

Book Review

**Gordon Bowker, *James Joyce: A New Biography*
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. (\$35.00)**

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Regarding Gordon Bowker's new James Joyce biography, one question immediately springs to mind: why? Herbert Gorman's 1939 biography was authorized, and Richard Ellman's 1959 work, although hoary, is still venerated. Bowker begins by acknowledging he must "stand on the shoulders of these and other books" (xi). Then, he asserts he "will attempt to go beyond the mere facts and tap into Joyce's elusive consciousness" (8). Bowker's biography, furthermore, "is informed by the belief that it is enlightening to view the work of a highly autobiographical writer like Joyce in the context of his life" (8). What Bowker does not state is that Gorman's biography, overseen by the author himself, borders on hagiography. Ellman, too, labored at a time when members of Joyce's family and some of his fiercest protectors survived. Both the passing of these individuals and the wealth of material discovered since Ellman revised his book in 1982 justify a writer with Bowker's perspective reexamining the "riverrun" (5) that constitutes Joyce's life and work.

Bowker divides the 540 pages of *James Joyce: A New Biography* purely by chronology into 35 chapters, some covering only a few months of a capstone year, such as 1904. Each chapter receives its own title; one memorable choice is "*Ulysses*: Inside the Dismal Labyrinth

(1920 – 1921).” Writing in a straightforward style, Bowker plumbs both the shallows and the depths of the Liffey, the river that meanders throughout Joyce’s works even though he rarely saw it after 1904, when he was in his early twenties, and never at all after 1912. From the shallows emerges a good sense of major characters in the subject’s life. We see the dissolute father, John Stanislaus Joyce, under whose leadership the family fell from the middle class even while the man lived to a surprisingly old age. In strong contrast stands pious, musically talented, doomed Mary (“May”) Murray Joyce, who was worn down by family strain and giving birth to ten surviving children before she succumbed (to cancer, thought her son James) when she was only 44. May’s traumatic death scene, according to Bowker, followed Joyce into *Ulysses* and Stephen Daedalus’s nightmare.

In 1904, Joyce experienced the “instant epiphany” (121) of seeing Nora Barnacle, with whom he secured a first date on June 16, which *Ulysses* would immortalize as Bloomsday. Hereafter, Nora served as James’s muse, mistress, mother to his children Giorgio and Lucia, and finally (after cohabitating with him for more than a quarter of a century) wife. Joyce remarked upon his delay in marrying Nora by commenting on what was called the “Marry-Your-Aunt Bill,” signed into law by George V around the time of Joyce’s nuptials, and saying the King should sign a “Marry-Your-Wife Bill.” As the long decades of frequent despair and even more frequent poverty show, Nora had already accepted the writer for better or for worse. In addition to Joyce’s close relationship with his brother Stanislaus (“Stannie”), Nora and two other women somehow kept Joyce going even through poverty and blindness and after alternating periods of lethargy and highly animated drunkenness.

These two women, who occupy heroic places in this biography, were Sylvia Beach and Harriett Weaver. Bowker tells how, upon first entering Beach's Shakespeare and Company, Joyce "must have thought he had walked into a literary Elysium" (277). On walls already partly covered by photographs of Whitman, Poe, and Wilde, Beach's new "literary heroes" Pound, Hemingway, Lawrence, and Joyce himself would in time appear. Beach, who had owned her bookstore less than a year and never before published a book, risked not only her finances but potentially even her freedom by publishing *Ulysses* when no one else would. Beach then endured almost innumerable revisions and additions as well as Joyce's many eccentricities and superstitions and, nevertheless, put a copy of the novel in Joyce's hands on his fortieth birthday. In addition, she gave Joyce an assessment that is startlingly close to true: "You are the greatest writer who ever lived but even Pound has more sense" (363).

In 1914, Harriet Weaver made a "comparatively silent" (214) entrance as opposed to Pound's "hurricane" first appearance but all the same was "as significant and more long-lasting" (215) in her influence than was the man for whom Hugh Kenner named the Era. Weaver initially assisted Joyce by publishing his writing in *The Egoist*. By the time Weaver and Joyce actually met, a decade later, Weaver had long supported Joyce financially. She spared no effort in wringing a few extra pence from an inheritance while Joyce "refused to conceal his own extravagance, ordering taxis and tipping lavishly when she would have taken the bus or tube train" (311). Combined financial and emotional assistance would continue until well in the 1930s, and Weaver subsequently paid for Joyce's funeral and served as his literary executor. The numerous examples of Weaver's contributions and Joyce's spendthrift ways partly

undermine the inevitability of Joyce's poverty: but for the wasting of many pounds, he may not have suffered for a few centimes.

At times, Bowker's attempts to tie Joyce's life and work together sink to the bottom. Writing of the short story "Eveline," Bowker notes that Joyce used the story to express "his fears of being deserted at the dockside by a hesitant lover" (130). Reading Hugh Kenner's 1972 essay "Molly's Masterstroke" may have changed the way Bowker understood the story. The extremely specific reports of Joyce's spending sometimes overshadow major events, as well. For example, "The ABC of Blind Love and Ruination (1936 – 1938)" tells, on page 498 how Joyce "had to send urgently to Monro" for 100 British pounds. Then, a single page later, Bowker slips in a few lines about how photographs of Joyce appeared "notably in *Time* and *Picture Post*" (499). The confluence of these facts is jarring.

Incongruities in Joyce's life, work, relationships, and reader reactions should not come as a surprise, however. Bowker writes, "In all he helped some fifteen or sixteen Jews escape to safety" (500), making Joyce a minor hero of the Holocaust. Yet the possibly mad anti-Semite Pound began his service to Mussolini and the Axis powers by giving 1941 broadcasts that "dealt with Joyce and most appreciatively with *Ulysses*" (539). Maybe Pound was insane, at that.

Joyce's name, of course, must appear at or very near the top of writers who never won the Nobel Prize. In 1936, even while "young writers, such as [future Nobel winner] William Faulkner and Malcolm Lowry, were ... knocking at Joyce's door," Joyce learned "Eugene O'Neill, a writer much influenced by *Ulysses*" (488) had won literature's most prestigious award. Elias Canetti, who won the 1981 Nobel Prize, occupies today a grave beside that of Joyce. "That prize," Bowker drily notes, "always was just out of Joyce's reach" (537). This

meticulous attention to detail is one of several reasons why the question of whether or not Bowker's *James Joyce: A New Biography* deserves reading is Molly Bloom's echoing "Yes."