

# How James Joyce Changed My Life

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My father was always reading, in his blue overstuffed armchair in the living room. He looked certain, calm and serious, gazing into his book, legs crossed at the knee, smoking nonfilter Camel cigarettes. At the age of 15, I asked him to recommend a book, and he picked one out of one of his glass-door bookcases, a thick red novel, *Crime and Punishment*. I began to read it, lying on my bed in my little room upstairs, and within two pages I was hooked on reading. Suddenly, for as long as I was reading, and in the contemplation of it afterward, the sense of profound aloneness that had settled around me at that time in my life lifted. I was being admitted into another mind, and somehow our two minds united.

A year later, in 1960, having been born and lived in the same house in Queens since 1944, and having gone to parochial school under the Dominican nuns and the Franciscan brothers, and to high school in Brooklyn, educated by the Christian Brothers, I discovered, in the local Jackson Heights paperback bookshop, an author named James Joyce, an Irishman like my father—though

Joyce was considered the Antichrist by many Irish, and my father didn't include the Antichrist on his bookshelves. My mother was French, but Mr. Joyce had left Dublin to live in Switzerland and Trieste and France, too. That made me long to see all those places. He also visited Copenhagen and learned to speak the language of the Danes, and his first publication was a review of the last play of the Dano-Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, the review written when Joyce was only seventeen. Even in exile, however, he mostly wrote about the city of his birth, Dublin. I read three of his most important books of fiction in the order he published them: *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*. Only much later did I read the remaining fragment of *Stephen Hero*, which Nora Barnacle saved by plunging her bare hand into the flames into which Joyce, himself, had consigned the only manuscript, preserving it by her heroic act from annihilation; his excellent play *Exiles*; *Giacomo Joyce*; and parts of *Finnegans Wake*, as well as two or three books about it—I keep meaning to read all of *Finnegan* and might yet still.

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