

Frank Delaney, 74, Author Whose Passion Was Deconstructing Joyce's 'Ulysses,' Dies

By SAM ROBERTS

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Frank Delaney in 2012. Credit Meng Li, via Reuters

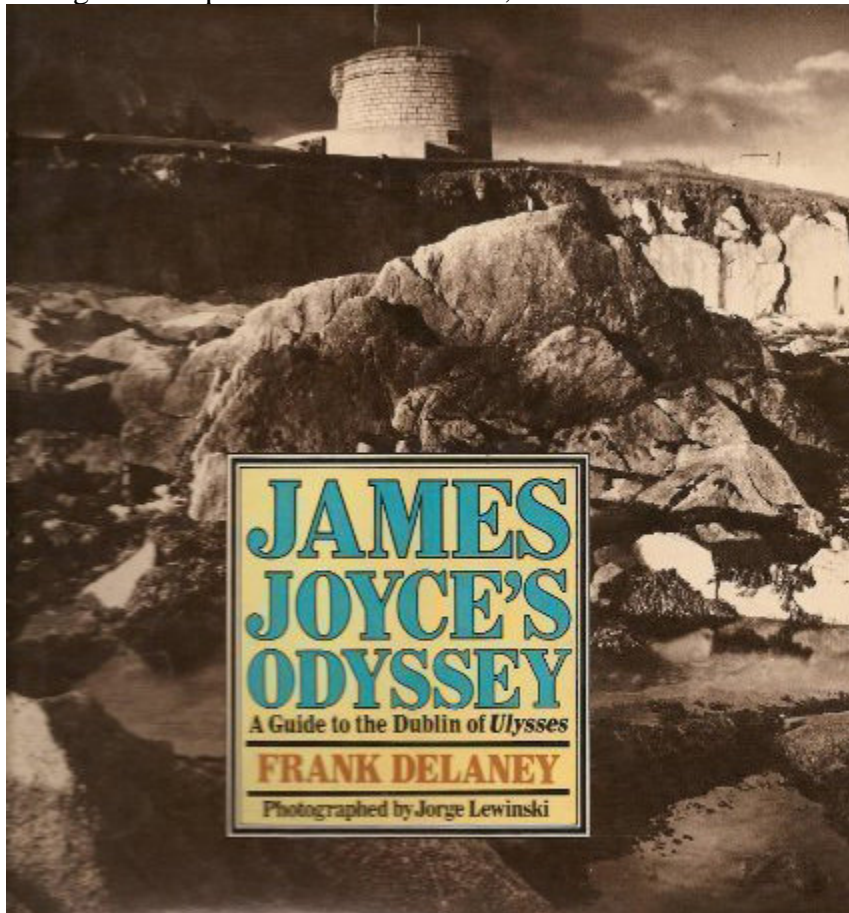
Frank Delaney, an Irish-born author and broadcaster who, like most novices, initially dismissed [James Joyce](#)'s "Ulysses" as unreadable but later spent his career making that elusive novel about ordinary people accessible to ordinary readers, died on Tuesday in Danbury, Conn. He was 74.

Mr. Delaney, who lived in Kent, Conn., died in Danbury Hospital, where he was being treated for a stroke he suffered the day before, said Jason H. Wright, a family friend.

While "Ulysses" was his passion — he originated a weekly five-minute podcast to deconstruct the book and wrote a personal Baedeker to Joyce's Dublin — he was also a literary impresario and interpreter who interviewed hundreds of fellow authors and was often solicited to judge book awards, including the [Man Booker Prize](#).

His impassioned delivery and Tipperary inflection during those interviews, as well as in film documentaries on artists, writers and etymology, once prompted NPR to anoint him "the most eloquent man in the world." His podcasts on "Ulysses" have been downloaded more than 2.5 million times.

Mr. Delaney found his first copy of the book in a brown paper bag on a Dublin bus, abandoned by an American tourist. Published in full in 1922, the novel parallels Homer's "Odyssey" in a dense stream-of-consciousness sojourn by Leopold Bloom, a Jewish immigrant from Hungary, through his adopted Dublin on June 16, 1904.



Mr. Delaney's book "James Joyce's Odyssey: A Guide to the Dublin of 'Ulysses.'" Credit Henry Holt & Co

The book was banned as obscene, criticized as chaotic, dissected to death and pronounced a modernist masterpiece — "a vast, entertaining, funny, absorbing, exciting, complex, immensely enjoyable novel," Mr. Delaney called it in 2011 in *The Economist*.

Don't agree? Everyone can concur with his summation: "A book to get lost in."

To help frazzled readers find their way through the novel's 260,000 words while making them less forbidding, Mr. Delaney, in the first episode of his podcast, invoked the "Peanuts" character Snoopy. He also wrote a rap tribute to Joyce.

Some conventional scholars were appalled, to which Mr. Delaney parried, "No one hates a popularizer more than an intellectual."

In his weekly line-by-line analyses, he sought to explain that while "every sentence in 'Ulysses' has more than one meaning and sometimes many meanings," Joyce's "multitasking in prose" could be contemplated simply.

"In the ordinary is the extraordinary," Mr. Delaney said of the book on [his blog](#). "In the particular is the universal."

"Above all," he told *The Guardian* in 2004, Joyce "taught every writer the importance of naturalistic dialogue; with his fine tenor voice Joyce knew better than most that we read not with the eye but with the ear."

In Mr. Delaney's book "James Joyce's Odyssey: A Guide to the Dublin of 'Ulysses,'" he wrote that Joyce "believed that the key to human nature lay in observing the commonest acts of man, ordering a drink, eating a meal, opening an umbrella, folding a newspaper."

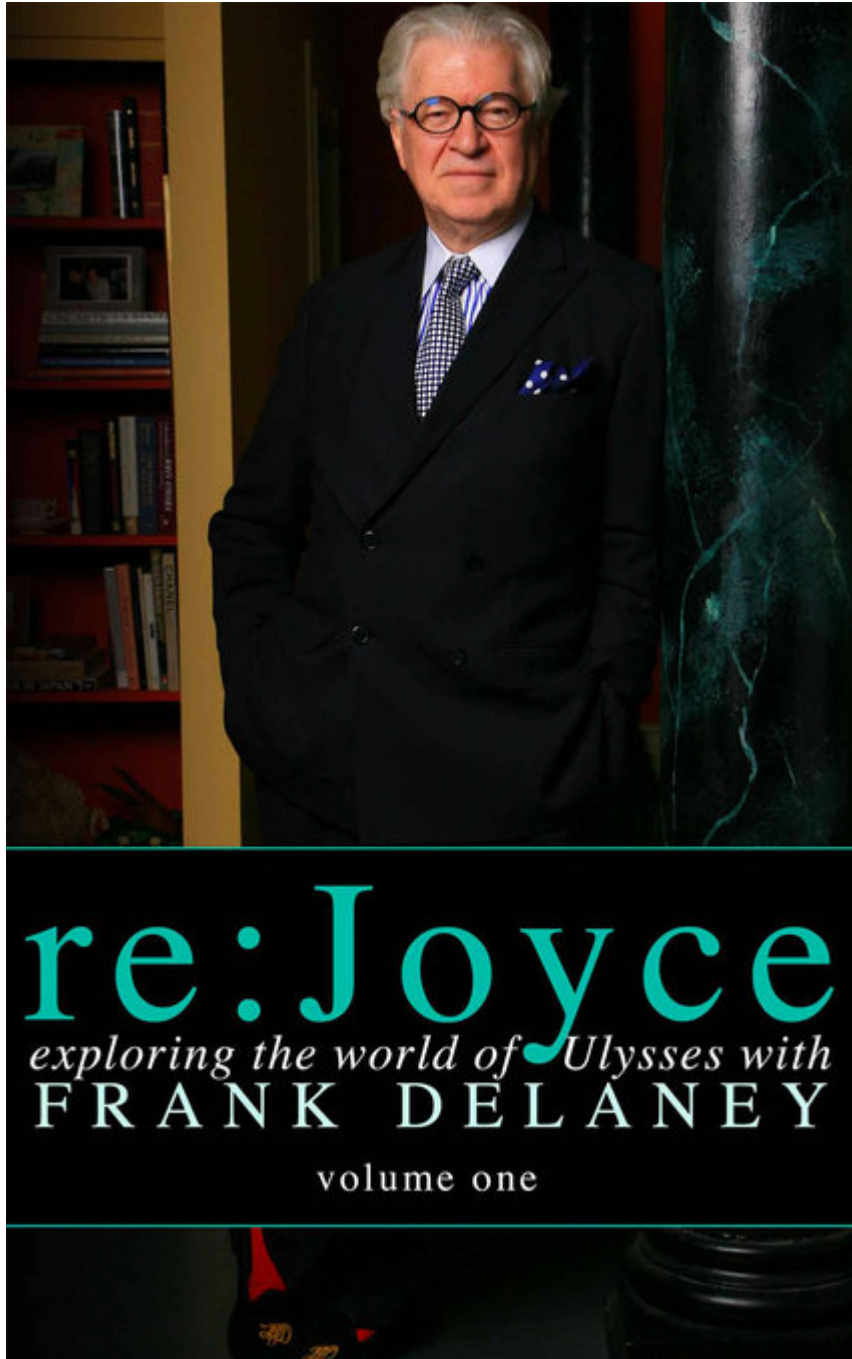
Reviewing the book in *The Boston Globe* in 1982, Robert Taylor described Mr. Delaney's book as "a work of incisive criticism, written with style and grace and intelligence."

"Delaney avoids the temptation to treat Joyce as a petrified object, a monument," Mr. Taylor wrote. "In fact, one of the most charming aspects of the volume is the interweaving of Delaney's personal experience with Joyce's novel — remarking the poignancy with which lives are touched by literature."

For example, Mr. Delaney wrote: "Once, in this part of Dublin, I trysted with a girl who, like me, had no timepiece, but we both lived in earshot, though in opposite directions, of the same church. So we left our separate residences when the bell began to ring. Thus, later, and through the entire day, the same bells ring in the ears of different characters in 'Ulysses,' the same processions are saluted in different parts of the city, the same persons are observed in different streets."

Francis James Joseph Raphael Delaney (he rolled his eyes whenever he repeated his full name) was born on Oct. 24, 1942, in County Tipperary. His father, Edward, was the principal of the elementary school in Thomastown; his mother, the former Elizabeth Josephine O’Sullivan, was a kindergarten teacher there. Both helped found the Irish teachers’ union.

Photo



Mr. Delaney made the elusive novel “Ulysses” accessible to the average reader. Credit Frank Delaney

Mr. Delaney is survived by his wife and frequent collaborator, Diane Meier, a marketing executive; their sons, Bryan and Owen; and three grandchildren.

He was 8 when his godmother, a teacher, gave him a copy of “Treasure Island” with this advice: “As you read, think of the man who was making up this story. Where was he sitting, what kind of pen was he writing with?” He developed such an affinity for the author, Robert Louis Stevenson, that he later wrote a faithful sequel titled “Jim Hawkins and the Curse of Treasure Island.”

“With his straggling mustache, his unstoppable curiosity and his heart of fire,” Mr. Delaney wrote of Stevenson, “he has always been one of the very few authors with whom I’d ever have wanted to hang out.”

He had wanted to be a novelist since childhood, he said in a 2014 interview timed to coincide with the Dublin Writers Festival. “I’ve always relished the power of the tale,” he said, “how it grabs us and then absorbs us, and casts a spell over us, and teaches us.”

He was a radio and television reporter in Ireland; created the “Bookshelf” and “Word of Mouth” programs on BBC Radio and “The Book Show” on Sky News; and wrote “The Celts” for the BBC, the screenplay for the 2002 adaptation of “Goodbye, Mr. Chips,” the novel “Ireland” and nearly two dozen other fiction and nonfiction books, both in Britain and after moving to the United States in 2002.

He posted a daily Writing Tip (“Always finish your work session in the middle of a sentence”) on Twitter and ran contests on his blog.

In one, he challenged readers to write their autobiographies, on Twitter, in 140 characters or less: “Be kind to yourself — or cruel: e.g., Hemingway: I gave Life both barrels. Or Ezra Pound: They caged me but my poems got out through the bars and flew across the world. Or Gertrude Stein: They said I was obscure, and yes, meaning my meaning’s hidden meaning had meaning hidden. Or F. Scott Fitzgerald: I didn’t find wisdom in the bottom of a glass; I found my reflection.”

Mr. Delaney might have summed up his life in just seven characters: “Ulysses.” He rediscovered the book as the centennial of Joyce’s birth approached in 1982, when he figured, correctly, that the BBC would be tapping his literary ken for a retrospective.

“I began to read it aloud, and it started to make sense — because it’s not a novel, it’s a prose poem,” he recalled.

He began his weekly podcasts in 2010. A year later, he had analyzed only the first of the book’s 18 episodes. Deconstructing the entire book at that rate, he estimated then, would take another 30 years.

He figured that he would probably not tackle Joyce’s even more impenetrable novel, “Finnegans Wake,” next.