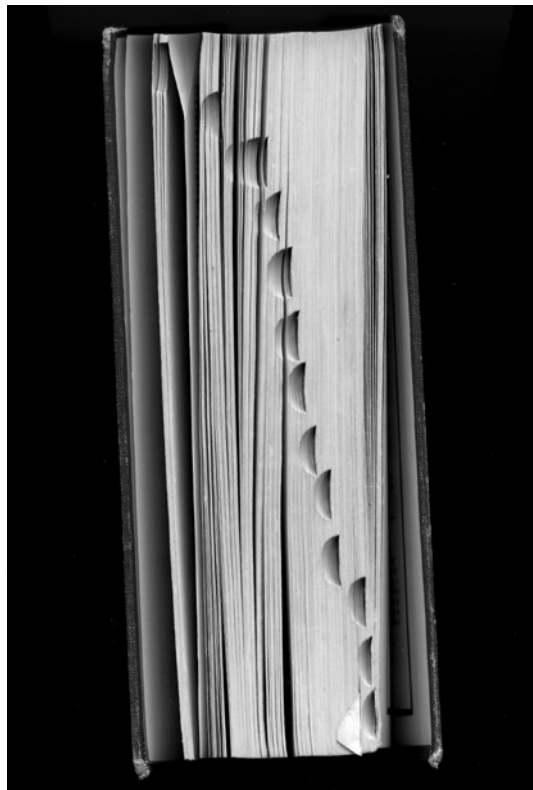


Five Dials



CELEBRATING THE LIFE AND WORK OF
DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

1962–2008

A Five Dials Special

PUBLISHED BY HAMISH HAMILTON



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Foster Wallace's literary agent and longtime friend.

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*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

Artwork by

MICHAEL SCHMELLING

Amy Wallace-Havens

UNTIL VERY recently, David and I were lucky in that we had such a limited experience with grief. When our grandmother died, just in the last decade, we were emotional novices. I remember sitting next to David at Gramma's memorial service. Whoever spoke first had uttered maybe five words before we both became loudly unglued – wailing, sobbing and clinging to each other. If we hadn't been in the presence of actual relatives, I think the assembled would have surely thought we were shills, that Gramma Betty had not left to chance the level of distress that would be registered at her funeral. We absolutely marveled – clutching our stiff balls of Kleenex – that our grandfather could find it in himself to stand and to speak of the honour that it had been to be our grandmother's husband for sixty years. How could he so calmly speak of his heart's joy in the past tense? This seemed utterly superhuman to David and me. And I stand here today not at all calm but knowing that David would have found it in himself to do this for me.

David was not always an easy brother – forget winning an argument or having the last word, ever. But he was loyal and good and protective. It took him some years to get over the disappointment of being stuck with a female sibling, but he did. Although as children we spent a great deal of time simply avoiding each other, it was understood that he was there if I really needed him. When I was ten, I decided to try out for Little League, which was not much done by girls in those days. I know that David was probably horrified in his heart of hearts, but he took it upon himself to teach me to catch a fly ball, to run down a grounder, and – most important of all – not to throw like a girl. To this day I have a decent arm, although I imagine I throw like a boy who would rather be

reading Kafka or watching *The Waltons* than playing baseball.

In the days following David's death, my mother and I realized that we could sit in front of the computer and conjure David on YouTube. There he was on the Isle of Capri, struggling to explain to the Italian-speaking audience that this was his first experience ever of being in a place where he didn't speak a single word of the language. There were David's mannerisms and loveable self-mocking digressions, and for a moment I actually forgot that he was dead – there he WAS, for heaven's sake – explaining to the chuckling crowd that he felt like a baby, he could not understand, and he could not make himself understood.

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

If David could have been a little bit gentler with himself, perhaps he could have simply shut up shop for a while and tried to heal. But unlike almost any other profession, writers cannot 'retire' – if they stop writing, they cease to be writers, at least in their own minds. David loved being a writer, not so that he could dazzle us with the glorious arias of his intellect, but so that he could take us with him as he

questioned what most of us don't bother to question. David was not a know-it-all. If he was a genius it's because he was smart enough to be curious about everything. So many of our conversations began with David's saying 'Why do you think . . .?' or 'Do you ever wonder . . .?'. David always thought, and he *always* wondered. As his depression essentially metastasized, although he was panicky and sleepless and dropping huge amounts of weight, I think it was the fear that he would never be well enough to write again that finally consumed him. It was the writing that made it so much less lonely to be in his head.

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

Shortly before David's death, I re-read 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 importantly, he can put his fingers 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. ◇

Bonnie Nadell

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

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

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

David had a complicated relationship with fame from the very beginning of his career. He liked the attention but he couldn't shrug things off the way most writers can. He never read his reviews or wanted to know print runs or sales figures. Never wanted to be interviewed on TV the times he got asked, or go to parties, or meet the Hollywood producers who optioned his books. In order to write, David couldn't be in the public eye and still function. It was simply too hard for him. David didn't have the armour most of us develop to survive in the world. I knew this and so did his publishers Little,

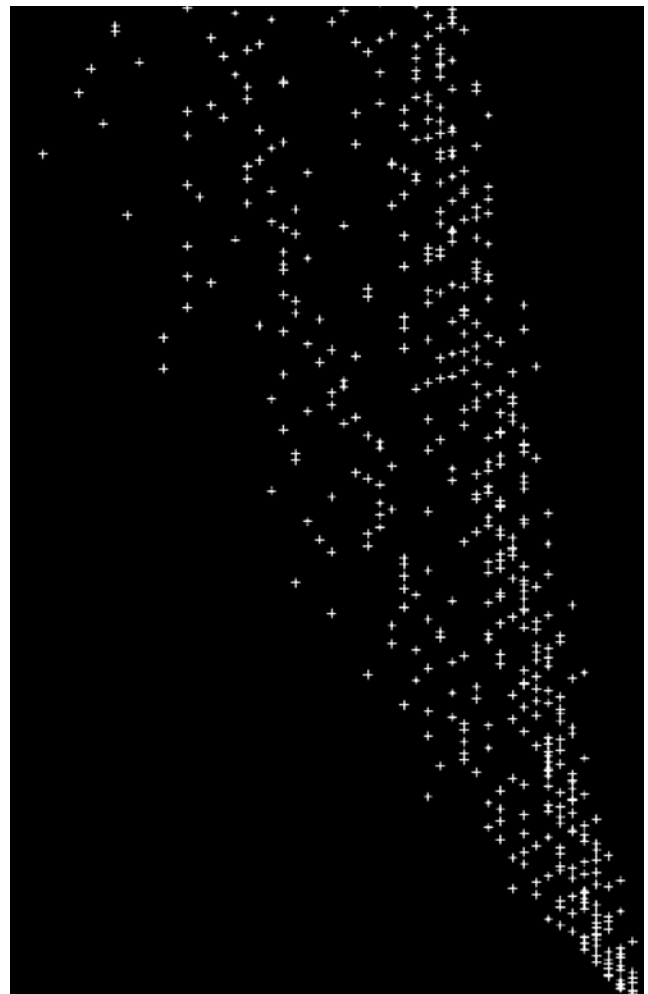
Brown and Company; we all protected him. Being David's agent often meant being a shield for him.

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

This spring, before things got bad, David was going to write about Obama and rhetoric for GQ. David was listening to Obama's speech-

es and GQ had reserved him a room at the convention in Denver. I knew David was never going to meet Obama or even get near him. He wanted to spend his time with the speechwriters sitting in Chicago sweating out Obama's words. Everything David learned would have come from watching from the outside, from being on the edge. And if David had been well enough to go to Denver, he would have spent most of his time in his hotel room or somewhere far away from the action and chatter. But he would have shown us things we would never have noticed, people we would never have spoken to and had ideas about rhetoric and language that most of us would never have thought without him.

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



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.’

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 *The Broom of the System* hit my inbox at Penguin in 1986, courtesy of Bonnie Nadell. What a startlingly fresh and original book that was, a neo-postmodern extravaganza, ultra-brainy and high-spirited at a time when American fiction was mostly out strolling the strip malls or cruising the clubs. We published it as the first trade paperback original in our Contemporary American Fiction series, and it was a critical and commercial success. And this remarkable book brought David Wallace, a truly remarkable person, into my work life. I am so proud and happy that twenty-plus years later *The Broom of the System* is still selling steadily and drawing new readers into David’s uniquely imagined world. I was re-reading it last night, and I had to wonder, how did I ever slip this one past the Authorities? It’s a wild piece of work – hysterical realism, yo. (I read *Our Mutual Friend* over the summer, and it seemed totally clear to me that Charles Dickens had been deeply influenced by David Foster Wallace.)

In my mind David will always be young. At twenty-four when our paths crossed, he was painfully deferential, totally unworldly, woefully underdressed, but you knew that he possessed a formidable, even staggering talent and intellect. Maybe my favouritest moment in publishing ever was a reading that Penguin arranged for the CAF series at the McBurney YMCA, with T.C. Boyle, Laurie Colwin, Frank Conroy and David reading from their work, with

me introducing them in alphabetical order. As the first three mature and practised literary stars strutted their stuff, David sank deeper and deeper into his seat, clearly suffering the tortures of the damned. It was his first reading EVER – what had we done? I can still taste my guilt. But then his turn came, he got up, walked to the lectern, calmly took a long sip of water, said, ‘Ahhhh,’ and read the epileptic baby/John Irving send-up section of *Broom* with incredible brio. As the song goes, he blew that room away. He was the Ruby Keeler of fiction – he went out there a nobody and he came back a star. I was in awe.

But as all who knew and worked with David know, he never carried himself like a star in the least. In fact he had no defences, in my experience, against the toxins endemic to the literary-industrial complex. I vividly remember one August day in 1988 when David came down to the city for, God help us, a photo-shoot for some slick magazine on ‘the Hot Young Writers’. David had been up at Yaddo with a fast crowd – Jay McInerney, David Leavitt, Mona Simpson – and all their talk of Andrew says this and Binky does that had really knocked him sideways. That morning’s shoot, with Tama Janowitz and Christopher Coe, a very flamboyant gay novelist, camping about, had finished the job. By the time he arrived at my office for lunch he was in the midst of a full-blown anxiety attack or nervous breakdown. Oh my. So I reached back to the skill-set that the sixties had equipped us all with and calmly

talked him down, just the way we used to do in the dorms when someone was having a bad trip. Trust me, it was exactly like that.

So many memories come back: that just incredibly squalid Somerville apartment he shared with Mark Costello, with those textbooks on symbolic logic whose *titles* I could not understand, let alone their contents. The eyestrain-causing five- and seven-page single-spaced editorial letters without a single typo that hog-tied my much slower brain. The somewhat unfortunate chewing-tobacco years. The sweetness and the vulnerability and the modesty. With a mind like his, David could have easily applied himself to some money-spinning job like, I don’t know, devising fiendishly complicated financial instruments to leave the American economy in smoking ruins. He could have done that! Instead he devoted his genius to renewing the fragile enterprise that is serious American writing. That’s serious, not solemn. He was the most idealistic of ironists, and his vision of the world was fuelled by deep wells of sincerity and a dogged quest for authenticity. Oh boy, will we miss him. ♦



Colin Harrison

ONE DAY IN the spring of 1995, I got a phone call at *Harper's Magazine* from Dave. He was calling from a 700-foot luxury cruise ship, called the *Zenith*, off the coast of Florida. I'd sent him on this trip to write an article, and he'd phoned just to let me know that yes, he was on board, as planned, and, by the way, what exactly was his magazine assignment again?

I paused before answering.

Telling Dave what to write about was a tricky proposition. In his previous non-fiction piece for *Harper's*, in which he'd written about the Illinois State Fair, Dave had, within the first few lines of the piece, blown up any idea that he considered himself a conventional journalist and also gleefully detonated the notion that I, his editor, knew what I was doing.

Let me quote from that piece:

'I'm fresh in from the East Coast, for an East Coast magazine,' he wrote. 'Why exactly they're interested in the Illinois State Fair remains unclear to me. I suspect that every so often editors at East Coast magazines slap their foreheads and remember that about ninety per cent of the United States lies between the coasts, and figure they'll engage somebody to do pith-helmeted anthropological reporting on something rural and heartlandish.'

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

But there was another reason I hesitated to answer his question. In telling Dave what the magazine assignment was, I might accidentally suggest what *not* to do, which could be unwise. The smart thing would be to just let Dave and his imagination and neuroses run wild. In his piece on the Illinois State Fair, curiosity and anxiety had combined again and again to great effect.

I FIGURED THAT the best thing was to give Dave *no editorial guidance whatsoever*. Not a word. So, no, there was no par-

ticular assignment, except that he was to be Dave Wallace on the spotless cruise ship ploughing through the aquamarine waters of the Caribbean. I said, 'There's nothing else I can tell you, Dave.' There was a pause. I'm willing to bet Dave made one of his lightning-quick facial grimaces before responding, 'Okay.' He seemed simultaneously relieved and amused, like he knew something I didn't – which was, of course, already true.

I like to think of that conversation now because I know more or less what happened next. Dave – big, fleshy, semi-shaven Dave Wallace, with his bandana and his sneakers and his quick smile – explored that huge luxury ship, inspecting its many restaurants and gaming rooms and lounges, all twelve decks and 1,374 passengers, their acres of horrifying flesh soon frying in the sun. He piled up tens of thousands of fabulous words describing the ship and its inhabitants. As for that frying flesh, he'd write, 'I have seen every type of pre-melanomic lesion, liver spot, eczema, wart, papular cyst, pot belly, femoral cellulite, varicosity, collagen and silicone enhancement, bad tint, hair transplants that have not taken – i.e., I have seen nearly naked a lot of people I would prefer not to have seen nearly naked.' These are the kinds of details that sickeningly thrilled him.

Naturally, though, Dave found the ship's relentless pampering highly stressful, so he semi-agoraphobically retreated to his room, especially to the shower, of which he said, 'itself overachieves in a very big way. The HOT setting's water is exfoliatingly hot, but it only takes one preset manipulation of the shower knob to get perfect 98.6 degree water. My own personal home should have such water

pressure: the shower-head's force pins you helplessly to the stall's opposite wall, and the head's MASSAGE setting makes your eyes roll up and your sphincter just about give ...

'But all this is still small potatoes compared with my room's fascinating and potentially malevolent toilet. A harmonious concordance of elegant form and vigorous function, flanked by rolls of tissue so soft as to be without perforates for tearing, my toilet has above it this sign: THIS TOILET IS CONNECTED TO A VACUUM SEWAGE SYSTEM. PLEASE DO NOT THROW INTO THE TOILET ANYTHING OTHER THAN ORDINARY TOILET WASTE AND TOILET PAPER. The toilet's flush produces a brief but traumatizing sound, a kind of held, high-B gargle, as of some gastric

disturbance on a cosmic scale. Along with this sound comes a suction so awesomely powerful that it's both scary and strangely comforting: your waste seems less removed than hurled from you, and with a velocity that lets you feel as though the waste is going to end up someplace so far away that it will have become an abstraction, a kind of existential sewage-treatment system.'

He loved writing that, I know he did.

A few months after his call, Dave turned in an ocean-liner of a magazine piece, way too big to dock. We devoted twenty-four entire pages of the magazine to the article and, but for the need to run some advertising, 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 travellers revealed a kind of love for them. While aboard, Dave surely sensed he was on to 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. ◇

hysterical
realism
ironic
idealism

Michael Pietsch

WORK FOR Little, Brown and Company, and I had the tremendous good fortune to work with David Wallace on his books *Infinite Jest*, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Oblivion* and *Consider the Lobster*. And I want to say right at the start that working with David was a thrill beyond anything I imagined when I entered this profession. The novel *Infinite Jest* is, I believe, one of the great American works of fiction, a work of mind-boggling ambition and originality that depicts contemporary life as a surfeit of pleasures and indulgences that can make connection with other people lethally difficult. Since encountering that novel I've found it difficult to view life in our times in any other way.

My goal here today is to try to get across in some way how much I loved David, and why, and how lucky I feel to have known him. First: for the things he wrote. I got to know David because I was a fan. Even if I'd never known him I'd be mourning the loss of a writer who took in the fire-hose blast of our world in all its voices and forms and varieties and gave it back to us in these gargantuan, howlingly funny, nakedly sad, philosophically probing novels, stories, and essays. He delineated the inside of the skull, the convoluted self-talk we all carry on constantly, in a way that no writer ever has. And at the same time that he could capture the tiniest granularities of self-consciousness, he also saw and could draw the broadest outlines of the big-picture world. His books are vast terrains that will continue to be explored in readers' minds as long as there are readers.

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

my computer. David came to New York seldom. Once he wrote to me, apropos some NYC brouhaha about who had and who hadn't gotten nominated for some award, 'This is why I'm glad I live in a cornfield.'

We communicated mostly through letters. And through a form of communication that I thought of as a Dave speciality, the phone message left on the office answering machine hours after everyone had departed. Very few emails – he came to email reluctantly, and preferred the narrow-margined single-spaced letter in ten-point Times Roman over all other forms of written communication. I never saw what he was like in the morning before his coffee, I never sat and watched a video or a football game or a tennis match with him. But in our occasional visits and our hundreds of letters and phone calls and late-night messages, I saw what he was like while he was writing, and revising, and working out what exactly he wanted a novel or story or essay to be.

Those letters were extraordinary, and I tore into every one of them hungrily knowing there was pleasure awaiting me inside. Mostly the letters had to do with the editing of his books. They are documents of the superhuman care David took with his writing, but at the same time of the joy and pride he took in his work. Here is a sample from innumerable pages of back-and-forth on *Infinite Jest*, in which David was responding to request after request for cuts. Which cut requests, please bear in mind, were the work he had *asked* me to do:

p. 52. This is one of my personal favourite Swiftian lines in the whole manuscript, which I will cut, you rotter.

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

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

pp. 327–30. Michael, have mercy. Pending an almost Horacianly persuasive rationale on your part, my canines are bared on this one.

pp. 739–48. I've rewritten it – for about the eleventh time – for clarity, but I bare teeth all the way back to the second molar on cutting it.

p. 785ff– I can give you 5,000 words of theoretico–structural arguments for this, but let's spare one another, shall we?

David's love affair with the English language was one of the great romances of our times, both a scholarly learn-every- nuance love and a wildly passionate flights-and-flourishes love. David's idea of an unbeatable magazine assignment was when he was asked to review a new dictionary. One of his proudest moments, he wrote, was when he learned 'I get to be on the American Heritage Dictionary's Usage panel. . . My mom whooped so loudly on the phone that it hurt my ear when I told her.' David loved encountering new words. In one letter he wrote of 'the last sludgelets of adolescent self-consciousness being borne away on the horological tide.' And added in parentheses, 'I just learned the word "horology" and was determined to use it at least once.' No mention of the fact that he had just invented the word 'sludgelets.' I think he wanted to use every word in the language before he was done. In one talk about the drawbacks of using words that sent readers running to their dictionaries, I mentioned a favourite book by another writer whose first word is the very obscure 'picric'. (Means yellowish.) David's instant response was, 'I already *used* that!'

I worked with David at the professional interface between him and his readers, a borderline he approached with vast apprehension. To say that David was uncomfortable in the public eye is to understate enormously. He said no thank you, politely but unalterably, to an invitation to appear on *The Today Show* when *Infinite Jest* was published. He submitted to photo sessions only when placed under multiple duress not just by his publisher and his publicist but also by his beloved literary agent, Bonnie Nadell. When David visited our offices, people would jostle for the chance to meet him. David wrote of those encounters, 'People who regard me as a Golden Boy make me feel lonely and

unknown.’ His manners were too good for him simply to say no to those encounters, but he would turn the conversation within seconds to the assistants who he dealt with day to day, or to the twins his publicist had just given birth to, or to any subject other than himself.

‘I don’t want to be a hidden person, or a hidden writer: it is lonely,’ he said in another letter. He shied from being known in a public way but he worked hard not to be hidden from the people he encountered in person. He wanted them to know him himself, not some caricature or idea of him. One way David endeavoured to be known was by endeavouring to know others. His solicitousness was legendary. In one note he asked me to remind a new mother in the office that it was time to switch from skimmed milk to 2% or whole milk. He wrote thank you notes not just to the copy-editor who worked on *Consider the Lobster* but also to the supervisor 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 bandana-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 jocularly that I will not begin to be able to capture here, all helped make sure that people didn’t feel intimidated. He wanted to let people in. The critic Laura Miller observed that he was smart enough to know that every person he encountered was smarter than him in *some* way, about something, and that there was something he could learn from everyone. I’m reminded of his essay ‘The View from

Mrs Thompson’s’, about the days after 9/11, when he sees that everyone has an American flag of some kind, a big one for the porch or a small one for the car. And he doesn’t have a flag, and has no idea even where you go to buy one, when every other person in the country seems to have been born knowing these things. Always something to learn.

David’s great act of kindness to me was trusting me to help him bring his books into the world. I couldn’t pretend to grasp the depth or magnitude of all he set out to do, but he needed an Authority Figure who he would listen to sometimes, and I was lucky to be the one who he fitted out for that role. Of one scene I proposed cutting he wrote: ‘Well, it introduces three characters, five themes and two settings.’ His patience with me is one of the things that I will always treasure.

David wrote, ‘I want to author things that restructure worlds and make living people feel stuff’. He certainly 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 everyone in this hall today will do all we can to help make sure that those words are read, and spread, and appreciated, admired and celebrated. ◇



an assortment of
medicine bottles

Don DeLillo

INFINITY. This is the subject of David Wallace's book on the mathematics, the philosophy and the history of a vast, beautiful, abstract concept. There are references in the book to Zeno's dichotomy and Goldbach's conjecture, to Hausdorff's maximal principle. There is also the offsetting breeze of Dave's plainsong – *OK then and sort of and no kidding and stuff like this.*

His work, everywhere, tends to reconcile what is difficult and consequential with a level of address that's youthful, unstudied and often funny, marked at times by the small odd sentence that wan-

ders in off the street.

'Her photograph tastes bitter to me.'

'Almost Talmudically self-conscious.'

'The tiny little keyhole of himself.'

A vitality persists, a stunned vigour in the face of the complex humanity we find in his fiction, the loss and anxiety, darkening mind, self-doubt. There are sentences that shoot rays of energy in seven directions. There are stories that trail a character's spiralling sense of isolation.

'Everything and More'. This is the title of his book on infinity. It might also be a description of the novel *Infinite Jest*, his

dead serious frolic of addicted humanity. We can imagine his fiction and essays as the scroll fragments of a distant future. We already know this work as current news – writer to reader – intimately, obsessively. He did not channel his talents to narrower patterns. He wanted to be equal to the vast, babbling, spin-out sweep of contemporary culture.

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

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

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OTHER WORD ~~NOT~~

Zadie Smith

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

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

To whom much is given, much is expected. Dave wrote like that, as if his talent was a responsibility. He had a radical way of seeing his own gifts: 'I've gotten convinced,' he wrote, 'that there's something kind of timelessly vital and sacred about good writ-

ing. This thing doesn't have that much to do with talent, even glittering talent [...] Talent's just an instrument. It's like having a pen that works instead of one that doesn't. I'm not saying I'm able to work consistently out of the premise, but it seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It's got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved.'

This was his literary preoccupation: the moment when the ego disappears and you're able to offer up your love as a gift without expectation of reward. At this moment the gift hangs, like Federer's brilliant serve, between the one who sends and the one who receives, and reveals itself as belonging to neither. We have almost no words for this experience of giving. The one we do have is hopelessly degraded through misuse. The word is prayer. For a famous ironist, Dave wrote a lot about prayer. A married man, confronted by a teenage seductress, falls to his knees and prays, but not for the obvious reason. 'It's not what you think I'm afraid of,' he says. The granola-cruncher prays as she is raped, but she isn't praying for her own rescue. A man who has accidentally brain-damaged his daughter prays with a mad Jesuit in a field, as a church made with no hands rises up around them. When the incomprehensible and unforgivable happens, Dave's characters resort to the impossible. Their prayers are irrational, absurd, given up into a void, and *that*, paradoxically, is where they draw their power. They are the opposite of ironical. They are full of faith, a quality Kierkegaard defined as 'a gesture made on the strength of the absurd'.

When I taught *Brief Interviews* to college

kids I made them read it alongside Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. The two books seem like cousins to me. Both find black comedy in hideous men who feel themselves post-love, post-faith, post-everything. 'When people nowadays will not stop at love,' wrote Kierkegaard, 'where is it that they are going? To worldly wisdom, petty calculation, to paltriness and misery? [...] Would it not be better to remain standing at faith, and for the one who stands there to take care not to fall?' The truth, he argued, is that we haven't even got as far as faith. Kierkegaard took faith seriously, recognized it as an impossible task, at least for him. Dave took faith seriously, too: it's his hideous men who don't. The most impassioned book recommendation he ever gave me was for *Catholics* by Brian Moore, a novella about a priest who, after forty years in a monastery, finds he still isn't capable of prayer. Anyone who thinks Dave primarily an ironist should note that choice. His is a serious kind of satire, if by satire we mean 'the indirect praise of good things'.

But I don't mean to replace an ironist with a God-botherer. The word God needn't be present – I'd rather use the phrase 'ultimate value'. Whatever name one has for it, it's what permits the few heroes in *Brief Interviews* to make their gestures on the strength of the absurd, making art that nobody wants, loving where they are not loved, giving without the hope of receiving. Dave traced this ultimate value through the beauty of

a Vermeer, to the concept of infinity, to Federer's serve – and beyond. As he put it: 'You get to decide what you worship.' But before we get giddy with po-mo relativity, he reminds us that nine times out of ten we worship ourselves. Out of this double-bind, the exit signs are hard to see, but they're there. When the praying married man puts his hands together, the gesture might be metaphysical, but he's seeking a genuine human connection, which, in Dave's stories, is as hard to find as any god. Love is the ultimate value, the absurd, impossible thing – the only thing worth praying for. The last line is wonderful. It reads: 'And what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way.' ♦



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 super-sensitized 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 of what a fix we're in on this earth, stuck in these bodies, with these minds.

This alteration seemed more spiritual than aesthetic. I wasn't just 'reading a great story' – what was happening was more primal and important: my mind was being altered in the direction of compassion, by a shock methodology that was, in its subject matter, actually very dark. I was undergoing a kind of ritual stripping away of the habitual. The reading was waking me up, making me feel more vulnerable, more alive.

The person who had induced this complicated feeling was one of the sweetest, most generous, *dearest* people I've ever known.

I first met Dave at the home of a mutual friend in Syracuse. I'd just read *Girl with Curious Hair* and was terrified that this breakfast might veer off into, say, a discussion of Foucault or something, and I'd be humiliated in front of my wife and kids. But no: I seem to remember Dave was wearing a Mighty Mouse T-shirt. Like Chekhov in those famous anecdotes, who put his nervous provincial visitors at ease by asking them about pie-baking and the local school system, Dave diffused the tension by turning the conversation to us. Our kids' interests, what life was like in Syracuse, our experience 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-charged, 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 reverence 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.

For now, there's just grief. Grief is, in a sense, the bill that comes due for love. The sadness in this room amounts to a kind of proof: proof of the power of Dave's work; proof of the softening effect his tenderness of spirit had on us; proof, in a larger sense, of the power of the Word itself: look at how this man

got inside the world's mind and changed it for the better. Our sadness is proof of the power of a single original human consciousness.

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

But in closing, a pledge, or maybe a prayer: every one of us in this room has, at some point, had our consciousness altered by Dave. Dave has left seeds in our minds. It is up to us to nurture these seeds and bring them out, in positive form, into the living world, through our work, in our actions, by our engagement with others and our engagement with our own minds. So the pledge and the prayer is this: we'll continue to love him, we'll never forget him, and we'll honour him by keeping alive the principal lesson of his work: mostly we're asleep, but we can wake up. And waking up is not only possible, it is our birthright, and our nature, and, as Dave showed us, we can help one another do it. ◇

wake-up
artist


Jonathan Franzen

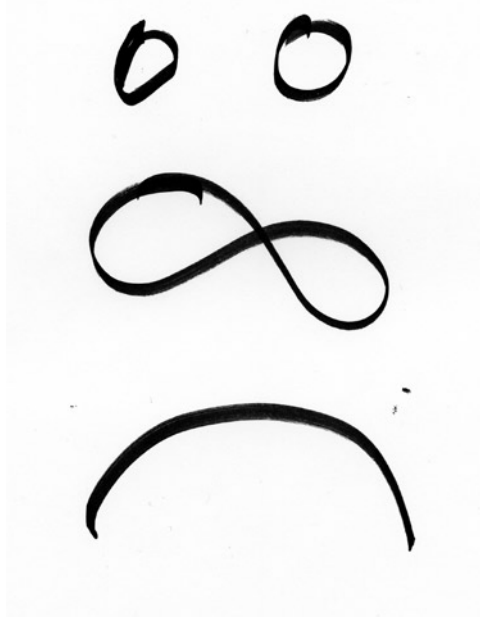
LIKE A LOT of writers, but even more than most, Dave loved to be in control of things. He was easily stressed by chaotic social situations. I only ever twice saw him go to a party without Karen. One of them, hosted by Adam Begley, I almost physically had to drag him to, and as soon as we were through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

One thing that made Dave an extraordinary college teacher was the formal structure of the job. Within those confines, he could safely draw on his enormous native store of kindness and wisdom and expertise. The structure of interviews was safe in a similar way. When Dave was the subject, he could relax into taking care of his interviewer. When he was the journalist himself, he did his best work when he was able to find a technician – a cameraman following John McCain, a board operator on a radio show – who was thrilled to meet somebody genuinely interested in the arcana of his job. Dave loved details for their own sake, but details were also an outlet for the love bottled up in his heart: a way of connecting, on relatively safe middle ground, with another human being.

Which was, approximately, the description of literature that he and I came up with in our conversations and correspondence in the early 1990s. I'd loved Dave from the very first letter I ever got from him, but the first two times I tried to meet him in person, up in Cambridge, he flat-out stood me up. Even after we did start hanging out, our meetings were often stressful and rushed – much *less* intimate

than exchanging letters. Having loved him at first sight, I was always straining to prove that I could be funny enough and smart enough, and he had a way of gazing off at a point a few miles distant which made me feel as if I were failing to make my case. Not many things in my life ever gave me a greater 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 loneliness' 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 rhetorical 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 humour

or fabulously reticulated self-consciousness, you could smell the ozone from the crackling precision of his sentence structure, his effortless and pitch-perfect shifting among ten different levels of high, low, middle, technical, hipster, nerdy, philosophical, vernacular, vaudevillian, hortatory, tough-guy, broken-hearted, lyrical diction. Those sentences and those pages, when he was able to be producing 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 apartment 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 comforting structure of the games versus the weird deep fraternal rivalries boiling along underneath – but truly the main thing was the writing. For most of the time I knew Dave, the most intense interaction I had with him was sitting alone in my armchair, night after night, for ten days, and reading the manuscript of *Infinite Jest*. That was the book in which, for the first time, he'd arranged himself and the world the way he wanted them arranged. At the most microscopic level: Dave Wallace was as passionate and precise a punctuator of prose as has ever walked this earth. At the most global level: he produced a thousand pages of world-class jest which, although the mode and quality of the humour never wavered, became less and less and less

funny, section by section, until, by the end of the book, you felt the book's title might just as well have been *Infinite Sadness*. Dave nailed it like nobody else ever had.

And so now this handsome, brilliant, funny, kind Midwestern man with an amazing spouse and a great local support network and a great career and a great job at a great school with great students has taken his own life, and the rest of us are

left behind to ask (to quote from *Infinite Jest*), ‘So yo then, man, what’s *your* story?’

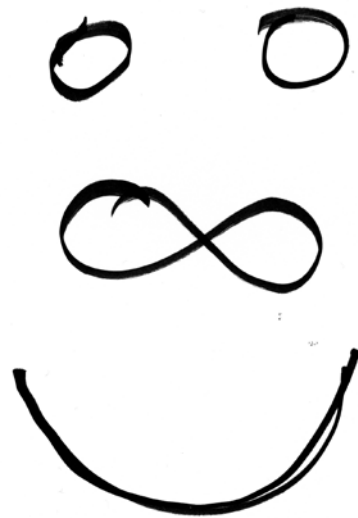
One good, simple, modern story would go like this: ‘A lovely, talented personality fell victim to a severe chemical imbalance in his brain. There was the person of Dave, and then there was the disease, and the disease killed the man as surely as cancer might have.’ This story is at once sort of true and totally inadequate. If you’re satisfied with this story, you don’t need the stories that Dave wrote – particularly not those many, many stories in which the duality, the separateness, of person and disease is problematized or outright mocked. One obvious paradox, of course, is that Dave himself, at the end, did become, in a sense, satisfied with this simple story and stopped connecting with any of those more interesting stories he’d written in the past and might have written in the future. His suicidality got the upper hand and made everything in the world of the living irrelevant.

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

People who like to be in control of things can have a hard time with intimacy. Intimacy is anarchic and mutual and definitionally incompatible with control. You seek to control things because you’re afraid, and about five years ago, very noticeably, Dave stopped being so afraid. Part of this came of having settled into a good, stable situation here at Pomona. Another really huge part of it was his finally meeting a woman who was right for him and, for the first time, opened up the possibility of his

having a fuller and less rigidly structured life. I noticed, when we spoke on the phone, that he’d begun to tell me he loved me, and I suddenly felt, on my side, that I didn’t have to work so hard to make him laugh or to prove that I was smart. Karen and I managed to get him to Italy for a week, and instead of spending his days in his hotel room, watching TV, as he might have done a few years earlier, he was having lunch on the terrace and eating octopus and trudging along to dinner parties in the evening and actually enjoying hanging out with other writers casually. He surprised everyone, maybe most of all himself. Here was a genuinely fun thing he might well have done again.

About a year later, he decided to get



himself off the medication that had lent stability to his life for more than twenty years. Again, there are a lot of different stories about why exactly he decided to do this. But one thing he made very clear to me, when we talked about it, was that he wanted a chance at a more ordinary life, with less freakish control and more ordinary pleasure. It was a decision that grew out of his love for Karen, out of his wish to produce a new and more mature kind

of writing, and out of having glimpsed a different kind of future. It was an incredibly scary and brave thing for him to try, because Dave was full of love, but he was also full of fear – he had all too ready access to those depths of infinite sadness.

So the year was up and down, and he had a crisis in June, and a very hard summer. When I saw him in July he was skinny again, like the late adolescent he’d been during his first big crisis. One of the last times I talked to him after that, in August, on the phone, he asked me to tell him a story of how things would get better. I repeated back to him a lot of what he’d been saying to me in our conversations over the previous year. I said he was in a terrible and dangerous

place because he was trying to make real changes as a person and as a writer. I said that the last time he’d been through near-death experiences, he’d emerged and written, very quickly, a book that was light-years beyond what he’d been doing before his collapse. I said he was a stubborn control freak and know-it-all – ‘So are you!’ he shot back at me – and I said that people like us are so afraid to relinquish control that sometimes the only way we can force ourselves to open up and change is to bring ourselves to an access of misery and the brink of self-destruction. I said he’d undertaken his change in medication because he wanted to grow up and have a better life. I said I thought his best writing was ahead of him. And he said: ‘I like that story. Could you do me a favour and call me up every four or five days and tell me another story like it?’

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

AMY WALLACE-HAVENS is David's sister. She is a deputy public defender in southern Arizona.

BONNIE NADELL is vice president of Frederick Hill Bonnie Nadell Agency in Los Angeles.

GERRY HOWARD is an executive editor at large for Doubleday.

COLIN HARRISON is a novelist, and a vice president and senior editor at Scribner.

MICHAEL PIETSCH is executive vice president and publisher of Little, Brown and Company.

DON DELILLO has written fourteen novels, including *White Noise* and *Underworld*.

ZADIE SMITH has written three novels and the essay collection *Changing My Mind*.

GEORGE SAUNDERS is the author of several books, including *Pastoralia*.

JONATHAN FRANZEN is the author of several books, including *The Corrections*.

MICHAEL SCHMELLING has produced four books of photography. His latest, *The Plan*, features 523 photos on the subject of hoarding. www.michaelschmelling.com

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