Brendan Behan, first to read the manuscript of JP Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man*, told his friend: “This book of yours is going to go around the world and beat the bejaysus out of the Bible.” Behan got the first half right.

The first novel of JP Donleavy, who died on Monday near his home in Co Westmeath, has never been out of print in English since its 1955 publication. It has been translated into two dozen language, with sales topping 45 million.

Donleavy’s impact as a writer – novelist and playwright – has been far-reaching. A skilled amateur boxer, who trained as a teenager at the New York Athletic Club, Donleavy was a fighter in life, never accepting rejection and standing up to anyone who challenged him, including pub critics, the literary establishment, government and church censors.

After *The Ginger Man* was published by Maurice Girodias, of The Olympia Press, in The Traveller’s Companion Series, which specialised in formulaic erotica, Donleavy strenuously objected.

He assumed his novel would be published by Olympia’s Collection Merlin, a literary imprint that published Samuel Beckett. Girodias and Donleavy became involved in a legal battle that spilled over into the courts of three nations – England, France and America. Donleavy would prevail, but it took 21 years.

*The Ginger Man* was banned in France, Ireland and Australia. In Ireland, the Censorship of Publications Board in early 1956 added the title to a list of 76 books banned from sale and distribution in the Republic. Donleavy, who had been born in the US, went to Trinity College in Dublin in the 1940s, and became an Irish citizen in 1967. He was required to complete forms for exemption from the ban to obtain personal copies. Some requests were approved, others denied on the grounds he had surpassed his limit.
Theatrical adaption

Donleavy’s 1959 theatrical adaption of *The Ginger Man* won favourable notices in London, but closed after three performances in Dublin, when Donleavy refused to make cuts demanded by archbishop John Charles McQuaid. People took notice, especially artists and writers who were encouraged by Donleavy’s defiance.

Donleavy’s second novel, *A Singular Man*, about a mysterious loner, George Smith, was first published in late 1963 by Atlantic-Little, Brown in Boston. Seymour Lawrence, who acquired the manuscript, was enthusiastic. His directors were not and wanted the book dropped, fearing possible prosecution on obscenity charges. When Donleavy was alerted, he fired off a legalistic letter to the board of directors, seeking remedies including significant damages if *A Singular Man* wasn’t published. The directors relented.

Lawrence left and decided to launch his own imprint. Donleavy encouraged him. While a trimmed edition of *The Ginger Man* had been published in 1958 in the US, Lawrence published the first unexpurgated edition there in 1965.

Things began to change in the 1960s, the decade-plus of social upheaval and challenge to authority that spilled into the early 1970s, which Donleavy helped foment with his writings and refusal to conform. Decades of censorship laws in numerous western countries were repealed or eased. The Irish ban was lifted in 1981.

After moving to Co Meath in 1969, Donleavy left for Levinston Park, in Mullingar, Co Westmeath, in 1972 and would spend the rest of his life there. He was the outsider in a big country house in hunt country, which inspired him to write such sendups as *The Onion Eaters* (1971) and *The Destinies of Darcy Dancer, Gentleman* (1977).


The academic and the literary establishment have been slow to embrace Donleavy. But the recognition finally came. In mid-1998 *The Ginger Man* was ranked 99 on the list of the 100 Best Novels of the 20th Century, as ranked by Modern Library. In 2016, Trinity College awarded him at age 90 a Doctorate of Letters (LittD).

Throughout his long and fascinating life, Donleavy always did things his way. His impact has been and will continue to be significant. The battles he fought and won have benefited not only his readers around the world, but also younger writers who don’t have to fight the battles he fought for freedom of expression and against censorship. His victories have opened doors for younger generations who can concentrate on their creative efforts.

- Bill Dunn, author, is also the archivist of JP Donleavy’s papers and the editor of his collected correspondence to be published as *The Ginger Man Letters* by The Lilliput Press.
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