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J.P. Donleavy, Author of 'The Ginger Man,' Dies at Age 91

J.P. Donleavy, the incorrigible Irish-American author and playwright whose ribald debut novel "The Ginger Man" was censored and scorned, but eagerly read and later embraced as a groundbreaking classic, has died.

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By HILLEL ITALIE and GREGORY KATZ, Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — J.P. Donleavy, the incorrigible Irish-American author and playwright whose ribald debut novel "The Ginger Man" met scorn, censorship and eventually celebration as a groundbreaking classic, has died at age 91.

Donleavy, a native New Yorker who lived his final years on an estate west of Dublin, died Monday in Ireland. His death was confirmed by personal assistant Deborah Goss.

The author of more than a dozen books, he sometimes was compared to James Joyce as a prose stylist, but also was admired for his sense of humor. "The Ginger Man," first published in 1955, sold more than 45 million copies and placed No. 99 on a Modern Library list of the greatest English language fiction of the 20th century.

"The Ginger Man' has undoubtedly launched thousands of benders, but it has also inspired scores of writers with its vivid and visceral narrative voice and the sheer poetry of its prose," American novelist Jay McInerney wrote in the introduction for a 2010 reissue.

When the novel was published, authorities targeted its profanity and graphic sexual content. It was banned in Ireland and the United States. Several publishers rejected the book before it was acquired by the Paris-based Olympia Press, which specialized in explicit and avant-garde materials. To Donleavy's fury, Olympia released the book through an imprint dedicated to pornography.

"The Ginger Man" is an ambling, picaresque tale about the adventures of Sebastian Dangerfield, an American in Dublin after World War II who neglects and abuses his wife and child, mooches off his friends, bilks his landlords, drinks wherever he can run up a tab and rarely lets a woman's appearance go unnoticed.

"I have discovered one of the great ailments of Ireland, 67 percent of the population has never been completely naked in their lives," Sebastian observes. "I am bound to say that this must cause a great deal of the passive agony one sees in the street."

Often cited as prophetic of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, "The Ginger Man" sold so well that it enabled Donleavy to buy Olympia after he and the publisher spent years suing each other over rights to the book.

The author initially had less success adapting "The Ginger Man" for the stage. The play opened in London in 1959 with Richard Harris as Dangerfield, but closed within days in part because of objections from the Roman Catholic Church. A New York production starred Patrick O'Neal, who later opened a Manhattan restaurant and named it after Donleavy's book.

"The Ginger Man" is also among the most prominent novels never to have been made into a feature film,



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