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Getting to the Heart of a Joycean Masterpiece 'In Bed With Ulysses,' Film Celebrating James Joyce Novel

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Bloomsday — June 16, the day of the events in James Joyce's masterpiece "Ulysses" — approaches and with it the release of Alan Adelson and Kate Taverna's documentary "In Bed With Ulysses," a film that strips away the academic clutter surrounding that kaleidoscopic novel to reveal the vital human pulse between its lines. It does so with staged readings of the livelier passages (not, I emphasize, re-creations of them), period footage and insightful commentators (including the Irish novelists Colum McCann and Edna O'Brien), not to mention humor and a palpable enthusiasm.

The book's origins are familiar but merit re-examination: Joyce's union with the former Nora Barnacle, the earthy, skeptical Irishwoman who was a model for the character Molly Bloom; the itinerant existence the couple led across Europe; the women (among them Joyce's publisher Sylvia Beach and his patron Harriet Shaw Weaver) who helped midwife the novel's release; and the obscenity battle attending its arrival in the United States. The movie also examines John Creagh, the firebrand priest whose anti-Semitic rants in Limerick prompted a rash of assaults against Jews in 1904. The film suggests that Leopold Bloom, the Jewish character whose perambulations form the narrative's central arc, was partly inspired by the attacks, as was the time the story takes place. (The year 1904 was also when Joyce had his first sexual encounter with Barnacle.)

Let the professors map the structural architecture of "Ulysses"; the documentary prefers to celebrate the view from the Joyce Tower, south of Dublin, at Sandycove, site of the novel's opening. The movie lets fresh air into "Ulysses" like a gust from the Irish Sea.