

Finnegans Wake – the book the web was invented for



Modernist master ... James Joyce, pictured in 1934. Photograph: Roger Viollet/AFP/Getty

James Joyce's difficult masterpiece has baffled readers for over seven decades, but music, reading-aloud and digital technologies are opening up rich new interpretations

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Tuesday 28 April 2015 09.55 EDT

Ninety years ago this month, the fourth edition of Ford Madox Ford's [Transatlantic Review](#) came out. It featured the first new work to be published by James Joyce since *Ulysses* in 1922. The modestly titled, eight-page piece, *From Work in Progress* was the beginning of a project that was to be, if anything, even more scandalous and divisive than its predecessor.

In the 15 years between this first fleeting appearance and the eventual publication of **Finnegans Wake** on 4 May, 1939, Joyce's book was to alienate long-time supporters such as Ezra Pound and attract a younger generation of writers, critics and publishers, including Samuel Beckett, Eugene Jolas, Robert McAlmon and Stuart Gilbert.

In the years since its publication, the *Wake* has lived something of a double life. On the one hand, it has been a darling of academia, lending itself to exegesis as few other novels do. On the other, it has baffled generations of ordinary readers, even those who admire and enjoy Joyce's earlier writing. As a result, it has gained a reputation as a book more written about than read, the ultimate in modernist incomprehensibility. It has almost become a badge of middlebrow honour to declare to the world that you have never, and will never, read the thing.

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And yet. The fact is that anything that is written can be read, if you go at it in the right way. Many of the book's admirers have suggested that the right way to approach the *Wake* is to see it as oral as much as literary. As Jolas put it: "Those who have heard Mr Joyce read aloud from **Work in Progress** know the immense, rhythmic beauty of his technique. It has a musical flow that flatters the ear, that has the organic structure of works of nature, that transmits painstakingly every vowel and consonant formed by his ear."

Joyce himself lent some credence to this approach by [recording a section from the Anna Livia Plurabelle](#) chapter at the Orthological Institute at Cambridge in 1929, in his best cod-Irish brogue.

Forty years later, Irish folk group the Dubliners, who owe their name to the fact that singer Luke Kelly was reading Joyce's short stories when they needed one, went one better by recording [The Ballad of Persse O'Reilly](#), a "scurrilous rant against HC Earwicker" that appears early in the novel. Most impressively of all, in 1992, the Irish writer Patrick Healey [recorded the whole thing](#); 35 hours of audio recorded over a four-day period in Bow Lane recording studios, Dublin.

Since the Wake went out of copyright in the EU in 2012, there has been a perceptible shift. For one thing, there are now more print editions available to compete with the standard Faber text, whose pagination serves as the bedrock that supports the weight of critical interpretation that has grown around the work. These range from a reasonably priced [Wordsworth Classics paperback](#) to a somewhat pricier, but beautifully illustrated, [Folio Society printing](#). Closer to Jolas's oralist approach, the Irish actor Olwen Fouéré [brought a chunk of it to the stage](#). You can even [take a Wake walk](#) in [Dublin's Phoenix Park](#).

More interestingly, the move to the public domain meant that the Wake could more easily enter the world beyond print culture. There is an excellent [annotated version](#) of the text online which, when I discovered it, led me to think that the book, like other supposedly difficult modernist texts such as Eliot's [The Waste Land](#) and [The Cantos](#) of Ezra Pound, is like an early iteration of hypertext.

The book was, we can now see, crying out for the invention of the web, which would enable the holding of multiple domains of knowledge in the mind at one time that a proper reading requires.

The web, too, has taken to **Finnegans Wake** with open arms. There's a Twitter account, [@finnegansreader](#), which is dedicated to tweeting the entire text, 140 characters or fewer at a time. With 1,500 followers, it's no One Direction, but it shows a healthy level of interest in a supposedly unreadable book. Another, [@FW_WOTD](#), tweets daily definitions of Wake words; it's even more popular.

Stephen Crowe, a Seattle-based illustrator, is working his way through a more thoroughgoing reimagining of the Wake on his [Wake in Progress](#) site. It's an ongoing, image-by-image recreation of Joyce's book as a kind of graphic novel. A project as insanely ambitious as this could only take shape online; print would be both too inflexible for Crowe's slow pace and too expensive.

Another Wake project that has been made possible by digital technology is taking shape over at [Waywords and Meansigns](#). The musicians involved in this project are putting together a collaborative musical version of the whole book with samples from the final work on the site already. The complete setting will be available, free, on 4 May, to mark the 76th anniversary of the book's first publication.

So, is the web changing our perception of Joyce's late masterpiece? I'm a dedicated lover of the printed word, but perhaps Finnegans Wake needed the web to become easily readable. Maybe Joyce's multiple concurrent layers of meaning and rejection of linearity need hypertext and online reading habits to open them up to a wider audience. And maybe, just maybe, future generations will look back on early discussions of Finnegans Wake's unreadability and wonder what the hell was the matter with us.

Ulysses employed the techniques of film; Finnegans Wake imagined technology which did not even exist. It is a novel "if we are to call it such" written for the 21st century, and perhaps the only way it can be adapted in other media is through the internet's nonlinear, labyrinthine structures; the online project First We Feel Then We Fall does just that, creating a multimedia adaptation of Finnegans Wake that "transfers" the novel "to audiovisual language," and demonstrates the novel as "in the words of The Guardian's Billy Mills" "the book the web was invented for." Finnegans Web & Wiki. A Wiki-based Study Guide to Finnegans Wake | Feed on. Posts. JOYCE, JAMES. FINNEGANS WAKE. (London; Faber & Faber; New York: Viking Press, 1939) 260 x 171 mm. (10 1/4 x 6 3/4"). 4 p.l., (first blank), 628 pp. Every new interpretation of the Wake leads to potential new eyes and ears, as well as deeper understanding of the Wake. Please give this project a listen. <http://www.waywordsandmeansigns.com/>. Finnegans Wake is a 1939 novel written by James Joyce. It took him 17 years to write, and may take nearly as long to read, as it is completely written in an idiosyncratic, made-up language that vaguely resembles English spoken with a thick Irish brogue. Critics and scholars disagree about a lot about this book, but most agree that it portrays a man's dream, and that it's full of complex, layered allusions and jokes. Arguments still rage as to whether it has a plot. Finnegans Wake is a book by Irish writer James Joyce. It has been called "a work of fiction which combines a body of fables with the work of analysis and deconstruction".:210"211 It is significant for its experimental style and reputation as one of the most difficult works in the Western canon. Written in Paris over a period of seventeen years and published in 1939, Finnegans Wake was Joyce's final work. The entire book is written in a largely idiosyncratic language, which blends standard English