripping umbrellas--

the monsoon having arrived  
with a bang--  
and tiptoeing through slush.  
their names...one must have  
a mythic ring...

how about Ali Baba Sindbad,  
and the other, stolidly resonant...

Babu Hurree Chunder Mookherjee,  
that extraordinary creation  
of the master of Anglo-Indian fusion,  
Ruddy Yaar Kiplingan.

As for correspondence between chapters, why, 'Circe' is of course set in the old red light district of Kandu Patti; 'Scylla and Charybdis' in the Northbrook Hall Library: the subject of the impassioned debate that takes place there isn't about Shakespeare's supposed cuckoldry, as in the Dublin version, but something equally exciting, whether 'tis nobler to pursue Vaishnavaite devotion, with the help of one's own spouse or someone else's. For the rest, let undergrads toil on it as a tutorial assignment, meticulously plotting Joyce's Dublin on to our tropical metropolis.

Suddenly  
I am struck  
By a double-barrelled epiphany:  
Dublin is Dhaka is any city  
And Bloomsday is today is any day...

Henceforth,  
The map of Dublin as in Ulysses  
Suffices for all cities,  
And calendars are redundant  
For everyday in Bloomsday...

Hurre Babu (for you are perennial citizen of these sultry parts), kindly note: here's a suitable topic for yet another of your submissions to Notes & Queries, to be only rejected, like the others to the Royal Society, and eventually to be included in a privately printed limited edition of a definitive collection of all your unpublished adumbrations.

Dhaka, Bloomsday, 2004

Kaiser Huq teaches English at Dhaka University.

## Amiya Chakraborty On James Joyce

Ogden or Richards). It was after dinner, the two of them still sitting by the table. Then Joyce, wanting to check some word or phrase had opened the door to go to the next room and in the dark had almost tripped over the maid. She, entranced by the reading, had been listening at the door. The maid had been French, and of course uneducated, and it would have been quite impossible for her to have understood even a word (it would have been beyond her even if she had been English and educated). Joyce said, see, those who want to, do understand! Why, nobody could tell. They, he continued, who listen and read exclusively to read and listen have no barriers to comprehension. For their end was to understand. Pundits had pronounced on his books, but the biggest compliment on his writing had been paid by that maid-servant.

I listened. A faint American accent, a habit of pausing long in mid-sentence, then completing the thought. Airy paragraphs, ornately dotted. Heart-stealing nevertheless. Joyce was silent for a few minutes, then mentioned that the gramophone company had recorded him reciting from his novel. People fell asleep listening to it. There had to be many reasons for this. Could be the prose induced drowsiness. But then so did songs. The whole process seemed to unrelated to the content of a work.

His wife appeared. It was time for tea. The one who stepped into the room bearing the antique silver china, then served us, was she the very same eavesdropping, enchanted, domestic help? My question remained unasked. Joyce's men while drinking tea was grave, his talk somber. As if deeply pondering the teacup, the act of sipping, the spoon, our eating. His glance remained fixed on the tea utensils. In the middle of the conversation he enquired about my impending departure, the precise time, the specific train. My own answers were received with the air reserved for the revelation of timeless mysteries.

I recall one more fact. He had said he would give me the portions of the manuscript that had already been published, part of the novel in the making. You must, he added, read them on board the ship. And to let him know from there what I really thought of it. About the work and its language, he said, listen, in any European port sailors from all over the world, on shore for a few hours or days, gathered in bars. They came together in the evenings for fellowship. What did they talk about, and in which language? Some were Norwegians, one perhaps a Levantine Jew, a few Dutch, or maybe Spaniards or Americans or British. There was no common language, yet the talk flowed freely. A bottle in hand, laughter in the eyes, a fountain of words, somebody unfolding a tragic story, others listening with sympathy, whatever they said and understood was enough for the occasion, for the boisterous camaraderie of the moment!

Joyce explained that the words in his books were derived from other languages, or were influenced by them. Sometimes multiple words were combined to form one, at other times one word was split

into varying rhythms. Entire passages were the result of several different languages, combined from the tongues of many different nationalities and cultures. Those who went to the heart of language listened to both the mind's and the body's speech, to the whole, to the universal among all men. The same was true of writing.

As I listened to him it occurred to me that writers who hotly deny that their books embody a particular idea or theory are the ones who were most attentive to them. The constellation of languages was Joyce's very own creation. Content was embedded in the style itself. This particular technique of mingling together the waves of enraptured minds everywhere surely meant habitual self-abnegation, a forgetting of the self. Though what this practice had inspired in him mankind had declared to be supreme.

I did read on board the ship the pages Joyce gave me. I have to confess it was no easy matter, since I found virtually the whole thing incomprehensible. All attempts to grasp the meaning of the work meant either splitting headaches, or else bobbing along in a tide of black print. Every once in a great while, whispers of once-familiar thoughts now lost in the desolate wind blew past my ear. I felt a distinct pulsation in my mind. Then an ugly thought reared its head: the fear of uncleanness, of impure admixtures. Finally, driven to despair by this stupa of speech, this calculus of words, this laboratory of language, I threw it aside. And found renewed pleasure in the small talk of my fellow passengers, Englishmen stuffed into their government uniforms. The Mediterranean's wordless blue murmur seemed to make more sense, even as I dimly registered the inaccessible splendor of the text. I should have read it. Much later, I again read those sections of *Finnegan's Wake*. It was an exact repeat of my previous experience.

I never did respond to Joyce. To say anything to the single-minded author of such a densely-constructed narrative would have been futile.

I remember Joyce's face. A small, ironic smile hovering at the corner of his mouth, an immensely abstracted expression--partly no doubt because of his extremely poor eyesight--but lit with human warmth. Infinitely courteous.

And therein hangs a tale.

Just before I took my leave Joyce said, I'll give you an old book, but first tell me clearly the meaning of your name.\* Then left the room.

The book he presented me with was inscribed "To Mr. Ambrose Wheelturner." Along with the comment that in Europe this indeed was a most befitting name for me. That it was not merely a translation, but a true and proper name.

\*Amiya's full name was Amiyachandra Chakraborty. First published in *Six Seasons Review*, 2002, University Press Limited, Dhaka. Translated from Amiya Chakraborty's *Shesh Probondho*, Mowla Brothers, Dhaka.



PARIS. A fog-wrapped evening; lights glow in the streets. It was time now to leave Europe. Having decided to leave via Syria, I had spent the better part of the day at various travel agents' offices. Suddenly I thought of James Joyce; then, wanting to properly round off my last night in France, I decided to call on him. I had met Joyce just the other day at a literary get-together, and he had invited me to his home.

I had never read James Joyce's writing completely, end to end. Till this day he continues to elude me. Whenever I came up for air after a dive into his wordocean, moss, seaweed, other strange, wonderful marine life silkily clung to my skin. It left me feeling restless, uncertain. The experience dazzled both the eye and the mind, an unforgettable thing. All those colours, such varying speeds, glimpses of shimmering ruins beneath the waves. If only the saltwater didn't sting one's eyes, it would have been possible to see so much more but to stay submerged for any length of time in this particular sea of language one needed the deep-sea diver's special gear. Though I did know that our language, our very mode of thinking, was now tied inextricably to this fertile, bubbling genius. In other words, in no small measure have we been defined by this Paris-based, Irish writer's freewheeling prose. I was amazed that I, a Bengali from a thousand miles away, a stranger on the opposite shore, felt such happy kinship with him.

I climbed up the stairs. Joyce himself was standing at the top of his heavily-curtained flat. A lush carpet; a large, stylishly-decorated yet old-fashioned apartment. Every bulb was ablaze. Joyce's glasses had very thick lenses, the light occasionally glinting off his blurred vision. Again, it reminded me of the sea. The man was ethereal, not of solid earth.

Our talk turned to matters Indian; what were the writers there doing? Joyce mentioned Rabindranath Tagore's name with utmost respect. One should never read translations, he declared, translations were not literature. And yet, how astonishing that this Bengali genius could be found in them. He had seen Tagore in Paris. Had Bengali absorbed many other languages? Was Rabindranath's language as such? I saw that it was language itself, words, that he was most fascinated by.

He was reticent about himself. But certain hints about the Work In Progress were forthcoming. One night Joyce had been reading a certain section of the new work to a friend (I forgot whether it was