

Our Psychic Living Room

Why It's Particularly Important to Read David Foster Wallace

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Two years have now passed since the death of David Foster Wallace in the fall of 2008. His legacy as a writer has been the subject of nonstop debate since the day of his suicide. I'll cut to the chase: I believe he was, in his own way, a literary genius. Let me explain why.

You may have opened *Harper's* or *Rolling Stone* back around the turn of the century and read a really funny essay by a chatty, neurotic essayist who had *Rain Man*-like abilities to recall and describe experiences as diverse as attending the Illinois State Fair, playing tennis during a tornado, and following John McCain's presidential campaign. You may have found the essays hilarious, or quite brilliant. You may have gone so far as to say, as the critic Michiko Kakutani did in the *New York Times*, that they described modern life with "humor and fervor and verve," and you may have wanted to read more of them. Regardless of how you felt, you probably dealt with the situation in a normal, adult way. That is, you looked up the essayist's name online and maybe bought some of his collections, like *Consider the Lobster* or *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. I'll go ahead and assume you didn't form an obsessive attachment to the author and delve perilously deep into his essays and fiction and then have to purge all your David Foster Wallace emotional attachment errata onto a blank page and call it an "essay." Because that's what I did—and let me tell you, gentle reader: it hasn't been fun.

But it has given me something to do with my time, and it's also given me this sort of quixotic sense of purpose, this mission to Tell the People about David

Foster Wallace—because the people, being a well-educated and discerning people, deserve to know. But this is an embarrassing mission, to be sure, because what if the people already know about David Foster Wallace? The majority of readers of this magazine will probably test out of David Foster Wallace 101, having already read some of his essays and maybe some of his fiction or, failing that, the numerous adoring profiles.

But what do these readers actually think about David Foster Wallace? Isn't all the postmortem hype confusing and disorienting? Isn't he the kind of dense novelist who gets touted by stoner twenty-and-thirtysomethings? Is liking Wallace just a grad school affectation, like watching Danish art films? Is liking Wallace a fun and cool thing to do because he had a history of substance abuse and underwent electroconvulsive therapy? Or does liking Wallace have nothing to do with grad school or stories of Genius in Its Byronic Youth and everything to do with patience and an earnest desire to be a better human being? I think so. I think it'll become quite obvious if you grit your teeth and hack away at all the melodramatic bullshit.

Among nonmembers of the literary in-crowd, there tends to be no controversy about Wallace's greatness as an essayist—everyone agrees that he was hilarious and engaging and that his essays are a joy to read. The real war is being fought in the trenches of his fiction, where even the most well-meaning people are putting down his books a hundred pages in and complaining of pretentiousness and overwriting. For a remarkably biased person such as myself, this

seems like an interesting conflict to get in on. Let me be completely transparent here and say that I'm not an ecstatic reviewer from *Salon* magazine. I'm not currently in possession of a Ph.D. in English, nor do I live in a Tribeca loft and subsist on Red Bull and sushi. I'm just like you, except for (maybe) this one difference: I really, really love David Foster Wallace's fiction. And I want to make a case not merely for his writing but for his fiction writing. I want to make a case for its earnestness and honesty, and then I want to make a similar case for the writer himself. So please bear with me.

The Hyper-Articulate Tin Man

David Foster Wallace's 1,079-page magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, is set in the year 2009 in the Organization of North American Nations, a political fusion of Canada, Mexico, and the United States, where giant corporations subsidize everything from cars to calendar years. The book chronicles the stories of students at the elite Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA) in Boston, as well as a group of recovering drug addicts at the nearby Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. Hal Incandenza, one of the novel's protagonists, is a lexical prodigy and tennis star at the ETA who goes to great lengths to conceal his marijuana addiction from all but his closest friends. The other putative protagonist is Don Gately, a former burglar and Demerol addict who's gone straight and now works the graveyard counseling shifts at Ennet House, listening while the likes of coke-addicted Randy Lenz and marijuana-addicted Kate Gompert recount their nightmares. The book's plot is massive and unwieldy and mainly concerns attempts of a Quebecois separatist group to obtain the original print of a film called *Infinite Jest*, which was written and directed by Hal's father, the cinematic auteur James Orin Incandenza (aka Himself, aka the Mad Stork). A character in the film—and by extension the film itself—is apparently so beautiful that viewers have actually been known to die from pleasure. In the hands of the Quebecois separatists, such a film would be a powerful WMD. There's much talk about the American addiction to pleasure and our tendency to take the path of least resistance, and so on.

The book met with some bemused, irritated, and downright negative criticism on its debut. In a *New York Times* review in 1996, the aforementioned Michiko Kakutani compared *Infinite Jest* to “one of

those unfinished Michelangelo sculptures: you can see a godly creature trying to fight its way out of the marble, but it's stuck there, half excavated, unable to break completely free.” Wallace's short fiction fared similarly. In a lecture James Wood gave on *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, a collection of stories by Wallace, he described the book's organizing principle as “a caravan of vileness” and complained, “Wallace gives you the key, overexplaining the hand, instead of being enigmatic, like Beckett.” Walter Kirn, author of *Up in the Air* (the novel on which the film with George Clooney was based), has an opinion of Wallace that most closely matches that of the vox populi. Reviewing *Oblivion*, another collection of Wallace's short stories, Kirn writes:

And there, perhaps unfairly decontextualized (to use a Wallace-type word), you have it: the ostentatiously elongated, curiously bureaucratic, stubbornly overdetermined prose style that is either—depending on what you think about brevity being the soul of wit—the coolest thing going in high-quality lit these days or profoundly damning evidence that American fiction is almost bankrupt and, like a desperate central government, is printing up stacks of impressively engraved, stupendously high-denomination bank notes in a bid to delay for a while its utter collapse. . . .

He has the vocabulary. He has the energy. He has the big ideas. He has the attitude. Yet too often he sounds like a hyperarticulate Tin Man. Maybe this is a concentrated version of how we all sound lately. Data-dazed. Cybernetic. Overstimulated. Maybe this is the voice of the true now. Or maybe genius, like language, can't do everything, and maybe the Wizard should give the guy a heart.

To a lot of people, Wallace's stories seem like they could be great, interesting, and affecting, and maybe he is (or was) the voice of the “true now,” but the fact is that his writing is steeped in technical argot; his sentences are stem-winders; and he was, well, an overeducated white guy who wrote overwrought, experimental, and sometimes downright clunky fiction that reads like a verbal Escherian maze. Maybe he should have lightened up a little—or maybe he should have stopped freebasing Adderall so as to have a shot at writing a sentence under ninety words. Either way, he's not number one on most American readings lists, which fact I think is a shame. It's true that sentences like this one may have been standard operating procedure for Wallace:

The magic—which my mother likely reported to me from her vantage on our living room’s sofa, while watching me pull the cement mixer around the room by its rope, idly asking me if I was aware that it had magical properties, no doubt making sport of me in the bored half-cruel way that adults sometimes do with small children, playfully telling them things that they pass off to themselves as “tall tales” or “childlike inventions,” unaware of the impact those tales may have (since magic is a serious reality for small children), though, conversely, if my parents believed that the cement mixer’s magic was real, I do not understand why they waited weeks or months before telling me of it.

But that doesn’t necessarily mean that Wallace is a cold and highly technical lexical machine. Sure, the prose is overstuffed, but it’s careful and remarkable in a way that a lot of fiction isn’t: the passage here delivers the little history of the child’s bewilderment and the parents’ pseudocruelty with a kind of angst that just seems right for Wallace’s purposes here. And things really come into focus when you read the sentence that follows: “They were a delightful but often impenetrable puzzle to me; I no more knew their minds and motives than a pencil knows what it is being used for.” A child’s innocent confusion about the adult mind is brought to light by the invocation of a pencil’s qualia, something that does not exist for adults but that could seem very real to a child with an expansive imagination. Even James Wood begrudgingly admits that “[Wallace] is onto something.”

Because he wrote in the latter half of the twentieth century, and because he was labeled a “hyperarticulate Tin Man” (and other similar things), Wallace is most often placed in the postmodern cabal, among the likes of DeLillo, Vollmann, Pynchon, Gaddis, Gass, and Barth—who was the literary “father” Wallace supposedly had to “kill,” if you believe in the Titanian mythos of patrilinear succession in American literary fiction. Unlike the novels of most postmodernists, however, Wallace’s are not a martyring challenge to read—absent from *Infinite Jest* are the willfully obscure stylistic choices that make slogging through something like William Gaddis’s *J. R.* such a Herculean task. To read Wallace, all you really need is a little endurance and a willingness to crack the dictionary. In fact, Wallace’s fiction is so humane and accessible compared with that of his contemporaries that scholars like Marshall Boswell have suggested that he might be something

different from the postmodernists altogether. As Boswell writes in his 2003 book *Understanding David Foster Wallace*:

Although Wallace is often labeled as a “postmodern” writer, in fact he might be best regarded as a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism. He confidently situates himself as the direct heir to a tradition of aesthetic development that began with the modernist overturning of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism and continued with the postwar critique of modernist aesthetics. Yet Wallace proceeds from the assumption that *both* modernism and postmodernism are essentially “done.” Rather, his work moves resolutely forward while hoisting the baggage of modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on its back.

It’s true that Wallace’s writing borrows as much, if not more, from *Ulysses* and *To the Lighthouse* as it does from *The Sot-Weed Factor*. That said, I agree with Boswell that it is difficult to identify Wallace as a dyed-in-the-wool member of any aesthetic movement. Wallace was more concerned with honestly transcribing the particulars of his world than he was with self-consciously aping any literary trend. He once spoke with disdain about “the crank turners, the little gray people who take the machines others have built and just turn the crank, and little pellets of metafiction come out the other end.” It seems fitting that his aesthetic is “still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable)”; he built the literary machine, and many young writers are dying to turn the crank.

In an artistic climate in which it is fashionable to be distant, coy, and “mysterious”—to sit like a god above your metafictional work and pare your fingernails while the reader struggles on in futility—Wallace is something of a relief: warm, vulnerable, self-effacing. He wrote with a big-hearted curiosity about the world around him; if anything, that’s extremely charming.

The stories about Wallace are not the same sort of gonzo stories one hears about other contemporary writers. Unlike T. C. Boyle, Wallace did not soak his feet in chicken blood while he wrote, and he eschewed William Vollmann’s practice of befriending skinheads (although Wallace did hang out in a lot of halfway houses while researching *Infinite Jest*). Rather, one hears about Wallace’s tremendous sense of humor (he was so entertaining that fellow undergraduates at Amherst referred to him as the “Dave Show”), his tendency to adopt dogs whose former owners had

abused or mistreated them, and the patience and respect he devoted to his English students. There's also a good deal of talk about his humble beginnings. It's remarkable to some people that the man who authored *Infinite Jest* grew up in the rural Midwest. It comes as no surprise, however, that his father was a philosophy professor at the University of Illinois and his mother an English professor at a local community college. Wallace excelled in sports from an early age, and as a teenager, he was one of the highest-ranked football players in the township. In his early teens, he made the move to tennis, a decision supposedly motivated by his lack of bulk. By his late teenage years, however, he had emerged as an athlete-cum-frenetic intellectual. The decision to attend Amherst, his father's alma mater, seemed a natural one, but Wallace was severely homesick and emotionally unstable as an underclassman and ended up having to take time off. He told David Lipsky, author of *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (2010), that during this fraught period, he was placed on a mood regulator that made him feel like he was "stoned and in hell." Despite his struggles, he graduated summa cum laude in 1985 with degrees in English and philosophy.

After Amherst, he attended the University of Arizona's MFA program and published *The Broom of the System*, an anti-*Künstlerroman* that's an explosive synthesis of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and Derrida's literary criticism, while still a student there. In the early 1990s, he abandoned a doctoral program in philosophy at Harvard and sought a teaching position in the English department at Emerson College. He'd found his calling as a teacher of English and creative writing, and he would remain one thereafter: he accepted positions first at Illinois State University (1992) and then at Pomona College (2002). By 2003, Wallace had received a MacArthur Fellowship and had published stories in the *Paris Review* and the *New Yorker* and essays in *Harper's*, among other places (several essays were published in his collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*). He had a light teaching load at Pomona, which gave him freedom to focus on his writing—especially the completion of *The Pale King*.

Knowing his impressive biography, it's easy to gloss over the fact that Wallace hanged himself. He was a diagnosed depressive who had been on a dinosaur of a mood regulator called Nardil for most of his adult

life. Hal Incandenza, James Orin Incandenza, and Kate Gompert in *Infinite Jest* personify Wallace's depression, which he describes in great detail in the short stories "Good Old Neon" and "The Depressed Person." Despite its obvious presence in his fiction, Wallace was secretive about his depression, and only family members and close friends were aware of his condition.

The premature death of a writer always elicits a curiosity in his or her work that might not have been around while he or she was alive. Lately, more and more people have begun reading Wallace. These same readers have taken to the agora of the blogosphere, with mixed results. As one might expect, the most enthusiastic pro-Wallace rhetoric comes from my demographic (privileged under- and postgraduates): "*Infinite Jest* feels very real, with the underlying premise that we *must* read, write, or talk ourselves out of the metafictional spiral; that it is actually urgent that we connect with the world, not hide from it with drink or drugs or television or literary skill." This came from someone whose nom de guerre is MimiSmarty pants and who actually sacrificed her beer money to buy a hardcover copy of *Infinite Jest*. A blogger I'll call A. N. writes this about a short story, "The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing," the young Wallace published in the *Amherst Review*: The story, "which bears most of his stylistic earmarks circa *Infinite Jest*, grapples with themes that would echo throughout much of his work to follow: infinity, fear, the risk of autobiography, fiction as an event, the struggle to empathize—the struggle to simply be in one's own skin. All of this with a keen and self-aware sense of humor which dares you not to let Wallace's cheeky, vigorous and, behind all that, ultimately hurt voice crawl into your head and stay there." If nothing else, this is proof that there is an online community of fervent young readers sitting shivah for their fallen king. Take that, op-ed alarmists who don't think young people read!

Then there are the wearisome adults who puzzle through the text carefully and ploddingly and emerge with theories about what really happens to the bedridden Don Gately at the end of *Infinite Jest* or what's really wrong with the psychotic grade school teacher in the short story "The Soul Is Not a Smithy." Some of them complain about how much of Wallace's fiction lacks a proper ending, which is a legitimate complaint. Nearly all of their reviews end with a paragraph break followed by a single sentence: "I'll need to read it again."

Finally, there is a small but outspoken anti-Wallace junta, people who read the novels just to a) exhort potential readers to stick with Wallace's nonfiction, b) dismiss Wallace as a pretentious brat hiding behind a silkscreen of clever metafiction, c) dismiss Wallace as someone who's got literary chops but fails to deliver anything meaningful because he's just a walking thesaurus and/or pile of degrees.

Who knows what all this attention might have done to the late Wallace, whose relationship with his critics was always pretty genial? It would have been business as usual. Either Wallace loses his puppy-doggish admirers in a labyrinth of deeper thought—" [The media is] this machine that has you out here, asking about my reaction to a phenomenon that consists largely of your being out here. . . . [I]t's all very strange"—or puts them at ease with his self-deprecating sense of humor: "A lot of this [attention], it's nice, I would like to get laid out of it a couple of times, which has not in fact happened. I didn't get laid on this tour." For Wallace, the admiration of readers was always a small miracle—people reading *my* stuff, and *liking* it?—which should do a good deal to disabuse readers of any ideas about him being an imperious literary trickster who wrote difficult fiction just to get people to talk about him. With Wallace, what you see is what you get. His sentences may be stem-winding, but they're earnest. In fact, most of Wallace's fiction is so un-ironic and nonhipster that critics have actually accused it of risking sentimentality.

What Wallace is often trying to say in his fiction and essays—the message, as it were, at the heart of so much outpouring of feeling—is simple: think about someone else besides yourself. Which is a message a lot of us need desperately to hear. Wallace attacked the bored stasis of the unengaged American life—the stoned sitting and staring, the herdlike consumption of pleasure-inducing drugs (which could be anything from alcohol and cocaine to things like shopping and television)—and sounded an unselfish call to action. As someone who fought valiantly to escape the constraints of his own troubled mind, Wallace knew the value of a good change in perspective. "You are not the only person on this earth," he seems to be telling his readers. "You really need to understand that and try to act accordingly." If every bored person could just wake up and stand witness to what's happening in the world, then maybe we'd all be a little more generous with our time and resources. To appropriate the words of

MimiSmarty pants, Wallace wants us to do everything we can to talk ourselves out of the metafictional spiral, to stop "hiding" and start doing something.

Soma and the American Life

In a 1996 interview, Wallace identified *Infinite Jest* as a "sad" novel:

The sadness that the book is about, and that I was going through [when I wrote it], was a real American type of sadness. I was white, upper-middle-class, obscenely well-educated, had had way more career success than I could have legitimately hoped for and was sort of adrift. A lot of my friends were the same way. Some of them were deeply into drugs, others were unbelievable workaholics. Some were going to singles bars every night. You could see it played out in 20 different ways, but it's the same thing. . . . I get the feeling that a lot of us, privileged Americans, as we enter our early 30s, have to find a way to put away childish things and confront stuff about spirituality and values.

That sadness—that feeling of being adrift—has a very strong presence in *Infinite Jest*: the students at the ETA are competitive but not entirely sure why (there is much talk about entering "The Show," which is the world of professional competitive tennis, and whether such a fate is more desirable than just going to college or dental school). Many ETA students are frequent abusers of recreational drugs, and a rowdy and slightly insane student named Michael Pemulis makes a comfortable living selling Visine bottles of clean urine to students who need to pass drug tests. The Ennet House is full of melancholy, aimless addicts who want desperately to get clean but sometimes cannot, and therefore have a difficult time determining how or why they began abusing to begin with. The only place in the book where characters are forced to undergo the sort of maturation Wallace described—confronting "stuff about spirituality and values"—is in Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. The former addicts are force-fed clichés like "one day at a time" and asked to thank a higher power they may or may not believe in for granting them the courage to live a sober day. At first, this all feels like a giant lie to a lot of the addicts, but then they begin to realize that this "lie" is the only thing keeping them alive and that they should have developed this primitive telos (cheesy though it

may seem) a long time ago. The Alcoholics Anonymous spiritual network is the kind of thing that frees addicts from their own minds and allows them to enter the real world.

And there's the rub for so many characters in *Infinite Jest*: medicate oneself into a waking dream or struggle through all the discomfort and pain and claim a spot in the world? Somewhere around page 896 of *Infinite Jest*, Hal Incandenza lays down on the floor in one of the ETA subdormitories and does not move from that spot for the rest of the book. The banal details of his adolescent life fell him: "Maybe the worst part of the cognitions involved the incredible volume of food I was going to have to consume over the rest of my life. Meal after meal, plus snacks. . . . I experienced, vividly, the image of a broad cool well-lit room piled floor to ceiling with nothing but the lightly breaded chicken fillets I was going to consume over the next sixty years." No one can rouse Hal, not even Michael Pemulis, who happens to be his best friend. Questions directed at Hal about why he has been laying on the ground for so long go unanswered, except the question "Thinking?" to which Hal responds: "The opposite. Thought-prophylaxis." (One could think of Radiohead's music video for "Just" as a visual analogue to this scene.)

A lot of important-sounding people will tell you that *Infinite Jest* is a book about addiction, obsession, consumerism (and how it's related to the two prenominate things), passivity, power, and the need to find order in one's life. They are right, but if they stop there, they overlook the fact that the book is also about trying your best to be a good, kind human being in a hostile world; about telling the Truth; about admitting your vulnerabilities and sincerely seeking help from others. In certain cases, characters must trust their lives to the inbound goodness of other people, which is a scary thing to do in an incredibly self-centered age.

The reader learns quickly that an important part of cultivating this inbound goodness is forgoing the numb passivity that controlled substances induce, a message we may recognize from medicated, dystopian novels like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Gately awakens Lazarus-like from a twenty-year doze by finally kicking the Demerol monkey. Hal realizes that his prodigious marijuana consumption is only harming him and tries to stop. The reader gets the impression that those who make a good-faith effort to fight against the passivity will emerge triumphant. Those victors are Wallace's saints. They are the ones who actually give a shit about something besides themselves.

The Tin Man's Legacy

Wallace was on this earth for too short a time, but it was good while we had him. For a couple of years there, we knew just what Hal Incandenza meant by "thought-prophylaxis"; we marveled at John McCain's story and agreed that state fairs are weird and that tennis is a great metaphor for life. We willingly gave ourselves over to Wallace's mind and personality—we devoured his output, and we wanted him to write more. We wondered what he had to say about basketball or antiabortion activists or the American Southwest. We felt welcome in his head. And Wallace wasn't condescending. He bent over backward to help us understand what he was trying to say: he agonized over word choice, tried to explain away ambiguities with footnotes, and packed as much expository detail into every sentence as he possibly could. And ultimately it turned out that what he was trying to say wasn't that complicated. We read Wallace with the attitude of a meek old man at a peep show, simultaneously marveling and shuddering at what was on display. We would never think of putting ourselves on display in the same way—we don't even know how. But of course we couldn't look away.

Wallace's intellect became our psychic living room, the place we went to be comforted and reassured: "Yes, you're normal. Don't worry, someone else has already had this exact same thought." All this reassurance would make us think, "If this guy has been having these thoughts, then maybe I'm not alone in this world. Maybe there are even more people out there with the same thoughts as mine." Then we'd get to wondering about the billions of other minds at work just like ours, like the mind of a stockbroker in Tennessee and the mind of a toddler in Costa Rica and the mind of a mother in the Congo and the mind of a construction worker in Lebanon, and we'd imagine how all their thoughts are knit together in the same way ours are. And we'd think, "Isn't this whole thing miraculous, the fact that we can share all this stuff and the only thing we've got to do is be human? Now this is one hell of an idea. This is something I can really get behind! What's the point of hermiting yourself in your own brain if there's a whole world out there full of love and fear and pity and compassion?"

And that is exactly what David Foster Wallace wanted us to think. ◆