



David Foster Wallace giving a reading at All Saints Church, San Francisco, 2006.  
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## *Scholar-Practitioner Q & A . . .*

### Derivative Sport: The Journalistic Legacy of David Foster Wallace

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**Abstract:** The late writer David Foster Wallace is best known as the author of the 1,079-page novel *Infinite Jest*. But he also produced some of the most well known pieces of magazine journalism throughout the 1990s and 2000s. He was a three-time finalist for the National Magazine Award, winning once in 2001 for his *Rolling Stone* profile of Senator John McCain's presidential campaign, "The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys, and the Shrub." Because of his distinct voice, ability to blend high and low culture, and innovative use of footnotes, Wallace cast a long shadow of influence on a generation of literary journalists. In order to better understand the impact Wallace had on contemporary magazine writers, I spoke to his former editors, Colin Harrison and Joel Lovell, as well as current writers Maria Bustillos, Leslie Jamison, Michelle Orange, Jeff Sharlet, and John Jeremiah Sullivan about what it was like to work with him and how he influenced their own work. I've compiled those interviews into a kind of roundtable-style discussion that tells the story of Wallace and his contributions to literary journalism in the United States. (This piece, in slightly different form, was originally published on Longreads.)

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At a hip Manhattan book launch for John Jeremiah Sullivan's 2011 essay collection *Pulphead*, David Rees, the event's emcee, asked the two-time National Magazine Award winner, "So John . . . are you the next David Foster Wallace?"<sup>1</sup> The exchange is startling for its absurdity, and Sullivan shakes his head in disbelief before finally answering, "No, that's—I'm embarrassed by that." But the comparison has attached itself to Sullivan and a host of other young literary journalists, who, critics have noted, bear resemblance to Wallace in style, subject matter, and voice.

When Leslie Jamison published *The Empathy Exams*, her 2014 collection of essays and journalism, a Slate reviewer said "her writing often recalls the work of David Foster Wallace."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, when Michelle Orange's *This Is Running for Your Life* appeared a year earlier, a review in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* proclaimed: "If Joan Didion and David Foster Wallace had a love child, I thought, Michelle Orange would be it."<sup>3</sup>

Wallace was, himself, a three-time finalist for the National Magazine Award, winning once, in 2001<sup>4</sup>; yet he compulsively identified himself as "not a journalist" both in his interactions with sources and reflexively as a character in his own stories.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, he casts a long shadow in the world of literary journalism—a genre of nonfiction writing that adheres to all the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of traditional journalism, while employing rhetorical and storytelling techniques more commonly associated with fiction. To give better shape to that penumbra of influence, I spoke with Sullivan, Jamison, and Orange, along with Maria Bustillos, Jeff Sharlet, Joel Lovell, and Colin Harrison about Wallace's impact on today's narrative nonfiction writers. They spoke about comparisons to Wallace, what they love (and hate) about his work, what it was like to edit him, their favorite stories, posthumous controversies, and his influence and legacy.

Joel Lovell worked with Wallace only on one brief essay. Despite that singular experience, Lovell's editorial time at *Harper's* and elsewhere in the 1990s and 2000s put him in great position to witness Wallace's rising status in the world of magazine journalism. He was unequivocal when I asked him which nonfiction writer today most reminds him of Wallace.

**Joel Lovell**, *Harper's*, editor: The clear descendant is John Jeremiah Sullivan, of course. For all sorts of reasons (the ability to move authoritatively between high and low culture and diction; the freakishly perceptive humor on the page), but mostly just because there's no one else writing narrative nonfiction or essays right now whose brain is so flexible and powerful and whose brainpower is so evident, sentence by sentence, in the way that Wal-

lace's was. No one who's read so widely and deeply and can therefore "read" American culture (literature, television, music) so incisively. No one who can make language come alive in quite the same way. He's an undeniable linguistic genius, like Dave, who happens to enjoy exercising that genius through magazine journalism.

**Josh Roiland**: Colin Harrison worked with Lovell at *Harper's*. He commissioned and edited Wallace's two most famous magazine pieces, "Ticket to the Fair"<sup>6</sup> and "Shipping Out."<sup>7</sup> Those experiences, plus his brief overlap with Sullivan at the magazine, produced a different take than his colleague's.

**Colin Harrison**, *Harper's*, editor: John is a fabulous writer, but I did not think of them in the same space, probably because they're so personally different. John is a very—it's been a long time since I've talked with him—but John is a very sort of pulled-together, orderly person. And Dave was, you know, Dave. Physically very different. That doesn't mean there aren't similarities to be seen; I just didn't see them.

**Roiland**: For his part, Sullivan told me that while he doesn't necessarily enjoy the comparison to Wallace, it no longer bothers him.

**John Jeremiah Sullivan**, writer: It was freaky when that started happening. I've just decided to try to stay in my mind and not be affected by all that hype/backlash either way because I think what I think about his work and that hasn't changed. If anything, my appreciation for it has deepened, even as I've become more critical of it.

**Roiland**: For Jamison and Orange, whose work has also drawn considerable comparisons to Wallace's, that appreciation—as well as his influence—has also been substantial.

**Leslie Jamison**, writer: I should probably start by saying—and the very insertion of this disclaimer is itself probably a symptom of Wallace's imprint on my style, the sudden plunge into intimate conversation with one's reader, not infrequently by way of apology!—that *Infinite Jest* has been, by quite a bit, the most personally meaningful to me of all of the Wallace writing that I've read. Partially because he's so moving on recovery, material he preferred to treat in fiction. But also for the sheer energy and complexity and wrinkledness of its imagination, for the way that imagination never once forgot it was animated by beating human hearts there in the text. And Wallace's interest in the possibilities of sincerity, the way that it wasn't necessarily opposed to rigor but could be its ally—that's really artistically and humanly inspiring to me.

**Michelle Orange**, writer: What I love about . . . all of Wallace: the way he moves between, and indeed creates, an essential connection between acute observational detail and grand-scale perspective. Few writers, especially of nonfiction, show either the relentlessness or the dexterity he does in pulling

off that trick. I could gas on and on about it. Instead I'll just say his hold on the endlessly complex relationship between entertainer and audience is for me the central allure of his work. He sets up different versions of that dynamic over and over again, in all sorts of contexts; it's also embedded in the text itself, which is to say . . . that he performs like few others on the page.

**Roiland:** Of course, there isn't consensus among nonfiction writers regarding Wallace's journalistic importance. Jeff Sharlet, who won the 2015 National Magazine Award in the category of Reporting for his *GQ* story, "Inside the Iron Closet," sees little beneath the surface of Wallace's affected voice and pithy observations.

**Jeff Sharlet,** writer: I mean, there's plenty of it that's good—smart characterizations, dense detail, lovely prose. But I don't find it exceptional. The one [article] I thought I could teach, from *Rolling Stone* right after 9/11,<sup>8</sup> I gave up on because my students . . . called bullshit on it. They thought it was thin. I feel the same way about "Federer," which is built around what I find [to be] a banal Religious Studies 101 idea.<sup>9</sup> Yes, there's some great language. But great language isn't enough without great reporting. And I just don't see Wallace as ever very interested in reporting. Which is ironic, given the density of his fiction. I mean, yes, he looked shit up for his journalism—but in a whimsical way.

**Roiland:** Sharlet's criticism shows that writers' annoyances and displeasures with Wallace's work existed long before the spate of hot takes that slowly sprouted up online in the years after his death in 2008.

**Sharlet:** I have never, not once, had a conversation about DFW with another working journalist. I'm sure many have read and enjoyed him, but in terms of frequency with which he's invoked, he's behind Didion, Agee, Mitchell, Mailer, Wolfe, Thompson, Herr, Orwell, Liebling, Baldwin.

**Roiland:** When Wallace died, a literary tide initially carried out his reputation, to be lovingly gazed at, beyond reach and reproach. He was called "the best mind of his generation."<sup>10</sup> His 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech emerged from internet obscurity,<sup>11</sup> to pocket-sized devotional,<sup>12</sup> to viral meme.<sup>13</sup> Some anointed him "Saint Dave."<sup>14</sup> A cottage industry of scholarly and popular work sprang up.

When the waters returned, however, they carried with them the flotsam of scrutiny, depositing detritus along the internet's shoreline.<sup>15</sup> Charges of exaggeration and fabrication collected like driftwood.<sup>16</sup> A travelogue<sup>17</sup> and a biography<sup>18</sup> emerged. Wallace (or, at least his male readers) became shorthand for the mansplaining "lit-bro."<sup>19</sup> He was responsible for the "slangy" casualness of blog culture.<sup>20</sup> He gave readers rashes.<sup>21</sup> And in an inevitable, ironic full circle, Wallace's work and life became *The Entertainment* with the biopic

*The End of the Tour*.<sup>22</sup> No longer did critics have to read Wallace to render judgment; they could opt out and judge him based on secondary sources.<sup>23</sup>

Such synecdoche, however, glosses over how the self-described "library weenie from the lower level of Frost Library at Amherst College" became the cultural figure David Foster Wallace.<sup>24</sup>

It was at *Harper's* in the 1990s where Wallace published both celebrated short stories as well as renowned works of nonfiction. He worked closely with Harrison at the magazine and, to lesser extent, with Lovell and Sullivan. But it was a fiction editor who originally brought him onboard.

**Harrison:** Charis Conn knew Dave long before I did. She was the one who probably brought his fiction into the magazine originally.

**Lovell:** He was close friends with Charis, who edited his fiction at *Harper's*. Charis loved editing him and spoke a kind of private language with him, and he recognized her singular genius and respected it.

**Harrison:** We did not actually talk about his magazine pieces—the big pieces—that much. Charis felt possessive of David, as editors feel possessive of writers, and I don't know what she thought of those pieces. I suspect she admired them, but I don't know.

**Roiland:** Others admired them as well. The writer David Lipsky called "Ticket to the Fair" and "Shipping Out" "some of the most famous pieces of journalism of the past decade and a half."<sup>25</sup> Despite the great popularity that would attend those magazine stories, it was not a natural venue for the novelist Wallace, which created editing issues.

**Lovell:** My somewhat distant sense is that the biggest challenge to editing Dave's nonfiction was in striking a balance between the magazine's needs and his instinctual impulse to not give a fuck about what the magazine needs. That was the tension that led to his best work—when he was forced to play within boundaries and by rules that he wanted to ignore. From the limited knowledge I have of various editors' experiences with him, some were better at engaging in that struggle than others. I don't mean it was simply a matter of imposing word counts or house grammar style or whatever, but more of calibrating how much indulgence was the perfect amount of indulgence. Colin Harrison, who edited his big nonfiction pieces at *Harper's*, was probably better than anyone at knowing how to productively fight with him about that stuff.

**Harrison:** The challenges in the case of the first two pieces we commissioned were that they were just way too long for the magazine. I don't remember the original length that the state fair piece was commissioned at but it came in much longer than that. The cruise ship piece was the longest piece I'd ever done; it was the longest piece we'd ever done at *Harper's* in my

time there. And so, when those pieces came in I read them and was greatly admiring of them but the fact of the matter is it was a magazine, not a book. Then Dave and I would have to start to talk about cutting it to get it into to a shape . . . and with Dave every edit that one did needed to be discussed. I've said it before, it was like a tennis match with the conversation back and forth.<sup>26</sup> He would give or not give. Sometimes he'd really disagree and just dig in his heels. It was kind of part of the fun of it, though, too.

**Roiland:** Lovell edited Wallace once. They worked together on a short piece that probed Franz Kafka's dark humor. Today that essay is perhaps best known for the menacing fax that Wallace sent to Lovell warning him not to "copy edit this like a freshman essay." That letter is collected with the rest of Wallace's papers at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. It was leaked online and subsequently went viral. Wallace closed by telling Lovell: "I will find a way to harm you or cause you suffering if you fuck with the mechanics of this piece."<sup>27</sup>

**Lovell:** That Kafka piece for the *Harper's* Readings section was an adaptation of a talk Dave had given. My memories of our conversations around the essay are much more pleasant than what that fax with the skull and crossbones (with tongue sticking out) and threats to cause me harm might suggest. (Incidentally, I can't tell you how much I wish I'd saved the fax.)

**Sullivan:** There may have been some humor in that [fax]. And there are some mechanics of magazine production involved because, unless I'm wrong, that Kafka piece was going into the Readings section, and that was the section where they would take things and really make them their own and condense them by eighty percent. It was maybe the case that Wallace had something in Readings before.<sup>28</sup> I feel like, in fact, almost certainly he had. And if that's the case then he may have just felt like: *I know what you guys do in Readings, and don't do that to me.*

**Lovell:** We talked about what the piece might need to work in the magazine, and while I was a very young editor at the time and my brain was of course a BB to his battleship, he still treated me like I actually had suggestions that were worth his time and energy—which meant a great deal to me at the time and still does.

**Roiland:** For Maria Bustillos, "Laughing with Kafka" is the Wallace essay that most resonates. Near the end, Wallace identifies what he calls "the really central Kafka joke,"<sup>29</sup> and it's not hard to read it as a stand-in for a philosophy that Wallace himself held: "[T]hat the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home."<sup>30</sup>

**Maria Bustillos,** writer: [It] decocts a whole worldview so compactly,

and because it is a master class in black humor.

**Roiland:** Lipsky notes in his *Rolling Stone* obituary that Amy Havens Wallace told him that in high school her brother "pinned an article about Kafka to [his bedroom] wall with the headline THE DISEASE WAS LIFE ITSELF."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in the book version of the state fair essay, renamed "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," Wallace writes that his particular neurological make-up is "extremely sensitive: carsick, airsick, height sick." He then added: "My sister likes to say I'm 'life sick.'"<sup>32</sup>

Such existential dread led Wallace "to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles" in his work.<sup>33</sup> For example, he believed works of fiction helped readers feel "less alone inside."<sup>34</sup> But even in his nonfiction, readers can easily identify his attempts to "treat plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction."<sup>35</sup>

**Jamison:** Wallace—in fiction and nonfiction—is earnestly committed to sentiment; to probing it and understanding how it works, to resisting the ways that irony sort of carelessly pushes back against it. I'm not sure he'd call it an earnest appeal to sentimentality, but I do think he was interested in thinking about why people pulled away from sentimentality, or resisted it, when it became an easy punching bag.

**Orange:** Wallace showed himself unremittingly, in his nonfiction, as an artist *above all* seeking and moved by the real, the sincere, the sublime, the untroubled moment, the unclogged line of communication, of apprehension.

**Jamison:** More than anything, he felt we owed each other an earnest commitment to respecting and imagining one another's consciousnesses. I'm thinking also the end of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*—that call to insist on the consciousness of another<sup>36</sup>—feels integral to "This Is Water."<sup>37</sup> I do feel that, yes, Wallace was speaking to an audience, but he also really meant what he said in that speech, and its idea[s] motivate other writing even if they don't get quite the same blunt articulation in other pieces.

**Roiland:** Despite the at times heaviness of his philosophical examinations, Wallace was able to draw readers in and engage them via the most singular feature of his nonfiction: voice. A. O. Scott aptly characterized Wallace's writing voice as "hyperarticulate, plaintive, self-mocking, diffident, overbearing, needy, ironical, almost pathologically self-aware. . . . It was something you instantly recognized even hearing it for the first time. It was—is—the voice in your own head."<sup>38</sup>

**Orange:** The voice of Wallace's nonfiction feels calibrated to perform some very specific tasks, and chief among them is the task of connecting with and disarming a particular kind of reader. I imagine Wallace addressing a Wallace-like reader: hypersensitive and perceptive, witty and incredulous,

sincere but helplessly knowing. By exaggerating those parts of himself in his observations of a shared or familiar reality, he instills a certain trust in the reader. Forming that trust is the job of any narrator, but especially a narrator of nonfiction.

**Harrison:** There was an ongoing broadening and loosening of the first-person voice in long-form magazine journalism. That said, Dave brought into his nonfiction highly developed fictional technique and a willingness to get naked with everybody about his own psychological moods, the result being a kind of hyper-wet intimacy.

**Orange:** Wallace lit up his subjects with a voice that spoke directly from and to his cynical, media-saturated, mid-nineties moment. For a reader that kind of voice—that kind of communion—provides tremendous relief. It's almost sexual, and can't be faked. Of course we're all chasing that.

**Roiland:** There is a difference, however, between chasing and co-opting. The writers I spoke with, while admiring of Wallace's style, were also guarded against it influencing their own work too much.

**Sullivan:** Asking a writer about his or her influences is like asking about a childhood trauma—the way it happens is so chaotic. If I could actually project myself back into that brain, how insecure it was, how ambitious it was, encountering a writer like Wallace, what really happens in that moment, if you really want to get into it, it's messy. You encounter a strong voice and it's like, *Okay, I have to protect myself against this*. At the same time, it's going to be asked of me by readers that I have to operate at this level, so I have to learn what's going on here. And that's before you even get into a world where you might know these people personally and have to deal with the whole level of bullshit that comes with that. It's fucked up.

**Orange:** Sometimes flattering or heady comparisons confront a writer with an influence, the extent of which she had not previously grasped or which she might not be willing to acknowledge. Sometimes they feel off the mark, or lazy. Almost always they are mortifying. It's about being unworthy, obviously, but it's also about the fight to exist in your own right and to find whatever level you're actually capable of reaching.

**Harrison:** You can find pieces of his style all over the place, whether it's increased use of the word "hideous" or *-ish* attached to all sorts of words, or the sort of meta-text of footnotes, and so forth. All of his idiosyncratic tics were noted by the next generation of young writers and were used and spread like little tiny rhetorical memes. It's like a cone that fed out from him over time; you'd have to account for all those people.

**Lovell:** You see Wallace's influence all over the place—Wells Tower, Molly Lambert, Alex Pappademas, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, Tom Bissell. This is

off the top of my head. There are obviously lots of others, critics like Sam Anderson and Emily Nussbaum and Wesley Morris, people who are totally steeped in magazine conventions but also in literary/film/music/etc., criticism, in popular culture, in the art of building an argument, and also happen to have great comic sensibilities and a highly sensitized awareness of their audience at every given moment. At their best, all of these writers have the ability to reawaken some pretty stale forms.

**Orange:** I'm not sure I know myself how his nonfiction influenced mine. I suspect a baseline influence once or twice removed—that is, I was first influenced by writers who were themselves clearly influenced by Wallace.

**Harrison:** By the time I encountered Dave I had probably published four novels, so in that sense no. My writing is very different in all respects. That said, certainly, like a lot of writers, when you are amused by a writer, then the spore of that writer's sensibility enters you whether you want [it] to or not. Like a lot of people, I'm sure there are sentences here and there that I've written that might have a tiny bit of DFW stamp on them.

**Orange:** In flourishes here and there it's hard to resist. At the tic level it's something to avoid and weed out, though, like any other tic. That can be a matter of mindfulness—developing the confidence and rigor to sustain one's own voice. But maintaining a molecular awareness of influence is as impossible as maintaining a molecular awareness of anything.

**Roiland:** Wallace's influence on these writers was more inspirational, rather than imitational, often freeing them up to take their own rhetorical risks.

**Jamison:** I'd say less that I've ever experienced myself as consciously copying his style, and more that reading him can be a liberating experience—almost like it grants permission to transcribe thought, in all its complication and shagginess, onto the page rather than feeling a pressure to tidy it up.

**Bustillos:** He helped to free me, as he did many of his contemporaries, to own all that antic influence of the late 1970s we'd inherited through Marcus, Burroughs, Bukowski, and Bangs, the (correct) conviction that the objects of mass culture are worthy of the most serious consideration. Wallace is like a prism for that insight.

**Orange:** Most often with Wallace I find myself returning to his work when I'm stuck and need to loosen up, regain that sense of what's possible. In addition, I was attracted to an atmosphere or larger project or sensibility that Wallace's writing helped set into motion. When I met it directly, his was a voice and a style that gave me a particular and deeply exciting sense of what is possible in writing that I didn't have before. In the simplest terms, his writing made me want to write.

**Bustillos:** Both of us grew up on Bangs and the *NME* and *The Doors of Perception* and Carlos Castaneda, and so on. Junior Intellectual Stoners, super prolix, I mean that was such a thing in the late 1970s/early '80s. Such overlap as there was and is had been bred in the bone (Brian Eno!!). I am not as skilled a prose stylist as he, but I consider him like a comrade—or a classmate?

**Sullivan:** I always felt more inspired by Wallace than influenced. And the reason for that has partly to do with chronology. Because of my dad [sports-writer Mike Sullivan] and because of going to Sewanee and because of getting into publishing right after college, I wound up reading all that New Journalism really early. And not just the New Journalism, but Twain, and then as an undergraduate I got really into the eighteenth century so I started reading Swift and Defoe and stuff. When I encountered Wallace the thing he was up to didn't seem new. At the same time, there was a sense of excitement that went along with that because I saw that he was similarly keyed into this tradition of writing and was doing new things with it. And that was inspiring and made it feel like that it was still alive. That's the main feeling I remember getting from *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, like, *it's still alive*; this isn't a historical thing.

**Harrison:** The New Journalism starts in the '60s [and brought with it the] intrusion of the first-person voice, the *narrative of the writer's perceptions* is the narrative of the piece.<sup>39</sup> It's participatory. It's overtly subjective. Objective reporting is submerged and not seemingly the primary focus, and so there was a lot of that long before Dave Wallace came along. Other writers have done it quite well. I mean if you go back to *Esquire*, then later *GQ*, they did a lot of it. Some of it found its way into *New York* magazine, the *New York Times Magazine*.

**Sullivan:** I feel like that total stylistic freedom had already been established. That's the simplest way for me to say what I mean about [influence]. I'm not trying to sound pretentious about chronology and reading and all that. I read all of Terry Southern before I read David Foster Wallace, and that does something to you. [Wallace's style] just didn't seem that freaky. In fact, I'm not sure it even seemed that Wallace was going to go quite as far. But he was doing it really well, and he was dealing with problems, and I liked that he had retreated a little bit of that snide tone that ran through so much of the New Journalism. He made his characters vulnerable in a way that those guys didn't. Either they didn't have the guts to do it or it wouldn't have occurred to them, or even been desirable to them.

**Roiland:** Sullivan, of course, is correct. There is a long tradition of American literary journalism, and it stretches much further back than just the New Journalism. That said, the genre has experienced an extended renaissance over the last decade and, with it, numerous conversations about its conventions

and controversies.<sup>40</sup> Much of the popular discourse about this resurgence—often under the problematic moniker “long form”<sup>41</sup>—has been somewhat shortsighted and ahistorical. Jeff Sharlet wondered if the celebration of Wallace's journalism—defined, as he saw it, by an indulgent narrative voice—was symptomatic of such myopia.

**Sharlet:** I suppose you could make an argument that he's responsible for that turn toward the baroque one sees in the work of some men's magazine literary journalists—though I'm not sure that's true.

**Sullivan:** Now when I look, in fact, I see that it was everywhere. There were a lot of those sportswriters—and probably writers in other sections of the paper too, that I wasn't paying as close of attention to—they thought of themselves as kind of an army of junior Gonzo reporters. Like, “we were gonna have fun with [it]!” That had always been there in the sports writing world to some extent; in fact, it's probably where the original Gonzo impulse—that Gonzo impulse definitely drew on the *self-identifying hack journalist*. And that goes all the way back to Grub Street.

**Sharlet:** [Is it] the institutionalization of literary journalism in J-schools and creative writing programs, and the subsequent canonization of and overdependence on Tom Wolfe, and, to a lesser extent, Gay Talese? Is it the neoliberalization of Gonzo?

**Roiland:** For his part, Wallace called the Gonzo impulse within the New Journalism “naïve and narcissistic.”<sup>42</sup> He told the French journalist Didier Jacob that he disliked much of Hunter S. Thompson's writing, except for his book, *Hell's Angels*.<sup>43</sup> Nor did he care for Tom Wolfe, preferring instead James Baldwin, Joan Didion, John McPhee, Cynthia Ozick, and, later, Annie Dillard.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Harrison did not see much direct influence from the New Journalists on Wallace's work.

**Harrison:** No, not really. He was *sui generis*. He was *ab ovo*. He was his own thing. He was imitated more than he imitated.

**Roiland:** So then are any of these similarities—either historical or contemporary—really of any use? Or are they just a byproduct of the business of blurbing and selling books in an oversaturated market?

**Orange:** I understand the impulse behind those types of comparisons, but yes, they can be frustrating, as well as awkward and uncomfortable. Just last week, a student of mine quoted that “love child” line [from the *LA Review of Books* review of *This is Running for Your Life*] while introducing me at a faculty reading, and rather than face the room I considered crawling to the nearest exit. In general, I try not get too worked up about comparisons, if only because it's all beyond my control. It's part of the marketing process and a facet of how books are metabolized by the reading and reviewing pub-

lic. Certain names come to stand in for certain qualities or concerns, a style or sensibility—the Didion thing has become a sort of joke. Another student recently commented on her lack of enthusiasm for a writer she understood to be “Joan Didion’s heir apparent.” I couldn’t resist replying that she shouldn’t be too disappointed, as Didion now gives birth roughly every other week.

**Roiland:** The lineal relation between Didion and Wallace is voice. For many contemporary writers publishing in online narrative publications, such as the late Grantland and FiveThirtyEight, Wallace’s ancestral influence—for better or worse—is ushering in an age of journalistic paratext, via his voluminous use of footnotes. These digressions and diversions were absent in “Ticket to the Fair,” but overwhelmed “Shipping Out” and much of his later work. In a 1997 television interview with Charlie Rose, Wallace admitted that the footnotes “become very, very addictive and it’s almost like having a second voice in your head.”<sup>45</sup>

For some readers, that was one voice too many. Rather than being distracted by Wallace’s footnotes, however, Jeff Sharlet was plainly dismissive of the idea that Wallace pioneered a technique that would later become *de rigueur*.

**Sharlet:** When I think of footnotes, I think of where I first encountered them as a central part of a creative text, Oliver Sacks’s *Awakenings*, written while DFW was a kid. And then, later, as part of Eggers’s pre-fame initiative, *Might* magazine. But I’m sure Sacks wasn’t first. That’s nothing against Wallace’s footnotes—I just don’t see them as a big deal. The celebration of his footnotes represents the same banal ahistoricism at work in the coinage of the term *long form*.

**Roiland:** Wallace certainly wasn’t the pioneer. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t an editorial pain in the ass.

**Harrison:** In some cases, there were so many footnotes we could not accommodate them from a layout point of view. I mean, if you remember, the two-column format with art, and some of the art was run-around collage, and, what you want is for the footnote to correspond to the thing being footnoted, in the same column, and if there are a whole stack of footnotes they begin to run to the next column, or the next page, and it just becomes untenable, it just becomes impossible to lay out the magazine. This is why I say he was writing something that was a magazine piece as opposed to writing a magazine piece. You can do that sort of crazy footnoting on and on and on in a standardized manuscript page; it just runs to the next page. So we *had* to do battle over that. I don’t remember which ones we cut, but I know we cut them. I would say things to David like, “Hey Dave, this is a brilliant footnote. It’s incredibly funny, it’s fabulous. I wish we could run it the way you have written it, but we actually can’t do it.” And you know, he didn’t like that. And I remember there

was one footnote, which was just an exclamation point. I said, “Dave, c’mon, what are we doing here?” We kind of lingered over it, and I said, “All right, fine.” I gave as much to him as I could give to him, under the circumstances.

**Roiland:** Sullivan thought the footnotes could, at times, detract from the overall storytelling in some of Wallace’s later prose, especially in a story about conservative talk radio for the *Atlantic* titled “Host.”<sup>46</sup> In that piece, Wallace used paratextual boxes and a dizzying array of lines and arrows crisscrossing the page to repeatedly redirect the reader’s eye.

**Sullivan:** It’s almost a little sadistic, isn’t it? You feel with Wallace sometimes what you feel with so many experimental/modern/postmodern writers is that they got weaker when they lost their grip on the storytelling a little bit. Anytime any other element of what was going on was allowed to become even slightly more interesting than the storytelling, you feel a lot of air go out of the tires. And it’s like, at this point we’re kind of watching you on a tight wire. You’re solving technical prose problems and that’s not why we’re here. That’s *your* obsession.

**Roiland:** For Harrison the footnote fracas were just symptomatic of the ongoing struggle to get a writer best known for writing a 1,079-page novel to conform to the standards of a much slimmer medium.

**Harrison:** Again, not to sound like a broken record, but a magazine is a magazine, and the pieces in a magazine have to live in proportion to the overall magazine itself, to the other pieces of the magazine, even in relationship to the advertising, and then of course in proportion to themselves. [With] those two pieces we were really stretching the boundaries and limits of what a magazine piece was and could do, and in a fascinating and successful way. But they were still magazine pieces in a magazine. I remember reading both pieces in the original form and saying, “There’s a magazine piece in this and it’s fabulous, it’s brilliant, it’s, you know, a firehose of Dave. But we have to find the piece that moves and ends successfully.”

**Roiland:** There were thirty-three footnotes in “Shipping Out” (that number bloomed to 137 in the retitled, ninety-seven-page book version, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again.”<sup>47</sup> Most of the writers I spoke with pointed to the cruise ship story as their favorite. Those selections, however, were not without equivocation, because the writers admired many of his other stories as well.

**Orange:** Oh, the cruise ship essay. I could try for the left fielder, but the obvious choice is obvious for good reason. It offers the better part of who he was as a writer, his larger project, his skill and soul, his despair and his abiding humor. Everything that made him problematic and everything that made him truly great—for me the whole thing is in that piece.

**Sullivan:** Hmm. I don't want to say the cruise ship thing because that would be so obvious, but it may still be the one that, if you could just save one or teach one, that might be it.

**Lovell:** Man, that's a tough one. Personally, the state fair and cruise ship pieces were totally revelatory, just because of where I was at that point in my reading/editing life.

**Jamison:** I love "Shipping Out" because it plunges into feeling and maturing when I'm not expecting it; because it's funny but he also implicates himself; because it understands that there is meaning in everything but also has fun with that notion [and] doesn't take it too seriously; because "Meth-amphetaminic"; because "trilingual lifeboat."

**Sullivan:** But also, you know that I love the one about Michael Joyce.<sup>48</sup> It's much better than the Federer piece. I also love the one he wrote about playing tennis when he was younger.<sup>49</sup> Toward the end there were some things that I admired more than enjoyed, like the radio deejay piece.<sup>50</sup>

**Lovell:** But McCain is the piece that I admire the most, just because there's no genre more constrained than the political profile, and he somehow managed to make something intensely real out of the most inauthentic process and to raise questions and ideas and venture opinions without any pretense regarding the essential rightness of his conclusions.<sup>51</sup> It was a many-thousand-word call for engagement, which I still find incredibly stirring.

**Roiland:** Harrison, too, declared himself to be an obvious fan of "Shipping Out." But he noted that there were more difficulties with that story than simply shoehorning all of Wallace's footnotes into the magazine.

**Harrison:** Magazine pieces need an ending. They need to end. They need to end in a way that you know what the ending is and why you read it and what it all meant. As I recall, we struggled a little bit more with the cruise ship ending. David just needed to make an ending, and not just fuzz away into his thinking.

**Roiland:** It wasn't Wallace's messy endings, however, that bothered Jeff Sharlet; it was the ironic tone laden throughout his work. Sharlet also identified both "Ticket to the Fair" and "Shipping Out" as "formative" for him—albeit for a much different reason.

**Sharlet:** Seriously. I hated them so much when they came out in *Harper's*. Many a time I've reined in the snark in an essay thinking of those pieces, thinking of the narcissistic, defensive self-deprecation.

**Roiland:** More recently those early stories have also come under scrutiny for reasons other than their effulgence.

**Sullivan:** Our understanding of that one [the cruise ship story] has had to evolve a little bit, hasn't it? Because learning that he made up, what sounds

like, big parts of it, which is a real bummer.

**Roiland:** Wallace's reporting would be called into question after his death. Jonathan Franzen and David Remnick made public comments that averred Wallace wasn't always faithful to the facts.<sup>52</sup> D. T. Max probed these accusations in his biography, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*. And I added my own voice to the conversation with an essay<sup>53</sup> explaining the complex journalistic philosophy Wallace, a novelist, constructed for himself. How did the person who commissioned and edited those seminal stories feel when the accusations surfaced?

**Harrison:** Basically a shrug.

**Roiland:** Really?

**Harrison:** Whatever Dave was doing in those two pieces for *Harper's* he was not pretending to be a hardcore "journalist." And so, the rhetorical footprint of the pieces was larger than the footprint of a typical journalistic piece of reportage [such] that I just didn't really worry about it. You read those pieces to get Dave's mind and his language and his eye. Again, a shrug.

**Sullivan:** Knowing a little bit about how the circumstances of that piece came about, it's really hard not to think of it [as journalism]. It was conceived precisely as a piece of journalism and reporting. That was the joke. Charis loved Wallace's fiction, which is amazing, because it was so early, but she really saw something in it, and she went to Colin and said, *You guys do this weird nonfiction shit. I don't do that. But this guy is a really interesting writer. Why don't you send him on one of your capers?* That's how it happened. That was the conception of the piece: Insert genius into Gonzo. And, it worked.

**Roiland:** Harrison's indifference to these later critiques, however, did not stem from an unfamiliarity with journalistic rigor. Nor was he defensive about the accusations or his role in the editorial process.

**Harrison:** By way of context, as a magazine editor and as a journalism editor, I've done a lot of really serious, strict, straight-up journalism, okay? I know what that is. I know what fact checking is. I know what libel law entails. One of the books I published this last year was the *Washington Post* on Donald Trump.<sup>54</sup> That's where I am coming from, in one respect. When I was working with Dave, I had done pieces on George W. Bush's political background and where his money had come from. I had done some serious journalism. I was very familiar and onboard with the rigorous requirements of serious journalism. I wasn't just wandering out of the woods.

In the case of Dave, again, if you wanted to read about the cruise ship industry or how the cruise ship worked, etc., there were lots of places a reader could go. If you wanted to find out what it was like to gaze upon the showerhead in a cruise ship bunk and contemplate the watery fellatio it can per-



form—whatever it is that he plays around with—you have to go to someone like Dave Wallace. And a lot of his so-called “violations” of the form, they were not really that. They were simply meanderings through his own head. You can’t fact check what your writer was thinking about at a certain time. You just can’t do it. So he wants to imbue his thoughts retroactively into a piece—how do you disprove that? And if you can, why would you want to do it anyway in the case of David Foster Wallace? These are creative pieces.

By the way, let’s not forget, they *were* fact checked. If he said that the ship was of a certain length, or if there was a certain ride at the Illinois State Fair—and there was, and they *were* fact checked. Whatever sort of reportorial violations may have occurred, they were at the margins where reporting and reportage began to go watery and become “the world according to Dave.” I knew that. I saw that going into it, and retrospectively it’s shown to be an okay thing.

**Orange:** Yet another student asked me why, given the embellishments in some of Wallace’s nonfiction, he didn’t publish them as fiction. I just sighed.

**Harrison:** [The controversy] wasn’t worth a lot of contemplation, for me. But I respect the people who want to go into it because what they’re really trying to do is to understand how his mind works, and how he perceives what he was doing, and that is an entirely legitimate intellectual issue. People *should* talk about that if they want to. I’m just—that’s not where I am, but I get that people want to talk about that.

**Roiland:** Despite the posthumous questions of factual fidelity, none of the writers I spoke with said those indiscretions ultimately changed their opinion of Wallace and the impact he had on their writing lives and on the world of magazine journalism.

**Sullivan:** I mean, if I step outside of myself and look at it, almost physically, one thing sticks out very quickly and that is that my copies of all the books I had while I was at Sewanee and in Mississippi—there was like a five-year period when, you know when you’re reading so much that you don’t eat? When I look at the books from that period of my life, all of the old books from the seventeenth century forward are all marked up and penciled. And the contemporary stuff, I just didn’t do that with. It was partly—it was arrogance or a self-protective thing maybe. I didn’t want to allow that in somehow. Except for [*A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*]*—*which every page is just covered. And my writing is like testy and competitive and incessantly trying to catch him in a bullshit move. And so that almost says more to me about what was really going on than anything I could really say now, that has an honesty to it. It just shows that he did something; he got his finger into a certain wound and was moving it around.

**Jamison:** I love all of these things that I’ve found in his nonfiction: the form and energy and unapologetic purpose of the digression, the willingness to dig deep into detail, the *faith* in detail as something that matters, but the refusal to indulge in the easy metonymy of letting one detail stand for everything. He’s wonderful at articulating pleasure and appreciation and tackles his objects from so many angles. The multiplicity of perspectives feels almost like an ethical stance—the refusal of the single view.

**Roiland:** All the rhetorical features that Jamison declaimed, Jeff Sharlet regarded as artifice. He dismissed both Wallace’s reporting and his writing.

**Sharlet:** I don’t see him as having a legacy in journalism. Certainly not when we consider the big umbrella of journalism, where his work is essentially irrelevant, but not in literary journalism either.

**Roiland:** As did Sullivan earlier, Sharlet saw Wallace as a latter-day Gonzo. But Sharlet believed Wallace lacked the political fangs of his predecessors. As a result, his bequest to the next generation of nonfiction writers was the toothless substitution of style for substance; stories as ornamental baubles.

**Sharlet:** For years so many young male literary journalists wanted to be Hunter Thompson. I don’t see that anymore. Which is mostly good news. But perhaps the baroque turn represents the super-stylization of Thompson—style as some kind of display of virility—absent Thompson’s politics. The irony of the erasure of Thompson is that what was jettisoned was his most journalistic quality: his commitment to fucking those with power. Maybe the baroque turn represents what remains. Maybe Wallace’s journalism represents what remains.

**Roiland:** Those who worked with Wallace at *Harper’s*, however, admired his stylization. Colin Harrison believed Wallace not only cemented his literary reputation with “Ticket to the Fair” and “Shipping Out,” but actually elevated the standards for all other writers at the magazine.

**Harrison:** If you go back to Dave’s short stories that he did with Charis, and the tennis and tornados piece, which we ran in the Readings section—those were considered wonderful pieces. But we were publishing wonderful pieces all the time. It was not until the state fair piece that we kind of “blew it out,” and that really kind of reset the bar at a higher level for him and the magazine. I remember taking the [state fair] manuscript to Lewis Lapham, taking it into his office and saying, “You are really gonna love this.” And I was right. I went in and talked to him later in the day or the next day, and he was just gobsmacked at how fabulous it was. Lewis was all about good writing.

**Roiland:** Despite, or maybe because of the direct comparisons, Sullivan, whose *GQ* review of Wallace’s posthumous novel *The Pale King* contains some of the best observations and analysis on Wallace’s journalism, is a staunch ad-

vocate for Wallace's place in the history of literary journalism in America.<sup>55</sup> We spoke by phone for more than an hour for this interview. Afterward, he was left with a nagging sentiment of something still unsaid. He emailed me a half hour after we hung up, and his message encapsulates the paralyzing power of Wallace's legacy, something that writers feel both inspired and haunted by.

**Sullivan:** Something I wanted to say—and something that, when you consider the accuracy of it, ought to make clear the fundamental silliness of this new dismissiveness toward DFW—is that his work did more than anyone's, during the period between 1990 and his death, to generate sheer interest in the art of literary journalism. I was there, so I can state this as something close to a fact. Even though the pieces I saw come through *Harper's* (the language essay was the only one I had any involvement with, and that very slight)<sup>56</sup> were not as good, or at least not as exciting as the early stuff, we still treated them like holy objects when they came into the office, from Lapham on down to the copy editors. Everybody knew. And the younger people (mostly men, admittedly) who were writing for the magazine, they wanted to write stuff as good as what Wallace had done. That was the unspoken, and sometimes spoken, ambition that hung in the air. When "Horsemen, Pass By"<sup>57</sup> came out, I got a note from [a senior *Harper's* editor] saying it was "the best thing *Harper's* had done since Wallace's cruise ship essay." I was thrilled by that, and encouraged by it. But what did it say, implicitly? The best thing *since* that essay. Right? You see? It's stuff like that, that can drive some people nuts.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> FSG Originals, "John Jeremiah Sullivan + Caveman."
- <sup>2</sup> O'Connell, "The Flinch," Review of *The Empathy Exams*, graph 7.
- <sup>3</sup> Bassist, "Elissa Bassist Interviews Michelle Orange," graph 1.
- <sup>4</sup> ASME, "National Magazine Award Winners 1966–2015," Feature Writing.
- <sup>5</sup> Harrison, "In Memoriam: On David Foster Wallace," graph 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Wallace, "Ticket to the Fair," 35–54.
- <sup>7</sup> Wallace, "Shipping Out," 33–56.
- <sup>8</sup> Wallace, "David Foster Wallace on 9/11."
- <sup>9</sup> Wallace, "Roger Federer as Religious Experience."
- <sup>10</sup> Scott, "Best Mind of His Generation."
- <sup>11</sup> Bissell, "Great and Terrible Truths."
- <sup>12</sup> Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts*.
- <sup>13</sup> Wallace, "This Is Water," YouTube.
- <sup>14</sup> Max, "Why David Foster Wallace Should Not Be Worshipped."
- <sup>15</sup> Lorentzen, "The Rewriting of David Foster Wallace."
- <sup>16</sup> Randall, "Jonathan Franzen Said David Foster Wallace Fabricated Some Nonfiction"; Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*.
- <sup>17</sup> Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*.
- <sup>18</sup> Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*.
- <sup>19</sup> Fischer, "Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace," graph 2.
- <sup>20</sup> Newton, "Another Thing to Sort of Pin on David Foster Wallace," graph 5.
- <sup>21</sup> Dyer, "My Literary Allergy."
- <sup>22</sup> Segel and Eisenberg, *The End of the Tour*.
- <sup>23</sup> Hungerford, "On Not Reading."
- <sup>24</sup> Rose, "David Foster Wallace," 29:40.
- <sup>25</sup> Lipsky, "The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace," graph 67.
- <sup>26</sup> "Finite Jest: Editors and Writers Remember David Foster Wallace," graph 15.
- <sup>27</sup> Wallace, fax to Joel Lovell.
- <sup>28</sup> Wallace, "Tennis, Trigonometry, and Tornadoes," 68–78.
- <sup>29</sup> Wallace, "Laughing with Kafka," 23, 26–27.
- <sup>30</sup> Wallace, 26.
- <sup>31</sup> Lipsky, "The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace," para. 13.
- <sup>32</sup> Wallace, "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," 99.
- <sup>33</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 81.
- <sup>34</sup> McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," 127.
- <sup>35</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 81.
- <sup>36</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.
- <sup>37</sup> Wallace, "This Is Water."
- <sup>38</sup> Scott, "Best Mind of His Generation," graph 5.
- <sup>39</sup> Emphasis Harrison's in interview with author.
- <sup>40</sup> Mahler, "When 'Long-Form' Is Bad Form"; Packer, "*Rolling Stone* and the Temptations of Narrative Journalism"; Bennet, "Against 'Long-form Journalism,' "; Hannan, "Dr. V's Magical Putter."

- <sup>41</sup> Roiland, "By Any Other Name," 60–89.  
<sup>42</sup> Jacob, "Interview with David Foster Wallace," 155.  
<sup>43</sup> Jacob, 155; Thompson, *Hell's Angels*.  
<sup>44</sup> Jacob, 154–55.  
<sup>45</sup> Rose, "David Foster Wallace," 18:06.  
<sup>46</sup> Wallace, "Host," 51–77.  
<sup>47</sup> Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," 256–353.  
<sup>48</sup> Wallace, "The String Theory."  
<sup>49</sup> Wallace, "Tennis, Trigonometry, and Tornados," 68–78.  
<sup>50</sup> Wallace, "Host," 51–77.  
<sup>51</sup> Wallace, "The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys, and the Shrub," 53–65.  
<sup>52</sup> Dean, "A Supposedly True Thing Jonathan Franzen Said."  
<sup>53</sup> Roiland, "The Fine Print," 148–61.  
<sup>54</sup> Kranish and Fisher, *Trump Revealed*.  
<sup>55</sup> Sullivan, "Too Much Information."  
<sup>56</sup> Wallace, "Tense Present," 39–58.  
<sup>57</sup> Sullivan, "Horseman, Pass By," 43–59.

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