

David Foster Wallace  
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1458 words on a book that has more than 1000 pages.

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*We dropped this in on the blue line.*

*DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, AUTHOR OF INFINITE JEST, THE BOOK OF THE SEASON, IF NOT THE YEAR, SMOKES AMERICAN SPIRIT CIGARETTES AND CHEWS TOBACCO. HE HAS A FIRM HANDSHAKE, A COMPELLING INTENSITY AND A BRIGHT FUTURE.*

We begin not with his new novel, but with his recent piece in this January's *Harper's*, a hilarious novella-length account of his week on a cruise ship.

That piece was severely cut," he says. "Most of what remains were the comic sections. Magazines are hard that way. But I have to say that *Harper's* flew me out to make the cuts. They really care. A lot of people say that, they do and they're right. That's why people write for them, even though they don't pay that much.

At least he's getting easier to edit. His first novel, *The Broom of the System*, rolled merrily along for almost 500 pages. Then, at the very last paragraph, it fell apart. Why?

I was hard to edit and had lots of reasons why the ending of that novel had to be that way. But it shouldn't have, which is probably why you shouldn't let 23-year-olds do it. I had my reasons, but no one since has been able to describe it or be satisfied.

If you don't make fun of me, I'll tell you what I was trying to do. I was very interested in technical semantics, which is the relationship between form and context. That paragraph at the end is missing the word word, so I thought I would bridge both the formal and the reference. Instead, I missed on both counts.

Now, ten years later, I understand that people read for intellectual reasons and emotions. And that the ending that I wrote is almost off putting, like giving the finger to the reader. I'm interested in a marriage of the two. Before I wanted to throw out the emotional in favor of the technical. Now I would get rid of the technique to save the emotion.

A lot of this never occurred to me until I started teaching (at a Illinois college). I'm not sure if it's good for the students, but it's been real good for me. Through teaching, I've learned that it's a lot harder to connect on the emotional level.

This one (*Infinite Jest*) was cut by 400 pages or so. There were commercial cuts and literary ones. I listened, and cut out most of the literary ones.

(Not that the novel is getting so much attention, connecting, much is being made of Wallace's new normality. And he seems infinitely normal) I had an advantage in that I got a taste of fame early on. Everything about it makes me really self-conscious. I need to be on the sidelines, to watch, so I can tell the stories. I am not the story. And it makes me nervous getting this attention, because it makes it harder to stay on the sidelines and observe. Still, having pretty girls smile at me has its advantages.

[Teaching, however, is another story] I like teaching and am on a tenure track. I don't have to be there that much, and am like the Switzerland of the department. All the factions talk to me and I smile and they think I agree with them.

As far as the kids go, they'll do what they want. But I try to explain why what they see as bravery is really cowardice. It is difficult to try to work the magic of fiction, of one gut talking to another gut. Intellectual engagement is only part of it. And if that's what you work, you'll run out of steam.

[Although I don't know if it does any good], I'm brutal with those I think are talented. I tell them that there is no pressure here - and I make them write stories about when their hamster died so they can get over the phobia of looking unhip, of writing something that SNL will make fun of. Because that's

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what they see as the horror of today, much like obscenity was 50 years ago. They're brainwashed.

There's also the other group, who write bad Hallmark moments. You have to talk to them about cheese, and try to give an edge to their formulaic habits.

The funniest thing about it is that all of them seem like parts of me. That may sound simplistic to everyone else, but it was a revelation to me. If I hadn't been teaching, I don't think I would have made the cuts.

They look at you with a combination of reverence and with this Oedipal "we'd like to be like you and want to kill you." Ultimately, they probably want your job.

[The conversation switches to Generation X] I think the '80s were a spasm of fake hardy optimism, primarily in the form of materialism. The '90s, both because of the collapse of Reganomics and the approach of the millennium, are more frank about being confused.

What's interesting to me about the '60s and '70s generation was that they changed the ball game. The avant-garde debunked the myths but didn't have the foresight to follow it up with anything. So we grew up in the rubble. Something has to build something else.

That helps explain why serious art is important. Somewhere in all of us is a hunger for narrative, to see what we're up to and about. We have to substitute the hedonism and spiritual naivete that left us with nothing with something. Except we don't know what it is.

That's why you see such a frightening right-wing resurgence, it comes from having a void. Pat Buchanan may be very easy and very appealing to a lot of people, but art is the chance for us to do the hard work.

It's because serious art is so marginalized, in fact, that I think the times are so exciting. The avant-garde is so convoluted and self-satisfied that it can't speak to the parts of us that are hungry and can't marry sophistication with reading pleasure. That's all the stuff I'm trying to do with this book, and why it's a scary and exciting time to be alive all at once.

It's not even that readers are stupid, as so many of the intellectuals think, but that they're not used to working hard. Really good art, though, seduces the reader and holds out real promise.

I know that most of my life is about trying to forge some personal identity. If you grow up with TV, like all of us born after 1960 did, it's harder to separate yourself from cultural constructs. A half hour ago, I was watching *Wild Wild West* on some cable station and it was very moving for about 20 minutes because it pulled me back. I probably had my first spontaneous erection when I was four watching Robert Conrad and some girl in some weird sex scene. That has a real emotional pull.

And that's the challenge: to countenance what's important to narrative. We have to surf and triage and decoct so much meaning from the information overload just to get through life that a writer must get you to taste the truth without throwing the book against the wall.

[It's nothing less than trying to address cultural infantilism] When people my age talk about how miserable a time this is, they usually explain it by diminished economic expectations. But I think of it more as a lack of identification. If you're about 30, believing in something bigger than you is not a choice. You either do or you're a walking dead man, just going through the motions. Concepts like duty and fidelity may sound quaint but we've inherited the best and the worst, and we've got to make it up as we go along. I absolutely believe in something, even though I don't know what it is. And those friends of mine who are religious... I envy them because they don't have to think about it. You want to sleep with somebody who's not your wife? It's a sin and that's the end of it.

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ONE OTHER THING.

The belief, in whatever it is, is not for something  
but for your own sake. If we don't as a generation find  
that, we'll either crash and burn or come up with

something really

POWERFUL AND BEAUTIFUL.