A.A. 2023-2024 **Reading Comprehension TEXT 6**

**‘It never ends’: the book club that spent 28 years reading Finnegans Wake**

*The group in Venice, California, started the difficult James Joyce book in 1995. They reached its final page in October*

For a quarter century, Gerry Fialka, an experimental film-maker from Venice, California, has hosted a book club devoted to a single text: James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, one of the most famously difficult texts in literary history.

Starting in 1995, between 10 and 30 people would show up to monthly meetings at a local library. At first they read two pages a month, eventually slowing to just one page per discussion. At that pace, the group – which now meets on Zoom – reached the final page in October. It took them 28 years.

That amount of time “could well be a record”, said Sam Slote, a Joyce expert at Trinity College, Dublin, and one of the editors of How Joyce Wrote Finnegans Wake. His own weekly Wake group in Dublin, which is made up of about a dozen Joyce scholars, is on track to read through the text in a brisk 15 years.

The [California](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/california) reading group spent longer reading Finnegans Wake than Joyce spent writing it: the 628-page experimental text took the author 17 years to complete, Slote said, including a four-year stretch of near-complete writer’s block.

Fialka, who started the group in his early 40s, is now 70. “I don’t want to lie, it wasn’t like I saw God,” Fialka said, of reaching the book’s end. “It wasn’t a big deal.”

While Joyce’s Ulysses has a reputation as a difficult novel, Slote said, Finnegans Wake is “a whole different level”, with ongoing debate over basic points such as where and when the novel is set, or who the characters are. It is written in a mishmash of reinvented words, puns and allusions, with references to roughly 80 different languages.

“When people hear you’ve been a member of a book club that reads the same book every time you meet, most people go, ‘Why would you do that?’” said Bruce Woodside, a 74-year-old retired Disney animator who joined Fialka’s reading group in the 1990s. Though “it’s 628 pages of things that look like typographic errors”, said Woodside, who has been reading and re-reading Finnegans Wake since his late teens. “There’s a kind of visionary quality to it.”

He found the club’s early atmosphere “kind of chaotic”. The first impression of most readers is that Finnegans Wake is “gibberish”, Woodside said, and he recalls that “a lot of commentary on it was gibberish”, too.

Woodside dropped out of Fialka’s group for about two decades, but after he retired, he decided to go back. He had sampled other book groups, including a Proust reading group that had pivoted to reading Finnegans Wake, but it was hard to find anyone “who was really delivering a lot of intelligent commentary on the book”.

“Gerry’s group was just fun,” Woodside said. In the 20 years he had missed, he said, the group had advanced from chapter one to chapter 15.

Peter Quadrino, 38, joined Fialka’s group around 2008 or 2009. He would drive up three hours from San Diego, where he lived, to attend the meeting. “If you’re really interested in Finnegans Wake, it’s kind of hard to find people who will talk about it with you.”

Because Joyce spent 17 years of his life working on the book and then died not long after it was published, “He didn’t really get to explain it,” Quadrino said. “It’s up to us to figure it out, and figure out why he was so devoted to it.”

When Quadrino moved to Austin, Texas, in 2011, he did not want to stop reading, so he put up fliers around town, put some ads in the newspaper, and started his own Texas-based group. Twelve years in, Quadrino’s group is now about halfway through Finnegans Wake, putting them on track to complete the whole thing in about 24 years.

Joyce himself would probably be pleased to hear of these endeavors: he once described the perfect reader of Finnegans Wake as “suffering from an ideal insomnia”, and said: “The demand I make of my reader is that he should devote his entire life to reading my works.”

Fialka said he once saw a list of at least 52 active Finnegans Wake reading groups, though Slote, the Joyce scholar, said he thinks there are even more.

Different groups have their own local character. “The New York group is really argumentative, and they’re always yelling at each other, but they’re all friends, they’ve all known

The sheer difficulty of Finnegans Wake makes reading it a kind of democratic experience, Slote said. Expertise doesn’t go very far. “You have to accept that no one person is really going to get it, which is where the idea of community reading can really kick in,” he said. A team effort can also help with decoding Joyce’s many allusions, which range from references to 19th-century Irish politics to French literature to popular drinking songs to the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

Quadrino, who has a corporate day job, said he considers his Austin Wake group “the most fulfilling thing in my life”.

“In the course of a meeting, I have 30 different Wikipedia tabs open,” he said. “You’re always learning about some new historical figure, or event, or some poet. It really just feels like my brain just took a shower. It’s so refreshing.”

Fialka emphasises that media reports saying his group has “finished” the book are wrong. “We didn’t end. The last sentence of the book ends midsentence and then it picks up at the front of the book. It’s cyclical. It never ends.”

This November, they started back on page three.

“There is no next book,” Fialka told me. “We’re only reading one book. Forever.”

*Adapted from The Guardian 12.11.2023*

**Now read the following statements and write TRUE or FALSE after each of them.**

1. Finnegans Wake is one of the most difficult texts in literary history especially because Joyce used 80 different languages to write it.

1. Even though Gerry Fialka’s group has spent twenty-eight years reading Finnegans Wake they cannot claim they have finished the book because of how it is structured.