



# A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments

*David Foster Wallace*

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## **A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments** David Foster Wallace

In this exuberantly praised book - a collection of seven pieces on subjects ranging from television to tennis, from the Illinois State Fair to the films of David Lynch, from postmodern literary theory to the supposed fun of traveling aboard a Caribbean luxury cruiseliner - David Foster Wallace brings to nonfiction the same curiosity, hilarity, and exhilarating verbal facility that has delighted readers of his fiction, including the bestselling *Infinite Jest*.

## **A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments Details**

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**David Foster Wallace**

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## From Reader Review A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments for online ebook

### Steve says

Judging from the traffic tie-ups you see, I'm not the only one who slows down to gape at a car crash. The temptation would be even greater somewhere like Beverly Hills with a Ferrari involved. I suppose reading this book would fall under a similar rubric: gawking at a star betided by tragedy.

By nearly all accounts, mine and the MacArthur's included, DFW was a genius. This is all the more obvious given the essay format—a good way to highlight his gift.\* He saw big pictures, as his social commentary and cultural critiques made clear. He could also drill down to subtle human quirks which, though remote, are still recognizable (after he pointed them out). I'm sure his genius extended beyond my comprehension of it, too, especially with his more philosophical musings.\*\* Though one of his goals was to lead readers to “aha” moments of insight, he never talked down to anyone to get there.

The subjects were varied, covering topics like tennis (as a regionally ranked junior player he knew the sport well), television, the Illinois State Fair, literary theory, and cruise ship excursions. You get the feeling he could write about anything, though, and it would all be brilliant. He could vary his tone, too, alternating between professorial, sardonic, insightful, and funny. I guess in popular parlance you'd call him a hipster, but he seemed a little less edgy and a little more caring than others of that ilk. Now that I think about it, I shouldn't even try to categorize such a multifaceted and unique individual.

One passage in the book struck me as particularly good. From what I've seen, it was one of his recurring themes. It has to do with irony and irreverence as a rhetorical mode. Turns out, fun as it may be for a time, he views it all as ultimately unfulfilling. With an ironist's repertoire of criticism and destruction, there's rarely anything constructive to “replace the hypocrisies it debunks.” Consistent with that, in an interview I just read he spoke disparagingly of all the arch, pomo attitude there is these days.

So why did he do it? To be honest I really didn't read this looking for clues. It's hard not to think of his fate, though, when he talked so honestly about despair, and fighting the urge to throw himself off the ship that he otherwise wrote so playfully about in the title piece. I suppose depression and bad chemistry were the clinical reasons, but it's natural to wonder what within his outlook he might have revealed to tip his hand. Did he simply *think* too much and in increasingly inward ways? Was he too keenly aware of how different he was? Even his friends may not know. What I do know is that they miss him. That includes friends he never met; those he connected with through his works.

\*We might also conclude that the essay format is a way to see the curse of his genius, too, with hints of alienation in a world of average intelligence and a hyper-awareness of flaws including his own.

\*\*When an essay jumps right in saying that “In the 1960s the poststructuralist metacritics came along and turned literary aesthetics on its head by rejecting assumptions their teachers had held as self-evident and making the whole business of interpreting texts way more complicated by fusing theories of creative discourse with hardcore positions in metaphysics,” you know you're in for a challenge.\*\*\*

\*\*\*You get really used to footnotes in a DFW essay. Maybe it's just the way a really smart person's mind works—they can go on for hours with the asides their active noggins flit to, discursively disrupting the linear flow but in interesting ways. You get a lot of long sentences with him, too (I say hoping it's without irony as I flatter him with imitation in yet another nested aside).

## karen says

this book made me wet myself. twice. i wish to god i was exxagerating. or elderly. but poor dfw on a cruise ship... no one has ever paired genius with social awkwardness more charmingly.

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## Aubrey says

One of my more obsessive habits on Goodreads involves comparing books with others. If you're one of my friends, chances are I've clicked the little button on your homepage an average of three times, sometimes more if you have a particularly large library (looking at you, Hadrian/Kris/& co.) Throughout my nearly two weeks of reading this book, the prim and peppy 'currently-reading' would show up next to a record number of gleaming five stars, up near the tippy top if listed in order of rating.

In short, I am amongst good company.

It's been nearly three years since I added *Infinite Jest* into rank and file, almost one since I pulled the beast out of the depths of one of the massive university libraries. I read it at school, I carted it back home for the holidays, and finished in the kind of stricken rhapsody of composition that I've been chasing ever since. Said ever since included coming to terms with IJ's reputation, replete with tales of pretentious woe, ballads of fiendish glee, and the moribund crossroads between the two embodied in the form of hipster lists. It's likely that I held off for so long on coming back to DFW for fear of finding out that I really hadn't adored all that much, and it was the internalization of all that hype both laudatory and inverse that had prompted that overwhelming favoritism.

I needn't have worried.

Of course, this isn't IJ, and trust me when I say that that particular megalodon is not safe from a future reread. However, it *is* DFW, and this collection of nonfiction has plenty of dots connecting over to the more fictional bents: math, tennis, debilitating awareness of self, and that keen eye of tangential cross sections of life and literature that raises the age I currently live in to something not quite art, but interesting enough to hold its own against the sea of classics and other eclectic that usually fills my escapist needs.

In other words, DFW liked a lot of the things I do, and wrote about them in such a way that makes me *likes* liking them, which doesn't happen so often when your main interests include engineering-level calculations, sociocultural treatises, and hardcore critical theory of fictioning. The best part of DFW is he can carry across all that in a manner both big-worded and esoteric, taking the subject seriously in the complex systems rather than the ivory tower sense of the word. For example, he convinced me to try out David Lynch without ever straining my interest levels or coming off as an asshole, an achievement greatly added by his obvious enjoyment of the guy's movies. DFW may have had some extremely heavy interests, but all that academic jargon and/or molasses with a noticeable veneer of 'you're sure you're good enough, punk'? Nada, zero, zilch. Poof. Did I mention he's hilarious, in ways ranging from erudite to funny as fuck filth? Let me say it again.

And that retention of his. I am a firm believer in his '500,000 bits of discrete information' statement, as well as his ability to contextualize anything, anywhere, at any speed seen fit. The sections in the titular essay succeeding an overindulgence in caffeine are especially demonstrative, but only by a hair. It's this

hypersensitive intake valve combined with a strong desire to share that's resulting in my not giving DFW crap for throwing out the 'politically correct' word and being so white and male and American in general. Not everyone has my viciously obsessive interest in social justice, so I will simply state that he's aware when it counts and move on.

Besides, that *Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction* essay? Genius, in the 'my life makes so much more sense right now' gist of the word. Accuse me of favoritism, but that little piece of work made up for every niggling twinge and then some.

Finally, there remains the fact that I discovered DFW and his writing after September 12, 2008. What writings there are now are all the writings that remain for my future readings. Thus, I have decided to ration my DFW intake for one work per year, a cycle that began with *IJ* and will last not nearly long enough.

Here's to you, David Foster Wallace. I'll never meet you, but I will remember.

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## **MJ Nicholls says**

Goodness gracious. As much as I revere Wallace's fiction—his attempt to rescue American culture from the despairing morass of self-aware ironical knowingness—his nonfiction is in *another league*. The sheer cinematic exuberance, the “floating eye” quality of these pieces is breathtaking and wonderful, bringing the reader as deep into each experience as is textually possible, and as close to Wallace as we can be on the page.

His fiction has a ‘surgical’ quality, much like J.G. Ballard or Will Self (whose own essay style mirrors Wallace's, though proves less compelling than his fiction), more bound up in high-wire intellectual games which only connect when the reader is complicit in the clevernesses at the heart of these stories, or serve to undo the story by adding meta-layers more about fiction writing itself. (And so metafictional by proxy. An example would be the story ‘Incarnations of Burned Children,’ which on a deeper reading is a story *about* narrative position/POV, not the heartrending events depicted within. So despite his work going for direct emotional shocks, it is largely trapped in the cranium).

So in this essay collection, by making the focus tangentially on Wallace himself as filtered through the Illinois State Fair, a revolting cruise ship, or a tortured TV consumer, the work has a deeply personal and directly emotional feel, and although not as ambitious as his attempt to depict the grand throbbing alive-ness of life as in *Infinite Jest*, the work shines and sings with a more reader-friendly humour, brio and natural warmth, as well as the stylish feats of intelligence and logical probity that is his trademark. Phew.

An essential text for any serious reader of contemporary essays.

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## **Geoff says**

This, my first experience reading David Foster Wallace, disabused me of a few prejudices that in retrospect seem shamefully naive, one of which being that objects of the American Media Hype Machine are necessarily mediocre. I believed that there had to be something vapid or cheap or sensationalist about things or persons that become loci of the intellectual-creative “next-voice-of-our-generation” ballyhoo. It's tough not to be cynical. The whole zeitgeist of our times is cynicism, aloofness, a disdain of sensitivity bordering on neurosis (and I mean a healthy, cultured sensitivity, one nurtured in restraint and consideration and taste, not an emo-ish “horticulturally cultivated five o'clock shadow thick glasses staring pensively over a latte and

word document always always in public in sight of the pretty girls' sensitivity). Fight Clubs, Heartbreaking Works of Staggering Geniuses, American Psychos,... if these are the voices of our times let me be an anachronism. In my narrow-mindedness, I lumped DFW in with these other bright young things, figuring he was another spoiled product of moneyed, media-saturated, hipper-than-thou America, wielding an *a priori* standoffishness as crutch and sword. It's what I'd come to expect of popular entertainment as a whole. I don't mean Harry Potter/Girl with the X tattoo lit. (stuff that is immensely popular but actually has redeeming factors and is based in a solid tradition of plot, earnest character development, involved drama, etc.), but stuff that was supposed to represent the intellectual undercurrents of what it is to be a living mind in America in the early twenty-first century; you know, *edgy stuff*. McSweeney's has some funny t-shirts, but in the end all the irony can be fucking despairing. Contrived coolness, ultraviolence representing god knows what, involuted sexual obsessions as supposed comment on middle-class repression and ennui or some nonsense, solipsistic unearned first-person memoiric explorations of "what-am-I-in-this-crazy-work-a-day-world"- it keeps on piling up to a vomitous apogee, and I find myself saying "fuck it" and reading Proust or Walser or Pessoa or Flaubert just so I can fucking breathe, just to feel someone expressing something honest and with an unmanufactured posture.

Enter DFW. I can't comment on *Infinite Jest* (a book for another day, when I again have surplus hours to give to a tome, hopefully soon), but *A Supposedly Fun Thing...* cuts through all of my above complaints like a glowingly-hot knife through butter. It has come to be the ubiquitous descriptor of Wallace, that he was "a decent guy", and from what I can glean from this collection of essays the shoe fits (and is there really a higher compliment?)... but in addition to his essential decency (involving empathy, kindness, a bullshit detector always set on 11, the keenest eye for a telling detail I've encountered in books of my times), it is the way he subsumes the alienating, cheapening aspects of our culture into his vast intellect, deconstructs them into their vital parts, analyzes their components, and restructures them into a completely non-ironic, funny-as-hell, and enlightening statement about what it is to be a human being. And my god, the humor in this book! Never before have I bitten my lip to bleeding so many times attempting to restrain outright bursts of mad laughter reading this in public. And it's consistent. And underneath the laughter is that certain lattice within modern humor at its best form (and I'm thinking of like Louis CK here, or Mitch Hedberg, or Bill Hicks) where the laughter is ringing above a potential abyss, and that humor and the transformation of creeping despair into something luminous are the only ways of redeeming contemporary things and ideas from utter degradation and fitting them back into the lineage of a culture of thorough humanist examination. Calling DFW "the last humanist" is tempting, but then I'd be falling into the same traps of cynicism these essays made me believe it is possible to free ourselves from.

Good readers go into books looking for an honest, unique interpretation of some facet of genuine experience; over the years I have found myself searching farther back into other cultures and other eras very distant from mine for that kind of fulfilling, rounded perspective. What *A Supposedly Fun Thing...* has shown me is that while it is still an essential component of a dedicated humanist to understand the history of thought and expression, especially in the face of the dulling, warping aspects of rudderless progress and an increasingly fragmented reality, that there are outposts of sincerity, of good-nature, representatives of the "decent guys" of the creative temperament, hard at work, chewing on the problems that haunt us, me, you, this very day, dealing with the stuff of our every days in terms that elevate them above the every day (DFW, in this book alone, elevated tennis, state fairs, David Lynch, television, a week-long cruise, the athlete, to the realm of eternal motif). They're just working a lot harder, being driven down tougher paths, having to fortify their honesty and sensitivity and steel themselves in the face of fragmentation to a greater degree. DFW disabused me of the notion that I have to look outside of my own times for some hero of the candid, the honest, the unique, and I think he would have considered that some sort of success.

On a more depressing note, I understand now that the media hype that at first so turned me off to the David Foster Wallace machine was in a great part due to his suicide. Suicide makes everything more momentous, gives a retrospective ur-meaning to all the aspects of a life, imposes an immediate posterity on a creative human being's works. I can't fathom what it would have been like in 2008 had I known his work, but I can

sense the immense loss to our times that his passing has meant. I mean, imagine looking forward to more *Harper's* experiential essays, a complete *Pale King*, more laughter, more insights. Overly sensitive souls run the risk of being so sensitive that all they feel is pain, and the weird and baroque regimen of drugs Wallace was on somehow did not dull this sensitivity, this awareness (and in some perverse way made him even more representative of our times). As I said before, really insightful humor runs right along an abyss of terror, things that uplift keep a dialogue with things that destroy us, they inform and expand awareness in the other. Somewhere early in the titular essay of this book, Wallace goes on one of his famous footnote-digressions, which also happens to be quite representative of his sense of humor and mode of observation, about the despairing phenomenon of "The Professional Smile". I'll quote it at length:

*"...the Professional Smile, a national pandemic in the service industry... You know this smile- the strenuous contraction of circumoral fascia w/incomplete zygomatic involvement- the smile that doesn't quite reach the smiler's eyes and that signifies nothing more than a calculated attempt to advance the smiler's own interests by pretending to like the smilee. Why do employers and supervisors force professional service people to broadcast the Professional Smile? Am I the only consumer in whom high doses of such a smile produce despair? Am I the only person who's sure that the growing number of cases in which totally average-looking people suddenly open up with automatic weapons in shopping malls and insurance offices and medical complexes and McDonald'ses is somehow causally related to the fact that these venues are well-known dissemination-loci of the Professional Smile?"*

*Who do they think they are fooling by the Professional Smile?*

*And yet the Professional Smile's absence now also causes despair. Anybody who's ever bought a pack of gum in Manhattan cigar store or asked for something to be stamped FRAGILE at a Chicago post office or tried to obtain a glass of water from a South Boston waitress knows well the soul-crushing effect of a service worker's scowl, i.e., the humiliation and resentment of being denied the Professional Smile. And the Professional Smile has by now skewed even my resentment at the dreaded Professional Scowl: I walk away from the Manhattan tobacconist resenting not the counterman's character or absence of goodwill but his lack of professionalism in denying me the Smile. What a fucking mess."*

I'm confident David Foster Wallace was never giving us the Professional Smile.

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## **mark monday says**

he picked up a book. he read the book. it was him all over. the best version of himself! and the worst.

what is postmodernism, really? is it a way to understand the world, to define the world, to separate yourself from the world... when you are actually a part of that world? a part of the so-called problem? you want to put a layer between you and the world. you are so much apart from it, right? an unwilling participant in all of those repulsive patriarchal and terminally corny signs and signifiers, things that disgust you, it's not fair, just because you happen to have the misfortune to be born straight & white & male and, as they say, privileged. you need the distance, the alienation, the angst of being someone, something, anything, *apart*... because you know you are different. right? you just know it. you enjoy things and yet you don't enjoy them, you enjoy not enjoying them, your layer of hipster irony protects you and maybe fulfills you. and you will never admit that. you self deprecate, in your own egotistical way. you are the boss of you; no one can take that away. everything is so corny and full of bullshit, surely they must see that. and yet there must be truth there, if you look for it. you tell yourself that. you write a book, a great book about life and love and living and loving, etc. you write a book, or imagine yourself writing a book. it is not this book. this book is all about the

unimportant things, the annoying things, the fake shit and all the bullshit. does it satisfy you? not really. so you read a book. you feel better. let the irony take over, it comforts you. you are not angry, not angry at all. you laugh at all that fake shit, all the bullshit. *angry* is a hot emotion. you don't feel those, at least not anymore.

you go to a movie set. Lost Highway. you try to keep an open mind but it is all fake, it is all bullshit. there are too many assholes in the world! and yet the director at the center of it all is not fake, he is not bullshit, he's not an asshole. does he understand something about life that you do not? what does he understand, what does he know? you want to know. he is just being himself, and you don't understand that. or maybe you do. it all makes you deeply uncomfortable.

you go to a fair; you go on a cruise. both are depressing. but funny! the kind of funny that you can only sheepishly admit. perhaps you are a part of the problem; it is people who look just like you who created this world that you despise. you try to enjoy the fair. you try to enjoy the cruise. you take enjoyment from your lack of enjoyment. you write a book, a collection of short works, at times even a "personal narrative". that's the phrase, right? you personally inject yourself into the narrative, into this ridiculous world. you feel better! but not really. fuck this life. fuck this earth. there is only one way to live in this life and that is through the glass of irony, a postmodern form of protection, the strongest barrier, it will protect you, just breathe, you know you can do it, it's not so bad,

my name is mark. i'm not white, not really, only half-white, does that count as white? i don't feel white, however that feels. i am bisexual, no really. i veer gay if that it makes it easier to swallow. oh and i wasn't born in this country, this U.S. of fucking A. and hey, what's money? i've never had it; i'll never get it. and who the fuck is David Foster Wallace? i dunno. he's some dude that everyone jacks off to, apparently.

i have a friend named Benji - a golden lad (at least in my mind; i look at him through the lense of my very first impression, forever ingrained). he is nothing like DFW. once he talked about how he doesn't see race or class or sexuality, because he's never had to. he was raised by good progressives; he was raised to love life. nice life! he talked about how he wished everyone could be like him, not white or straight or a guy or from money or whatever, but able to look at things like they were and not let all the bullshit get them down, and so just live. not assign guilt or blame, just to understand, or try to, and then move on. not judge. you know, it should be easy, life should be easy, why isn't it? i listened to him say these things and i thought *i wish. i wish i could be that way. you are so naive, Benji. i fucking hate you. i fucking love you.* DFW is the opposite of Benji. and yet, and yet... is the difference merely a question of awareness? of critical distance? i can't imagine being a person like Benji, being that blithe. now Benji could enjoy a county fair, an awful cruise, he could enjoy it without irony i think. certainly without that underlying feeling of sadness and, yep, i won't pretend, without the condescending irritation at the futility of all these fucking gestures, the fake shit and the bullshit, the power imbalances, the need to make form equal meaning. i love Benji but i'm not sure i understand him. so why do i understand David Foster Wallace? he is nothing like me. he is like Benji. straight white male; money: not a problem. what do i have in common with David Foster Wallace? nothing. the idea is ludicrous. and yet, and yet... why do i read him and feel like i am reading my own thoughts, right there on the page? my own thoughts, staring back at me.

## Matt says

For some strange reason back in junior high school we were allowed a brief recess after lunch. The problem here is that there was very little to do during this recess. Here are the three activity choices that I remember:

1. Mill around on the concrete like inmates always do in "the yard" on those prison television shows.
2. Play a game that one of my fellow scholars evidently invented that involved a mob of guys bouncing a tennis ball off of a wall and trying to nail each other in the testicles with said ball (Uh...yeah...that one always puzzled me too).
3. Play tennis on the courts adjacent to school.

I chose option number three, mainly because several of my buddies fancied themselves as tennis pros in training. Being a gawky, uncoordinated twelve year old and taking up tennis was probably not the best layed plan in hindsight. I also seemed to have anger management issues that only showed up on the court. The only explanation there is that I must have internalized those film clips of John McEnroe throwing one of his famous tantrums and somehow reasoned in my candy-addled kid brain that this was how tennis was *supposed* to be played.

The final straw came on the day when I got so mad that I hurled my \$2.98 racket at the sky in a high arch. The racket went over my opponents and the fence and bounced twice off of the top of it's head in the grass before coming to rest. I still remember the satisfying "wiff wiff wiff" sound that the racket made when I launched it, but GOOD GAWD I can't believe that I did not kill someone. Somewhere between the release and the bounce I suddenly realized that I hated tennis. In fact I loathed the sport with a passion, and that was the end of that.

So what the hell does that story have to do with this book? "A Supposedly Fun Thing..." contains *two* articles on the subject of tennis, as this sport was evidently one of Mr. Wallace's youthful passions. I was less than enthused about this fact upon beginning this book, going so far as to think that those articles might even be a deal breaker. Ultimately, I was completely mesmerized by both of these pieces.

This was my first reading of DFW, and this book proved to me that he was a writer of awesome talent and intelligence who could probably tackle the most boring subject matter and find an angle to make the piece insanely interesting. He doesn't so much write about a subject but instead performs an autopsy on it in a very thorough and precise manner while somehow refraining from an overly belabored writing style.

There is also a certain naked honesty contained in these essays. In "David Lynch Keeps His Head", Wallace does not hesitate to lambaste the filmmaker over what could be considered past artistic miscues, yet this piece still made me want to run out and watch a few David Lynch movies for the umpteenth time. DFW does not exclude himself from his own critical eye either. The title piece revolves around a magazine financed luxury cruise trip taken by Wallace where he shares several social faux pas that he commits onboard the ship. These include such things as brushing off the pre-cruise instructions to bring a tux for formal meals and the resulting disdainful looks that he receives from the geriatric guests when he shows up wearing a tuxedo t-shirt along with an unplanned spit-take when he realizes that he has just put caviar in his mouth.

Probably my two favorite essays in this book are "E Unibus Plurum: Television and US Fiction" and "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All." "E Unibus..." is probably the best cultural critique of television that I have ever read up to this point. "Getting Away..." explores the phenomenon that is the rural state fair. As someone who has "enjoyed" more than my share of these rural fairs growing up, I can say without a doubt that he completely nailed the whole bizarre spectacle. Now there's some subject matter for your next film, Mr. Lynch.

I'm usually very curmudgeonly in awarding a book that magical fifth star, as my personal parameters dictate that the book must fundamentally change my life or alter my understanding of the world in order to score that elusive star. This book may not have achieved that, but it did explode my previous notions of what could be accomplished in the realm of the non-fiction essay. It is also entertaining as hell. There is yet another reason for the five star rating that is of equally questionable validity...

A long time ago in a writing class far, far away I remember an assigned reading involving two marginal authors discussing the writing game. The more seasoned author shared the insight that writers should always just write what they know, as the reader is merely reading in order to get to know the author better anyway and ultimately every human just yearns for that connection and nothing more. I remember this so vividly because I thought that idea was essentially complete bullshit. "I'm into it for the *ideas...man.*" Now this book has to come along and cause me some serious cognitive dissonance. It's all there: the over-analyzed social awkwardness, the off-kilter jokes, and the observations of common human ritual that can only be achieved by an outsider. I could totally go out for drinks with this guy every night. Of course he would intellectualize me under the table, but I would pick up the tab to cut down on the disparity. Unfortunately, however, that ship has sailed.

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## David says

David Foster Wallace is one awesomely smart guy. This is both his greatest strength and his potential Achilles heel as a writer. Personally, I will read anything this man writes, because I think he is a true genius with a rare sense of compassion, and a hilarious sense of humor. Even when his writing falls victim to its own cleverness, I still find it worthwhile - perhaps because one senses that the writer is a true mensch (not something I feel when being dazzled by the cleverness of a Dave Eggers, for instance).

Oh hell, I want to be seated next to DFW on a long transpacific flight subject to major delays, OK? I have an enormous intellectual crush on this man. And when I cavil, it is done out of love, pure and simple.

But when discussing this book of his, caviling would simply be out of place. It contains two of the funniest essays I have ever read in my life (the descriptions of his experiences on a cruise liner and at the state fair, respectively). I think you should buy your own copy, because I certainly am not going to loan you mine.

Added on edit: so, I've noticed that goodreads seems to order books listed by review according to the wordcount of the reviews in question, from longest to shortest. A result of this has been that my negative review of DFW's ill-starred "Everything and More" shows up ahead of my 5-star review of this collection. This pains me enormously, as I really admire this writer's prodigious talent immensely - even his occasional misfires beat the pants off many a less talented author's best efforts. So I am shamelessly adding this paragraph in a transparent effort to game the system - the desired result being that my positive review of this quirky, talented author show up before the negative review.

I am guessing that the preceding paragraph will have been sufficient to accomplish my devious ends, so will curtail my empty babbling here. Let's see if I'm right in this conjecture.

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## Bonnie says

*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* is a brilliant collection of "essays and arguments". This collection was published in 1997 exactly one year after *Infinite Jest* and is comprised of articles previously published from 1990 to 1996 in several different publications. His topics are tennis, television, a state fair, literary theory, David Lynch, and a luxury cruise. It doesn't matter if you are especially interested in these things or not, because you will be!

### 1. Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley (1990)

<http://www.keenzo.com/showproduct.asp...> [Harper's, "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes", 1992.]

Wallace writes that he was "a pretty untalented tennis player" and "could hit a tennis ball no harder or truer than most girls in my age bracket." But, "I was at my very best in bad conditions." And then he goes on to describe those bad conditions in detail.

### 2. E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction (1990) [http://jsomers.net/DFW\\_TV.pdf](http://jsomers.net/DFW_TV.pdf) [The Review of Contemporary Fiction, 1993.]

"...if Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it. This high-cultural postmodern genre, in other words, was deeply informed by the emergence of television and the metastasis of self-conscious watching. And (I claim) American fiction remains deeply informed by television..."

### 3. Getting Away From Already Pretty Much Being Away From It All (1993) [Harper's, "Ticket to the Fair", 1994.]

Observations at the Illinois state fair.

"I suspect that part of the self-conscious-community thing here has to do with space. Rural Midwesterners live surrounded by unpopulated land, marooned in a space whose emptiness starts to become both physical and spiritual. It is not just people you get lonely for. You're alienated from the very space around you, in a way, because out here the land's less an environment than a commodity. The land's basically a factory. You live in the same factory you work in. You spend an enormous amount of time with the land, but you're still alienated from it in some way. It's probably hard to feel any sort of Romantic spiritual connection to nature when you have to make your living from it."

### 4. Greatly Exaggerated (1992) [Harvard Book Review, 1992].

A review of *Morte d' Author: An Autopsy* by H. L. Hix, which, surprise, looks at the "death of the author" argument.

"For those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane. As William (anti-death) Gass observes in *Habitations of the Word*, critics can try to erase or over-define the author into anonymity for all sorts of technical, political, and philosophical reasons, and 'this "anonymity" may mean many things, but one thing which it cannot mean is that no one did it.' "

### 5. David Lynch keeps his head (1995) <http://www.lychnet.com/lh/lhpremiere...> [Premiere, 1996.]

On the set of *Lost Highway*; a profile of Lynch.

"An academic definition of Lynchian might be that the term "refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter." And "For me, Lynch's movies' deconstruction of this weird "irony of the banal" has affected the way I see and organize the world. I've noted since 1986 that a good 65% of the people in metropolitan bus terminals between the hours of midnight and 6:00 A.M. tend to qualify as Lynchian figures—flamboyantly unattractive, enfeebled, grotesque, freighted with a woe out of all proportion to evident circumstances.""

6. Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Limitation, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness (1995)  
<http://www.esquire.com/features/sport...> [Esquire, "The String Theory", 1996.]

Yay! more tennis.

"I submit that tennis is the most beautiful sport there is, and also the most demanding. It requires body control, hand-eye coordination, quickness, flat-out speed, endurance, and that strange mix of caution and abandon we call courage. It also requires smarts. Just one single shot in one exchange in one point of a high-level match is a nightmare of mechanical variables. Given a net that's three feet high (at the center) and two players in (unrealistically) a fixed position, the efficacy of one single shot is determined by its angle, depth, pace, and spin. And each of these determinants is itself determined by still other variables—for example, a shot's depth is determined by the height at which the ball passes over the net combined with some integrated function of pace and spin, with the ball's height over the net itself determined by the player's body position, grip on the racquet, degree of backswing, angle of racquet face, and the 3-D coordinates through which the racquet face moves during that interval in which the ball is actually on the strings. The tree of variables and determinants branches out, on and on, and then on even farther when the opponent's own positions and predilections and the ballistic features of the ball he's sent you to hit are factored in. No CPU yet existent could compute the expansion of variables for even a single exchange—smoke would come out of the mainframe. The sort of thinking involved is the sort that can be done only by a living and highly conscious entity, and then only unconsciously, i.e. by combining talent with repetition to such an extent that the variables are combined and controlled without conscious thought. In other words, serious tennis is a kind of art".

7. A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again [Harper's , "Shipping Out", 1996.]

Wallace goes on a cruise and discovers that "there is something about a mass-market luxury cruise that's unbearably sad."

One of his acquaintances on board is a spoiled teen named Mona, who has the "tiny delicate pale unhappy face of a kind of corrupt doll". Could this be her?

<http://youtu.be/vN2WzQzxuoA?t=31s>

These essays are fun, sad, tender, snarky, intellectual, strange, ordinary. Flawed and perfect. Always entertaining, and always human.

## Stephen M says

### A Definitely Awesome Thing that I'll Most Certainly Read Again

Full disclosure: I felt the smallest twinge of disappointment as I read these essays; (not because of the quality therein—there's hardly any disappointment to be had there—but because it dawned on me that *Infinite Jest*, a book that I had spent the better part of February and March, slaving over and worshipping, was not in fact some work of genius that grew out of the side of DFW's head and broke off one night in a fit of divinely inspired creativity, but actually that *IJ* was a long, arduous work that came about as a result of years of writing and rewriting as DFW honed his craft, those winding, serpentine sentences that wrap around massive stores of information and unravel beautiful narratives covering every conceivable minutiae of a given situation, the footnotes that drag you underneath the surface of a sentence and reveal the inner-workings of a cruise ship's maintenance crew or the social status of each individual at his dinner table and upon resurfacing from the footnote, you carry the weight of all the new information upon the sentence that you once left and when you reread the sentence, this new knowledge that you have enlivens the significance of a glance or another character's tick; the footnote delves into that subconscious baggage that we carry around everyday that inform our judgements and preconceptions about every person and thing we encounter throughout life thus when I realized that these styles were worked towards upon reading *A Supposedly Fun Thing that I'll Never Do Again*, *Infinite Jest* became somewhat less special in being the only book that I've read to have all of DFW's stylistic tics). Thankfully, the disappointment wore off quickly. I came to appreciate the style that DFW worked so hard to hone. These essays are a display of the development of the *IJ* style. The footnotes become more and more involved as the essays progress. First there are only a few innocuous notes, simply to elucidate a small point, until the final titular essay in which the footnotes are used without restraint in full DFW-short-story-length-footnotes that intrude mid-sentence.

These essays may be the best way to come to know DFW (or at least the persona he projected). I think it sheds some light on why he has become so beloved among new generations of readers. It's easy to come across like a pompous ass in your writing, especially if you're a freaky genius like Dave Wallace was and you use rambling, run-on sentences and use info-dumping footnotes. It would be easy for any one of these essays to come across as the inflated pontifications of an over-educated intellectual, but there's something about DFW that is lovable and endearing. Although it too often consumed him, it helped that he was so self-deprecating. It gave his genius the checks and balances that a lot of other genius authors lack. Thus it lessened the extent to which he cared about his (otherwise) rampant ego. He is<sup>1</sup> hyper-self-aware and it comes across in long descriptions of every imaginable bit of sensory detail. In his David Lynch essay, he essentially transcribes the entire rough cut of *Lost Highway* into a section of the essay. Apparently he found it insufficient to merely give a plot summary and instead divined the entire script, shot list and set decoration from what must have been several viewings of the rough cut.

Occasionally his writing is tedious. There were times when I got antsy. I wanted him to get to the point and cut through all that detail and rambling. He even prefaces one of his paras by saying that "this probably will be cut by the editor but. . . (insert a few pages of details)". But any time that it became too much to handle, or when I got too bored with his work, there would be some turn of phrase, or a particular observation that would make me fall head over heels in love again. This collection is essentially "everything that Dave is into and thinks about on a day to day basis". And for so many authors, this would be excruciating to read, boring as all hell, but listening to DFW ramble on about his interests is revelatory. How did so much intelligence and sensitivity end up in one person? He was in a class of his own.

(As I stop fellating him<sup>2</sup> and attempt at some type of objectivity)

### **Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley**

Very interesting piece. Thus begins DFW's style of experimental non-fiction. This piece is more image and metaphor centered than would be your typical "tell the facts" style of non-fiction. There are a glut of insights into tennis, especially DFW's own style of play which consisted of his adaptation to his environment (marked by heavy winds of the mid-west) and used it to his advantage (perhaps developing some personal motif about his chameleon-like literary experimentations of his early work). Thus when he began playing tennis indoors on nice courts, he had no inclement weather with which to use to his advantage. Ends with a cartoon-like description of being caught in a tornado while playing and smashed against the chain link fence. It is mostly devoid of the *IJ* trademark stylistic ticks and is almost strange to read an entire Wallace essay without footnotes.

### **E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction**

This is an introduction on DFW's thoughts about television and the strange way in which it is consciously aware of itself while dolling out the usual advertisement and banal sit-coms. This may or may not be dated given the rise of the internet (about which I wished so much that DFW could have written) and given that I hardly watch any tv (besides Bronco games on sunday) it didn't have as much of an impact than would otherwise. I've also more or less known about all the ideas within the essay via all the interviews I've seen of DFW. It's good to have all his thoughts about television in one place.

### **Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All**

This is where DFW gained serious notoriety as a non-fictionist (and I'd almost say as a writer period, given that the majority of people who've read DFW have read his non-fiction as opposed to tackling the mammoth *Jest*; tis a shame). This is Dave at his most funny. Esquire has commissioned him to write a piece on an Illinois State Fair in bumfuck nowhere. The rural, right-wing, conservatives (which heavily populate the American mid-west) function as a comedic shooting-gallery for DFW's socially awkward journalistic persona, describing each rural Illinois denizen with simultaneous wit and discomfort that it's hard to hold the book still while howling in laughter.

### **Greatly Exaggerated**

Here, Mr. Wallace flexes his erudition and reviews a piece of lit theory that criticizes the post-modern death-of-the-author theorists like Derrida, Barthes, et al. At this point it becomes clear that this collection of essays is more of a grab-bag of his musings and interests and opposed to anything with clear structure or links. But this is all wonderful, because it seems as though he was one of those people who had several, disconnected interests and but studied each one of them exhaustively. He brings all his knowledge of literature theory to bear upon questions of authorship and structuralism. A great insight into some of his attitudes towards these topics.

### **David Lynch Keeps His Head**

Another item on the list of things that make David-san tick, the work of David Lynch. This essay is one part exposé of a trip to the set of *Lost Highway*, one part cataloging of all things "lynchian" and one part defense of the body of Lynch's work against ignoramuses, critics and otherwise. This essay has everything that one could love about DFW in one continuous piece of writing: awkward social interactions; acute observations of human beings in their natural habitat; self-deprecating humor of the gut-busting and tear-inducing variety; brilliant musings on aesthetics and the state of pop-culture; and a passionate discussion of medium of film, its capacity to influence the audience's mind like no other medium. If you only want to read one essay, read this one.

## **Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Profession Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness**

To be honest this essay was the least interesting. In his interview with Charlie Rose, he talks about this essay in particular. He says that the project began with his interest in the up and coming Michael Joyce and his career, but of course, the essay ended up being about himself. And although, of course, you end up writing about yourself in every writing venture, in this instance, it detracted from the piece instead of adding to it. In other essays, especially the titular one, DFW's persona makes it hilarious and relatable but here, it drags the essay in two directions, one side pulling toward Michael Joyce, and the other pulling towards DFW's digressions and personal asides. There's a healthy balance to be had—in fact all of writing seems to be a balancing act. I sometimes wonder how DFW pulls it off, given how long-winded he can be. But here, it is apparent that it doesn't *always* work in every instance. What can you do? It makes me like him even more because it shows he's human. Not a robot but a ghost.

### **A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again**

My opinions of this piece are scattered about this entire review, because it is, in many ways a culmination of all the pieces that come before it. It is the culmination of DFW's style, as we know it from *IJ*, as well as a culmination of his thoughts and ideas as a writer. But it's still worth noting a few things. First, I've heard of accusations that DFW made up the people (not just changed their names) that are in this piece. I first wonder how one would ever know that—actual interviews with the people themselves?—but even more important, who cares? If your main concern is the literal content of this book, or the literal content of any book for that matter, and your main concern is the truth values of the author's statements, then I'm sorry to say you've sorely missed the point of this book and the point of reading (literature reading at least). The interactions with other people in this piece do not even take up most of it. It is DFW's own internal state and his musings on all that is going on around him. What's important is the way in which DFW uses this socially-awkward, hyper-sensitive persona to write a devastating critique of American consumerism. He (the persona and author) has/d this uncanny ability to deconstruct any situation. His self-awareness is not just focused inward, but outward too. There's hardly anything that flies over D's radar, hardly anything that he isn't consciously aware of and analyzing. What average person would notice and reflect upon the time intervals upon which the maids clean his room? DFW did. He also (in a section that earns multiple "lol"s in the absolute literal sense of the phrase) tests the maids' cleaning habits by leaving his room at random times during the day and noticing the exact amount of time it takes for him to be gone until they clean. He notices the fact that it takes exactly 30 minutes (no more and no less) for the maids' to begin straightening his room. This leads him to reflect upon the absurd, possible ways that the boat could ever know how long any of its tenants are gone, and more so, the kind of hegemonic rulership the maids must be under to maintain such constant vigilance to clean. He compares and contrasts their working conditions to his own pampering and toddler-like state that he's been thrown into on this cruise. He notices the strong disconnect between the servers and those that are served. This illustrates the stark divide between the two classes of people, how one become like pampered, spoiled children and the other are stiff, unemotional alienated workers. See what we're dealing with here? Any other person would shrug off such observations, effectively cutting off his or her ability to reflect at all on the frightening implications of such capitalistic excess. This ought to be a wake up call for any person with such introspective, hyper-sensitive tendencies. For a great deal of such sensitive, analytical people are racked with insecurities due to the propensity for constant self-judgement and analysis. We should know and appreciate the fact that those people are an essential part of a society if it is to be aware of itself and change itself for the better. There must be people like DFW, lest it continue to walk blindly, unaware.

<sup>1</sup>unsure whether to use the present tense "is" to refer to the narrative persona of DFW, the de facto tense

usage of any literary paper to immortalize the author via that mysterious, vaguely defined persona of the text or whether to use the past tense “was” to refer to DFW the person, who tragically passed away and thus referred to in the past tense. I suppose the present tense will do, not only to stay true to lit paper norms but also to dupe myself (on some unconscious level) that he is actually still alive and his death is some illuminati conspiracy because actually he’s currently being held captive in some underground government facility, commissioned to write confidential reports of the government’s most clandestine operations, the first of which was a disaster, as the report was some 100 pages over the maximum limit, and included a particularly long digression on the correct MLA method of citation of confidential military reports, as presented in sub-clause 23a of an already over-long footnote.

<sup>2</sup>barely capable of keeping my gushing love for him under wraps here. I have come to be known as the "DFW" guy at the local bookstore. And in fact, upon my visit to pick up this book, it provided the fodder for small talk with the attractive girl at the register. We shot the shit about DFW, literature and writing and the conversation ended with me taking her number, as well the book, home with me. And but so in typical DFW socially awkward fashion, we have only managed since then to effectively "out awkward" one another upon every encounter, half-starting conversations, repeating questions, and running into one another just after having said goodbye; it's good to know that I can live my life in all ways Wallace, including failed propositions for dates, cringe-inducing attempts at conversation, and protracted sessions of post-hoc self-deprecation.

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## **Oriana says**

Oh David. I miss you with a plangency that belies the fact that I never met you, never would have. You were and are and will always be such a serious force in my life.

I've read this two or three times, and a few weeks after DFW died I picked it up again, almost on a whim. I'd been having trouble finding something to sink my teeth into—I rejected Anna Kavan, William Vollmann, and Felipe Alfau in short order—and I kind of pulled this book without thinking about the timing, refusing to consider myself one of the jumpers-on, someone needing desperately to reread an author right after his sudden, shocking death. I mean, I've read all his books before, right? So I should be able to revisit them whenever I want, without feeling like a scenester wannabe.

I didn't remember much about this one, except a weird snippet about playing tennis in a tornado. So try to picture my shock, in the early pages of the very first essay, when I came upon this:

*On board the Nadir — especially at night, when all the ship's structured fun and reassurances and gaiety-noise ceased — I felt despair. The word's overused and banalified now, despair, but it's a serious word, and I'm using it seriously. For me it denotes a simple admixture — a weird yearning for death combined with a crushing sense of my own smallness and futility that presents as a fear of death. It's maybe close to what people call dread or angst. But it's not these things, quite. It's more like wanting to die in order to escape the unbearable feeling of becoming aware that I'm small and weak and selfish and going without any doubt at all to die. It's wanting to jump overboard.*

Cut to me, hair blowing crazy in the wind outside my apartment, with a cigarette in my hand and tears streaming down my face.

So, you know, I don't know what to say. It really was very hard for me to get through this reading without feeling like a stupid bandwagon-jumper. It really was very hard not to *notice* all the despair slyly threaded throughout these essays, intermixed with the jokes, the seriousness, the brilliance. But even while doing all that noticing, I kept second-guessing and scolding myself for overemphasizing something that only now seems true, in retrospect. I mean, if he'd come out of the closet recently instead, everyone would be piecing together "clues" from his oeuvre about his homosexual tendencies, you know?

I'm having trouble explaining this, but I guess I have a serious problem with how the soul-baring-ness of the autobiographical writer leads to this tacit agreement that readers can poke their noses "between the lines" to figure out more than the writer is telling. But then WTF, these things are actually *there!* Right? I just kept looping myself around and around, not feeling comfortable with anything I thought about anything.

So whatever. This book is ungodly fantastic, the fact that he is gone is so goddamn devastating, the whole thing is beautiful-awful but mostly just fucking awful.

If anyone is still reading or cares, here are some thoughts on the individual essays.

The title essay and "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" are spectacular. Hilarious too, which is something we sometimes forget about DFW, given how super serious & intellectual he is.

In "Greatly Exaggerated" he is so fucking smart that I couldn't even read the essay, because I am not, and never will be, his intellectual equal.

"E Unibus Pluram," on the other hand, was incredibly smart but also (for the most part) accessible to us mere mortals, and was incredibly interesting, if sadly a bit dated.

"David Lynch Keeps His Head" was a nice middle ground: incredibly obsessive-nerd-y, but it made me desperately want to watch *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* again.

I only read about half of the Michael Joyce essay because my attention span for tennis (especially its accompanying statistics and arcania) is pretty short.

"Derivative Sports in Tornado Alley" was plaintive and sad and the most 'personal' (maybe?!?!?) of the essays, and though it was the one that stuck with me the most on my first read of this book, this time I think the images of the bovine herds of fat sweaty Mid-Easterners stuffing their faces with funnel cake and hot dogs at the State Fair will remain in my head for a long while.

God I am so depressed.

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## Janet says

I'd like to add a new category to GR called 'read enough' – for those books that leave you staggering to your feet wiping the blood from your mouth conceding defeat. You know the gap between to-read and read. Amazingly enough I actually finished this book but only because the final 100 pages were footnotes followed by footnotes to his footnotes. Are you kidding me?

This is a collection of essays covering everything from playing tennis in the tornado belt to television and its relationship to U.S. fiction to the 1993 Illinois State Fair – the other essays were beyond my comprehension and may as well been written in Farsi. I haven't been this restless since I had to repeat Algebra II in summer school.

Holy mother of Abraham Lincoln but Wallace is a long-winded pretentious sack of sh\*t – he knows a lot and he's determined to impart every last atom of it and after that he's going to explain it all again in a slightly different way every bit as pedantic and boring with even more obscure references. DFW you win – I can't keep up with you.

Two of the essays – the one about the state fair and the other about cruise ship travel are much more accessible – these are the pieces that other reviewers have described as hilarious but with pathos. FYI, DFW, most of us feel tiny and a trifle insignificant when we stand in a desert or meadow gazing up into the starry night – really are these feelings more poignant when poised at the deck rail of a high end cruise ship? Is loneliness even harder to bear when on an all-expenses paid trip? His humor? Not irony but an elitist's musings on lesser fortunates – say, Midwestern fairgoers – funny but cringe worthy in its mean-spiritedness.

By the reviews on GR DFW is an absolute God. Convince me! Until then he's a depressive with a wry wit and superiority complex who looked down to show his inferiority to his nameless rabble of victims.

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## Books Ring Mah Bell says

This summer I got this book from the library. I started on the cruise ship story and soon realized I would want my very own copy to dogear, underline, and do other dirty booknerd things to.

David Foster Wallace, you are (were) genius! I think I may be in love with you! I love your footnotes-footnotes that range from a simple "duh!" or "!" to 2 page long footnotes that have footnotes themselves. Not a lot of authors could get away with that, but you, my love, can.

Could.

Did.

Whatever.

As I stated, the first part of this book I read was "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never do again". What a delectable read! Your gift for detail - so rich, crisp, clear, hilarious, delicious, repulsive, INCREDIBLE! I'm so smitten with you it's unbelievable. I'd leave my husband for you! (1)

I never in my days wanted to go to a state fair, but I willingly went with you in this book and was amazed. Without your guidance through the fairgrounds, I would have never gone. And without stepping foot there, I could smell the livestock, the sweaty masses of people, the greasy food. Your detail rocks my world. Your amazing observations... you make me tingle! And I enjoyed the hell out of my trip to the fair. Thank you.

I could kiss you, DFW! (2) Instead, I'll read everything of yours I can get my hands on! Then, I'll push it on any of my friends and family until they are sick of me raving about you! And, once I have read everything you wrote I'll read them again! and again! (3)

Yet, in all these stories there's this underlying stench of depression and loneliness that truly breaks my heart.

Maybe, having been visited by the black cloud of depression myself, I "feel" you more. (4)

I'm so very sorry you left the world.

I'm so very glad you left us with something amazing.

(1) only if my husband left me first (1a)

(1a) and if you weren't dead.

(2) but I can't because you are dead, you sonofabitch!

(3) because your punk ass had to commit suicide and there will be no more DFW stuff out there, you jerk!

(3a)

(3a) I find this depressing as hell, thank you very much! (3b)

(3b) Not because you care, David Foster Wallace, because you are dead. (3c)

(3c) Now I'm mad at you! (3d)

(3d) But I still love you.

(4) Oh, and feel you I would... if you were still breathing!

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## Roy Lotz says

*I have felt as bleak as I've felt since puberty, and have filled almost three Mead notebooks trying to figure out whether it was Them or Just Me.*

By far my favorite review of this book—and one of my favorite reviews on this site—is Geoff's energetic paean. So I find it somewhat ironic that, setting out to write my own review, I am forced to begin with the opposite moral: *do not trust the American-hype machine*. This is not because everything popular is bad, nor because of any Orwellian or Adornoesque suspicions of mass manipulation. This is, rather, for the very simple reason that inflated expectations can make even genuinely joyful experiences a touch disappointing and, thus, embittering.

DFW is a sublime illustration of this. Few authors on this site, if any, can compare with the gratuitous amount of praise heaped upon them by book-worms and casual readers alike. I mean, for Pete's sake, in one review there's even a photoshopped image of DFW's face edited onto Jesus' body (an impressively literal example of idolatry). And because I had the enthusiastic voices of so many fellow readers in my head as I opened the first page, I couldn't get myself to stop thinking the same thought: "So *this* is what everybody's raving about?!"

And the other unfortunate consequence of this superfluity of praise, besides giving the experience itself a tinge of discontent, is that now I feel a bit defensive about my opinion, as if not joining this chorus makes me a sinner. Perhaps I am? But listen; let me be clear from the get-go: I enjoyed this book quite a bit. It's just I have some emotional baggage to deal with. Bear with me.

This book is a collection of essays Wallace wrote during the early half of the nineties. In terms of both subject-matter and quality, it's a mixed bag. Some are forgettable or worse; and some are fantastic and hilarious. These essays, however, all share distinctive traits and, in my opinion, serious flaws.

Let me get the most obvious flaw out of the way first. Every essay is too long. I'm surprised any editor let

Wallace get away with such meandering, such overabundance, and such aimlessness as one finds here. He pursues tangents, includes needless details, and generally opines about everything which passes before his eyes. I know it would feel like bloody murder to cut lines from such a talented writer. But every good writer knows, at least in the back of her head, that writing is ultimately for the reader, not the writer. The entire profession of editing exists because of the all-too-human tendency to forget this. This general too-much-ness (to use a Wallacism) often gives his writing a lack of focus and power, turning what should be an act of communication into an info-dump.

Another flaw, which I admit is a bit petty of me to rag on, is his unnecessary orthographic trickery. Here's an example: "*The net, 3.5 feet high at the posts, divides the court widthwise in half; the service lines divide each half again into backcourt and fore-*." The language in this sentence strikes me as deliberately annoying and ugly. For one, the word "widthwise" is awful; and by saying "backcourt and fore-," he forces the reader to perform a mental operation to get the sentence's meaning—and an unsatisfying mental operation, too. And besides, this sentence is explaining what a bleeding tennis court looks like, the sort of thing you can safely omit. There's stuff like this throughout, phrases and abbreviations which struck me as serving no purpose except to be intentionally irritating.

A much deeper flaw is with some of the ideas he puts forward. The whole point of his essay about Michael Joyce, the tennis player, is that practicing to be a professional athlete requires so much time it ends up warping you—which is pretty obvious, if you ask me. And I cannot find a better way to sum up his book review about the "Death of the Author" except to say that it was intellectual masturbation to very dull porn. But this lackluster theorizing was most apparent in his essay about television, in which he argues that irony is becoming pervasive, suffocating, and dangerous. Not only has this concern been rendered obsolete because of technological advancement—an option which he explicitly rules out—but besides that, I can't help but find Wallace's battle-cry to "risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs," a bit feeble, as if breaking out of your twenty-something cage of irony is a heroic struggle.

All this is DFW at his worst—pretentious, show-offy, faux-profound; in other words, that annoying guy in a turtleneck who lived down the hall in your college dorm. (That was me in my dorm, in case you're wondering.)

But DFW at his best is another creature entirely. He's friendly, interesting, funny, and insightful. He's charming—the sort of guy I'd love to have a beer with. In fact, DFW can be downright addictive; by the time I got near the end of this book, I couldn't put it down. I was stifling laughter on the metro, and interrupting my girlfriend repeatedly to make her read a funny passage. She liked these, too, and didn't even mind when I did it again two minutes later.

DFW is at his best in two essays in this collection: his trip to the State Fair and his trip on a luxury cruise-line. They're similar works, both involving the socially awkward, delectably nervous, highly oversensitive, somewhat misanthropic, thoroughly overeducated DFW entering an environment which caters to none of these qualities. In these situations, DFW is pushed to find humor in his situation; and this search leads him to insights, both about his environment and himself. His is the kind of humor that functions both as comedy and as philosophy, providing perspective, analysis, and interpretation, leading you to acceptance of yourself and your place in the world.

What also sets these works apart is a keen anthropological eye. Details crowd these pages, lined up into lists, tucked into corners, jammed into footnotes. And although many of these details are unnecessary, and some are simply distracting, most are delectable and delicious. "*The very best way to describe Scott Peterson's demeanor is that it looks like he's constantly posing for a photograph nobody is taking.*" DFW combines a journalist's curiosity with a neurotic's oversensitivity and a novelist's voyeurism. The result is a man exquisitely attuned to his environment.

To sum up, I've decided I like the guy, and I think he's a fantastic writer. My only regret is that I met DFW with expectations inflated to the size of the Hindenburg, which caused me constantly to measure him against the literally godlike person he was described to be. And the real shame is that, barring some youthful inability to figure out which details of his life are worth writing down, he strikes me as a humble, decent, and honest person—not the kind of person who'd want to be known as a Goodreads God. It's a shame he's gone.

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## Florencia says

*Like most unbearably sad things, it seems incredibly elusive and complex in its causes and simple in its effect: on board the Nadir—especially at night, when all the ship's structured fun and reassurances and gaiety-noise ceased—I felt despair. The word's overused and banalified now, despair, but it's a serious word, and I'm using it seriously. For me it denotes a simple admixture—a weird yearning for death combined with a crushing sense of my own smallness and futility that presents as a fear of death. It's maybe close to what people call dread or angst. But it's not these things, quite. It's more like wanting to die in order to escape the unbearable feeling of becoming aware that I'm small and weak and selfish and going without any doubt at all to die. It's wanting to jump overboard.*

I have many quotes to share. Beautifully written, thought-provoking quotes. Clearly (such a cliché, but it's true), it's not the writer's fault, it's me. I really **loved** a couple of essays (amazing insights, beautiful language) but I simply couldn't connect with the rest of them. Again, I felt like a complete outsider, something that has happened to me before with other foreign writers. I may be gaining a couple of fervent enemies with this, but I really don't see the point in saying that I loved the whole book when I actually didn't. So, those almost four stars were given according to what I felt while reading those particular essays (standing ovation to "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction"). They were THAT good.

March 2, 14

\* Also on my blog.

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