

## Sidney Feshbach

Alison Armstrong

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### Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Alison () "Sidney Feshbach," *James Joyce Literary Supplement*. Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 22.  
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls/vol37/iss1/22>

## Sidney Feshbach

By Alison Armstrong

Sidney Feshbach died at the age of 90 on May 11, 2022, and is remembered with great affection by his family, former students, and colleagues who knew him best as a Joyce scholar.

When two or more began to gather in Joyce's name, the James Joyce Industry rapidly reached global dimensions in less than a hundred years. The first batch of participants who were essential to its foundations included Fritz Senn, Clive Hart, Leo Knuth in Europe, and (thanks to per diem expense accounts from US academia), Tom Staley, and Bernie Benstock in Tulsa and Kent State, respectively, until Tulsa became the omphalos of the James Joyce Foundation, and in New York City, the James Joyce Society, whose lineage of influential presidencies included William York Tindall, Padraic Colum, Zack Bowen, and Sidney Feshbach. His credentials include delivering the first paper at the first International Joyce Symposium in Dublin in June 1967.

Sid served as President of the James Joyce Society from 1986-2000, after taking the mantle from Zack Bowen (1977-1985), who then joined the Miami Joyce gang in Florida. The Society met in the upstairs room of Gotham Book Mart in the diamond district of West 44th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues, most often on a Thursday night. Sid would afterward repair to Leonia, New Jersey, or sometimes leave directly for Amherst, Massachusetts, where he and his wife, Oriole, a prolific painter, also lived. Sid retired as Professor of English from the City College of New York in 1994 but continued as advisory editor to the *James Joyce Quarterly*, which began in 1987. As a talented teacher and respected scholar, Sid's publications include editing and writing on James Joyce (including "Longitude and Latitude" of the ten thunderwords in *Finnegans Wake*), Marcel Duchamp, Samuel Beckett's film, Empedocles, Herman Melville, and Wallace Stevens (on whom Sid's book was in progress when he died).

In a 1994 number of *James Joyce Quarterly*, Sid recalls a meeting around 1960 of the James Joyce Society:

... after someone ... presented a paper ... the president of the society, Padraic Colum, turned toward the packed room ... and asked if Mr. Thornton Wilder would say something... He [Wilder] said he had been puzzling over a passage in *FW*, a paragraph with several French references. He spoke very quickly and seemed excited. He had come upon "reborn of the cards" (*FW* 304.27-28), which was a near translation of "Renee Descartes." This, he said, increasing his speaking speed, may explain a remainder of what he said ... "the glorifies of being presainted maid to majesty" (*FW* 304.22). This could allude to Jean d'Arc ... and the maiden name of the mother of Descartes, Jeanne Brochard? Another Jeanne at the stake or rather at the "spit" (*broche*). Then he sat down, excited beyond words.... His rush of words and radiant pleasure surprised everyone into applause.... Here was the great playwright and novelist and teacher standing and speaking with the ... enthusiasm of a schoolboy.

Jonathan Goldman, the Society's current president who recently took over from A. Nicholas Fargnoli, recalls a long conversation with Sid in January 2022 in which he was urged to relish the time he might have with growing family and friends. "The work would always be there," he said, "and I would never finish all the projects I wanted, but one can never get back time we miss with our people."

Sid is survived by two daughters, two stepsons, two sons-in-law, a dozen grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren ... evidence that he had followed his own advice.

Patrick Reilly recalls how helpful and considerate Sid was when talking about *FW* to his classes at Baruch College in the early 2000s. Phillip "Flip" Ahrens, who worked on the floor for many years

in the original GBM shop, offered this in May 2022: “I knew Sidney through various encounters with The James Joyce Society through the years at Gotham Book Mart. I can only imagine what a great teacher he must’ve been!... Sid was an important cog in the machinations of GBM and helped make it the serious literary destination it was known for.”

Sadly, many whom we knew in the Gotham Book Mart days of the Joyce Society have departed before Sid—Bob Day, Kevin Sullivan, Strother Purdy, and Mary Reynolds among them, as well as Andy Brown, who bought GBM from Miss Frances Steloff. The Society eventually moved to several locations, including an antiquarian bookshop a few streets north of the West 44th Street shop, then to penthouse rooms in the Roger Smith Hotel on Lexington Avenue before settling in Glucksman Ireland House (NYU) with Nick Fagnoli as president (whose 21 years of tenure were akin to the duration of Sid’s). Nick recalls that “Sid’s commitment to the James Joyce Society was unwavering and always professional. Even before becoming vice president under Zack Bowen, Sid took an active role in promoting the society, and, when he became president, he continued to advance its prestige among Joyce scholars and enthusiasts here and abroad.” And let us recall that all the communications were then done with flyers and postcards mimeographed and sent through the mail.

GBM is remembered not only as the perfect venue for the James Joyce Society but also for Miss Steloff’s patronage well into her 90s; she would often descend from her upstairs apartment with her big yellow cat to sit in on a meeting. During working hours, she was most helpful in retrieving copies of Joycean materials from her secret stores in the cellar, such as mint copies of *transition*. And we must also remember the elegant Phillip Lyman’s presence, often at the door of the upstairs room to collect dues.

Wise men and women did indeed fish there. And Sid Feshbach kept the stream flowing...

Donations in Sid’s name may be sent to the Union of Concerned Scientists or to the James Joyce Society.

—*New York City*