The David Foster Wallace Reader by David Foster Wallace, review: 'a heady reminder'

David Foster Wallace was a virtuosic novelist whose untimely death turned him into an icon. Duncan White examines the life and myth of a hipster saint

Since he killed himself in September 2008, David Foster Wallace has been busy. With a posthumous production line to rival Tupac Shakur and Franz Kafka, Wallace has put out The Pale King (a 500-page unfinished novel), Both Flesh and Not (a collection of essays), This Is Water (a transcript of the commencement speech he gave at Kenyon College in 2005), and Fate, Time and Language (his undergraduate philosophy thesis). And now arrives this thumping great book, The David Foster Wallace Reader, a 1,000-page greatest hits collection, replete with a few obscure bootlegs: a previously hard-to-find short story from his college days and hitherto unpublished teaching materials.

In recent years Wallace has appeared as himself in a biography by New Yorker writer D T Max and as a bandana-wearing, tobacco-chewing character called Leonard in the Jeffrey Eugenides novel The Marriage Plot. He’s shortly coming to the silver screen, in a film based on the 2010 book Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself, an unexpurgated transcript of five days of interviews Wallace gave to Rolling Stone journalist David Lipsky in 1996. Wallace is to be played by Jason Segel, who you might remember from The Muppets.

Boom time for the Wallace industry, right? To the glib and the cynical his suicide appears to have been a pretty canny career move. On this view, Wallace is the Kurt Cobain of American letters, a grungy icon of the Nineties mythologised by his self-destruction, a hipster saint for the disaffected MTV generation. This makes both his enemies (particularly Bret Easton Ellis) and his friends (particularly Jonathan Franzen) pretty angry. To Ellis, Wallace is a “fraud” whose suicide has falsely elevated his reputation; to Franzen it has turned the brilliant, nuanced, flawed Wallace into “a very public legend”.

The legend verges on cliché. It’s the tortured artist consumed by his own Romantic weltanschmerz: The Sorrows of Young Wallace. But he was not young. He was 46, middle-aged. And there was nothing remotely glamorous about his suicide. Wallace believed he first suffered depressive and anxious feelings as young as nine years old. At 26 he took an overdose of sedatives and had to be placed on life support and have his stomach pumped. He underwent electro-convulsive therapy. A year later, in November 1989, he was admitted to McLean psychiatric hospital in Boston after threatening to hurt himself. He was told he needed to get clean of his dependence on drugs and booze or be dead by 30. Two years later he was again in a psychiatric unit, diagnosed with suicidal depression.

From that point on, Wallace used the antidepressant Nardil to manage his condition. In many ways it seems to have worked. In 1996 he published Infinite Jest, a vast novel of such astonishing brilliance that it made him the trendiest writer in America. With every new story and essay, Wallace’s reputation grew. In 2004 he married the artist Karen Green and they settled in Claremont, California. He taught creative writing at Pomona College and worked on The Pale King. Then Wallace decided to come off the Nardil and spiralled back into depression. No combination of meds worked to lift it, not even going back on the Nardil. He hanged himself from a patio rafter after arranging the manuscript pages of The Pale King and writing a two-page note. Wallace fought long and hard against a miserable disease and lost.

Wallace’s devoted readership was left stunned. His future works died with him and, to the selfish reader, this is what hurt most, being denied the books he was yet to write. Wallace’s prose is addictive; in killing himself he robbed us of our supply. How to fill the void? The unfinished, the uncollected and the marginal writings might lack the purity and kick of the real thing but they are better than going cold turkey.

The David Foster Wallace Reader does not offer much in the way of new material but it is a heady reminder of why we got hooked in the first place. The bulk of the new stuff is about 40 pages of teaching materials that, unfortunately, sounds more promising than it is. Wallace did not give lectures – his creative writing classes were based around group discussions – so what these teaching materials actually constitute are syllabi, student questionnaires,
More valuable to the DFW completist is the early short story “The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing”, which Wallace published in the Amherst Review in 1984, when he was only 22. The narrator suffers from depression and has been given drugs to help him cope. The antidepressants make him feel like he’s displaced from his own reality (on Planet Trillaphon) but the alternative (the Bad Thing) is unthinkable. Here’s the narrator describing how the Bad Thing feels: “Imagine feeling really sick to your stomach. Almost everyone has felt really sick to his or her stomach, so everyone knows what it’s like: it’s less than fun. OK. OK. But that feeling is localised: it’s more or less just your stomach. Imagine your whole body being sick like that: your feet, the big muscles in your legs, your collarbone, your head, your hair, everything, all just as sick as a fluey stomach. Then, if you can imagine that, please imagine it even more spread out and total. Imagine that every cell in your body, every single cell in your body is as sick as that nauseated stomach.”

Leaving aside the insight it gives us into what he was going through, the story is remarkable in the way Wallace inhabits his narrator’s voice. The pitch is near perfect. It is a skill that defined Wallace as a writer – he had an incredible ear for the quirks and tics of spoken American – and one that is on virtuosic display throughout this Reader.

This is where the DFWR succeeds, in reminding us of just how good Wallace’s greatest hits are. There’s a sampling of the Pynchonian pyrotechnics of his first novel, The Broom of the System, and the best short stories are here, including “Little Expressionless Animals”, “The Depressed Person” and “Good Old Neon”. Then there are the essays, ranging in subject matter from Kafka to the Illinois State Fair. I’m not sure I have read a better piece of travel writing than “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again”, Wallace’s account of taking part in a cruise, or a better piece of sports writing than his profile of Roger Federer.

But then here come my two reservations. The first is that the material, while organised chronologically, is divided between fiction and non-fiction, so, if read sequentially, you would have to read all his fiction before starting on the essays. This is, I think, a missed opportunity.

Take the relationship between Wallace’s essay on American television, “E Unibus Pluram”, and Infinite Jest, a novel in which an ultra-addictive film cartridge is sending people into lethal states of catatonia. When he wrote the essay, in 1990, Wallace argued that the idea of using irony as an intellectual weapon had been “absorbed, emptied, and redeployed” by television. This, Wallace warned, had grim implications for American fiction as it entered the Nineties: the weary ironist was no longer the rebel but part of the problem.

“The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country,” Wallace wrote, “might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles.” In Infinite Jest, Wallace was trying to write with the kind of sincerity he had called for in “E Unibus Pluram”. Placing this essay in its chronological position before the excerpts of Infinite Jest, rather than some 300 pages after it, would allow for better understanding of the development of Wallace’s ideas.

Which leads me to the second reservation. There are 250 pages’ worth of excerpts from Infinite Jest included here, which is actually not as much as it sounds. In fact, it is roughly equivalent to how many pages Wallace reluctantly cut from the original manuscript. Now, it is hard to excerpt any novel, but particularly so in the case of Infinite Jest, in which, as Wallace wrote, “everything in it is connected to everything else”. For the reader of the novel, what initially appears episodic begins to cohere as the book unfolds into a meticulously planned fictional world. The excerpts cannot hope to approximate this immersive sensation. It is hard to see a way around this: it is impossible to excerpt Infinite Jest without losing what is essential to its brilliance, and it is impossible to understand Wallace’s essential brilliance without Infinite Jest. It is hardly the fault of the editors: you can hardly stick the whole thing in.

This is a problem for Wallace’s legacy as a whole. In their introduction, the editors hope that the DFWR will serve as “an ideal introduction for students”. As Wallace enters university syllabi (yes, the Nineties are now a historical period), the next generation of Wallace readers will be born in the classroom. The worry is that, despite the valiant efforts of Wallace scholars, Infinite Jest is just too big to teach. I read the first hundred pages four or five times before I got up enough momentum to take me through the full thousand. In the age of TED talks and tweets, it takes a special kind of commitment to read a novel with 388 endnotes, some of which even have their own footnotes. This is the biggest threat to his legacy: that his most important book will not be read and that the finest expression of his talent will be locked up in an opulent palace of its own excess.
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