

# Celtic tiger

*As his notorious Fifties novel 'The Ginger Man' finally makes it to the big screen, the indomitable Irish literary giant JP Donleavy tells BRITT COLLINS about Brendan Behan, subterranean orgies and falling for Johnny Depp's charm*

It isn't often that a book provokes not just one, but three legal battles. But then *The Ginger Man* isn't your average novel. When Irish-American writer JP Donleavy penned his scandalous debut in 1955, the world (Ireland especially), wasn't ready for it or its lusty, violent anti-hero Sebastian Dangerfield. Not that the book was without its plaudits: Dorothy Parker called it a 'work of rare genius'; and it became essential reading for generations of young rebels, going on to sell 50 million copies worldwide – it hasn't ever been out of print.

Even so, Donleavy's notorious narrative – which was published by Olympia Press (the only publisher brave enough to distribute the infamous *Lolita*) – enraged polite society and the censors. Set in 1950s Dublin, his racy, lyrical novel charts the adventures of Sebastian Dangerfield, a hero with a penchant for wild carousing, who constantly dreams of his next seduction while working his way through a staggering number of pubs.

In its day, *The Ginger Man* attracted as much scandal as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, was banned in Ireland and America, and dropped from British libraries. Following the intervention of the Vatican, the stage adaptation was pulled from Dublin theatres in 1959. 'There was outrage,' recalled Richard Harris, who played the debauched, boozing, brawling and wife-beating Dangerfield. 'The whole country was closing in on us, and we were followed day and night.' Copies of the novel were still being smuggled into Ireland in the 1970s.

Now, as he turns 80, Donleavy is back in the limelight. *The Ginger Man* is to be made into a long-awaited film starring Johnny Depp as Dangerfield, and directed by Laurence Dunmore, whose debut feature, *The Libertine*, also starred Depp. 'I initially read the book as a young man' says Dunmore. 'I thought it was sensational – still do – the style of the writing, the story that it tells. For

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JP DONLEAVY IN  
THE GROUNDS OF  
LEAVINGTON PARK?  
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me, only Johnny possesses the charismatic brilliance as an actor to bring a complicated character like Sebastian Dangerfield to life.'

Over the years, some of the biggest names in Hollywood, including John Huston, Mike Nichols and Robert Redford, have tried to turn *The Ginger Man* into a film; some came to Donleavy with blank cheques. 'But as one of the few authors who owns 100 per cent rights to my work,' he says, 'I've always stood in their way. I couldn't bear to see it done badly. It would crush me.' His recent decision to turn his cult classic into a film is due, in no small part, to the casting of Depp, whom he met recently in New York. 'Mr Depp is something else,' he says. 'He's very bright and very knowledgeable, and he has a fantastically black sense of humour.'

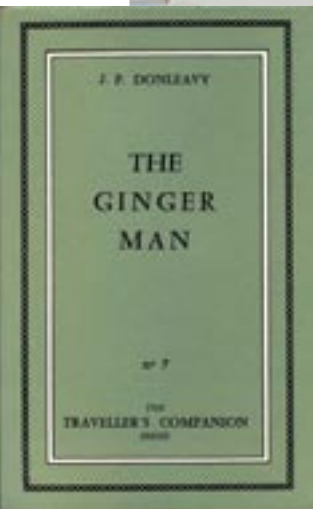
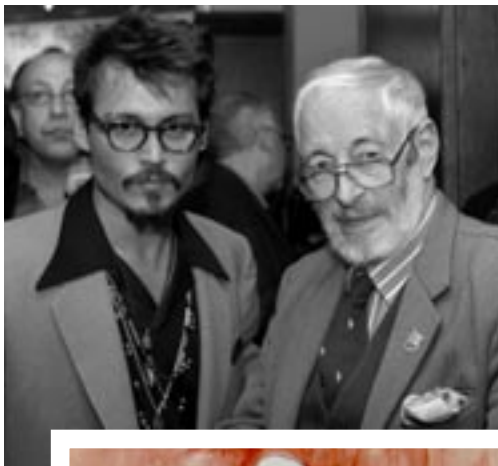
The film will feature ex-Pogue Shane MacGowan as Donleavy's one-time drinking buddy, the Dublin playwright Brendan Behan. 'Donleavy's amazing, a real poet,' says MacGowan, who named 'Fairytale of New York' in tribute to one of Donleavy's plays. 'He's probably one of the last great Irish writers on par with James Joyce or Oscar Wilde.'

Today, Donleavy lives alone in his 25-room mansion, Levington Park; a sprawling pile in the wilds of the Irish countryside. He ventures out, by his own admission, only a couple of times a month. Despite having played host to the bright young things of his day – Mick and Bianca Jagger were regular guests at Levington Park in the Sixties and Seventies – he now lives a solitary existence.

When I visit Donleavy, I find the elusive author wandering outside his front door, dressed in earthy tweeds and a flat cap – a slight, spirited man with sad, green eyes and a long, patrician nose. He whisks me into an elegant drawing room lined with his own paintings – bright, whimsical watercolours of creatures with enormous heads and penises and delicate legs; and dark, sultry oils of naked women with Modigliani faces. He is preparing for a 60-year retrospective of his artwork at a Dublin gallery. His paintings, which sell for between £3,000 and £20,000 each, are snapped up by collectors; Johnny Depp and Sean Penn among them. Painting was always his first passion, he says, but he turned to writing in response to hostile art critics. 'I was desperate to gain recognition as an artist, and realised that the only way was to write a book that would go everywhere, get into everyone's hands. Most people are unaware just how many writers have, in fact, been painters, including Henry Miller and DH Lawrence.'

Donleavy left New York for Dublin in 1946 at 20 years old, to study zoology at Trinity College. A devastatingly handsome rich boy, he was fascinated by the less-than-salubrious existence of the city's underclasses: a foggy world of violence, death and depravity. 'It was another side of Irish life,' he recalls. 'The freezing cold, the smells and constant funerals and hearses with the all-too-familiar sight of tiny white coffins of children dead of starvation. It was horrifying.'

# THE REVIEW



FROM TOP: DONLEAVY WITH JOHNNY DEPP. TKTKTKTKTK[TITLE] BY DONLEAVY. A 19TK COPY OF *THE GINGER MAN*. MARY WILSON PRICE???, HIS SECOND WIFE??, AT LEAVINGTON PARK??



In Dublin, he fell in with a group of wild young writers, including the holy trinity of self-destructive Celts: poet Patrick Kavanagh, comic writer and columnist Flann O'Brien and playwright Brendan Behan. 'They were a bunch of charming chancers trying to avoid working for a living,' Donleavy recalls.

Donleavy had hawked his book around 45 publishers in Britain and America and in 1953, when he returned from America unable to get it published, Behan suggested that he 'send it to these nice Americans in Paris'. The French publishing house Olympia Press was run by Maurice Girodias and famous for its stable of distinguished but risqué writers. What he did not realise was that Olympia also published a series of pornographic books. 'When Maurice Girodias approached me, he cited Beckett, Bellow and Nabokov among his writers,' Donleavy explains. 'But when *The Ginger Man* came out, it was published as part of a pornographic series of titles. It was just pure smut, and I was their token highbrow author.'

He had sold his story for £250 and felt he would now never be taken seriously. He swore that he would avenge his book if it was the last thing he did, and there followed 25 painful years of litigation. The battle ended in a dramatic twist, with Donleavy buying out Olympia Press. 'I never set out to ruin Girodias,' he says. 'It was an extraordinary reversal of fortunes and bitterly ironic. I just wanted to publish my book properly.'

*The Ginger Man* established Donleavy as a writer of promise, and he went on to write a further 26 books and plays. The Dangerfield character was based on Donleavy's friend at Trinity, Gainor Stephen Crist, also an American living in Dublin, who later disappeared mysteriously in Tenerife (he was taken off a boat after falling sick on a passage to Florida in the summer of 1964, and never seen again). 'Gainor was a whirlwind. He gathered people wherever he went,' Donleavy says of his friend. 'Extraordinary things happened to him. He was always getting into messes and scraps and expecting to be bailed out.'

The semi-autobiographical story reflects Donleavy's experiences as a young American wandering through the city's dangerous backstreets and catacombs and the extended cellars of the Georgian houses in Fitzwilliam Place, which were used as illegal drinking dens and were renowned for their brawls and orgies. 'It was like descending into hell. It was run by this English gentleman who was gay. I think he was in the RAF. He would often meet his guests stark naked,' he says.

Behan, whom Donleavy met when he came to Ireland in 1946, had been the first person to read *The Ginger Man*. 'He broke into

my cottage in Wicklow while I was away. When I got back, everything was in disarray and all my shoes were gone – all 26 pairs! When I found the manuscript of *Borstal Boy* among the mess, I realised, "Christ, Brendan Behan has been here!" Then I picked up my own manuscript, and saw all these funny little marks: "Leave this in", "Take this out". He arrived back from a pub an hour later, ranting about how much he hated the countryside and the wet, which is why he took my shoes. As soon as his feet got wet, he threw the shoes into the fields and put on another pair, so that he got to the pub with dry feet. I was furious. I thought, "My God, how dare he desecrate my manuscript like this and steal my shoes?" But later I realised what a very sophisticated author he was – I took in all of his marks.'

Unlike Dangerfield, for whom women were either 'whores or insolent bitches', Donleavy claims never to have been a womaniser.

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He married his first wife, Valerie, an English speech therapist, in 1949, and they had two children. After his marriage ended, there followed a five-year affair with Tessa Sayle, a London literary agent, which he describes as 'the happiest, most

creative period' of his life. He met Mary Wilson Price, MW as she was known, in New York when she auditioned for his stage adaptation of *A Singular Man*. She became his second wife and, he says, 'threw the grandest parties in Ireland. I never went to any of them. I would disappear into the secret rooms and passageways and watch from an upstairs window'. Eighteen years later, she left him for Finn Guinness. Since his last girlfriend left a few years ago, aside from a housekeeper and his assistants, he has lived alone on his estate, with a collection of ancient-breed cows.

On the second day of my visit, as we head into town for the Sunday papers, he pulls up in front of a gothic building and says: 'I think you'll appreciate this place. It's one of the world's grandest loony bins... I come here on Sundays. It's my social life.' He takes me on a tour of the grounds. 'They let the loonies wander around, wild and unrestrained,' he says. 'Half of the people in Ireland pass through here. It must be a terrible thing to lose your mind, but I appreciate their honesty. They've forgotten how to lie, or have never learned how to.'

It's a comment that's typical of his take on the world – at once odd and insightful. As we drive back through the windswept lanes that Joyce once frequented in his horse-drawn carriage, it strikes me that, despite his reclusive life and affinity with the mad, lost and lonely, like his notorious anti-hero Sebastian Dangerfield, Donleavy won't easily be forgotten. □