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OFF THE RADAR

REMEMBERING DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

It was a strange and horrible sensation **seeing the headline** announcing author David Foster Wallace's death as I turned a page of the Sunday paper. I gasped—a reaction I'd never had before upon receiving bad news. Perhaps some things are so surprising, and so unmooring, that we unconsciously suck in air to remind ourselves that we're still alive. I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that, after a moment passed, I burst into tears. Like a 15-year-old's dreamy adulation for a rock star, I'd maintained into my 30s a wide-eyed love for anything written or said by the man.

Even when I didn't like or fully understand something he wrote, I found myself making excuses and assuming I simply wasn't smart enough to get it. I didn't like thinking this way, particularly about a writer whose work glimmered with critical reflection, but the connection I felt to him through my interpretation of his oeuvre and his general life views, ran so deep that I couldn't help myself. One of my heroes, an artistic anchor by which I steadied myself in the world, had hanged himself.



DFW

Wallace was known, of course, for his pyrotechnical writing. But it's a crime to his legacy to perpetuate the lazy, ill-informed, and too-common notion that his writing was merely the pretentious work of a brainiac brandishing words like a peacock's fanned feathers. True, his work was sometimes difficult—particularly his fiction—but his devices and rhetorical loop-de-loops were always in service of larger ideas and deeply rooted in empathy.

At an interview I attended years ago, Wallace talked about how he wrote because he was lonely, and that writing was a way for him to connect with other people, presumably ones who were lonely and affected by the **same elements of American life** that he was troubled and fascinated by. (In fact, read DFW's **haunting musings on suicide in this commencement speech** he delivered in 2005.) I can only hope that amid his unendurable pain he felt a sliver of solace knowing that through his art he did connect, deeply, with so many who were ultimately made the better for it.

Reading a great writer is to have someone articulate that which you had always thought but were unable to express. Reading DFW was that, sure, but also so much more: routinely his writing expressed what I didn't even know I had been thinking until after reading it. He conveyed the unnerving nebula of my subconscious, an often vague sense of sadness, of being overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of life, in all its splendor and despair, and the delight, exhaustion, and terror of trying to make sense of it all. In his short story "Good Old Neon"—a 40-page neutron bomb on self-consciousness and the peculiar loneliness of a contemporary American—Wallace did, and still does after countless readings, exactly that on nearly every page. It's difficult to pull a single quote to truly reflect the torrent of ideas in "Neon," but a good primer is this passage on the torturous limitations of language:

The truth is you already know what it's like. You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other

through these tiny keyholes.... This is what it's like. That it's what makes room for the universe inside you, all the endless inebent fractals of connection and symphonies of different voices, the infinities you can never show another soul. And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees? Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock. But at the same time it's why it feels so good to break down and cry in front of others, or to laugh, or speak in tongues, or chant in Bengali—it's not English anymore, it's not getting squeezed through any hole.

It takes a master of words to communicate so eloquently how words are inadequate to communicate. That, in essence, was David Foster Wallace. He will be greatly missed.

By David Zweig 09/15/08 11:00 AM

File Under: David Foster Wallace, Off the Radar, Pop, Suicide

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I saw the announcement of Mr Wallace's death yesterday, and I felt saddened by his loss because I had not yet had an opportunity to read his work. I checked out this article because I wanted to know more about him. What I have learned saddens me even more. Mr Wallace was young, as I had thought; and his suicide made me think of the 80's and 90's when suicide among the young seemed to skyrocket, and the simple wondrousness of life seemed not to be evident to so many youth.

I am not a religious conservative; however, I do sincerely believe in having spiritual roots. It truly doesn't matter whether you want to follow Buddhism, Catholicism, Speaking in Tongues or hang out with the "hang upside down by your toes" group - it truly helps to have a connection to something outside yourself.

As I read the small blurb offered as an example of Mr Wallace's writings, I too felt his alienation and despair; his partition from the society around him. I recognize that dark place, as I think do all depressives. I have never been sure if verbalizing our depression spiral is a good and worthwhile thing, because it allows us to wallow in that depression as we get all the words exactly right to express our despair. Mr Wallace's piece is in fact his admission that one never gets the words exactly right.

But you can find peace in other than the 100% revelation of one's soul.

True love is probably as close as humans can get to this right now in our evolution. And I do believe that even if humans develop telepathy we will find a way to keep at least one room in our minds closed to others. But love allows us to 100% trust our souls with another human. It is only with that trust we can allow ourselves to bare the 99.99% of ourselves we are able to let out.

I feel an infinite sadness for this man of genius, apparently unable to find the love he so desperately needed in order to find the spiritual healing he so desperately desired.

Posted by: [LaVerne](#) on September 15, 2008 12:12 PM

Thank you for posting such an eloquent encapsulation of his writing. As someone who almost always would rather read than watch tv, I am bewildered by my complete ignorance of DFW's writings. I look forward to reading more of his writings & novels. Finally, I can't help thinking how much of a shame it is that a generational voice that resonated with so many committed suicide-- someone whose passing has elicited such a preponderance of memorial articles written where it seems that nearly every writer has their own favorite piece of work. It's been a tough couple of month's for intellectuals - I am reminded of the tribute paid to George Carlin earlier this Summer.

Posted by: [hughrobert](#) on September 16, 2008 9:15 AM

this article got me to join, i am grieveing for myself of course, as i think mr. wallace would definitely understand. i thought the article was well written.

Posted by: [iamrobert](#) on September 17, 2008 12:33 PM