

How to Read Books While Rome Burns?

These are dark times. And stupid ones. Conflict in the Middle East, and conflict in Europe, a cost-of-living crisis, impending climate catastrophe, widespread mistrust throughout both national and international politics, and the electorate's seemingly instinctive disinterest in those very politicians who are so busy mistrusting one another, all buzz indiscriminately in the ensuing (and not blameless) media frenzies. And while the media buzzes, election turnouts in the UK have steadily declined, with young people, specifically those between 18 and 21, the least likely to vote. News item after news item is streamed direct into the comfort of homes while it becomes increasingly hard to tell the difference between political elections and Love Island evictions. In the context of such calamity, reading David Foster Wallace's beguiling, perplexing, taxing, and rewarding writing may seem like settling down to read a good book while Rome burns, but then reading good books mightn't be the most foolish course of action in such a situation, and to my mind Foster Wallace has some important and mindful things to say in (and of) such a context.

Foster Wallace's reputation reached a peak in the years following his death by suicide in 2008, but the worship of the lost American genius has since been balanced by some much-needed critical scrutiny. Notwithstanding the tennis players, drug addicts and wheelchair bound, Québécois terrorists, Foster Wallace's novel, *Infinite Jest* (which was published in 1996), is at its heart an enquiry into the nature of

entertainment and the lengths to which we are willing to go in the pursuit of pleasure.

Towards the end of the novel, and just as he is about to succumb to drug addiction and mental breakdown, Hal Incandenza admits:

It now lately sometimes seemed like a kind of black miracle to me that people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end. Could dedicate their entire lives to it. It seemed admirable and at the same time pathetic. We are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately - the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly. To games or needles, to some other person. Something pathetic about it. A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into. Flight from exactly what? These rooms blandly filled with excrement and meat? To what purpose?

Hal wonders ‘To what purpose?’ To what purpose should young people jump through the countless (and increasing) educational hoops designed by successive governments to skew statistics? To what purpose should young people avoid the needles and the internet and the vapes and the Guinness and plunge headlong into careers and tax and long-term mortgages?

Some of the answers to those questions, I think, can be found in Foster Wallace’s writing, and specifically in the work that Foster Wallace’s writing requires the reader to do. For Foster Wallace, literary cleverness cannot be an end in and of itself: literature has a responsibility to speak to the world as much as to mimic it. In an interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993, he explained:

If what's always distinguished bad writing--flat characters, a narrative world that's clichéd and not recognizably human, etc.--is also a description of today's world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world. If readers simply believe the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then [Bret] Ellis can write a mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything. [...] we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that

locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.

In applying CPR, Foster Wallace's art also encourages his readers to reflect upon a cluster of deep and difficult questions. To what purpose does fiction relate to life and what can it teach us? To what extent should we pursue happiness? Is happiness the same as fulfilment, or pleasure?

Foster Wallace believed that 'Fiction's about what it is to be a [...] human being', and as I just said, he also believed that it ought to make the reader work. Or perhaps to put it slightly differently, he reminds us that fictions don't only have meanings that readers ought to figure out (or find), but rather those meanings intertwine with form in order to make the reader think, and feel, and maybe even change. In an interview with Laura Miller in 1996, Foster Wallace observed:

[There] is this existential loneliness in the real world. I don't know what you're thinking or what it's like inside you and you don't know what it's like inside me. In fiction I think we can leap over that wall itself in a certain way. But that's just the first level, because the idea of mental or emotional intimacy with a character is a delusion or a contrivance ... There's a kind of Ah-ha! Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do. It doesn't happen all the time. It's these brief flashes or flames, but I get that sometimes. I feel unalone – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness.

There are plenty of writers who would agree with this kind of thinking, from Dante to Primo Levi, and Shakespeare to Samuel Beckett (to name some of my own favourites). And yet as Foster Wallace's writing also suggests, attending to such complexity is difficult, it requires effort and concentration and a willingness to be

frustrated. On the other side of that frustration, there are rewards to be found, as Foster Wallace puts it, ‘intellectually, emotionally, spiritually’.

In the aftermath of Foster Wallace’s suicide, his wife Karen Green produced the stunning lyric elegy that I now have in my hand. *Bough Down* is a meditation on grief that includes carefully crafted prose poems and visual art (Green was an artist before becoming an author) and in it she certainly asks her reader to work. As I read one short section from Green’s collection, think about the way her use of rhyme acts as a call to memory, while she describes her own memory being triggered by the sound of Foster Wallace’s father’s laughter; think about the way such rhyme acts as a structuring device amidst the devastation of her grief; it provides a shape to both thoughts and feelings that the reader momentarily accesses; it offers a means by which the reader can enter a ‘deep, significant conversation’ that both acknowledges the commonality of grief (it is, as Hamlet’s mother reminds him, common to us all), and yet at the same time the precise particularity of each individual’s experience (which is exactly what Hamlet points out in response to his mother in Shakespeare’s play).

In this passage, Green asks her reader to imagine her own act of imagination: she wants to put her former husband’s parents together in the hope that it will recreate him and so she herself will be resurrected (she will get her ‘life back’). She is struck by the passage of time, its cyclical nature, but she is also trapped by the fact that her life is now divided permanently into a before and an after. What Foster Wallace has done, can never be undone. But that’s enough preamble. Green writes:

September again and

I take your parents to the lighthouse, I do. There is nothing but September fog to cover our shame, and your father laughs just like you, at the opacity. I want to eat the laugh, I want to rub it on my chest like camphor, I want to make a sound tattoo. I also want to bash these two small people together and see if a collision of DNA will give me my life back. Last night we had a lightning storm, unprecedented. It scared me to think about who might be conducting it.

Green worries about who might have been conducting the ‘unprecedented’ storm, because the suggestion that someone might be doing so implies a presence that may also judge the decision taken by her husband to end his life. In the very midst of her pain, Green manages to ‘illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human’. Reading this material isn’t easy, the experience of working through Green’s collection and reflecting upon its implications is far from pleasurable, or entertaining, if by that we mean an addictive distraction of the kind Foster Wallace describes in *Infinite Jest*. Instead, by confronting the darkness, Green’s writing, and perhaps all great writing, momentarily allows us to feel, as Foster Wallace puts it, ‘unalone’. And in such dark and stupid times, that (I think) is extremely valuable.