

In the air

Books

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The writer David Lodge invented a character called Philip Swallow, an undistinguished English lecturer at the University of Rummidge, whose main claim to fame is the invention of an intellectual version of strip poker called „Humiliation“.

In this fiendish game, the price of victory is to expose a gap in your literary education, the bigger the gap, the greater your chances of success. Each player has to name a book he or she has never read, but assumes the others have read, and scores a point for every person who has read it. One member of an English Faculty admits to not having read *Hamlet*. He wins the game ... but loses his job.

If you were playing „Humiliation“, what book would you name?

Until this summer, mine might well have been James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which I read right through for the first time during the holidays.

It was an emotional and intellectual shock. Reading *Ulysses* is a cosmic journey in time and space – a journey into the heart of language, an initiation into the art of seeing, a new creation of the world in words. Shakespeare is a miraculous feast of language and the soaring poetry of the King James Bible pierces you to the core. But *Ulysses* is a compendium of all writing that has ever existed, a laboratory where a new language is invented before your eyes.

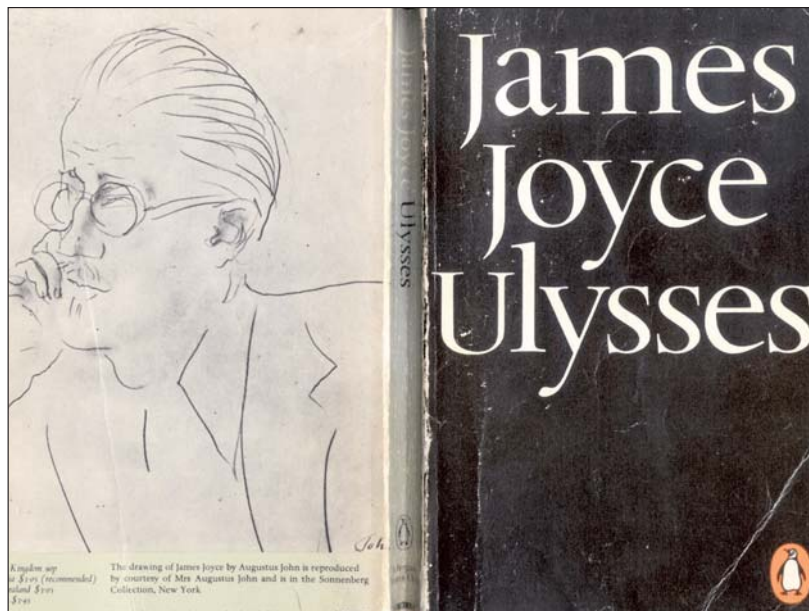
There is nothing Joyce cannot do with language – from the stream of consciousness writing early on in the book to Molly Bloom's famous monologue that ends it, which you have to rewrite for yourself as you read. One „chapter“ is a journey through styles of language, from the earliest texts influenced by Latin, passing through the distinctive voices of all the different periods up to the Babel tower of Joyce's present. He explores with relish technical and scientific modes of description and at the centre is a hallucinatory „trip“ to Hades, guided by the Green Fairy.

And discernible underneath the fabric of the text is the narrative framework of the *Odyssey* ...

Quite extraordinary. But I digress.

Lodge's game is designed for academic circles, but it raises questions about reading in general and „literary monuments“ in particular.

For instance: if you are not a teacher of literature, does it matter if you haven't read *Hamlet* – or the *Odyssey* or the *Divine Comedy* or *Faust* or *Don Quixote*? Is anyone going to think less of



you? And more importantly, can these old texts still transmit important values and insights in an age in which computer literacy is probably more useful for survival than literacy? Can they help us make sense of our lives, lend them shape and meaning?

And are they still part of the common experience that makes shared discourse possible? Personally, I find myself excluded from more conversations because of a lack of familiarity with computers than with books.

To take the question further: literary classics aside, does it even matter if you never read at all? Is reading still to be considered an essential human activity or merely as one hobby you can choose among many, like skateboarding or stamp collecting?

Recently, a popular celebrity admitted she had never read a book in her life. This statement spawned a spate of articles in English newspapers, some shrugging and saying „so what“, others spluttering she was sub-human.

You can undoubtedly get through life, be successful even, without reading a book.

Many people do still read however and there have never been as many books on the market as today. But books no longer necessarily contain texts of value and, perhaps inevitably, they no longer command respect. Publishers and booksellers deal in them as they might in any other commodity with a view to making a profit: first the ruthless hyping and marketing – and no gimmick is too low: some bookshops opened their doors at midnight to sell young children the latest *Harry Potter*. Then – unless of course books turn out to be money-spinners, like the *The Da Vinci Code* – they are deleted, pulped and forgotten.

A cynic might say more and more people are reading texts of less and less significance.

Is this really what we mean by reading, the mere physical acts of eyes moving over paper and hands turning pages, irrespective of the quality of the text? Surely real reading involves something more...

And the „literary monuments?“ Ask in a bookshop for Beckett or the *Odyssey* and you are told they do not keep „classics“ in stock ... unless they are on some academic syllabus.

Fortunately, the most famous „monuments“, like *Hamlet*, are still read in schools. Fortunately, because, yes, it is important to read these texts. Reading any text of value teaches you how to use words to describe what you experience, to formulate your ideas and opinions and analyze those of others. A literate population contains critical, independent-minded citizens, capable of standing up to totalitarian rulers. The latter obviously prefer a wordless, passive citizenry.

And each work carries forward knowledge of the past and elements of the literary tradition in which it is situated, ensuring cultural continuity. Readers for their part ensure that first-hand experience of them remains in the world and that this experience is passed on down the generations.

Remember the Book People in *Fahrenheit 451*, dedicated to saving valuable literary works for posterity?

Perhaps we should invent a new literary game. In „Salvation“, the players have to name a loved book they would be prepared to learn by heart and teach to a child in order to guarantee its survival.

My choice would be *Ulysses*. And yours?