

Reading *Ulysses* at the Rosenbach
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Reading *Ulysses* is sometimes regarded as the Mt. Everest of literary achievement, its difficulty rewarded by exaltation for those who complete the journey. Yet the book is also a great comic novel, which seems like a contradiction. How can a strenuous climb up Mt. Everest be comic? Which is it: a test, or a fun-for-all?

Spoiler alert: it is ultimately (but not initially!) a surprisingly meaningful fun-for-all. At first the book feels like a challenge because readers are trying to make sense of it in the usual ways. *Ulysses*, however, is most meaningfully read as an implied dialogue with the reader. As Oscar Wilde wrote in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.” It plays with our expectations (as Joyce chides in *Finnegans Wake*, “Have we cherished expectations?”), such as the (unconscious) expectation that we will see ourselves reflected through the characters as more heroic, more perfect, more consistent, and successful in the end. Instead, *Ulysses* stimulates readers to see themselves as they are, not as they would like to be. As Bloom reminds himself in “Nausicaa,” channeling Robert Burns, the aim is to “See ourselves as others see us.” The challenge *and* the fun of *Ulysses* are the same, then: to learn to see the strengths and limitations of how we (both individually and as a group) perceive and understand something new and unexpected. To guess at what might be going on and to laugh when we are wrong. To learn from the insights of the people around us. As Joyce writes in *Finnegans Wake*, “Hirp hirp for our missed understandings!” Like Homer’s Odysseus, we leave the rock of home (Ithaca) and journey into the unknown, becoming increasingly unmoored as the book unfolds.

Learning to laugh at oneself—with delight, understanding and sympathy—is a step towards accepting mortality. It is a prerequisite for establishing reciprocal relationships with others. The book is daring us to “Bloom,” and continue blooming; to open both heart and mind to the multitudinous differences and idiosyncrasies of others as they change across time. Ideally, *Ulysses* is read in concert with others, which is the privilege we have when reading it (or reading it again) at the Rosenbach. Its aim, quite simply, is to replace the desire for perfection with a renewed experience of the joy of life, with all of its possibilities and limitations.

If you are purchasing a copy, I recommend that you use the version edited by Hans Walter Gabler. <https://bookshop.org/books/ulysses-gabler-edition-vintage-books/9780394743127>
If you would like to listen to a recording of *Ulysses* as you read along, I would recommend the one done by the RTÉ. <https://www.rte.ie/culture/2020/0610/1146705-listen-ulysses-james-joyce-podcast/>

Recommended, but not required, is Don Gifford’s *Ulysses Annotated*:
<https://bookshop.org/books/ulysses-annotated-revised-and-expanded-edition-9780520253971/9780520253971>

I will make available a question sheet and a summary of the schema Joyce used for each episode. As always, we will also have the opportunity to see the Rosenbach manuscript of *Ulysses* and hear about it from the deeply knowledgeable Elizabeth Fuller.

Oct 7: Telemachus through Hades (episodes 1-6)
Nov 4: Aeolus and Lestrygonians (7-8)
Dec 2: Scylla and Charybdis and Wandering Rocks (9-10)
Jan 6: Sirens (11)
Feb 3: Cyclops (12)
Mar 3: Nausicaa and Oxen (13 and 14)
Apr 7: Circe (15)
May 5: Eumaeus and Ithaca (16 and 17)
Jun 2: Penelope (18)