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Kathleen O'Gorman

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Kathleen O’Gorman, Illinois Wesleyan University, interviewed by Charlie Schlenker, WGLT
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Today is Bloomsday. What is Bloomsday? It is an observance that fans of the James Joyce Book *Ulysses* observe every year in a variety of festive ways. There are particularly elaborate Bloomsday celebrations going on THIS year in Chicago and Champaign. WGLT's Charlie Schlenker talks with a Joyce scholar about the anniversary...

Charlie Schlenker: *Ulysses* has a formidable reputation as a literary work as a difficult to read tome and as a detailed and vivid description of a day in the life of the city of Dublin. Kathy O’Gorman, a Joyce scholar and English Professor at Illinois Wesleyan University, says this is the hundredth anniversary of the events of the day set down in the book by James Joyce and O’Gorman says more than fifty years have passed since fans of the work began honoring Joyce.

Kathleen O’Gorman: It’s such a celebration of a literary text. It’s extraordinary that a novel would compel this kind of celebration and these celebrations happen all over the world on Bloomsday, not just this year because it’s the hundredth anniversary of the big day but every year Bloomsday I get postcards from students...I think because it’s a text that is so rich and that people are able to appreciate and laugh with and about and live with and about. I think it’s very accessible in ways that would surprise people who haven’t read it.

Charlie Schlenker: How good a picture of Dublin do you get from *Ulysses*?

Kathleen O’Gorman: Oh...[laughs]...as someone said, you could reconstruct a map of the city if it were burned to the ground from the details of *Ulysses*. Joyce was excruciatingly careful with all of the details that he incorporates. It’s a magnificent picture.

Charlie Schlenker: He obviously cared enough about the city to go to that length of detail in the book but later he wrote, “How sick, sick, sick I am of Dublin. It is the city of failure, of rancor, and of unhappiness. I long to be out of it.” Well, what changed? [laughs]

Kathleen O’Gorman: Well, he did the same thing with Roman Catholicism. It was the thing against which he defined himself but in terms of which he endlessly defined himself, so I think there were those formative elements of his life and one of them was the place of Dublin, of Ireland, and all that that meant and another was family and another was the Church.

Charlie Schlenker: Why do people do that? I mean that’s not a unique thing to Joyce to rebel and then define yourself in opposition to something.

Kathleen O’Gorman: Well he wrote about what he knew and what he knew most intimately and most fully and, in a way, this book is an extraordinary tribute to what that constitutes— Ireland, home...[laughs]

Charlie Schlenker: Now Joyce actually had a very personal reason for setting the start of Leopold Bloom’s trek about Dublin on that particular day.

Kathleen O’Gorman: That was the date of his first date with Nora Barnacle, his—the love of his life and he wanted to immortalize that day.

Charlie Schlenker: Was that an important day even twenty years, forty years later?

Kathleen O’Gorman: Absolutely, it became a date that, for him, was significant in terms of many of his subsequent activities, books.

Charlie Schlenker: How do people observe Bloomsday?

Kathleen O’Gorman: With great spirit....[laughs]...they observe it by doing readings of *Ulysses*, they observe it by having contests, by having crossword puzzles that they post places, by—there was one wonderful celebration of it years ago in Washington D.C. There was a contest, the prize for which was a case of John Jameson, and you had to follow all kinds of clues that only people who knew Joyce’s texts intimately would really be able to follow through on and indeed there was a case of John Jameson waiting for someone at the end of the chase, so—and it was a multi-year chase actually. They started it one Bloomsday and it finished about two years later.

Charlie Schlenker: You had said that the book is surprisingly accessible for a lot of people and yet it has this powering reputation for impenetrability, reconcile those, would you?

Kathleen O’Gorman: I think it offers itself on millions of different levels and I think that is one of the things that really works in its favor. I know the very first time that I read the novel was in a graduate class, so I had not read it on my own or as an undergraduate and it had the same sort of reputation certainly at that time, but the group of graduate students with whom I read it met in a bar and one of them was a guy who had worked in the steel mills in Gary, Indiana for many, many years and we used to talk about the characters and the episodes endlessly it seemed and he in particular would talk about them as if they were people he knew every day of his life and I think there was something about the extraordinary portrayal of character in the novel that someone who had been a steel worker in Gary, Indiana could appreciate and yet he, and the rest of us as dutiful graduate students, could also go to the wonderful play that you find in the novel about language, about mythology, about all kinds of different things.

Charlie Schlenker: So what about the working man’s life rings true from era to era?

Kathleen O’Gorman: The relationship between probably the heroic and the unheroic or the antiheroic and how we define that. I think there’s a sense in which people who’ve read this as most students of *Ulysses* do read it in terms of *The Odyssey* take up that question pretty quickly, that here we have Homer’s text as a kind of tribute to the human spirit and then you get James Joyce’s version of it in which perhaps the most courageous act a person can engage is to get up and get out of bed and walk through our own little worlds every single day and I think the idea that that can be heroic is extraordinary and needs to be celebrated.

Charlie Schlenker: Illinois Wesleyan University Professor Kathy O’Gorman is spending Bloomsday today in Dublin on the joyous pilgrimage. I’m Charlie Schlenker, WGLT News.