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978-1-107-19595-0 — The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace
Edited by Ralph Clare
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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

Best known for his masterpiece *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace reshaped literature for a generation with his groundbreaking and original work. Wallace's desire to blend formal innovation with the communicative function of literature resulted in works that appeal as much to a reader's intellect as they do to emotion. As such, few writers in recent memory have matched his work's intense critical and popular impact. The essays in this Companion, written by top Wallace scholars, offer historical and cultural contexts for grasping Wallace's significance, provide rigorous individual readings of each of his major works of fiction and nonfiction, and address the key themes and concerns of these works, including aesthetics, politics, religion and spirituality, race, and posthumanism. This wide-ranging volume is a necessary resource for understanding an author now typically regarded as one of the most influential and important of his time.

Ralph Clare is Associate Professor of English at Boise State University and specializes in post-1945 American literature. He is the author of *Fictions Inc.: The Corporation in Postmodern Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture* (Rutgers, 2014) and is currently at work on a study of emotion and affect in contemporary fiction of the neoliberal era.

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For all those who continue to put the post-(post) in modernism.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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LEE KONSTANTINOU is Associate Professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park. He wrote the novel *Pop Apocalypse* (2009) and the literary history *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (2016). With Samuel Cohen, he coedited *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (2012). He is currently coediting a collection of essays on the comics of Art Spiegelman and is writing a monograph on Helen DeWitt's 2000 novel, *The Last Samurai*.

ROBERT L. MCLAUGHLIN is Professor of English at Illinois State University. He has published many articles on postmodern fiction, especially the work of Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace. He is the author of *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical* (2016), coauthor (with Sally E. Parry) of *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema during World War II* (2006), and editor of *Innovations: An Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (1998).

MATTHEW LUTER is on the English faculty at St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Jackson, Mississippi. He is the author of *Understanding Jonathan Lethem* (2015). His articles, on authors including Don DeLillo, Ellen Douglas, Willie Morris, and Bret Easton Ellis, have appeared in journals including *Critique*, the *Southern*

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Literary Journal, *Genre*, and *Orbit*. He is a founding board member of the International David Foster Wallace Society.

MATTHEW MULLINS is Assistant Professor of English and History of Ideas at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *Postmodernism in Pieces* (2016). His academic and public writing has appeared in *Callaloo*, *Arizona Quarterly*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *American Book Review*, and other places.

JEFFREY SEVERS is Associate Professor of English at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (2017) and the coeditor of *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide* (2011). His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Critique*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *MELUS*, and *Approaches to Teaching the Works of David Foster Wallace* (eds. Stephen J. Burn and Mary K. Holland).

JOSEPH TABBI is Professor of English at the University of Chicago at Illinois. He is the author of *Cognitive Fictions* (2002) and *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (1995). His biography of William Gaddis, *Nobody Grew but the Business* (2015), received an award from the Chicago Society of Midland Authors. The editor of the *electronic book review*, Tabbi is also the founding member of the *Consortium of Electronic Literature* (www.cellproject.net/).

LUCAS THOMPSON is a research fellow at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, Australia. He is the author of *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (2017), along with numerous other publications on contemporary US literature.

ANDREW WARREN is John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Humanities in Harvard's Department of English. He codirects the Mahindra Humanities Center's Seminar in Dialectical Thinking, and teaches and writes about Romanticism, poetry, philosophy, critical theory, and contemporary fiction. He is the author of *The Orient and the Young Romantics* (2014). His new project, *Romantic Entanglements*, is about entanglement (its figure, its concept, its use, and its problem) in the long eighteenth century.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

That Cambridge University Press has published a companion to David Foster Wallace is an acknowledgment in and of itself, but an occasion such as this was a long time in the works. In short, a big shout out is in order for the twin pillars of DFW Studies, Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn. Their careful and exacting work was the first that I, and many a budding Wallace scholar, encountered when existing scholarship was at a minimum. They provided the first substantial framework for understanding Wallace. Their book-length studies contain careful and rigorous readings that still open up Wallace's texts in compelling ways, and they ultimately helped to legitimate Wallace as a writer worthy of increased academic attention. That there is a thriving DFW community of scholars today is because of their foundational, and continuing, work.

In addition to thanking all of the contributors in this volume, thanks especially to all of the Wallace-heads out there whom I've met over the years at conferences in various cities, in the United States and abroad. To name (and, inevitably, to forget) a few: Nick Maniatis, the three Matt's – Luter, Bucher, and Mullins (the last of whom once strolled around Harvard incognito with me and kicked back in Emerson Hall, where we decided we liked our league best, be it more bush than ivy). To Lee Konstantinou, the irrepressible and energetic Marshall Boswell, Adam Kelly (whose clean Irish chin will never sport the dreaded neoliberal beard), Mike Miley, David Hering, Jeff Fisher, and Mary Holland (who let me convince her to "Return to *IJ*" in this volume and who has suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous panels!) – we'll always have Paris. Jeffrey Severs, whose paper on "Westward" blew me away at the first DFW conference at ISU and whose *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* virtually eviscerated me more recently, many thanks for talking me down from a very iffy introduction to this volume and for a number of discussions over the years. Stacey Olster has once again helped me immensely and saved me from

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myself more than once. If I were to give all the thanks I owe to her, it would run longer than a Bruce Springsteen concert, of which she has attended her share.

A tip of my editor's hat goes to Boise State's computer-savvy students working at "The Zone" for helping a certain Luddite prepare an entire electronic version of the manuscript – section breaks, roman numerals, end-notes, and all. The online bibliography compiled by the DFW Research Group at the University of Glasgow that I consulted saved me near the very end. Many thanks to the Boise State English department for granting me a course release to pursue this project, to BSU's Arts and Humanities Institute for providing the funding to attend the DFW Paris conference in 2014, and to the Idaho Humanities Council for providing a research fellowship that also gave me time and space to edit this volume.

A final word to one who will never read it: James Rother, in whose class I first read Wallace – the story "Lyndon" – as an undergrad at San Diego State in 1997. During one of several two-hour-long lectures I found myself in the middle of after visiting Rother during office hours (where he was inevitably trying to nap before our three-hour evening class), the towering man paused his furious tirade on the death of literature and handed me an essay he'd written on Wallace, a dense if stylish piece that I did my best to fathom later on. That time encapsulates the first Wallace and Wallace criticism I read. It's somewhat dizzying to think back upon it now. Back then I didn't know what graduate school was, and a not-so-simple college degree was an amazing thing. But despite Rother's rage and red-faced glare, his weekly jeremiads and the spittle that followed them, occasionally flecking my face, there came a consecration of sorts. Here I clutch the covenant.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1962 David Foster Wallace is born in Ithaca, NY, on February 21, to James D. Wallace and Sally Foster Wallace. The family soon moves to Champaign-Urbana, IL, after James secures a professorship in philosophy at the University of Illinois.
- 1967 John Barth publishes “The Literature of Exhaustion,” an essay heralding the ascendance of, and helping to define, postmodern American literature. Barth will become a touchstone of Wallace’s early work.
- 1971 Don DeLillo, a major influence on Wallace and with whom he will eventually have a long correspondence, publishes his first novel, *Americana*. Wallace has a fairly normal and happy childhood but will later trace the origin of his depression and anxiety to around this time, though his family did not notice.
- 1980 Wallace enrolls at his father’s alma mater, Amherst College, MA. He majors, like his father, in philosophy, though he chooses to pursue logic. Excels in his studies from day one.
- 1982 After experiencing a number of anxiety attacks and phobias, Wallace has a breakdown, marking the first acute bout of the depression that he will suffer from his entire life. He puts his studies on hiatus and recuperates at his parents’ house in Champaign-Urbana. Returns to Amherst in the fall.
- 1983 Back in Illinois for the summer, Wallace suffers another attack of depression. He is prescribed Tofranil as a result. Begins reading another major postmodern influence, Thomas Pynchon. The depression continues, causing him to withdraw from the fall semester at Amherst. During this crisis, Wallace makes a commitment to becoming a fiction writer.
- 1984 Wallace publishes what is considered his first work, a semiautobiographical story dealing with depression,

CHRONOLOGY

- “The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing,” in the student-run *Amherst Review*.
- 1985 Graduates from Amherst with two theses, one in philosophy, one in literature. Begins MFA in creative writing program at the University of Arizona in the fall.
- 1986 *The Broom of the System*, a revision of Wallace’s undergraduate literature thesis, is accepted for publication by Viking Penguin. Wallace meets Bonnie Nadell, who will become a longtime agent and friend.
- 1987 Publishes *The Broom of the System* to mixed reviews. Completes MFA in creative writing at the University of Arizona in the spring and receives Whiting Award, which allows him to attend the Yaddo writer’s colony in Saratoga Springs, NY, to finish work on his first collection of stories, *Girl with Curious Hair*. Returns briefly to teach at Amherst.
- 1988 Returns to Tucson to teach at the University of Arizona. Strikes up a correspondence with Jonathan Franzen after reading the author’s galleys for *The Twenty-Seventh City*. Begins attending drug and alcohol sobriety meetings. Consequently, ceases to take the antidepressant Nardil and has another serious breakdown. Returns to Champaign-Urbana. Attempts suicide by pills. Tries electroconvulsive therapy. Publication of *Girl with Curious Hair* by Viking Penguin is held up because of legal issues regarding the use of celebrity personages in some stories. Wallace, following his editor Gerry Howard’s move to W. W. Norton, changes publishers.
- 1989 Publishes *Girl with Curious Hair* with W. W. Norton. Receives O. Henry Award for “Here and There,” a story in the collection originally published in *Fiction*. Reads David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* and soon starts up correspondence with the author. Moves to Somerville, MA, and enrolls for a short period as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard, where he takes courses from Stanley Cavell and John Rawls, among others. Checks himself into McLean Hospital for rehabilitation after struggling with alcohol and marijuana addiction. Stays for four weeks.
- 1990 Moves into a halfway house in Brighton, MA, which will serve as a model of *Infinite Jest*’s Ennet House.
- 1990 Coauthors *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* with Mark Costello, one of the earliest publications to

CHRONOLOGY

- take rap music seriously as a topic of political, cultural, and societal interest.
- 1991 Suffers another breakdown that leads to a two-week hospital stay. Begins working in earnest on *Infinite Jest*, pieces and scenes of which he had conceived and written as early as 1986.
- 1992 Michael Pietsch of Little, Brown contracts *Infinite Jest*. Wallace moves to Syracuse, NY, to pursue a relationship with memoirist Mary Karr, whom Wallace had become obsessed with since meeting her in 1989. The tumultuous relationship lasts about a year.
- 1993 Wallace accepts job teaching literature and writing in Illinois State University's English Department, a bastion of postmodernist theory and fiction at the time, in Bloomington-Normal, IL, an hour from where he grew up. Continues work on *Infinite Jest*. Publishes the first version of his now famous "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. A revised version will appear in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*.
- 1996 *Infinite Jest* published to great acclaim. Wallace begins grueling book promotion tour.
- 1997 Publishes *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, a collection of essays and journalism Wallace had been writing over the years. Receives Lannan Literary Award and a MacArthur "Genius Grant."
- 1999 Publishes *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Receives O. Henry Award for "The Depressed Person," a story in the collection originally published in *Harper's* magazine.
- 2000 Publishes "The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys, and the Shrub," an article exploring John McCain's presidential campaign run, in *Rolling Stone*. The piece will eventually become "Up, Simba" in the essay collection *Consider the Lobster*. Receives Lannan Foundation Residency Fellowship.
- 2001 Franzen publishes *The Corrections* to high acclaim. The book becomes a bestseller. After 9/11, Wallace publishes "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," an essay examining regional American reactions to the terrorist attacks, in *Rolling Stone*.
- 2002 Accepts "The Roy E. Disney Professorship for Creative Writing" at Pomona College and moves to Claremont, CA. Begins a relationship with Karen Green, a visual artist. Receives O. Henry award for "Good Old Neon," a story later

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- collected in *Oblivion* and originally published in *Conjunctions*.
- 2003 *Everything and More* published, Wallace's book on Georg Cantor, infinity, and mathematics.
- 2004 Publishes *Oblivion*, his third story collection. Marries Karen Green in Urbana, IL.
- 2005 Publishes essay collection *Consider the Lobster*.
- 2006 Tenth-anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest* published by Little, Brown with an introduction by Dave Eggers. Eggers's publishing house, *McSweeney's*, founded in 1998, would publish some of Wallace's works in its literary magazine.
- 2007 Wallace guest edits *The Best American Essays 2007*, reflects upon the differences between nonfiction and fiction in his introductory essay, "Deciderization 2007 – A Special Report." Tries to stop taking Nardil again and suffers another breakdown and severe depression.
- 2008 Wallace takes his own life in Claremont, CA, on September 12, 2008.
- 2009 "Infinite Summer" multimedia, multiplatform, online reading group commences, draws a large number of participants. *This is Water*, Wallace's 2005 Kenyon College commencement address, is published. The first two academic conferences on Wallace's work are held, in Liverpool, England, and New York, New York, respectively. John Krasinski's film adaptation of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* released.
- 2010 Wallace's archive opens at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin. *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, Wallace's undergraduate philosophy thesis, is published. David Lipsky's book-length interview *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* published.
- 2011 Wallace's unfinished *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel*, edited by Michael Pietsch, is published by Little, Brown. Wallace had been struggling to write the novel for more than a decade, even attending accounting courses for research as early as 1996.
- 2012 *The Pale King* is nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. *Both Flesh and Not*, an edition of previously uncollected essays, is published by Little, Brown.
- 2013 Karen Green publishes *Bough Down*, a book of oblique elegies and collages for her deceased husband.

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- 2014 The first annual David Foster Wallace conference is held at Illinois State University.
- 2015 The controversial Wallace biopic *The End of the Tour*, directed by James Ponsoldt, is released. The script is based on Lipsky's interview *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*.
- 2016 Twentieth-anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest* published by Little, Brown with a forward by Tom Bissell.