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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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.