The author JP Donleavy has died aged 91

Story by Olga Aughey

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The late JP Donleavy

Author of the critically acclaimed The Ginger Man, JP Donleavy, has died aged 91.

He died on Monday at a hospital in Mullingar.

Mr Donleavy made Westmeath's Levington Hall his home in 1969, was born in Brooklyn, New York, the son of two Irish immigrant parents.

He travelled to Dublin to study in Trinity College and was best known for his 1955 novel The Ginger Man, which he penned at the age of 29.

It followed the exploits of the anti-hero Sebastian Dangerfield, a student at Trinity making his way following The Second World War, selling over 45 million copies worldwide.

It was banned in Ireland until the 1970s. His work also included The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B, A Singular Man, and A Fairy Tale of New York.

In an interview with this paper in 2009, JP looked back over those heady student days when he first cut a dash across Dublin and had fallen in with the literary crowd, one of them being Brendan Behan.

"We all drank in Davy Byrne's, which was sort of an artsy pub in the 1940s and Behan addressed me as a 'narrow back', which meant that I had made money off the 'broad backs', as the first generation immigrants had been called.

"Because I had been in the navy and so on, I took this as an insult and called Behan out for a fight. He didn't know of course that I had trained as a boxer in the New York Athletic Club. Anyway we were standing there in the lane outside Davy Byrne's when I said to him: 'Do you know that not one single person has put down their drink to come out and watch us fight', and he laughed and that was the start of a great friendship."

JP also talked of the poverty he saw in Dublin at the time.
"I would see huge houses with no doors and the shadow of rats darting in and out."

Donleavy was admired by many, including actor Johnny Depp, who was in talks for a role in for a screen version of The Ginger Man.

"I really had no idea how famous he was and ran into him quite by accident. I was sitting at my room in the New York Athletic Club and he came in and sat beside me. I had the manuscript for Dog On The 17th Floor beside me and he asked me what it was all about.

"I motioned to the window and gestured about jumping out and he laughed and took an interest in the story. That's how I began to know him and as it turns out we had similar childhoods. His childhood was countryfied as was mine."

Donleavy was also a visual artist and in 2015 received a Bord Gáis Energy Lifetime Achievement Award at the Irish Book Awards.