

THE LIFE OF LEOPOLD BLOOM

By Peter Costello

The best thing about this innovative novel is the deceptively simple idea behind it: to radically compress James Joyce's polymathic and daunting tome, "Ulysses," and extract from its weighty allusiveness a bare-bones narrative of Leopold Bloom, Joyce's central character and modern Everyman.

Like Alexander's decisive hacking of the Gordian Knot, Peter Costello has lopped off the arcane appendages that have challenged readers of "Ulysses" since its publication in 1922. Gone are the Homeric parallels that Joyce utilized as structural elements. No longer present are philosophical meanderings based on the thinking of such as Dante, with whose exile Joyce identified, and Giambattista Vico, whose cyclical theory of history he incorporated in his book. Nowhere in this slender volume are there to be found examples of bravura interior monologue or elaborately linguistic wordplay of the kind known simply today as Joycean.

What remains after Costello's prodigious sculpting is a straightforward account of the quotidian events that Joyce embellished with an artistic invention new to English literature. Thus unencumbered, the comings and goings of a canvasser of advertisements in Dublin on the single day that comprises the time frame of "Ulysses"--June 16, 1904, or Bloomsday--unfold with economy and immediacy.

But where Joyce left off, Costello continues for another 33 years, plausibly projecting on the basis of evidence left by his model, and imaginatively (if not always satisfyingly) supposing what became of Bloom and Molly and Stephen Daedalus after Molly's book-ending soliloquy.

Among the scenarios he creates are Molly's death, followed much later by Bloom's. Brought to center stage are their daughter and her husband and--pivotally--their child, Bloom's grandson, with whom the old man connects as he did a generation back with Stephen Daedalus.

Scholars who have paddled through the vast waters of Joyce studies will find in this book an immediately available short-hand that charts a clearer understanding of the mere man who created a world so much greater than his flawed self. The minor character of Stephen Daedalus' father is recognizable in this fiction as the

doppelganger of Joyce's own parent, who was in large part the spur for his son's adoption of "silence, exile and cunning" in the invention of not only his books but his life.

Joyce buffs will also be aware of unifying inventions like the journey back to Gibraltar that Bloom undertakes late in life, "An explorer in search of the past, the lost youth of his dead wife." So the old man sits for an entire afternoon in the Alameda Gardens, the ultimate and apotheosizing scene of Molly Bloom's epic daydream.

These and other novelistic events take place against a background of political and social life in turn-of-the-century Ireland. Through Bloom's sympathetic eyes we see the aftermath of real-life political events: the fall from grace of political reformer Charles Stewart Parnell and the violent end of Michael Collins, a leader in the 1916 Easter Rebellion.

Joyce used Irish history in the service of art. Costello can be said to have moved in a polar direction. He mines the novel to unearth the real Dublin that Joyce mythologized. Each chapter of "The Life of Leopold Bloom" is headed by a list of advertisements taken from a contemporary post office directory--just the kind of ads that Bloom himself might have solicited for the newspaper that employed him.

What we have then in "The Life of Leopold Bloom" is an aria that serves as the signature melody for the full-length opera. Peter Costello's necessarily attenuated pretty song will undoubtedly inspire some to consider going back to or taking in for the first time "Ulysses" in all its complex and integrated entirety.

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