What JP Donleavy did best was the desperate melancholy of men in their prime

Tributes: John Banville, Kevin Barry, Donal Ryan, Pat McCabe, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and others assess 'The Ginger Man' author

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Like many of the contributors here, I fell in love with the novels of JP Donleavy in my late teens, relishing the ribaldry of his plots and revelling in the richness of his language. (They also left me with a lifelong weakness for alliteration.) The books were inspired but also an aspirational read, a smudged window revealing an adult world of louche living and bohemian behaviour.

Here, some of Ireland's leading writers, critics and his publisher offer their assessment of a prolific author, forever destined to be remembered for his classic debut, The Ginger Man.

**Kevin Barry**
The fact of JP Donleavy at large still and rambling around a big old house outside Mullingar was one of the few things that seemed to be keeping the country going on a spiritual level. It feels as if a strange and neccessary occult light has been extinguished.

The Ginger Man is best approached about the age of 18, probably – there is something about its intensity and madcap abandon that appeals when you're in the haunted realm of poetical youth. It's a book that will persevere, I think; it has an unkillable energy.

*Kevin Barry's latest novel is Beatlebone*

**Antony Farrell**
Mike (as he was known to his TCD friends) the man? Warm, witty, watchful, with glistening eyes that held you in steady regard. He was a friend whom I miss; his passing marks the end of an era shaped by the formidable legacy of his work (2 published books, half of them novels, the remainder plays, short stories, non-fiction). As his publisher, Lilliput is privileged to produce his ebooks, the sixtieth anniversary edition of The Ginger Man in 2015 (winning its author a Lifetime Achievement Award and an honorary DLitt from Trinity in his 88th year), and his last novel, A Letter Marked Personal, completed in 2007, scheduled for 2018. The Ginger Man Letters: Genesis of a Masterpiece, edited by his archivist and biographer Bill Dunn, will follow.
Adieu to this great writer, a Brooklyn-born, Bronx-raised American, Mr Donleavy. He said once, “I was educated here, I live here, both my parents were Irish: how Irish can you get?” He became the defining voice of his and succeeding generations, a more approachable Beckett in a red by a similar fire: child of existential man: hapless, funny, filthy, sad. He created timeless characters who step from the page: one of a posse: Marcel Proust, including Bellow and Nabokov. Lolita appeared alongside The Ginger Man; the latter was rejected by 20 publishers before it found a home in Paris. Mike’s friend Brendan Behan predicted it would “go around the world and beat the bejayesus out of the Bible”: 50 million copies in 25 languages later, it has.

*Antony Farrell is founder and publisher

**John Banville**

In The Ginger Man, his first and best book, Donleavy caught Dublin in the rackety postwar years with the same vividness and immediacy as Joyce portrayed it in the fading of its shabby grandeur as the Empire’s second city. He was known for raw sex and raucous humour, but what he did best was the desperate melancholy of men in their prime.

*John Banville’s latest novel is Mrs Osmond*

**Pat McCabe**

It was Joyce Cary’s The Horse’s Mouth which first led me – as I suspect it did him – to JP’s The Ginger Man. Which, in tandem with Brendan Behan’s Borstal Boy, became my two favoured books of the time, indeed of any time.

It’s a matter of style – impish, disreputable. Quite intoxicating. They say that the later books kept repeating. That’s good. I couldn’t get enough.

But don’t make the movie, Shane MacGowan and Johnny Depp, because now Mr Dangerfield is about as shocking as Gracie Fields – in any case, that was never its attraction. Equally good is The Beastly Beatitudes Of Balthazar B.

God rest you, JP Donleavy – because you enriched my life, for sure.

*Co-Motion will present a double bill of Pat McCabe’s Frank Pig Says Hello and The Leaves of Heaven at the Dublin Theatre Festival, Draoiicht, October 4th-7th; axis Ballymun, October 11th-13th*

**Sinéad Gleeson**

When Dorothy Parker reviewed The Ginger Man in 1958, she pointed out that although JP Donleavy wrote most of the novel in the Bronx and Boston, he “did it with the love of Dublin ways in his heart, and the beat of Dublin talk in his head”. It’s a bawdy, nomadic tale and one of my favourite Irish novels. Brilliantly comic, it follows Sebastian Dangerfield – a hard-drinking, womanising bowsie; an unforgettable protagonist motivated by hedonism, women he’s not married tc and booze. His vivid account of Dublin life echoes the psychogeographic wanderings of Ulysses.

Donleavy wrote many more books, including the The Onion Eaters, A Fairy Tale of New York and The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B.
For The Book Show on RTÉ, myself and my producer drove down to Levington, his home in Co Westmeath. It's a textbook crumbling literary pile, a Jane Austen house transplanted to just outside Mullingar. JP, or Mike, spent most of his time in a smaller part of the house where the servants once lived. On the wall hung a photo of him and Joe Frazier, just before Frazier's 1971 fight with Muhammad Ali. (Donleavy was once a boxer, and also fought Jake La Motta). Mike was tending the fire when we walked in, and there was cake and tea before he showed us around the house. Past the giant marble fireplace, the room where James Joyce once stood. He stopped at a piano, and played us a tune, singing a couple of bars. Somewhere in the house, there's a full-size swimming pool in disrepair, but he said it was too dangerous to show us.

Every inch of the walls was filled with his paintings – hundreds of them – and people often forget what an accomplished artist he was. But one room stood out above all others. The room that contained all the different versions of his work, in editions and languages from all over the world. Memorabilia associated with theatre adaptations or his plays, notebooks, manuscripts of unfinished work. A writer's room, full of sentences, that showed just how many words he amassed in a lifetime. Donleavy will be missed, and we can only hope that the long talked-of film of The Ginger Man will now finally happen.

Sínead Gleeson presents the Book Show on RTÉ Radio

**Donal Ryan**

Antony Farrell of The Lilliput Press described JP Donleavy to me around six years ago: “He’s one of the true greats. And he’s kind. One of the kindest men you’ll ever meet.” Antony was his friend and neighbour. I didn’t meet him until 2015 when the Lilliput Press re-issued his raucous, rambunctious, epically successful masterpiece, The Ginger Man, a book I had first read in 1992 and re-read several times. The launch was at Trinity, stomping ground of its flawed and wonderful hero, Sebastian Dangerfield. JP Donleavy wore his greatness well; he was gentle and welcoming, slightly embarrassed at the attention, happy to chat with anyone who approached him. Later that year he was honoured at the Irish Book Awards and he made a lovely, witty speech; he lit up and lifted the room. He made everyone feel a part of his story. He was, as Antony said, “Rock n’ Roll in his universalism.” I’m so glad to have met him, and to be able to match my awe at his achievements with my fondness for his memory. What things to have been: great and kind. One of literature’s true gentlemen.

*Donal Ryan’s latest novel is All We Shall Know*

**Éilís Ní Dhuibhne**

JP Donleavy was one of the most famous writers alive in Ireland when I was a teenager. I remember on one occasion in the summer of 1971, when I was working in Greene’s Bookshop for the schoolbook rush, his wife came into the shop. We
all rushed to the top of the stairs to stare at her through the banisters (she was lovely, as I recall, with a long skirt and long hair.) He was a celebrity, not only in bookshops.

We all read The Gingerman back then. I didn’t fall in love with it and haven’t reread it. Later in the mid-seventies I had a close friend, and classmate, from the US. He and his pal had come to Ireland for a two year MA programme entirely on account of The Gingerman, which was they adored. The plan was to follow in at least some of the steps of their countryman, Sebastian Dangerfield. They were disappointed to discover that there was more than one university in Dublin, and that the University of Dublin is not the same as University College Dublin. They had to spend two years in Belfield, not in the Trinity which JP Donleavy had imbued with mythological status.

But they got over it.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s latest work is her Selected Stories

**Peter Fallon**

When I first went to America to give a reading in 1972, while I was still a student at Trinity, I was surprised by the number of people who said they “knew” Trinity from The Ginger Man. Soon afterwards I published in Blood and Station; John Jordan’s reminiscences of Gainor Crist on whom, it’s said, the novel’s central figure, Sebastian Dangerfield, is based.

From the early/mid ’70s, following my return to Co Meath, JP Donleavy and I were “neighbours”, he having settled at Levington Park across the Westmeath border. In 30 years we hadn’t met until, that is, I thought I’d correct this and wrote him a note. Arrangements were made through one Teresa for me to visit him one afternoon in August 2005.

He lived in what felt like a museum to himself and the tour he gave me was clearly well practised. There was the typescript of his bestselling novel, with Brendan Behan’s handwritten markings on it. There, upstairs and downstairs, were his paintings. He spoke constantly about himself, his trials and tribulations. He showed no interest in anyone else and, indeed, displayed no curiosity at all. It struck me that he was lost in his own past.

Until, that is, I began to make noises about departing and having taken up his time. Then it became clear that he knew more about me, and what I did and had done, than he’d let on or I’d have imagined. Suddenly his monologue turned into conversation and it struck me that he was not only lost in that past but lonely in it too. We did get to “Call me Mike”.

As it happened I was going on that evening to have dinner in Dublin with Seamus Heaney. Naturally I reported and Seamus remembered his own first, and only, meeting. When Seamus was at Queen’s he wrote to and invited JP Donleavy to come to address the English Society. What he remembered more than anything else was an arrival in a sports car and before the reading the slow unpeeling from each finger on both hands of the kidskin driving gloves. For the boy from
Bellaghy this was the ultimate in sophistication.

*Peter Fallon is a poet and publisher at Gallery Press*

**Patricia Craig**

JP Donleavy is one of those authors who will be forever remembered for a single work – in his case, *The Ginger Man*, which woke up Dublin to a sense of its comic incorrigibility. When the novel came out in 1955, it was greeted as a timely, uproarious and (to some) outrageous account of unbridled goings-on in the city. It made Donleavy’s name, and gave him a hold (as an Irish-American) on his ancestral country. He never matched it in any subsequent work of fiction, though JF Donleavy’s *Ireland* (1986) runs it close in terms of insouciance and exuberance. He deserves his place among those whose purpose was to cock a snook at hidebound, church-ridden Ireland.

*Patricia Craig is an author and critic. Her latest work is the memoir, Bookworm*

**Eibhear Walshe**

Certain books can evoke a very particular moment of your life, and all in an instant. For me, *The Ginger Man* brings me right back to my time in Dublin as a postgraduate student in the early 1980s. I first heard about JP Donleavy from my North American flatmates, all of whom much more passionate about Ireland and about Irish writers than I had been up to that point. My Canadian friend insisted that I read it, shocked that it had slipped beneath my radar and I was glad that I did.

It was a fortunate chance to find another literary version of the city I was living in, to put alongside Joyce and Edna O’Brien, my other favourites at the time. This was a likeable, raffish, bohemian Dublin, set just after the second World War and an agreeably comic world to explore for me. Traces of that world had survived right into the early 1980s and its exoticism was, then, part of its allure for me.

By this time, the fact that *The Ginger Man* had been banned only added to its allure for us. The world he depicted seemed exciting when compared to our relatively tame student lives and we relished this quality in particular. Donleavy’s novels never featured on our required reading lists but I was fascinated by the titles of his other works, particularly *The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B* and *The Destinies of Darcy Dancer, Gentleman* and I had no problem tracking them down. In those days, his books were widely available in Dublin bookshops and so I devoured them.

I haven’t re-read them in many years, and I’m not sure how those imagined worlds would resonate with me now, but a lucky combination of time and place made them very important to me as a young reader. JP Donleavy was part of an important formative moment for me and, I think, for many others, making Dublin an even more vivid place than the real one I was living in.

*Eibhear Walshe lectures in English at UCC and is the author of The Diary of Mrs Travers*
John Kelly
It was a very great honour to interview the great man at his home at Levington Park. He was gentle, charming and very generous with his time and energies – happy to show me around a house with many rooms and memories – the heart of a study piled high with books and boxes of manuscripts.

Not long afterwards Siobhán Kane organised a reading in Dublin with myself, Colin Barrett and Mike – as Mr Donleavy was known. Because of his age I think we all felt the need to mind him – even protect him – but he was soon in quiet command of his audience. Witty, sharp as a tack and reading from The Ginger Man in a pub called The Ginger Man. The Catacombs, alas, were closed.
*John Kelly is a writer and broadcaster*

John McCourt
The death of Irish-American author JP Donleavy is yet another severe loss to Irish literature, indeed to literature in general. Following Anthony Cronin, his departure deprives us of perhaps the last link to Ireland’s mid-century generation of “Angry Young Men” – Behan, Kavanagh, Flann O’Brien – each of whom in his way shook up and challenged what was considered good form and proper content in Irish writing and Irish society in the staid and often stultifying forties and fifties.

But Donleavy was more than a fly on their wall. He was a revolutionary writer in his own right, pushing the agenda with regard to content but also engaging in stylistic experiment (with more than a passing nod to Joyce). All this Behan instantly recognised. Donleavy’s range and reach extended well beyond his adopted home in Ireland (he is rightly valued as an important contributor to the American canon – especially for his bittersweet, deeply funny A Fairy Tale of New York).

Yet he deserves his place in the pantheon of great Irish comic novelists for his capacity to write brilliantly and often hilariously about drink, divilment of all kinds, and of course, sex, with all its pleasures and frustrations. I was lucky enough to stumble upon The Ginger Man in my late teens and, intoxicated by the vulgar, deplorable, but ultimately likeable scoundrel that is Rodney Dangerfield, for a few years could not get enough of his often electrifying if awkwardly titled novels, such as The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B, The Onion Eaters, and The Destinies of Darcy Dancer, Gentleman. Although Donleavy upset many an apple cart in the mid-twentieth century and although he would fail many of today’s political correctness tests, his best works remain vibrant testimonies to his time and will stand the test of time.
*John McCourt is Professor of English at the University of Macerata. He has just co-edited Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority, with Paul Fagan and Ruben Borg*
John Minihan
I started photographing JP in the early ’80s in London as a writer and an artist. He always stayed in prime locations like Claridges hotel or the St James Club. In the late ’80s he had a show of his paintings at a gallery off the Kings Road in Chelsea. One of the paintings was a head of Samuel Beckett and he told me that he had worked from my photographs of Beckett. Well, I was delighted. RIP.

*John Minihan’s works include Samuel Beckett: Photographs*

John Brannigan
‘All I want/ Is one break/ Which is not/ My neck’.

JP Donleavy once described how he found these words imprinted in concrete outside a café in Oklahoma, a quotation from his first and most famous novel, *The Ginger Man* (1955). It symbolised the oddity of his literary reputation, which largely have been ignored by literary scholars while loved by a cult following. His range of themes was diverse, but underpinning his thirteen novels is a spritely prose style and dark comedy about clamouring for food, drink and sex which was established early in *The Ginger Man*. The protagonist, Sebastian Dangerfield, scours bohemian Dublin to satiate his appetites.

It was based on Donleavy’s experiences with a charismatic fellow American student, Gainor Crist, in Trinity College, and on his associations with that tragic generation of Irish writers, Brendan Behan, Patrick Kavanagh and Flann O’Brien. *The Ginger Man* deserves to be considered the equal of Heller’s *Catch-22* and Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, as exemplar of the individual rebellion against social conventions. It is just as much at home in the Irish writing of the period in parading libertarian defiance of a repressive society. Something of its thematic significance might be lost with time, but what stands out is the lyricism of his prose: ‘Come here till I tell you. Where is the sea high and the winds soft and moist and warm, sometimes stained with sun, with a peace so wild for wishing where all is told and telling’.

*Prof John Brannigan is a lecturer at University College Dublin*

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