JP Donleavy obituary: acclaimed author of ‘a bawled-out comic song of sex’

The Westmeath resident and son of Irish parents felt no sentiment towards Ireland

JP Donleavy, who has died at the age of 91, was best known as the author of The Ginger Man, the critically acclaimed comic masterpiece. It is estimated that it sold over 50 million copies in more than 20 languages, and it has never been out of print. Banned in Ireland for 20 years, it was nevertheless hugely popular among Irish readers.

The book tells the story of the boozing, womanising, Sebastian Dangerfield and his pursuit of the chaste Miss Lilly Frost. It was first published in 1955 by the Olympia Press, Paris, as part of the Travellers’ Companion series along with such titles as Chariots of Flesh, Rogue Women and School for Sin. Donleavy was publicly outraged that his book was marketed as pornography, but privately acknowledged that the resultant notoriety boosted sales.

He sued the publisher, Maurice Girodias, over the rights to the book, entering into litigation that was conducted in court in London, Paris and New York and which continued for 21 years. Donleavy not only emerged victorious but also bought the Olympia Press.

James Patrick Donleavy was born on April 23rd, 1926 in Brooklyn, New York, one of the three children of an Irish immigrant family. When he was seven, the family moved to Woodlawn in the Bronx. His parents were comfortably off and he spent his teenage years “in a curious fairyland of privilege”. Not everything in the garden was rosy, however, and he was expelled from several high schools for bad behaviour.

He was more at home at the New York Athletic Club, where boxing was his chosen sport. Although he never fought competitively, in later life he liked it to be known that he could use his fists and boasted of his “violent reputation”.

Having served in the United States Navy during the second World War, he arrived in Dublin in 1946 to study science at Trinity College. He was not short of money. “My G.I. Bill of Rights plus an allowance sent by my faithful mother gave me a considerable income”, he said.

Donleavy abandoned his studies to pursue a career in painting and set up a studio in Killeen, Co Wicklow. Specialising in “risqué female nudes”, he held three solo exhibitions at the Dublin Painters’ Gallery on St Stephen’s Green. Aggrieved by some press reviews, notably in The Irish Times, he felt that his work would be better appreciated in London. He approached the Redfern Gallery there, but was told that he was not sufficiently well known for his work to be exhibited. Furious, he resolved to write a book that would make him known “in every nook and cranny all over the world”. In the summer of 1951 he began work on The Ginger Man.

RELATED

JP Donleavy 1926-2017: A life in pictures

The Ginger Man review: Dangerfield at 60 – still sailing his dream boats

JP Donleavy’s The Ginger Man at 60

Donleavy had been published in John Ryan’s Envoy. He was part of the company of Left-wingers, republicans that gathered in McDaid’s of Harry Street and frequented the Turf Club in Dublin, a bar that hosted after-hours drinking. The company included Brendan Behan, Arabella Blessington, a fellow-student and compatriot of Donleavy’s, Gainor Crist, who was the infant’s mother, and C.J. Gribbin, a poet who also became a fellow painter and later editor of The Collector.

Suggested for you

JP Donleavy 1926-2017: A life in pictures
Having completed the book on his return to the US in 1952, Donleavy submitted it to the Boston publishing house, Little Brown and Co. It was rejected. “There’s libel and there’s obscenity in that book!” he was told.

The editor-in-chief of Scribner’s, John Paul Miller, was more positive, quoting colleagues who described it as the “best manuscript” ever submitted to the company. He greatly regretted, therefore, that it was “unpublishable”. Donleavy moved to London. “My life literally depended on getting this book into print, and when I couldn’t, it just drove me out of America.”

It was Brendan Behan who recommended the Olympia Press, telling him: “This book of yours will go round the world an beat the bejayesus out of the Bible.” Legal problems aside, The Ginger Man was a great success. The Manchester Guardian praised an “outrageous and fantastic comedy” while, on the other side of the Atlantic, Dorothy Parker described it as “a rigadoon of rascality, a bawled-out comic song of sex”.

A television adaptation was broadcast by the BBC and in September 1959 a stage version, with Richard Harris in the lead role, was produced at the Fortune Theatre, London. The play received a hostile reception from the press when it transferred to the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin. The Evening Herald dismissed it as “sordid and repulsive”, the Evening Mail deemed it to be “tasteless, trivial and empty” and the Irish Independent condemned it as “an insult to religion and an outrage to normal feelings of decency”. Following an approach to the Gaiety management by a representative of the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, the play was taken off after three nights.

The Ginger Man prompted critics to compare Donleavy favourably to Joyce and Flann O’Brien, a comparison that failed the test of time. In his subsequent work he retained the trademark staccato style, the penchant for expletives and alliterations as well as the preoccupation with sex. His novels were described as Oedipal fairy tales. He was accused of misanthropy, misogyny and anti-semitism. And he was accused of repeating himself. None of which cut much ice with him. A bad review, he insisted, is always written by a bad writer.


ADVERTISEMENT
In 1967 Donleavy became an Irish citizen. In the early 1970s he purchased Levington Park, a 180-acre estate on the shores of Lough Owel near Mullingar. There, in the 20-room house he lived the life of an Irish gentleman, dressed in tweeds and speaking in the measured drawl of the vanishing gentry. Mick and Bianca Jagger were guests and Billy Connolly sent Christmas cards. He rode with the Westmeath Hunt and further amused himself by setting the dogs on visitors.

His writing won many awards in the US. His paintings were intermittently exhibited in the US and Europe, most recently in Dublin in February 2006. He regularly contributed to publications including The Times, The New York Times and Penthouse. The stage version of The Ginger Man was revived in Dublin in 1999.

Donleavy had no sentimental attachment to his adopted country; rather he was drawn to Ireland by the tax-free scheme for artists. In 2005 he disposed of his extensive literary archive, including the original manuscript of The Ginger Man. His expressed preference was for the papers to remain in Ireland, but he wanted “appropriate remuneration”. An American university acquired the archive for a seven-figure sum that no Irish library could match.

He married, firstly, Valerie Heron and, secondly, Mary Wilson Price; both marriages were dissolved. His children Philip, Karen, Rebecca Wallis and Rory survive him.

JP Donleavy obituary: acclaimed author of 'a bawled-out comic song of sex'

JP Donleavy, the artist: mad planets and strange fish

People say 'Don't you have your own country?' We reply 'Mind your own goddamn business'

Darren Aronofsky: 'My ego finds its way into all the films'

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

SUBSCRIBE NOW