

*D.F.W: From Myth to Man*<sup>1</sup>

by

Glenn Grigsby

“But when up against this summit's height  
I'm tense, I'm small, I'm speechless and I'm freezing”  
- The Hotelier, “Fear of Good”

After an author has past, it is typically quite normal to see a plethora of think pieces and retrospectives published in magazines and journals. Many of these appear to be the groundwork for heroic myth-making. For example, read the first few lines of Thomas McGuane's obituary for Jim Harrison in the New Yorker:

On Saturday night, my oldest friend, Jim Harrison, sat at his desk writing. He wrote in longhand. The words trailed off into scribbles and he fell from his chair dead. His strength of personality was such that his death will cut many adrift. He was seventy-eight years old and had lived and worked hard for every one of those years. He published a book a month ago (McGuane).

Within the first two sentence, one can plainly see the heroic myth-making at work. McGuane wants readers to know that his friend - a poet, an artist - died a death only seen in art and poetry: at work, tool in hand. It's a beautiful image, truth or not. And it is also not complicated. Harrison will become a heroic myth after death... this will not likely affect the reception of his work.

Most artists do not die the death that completely changes the reception of their work.

Take David Foster Wallace for example. The man was revered while he was alive - he wrote

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<sup>1</sup> To maybe monster (or, deeply-deeply-deeply-flawed man).

*Infinite Jest*, several acclaimed essays, and delivered possibly the most well-received Commencement Address of all time in 2005 at Kenyon College - but his death came as almost a betrayal to his art. His biographer, D.T. Max wrote this in his 2009 retrospective:

The writer David Foster Wallace committed suicide on September 12th of last year. His wife, Karen Green, came home to find that he had hanged himself on the patio of their house, in Claremont, California (Max).

For a writer who espoused the concepts of empathy and mental health, it is sort of upsetting to see him come to his end via suicide<sup>2</sup>. If David Foster Wallace's life has been turned into a myth, it is not a heroic one, it is a tragedy.

But it has a tragedy that has defined the reception of his work almost more than anything he ever did during his life; and DFW DID a lot. The man was a near-celebrity, giving interviews and submitting work to Literary Journals, Popular Magazines, and NPR Radio Shows alike. Indeed, The charter “David Foster Wallace” perhaps surpassed him as an author. Today, most people likely equate him to the man-childish Jason Segel on account of the (controversial) film *The End of the Tour*. But how did DFW go from the second coming of complicated postmodern literature to the - rather banal - Segel-ish Patron Saint of Sincere Humanity? How did he turn into a martyr after his sudden, unexpected, and betrayal of a death? This paper attempts to answer this question, and also attempts to critique DFW's “St. David” status... because what good is an author who preached “goodness” when he failed so badly and so often at being good himself?

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Karr wrote in her poem for DFW, “Suicide's Note: An Annual,” that: “Every suicide's an asshole” (Karr).

*From Myth...*

*Pt. 1: Segel-ish Patron Saint of Sincere Humanity, i.e., “St. David”*

According to Sean Levine’s article on HuffPo, David Foster Wallace’s seminal commencement address to the graduating class of 2005 almost didn’t happen (Levine). DFW, who felt grossly unqualified to deliver such an address, referred to the commencement as “the big scary ceremony” (Levine). For a man as anxious as DFW was noted to have been, the actually delivery of what came to be known as *This is Water* must have been nothing short of miraculous.

His biographer, D.T. Max states in his biography, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*<sup>3</sup>, that: “[Wallace] wrote a speech against egoism and egotism, about openness and humility, of apostles who behold but cannot see” (Max, 285). His favorite (dumb) joke from recovery - a fixture in his life and the myth of his life - was sincerely included in the beginning of the speech:

Two young fish are swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish goes by and calls out to them, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ The younger fish continue side by side for a while and then one stops and says, ‘What the hell is water?’” (Wallace).

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<sup>3</sup> This work is the literary biography as Tom Bissell imagines it: significant in that it “offers access to the creative imagination” (Bissell, 45). It is a significant work that has opened up the door to many avenues of thought and criticism that would not necessarily exist on the basis of just DFW’s lone works. If “imaginative context of literature” we read is important, it is certainly important here (55).

This dumb joke and the Truths<sup>4</sup> that it represents and found in the speech as a whole have become a sort of mantra to struggling students and empathetic folk everywhere. Just scan twitter:

1. “Listening to the ‘This Is Water’ Condensed Speech Twice in a Row at 12:30 Should Tell You a Lot about How i'm Doing Right Now” (Sullivan).
2. “‘This is Water’ is the most enlightening piece of reading about living a compassionate life you'll ever read. 10/10 recommended” (Rigsby).
3. “When I see people driving recklessly or getting in my way in public, I just think of D.F. Wallace's ‘This Is Water.’ #Perspective ” (Wj††¥).

But how did DFW's simple - yet perhaps profound speech - become what is likely his most referenced work? Was it solely for passages like this:

Not that that mystical stuff's necessarily true: The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to decide how you're going to try to see it. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship...

Because here's something else that's true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship — be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles — is that pretty much anything else you worship will

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<sup>4</sup> capital-T-Truth, D.F.W would have called it (Wallace).

eat you alive (Wallace).

One can't be too sure. Because after all, these passages do not come off as the work of a brilliant writer. If anything, they come off as the words of a spiritually conflicted high school Sunday school teacher. But people - secularist and the religious - eat this stuff up. Max concludes that it's because "...He had earned the right. [Because] it was one thing if your aunt told you you weren't the center of the universe... it was another if the author of *Infinite Jest* did" (Max).

#### *Pt 2: The Second Coming of The Complicated Postmodern Literature Scribbler*

After the publication of *Infinite Jest* in 1996, critics began to compare David Foster Wallace to his heroes of old: Pynchon, Barth, Gaddis, etc. (read literally any review and at least one of these authors will come up). Steve Brzezinski says in his review: "[*Infinite Jest*] brims with erudition, wit, and stylistic brilliance" (Brzezinski, 491). Sven Birkerts says: "Wallace is, clearly, bent on taking the next step in fiction. He is carrying on the Pynchonian [there's that namedrop] celebration of the renegade spirit in a world gone as flat as a circuit board he is tailoring that richly comic idiom [post-modern fiction] for its new-millennial uses" (Birkerts). And, in Dave Eggers's introduction to the 2006 reprint of the novel, he says: "[Wallace] is normal, and regular, and ordinary, and [*Infinite Jest*] is his extraordinary, and irregular, and not-normal achievement, a thing that will outlast him and you and me, but will help future people understand us - how we felt, how we lived, what we gave to each other and why" (Eggers, XVI). DFW, one can see, was the next incarnation of the post-modern satirist; he was going to be the author who made serious contemporary literature cool again... but, something happened.

Perhaps it was the reception of his followup to *Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Michiko Kakutani panned it in her review for The New York Times, and accused

him of writing an ‘airless, tedious book’ (Max, 254). Supposedly, DFW memorized the review (255). A retrospective of DFW’s work up until *B.I.W.H.M.* by A. O. Scott written for the New York Review of Books in 2000 noted: “Wallace’s anxious relationship with postmodernism and also his expectation he could have things both ways, pursuing the questionable tactic of writing cleverly to assert the superiority of sincerity in a world wedded to cleverness” (255). But where that “anxious relationship” led to a large amount of scrutiny, his fans seemed to need it. DFW’s anxiousness perhaps mirrored their own... indeed, in a World of Literature where there are numerous genres and styles of criticism, it is hard to know what is real... what matters... or what is True.

It is, perhaps, excessively hard to glean the Truth in *Infinite Jest*, but it’s there; and once the Truth is found, one can begin to see how he got from deep postmodern fiction to the still deep yet utterly simple Commencement Address that has since become his most quoted work. Look at pages 200-206 in *Infinite Jest*, and one will find sentences that appear to be cut from the same cloth as *This is Water*:

1. “That certain persons simply will not like you no matter what you do” (Wallace, 201).
2. “That no matter how smart you thought you are, you are actually way less smart than that” (201).
3. “That you do not have to like a person in order to learn from him/her/it” (202).
4. “That loneliness is not a function of solitude” (202).
5. “That there is such a thing as raw, unalloyed, agendaless kindness” (203).
6. “That concentrating intently on anything<sup>5</sup> is very hard work” (203).

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<sup>5</sup> Like this essay.

7. “That it takes a great deal of personal courage to let yourself appear weak” (204).
8. “That pretty much everybody masturbates. Rather a lot, it turns out” (204).
9. “That everybody is identical in their secret unspoken belief that way deep down they are different from everyone else. That this isn’t necessarily perverse” (205).
10. “That God might regard the issue of whether you believe there’s a God or not as fairly low on his/her/its list of things s/he/it’s interested in re you” (206).

The context of *Infinite Jest* is what gives these simple sentences a large portion of their weight. As Max said, simple truths spoken from your aunt are annoying... but written by the most brilliant writer of a generation... they are life changing.

Or, maybe they’re lies. Or at least half-truth<sup>6</sup>.

*...To Man*

*Pt. I: Authenticity?*

David Foster Wallace, like most writers, was human. He also might have been a monster. After DFW’s death, there was a plethora of good-feeling poured out on his behalf, it almost seemed as if the contemporary literary world had lost its living patron saint. James Ponsoldt’s 2015 film *The End of the Tour* is peak Wallace worship, and from this film birthed a whole lot of think pieces on Wallace’s legacy - his real legacy. In his - quite positive - review of the film, D. T. Max wrote that: “[DFW] has somehow moved from being the author of a massive novel... [so that] I’m sure fewer people know DFW as a writer than as a public figure, and that figure is a sort of laical saint, a professor of gentle, sustaining wisdom to whom we can turn in moments of confusion” (Max). Max ultimately seems to claim that DFW has now been relegated to the smart

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<sup>6</sup> Lower-t-truths.

side of a contemporary self help movement. He claims that DFW's quest for goodness and pleading for others to just be good is overshadowed by his fans ravenous claiming that he WAS always good (Max).

Mary Karr would disagree with that notion. Mary Karr - the acclaimed poet and memoirist - was the object of DFW's (incredibly problematic) affection throughout much of the 1990s. In fact, Max goes so far as to claim that DFW only managed to finish *Infinite Jest* due to his "dysfunctional yearning for Mary Karr" (Max, 296). This "dysfunctional yearning" would cause Wallace to do other things, like: "Get[ting] [Mary Karr's] name tattooed on his bicep - in a heart with a banner" (Karr, 319).

But that's not all. In fact, his "dysfunctional yearning" for Mary Karr rarely took on that odd yet perhaps still sweet in a sort of manic way tone. In her interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, Mary Karr revealed that DFW was in fact quite violent: that he pushed her from a moving car. She ultimately has a problem with Wallace's newfound "St. David" moniker. And it's hard to blame her. DFW was violent. It does not appear that he \*truly\* repented. Before he could explain his past - or even discuss it truthfully - he hanged himself.

It's not hard to learn what affect DFW's suicide had. It martyred him to his fans. But it left a hole and stink of failure in his friends' and - past, present, and former - loved ones' hearts. Read lines from Karr's "Suicide's Note: An Annual:"

I hope you've been taken up by Jesus  
though so many decades have passed, so far apart we'd grown  
between love transmogrifying into hate and those sad letters  
and phone calls and your face vanishing into a noose that

I couldn't  
today name the gods  
you at the end worshipped, if any, praise being  
impossible for the devoutly miserable.

This poem is harsh, but it IS honest. In many ways, the writings that others have written about DFW are more honest than the writings that he himself made. This is not necessarily a huge deal, or at least, it would not be for most of us. But DFW espoused moral living, goodness, and honesty. Since, as Max says, many know DFW today as more of a moralist celebrity than as an author of literature, should revelations of DFW's personal life be taken into account when discussing the legacy of his work?

Perhaps the primary criticism of David Foster Wallace's dishonesty - perhaps a better phrase is "lack of authenticity" - is found at the heart of his novel *Infinite Jest*. In her interview with Terry Gross on Fresh Air, Mary Karr states that many of the people and scenes at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House were actually real people and real occurrences that both she and Wallace knew and experienced while living at a halfway house in Massachusetts (Gross). The fact that these real, nonfiction moments appear throughout this monolithic work of absurdist fiction obviously really bothered Karr (Gross). When she found out that she too, was in

*Infinite Jest*, she called the editor and asked him to make it all go away - to change the characters name, hair, birthplace, or whatever (Gross)<sup>7</sup>.

So what does it mean if - perhaps the best - features of DFW's *Infinite Jest* we're literal nonfiction? Memoir? And what does it mean if many of those nonfictional set pieces were literal scraps of life gleamed from a narcotics anonymous meeting?

#### *Pt. 2: Sincerity?*

The best contrast with what DFW did and what he likely should have done is represented in the works of Mary Karr. She wrote memoirs, and her memoir, *Lit*, deals with much of the same material that DFW lifted for *Infinite Jest*. For instance, Karr was in *Infinite Jest* - in

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<sup>7</sup> There are other examples, but they're harder to sift through and make sense of without reading a LOT of material. For instance, The Rolling Stone published a listicle titled "Six Things You Didn't Know About David Foster Wallace" in 2012 (basically a collection of DFW facts taken from D. T. Max's just-published biography - the laziest kind of content) in which the writing staff state that "[Wallace] wasn't as good at tennis as he claimed." Perhaps? But in a 1997 broadcast of Terry Gross's Fresh Air, Wallace and Gross shared this exchange:

GROSS: One of the characters in "Infinite Jest" is a tennis player, and you were a champion tennis player when you were...

WALLACE: I was not. I deny.

GROSS: OK, not champion.

WALLACE: I deny steadfastly that I was a champion. I played competitive tennis on a regional junior level.

GROSS: You were...

WALLACE: I was not a champion. I don't want anybody from my hometown...

GROSS: OK.

WALLACE: ...To hear me profess the word champion.

GROSS: You were a darned good tennis player (laughter).

WALLACE: I was decent by competitive standards (Gross).

Perhaps this is one-time false-humility used to shield routine exaggeration? But I do not think so. I also did not find this interview referenced in D.T. Max's biography (it was archived and dug up in 2015 ahead of the film *End of the Tour*). Ultimately, these issues are the EXACT thing that come up when one is researching a recently-deceased author who loved to talk and had a voracious output. It's freaking frustrating. And it's created a scenario in which one can interpret this man's life pretty much any number of ways and have a load of supporting evidence - often first-hand supporting evidence - for whatever interpretation one is trying to go with.

between all of the satire, irony, and nonsense - But DFW was in *Lit*. And he was named, treated mundanely, honestly, sincerely, and empathetically. And this is a man who once plotted to kill her husband (Max, 162).

In spite of the planned murder that Karr may or may not have known about, and in spite of knowing that he privately referred to his bedmates at their former shared 12 Step Program as “The Bimbo Brigade,” she entered into a short relationship with him (Karr, 318). The relationship did not last long and it quickly turned violent. Karr writes that “[DFW’s] inclined to throw all manner of object,” and that “[He pitched] my coffee table at me... splintering [it] on the wall.”

These are not the actions of a good man.

And unlike his (supposed?) honesty about his tennis skill, DFW never really came clean about his shortcomings. Not in his nonfiction and certainly not in his fiction. It makes one wonder if he should be trusted when he attempts to write sincerity a la *This is Water*.

Emily Harnett says that: “Sincerity furnishes the popular legacy of Wallace, along with footnotes, bandanas, and “This is Water” (Harnett). This is true. But it does not appear to be honest. Harnett goes on to say:

Sincerity has always been the rationale for praising smug superficialities and cheap feeling. For believing that convictions are laudable just by virtue of being convictions, regardless of their content. If we just really feel our feelings and really think our thoughts, the logic goes, somehow we’ll save ourselves and our culture (Harnett).

And this really does seem to be the issue. DFW's sincerity is almost paradoxically insincere due to his refusal to come clean about who HE was, and how HIS quest for goodness ultimately ended in failure time and time again.

### *Conclusion*

The central question here is: Should an author's life affect the reception of his work? Does it matter if the author is in authentic when his output depended so heavily on his readers' belief in his authenticity? Does it matter if his universally acclaimed Commencement Address on the topic of empathy and sincerity is not a sincere reflection of the speaker? Does it matter if the man who espoused that David Lipsky should "just be a good guy" (supposedly, if one's to take *The End of the Tour* as fact) was not a good guy himself (Ponsoldt)?

Maybe. Maybe it all matters.

What is absolutely true is that the rabid fanbase that eats up DFW in the A.W.D. need to pay attention to the D.F.W. that lived in the B.W<sup>8</sup>. This is happening. Articles about him, particularly those written by women - see Emily Harnett's 2016 piece, "How the Best Commencement Speech Of All Time Was Bad For Literature," for Literary Hub - are now taking a slightly more critical edge. Even articles by avowed fans are beginning to take note of D.F.W.'s flaws. In Megan Garber's 2015 piece for The Atlantic, "Could the Inter Age See Another David Foster Wallace," she notes - as have many others - that DFW was not always a good guy; but also that... "DFW," the literary symbol and Lifestyle Brand" now exists, and thus: [DFW's] are human shortcomings, the kind pretty much any person, being marred and messy, will somehow

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<sup>8</sup> This sentence is admittedly garbage and beyond a stupid joke.

relate to; the thing is, though, that the Wallace Industrial Complex doesn't tend to allow these things to color the man who is its principal and its principal product."

And that's true!

In his article, The David Foster Wallace Disease<sup>9</sup>, for Hazlitt, Sasha Chapin, a man - I emphasize because of Harnett's admonishment that: "Everyone has noticed that David Foster Wallace die-hards are disproportionately men." (Harnett) - admits that as a diehard fan, he does "not easily think of the complexities of Wallace's life" (Chapin). Chapin knows the facts:

He 'was violent with' Mary Karr... he slept with women in the twelve-step programs he lionized in his fiction... This is what we do with artists we love, or at least I do—we crudely bandage our wounds with a sampling of their complexities, or graft them onto our flimsy conception of 'the human condition' (Chapin).

This is one paragraph of brutal honesty in a gigantic essay full of hero worship - but it is better than nothing. And it also is telling. DFW's fans simplify DFW. DFW, perhaps, was not always honest... but is anyone always honest? Perhaps - had he lived a little bit longer - DFW would have blessed his fans with the truly honest and open memoir that he always should have written. Perhaps he could have dispelled DFW as Saint David before the movement began. Or perhaps he would have encouraged the moniker. Celebrity does weird things to an individual - particularly if that individual is an author.

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<sup>9</sup> Published on 15 Dec 2016... this paper's due date.

Ultimately, no one affected the interpretation of David Foster Wallace's work more than he himself. His life and celebrity will forever be intertwined with his output - both fiction and nonfiction - for better or worse<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Endings should not feel this forced. UGH!

### *Bibliography: Introduction*

When one is writing about a contemporary author, it can be difficult to find an abundance of good sources. For instance, I often write about Douglas Coupland, a Canadian author who is sometimes called the voice of Generation X, and I kid you not, I've had to order used sources from Amazon just to have enough material to write an academic paper.

This is now the case when writing about David Foster Wallace. Think pieces about him are STILL being written about him even a decade after his untimely death - indeed, his death, a suicide, did about as much for his literary output that his... you know, actual output did. I kid you not: An article about DFW was published today on Hazlitt. I found it on Facebook... it was good! I had to add it to my paper.

And that presents the primary problem when writing about DFW: There are just tons - TONS of sources. One could basically find 10 pages of sources on just about any sub-topic related to DFW - be it a literary analysis of *Infinite Jest* commentary on his Nonfiction, or even his (layman's) philosophy.

I chose to write my paper on DFW's popular reception over time. DFW went from being the second coming in cerebral postmodern literature, to a simple secular preacher espousing empathy, to a problematic force in both literature and popular culture after his death. (Indeed, after years of near-worship by his fans, feminists critics have since pointed out the flaws in his writing and in his life... needless to say, he wasn't the simple, good hero he was so often portrayed as).

I chose to include his novels in this bibliography because they are important to understanding both how his work was received, and important to understanding how he himself

has been received. I chose to highlight reviews that either he highlighted or would have highlighted... he seemed to appreciate (or perhaps loath) Michiko Kakutani, for instance. I also chose to find works by published writers about him. DFW was in many ways a writer for writers. I think these folks were his intended audience... at least until *This Is Water*.

I am also lucky because D. T. Max published an excellent literary biography. This book includes a source lists (works cited) and a wonderful index that makes research wonderfully easy. D. T. Max has also published numerous articles on DFW before and after his biography was published... in some ways, his biography is this bizarre living document. It's kind of creepy.

I also wanted to include sources I listed in our previous assignment. I promise, I did not do this to spite you... I understood your critique in that it wasn't exactly what you were looking for... but, frankly, a lot of info on this topic can be found in radio interviews (contemporary authors seem to haunt those airspaces)... I've also always wanted to cite a tweet... or two... or three.

This bibliography is hopefully simply labeled. I tried to make it as clear as possible. At the back of this bibliography is a work cited page that includes works that do not fit in the bibliography. I did write my essay knowing that I was going to do this kind of thing... again, just trying out something I've never really done before.

Please forgive small errors in the bibliography... a lot of this was compiled under grave sleep deprivation. I will not attempt to excuse grave errors.

Thank you for a wonderful class! I apologize for looking dead all the time... Thursday night may be the worst time of the week... so close to Friday, but just not quite.

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