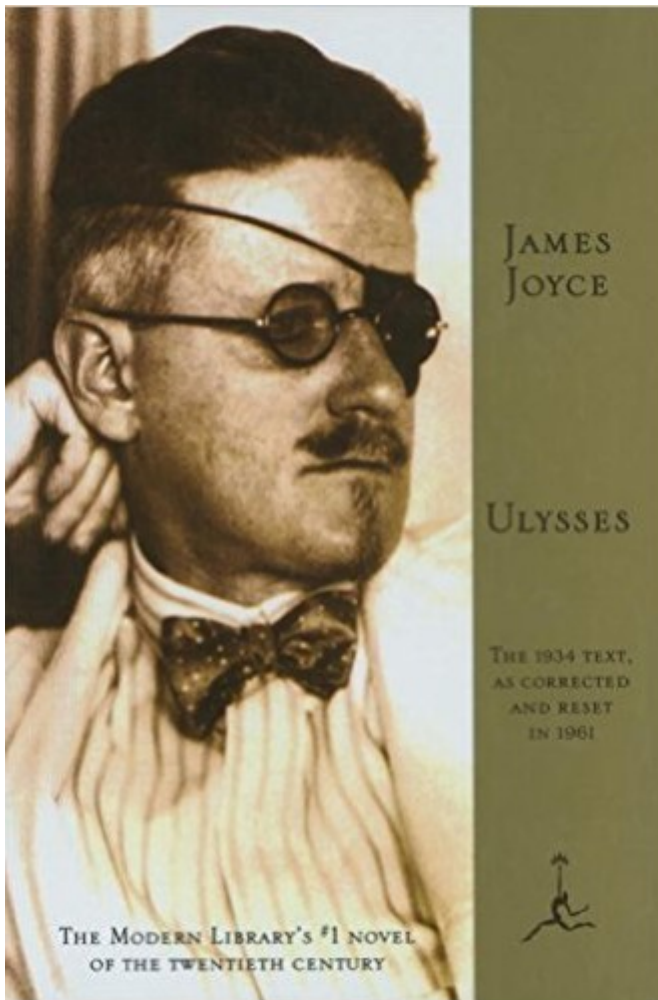


Ulysses, by James Joyce

selected by [Alan Jacobs](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Ulysses

by James Joyce
Modern Library

For 20 years I taught James Joyce's *Ulysses* every year, but I don't get to anymore—new university, new job description. I miss it terribly, even though my opinion of its quality wavered from semester to semester. Ezra Pound said of its

successor, *Finnegans Wake*, “Nothing short of a divine vision or a new cure for the clap can possibly be worth all the circumambient peripherization.” I sometimes felt that way about the complications of *Ulysses*. But most of the time I believed it was a masterpiece, and I always thought that at the very least it contained extended passages of unsurpassed brilliance. Above all, I delighted in the challenge of taking undergraduates through it.

When they first looked at *Ulysses* their eyes grew round as saucers—“You’re expecting *us* to read *this*?”—but I strove for a constant tone of avuncular encouragement. I also had elaborate handouts outlining the book’s structure and offering advice, the first line of which was: “Try to read this when you’re fresh and rested. It is difficult at any time, but almost impossible when you’re tired or distracted.” We took it slow. Eventually I could see people, one by one, figuring things out—it was like lights going on in a city at dusk. The more that lights went on, the more I tended to feel that the book is a marvel after all. And surprisingly often, at the end of a semester people would say to me, “I’m so glad you made us read *Ulysses*.”