

*This collection of tributes is a special volume  
printed in loving memory of David Foster Wallace.*



CELEBRATING THE LIFE AND WORK  
OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

1962-2008

Tributes were given on October 23, 2008 at the Skirball  
Center for the Performing Arts, New York University

Printed in the United States of America

*Finally, know that an unshot skeet's movement against the vast lapis lazuli dome of the open ocean's sky is sun-like—i.e. orange and parabolic and right-to-left—and that its disappearance into the sea is edge-first and splashless and sad.*

*—from “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again”*



Talks and readings by

Amy Wallace Havens

Bonnie Nadell

Gerry Howard

Colin Harrison

Michael Pietsch

Don DeLillo

Zadie Smith

George Saunders

Jonathan Franzen

Deborah Treisman





Amy Wallace Havens



UNTIL VERY RECENTLY, David and I were lucky in that 1  
we had such a limited experience with grief. When 2  
our grandmother died, just in the last decade, we were 3  
emotional novices. I remember sitting next to David at 4  
Gramma's memorial service. Whoever spoke first had 5  
uttered maybe five words before we both became loudly 6  
unglued—wailing, sobbing, and clinging to each other. 7  
If we hadn't been in the presence of actual relatives, I 8  
think the assembled would surely have thought we were 9  
shills, that Gramma Betty had not left to chance the 10  
level of distress that would be registered at her funeral. 11  
We absolutely marveled—clutching our stiff balls of 12  
Kleenex—that our grandfather could find it in himself 13  
to stand and to speak of the honor that it had been 14  
to be our grandmother's husband for sixty years. How 15

1           could he so calmly speak of his heart's joy in the past  
2           tense? This seemed utterly superhuman to David and  
3           me. And I stand here today not at all calm but knowing  
4           that David would have found it in himself to do this  
5           for me.

6           David was not always an easy brother—forget win-  
7           ning an argument or having the last word, ever. But he  
8           was loyal and good and protective. It took him some  
9           years to get over the disappointment of being stuck with  
10          a female sibling, but he did. Although as children we  
11          spent a great deal of time simply avoiding each other,  
12          it was understood that he was there if I really needed  
13          him. When I was ten, I decided to try out for Little  
14          League—which was not done much by girls in those  
15          days. I know that David was probably horrified in his  
16          heart of hearts, but he took it upon himself to teach me  
17          to catch a fly ball, to run down a grounder, and—most  
18          important of all—not to throw like a girl. To this day  
19          I have a decent arm, although I imagine I throw like a  
20          boy who would rather be reading Kafka or watching *The*  
21          *Waltons* than playing baseball.

22          In the days following David's death, my mother and  
23          I realized that we could sit in front of the computer  
24          and conjure David on YouTube. There he was on the  
25          Isle of Capri, struggling to explain to the Italian-speak-

ing audience that this was his first experience ever being 1  
in a place where he didn't speak a single word of the 2  
language. There were David's mannerisms and loveable 3  
self-mocking digressions, and for a moment I actually 4  
forgot that he was dead—there he *was*, explaining to 5  
the chuckling crowd that he felt like a baby, for heaven's 6  
sake—he could not understand, and he could not make 7  
himself understood. 8

Although I have been in the company of fellow native 9  
speakers since that awful Saturday morning when my 10  
husband thrust the phone into my hands, I have felt my 11  
ability to communicate and to comprehend slide away. 12  
I simply cannot find the words to express what David's 13  
absence feels like, and I cannot begin to understand 14  
that this is forever. The language of grief is hideous and 15  
guttural, composed of lung-tearing sobs and strangled 16  
screams. And although I am sure that many of you have 17  
found yourselves in this empty, wordless place, I simply 18  
feel that no one will ever truly understand, least of all me, 19  
how words will have any function anymore. 20

If David could have been a little bit gentler with him- 21  
self, perhaps he could have simply shut down shop for a 22  
while and tried to heal. But unlike those in almost any 23  
other profession, writers cannot “retire”—if they stop 24  
writing, they cease to be writers—at least in their minds. 25

1 David loved being a writer, not so that he could dazzle  
2 us with the glorious arias of his intellect, but so that he  
3 could take us with him as he questioned what most of  
4 us don't bother to question. David was not a know-it-  
5 all. If he was a genius, it's because he was smart enough  
6 to be curious about everything. So many of our conver-  
7 sations began with David saying "Why do you think,"  
8 or "Do you ever wonder..." David always thought,  
9 and he *always* wondered. As his depression essentially  
10 metastasized, although he was panicky and sleepless and  
11 dropping huge amounts of weight, I think it was the fear  
12 that he would never be well enough to write again that  
13 finally consumed him. It was the writing that made it so  
14 much less lonely to be in his head.

15 He fought very hard. This was not his first battle  
16 with clinical depression, and the fact that he had sur-  
17 vived that earlier time made us hope that he could do it  
18 again. Depression is not well understood, but in David,  
19 although chemicals were running amok in his brain,  
20 this seemed like a cancer of the soul. The fact that he  
21 was loved so fiercely by his friends, his family, his wife,  
22 could not penetrate the fear and loneliness. David sim-  
23 ply ran out of the strength to hope that tomorrow might  
24 be a little bit better.

25 Shortly before David's death, I reread Alice Sebold's

*The Lovely Bones*, and the notion that each person made  
his own quirky sort of heaven resounded as I tried to  
believe that David—not his oeuvre but David—was  
separated from us merely by a sort of membrane. In  
David’s heaven, he can eat chocolate Pop-Tarts again,  
and people never say, “I’m nauseous,” when what they  
really mean is that they think they’re going to throw up.  
In David’s heaven, the horizon stretches an uncluttered  
midwestern forever, and the scent of bayberry candles  
is everywhere. But most important, he can put his fin-  
gers in his mouth and whistle to summon his beloved,  
departed dogs—Roger, Drone, and Jeeves. David and  
his dogs go for endless runs, and his enormous high-  
tops make no sound in the clouds.

Thank you so much for being here. My family and I  
are proud beyond measure that our boy meant so much  
to so many. He meant everything to us.

*Amy Wallace Havens is David’s sister. She is a deputy public  
defender in southern Arizona.*

Copyright © 2008 by Amy Wallace Havens





**Bonnie Nadell**



I KNEW DAVID as his literary agent. We met in 1985 when 1  
he was an MFA student at the University of Arizona and 2  
I had just moved to San Francisco and become an agent 3  
with Fred Hill. He had never published a story outside 4  
of college and I had never sold a book. So we grew up in 5  
publishing together. 6

From the very beginning, I knew David was smart. 7  
When he sent out the query letter for *Broom of the* 8  
*System* (his first novel) he used the word *diachronic*. I 9  
didn't know what it meant, looked it up and found it 10  
meant "out of order." Which made perfect sense since 11  
he had sent the eighth chapter of the novel instead of 12  
the first. It didn't take me to realize that David was the 13  
smartest person I'd ever met. I loved his writing and 14  
wanted the world to see his gift. 15

1           The thing is, David always wore his intelligence so  
2 lightly. *Broom of the System* ends without the last word  
3 and doesn't really have a final scene. I in my twenty-  
4 five-year-old wisdom, tried to convince David to wrap  
5 up the story in a traditional way before I sent it out  
6 to publishers. He proceeded to explain to me using,  
7 Wittgensteinian philosophy, why it was that way and  
8 needed to remain. I think that was when I understood  
9 that David's mind worked in an entirely different way.  
10 Of course, Gerry Howard, his editor, had the same con-  
11 versation with David a few months later. The book was  
12 published as David wanted.

13           David had a complicated relationship with fame from  
14 the very beginning of his career. He liked the attention,  
15 but he couldn't shrug things off the way most writers  
16 can. He never read his reviews or wanted to know print  
17 runs or sales figures. Or be interviewed on TV the times  
18 he got asked or go to parties or meet the Hollywood  
19 producers who optioned his books. In order to write,  
20 David couldn't be in the public eye and still function.  
21 It was simply too hard for him. David didn't have the  
22 armor most of us do to survive in the world. I knew this,  
23 and so Little, Brown and we all protected him. Being  
24 David's agent often meant being a shield for him.

25           Because David needed to keep himself apart from the

noise of our culture, people would ask sometimes if he 1  
was difficult as a client; was he condescending, patron- 2  
izing? Never. David was an incredibly sweet person. If 3  
anything, he would offer up too much. When David 4  
was writing about talk radio in LA for the *Atlantic*, he 5  
called one afternoon to get directions to the nearest Koo 6  
Koo Roo. He had promised to pick up that night's take- 7  
out dinner for the tech guys at the station. I tried to 8  
convince him that the writer from the Atlantic wasn't 9  
the one who had to buy the evening's chicken takeout. 10  
But I also gave him the simplest possible directions 11  
since I knew he hated driving around Los Angeles and 12  
was going to do it anyway. And that he would spend 13  
his time at the station sitting in a back room with these 14  
guys eating his own take-out dinner, listening to them 15  
and absorbing everything they said. 16

This spring before things got bad, David was going 17  
to write about Obama and rhetoric for *GQ*. David was 18  
listening to Obama's speeches, and *GQ* had reserved him 19  
a room at the convention in Denver. I knew David was 20  
never going to meet Obama or even get near him. He 21  
wanted to spend his time with the speechwriters sitting 22  
in Chicago, sweating out Obama's words. Everything 23  
David learned would have come from watching from 24  
the outside, from being on the edge. And if David had 25

1           been well enough to go to Denver, he would have spent  
2           most of his time in his hotel room or somewhere far  
3           away from the action and chatter. But he would have  
4           shown us things we would never have noticed, people  
5           we would never have spoken to, and had ideas about  
6           rhetoric and language that most of us would never have  
7           thought without him.

8           For twenty three years David made me see the world  
9           through his eyes—made me think harder, feel infinitely  
10          sadder, and laugh at all sorts of crazy things. We will all  
11          miss him dearly.

12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23          *Bonnie Nadell is vice president of Frederick Hill Bonnie Nadell*  
24          *Agency in Los Angeles.*

25          Copyright © 2008 by Bonnie Nadell

Gerry Howard





WHEN YOU REACH your late fifties, as I have, the question “What have you done to justify your miserable existence?” presents itself with steadily increasing insistence. I’ve formulated a number of tentative answers to that question, but one of the best I can offer is, “I published the first two books by David Foster Wallace.”	1 2 3 4 5 6
In an editorial career the shocks of recognition arrive at highly irregular intervals—those moments when a manuscript grabs hold of your mind and heart and says, “Baby, we were made for each other.” That’s exactly what happened when the manuscript of <i>The Broom of the System</i> hit my in-box at Penguin in 1986, courtesy of Bonnie Nadell. What a startlingly fresh and original book that was, a neopostmodern extravaganza, ultrabrainy and high-spirited at a time when American fiction was	7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

1 mostly out strolling the strip malls or cruising the clubs.  
2 We published it as the first trade paperback original in  
3 our Contemporary American Fiction series, and it was  
4 a critical and commercial success. And this remarkable  
5 book brought David Wallace, a truly remarkable per-  
6 son, into my work life. I am so proud and happy that  
7 twenty-plus years later, *The Broom of the System* is selling  
8 steadily and drawing new readers into David's uniquely  
9 imagined world. I was rereading it last night, and I had  
10 to wonder, how did I ever slip this one past the authori-  
11 ties? It's a wild piece of work—hysterical realism, yo. (I  
12 read *Our Mutual Friend* over the summer, and it seemed  
13 totally clear to me that Charles Dickens had been deeply  
14 influenced by David Foster Wallace.)

15 In my mind David will always be young. He was  
16 twenty four when our paths crossed, painfully deferen-  
17 tial, totally unworldly, woefully underdressed, but you  
18 knew that he possessed a formidable, even staggering  
19 talent and intellect. Maybe my favoritest moment in  
20 publishing ever was a reading that Penguin arranged  
21 for the CAF series at the McBurney Y, with T.C. Boyle,  
22 Laurie Colwin, Frank Conroy, and David reading from  
23 their work and with me introducing them in alphabeti-  
24 cal order. As the first three mature and practiced literary  
25 stars strutted their stuff, David sank deeper and deeper

into his seat, clearly suffering the tortures of the damned, 1  
It was his first reading *ever*—what had we done? I can 2  
still taste my guilt. But when his turn came, he got up, 3  
walked to the lectern, calmly took a long sip of water, 4  
said “Ahhhh,” and read the epileptic baby/ John Irving 5  
send-up section of *Broom* with incredible brio. As the 6  
song goes, he blew that room away. He was the Ruby 7  
Keeler of fiction—he went out there a nobody, and he 8  
came back a star. I was in awe. 9

But as all who knew and worked with David knew, 10  
he never carried himself like a star in the least. In fact, 11  
he had no defenses, in my experience, against the tox- 12  
ins endemic to the literary-industrial complex. I vividly 13  
remember one August day in 1988 when David came 14  
down to the city for, God help us, a photo shoot for 15  
some slick magazine on the “hot young writers.” 16  
David had been up at Yaddo with a fast crowd—Jay 17  
McInerney, David Leavitt, Mona Simpson —and 18  
all their talk of Andrew says this and Binky does that 19  
had really knocked him sideways. Then that morning’s 20  
shoot, with Tama Janowitz and Christopher Coe, a very 21  
flamboyant gay novelist, camping about, had finished 22  
the job. By the time he arrived at my office for lunch. 23  
he was in the midst of a full-blown anxiety attack or 24  
nervous breakdown. Oh my. So I reached back to the 25

1 skill set that the sixties had equipped us all with and  
2 calmly talked him down, just the way we used to do in  
3 the dorms when someone was having a bad trip. Trust  
4 me; it was exactly like that.

5 So many memories come back: That just incred-  
6 ibly squalid Somerville apartment he shared with Mark  
7 Costello, with those textbooks on symbolic logic whose  
8 *titles* I could not understand, let alone their contents.  
9 The eyestrain-causing five- and seven-page single-spaced  
10 editorial letters without a single typo that hog-tied my  
11 much slower brain. The somewhat unfortunate chew-  
12 ing-tobacco years. The sweetness and the vulnerability  
13 and the modesty. With a mind like his, David could have  
14 easily applied himself to some money-spinning job like,  
15 I don't know, devising fiendishly complicated financial  
16 instruments that leave the American economy in smok-  
17 ing ruins. He could have done that! Instead, he devoted  
18 his genius to renewing the fragile enterprise that is seri-  
19 ous American writing. That's serious, not solemn. He  
20 was the most idealistic of ironists, and his vision of the  
21 world was fueled by deep wells of sincerity and a dogged  
22 quest for authenticity. Oh boy, will we miss him.

23  
24 *Gerald Howard is an executive editor at large for Doubleday*  
25 Copyright © 2008 by Gerald Howard

**Colin Harrison**



ONE DAY IN the spring of 1995, I got a phone call at *1*  
*Harper's Magazine* from Dave. He was calling from a *2*  
seven-hundred-foot luxury cruise ship called the *Zenith* *3*  
off the coast of Florida. I'd sent him on this trip to write *4*  
an article, and he'd phoned just to let me know that *5*  
yes, he was on board, as planned, and, by the way, what *6*  
exactly was his magazine assignment again? *7*  
I paused before answering. *8*  
Telling Dave what to write about was a tricky propo- *9*  
sition. In his previous nonfiction piece for *Harper's*, in *10*  
which he'd written about the Illinois State Fair, Dave *11*  
had, within the first few lines of the piece, blown up any *12*  
idea that he considered himself a conventional journal- *13*  
ist and also gleefully detonated the notion that I, his *14*  
editor, knew what I was doing. *15*

1           Let me quote from that piece: “I’m fresh in from  
2 the East Coast, for an East Coast magazine,” he wrote.  
3 “Why exactly they’re interested in the Illinois State Fair  
4 remains unclear to me. I suspect that every so often edi-  
5 tors at East Coast magazines slap their foreheads and  
6 remember that about 90 percent of the United States  
7 lies between the coasts, and figure they’ll engage some-  
8 body to do pith-helmeted anthropological reporting on  
9 something rural and heartlandish.”

10           Ah, to be cleverly ridiculed in the pages of one’s own  
11 magazine. So now, as Dave floated somewhere off the  
12 coast of Florida, I knew that whatever answer I gave  
13 him could be subject to inclusion in the piece itself, and  
14 perhaps even a source of further mockery.

15           But there was another reason I hesitated to answer his  
16 question. In telling Dave what the magazine assignment  
17 was, I might accidentally suggest what *not* to do, which  
18 could be unwise. The smart thing would be to just let  
19 Dave and his imagination and neuroses run wild. In his  
20 piece on the Illinois State Fair, curiosity and anxiety had  
21 combined again and again to great effect. Here’s one  
22 passage:

23  
24                   We’re about 100 yards shy of the Poultry  
25                   Building when I break down. I’ve been a rock



about the prospect of poultry all day, but now 1  
my nerve goes. I can't go in there. *Listen* to the 2  
thousands of sharp squawking beaks in there, 3  
I say. Native Companion not unkindly offers 4  
to hold my hand, talk me through it. It is 100 5  
degrees and I have pygmy-goat shit on my shoe 6  
and am almost crying with fear and embar- 7  
rassment. I have to sit down on a green bench 8  
to collect myself. The noise of the Poultry 9  
Building is horrifying. I think this is what 10  
insanity must sound like. No wonder madmen 11  
clutch their heads. There's a thin stink. Bits of 12  
feather float. I hunch on the bench. We're high 13  
on a ridge overlooking the carnival rides. When 14  
I was eight, at the Champaign County Fair, I 15  
was pecked without provocation, flown at and 16  
pecked by a renegade fowl, savagely, just under 17  
the right eye. 18

Sitting on the bench, I watch the carnies 19  
way below. They mix with no one, never seem 20  
to leave Happy Hollow. Late tonight, I'll watch 21  
them drop flaps to turn their booths into tents. 22  
They'll smoke cheap dope and drink pepper- 23  
mint schnapps and pee out onto the midway's 24  
dirt. I guess they're the gypsies of the rural 25

1 United States — itinerant, insular, swarthy,  
2 unclean, not to be trusted. You are in no way  
3 drawn to them. They all have the same blank  
4 hard eyes as people in the bathrooms of East  
5 Coast bus terminals. They want your money  
6 and maybe to look up your skirt; beyond  
7 that you're just blocking the view. Next week  
8 they'll dismantle and pack and haul up to the  
9 Wisconsin State Fair, where they'll never set  
10 foot off the midway they pee on.

11 While I'm watching from the bench, an old  
12 withered man in an Illinois Poultry Association  
13 cap careens past on one of those weird three-  
14 wheeled carts, like a turbocharged wheelchair,  
15 and runs neatly over my sneaker. This ends  
16 up being my one unassisted interview of the  
17 day, and it's brief. The man keeps revving his  
18 cart's engine like a biker. "*Traish*" he calls the  
19 carnies. "Lowlifes." He gestures down at the  
20 twirling rides. "Wouldn't let my own kids go  
21 off down there on a goddamn bet." He raises  
22 pullets down near Olney. He has something  
23 in his cheek. "Steal you blind. Drug-addicted  
24 and such. Swindle you nekked them games.  
25 Traish. Me, I ever year we drive up, I carry my

wallet like this here.” He points to his hip. His 1  
wallet’s on a big steel clip attached to a wire 2  
on his belt; the whole thing looks vaguely elec- 3  
trified. Q: “But do they want to? Your kids? 4  
Hit the Hollow?” He spits, brownly. “*Hail* 5  
no. We all come for the shows.” He means the 6  
livestock competitions. “See some folks, talk 7  
stock. Drink a beer. Work all year round rais- 8  
ing ’em for show birds. It’s for pride. And to 9  
see folks. Shows’re over Tuesday, why, we go 10  
on home.” He looks like a bird himself. His 11  
face is mostly nose, his skin loose and pebbly 12  
like poultry’s. His eyes are the color of denim. 13  
“Rest of this here’s for city people.” Spits. He 14  
means Springfield, Decatur, Normal. “Walk 15  
around, stand in line, eat junk, buy soovneers. 16  
Give their wallet to the traish. Don’t even know 17  
there’s folks come here to work up here.” He 18  
gestures up at the barns, then spits again, lean- 19  
ing way out over the cart to do it. “We come 20  
up to work, see some folks. Drink a beer. Bring 21  
our own goddamn food. Mother packs a ham- 22  
per. Hail, what we’d want to go on down there 23  
for? No folks we know down there.” He laughs. 24  
Asks my name. “It is good to see folks,” he says 25

1           before leaving me and peeling out in his chair,  
2           heading for the chicken din. “We all stayin’ up  
3           to the *motel*. Watch your wallet, boy.”  
4

5           With passages like these, I figured that the best thing  
6           was to give Dave *no editorial guidance whatsoever*. Not  
7           a word. So, no, there was no particular assignment,  
8           except that he was to be Dave Wallace on the spotless  
9           cruise ship plowing through the aquamarine waters of  
10          the Caribbean. I said, “There’s nothing else I can tell  
11          you, Dave.” There was a pause. I’m willing to bet Dave  
12          made one of his lightning-quick facial grimaces before  
13          responding, “Okay.” He seemed simultaneously relieved  
14          and amused, like he knew something I didn’t--which  
15          was, of course, already true.

16          I like to think of that conversation now because I  
17          know more or less what happened next. Dave—big,  
18          fleshy, semi-shaven Dave Wallace, with his bandanna  
19          and his sneakers and his quick smile, explored that huge  
20          luxury ship, inspecting its many restaurants and gaming  
21          rooms and lounges, all twelve decks and 1,374 passen-  
22          gers, their acres of horrifying flesh soon frying in the  
23          sun. He piled up tens of thousands of fabulous words  
24          describing the ship and its inhabitants. As for that  
25

frying flesh, he'd write, "I have seen every type of pre- 1  
melanomic lesion, liver spot, eczema, wart, papular cyst, 2  
potbelly, femoral cellulite, varicosity, collagen and sili- 3  
cone enhancement, bad tint, hair transplants that have 4  
not taken — i.e., I have seen nearly naked a lot of people 5  
I would prefer not to have seen nearly naked." These are 6  
kind of details that sickeningly thrilled David. 7

Naturally, though, Dave found the ship's relentless 8  
pampering highly stressful, so he semiagoraphobically 9  
retreated to his room, especially to the shower, which 10  
he said, 11

12  
itself overachieves in a very big way. The HOT 13  
setting's water is exfoliatingly hot, but it only 14  
takes one preset manipulation of the shower 15  
knob to get perfect 98.6 degree water. My 16  
own personal home should have such water 17  
pressure: the shower-head's force pins you help- 18  
lessly to the stall's opposite wall, and the head's 19  
MASSAGE setting makes your eyes roll up and 20  
your sphincter just about give... 21

22  
But all this is still small potatoes compared 23  
with my room's fascinating and potentially 24  
malevolent toilet. A harmonious concordance 25

1 of elegant form and vigorous function, flanked  
2 by rolls of tissue so soft as to be without per-  
3 forates for tearing, my toilet has above it this  
4 sign: THIS TOILET IS CONNECTED TO A VACUUM  
5 SEWAGE SYSTEM. PLEASE DO NOT THROW IN TO  
6 THE TOILET ANYTHING OTHER THAN ORDINARY  
7 TOILET WASTE AND TOILET PAPER. The toilet's  
8 flush produces a brief but traumatizing sound,  
9 a kind of held, high-B gargle, as of some gastric  
10 disturbance on a cosmic scale. Along with this  
11 sound comes a suction so awesomely powerful  
12 that it's both scary and strangely comforting:  
13 your waste seems less removed than hurled  
14 from you, and with a velocity that lets you feel  
15 as though the waste is going to end up some-  
16 place so far away that it will have become an  
17 abstraction, a kind of existential sewage-treat-  
18 ment system.

19  
20 He loved writing that, I know he did.

21 A few months after his call, Dave turned in an  
22 ocean-liner of a magazine piece, way too big to dock.  
23 We devoted twenty four entire pages of the magazine  
24 to the article and, but for the need to run some adver-  
25 tising, would have included more. Although the article

was laced with Dave's obsession with mortality and yes, even references to suicide, his attentive detail to his fellow travelers revealed a kind of love for them. While aboard, Dave surely sensed he was onto something big, something cohesive and funny and utterly original. He must have had fun writing that piece, as self-lacerating as it was, and so this is how I prefer to remember Dave. Smiling. Laughing. Happy that he just wrote something great.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15

*Colin Harrison is the author of six novels, including The Havana Room and The Finder. Formerly deputy editor of Harper's Magazine, he is now vice president and senior editor at Scribner.*

Copyright © 2008 by Colin Harrison





**Michael Pietsch**



HELLO. I WORK for Little, Brown and Company, and I	1
had the tremendous good fortune to work with David	2
Wallace on his books <i>Infinite Jest</i> , <i>A Supposedly Fun</i>	3
<i>Thing I'll Never Do Again</i> , <i>Brief Interviews with Hideous</i>	4
<i>Men</i> , <i>Oblivion</i> , and <i>Consider the Lobster</i> . And I want to	5
say right at the start that working with David was a thrill	6
beyond anything I imagined when I entered this profes-	7
sion. The novel <i>Infinite Jest</i> is, I believe, one of the great	8
American works of fiction, a work of mind-boggling	9
ambition and originality that depicts contemporary life	10
as a surfeit of pleasures and indulgences that can make	11
connection with other people lethally difficult. Since	12
encountering that novel, I've found it difficult to view	13
life in our times in any other way.	14
My goal here today is to try to get across in some	15

1            way how much I loved David, and why, and how lucky  
2            I feel to have known him. And the first thing is: for  
3            the things he wrote. I got to know David because I was  
4            a fan. Even if I'd never known him, I'd be mourning  
5            the loss of a writer who took in the firehose blast of  
6            our world in all its voices and forms and varieties and  
7            gave it back to us in these gargantuan, howlingly funny,  
8            nakedly sad, philosophically probing novels, stories,  
9            and essays. He delineated the inside of the skull, the  
10           convoluted self-talk we all carry on constantly, in a way  
11           that no writer ever has. And at the same time that he  
12           could capture the tiniest granularities of self-conscious-  
13           ness, he also saw and could draw the broadest outlines  
14           of the big-picture world. His books are vast terrains  
15           that will continue to be explored in readers' minds as  
16           long as there are readers.

17           But I *did* know David, in a particular and maybe  
18           peculiar way, and my love for him is rooted in fifteen-  
19           plus years of working closely with him on his books  
20           and on helping him bring those books to readers. Our  
21           relationship was a long-distance one. My old Rolodex  
22           card for him has addresses crossed out in Tucson,  
23           Urbana, Somerville, Arlington, Brighton, Syracuse,  
24           and Bloomington before the Claremont entry in the  
25           Contacts folder on my computer. David came to New

York seldom. Once he wrote to me, a propos some NYC 1  
brouhaha about who had and who hadn't gotten nomi- 2  
nated for some award, "This is why I'm glad I live in a 3  
cornfield." 4

We communicated mostly in letters. And through a 5  
form of communication that I thought of as a Dave spe- 6  
cialty; the phone message left on the office answering 7  
machine hours after everyone had departed. Very few 8  
e-mails. He came to e-mail reluctantly and preferred 9  
the narrow-margined single-spaced letter in ten-point 10  
Times Roman over all other forms of written commu- 11  
nication. I never saw what he was like in the morning 12  
before his coffee; I never sat and watched a video or a 13  
football game or a tennis match with him. But in our 14  
occasional visits and our hundreds of letters and phone 15  
calls and late-night messages, I saw what he was like 16  
while he was writing, and revising, and working out 17  
what exactly he wanted a novel or story or essay to be. 18

Those letters were extraordinary, and I tore into 19  
every one of them hungrily knowing there was pleasure 20  
awaiting me inside. Mostly the letters had to do with 21  
the editing of his books. They are documents of the 22  
superhuman care David took with his writing, but at 23  
the same time of the joy and pride he took in his work. 24  
Here is a sample from innumerable pages of back-and- 25

1       forth on *Infinite Jest*, in which David was responding to  
2       request after request for cuts. Which cut requests, please  
3       bear in mind, were the work he had asked me to do:  
4

5             p. 52—*This is one of my personal favorite*  
6             *Swiftian lines in the whole manuscript, which I will*  
7             *cut, you rotter.*

8             p. 82—*I cut this and have now come back an*  
9             *hour later and put it back.*

10            p. 133—*Poor old FN 33 about the grammar*  
11            *exam is cut. I'll also erase it from the back-up disk so*  
12            *I can't come back in an hour and put it back in (an*  
13            *enduring hazard, I'm finding).*

14            pp. 327–330. *Michael, have mercy. Pending an*  
15            *almost Horacianly persuasive rationale on your part,*  
16            *my canines are bared on this one.*

17            pp. 739–748. *I've rewritten it—for about the*  
18            *11th time—for clarity, but I bare teeth all the way*  
19            *back to the 2nd molar on cutting it.*

20            p. 785ff—*I can give you 5000 words of theo-*  
21            *retico-structural arguments for this, but let's spare*  
22            *one another, shall we?*

23  
24       David's love affair with the English language was  
25       one of the great romances of our times, both a schol-

arly learn-every-nuance love and a wildly passionate 1  
flights-and-flourishes love. David's idea of an unbeat- 2  
able magazine assignment was when he was asked to 3  
review a new dictionary. One of his proudest moments, 4  
he wrote, was when he learned "I get to be on the 5  
*American Heritage Dictionary's* Usage Panel. . . . My 6  
mom whooped so loudly on the phone that it hurt my 7  
ear when I told her." David loved encountering new 8  
words. In one letter he wrote of "the last sludgelets of 9  
adolescent self-consciousness being borne away on the 10  
horological tide." And added in parentheses, "I just 11  
learned the word 'horology' and was determined to use 12  
it at least once." No mention of the fact that he had just 13  
invented the word *sludgelets*. I think he wanted to use 14  
every word in the language before he was done. In one 15  
talk about the drawbacks of using words that sent read- 16  
ers running to their dictionaries, I mentioned a favorite 17  
book by another writer whose first word is the very 18  
obscure word *picric*. (Means yellowish.) David's instant 19  
response was, "I already *used* that!" 20

I worked with David at the professional interface 21  
between him and his readers, a borderline he approached 22  
with vast apprehension. To say that David was uncom- 23  
fortable in the public eye is to understate enormously. 24  
He said no thank you, politely but unalterably, to an 25

1 invitation to appear on the *Today* show when *Infinite*  
2 *Jest* was published. He submitted to photo sessions only  
3 when placed under multiple duress not just by his pub-  
4 lisher and his publicist but also by his beloved literary  
5 agent, Bonnie Nadell. When David visited our offices,  
6 people would jostle for the chance to meet him. David  
7 wrote of those encounters, “People who regard me as a  
8 Golden Boy make me feel lonely and unknown.” His  
9 manners were too good for him simply to say no to  
10 those encounters, but he would turn the conversation  
11 within seconds to the assistants who he dealt with day  
12 to day, or to the twins his publicist had just given birth  
13 to, or to any subject other than himself.

14 “I don’t want to be a hidden person, or a hidden  
15 writer: it is lonely,” he said in another letter. He shied  
16 from being known in a public way, but he worked hard  
17 not to be hidden from the people he encountered in per-  
18 son. He wanted them to know him himself, not some  
19 caricature or idea of him. One way David endeavored  
20 to be known was by endeavoring to know others. His  
21 solicitousness was legendary. In one note he asked me  
22 to remind a new mother in the office that it was time  
23 to switch from skim milk to 2% or whole milk. He  
24 wrote thank-you notes not just to the copy editor who  
25 worked on *Consider the Lobster* but also to the super-



visor who had assigned the job to so talented a copy editor, and he offered to pay a bonus out of his own pocket to the designer who wrestled down a particularly gnarly layout. My daughter still remembers from a visit to our house a dozen years ago the nice man who played tag with her and her little brother, and who invented “worm tag” when ordinary tag grew dull.

Everyone I’ve talked to in the weeks since he died has recalled how *kind* David was. And it’s true: he was sweet, he was kind, he was solicitous. I’ve spent a lot of time wondering why this is such a prominent note. I think it’s because he *was*, and because he knew enough about pain to know exquisitely how much kindness matters. And because he knew that people who had read his work expected to be intimidated by him in person. David knew that his image could scare people off or make them afraid to talk to him, so I think he worked extra hard—through kindness—to get them to see him as he really was, not as a formidable bandanna-sporting wunderkind. I’m not saying the kindness was a tactic: David’s manners and concern for others were bred deep and genuine. But maybe the smiley faces he drew in the margins of his letters like a goofy schoolkid, the casual (on a good day) way he dressed, the playfulness and jocularity that I will not begin to be able to capture here,

1 all helped make sure that people didn't feel intimidated.  
2 He wanted to let people in. The critic Laura Miller  
3 observed that he was smart enough to know that every  
4 person he encountered was smarter than him in *some*  
5 way, about something, and that there was something he  
6 could learn from everyone. I'm reminded of his essay  
7 "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," about the days after  
8 9/11, when he sees that everyone has an American flag  
9 of some kind, a big one for the porch or a small one for  
10 the car. And he doesn't have a flag, and has no idea even  
11 where you go to buy one, when every other person in the  
12 county seems to have been born knowing these things.  
13 Always something to learn.

14 David's great act of kindness to me was trusting me  
15 to help him bring his books into the world. I couldn't  
16 pretend to grasp the depth or magnitude of all he set out  
17 to do, but he needed an Authority Figure who he would  
18 listen to sometimes, and I was lucky to be the one who  
19 he fitted out for that role. Of one scene I proposed cut-  
20 ting, he wrote—"Well, it introduces three characters,  
21 five themes, and two settings." His patience with me is  
22 one of the things that I will always treasure.

23 David wrote, "I want to author things that restructure  
24 worlds and make living people feel stuff." He certainly  
25 did those things. The world has a huge hole in it for the

lack of his giant brain and his giant heart to take in and  
examine for us all that lies ahead. And for the lack of  
his kindness.

But we all have all the words he wrote. I hope every-  
one in this hall today will do all we can to help make  
sure that those words are read, and spread, and appreci-  
ated, admired, and celebrated.

*Michael Pietsch is executive vice president and publisher of  
Little, Brown and Company.*

Copyright © 2008 by Michael Pietsch

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25



Don DeLillo



INFINITY. THIS IS the subject of David Wallace's book	
on the mathematics, the philosophy, and the history of	1
a vast, beautiful, abstract concept. There are references	2
in the book to Zeno's dichotomy and Goldbach's con-	3
jecture, to Hausdorff's maximal principle. There is also	4
the offsetting breeze of Dave's plainsong— <i>OK then</i> and	5
<i>sort of</i> and <i>no kidding</i> and <i>stuff like this</i> .	6
His work, everywhere, tends to reconcile what is dif-	7
ficult and consequential with a level of address that's	8
youthful, unstudied, and often funny, marked at times	9
by the small odd sentence that wanders in off the street:	10
"Her photograph tastes bitter to me."	11
"Almost Talmudically self-conscious."	12
"The tiny little keyhole of himself."	13
A vitality persists, a stunned vigor in the face of the	14
complex humanity we find in his fiction, the loss and	15

1 anxiety, darkening mind, self-doubt. There are sentences  
2 that shoot rays of energy in seven directions. There are  
3 stories that trail a character's spiraling sense of isolation.

4 *Everything and More*. This is the title of his book  
5 on infinity. It might also be a description of the novel  
6 *Infinite Jest*, his dead serious frolic of addicted humanity.  
7 We can imagine his fiction and essays as the scroll frag-  
8 ments of a distant future. We already know this work  
9 as current news—writer to reader, intimately, obsessively.  
10 He did not channel his talents to narrower patterns. He  
11 wanted to be equal to the vast, babbling, spinout sweep  
12 of contemporary culture.

13 We see him now as a brave writer who struggled  
14 against the force that wanted him to shed himself. Years  
15 from now, we'll still feel the chill that attended news of  
16 his death. One of his recent stories ends in the finality  
17 of this half sentence: *Not another word*.

18 But there is always another word. There is always  
19 another reader to regenerate these words. The words  
20 won't stop coming. Youth and loss. This is Dave's voice,  
21 American.

22  
23 *Don DeLillo has written fourteen novels, including White*  
24 *Noise and Underworld.*

25 Copyright © 2008 by Don DeLillo



Zadie Smith



TO THE CRITICS, *Brief Interviews* was an ironic book 1  
about misogyny. Reading it was like being trapped in 2  
a room with ironic misogynists on speed, or something 3  
like that. To me, reading *Brief Interviews* wasn't at all 4  
like being trapped. It was like being in church. And the 5  
important word wasn't *irony* but *gift*. Dave was clever 6  
about gifts: our inability to give freely or to accept what 7  
is freely given. In his stories giving has become impos- 8  
sible: the logic of the market seeps into every aspect 9  
of life. A man can't give away an old tiller for free; he 10  
has to charge five bucks before someone will come and 11  
take it. A depressed person desperately wants to receive 12  
attention but can't bring herself to give it. Normal social 13  
relations are only preserved because "*one never knew* 14  
*after all, now did one now did one now did one.*" 15

1            *Brief Interviews* itself was the result of two enormous gifts. The first was practical: the awarding of the  
2 MacArthur. A gift on that scale helps free a writer from  
3 the logic of market, and maybe also from that bind  
4 Dave himself defined as postindustrial: *the need always*  
5 *to be liked*. The second gift was more complicated. It  
6 was his talent, which was so obviously great it confused  
7 people: why would such a gifted young man create  
8 such a resistant, complex piece of work? But you need  
9 to think of the gift economy the other way round. In  
10 a culture that depletes you daily of your capacity for  
11 imagination, for language, for autonomous thought,  
12 complexity like Dave's is a gift. His recursive, labyrinthine  
13 sentences demand second readings. Like the boy  
14 waiting to dive, their resistance "breaks the rhythm that  
15 excludes thinking." Every word looked up, every winding  
16 footnote followed, every heart- and brain-stretching  
17 concept, they all help break the rhythm of thoughtlessness—your gifts are being returned to you.

20            *To whom much is given, much is expected*. Dave  
21 wrote like that, as if his talent was a responsibility. He  
22 had a radical way of seeing his own gifts: "I've gotten  
23 convinced," he wrote, "that there's something kind of  
24 timelessly vital and sacred about good writing. This  
25

thing doesn't have that much to do with talent, even 1  
glittering talent. [...] Talent's just an instrument. 2  
It's like having a pen that works instead of one that 3  
doesn't. I'm not saying I'm able to work consistently 4  
out of the premise, but it seems like the big distinc- 5  
tion between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in 6  
the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the conscious- 7  
ness behind the text. It's got something to do with 8  
love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part 9  
of yourself that can love instead of the part that just 10  
wants to be loved." 11

This was his literary preoccupation: the moment 12  
when the ego disappears and you're able to offer up 13  
your love as a gift without expectation of reward. At 14  
this moment the gift hangs, like Federer's brilliant serve, 15  
between the one who sends and the one who receives, 16  
and reveals itself as belonging to neither. We have 17  
almost no words for this experience of giving. The one 18  
we do have is hopelessly degraded through misuse. The 19  
word is prayer. For a famous ironist, Dave wrote a lot 20  
about prayer. A married man, confronted by a teenage 21  
seductress, falls to his knees and prays, but not for the 22  
obvious reason. "It's not what you think I'm afraid of," 23  
he says. The granola-cruncher prays as she is raped, but 24  
25

1 she isn't praying for her own rescue. A man who has  
2 accidentally braindamaged his daughter prays with a  
3 mad Jesuit in a field, as a church made with no hands  
4 rises up around them. When the incomprehensible and  
5 unforgivable happens, Dave's characters resort to the  
6 impossible. Their prayers are irrational, absurd, given  
7 up into a void, and *that*, paradoxically, is where they  
8 draw their power. They are the opposite of ironical.  
9 They are full of faith, a quality Kierkegaard defined as  
10 "a gesture made on the strength of the absurd."

11 When I taught *Brief Interviews* to college kids, I  
12 made them read it alongside *Fear and Trembling*. The  
13 two books seem like cousins to me. Both find black  
14 comedy in these hideous men who feel themselves  
15 post-love, post-faith, post-everything. "When people  
16 nowadays will not stop at love," wrote Kierkegaard,  
17 "where is it that they are going? To worldly wisdom,  
18 petty calculation, to paltriness and misery? [...] Would  
19 it not be better to remain standing at faith, and for the  
20 one who stands there to take care not to fall?" The  
21 truth, he argued, is that we haven't even got as far as  
22 faith. Kierkegaard took faith seriously, recognized it as  
23 an impossible task, at least for him. Dave took faith  
24 seriously, too: it's his hideous men who don't. The  
25

most impassioned book recommendation he ever gave 1  
me was for *Catholics* by Brian Moore, a novella about 2  
a priest who, after forty years in a monastery, finds he 3  
still isn't capable of prayer. Anyone who thinks Dave 4  
primarily an ironist should note that choice. His is a 5  
serious kind of satire, if by *satire* we mean 'the indirect 6  
praise of good things'. 7

But I don't mean to replace an Ironist with a God- 8  
botherer. The word *God* needn't be present – I'd rather 9  
use the phrase: "ultimate value." Whatever name one has 10  
for it, it's what permits the few heroes in *Brief Interviews* 11  
to make their gestures on the strength of the absurd, 12  
making art that nobody wants, loving where they are not 13  
loved, giving without the hope of receiving. Dave traced 14  
this ultimate value through the beauty of a Vermeer, to 15  
the concept of infinity, to Federer's serve — and beyond. 16  
As he put it: "You get to decide what you worship." But 17  
before we get giddy with po-mo relativity, he reminds 18  
us that nine times out of ten, we worship ourselves. Out 19  
of this double bind, the exit signs are hard to see, but 20  
they're there. When the praying married man puts his 21  
hands together, the gesture might be metaphysical, but 22  
he's seeking a genuine human connection, which, in 23  
Dave's stories, is as hard to find as any God. Love is the 24  
25

1 ultimate value, the absurd, impossible thing—the only  
2 thing worth praying for. The last line is wonderful. It  
3 reads: “And what if she joined him on the floor, just like  
4 this, clasped in supplication: just this way.”  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22

23 *Zadie Smith has written three novels. On Beauty is her most*  
24 *recent book.*

25 Copyright © 2008 by Zadie Smith



George Saunders



A FEW YEARS back I was flying out to California, reading *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. I found the book was doing weird things to my mind and body. Suddenly, up there over the Midwest, I felt agitated and flinchy, on the brink of tears. When I tried to describe what was going on, I came up with this: If the reader was a guy standing outdoors, Dave's prose had the effect of stripping the guy's clothes away and leaving him naked, with supersensitized skin, newly susceptible to the weather, whatever that weather might be. If it was a sunny day, he was going to feel the sun more. If it was a blizzard, it was going to really sting. Something about the prose itself was inducing a special variety of openness that I might call *terrified tenderness*: a sudden new awareness

1 of what a fix we're in on this earth, stuck in these bodies,  
2 with these minds.

3 This alteration seemed more spiritual than aesthetic. I  
4 wasn't just "reading a great story"—what was happening  
5 was more primal and important: my mind was being  
6 altered in the direction of compassion, by a shock meth-  
7 odology that was, in its subject matter, actually very dark.  
8 I was undergoing a kind of ritual stripping away of the  
9 habitual. The reading was waking me up, making me feel  
10 more vulnerable, more alive.

11 The person who had induced this complicated feel-  
12 ing was one of the sweetest, most generous, *dearest*  
13 people I've ever known.

14 I first met Dave at the home of a mutual friend in  
15 Syracuse. I'd just read *Girl with Curious Hair* and was  
16 terrified that this breakfast might veer off into, say, a  
17 discussion of Foucault or something, and I'd be humili-  
18 ated in front of my wife and kids. But no: I seem to  
19 remember Dave was wearing a Mighty Mouse T-shirt.  
20 Like Chekhov, in those famous anecdotes, who put his  
21 nervous provincial visitors at ease by asking them about  
22 pie-baking and the local school system, Dave diffused  
23 the tension by turning the conversation to...us. Our  
24 kids' interests, what life was like in Syracuse, our experi-  
25 ence of family life. He was about as open and curious

and accepting a person as I'd ever met, and I left feeling  
I'd made a great new friend.

And I had. We were together only occasionally,  
corresponded occasionally—but every meeting felt super-  
charted, almost —if this isn't too corny—sacramental.

I don't know much about Dave's spiritual life but  
I see him as a great American Buddhist writer, in the  
lineage of Whitman and Ginsberg. He was a wake-up  
artist. That was his work, as I see it, both on the page  
and off it: he went around waking people up. He was,  
if this is even a word, a *celebrationist*, who gave us new  
respect for the world through his reverence for it, a rever-  
ence that manifested as attention, an attention that  
produced that electrifying, all-chips-in, aware-in-all-  
directions prose of his.

Over the last few weeks, as I've thought about what  
I might say up here, I've heard my internalized Dave,  
and what he's been saying is, “don't look for consolation  
yet. That would be dishonest.” And I think that voice  
is right. In time—but not yet—the sadness that there  
will be no new stories from him will be replaced by a  
deepening awareness of what a treasure we have in the  
existing work. In time—but not yet—the disaster of his  
loss will fade and be replaced by the realization of what  
a miracle it was that he ever existed in the first place.

1           For now, there's just grief. Grief is, in a sense, the  
2 bill that comes due for love. The sadness in this room  
3 amounts to a kind of proof: proof of the power of  
4 Dave's work; proof of the softening effect his tenderness  
5 of spirit had on us; proof, in a larger sense, of the power  
6 of the Word itself: look at how this man got inside the  
7 world's mind and changed it for the better. Our sad-  
8 ness is proof of the power of a single original human  
9 consciousness.

10          Dave—let's just say it—was first among us. The most  
11 talented, most daring, most energetic and original, the  
12 funniest, the least inclined to rest on his laurels or believe  
13 all the praise. His was a spacious, loving heart, and when  
14 someone this precious leaves us, especially so early, love  
15 converts on the spot to a deep, almost nauseating, sadness,  
16 and there's no way around it.

17          But in closing, a pledge, or maybe a prayer: Every one  
18 of us in this room has, at some point, had our conscious-  
19 ness altered by Dave. Dave has left seeds in our minds.  
20 It is up to us to nurture these seeds and bring them out,  
21 in positive form [into the living world]—through our  
22 work, in our actions, by our engagement with others,  
23 and our engagement with our own minds. So the pledge  
24 and the prayer is this: We'll continue to love him, we'll  
25 never forget him, and we'll honor him, by keeping alive

the principal lesson of his work: mostly we're asleep, but	1
we can wake up. And waking up is not only possible, it	2
is our birthright, and our nature, and, as Dave showed	3
us, we can help one another do it.	4
	5
	6
	7
	8
	9
	10
	11
	12
	13
	14
	15
	16
	17
	18
	19
	20
	21
	22
<i>George Saunders is the author of several books, including Civil</i>	23
<i>War Land in Bad Decline and Pastoralia.</i>	24
Copyright © 2008 by George Saunders	25





Jonathan Franzen



LIKE A LOT of writers, but even more than most, Dave 1  
loved to be in control of things. He was easily stressed 2  
by chaotic social situations. I only ever saw him twice 3  
go to a party without Karen. One of them, hosted by 4  
Adam Begley, I almost physically had to drag him to, 5  
and as soon as we were through the front door and I 6  
took my eye off him for one second, he made a U-turn 7  
and went back to my apartment to chew tobacco and 8  
read a book. The second party he had no choice but to 9  
stay for, because it was celebrating the publication of 10  
*Infinite Jest*. He survived it by saying thank you, again 11  
and again, with painfully exaggerated formality. 12

One thing that made Dave an extraordinary college 13  
teacher was the formal structure of the job. Within those 14  
confines, he could safely draw on his enormous native 15

1 store of kindness and wisdom and expertise. The structure  
2 of interviews was safe in a similar way. When Dave was  
3 the subject, he could relax into taking care of his inter-  
4 viewer. When he was the journalist himself, he did his best  
5 work when he was able to find a technician—a camera-  
6 man following John McCain, a board operator on a radio  
7 show—who was thrilled to meet somebody genuinely  
8 interested in the arcana of his job. Dave loved details for  
9 their own sake, but details were also an outlet for the love  
10 bottled up in his heart: a way of connecting, on relatively  
11 safe middle ground, with another human being.

12 Which was, approximately, the description of litera-  
13 ture that he and I came up with in our conversations  
14 and correspondence in the early 1990s. I'd loved Dave  
15 from the very first letter I ever got from him, but the  
16 first two times I tried to meet him in person, up in  
17 Cambridge, he flat-out stood me up. Even after we did  
18 start hanging out, our meetings were often stressful and  
19 rushed—much *less* intimate than exchanging letters.  
20 Having loved him at first sight, I was always straining to  
21 prove that I could be funny enough and smart enough,  
22 and he had a way of gazing off at a point a few miles dis-  
23 tant which made me feel as if I were failing to make my  
24 case. Not many things in my life ever gave me a greater  
25 sense of achievement than getting a laugh out of Dave.

But that “neutral middle ground on which to make  
a deep connection with another human being:” this, we  
decided, was what fiction was for. “A way out of loneli-  
ness” was the formulation we agreed to agree on. And  
nowhere was Dave more totally and gorgeously able to  
maintain control than in his written language. He had  
the most commanding and exciting and inventive rhe-  
torical virtuosity of any writer alive. Way out at word  
number 70 or 100 or 140 in a sentence deep into a  
three-page paragraph of macabre humor or fabulously  
reticulated self-consciousness, you could smell the  
ozone from the crackling precision of his sentence struc-  
ture, his effortless and pitch-perfect shifting among ten  
different levels of high, low, middle, technical, hipster,  
nerdy, philosophical, vernacular, vaudevillian, horta-  
tory, tough-guy, broken-hearted, lyrical diction. Those  
sentences and those pages, when he was able to be pro-  
ducing them, were as true and safe and happy a home as  
any he had during most of the twenty years I knew him.  
So I could tell you stories about the bickering little road  
trip he and I once took, or I could tell you about the  
wintergreen scent that his chew gave to my little apart-  
ment whenever he stayed with me, or I could tell you  
about the awkward chess games we played and the even  
more awkward tennis rallying we sometimes did — the

1           comforting structure of the games versus the weird deep  
2           fraternal rivalries boiling along underneath — but truly  
3           the main thing was the writing. For most of the time  
4           I knew Dave, the most intense interaction I had with  
5           him was sitting alone in my armchair, night after night,  
6           for ten days, and reading the manuscript of *Infinite Jest*.  
7           That was the book in which, for the first time, he'd  
8           arranged himself and the world the way he wanted them  
9           arranged. At the most microscopic level, Dave Wallace  
10          was as passionate and precise a punctuator of prose as  
11          has ever walked this earth. At the most global level, he  
12          produced a thousand pages of world-class jest, which,  
13          although the mode and quality of the humor never  
14          wavered, became less and less and less funny, section  
15          by section, until, by the end of the book, you felt the  
16          book's title might just as well have been *Infinite Sadness*.  
17          Dave nailed it like nobody else ever had.

18                 And so now this handsome, brilliant, funny, kind  
19                 midwestern man with an amazing spouse and a great  
20                 local support network and a great career and a great job  
21                 at a great school with great students has taken his own  
22                 life, and the rest of us are left behind to ask (to quote  
23                 from *Infinite Jest*), “So yo then, man, what's your story?”

24                 One good, simple, modern story would go like this:  
25                 “A lovely, talented personality fell victim to a severe

chemical imbalance in his brain. There was the person 1  
of Dave, and then there was the disease, and the disease 2  
killed the man as surely as cancer might have.” This story 3  
is at once sort of true and totally inadequate. If you’re 4  
satisfied with this story, you don’t need the stories that 5  
Dave wrote— particularly not those many, many stories 6  
in which the duality, the separateness, of person and dis- 7  
ease is problematized or outright mocked. One obvious 8  
paradox, of course, is that Dave himself, at the end, did 9  
become, in a sense, satisfied with this simple story and 10  
stopped connecting with any of those more interesting 11  
stories he’d written in the past and might have written in 12  
the future. His suicidality got the upper hand and made 13  
everything in the world of the living irrelevant. 14

But this doesn’t mean there are no more meaningful 15  
stories for us to tell. I could tell you ten different ver- 16  
sions of how he arrived at the evening of September 12, 17  
some of them very dark, some of them very angering to 18  
me, and most of them taking into account Dave’s many 19  
adjustments, as an adult, in response to his near-death 20  
of suicide as a late adolescent. But there is one particu- 21  
lar not-so-dark story that I know to be true and that I 22  
want to tell now, because it’s been such a great happi- 23  
ness and privilege and endlessly interesting challenge to 24  
be Dave’s friend. 25

1           People who like to be in control of things can have  
2 a hard time with intimacy. Intimacy is anarchic and  
3 mutual and definitionally incompatible with control.  
4 You seek to control things because you're afraid, and  
5 about five years ago, very noticeably, Dave stopped  
6 being so afraid. Part of this came of having settled into  
7 a good, stable situation here at Pomona. Another really  
8 huge part of it was his finally meeting a woman who was  
9 right for him which, for the first time, opened up the  
10 possibility of his having a fuller and less rigidly struc-  
11 tured life. I noticed, when we spoke on the phone, that  
12 he'd begun to tell me he loved me, and I suddenly felt,  
13 on my side, that I didn't have to work so hard to make  
14 him laugh or to prove that I was smart. Karen and I  
15 managed to get him to Italy for a week, and instead of  
16 spending his days in his hotel room, watching TV, as he  
17 might have done a few years earlier, he was having lunch  
18 on the terrace and eating octopus and trudging along  
19 to dinner parties in the evening and actually enjoying  
20 hanging out with other writers casually. He surprised  
21 everyone, and maybe most of all himself. Here was a  
22 genuinely fun thing he might well have done again.

23           About a year later, he decided to get himself off the  
24 medication that had lent stability to his life for more  
25 than twenty years. Again, there are a lot of different sto-



ries about why exactly he decided to this. But one thing 1  
he made very clear to me, when we talked about it, was 2  
that he wanted a chance at a more ordinary life, with 3  
less freakish control and more ordinary pleasure. It was 4  
a decision that grew out of his love for Karen, out of 5  
his wish to produce a new and more mature kind of 6  
writing, and out of having glimpsed a different kind of 7  
future. It was an incredibly scary and brave thing for 8  
him to try, because Dave was full of love, but he was also 9  
full of fear—he had all too ready access to those depths 10  
of infinite sadness. 11

So the year was up and down, and he had a crisis in 12  
June, and a very hard summer. When I saw him in July 13  
he was skinny again, like the late adolescent he'd been 14  
during his first big crisis. One of the last times I talked 15  
to him after that, in August, on the phone, he asked 16  
me to tell him a story of how things would get better. I 17  
repeated back to him a lot of what he'd been saying to 18  
me in our conversations over the previous year. I said he 19  
was in a terrible and dangerous place because he was to 20  
trying to make real changes as a person and as a writer. I 21  
said that the last time he'd been through near-death expe- 22  
riences, he'd emerged and written, very quickly, a book 23  
that was light-years beyond what he'd been doing before 24  
his collapse. I said he was a stubborn control freak and 25

1 know-it-all—“So are you!” he shot back at me—and I  
2 said that people like us are so afraid to relinquish control  
3 that sometimes the only way we can force ourselves to  
4 open up and change is to bring ourselves to an access  
5 of misery and the brink of self-destruction. I said he’d  
6 undertaken his change in medication because he wanted  
7 to grow up and have a better life. I said I thought his best  
8 writing was ahead of him. And he said: “I like that story.  
9 Could you do me a favor and call me up every four or  
10 five days and tell me another story like it?”

11 Unfortunately I only had one more chance to tell him  
12 the story, and by then he wasn’t hearing it. He was in  
13 horrible, minute-by-minute anxiety and pain. The next  
14 times I tried to call him, after that, he wasn’t picking up  
15 the phone or returning messages. He’d gone down into  
16 the well of infinite sadness, beyond the reach of story,  
17 and he didn’t make it out. But he had a beautiful, yearn-  
18 ing innocence, and he was trying.

19  
20  
21  
22 *Jonathan Franzen is the author of the Twenty-Seventh City,*  
23 *Strong Motion, The Corrections, How to Be Alone, and*  
24 *The Discomfort Zone.*

25 Copyright © 2008 by Jonathan Franzen

Deborah Treisman



*An excerpt from "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley"*

IN LATE CHILDHOOD I learned how to play tennis on  
the blacktop courts of a small public park carved from  
farmland that had been nitrogenized too often to farm  
anymore. This was in my home of Philo, Illinois, a tiny  
collection of corn silos and war-era Levittown homes  
whose native residents did little but sell crop insurance  
and nitrogen fertilizer and herbicide and collect property  
taxes from the young academics at nearby Champaign-  
Urbana's university, whose ranks swelled enough in the  
flush 1960s to make outlying non sequiturs like "farm  
and bedroom community" lucid.

Between the ages of twelve and fifteen I was a near-  
great junior tennis player. I made my competitive  
bones beating up on lawyers' and dentists' kids at lit-

1           tle Champaign and Urbana Country Club events and  
2           was soon killing whole summers being driven through  
3           dawns to tournaments all over Illinois, Indiana, Iowa.  
4           At fourteen I was ranked seventeenth in the United  
5           States Tennis Association's Western Section ("Western"  
6           being the creakily ancient USTA's designation for the  
7           Midwest; farther west were the Southwest, Northwest,  
8           and Pacific Northwest sections). My flirtation with ten-  
9           nis excellence had way more to do with the township  
10          where I learned and trained and with a weird proclivity  
11          for intuitive math than it did with athletic talent. I was,  
12          even by the standards of junior competition in which  
13          everyone's a bud of pure potential, a pretty untalented  
14          tennis player. My hand-eye was OK, but I was neither  
15          large nor quick, had a near-concave chest and wrists so  
16          thin I could bracelet them with a thumb and pinkie,  
17          and could hit a tennis ball no harder or truer than most  
18          girls in my age bracket. What I could do was "Play the  
19          Whole Court." This was a piece of tennis truistics that  
20          could mean any number of things. In my case, it meant I  
21          knew my limitations and the limitations of what I stood  
22          inside, and adjusted thusly. I was at my very best in bad  
23          conditions.

24                 Now, conditions in Central Illinois are from a  
25                 mathematical perspective interesting and from a ten-

nis perspective bad. The summer heat and wet-mitten 1  
humidity, the grotesquely fertile soil that sends grasses 2  
and broadleaves up through the courts' surface by main 3  
force, the midges that feed on sweat and the mosquitoes 4  
that spawn in the fields' furrows and in the conferva- 5  
choked ditches that box each field, night tennis next 6  
to impossible because the moths and crap-gnats drawn 7  
by the sodium lights form a little planet around each 8  
tall lamp and the whole lit court surface is aflutter with 9  
spastic little shadows. 10

But mostly wind. The biggest single factor in Central 11  
Illinois' quality of outdoor life is wind. There are more 12  
local jokes than I can summon about bent weather vanes 13  
and leaning barns, more downstate sobriquets for kinds 14  
of wind than there are in Malamut for snow. The wind 15  
had a personality, a (poor) temper, and, apparently, agen- 16  
das. The wind blew autumn leaves into intercalated lines 17  
and arcs of force so regular you could photograph them 18  
for a textbook on Cramer's Rule and the cross-products 19  
of curves in 3-space. It molded winter snow into blind- 20  
ing truncheons that buried stalled cars and required 21  
citizens to shovel out not only driveways but the sides 22  
of homes; a Central Illinois "blizzard" starts only when 23  
the snowfall stops and the wind begins. Most people in 24  
Philo didn't comb their hair because why bother. Ladies 25

1 wore those plastic flags tied down over their parlor-jobs  
2 so regularly I thought they were required for a real classy  
3 coiffure; girls on the East Coast outside with their hair  
4 hanging and tossing around looked wanton and nude to  
5 me. Wind wind etc. etc....

6 I mention tornadoes for reasons directly related to  
7 the purpose of this essay. For one thing, they were a real  
8 part of Midwest childhood, because as a little kid I was  
9 obsessed with dread over them. My earliest nightmares,  
10 the ones that didn't feature mile-high robots from *Lost*  
11 *in Space* wielding huge croquet mallets (don't ask), were  
12 about shrieking sirens and dead white skies, a slender  
13 monster on the Iowa horizon, jutting less phallic than  
14 saurian from the lowering sky, whipping back and forth  
15 with such frenzy that it almost doubled on itself, try-  
16 ing to eat its own tail, throwing off chaff and dust and  
17 chairs; it never came any closer than the horizon; it  
18 didn't have to....

19 I know why I stayed obsessed as I aged. Tornadoes,  
20 for me, were a transfiguration.... They made no sense.  
21 Houses blew not out but in. Brothels were spared while  
22 orphanages next door bought it. Dead cattle were found  
23 three miles from their silage without a scratch on them.  
24 Tornadoes are omnipotent and obey no law. Force with-  
25 out law has no shape, only tendency and duration. I



believe now that I knew all this without knowing it, as  
a kid.

The only time I ever got caught in what might have  
been an actual one was in June '78 on a tennis court  
at Hessel Park in Champaign, where I was drilling one  
afternoon with Gil Antitoui. Though a contemptible and  
despised tournament opponent, I was a coveted practice  
partner because I could transfer balls to wherever you  
wanted them with the mindless constancy of a machine.  
This particular day it was supposed to rain around sup-  
per time, and a couple times we thought we'd heard  
the tattered edges of a couple sirens out west toward  
Monticello, but Antitoui and I drilled religiously every  
afternoon that week on the slow clayish Har-Tru of  
Hessel, trying to prepare for a beastly clay invitational  
in Chicago where it was rumored both Brescia and Mees  
would appear. We were doing butterfly drills—my  
crosscourt forehand is transferred back down the line to  
Antitoui's backhand, he crosscourts it to my backhand,  
I send it down the line to his forehand, for 45° angles,  
though the intersection of just his crosscourts make an  
X, which is four 90°s and also a crucifix rotated the same  
quarter-turn that a swastika (which involves eight 90°  
angles) is rotated on Hitlerian bunting. This was the  
sort of stuff that went through my head when I drilled.

1 Hessel Park was scented heavily with cheese from the  
2 massive Kraft factory at Champaign's western limit, and  
3 it had wonderful expensive soft Har-Tru courts of such  
4 a deep piney color that the flights of fluorescent balls  
5 stayed on one's visual screen for a few extra seconds, leav-  
6 ing trails, which is also why the angles and hieroglyphs  
7 involved in butterfly drill seem important. But the crux  
8 here is that butterflies are primarily a conditioning drill:  
9 both players have to get from one side of the court to the  
10 other between each stroke, and once the initial pain and  
11 wind-sucking are over—assuming you're a kid who's  
12 in absurd shape because he spends countless mindless  
13 hours jumping rope or running laps backward or doing  
14 star-drills between the court's corners or straight sprints  
15 back and forth along the perfect furrows of early bean-  
16 fields each morning—once the first pain and fatigue  
17 of butterflies are got through, if both guys are good  
18 enough so that there are few unforced errors to break  
19 up the rally, a kind of fugue-state opens up inside you  
20 where your concentration telescopes toward a still point  
21 and you lose awareness of your limbs and the soft shush  
22 of your shoe's slide (you have to slide out of a run on  
23 Har-Tru) and whatever's outside the lines of the court,  
24 and pretty much all you know then is the bright ball  
25 and the octangled butterfly outlines of its trail across

the billiard green of the court. We had one just endless rally and I'd left the planet in a silent swoop inside when the court and ball and butterfly trail all seemed to surge bright and glow as the daylight just plain went out in the sky overhead. Neither of us had noticed that there'd been no wind blowing the familiar grit into our eyes for several minutes—a bad sign. There was no siren. Later they said the C.D. alert network had been out of order. This was June 6, 1978. The air temperature dropped so fast you could feel your hairs rise. There was no thunder and no air stirred. I could not tell you why we kept hitting. Neither of us said anything. There was no siren. It was high noon; there was nobody else on the courts. The riding mower out over east at the softball field was still going back and forth. There were no depressions except a saprogenic ditch along the field of new corn just west. What could we have done? The air always smells of mowed grass before a bad storm. I think we thought it would rain at worst and that we'd play till it rained and then go sit in Antitoni's parents' station wagon. I do remember a mental obscenity—I had gut strings in my rackets, strings everybody with a high sectional ranking got free for letting the Wilson sales rep spray-paint a *W* across the racket face, so they were free, but I liked this particular string job on this

1 racket, I liked them tight but not real tight, 62–63 p.s.i.  
2 on a Proflite stringer, and gut becomes pasta if it gets  
3 wet, but we were both in the fugue-state that exhaustion  
4 through repetition brings on, a fugue-state I've decided  
5 that my whole time playing tennis was spent chasing, a  
6 fugue-state I associated too with plowing and seeding  
7 and detasseling and spreading herbicides back and forth  
8 in sentry duty along perfect lines, up and back, or mili-  
9 tary marching on flat blacktop, hypnotic, a mental state  
10 at once flat and lush, numbing and yet exquisitely felt.  
11 We were young, we didn't know when to stop. Maybe  
12 I was mad at my body and wanted to hurt it, wear it  
13 down. Then the whole knee-high field to the west along  
14 Kirby Avenue all of a sudden flattened out in a wave  
15 coming toward us as if the field was getting steamrolled.  
16 Antitoi went wide west for a forehand cross and I saw  
17 the corn get laid down in waves and the sycamores in a  
18 copse lining the ditch point our way. There was no fun-  
19 nel. Either it had just materialized and come down or it  
20 wasn't a real one. The big heavy swings on the industrial  
21 swingsets took off, wrapping themselves in their chains  
22 around and around the top crossbar; the park's grass  
23 got laid down the same way the field had; the whole  
24 thing happened so fast I'd seen nothing like it; recall  
25 that Bimini H-Bomb film of the shock wave visible in

the sea as it comes toward the ship's film crew. This all 1  
happened very fast but in serial progression: field, trees, 2  
swings, grass, then the feel like the lift of the world's 3  
biggest mitt, the nets suddenly and sexually up and out 4  
straight, and I seem to remember whacking a ball out of 5  
my hand at Antitoi to watch its radical west-east curve, 6  
and for some reason trying to run after this ball I'd just 7  
hit, but I couldn't have tried to run after a ball I had hit, 8  
but I remember the heavy gentle lift at my thighs and 9  
the ball curving back closer and my passing the ball and 10  
beating the ball in flight over the horizontal net, my 11  
feet not once touching the ground over fifty-odd feet, a 12  
cartoon, and then there was chaff and crud in the air all 13  
over and both Antitoi and I either flew or were blown 14  
pinwheeling for I swear it must have been fifty feet to the 15  
fence one court over, the easternmost fence, we hit the 16  
fence so hard we knocked it halfway down, and it stuck 17  
at 45°, Antitoi detached a retina and had to wear those 18  
funky Jabbar retina-goggles for the rest of the summer, 19  
and the fence had two body-shaped indentations like in 20  
cartoons where the guy's face makes a cast in the skillet 21  
that hit him, two catcher's masks of fence, we both got 22  
deep quadrangular lines impressed on our faces, torsos, 23  
legs' fronts, from the fence, my sister said we looked like 24  
waffles, but neither of us got badly hurt, and no homes 25

1 got whacked—either the thing just ascended again for  
2 no reason right after, they do that, obey no rule, follow  
3 no line, hop up and down at something that might as  
4 well be will, or else it wasn't a real one. Antitoi's tennis  
5 continued to improve after that, but mine didn't.

6  
7 *1990*  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22

23 *Deborah Treisman is the Fiction Editor at The New Yorker.*

24 Copyright © 1997 by David Foster Wallace

25 All Rights Reserved



11