JUST WHAT IS A "GREAT BOOK"? (*Here in Hanover* Magazine, 2007)

Great is a word made of rubber. From the presidency of Abe Lincoln to the taste of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia, it commonly stretches to fit anything we love, admire, or like. So what on earth do we mean by Great Books?

The everyday answer is a book that someone you know can't wait to talk about. More than once, you've surely heard someone say, "I've just read a *great* book on the Galapagos / fly fishing/ golf / bridge / Alzheimer's / investing / sex after sixty." But no such book is ever likely to become a capital-letter Great Book. Why? Because it won't make the Western Canon.

Strictly speaking, the *Canon* is the set of writings—from Genesis to Revelation—that are officially recognized as books of the Bible. In 1919, a secular version of the Biblical canon emerged when a Professor of English named John Erskine taught a course at Columbia University on what he considered the Great Books of the Western Canon—a list of 100 primary works of Western literature. Though Erskine soon decamped for the University of Chicago, Columbia still offers a great books course, and a few years ago it was taken and enthusiastically described by David Denby in *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (Simon & Schuster, 1997).

Great Books courses have spread like mighty oaks. Long before Denby read his way through Columbia's list, many other colleges and universities launched their own versions of Erskine's course. At the University of Chicago, where Erskine himself taught great books in the 1920s, President Robert Hutchins teamed with Mortimer Adler to launch a course that was eventually enshrined in *Great Books of the Western World*, a series first published by the Encyclopedia Britannica in 1952.

But there's one big difference between books of the Bible and the Great Books of the Western Canon. Unlike the former, the

latter is an ever-shifting, ever-disputed pile. New books are regularly shoved into it, and in recent years the old assumption that no one but a dead white European male can author a Great Book has been strenuously challenged. In 1972, a list of 137 works compiled by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren included just two women authors (both 19th century English novelists) and nobody from east of the Urals, south of the Mediterranean, or south of the Rio Grande. Twenty-two years later, Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994), which lists over 1500 works, salutes women writers from Sappho to Toni Morrison and makes room for texts from ancient India and medieval Arabia as well as for modern African writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. Reading your way through Bloom's list would take you through several millennia and halfway around the world and could easily consume the rest of your life.

Given that fact, does the phrase "great book" means anything at all? Or does it mean only that the book is good enough to make somebody's list of great books? Bloom himself admits that his list of twentieth-century books is a "canonical prophecy"—his shaky bet on works that may one day take their place in the canon. But the hardest thing to find among these lists—including Bloom's—is a set of the criteria used to determine what makes the cut.

One such set, however, can be found in *Second Look* (1992), the second volume of the late Mortimer Adler's autobiography. To make Adler's cut, we're told, a book had to be *relevant* to the problems of our own time, *inexhaustible* after multiple readings, and *evocative* (my term, not Adler's) – calling up many of "the great ideas and issues that have occupied the minds of thinking individuals for the last 25 centuries."

That's a very high bar. But to take just one example, let's see how the bar has been cleared by a novel that was still being written when John Erskine first taught great books at Columbia. Published in 1922, this novel has long been famous. It made the Adler-Van Doren list of all-time great books back in '72, and is number 1 on

the Modern Library Board list of the 100 Best English-Language Novels of the 20th Century. By now you've probably guessed what I'm talking about: James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

How does it meet Adler's criteria? First of all, as the story of what happens on a single day—June 16, 1904-- in the city of Dublin, *Ulysses* is unmistakeably relevant to urban life at the beginning of the twentieth century and remains relevant to our own lives at the beginning of the twenty-first. Joyce's Dublin is a world of newspapers, telegrams, clanging trolley cars, and new inventions such as the telephone and gramophone. It is also a world periodically convulsed by war. If Joyce could not foresee television, cell phones, the computer, the internet, or either of the two World Wars, Stephen Dedalus—a younger version of Joyce himself--is haunted by what he calls "the nightmare of history," a phrase that fits the brutality and persecution of the twentieth century quite as well as it encapsulates what came before. Writing the novel from 1914 to 1921, including the years of the bloodiest war the world had ever seen, Joyce daringly creates a character who embodies a resolute pacifism. Insulted at one point by a belligerent, anti-Semitic drunkard, Leopold Bloom first denounces persecution and then war: "But it's no use," he says. "Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred." Later in the novel, his wife Molly has a similar thought while lying in bed before dawn: "I don't care what anybody says itd be much better for the world to be governed by the women in it you wouldn't see women going around and killing one another and slaughtering."

Second, *Ulysses* is inexhaustible, if also exhausting, a book that can be read again and again. Written by a man who loved music and might have become a professional singer, its language resonates with the music of poetry. As my wife will readily tell you, I never look at a starlit sky without remembering what Bloom and Stephen saw as they looked up at the night sky over Dublin: "the heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit." Lyrical gems like that one sparkle throughout the book, which can also

make you laugh out loud. In a passage describing Dublin's "cordial" response to the British Viceroy and his party as they ride their carriages through the city (at a time when all Ireland was ruled by England), we get a sentence that wickedly alludes to the European practice of hanging long streamers out of upstairs windows to celebrate anyone or anything: "From its sluice in Wood quay wall under Tom Devan's office Poddle river hung out in fealty a tongue of liquid sewage."

Third, *Ulysses* evokes the whole history of literature, beginning with Homer's *Odyssey*, the ancient epic of a journey that is re-enacted by Leopold Bloom as he wanders the streets of Dublin. The idea of the journey is surely among the most enduring themes of literature, as can be seen in epics ranging from the *Odyssey* through Virgil's *Aeneid* to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Melville's *Moby Dick* and even Kerouac's *On the Road*.

But to say so much merely scratches the surface of *Ulysses*. Beyond clearing the bar set by Adler, it makes itself great by fusing the ordinary with the extraordinary. How on earth could Homer's heroic voyager—a warrior king, a master in the arts of survival and self-defense, the relentless killer of those who vainly besieged his wife during his long absence from her—how on earth could such a man re-appear in a 38-year old Dubliner of Hungarian Jewish extraction who makes his living selling newspaper ads, who detests war, who has never voyaged beyond Dublin Bay, who can scarcely row a boat without swamping it, and who does absolutely nothing to prevent or punish his wife's affair with another man? I couldn't possibly answer that question in the space I have left here. I will simply say that in a hundred ways, Joyce contrives to make us see the *daily* life of Bloom—eating breakfast, feeding his cat, reading the newspaper, opening the mail, defecating (yes, even that!), attending a funeral, going to work, covertly masturbating (that too!), scraping a drunken young man up off the sidewalk, and finally coming home—as something unmistakeably familiar and

yet also quietly heroic. In an age obsessed with war, Joyce shows us, the true Ulyssean hero must be a pacifist.

To sum up with the help of Ezra Pound, *Ulysses* is a great book because it delivers what all great literature gives us: news that stays news.

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