On September 12, 2008, the American writer David Foster Wallace committed suicide in Claremont, California. He was 46 and considered by many - to use the cliché he hated and which haunted him - the best writer of his generation.

During the year - which also saw the death of John Updike, the greatest American writer of the second half of the 20th century - Wallace has been eulogized in four public memorials, profiled in *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone* and the recipient of scores of tributes, celebrations and personal remembrances in newspapers and on the Web.

Born in Ithaca, New York, in 1962, Wallace was the author of two novels, three collections of short stories, two collections of nonfiction and numerous essays, magazine articles and criticism. His first novel, *The Broom of the System*, was his undergraduate thesis at Amherst College, where he studied "modal logic" and "mathematics in philosophy." Captivated by the work of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, Wallace converted an ex-girlfriend's observation that it would more interesting to be a character in fiction than a real person into a 400-plus-page story about switchboard operator Lenore Stonecipher Beadsman, who believes words create reality. It landed him an agent, a publishing deal and some buzz in literary circles.

In 1989, he published *Girl with Curious Hair*. "With this collection of stories," *The New York Times* declared, "David Foster Wallace... proves himself a dynamic writer of extraordinary talent, one unafraid to tackle subjects large and small... He succeeds in restoring grandeur to modern fiction, reminding us of the ecstasy, terror, horror and beauty of which it is capable when it is released from the television-screen-sized confines of minimalism."

Wallace battled depression from a young age, leaving college his junior year to return home to Illinois, where his parents worked as college professors. During his late 20s, he contemplated suicide, turning himself in at one point at a local medical center. For a time, the drug Nardil helped him achieve stability. After a stint at graduate school at the University of Arizona in the early '90s, Wallace became a creative writing teacher, posted at Amherst, the University of Illinois at Normal and eventually as the Roy E. Disney Professor at Pomona College in Claremont, outside of Los Angeles. He married visual artist Karen Green in 2001, and by all accounts seemed - and maybe even was - happy.

IN 1996, with the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace stormed the ramparts of the critical establishment. A 1,100-page, darkly comedic, mind-bendingly elaborate elaboration of the inanity and insanity of modern American pop culture, the novel, which defies concise summary, is about a pot-smoking, dictionary-reading high-school tennis player, the reformed criminal/junkie running a halfway house and Quebecois separatists who control a film (that shares the novel's name) which is so entertaining it kills or lobotomizes anyone who watches it. *Infinite Jest* contains hundreds of long, long, long sentences and 96 pages of footnotes.

The glitterati - and, more importantly, for purposes of fame, if not fortune, the vaguely literate - anointed Wallace the great writer and genius of his generation. In *New York Magazine*, Walter Kirn crowed: "Next
year's book awards have been decided. The competition has been obliterated. It's as though Paul Bunyan had joined the NFL, or Wittgenstein had gone on Jeopardy. The novel is that colossally disruptive. And that spectacularly good."

The novelist tried to take it in stride. Indeed, it seems impossible to find anyone with a bad thing to say about him. Even among those who aren't knocked out by his prose. The portrait which emerges, pre- and post-mortem, is of an almost unbelievably brilliant young man, troubled to be sure, but, well, hyper-aware, geeky and puppy-dog cute.

Cecil Giscombe, an English Department colleague at Illinois, remembers him as "a complicated guy. Smart, generous, on edge... we judged an undergraduate student writing contest once and I recall how thorough he was in reading the submissions and how much he admired the intelligence in the work of the winners - I remember sitting in a cramped office talking about what they had done on paper and the awe and pleasure in David's voice."

In an often cited profile in The New York Times, Frank Bruni described the self-mocking Wallace, who had forsworn reading reviews of Infinite Jest, sneaking into the campus library wearing sunglasses to check them out anyway: "I'm an idiot who imagines that people have nothing better to do than sit around and watch me read my reviews." Wallace wore the hatchet-wielding Bruni down, telling him at one point, "If you quote that, I'd really like you to quote that I acknowledge it sounds banal and clichéd."

Friends say Wallace wanted to get off of Nardil and experience life without its effects. He and his doctors agreed he would stop taking the drug in 2007, after it evidently triggered stomach pains following a meal at a Chinese restaurant. In 2008 his depression grew staggeringly bad, he dropped 32 kg. and his parents travelled to California to lift his spirits and, it appears, to help Green look after him. Left alone for a few hours on September 12, Wallace organized his papers, including the unfinished novel The Pale King, wrote a two-page note to his wife and hanged himself on the patio.

HEAVILY INFLUENCED by postmodern literature and fascinated with mathematics and philosophy, his ostentatiously erudite prose, arcane vocabulary (challenging the reader with words like "strambismic" and "erumpent"), and author-in-the-frame, picture-within-picture framework, are exhilarating - and exhausting. As the critic Sven Brikerts observed, in trying to sift through the mass of information available in the modern world, he "internalized some of the decentering energies that computer technologies have released into our midst."

Wallace often discovered something just below the surface, a second or two before everyone else found it, on the tip of the tongue. In that sense, his fiction captured on a meta-level the Microsoft-Google world; he was the Steve Jobs of American letters. Like an iPod, his work can be remote, evoking the clean, smart interfaces of Windows or a Mac, with their abstract, invisible, mind-bogglingly intricate programs inside.

Wallace, it appears, used the perpetual motion machine of writing, throwing his chips all in, with manic elaboration and major brainiac crapola, to stave off the inevitable - despair and death. The approach, he knew, didn't always work. The cliché about the mind as excellent servant and terrible master, he told students at Kenyon College in 2005, "expresses a great and terrible truth. It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in the head. They shoot the terrible master."

David Foster Wallace isn't always "a good read." Updike (whom Wallace reverenced but skewered, along with Norman Mailer and Philip Roth, in a 1997 review, as "The Great Male Narcissists") always insisted on "the centrality in fiction of readerly sensations of suspense, coherence, jouissance and recognition." David Wallace didn't. Consider, for example, Infinite Jest's 21-page description of the game Eschaton, a ramble of regulations, acronyms, conflict and intricately detailed war strategizing. Or Everything and More, his 2003

His self-conscious self-mockery, the novelist Lamar Herrin has observed, was so deep and pervasive "that almost anything he says he is, in effect, unsaying, which provides him a sort of stylistic tabula rasa and license to do it all again."

For better and worse, Wallace, like Samuel Beckett, was talking to himself: "I can't go on, I must go on; I can't shut up, I must shut up." But when Wallace was on, watch out. In The Catcher in the Rye, Holden Caulfield talks about a writer so good "that you wish he was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it." David Wallace can do this to you, even after he has tried your patience. That's why, as critic Caryn James has noted, like Pynchon, Stanley Elkin and John Irving, he could throw lots and lots of "stuff" against the wall and make some of it stick. And so, the same book that gives you 21 pages of rules for an adolescent game can be so spot on you put your reading glasses down and take a walk.

Here's a character named Charles Tavis: "Like many gifted bureaucrats, Hal's mother's adoptive brother Charles Tavis is physically small in a way that seems less endocrine perspectival. His smallness resembles the smallness of something that's farther away from you than it wants to be, plus is receding. This weird appearance of recessive drift, together the with compulsive hand-movements that followed his quitting smoking some years back, helped contribute to the quality of perpetual frenzy about the man, a kind of locational panic that it's easy to see explains not only Tavis's compulsive energy... but maybe also contributes to the pathological openness of his manner, the way he thinks out loud about thinking out loud..."

IN THE early '90s, Wallace took up magazine writing and the results were inspired. In fact, most of Wallace's nonfiction work is excellent. As Cecil Giscombe told us: "In the essays what I see is David's tenaciousness and his unwillingness to put up with false fronts and empty-headed gestures or slogans or occasions even as the work entertains and examines them."

A good case can be made that he's at his best when confined by the conventional form of short stories and essays. Such constraints bothered him and in classic Wallace style he rebelled - he wrote 20,000- to 30,000-word magazine articles and his short fiction collection, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, begins with a two-paragraph story on page zero. Nonetheless, the ostensibly absurd idea of Harper's editor Colin Harrison to send Wallace on a cruise ship yielded the 1993 article (and subsequent collection of essays with the same title), A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again. It is hilarious, moving and, ultimately, maybe the most alchemistic expression of Wallace's essence, at least for mere mortals who aren't up for the fiction.

The essay begins with Wallace in the airport at the end of his week at sea on a vessel named the Zenith, which he rechristens the Nadir, "trying to summon a kind of hypnotic sensuous collage" of his experience.

"I have seen sucrose beaches and a water very bright blue. I have seen an all-red leisure suit with flared lapels. I have smelled what suntan lotion smells like spread over 21,000 pounds of hot flesh. I have been addressed as 'Mon' in three different nations. I have watched 500 upscale Americans dance the Electric Slide. I have seen sunsets that looked computer-enhanced and a tropical moon that looked more like a sort of obscenely large and dangling lemon than the good old stony US moon I'm used to... I have (very briefly) joined a Conga Line."

STORYTELLING COMES, of course, in all different forms, but, as Updike insisted, it often conforms to a pattern: Readers are drawn in to an accessible story, brought along by solid writing and, in the best stuff, transported by a deeper meaning which stirs their deeper parts. This is true for the Supposedly Fun Thing that David Wallace never did again. In his signature manic style, he logs everything that happened to him. But along the way, the trip turns lugubrious, the narrative dark and the seas get choppy. It's like you're
watching the poor kid get down and go down. By the end, he is locked in his cabin, a no-show at the final events of the trip.

"This deep and creative visual trance... which period I spent entirely in cabin 1009, in bed, mostly looking out the spotless porthole, with trays and various rinds all around me, feeling maybe a little glassy-eyed but mostly good - good to be on the Nadir and good soon to be off, good that I had survived (in a way) being pampered to death (in a way) - and so I stayed in bed. And even though the tranced stasis caused me to miss the final night's climatic Passenger Talent Show and the Farewell Midnight Buffet and then Saturday's docking and a chance to have my after photo taken with Captain G. Panagiotakis, subsequent reentry into the adult demands of landlocked real world life wasn't nearly as bad as a week of Absolutely Nothing had led me to fear."

This conclusion is an existential sneak attack on how to conduct our lives in a universe that seems to be devoid of meaning. It's a soul touching, gallant effort by the then 33-year-old man, who tried, desperately, to remember, with Beckett, that "habit, everyday routine, is a blissful painkiller, distracting us from the perilous zones in the life of an individual, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being."

If inclined, friends and fans looking for some meaning or explanation of David Foster Wallace's suicide - or if that doesn't work, for a place to remember him - can possibly find traction here. For at least in this passage, the author is, if not at peace, then at least not in pain, as he prepares to engage, even if he can't embrace, the quotidian, landlocked life. He is there - and here - looking out the spotless porthole, feeling a little glassy-eyed but mostly good. And staving off despair.

Aren't we all.

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