

Introduction

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In the pantheon of writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, few loom larger than David Foster Wallace. Fêted during his lifetime and outright worshipped following his death in 2008, Wallace's writing captured the zeitgeist of millennial anxiety and confusion. Bridging the gap between the postmodern and its uncertain aftermath, Wallace's dizzying prolixity and extraordinary mastery of form, combined with his strange and estranging visions of the contemporary world, drew breathless critical reviews and immense loyalty among his many readers. Indeed, the effects of his work extend far beyond his direct engagement with readers; Wallace's status as cultural icon is perhaps best captured by the number of people who own, but have not read, his masterwork, *Infinite Jest*, as well as by those who recognize its symbolic value. Wallace – and especially *Jest* – is a touchstone in contemporary popular culture, with references to his work appearing in popular television shows like *Castle* and *The Gilmore Girls*, while the mention of his name in long-form cultural think pieces is a common occurrence. There is a strange dichotomy in this renown. Wallace's name is a kind of popular synecdoche for the earnest, highbrow cultural engagement of a subset of (mostly) young, white, male consumers. In an episode of the television series *Roots*, for example, a white teenage boy begins reading *Infinite Jest* with the specific aim of impressing a girl. As this suggests, Wallace's work continues to signal the development of the earnest, emerging-hipster, mainly white intellectual youth. At the same time, Wallace continues to exert a significant and highly nuanced influence in the literary and cultural life of the twenty-first century, echoing in the work of some of the most innovative writers of his own generation and the generations since. Wallace is mentioned explicitly as an influence by many authors, including Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, Porochista Khakpour and Ben Lerner. Whether directly acknowledged or otherwise, Wallace's legacy echoes in the work of these and many other critically acclaimed and

commercially successful authors, as Marshall Boswell has elucidated in his recent book on “the Wallace effect.”¹

Critical work on Wallace emerged in tandem with his publishing career, which began in 1987 with *The Broom of the System*. He was the subject of scholarly attention even before the sensation that was *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996. The 1993 summer issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* contained Wallace’s now-famous interview with Larry McCaffery, and also included Lance Olsen’s foundational “Termite Art, or Wallace’s Wittgenstein,” James Rother’s essay on the overlooked story “Order and Flux in Northampton,” and a short piece by Mark Costello on working with (or around) Wallace. With the publication of *Infinite Jest* came a greater intensity of critical and scholarly attention, including essays by Tom LeClair and Katherine Hayles that continue to resonate in more recent scholarship. Early in the twenty-first century, a clear sense emerged of Wallace as a truly significant writer, though he was largely assessed in the immediate context of postmodernism and its murky aftermath. Timothy Jacobs’ 2001 essay on Hopkins, Wallace and order set the tone for a reading of Wallace’s innovation within a longer historical context that has been picked up latterly by Lee Konstantinou and Lucas Thompson. Boswell’s *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, originally released in 2003 and with a second edition published in 2020, has remained a touchstone for Wallace scholarship since its publication, as has Stephen Burn’s *Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide*, from the same year. Much of the reading undertaken by this early scholarship engaged closely with Wallace’s own, quite directionist self-assessment and metacritical writing – Boswell, Burn and Jacobs were united, in their different critiques, in affording the essay “E Unibus Pluram” a central critical role as a kind of artistic manifesto. Subsequently, “E Unibus Pluram,” along with these influential interpretations of it, became foundational to scholarly readings of Wallace. Nonetheless, the work of this first wave of scholarship was diffuse rather than dialogic, and tended, as much foundational criticism does, towards the hagiographic, highlighting the cultural importance of what was then a critically underworked author.

Wallace himself haunts these early works of criticism. As several of the essays in the current volume note, Wallace was an inveterate director of his own interpretation, both in the way he invited readers to read his work and in the critical eye he turned on other authors of his own time and preceding generations. As Lucas Thompson notes in Chapter 5, there is,

¹ See Boswell, *The Wallace Effect*.

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among critics and scholars, “a sense that one’s interpretations have been anticipated by Wallace himself.”² It is notable too how frequently his observation of a particular skill or foible in one author’s work is applicable to his own writing, such as his observation of Franz Kafka’s radically literal humor, the “comedy-as-literalization-of-metaphor” whose lack of subtlety is its power, just as it is in Wallace’s own writing.³ Nevertheless, like many authors with such a powerful presence both in his own work and in contemporary culture at large, both the cultural and the critical discourses have wrestled with a tendency to over-biographize Wallace’s outputs, which the present volume works to avoid, focusing instead on his writings and legacy. However, a brief note of biography for those readers unfamiliar with Wallace’s background is useful to situate him in his contemporary context.

David Wallace was born into a family of words in Ithaca, New York, on February 21, 1962. His mother, Sally, from whom the Foster in his *nom de plume* would later come, would become an English teacher during Wallace’s childhood. His father, James, was an academic – a graduate student at Cornell University when David was born, later a professor of philosophy at the University of Illinois. David was joined by a younger sister, Amy, in 1964. In his biography of Wallace, D. T. Max talks of the importance of “midwestern virtues of normality, kindness, and community”⁴ and of a routine-based, serene upbringing, with Wallace’s love of reading nurtured by his parents, especially his mother. Language and writing loomed large in Wallace’s childhood, as an individual pursuit and a family passion. The rather sinister games played by the character Avril Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, in which she pretends to asphyxiate in response to a grammatical error, was an exaggeration of Sally’s own reaction to such errors. Wallace also fondly recalled his father’s reading to them; the written word was a kind of magic that bound the family together in an idyll of education and edification. Besides the classics, and the highbrow collective literary engagement of the family, Wallace read the more common texts of his age – *The Hardy Boys* and, as Jamie Redgate productively explores in Chapter 19, J. R. R. Tolkien – and began to develop a prodigious appetite for television that would last into his adulthood and deeply shape his writing.

An athletic and sociable boy, Wallace was an able tennis player in his youth, playing throughout high school until his form began to taper off alongside faster-growing peers. Although he remained a gifted player long

² See Chapter 5, 65.

³ Wallace, “Some Remarks,” *CL*, 63.

⁴ Max, *Every Love Story*, 1.

into his adolescence, Wallace lost his competitive edge, a struggle that would again be important to his writing, visible in the endless perfectionism of the students of Enfield Tennis Academy in *Infinite Jest*. As Max notes, this period coincided with Wallace's discovery of recreational drugs, and the return of a childhood anxiety, suggesting that the idyllic youth was not as straightforwardly tranquil as Max's account might imply. After high school, Wallace attended Amherst College in Massachusetts, where he double majored in English and Philosophy, and where the illness that would shadow and ultimately claim his life made its first clear appearance. Once again, Wallace excelled as a student, and was remembered as a dominant and able presence in the classroom, but late in his sophomore year, he suffered a debilitating period of depression, returned home to recover, drove a school bus for a period, read voraciously and began to develop his voice as a fiction writer. Returning to college with what his roommate Mark Costello described as a changed outlook, he wrote what would become *The Broom of the System* as his English major project, along with the Philosophy thesis that would be published after his death in the volume *Fate, Time and Language*, as well as beginning to publish in the college's literary magazine. An MFA at the University of Arizona was next, which would cement in Wallace a suspicion of creative writing programs and what he saw as their inauthenticity. The beginning of his career-long relationship with agent Bonnie Nadell and the publication in 1987 of *The Broom of the System*, his first novel, would launch him on to the American literary scene as a significant new voice, a significance that was amplified by subsequent publications, including, especially, the seismic *Infinite Jest*, in 1996. Meanwhile, though, Wallace struggled with his writing, applied to Harvard as a graduate student in Philosophy and spiraled into another depressive period, during which he withdrew from his studies to seek treatment at McLean psychiatric hospital in Boston. This stint saw him formally diagnosed and prescribed the antidepressant Nardil, upon which he would remain for most of the rest of his life. Having found some stability with this regime, Wallace began to return to his life, writing, teaching, dating and navigating fame. In 2001, he moved to Pomona College in California, where he would continue teaching until his death. Here he met and married artist Karen Green, adopted two dogs, and seems to have lived in relative serenity for seven years.

Wallace's death by suicide on September 12, 2008, sent shock waves through the literary world, and was followed by a deluge of memorials, reflections and think pieces on this "voice of a generation." Indeed, it is really since Wallace's death that a critical mass of scholarship and a sense of

grounded discourse has emerged, building on the earlier touchstones. From being relatively understudied before his death, Wallace has become in danger of being overdetermined by critical attention. The sense of a cohering cluster of scholarship began to emerge around 2009, with the first single-author conferences on Wallace in Liverpool and New York, followed in 2010 by the first volume of collected essays on his work, *Consider David Foster Wallace*, edited by David Hering and based on the conference in Liverpool. Some eighteen volumes on Wallace have been published in the intervening years; that is to say, new books are emerging at an average rate of nearly two a year, and this shows no sign of slowing down, with numerous new monographs and collections under contract or in press. In the earlier wave of scholarship, *Infinite Jest* was often the central focus, along with “E Unibus Pluram” and the aforementioned interview with Larry McCaffery, both published in 1993 in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. These texts created a lasting axis of critical concentration on his outputs from the mid-1990s. More recently, scholars have taken a longer view, less committed to *Jest* as a creative fulcrum and more invested in creating critical accounts of sustained aesthetic and ethical concerns across Wallace’s career. David Hering and Mary Holland’s work on form, and Jeff Severs’ interrogation of value in Wallace’s work have articulated systematic, wide-ranging understandings of the writer’s broad and complex corpus. The recent tide of critical work has built on the earlier scholarship while engaging in contemporary debates that situate Wallace’s writing relative to global literary exchange, embodiment and environmental humanities. The current volume continues this expansion into ongoing debates, further embedding and reexamining Wallace’s contemporary relevance and historical sweep, from the nineteenth century to the ongoing evolution of literature and popular culture. Bloomsbury Academic has established a series on Wallace, edited by Stephen Burn, that has moved the direction of scholarship away from the early terms of its dialogue, which was largely occupied with questions of narcissism, alienation and empathy, establishing Wallace in orientation to American postmodernism and as a cerebral, abstract thinker. By contrast, volumes in the new series have so far positioned Wallace’s work firmly within its broader context, highlighting his embeddedness in global literature, his undeniable cultural and literary impact on the generations after him, and examining his use of language in its sociolinguistic context, thus reimagining his Americanness in more socially grounded ways. Such scholarly progress is assisted by the opening of an incomplete archive of Wallace’s writing and papers at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, which itself opens up new avenues

for critical dialogue, both by offering new material for study and by recasting what we think we know from the published works. Tim Groenland's *The Art of Editing* and Jamie Redgate's *Wallace and I*, two excellent, widely different recent readings of Wallace's work, both depend on this archive in vital and various ways. As Ralph Clare recently pointed out, the archive "has complicated, if not outright disproven, a Unified Wallace Theory."⁵ *David Foster Wallace in Context* will contribute to this continuing development of the field of Wallace Studies, challenging and deepening existing readings, while also drawing attention to underworked areas of exploration, including linguistics, poetry and racial capitalism, among others. Outside of traditional scholarly publications, Wallace is widely assigned, studied and discussed, and is a fixture on contemporary university reading lists and syllabi, in both positive and negative contexts. Conferences devoted to his work continue at a rate of two or so a year, while papers and panels on his writing proliferate at larger conferences on literature, the humanities and American Studies. Recent years have seen the establishment of the David Foster Wallace Society, set up in 2017, which runs the peer-reviewed *Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*. All told, there is a sense that Wallace is experiencing a zeitgeist moment and, simultaneously, that his work has become an indisputable, if not uncomplicated, fixture in the contemporary canon.

This complication largely emerges from tensions between the literary and cultural legacies that have developed and been cemented since Wallace's death in 2008, tensions best described as grounded in a dissonance between the significance and value of Wallace's written works and the assessment of his public persona, along with what we know of his private life. Outside of the academy, Wallace has been a prominent cultural figure, surfacing in the public imagination as a sort of prophet, featuring in a *Jeopardy!* question in early 2021, and popping up twice in *The Simpsons*, the image of a wise writer gone before his time. Wallace is imagined as simultaneously of and reflecting his generation, coming of age at the zenith of postmodernism and in the period of rapid expansion of television at home, of which he acknowledged himself to be a heavy consumer, and which greatly influenced his work. He is, to contemporary eyes, in some sense the very incarnation of Kierkegaard's artist, portrayed as a genius too lofty and sensitive for this world. Along with his periodic appearance as a cultural symbol, there is a great deal of thoughtful and rigorous work on Wallace that emerges from non-academic sources, with

⁵ Clare, "Introduction," *Cambridge Companion*, 6.

numerous amateur reading groups of *Infinite Jest* particularly (see InfiniteSummer.org for an example of this phenomenon), social media groups devoted to his work and numerous podcasts that address his writing and life, including the long-running *The Great Concavity*. This diversity reflects Wallace's unusual place in contemporary cultural dialogues and particularly the "vibrant nonprofessional readership" that has marked his cultural significance over the years.⁶ This nonprofessional, fan-based, globally dispersed community constitutes its own (largely online) research nexus, complicating and contributing to more traditional scholarly dialogues. Of particular significance in this respect is the website www.thehowlingfantods.com, run by Nick Maniatis, which has been acknowledged by numerous scholars as a significant resource for bibliographies, reviews and information. Wallace-I, the long-standing LISTSERV community of fans run by Matt Bucher, is also a significant online gathering space for readers, scholars and information-seekers. This body of "non-professional" research is particularly interesting since it helps to shape a critical field that is also characterized by academic precarity, and in which the boundary between scholarly and "casual" criticism is ever more blurred. Within this context, after his death, opinion pieces and reflective essays devoted to Wallace's genius flourished for a time in mainstream media, followed more recently by an inevitable backlash on more than one front. Specifically, the organic development of Wallace Studies scholarship has moved from the early hagiography into a period of closer critical examination, which included work on Wallace's flaws as a writer, most frequently examining his complex and often unsatisfying approaches to race and gender.

This critical conversation preceded the #MeToo movement, which brought with it a reckoning of sorts in terms of Wallace's reputation. Mary Karr's Twitter posts in 2018 regarding her troubled past relationship with Wallace highlighted the sustained abusive behavior she experienced throughout their acquaintance in the late 1990s, during a tumultuous time for the young Wallace (which had already been mentioned in Max's 2012 biography).⁷ While the allegations have never been formally disputed, Wallace has naturally become the Q in this hideous interview, his interjections subject to speculation and projection, the frustrating silence of the dead forestalling any possibility of further clarity. Various other narratives have emerged of Wallace's attitudes to relationships, though nothing as troubling as Karr's account. More pertinently for the work of this volume,

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4. ⁷ See Max, *Every Love Story*, 146–81.

recent years have seen greater attention paid to the profile of Wallace's readers, the "lit-bro" figure who has come to be associated with Wallace's cultural legacy. This character – or caricature, perhaps – is every bit as vibrant in the popular imagination as the Kerouac and Hemingway boys of earlier generations, and both preceded and survives the allegations of abusive and unsavory behavior that have shadowed Wallace's reputation over the past number of years. Emerging from the critical and cultural confluence of these strands of thought, an ongoing conversation both within and without the discipline of Wallace Studies has explored and continues to explore what it means to study a writer whose work engages so deeply with toxic masculinities. This thread of discussion is necessarily taken up by a number of the essays in the volume, situating these conversations in the broader context of work reflecting on the ethics of cultural engagement and consumption. While this is by no means the only – or even the most productive – facet of the discipline, scholarly conversations on Wallace's sustained interest in forms of masculinity and embodiment in contemporary America have contributed to an exceptionally vibrant period in Wallace Studies. This (perhaps natural) trajectory has moved the criticism toward more granular engagement on gender and the body, as well as on topics such as politics, geographies, ecocriticism, attention, disability and so on. After the ground-clearing work of earlier scholars, this movement is particularly interesting as it coincides with a broader cultural reexamination of the processes of canonization, the moral and ethical obligations of author and of reader and scholar, and the power of what we choose to read and study in an age of almost limitless choice.

Debates about the ethics and merits of assigning and reading Wallace have ramped up in recent years. The most obvious example, and one that has crossed academic and popular media, is that which followed Amy Hungerford's 2016 essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "On Not Reading," about the value and virtue of engaging with a cisgendered, white, middle-class American man – one, moreover, who was at best enmeshed in systems of toxic privilege, and at worst, allegedly, violent and abusive – with Wallace becoming a kind of synecdoche for this argument in wider cultural dialogue. Nonacademic articles by writers, including Deirdre Coyle and Jessa Crispin, concentrated in 2017 but emerging periodically in the intervening years, have sought to articulate a sense of why Wallace, in particular, is so central in this dialogue, and why his displacement is important. Partly because Wallace's position was so profoundly emblematic of these systems of toxic privilege, and partly because his work appears through its almost flagellatory self-consciousness

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to acknowledge and attempt to expiate this privilege (arguably in both author and reader), Wallace provides an especially rich case study for the reconfiguration of the contemporary canon. Unarguably influential but obviously and avowedly problematic, Wallace's work appears to offer an ideal discursive space for these broader contemporary questions.

In this vein, in light of the critical mass of scholarship on his work and his relevance to the broader cultural moment in terms of discourses surrounding ethical and aesthetic value and the canon, the time is ripe for a volume of essays that examine the contexts of Wallace's writing. Intended to work as a source for both novice readers and more experienced scholars, the thirty-four essays that follow this introduction reach across the full spectrum of Wallace's considerable creative range, exploring form, theme and interpretation from a wide variety of angles. The book's main work begins with Part I, *Contexts*, which explores the literary and cultural contexts within which Wallace operated, tracing how he engaged with these heritages in ways both implicit and explicit. Pia Masiero opens the volume with an assessment of Wallace's narratological strategies, which opens space for Marshall Boswell's examination of empathy – one of the primary themes in Wallace's work – and his debt to Nabokov. Broadening out to consider the historical and cultural milieux in which we can usefully understand Wallace, Ralph Clare considers his emergence in the context of literary cultures of the 1980s, Catherine Toal employs a nineteenth-century lens to look at resonances with Herman Melville, and Lucas Thompson situates Wallace's writing amid its European influences. Influences of form come to the fore in Philip Coleman's tour through the role of poetry, and Matthew Luter examines the complex role of entertainment, another sustained theme. This essay opens the way for Corrie Baldauf's exploration of visual cues, art and clothing, closing a section that offers important guidance for readers and scholars on reading Wallace as a deeply culturally embedded author.

Following this part, the volume focuses more specifically on some of the dominant themes and preoccupations of Wallace's work, with Part II on *Ideas*. Wallace's preoccupation with philosophy is well documented, both in criticism, beginning with Lance Olsen's early work on his interest in Wittgenstein, and in the publication of his own undergraduate Philosophy thesis on free will and determinism under the title *Fate, Time and Language*, and the range of references and influences in his work is wide and complex. Alice Bennett follows Baldauf's work on ekphrastic transfers with an essay that intriguingly teases out the theme of attention, both within Wallace's work and as a feature of the time at which he was writing.

Jon Baskin's exploration of sincerity opens into Aine Mahon's account of perfectionism and the challenge of balancing irony and sincerity, suggesting a kinship between Wallace and Stanley Cavell that associates sincerity with redemption and self-improvement. In a related discussion, Antonio Aguilar Vazquez offers a reading of Rortyan pragmatism in Wallace's writing that both extends and challenges existing readings of the author's pragmatic bent. Maureen Eckert then imagines a world in which Wallace had gone into Philosophy instead of fiction writing as a profession, and in so doing offers a survey of Wallace's work on modal logic and fatalism, which is followed by Paul Jenner's examination of free will as it is worked through in Wallace's writing, especially *Infinite Jest*. Also interested in ideas of limitation and boundary, Stuart Taylor examines Wallace's sustained interest in infinity, which is followed by Allard den Dulk's tracing of the influences of existentialist philosophy and how, like infinity, it elucidates both the form and the thematic occupations of Wallace's work. In keeping with the theme of systems of thought that influence both structure and content, this part closes with Tim Personn's meditation on the importance of religion and spirituality, leading into Jamie Redgate's analysis of Wallace's ideas about consciousness and the soul, which offers an unexpected avenue of connection between Wallace and Tolkien. While the essays have different focuses, they work in conversation to explore how Wallace investigated ideas of both attention and distraction, showing how positive and negative exist in tension within his imagined worlds – how attention (positive) slips into obsession (negative), how sincerity becomes simulation, how communication can collapse into spectatorship, and the productive oppositionality of mind and body.

The next part, *Bodies*, considers the contexts of embodied experiences depicted (and not depicted) in Wallace's work. In recent years in particular, Wallace's engagement with the body – especially the gendered body – has become a primary critical focus. This part traces the dominant critical conversations in this area, beginning with Emily Russell's sketch of sex as a preoccupation for Wallace. Daniela Franca Joffe picks up on this theme and extends it to consider questions of race, gender and changing readership, as well as what she sees as a conservative trajectory in Wallace's representations of gender. Edward Jackson turns his attention to masculinity and its figurative weight, complicating critical narratives of how Wallace recenters traditional masculinities. Dominik Steinhilber considers the representation of gender against a changing backdrop of cultural

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understandings of authorship and structural violence. Moving away from the role of the normative body, the final essays in this part see Peter Sloane outlining Wallace's persistent thematization of disability, and Vincent Haddad returning us to the nineteenth century for a consideration of queerness and addiction fiction.

Haddad's essay opens into Alexander Moran's work on opiate fiction and capitalist systems of criminalization, the first essay in the final part, entitled *Systems*, which is occupied with the systems and structures that prescribe and proscribe individual behaviors. Moran's essay is succeeded by Colton Saylor's account of racial capitalism as a structuring force throughout Wallace's writing, which is both enriched and challenged by Mary Shapiro's assessment of dialect and racial identity. Jeff Severs grounds his reading in place and systems of agriculture, leading into Laurie MacRae Andrew's exploration of the interdependence of humanity and environment, in an essay on the dominant economic and cultural concerns of Wallace's work. Picking up on the theme of dependence and society, Joel Roberts returns us to issues relating to dialogue and citizenship, an increasingly dominant concern in the later part of Wallace's career. David Hering's essay on Wallace and Ronald Reagan extends this appraisal, tracing an earlier concern with the systems and stories of political engagement. The final two chapters of the volume circle back to the creative systems that governed Wallace's life and career, with Tim Groenland's exploration of Wallace's encounters with the publishing industry and, lastly, Mike Miley's account of the system that dominated Wallace's own life, that of the author–reader relationship. Finally, the volume closes with a Bibliography section. It has not been possible to include every single piece of scholarship on Wallace's writing – at least, not without sorely testing the word count and the patience of the editorial team at Cambridge University Press – and so what is gathered here comprises all works referenced in the volume and a range of significant works beyond that category (with apologies to the many excellent works of criticism that we could not fit in). In gathering this material, we wish to acknowledge – and to direct readers to – the David Foster Wallace Research Group at Glasgow University, who scrupulously maintained a comprehensive bibliography of work on Wallace until late 2019.

There are, of course, limitations to the scope of this collection, and I hope that scholars will find new and provocative directions for their own research emerging from the essays here. Essays on film and television, on classics, on finance, on sport and on affect are all avenues of thought

that I as editor – and, indeed, as a Wallace scholar – would wish to have included, but the space of a book is not infinite, even for Wallace. I hope, in keeping with Wallace’s own avowedly infinity-directed, anti-teleological project, that this book marks an opening, rather than a closing, for the vibrant and vital scholarly and cultural discussions about Wallace that have developed over the past decades.