J.P. Donleavy, Acclaimed Author of ‘The Ginger Man,’ Dies at 91

By ANITA GATES  SEPTEMBER 13, 2017

J. P. Donleavy, the expatriate American author whose 1955 novel “The Ginger Man” shook up the literary world with its combination of sexual frankness and outrageous humor, died on Monday at a hospital near his home in Mullingar, County Westmeath, Ireland. He was 91.

His sister, Mary Rita Donleavy, said the cause was a stroke.

Mr. Donleavy had considerable trouble finding a publisher for “The Ginger Man,” his bawdily adventurous story of 1940s university life in Dublin, which he described to The New York Times in 2000 as “celebratory, boisterous and resolutely careless mayhem.”

The playwright Brendan Behan, a friend, suggested that Mr. Donleavy send the manuscript to Olympia Press in Paris. This worked out well, in that Olympia accepted the book, and not well, in that it was published as part of the Traveler’s Companion series, which was known for erotica.

“That was basically the end of my career,” Mr. Donleavy told The Times. “I was ‘a dirty book writer’ out of Paris.” In fact, he went on to write many other successful
noveles.

“The Ginger Man” — whose bohemian American-in-Ireland antihero, Sebastian Dangerfield, has been described as impulsive, destructive, wayward, cruel, a monster, a clown and a psychopath — was both banned and burned in Ireland. When it was published in the United States in 1958, Chapter 10 was omitted, along with numerous sentences here and there.

The novel eventually won critical acclaim and public acceptance, so much so that it is now considered a contemporary classic, selling more than 45 million copies worldwide. Mr. Donleavy was compared to James Joyce and hailed as a forerunner of both the black humor movement and the London playwrights known as the Angry Young Men.

“What really makes ‘The Ginger Man’ a vital work,” Norman Podhoretz, the longtime editor of Commentary, wrote, “is the fact that it both reflects and comments dramatically on the absurdities of an age clinging to values in which it simply cannot believe and unable to summon up the courage to find out what its moral convictions really are.”

In a strange twist, after Mr. Donleavy had been pursuing legal action against Olympia for years to regain the book’s copyright, he ended up owning the Paris company, having sent his wife to slip into an auction and buy it for a relatively small sum in 1970 after it went bankrupt.

A stage version of “The Ginger Man” opened in London in 1959, with Richard Harris as Dangerfield, and a British television movie starring Ian Hendry was broadcast in 1962. Patrick O’Neal starred in an Off Broadway production in 1963 (and opened a restaurant named for the play across from Lincoln Center that same year), but there has yet to be a feature film version.

“Everyone who has ever been in Hollywood has had a go at making a picture from the book,” Mr. Donleavy told the London newspaper The Independent in 2010.

Mike Nichols, John Huston and Robert Redford all pursued the idea. At one point in the 1990s, Mr. Donleavy’s son Philip was set to produce a film version.
Johnny Depp was the most recent movie figure to announce plans to develop it.

Mr. Donleavy wrote more than a dozen novels, as well as plays and nonfiction books. If anyone doubted his taste for stylistic extravagance, the titles of some of his books — like “The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B.” (1968), the story of a man whose only happy affair was with his nanny, and “The Destinies of Darcy Dancer, Gentleman” (1977) — made that point on their own.

The protagonist of “The Onion Eaters” (1971) lives in a crumbling Irish castle and is prone to sex and violence. Even Mr. Donleavy’s so-called etiquette guide, “The Unexpurgated Code: A Complete Manual of Survival & Manners” (1975), was irreverent, including sections on “plate and knife licking” and “how to prevent people from detesting you.”

His fiction also included “A Singular Man” (1963), about a business executive who has affairs with two secretaries and his housekeeper, and “A Fairy Tale of New York” (1973), about an American who goes to work at a funeral home to pay for his wife’s burial. Both were adapted for the stage, as was “The Beastly Beatitudes.”

Mr. Donleavy was an accomplished painter and had exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic, including a show at the National Arts Club in Manhattan in 2007, when he was 81. Of old age, he wrote, “It’s not nice, but take comfort that you won’t stay that way forever.”

Mr. Donleavy found himself in the news in 2011 when his second wife, Mary Wilson Price, an actress, revealed that the two grown children she had given birth to during their 19-year marriage, which ended in divorce in 1989, were not Mr. Donleavy’s. DNA tests performed after the couple had separated established that Rebecca Donleavy was the daughter of Kieran Guinness, of the brewing dynasty, and Rory Donleavy was the son of Finn Guinness, Kieran’s brother, whom Ms. Price later married.

Ms. Price announced that she would publish a memoir, but not in Mr. Donleavy’s lifetime.
James Patrick Donleavy Jr. was born in Brooklyn on April 23, 1926, the son of James and Margaret Donleavy, Irish immigrants. He grew up in the northwest Bronx, near Van Cortlandt Park. His father worked as a florist and orchid grower and later became a firefighter.

The younger Mr. Donleavy began boxing at the New York Athletic Club in his teens and was told he had the makings of a middleweight champion. “The trick is to keep the arm and fist loose like a piece of spaghetti and the fist limp until the moment of impact,” he said in a 2000 interview with the magazine Irish America, having kept up his skills over the years. “If you do that, they won’t even see it coming.”

After serving in the Navy in World War II, he studied microbiology at Trinity College in Dublin on the G.I. Bill. The title character of “The Ginger Man,” Mr. Donleavy said, was inspired by a classmate there, Gainor Stephen Crist.

Mr. Donleavy lived in London and on the Isle of Man for most of the 1950s and ’60s, then moved to Ireland in 1969 after it had abolished the income tax for creative artists, including writers. He had lived since 1972 at Levington Park, a mid-18th-century stone manor house on a 180-acre estate and working farm in County Westmeath.

Asked to identify himself by nationality, Mr. Donleavy would say he was an American, but a writer for T: The New York Times Style Magazine described him in 2014 as “an odd fish swimming the mid-Atlantic apart from all the usual schools of thought.”

Mr. Donleavy’s first marriage, to Valerie Heron, ended in divorce in 1969. In addition to his sister, who is a professor of education at Lehman College in the Bronx, and the two children from his marriage to Ms. Price, his survivors include his son Philip and a daughter, Karen Donleavy, from his marriage to Ms. Heron, and several grandchildren. His brother, Thomas, died in 2016.

His last published novels were “The Lady Who Liked Clean Rest Rooms” (1997) and “Wrong Information Is Being Given Out at Princeton” (1998). Mr. Donleavy had
also been working on a manuscript, “The Dog That Fell From the 17th Floor,” for several years. All three were set in and around New York.

Mr. Donleavy sometimes expressed a decidedly practical opinion about his chosen career. “One day, while innocently looking in the window of an old established cheese shop in London, the definition of what writing is all about hit me,” he told Time magazine in 1968. “Writing is turning one’s worst moments into money.”

**Correction: September 15, 2017**

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this obituary misspelled the surname of the college classmate who inspired the title character of Mr. Donleavy’s novel “The Ginger Man.” He was Gainor Steven Crist, not Cris.

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