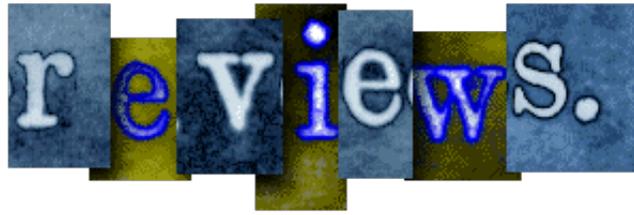


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Wallace in Wanderland

David Foster Wallace's essays -- pointed and diffuse, offhand and studied -- achieve brilliance by accretion

by Jordan Ellenberg

A SUPPOSEDLY FUN THING I'LL NEVER DO AGAIN, by David Foster Wallace. Little Brown, 384 pages, \$23.45.

In the title essay of David Foster Wallace's new collection of magazine pieces, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, the author observes a fellow passenger on the cruise ship *Zenith*: "Captain Video camcords absolutely everything, including meals, empty hallways, endless games of geriatric bridge . . . You can tell that the magnetic record of Captain Video's Megacruise experience is going to be this Warholianly dull thing exactly as long as the Cruise itself." Wallace's own record of the voyage isn't quite as long as that, but at 50,000 words, the length of a short novel, it's in the ballpark. Yet it's anything but dull -- "A Supposedly Fun Thing," and the other hyperextended you-are-theres that make up the bulk of this book, are transfixing. I'm still trying to figure out exactly why.

Wallace's style, like Captain Video's, is one of relentless accumulation. The essays overflow with telling details, less-telling details, acknowledgments of the less-tellingness of the latter, and so forth. He's prone to remarks like: "I have no idea what the story is on this or what conclusions to draw from it." He uses abbreviations freely, dips into journal form, indulges in lengthy footnotes, uses words like "stuff" and "weird" and "a lot" a lot, meanders into personal reminiscence or states that he's declining to do so -- all this in order to create the impression of an exhaustive and unmediated survey of everything the author felt, believed, and saw during (for example) his seven days on board the *Zenith*. Elsewhere in the book, the Illinois State Fair, the Canadian Open tennis tournament, and the set of the new David Lynch movie get the same treatment.

Somehow what we expect to be faults -- prolixity, redundancy, formlessness -- seem here to be irrelevancies, if not virtues. It's difficult to convey what a good writer Wallace is by quoting, because most of what's good about him doesn't betray itself in a single line, or even a single page. Wallace has come upon a prose style that finally doesn't care much about compression, efficiency, *le mot juste*, or even grace. Its main interests are global, not local. It's a prose that doesn't aspire to the condition of lyric.

(Which isn't to say that Wallace isn't attentive to language; he is, fanatically, and a whole much longer essay could -- should -- be written about his efforts to produce a workable style out of contemporary speech, or at least the contemporary speech of under-40 middle-class Americans. That's not the same as reproducing dialect on the page; it's the opposite, a distillation of the sturdiest qualities of English as some of us use it now. It's what Salinger did for the '40s and Richard Brautigan, among others, for the '60s. The way Wallace writes, I think, is the way I'll remember having spoken.)

The advantages of Wallace's style are most dramatically displayed in the essay on the Canadian Open, "Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm for Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness," which, to get this out of the way, is the best piece of sports writing I have ever read. Wallace follows Michael Joyce, the 79th-ranked player in the world, through the qualifying rounds of the tournament, with forays into the evolution of tennis styles, the question of free will for child athletes, Wallace's own junior-tennis career, the inevitable snobbery when intellectuals write about athletes, and so on. I wasn't interested in tennis before I read this essay. I'm not interested now. But for an hour, tennis was gripping -- not as a metaphor for art or free will or what have you, but tennis as itself, as an array of connected details, as a technological entity. I won't presume to say a lyric poem couldn't have done the same thing, but it would have started at a serious disadvantage. An irreducibly complex system like a tennis tournament can't be suddenly, blazingly *known* in a single line, however inspired; it doesn't have a heart to strike at. The same is true of NAFTA, higher math, the House Ethics Committee, and so on: all subjects to which I think Wallace's prose would be uniquely suited.

For readers familiar with Wallace's fiction, *A Supposedly Fun Thing* also serves as a manifesto for his latest novel, *Infinite Jest*. In critical pieces on Dostoyevsky, late-model literary theory, and the relationship between postmodern fiction and television, Wallace argues against aestheticism, irony, and coolness and endorses sincerity and seriousness. He deplores the absence of contemporary Dostoyevskys: "[W]e, fiction writers, won't -- ever -- dare try to use serious art to advance ideologies . . . We'd be laughed out of town . . . But they wouldn't -- could not -- laugh if a piece of passionately serious contemporary ideological fiction was also ingenious and radiantly transcendent fiction. But how to make it that? -- how even, for a writer today, even a very talented writer today, to get up the guts to even try?"

The critical essays here are not as successful as the narratives; in fact, they're not really critical essays at all, but accounts of Wallace's struggle to surpass (what he sees as) the smart glibness of his early work. Dostoyevsky, the postmodern fictionists, and the rest are secondary characters. Even the narrative pieces are, to some extent, in the same vein. Michael Joyce is explicitly presented as a kind of artist, whose unselfconsciousness is a model for the post-ironic novelist to emulate; and then, of course, there's Captain Video, whose zeal to record *everything* about the Megacruise eventually wins him the enmity of his fellow passengers. He's done in by the very spectation he's misunderstood as a means of connection with the rest of the cruise, just like the television-loving writers Wallace scolds in the postmodernism piece: ". . . doomed to shallowness by [their] desire to ridicule a TV-culture whose mockery of itself and all value already absorbs all ridicule."

If there's a theme to this multifarious book, that's it: the emptiness, the loneliness of watching. The title essay ends with Wallace envisioning himself off the cruise, out in the ocean, seeing the boat sitting far away in the water "lit up from within . . . like a kind of floating palace . . ." After all that's come before, it's an image of astonishing sadness, isolation, and perception; the writer as castaway, nothing under his feet but miles of freezing water. Wallace's hope -- and it's

a sincere, serious, hopelessly uncool hope -- is that all this is worthwhile because the isolation of writer from reader can hereby, at least for a second, be bridged. He succeeds. We'd rather be with him -- at least for a second -- than on board.

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