The Broom of the System Short Guide

The Broom of the System by David Foster Wallace

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Contents

Characters

Simply because of their respective sheer heft, Wallace's two novels have many, many characters, both peripheral and pivotal.

Despite the surfeit of intriguing minor characters, it is, as with most novels, The Broom of the System's very few major ones that demand our closest attention. Often in Wallace's works minor characters provide plot color, and aid in filling in plot circumstances, as minor characters are generally expected to function. And it is in these many characters' names that Wallace displays his penchant for gags, with names like Judith Prietht (after "Judas Priest," the hard-rock music group), Dick Lipp, and Sigurd Foamwhistle, and the gymnasts, Ruble and Kopek Spaskova (after Russian currency), for example. One thing that is especially significant about the major characters is their doubling. Lenore is echoed by her perpetually absent grandmother of the same name; Lenore's brother, Stoney (IV), is recalled in his domineering father, Stonecipher III; Lenore's employer and casual partner, Rick Vigorous, is reflected in his fictional alter ego, Monroe Fieldbinder; and Andrew Sealander Lang is mirrored in his youthful persona, "Wang Dang" Lang.

Wallace's doubling of characters is often confusing, especially when combined with the multitudinous array of secondary and tertiary minor characters, but is nevertheless executed for significant reasons. Because The Broom of the System is so intent on exploring the themes of isolation, communication, and self-consciousness, it follows then that Wallace highlights these aspects in his major characters. Doubling of characters is symbolic of these characters' failure to get out of themselves, to cease their inward retreat to the mind and the accompanying and paralyzing self-conscious introspection. Lenore's grandmother is thus symbolic of Lenore's proclivity to think continually only of herself. And Monroe Fieldbinder is a fictional persona in Vigorous's "Combination Embryonic Journal and Draft Space for Fieldbinder Collection." Vigorous writes humorously bad stories for this journal in which the protagonist possesses all of the characteristics that Vigorous lacks and covets: a cleft chin, a large sexual organ, and larger physical stature, among numerous others. In all of the Fieldbinder episodes, Fieldbinder repeatedly "grins wryly" when faced with dire circumstances and removes lint from his "impeccable slacks," and is simply the projection of all that Vigorous is not and wishes he could be. Therefore, both Lenore and Vigorous continually retreat into their own self-conscious headspace instead of confronting the difficult realities of their respective situations, and negate any possibility for redemption and abundant living free from despair in their lives. Andrew Lang operates similarly but seems to be the only substantial character who is wholly unself-conscious. His youthful persona ("Wang Dang" Lang) is just that, a representation of his past life. When faced with the despair resulting in an unfulfilling marital relationship, he sunders the marriage with frank and brutal honesty and pursues a new life—he does not become mired in his own consciousness, but rather seeks relationships with others to relieve his depression.

One of the few times that Lenore actually attains a moment outside herself is when she visits her brother, Stoney (IV). With him she discusses her grandmother's recent,

baffling disappearance and the sketch she left on the back of a Stonecipheco, Inc. babyfood label (the family company and bitter rival of Gerbers). Stoney (or La Vache or the Antichrist as he prefers) interprets the ballpoint pen sketch of a barber with his head exploded, and links it to Wittgensteinian philosophy. The sketch is itself a philosophical antinomy (a contradiction between two conclusions that are in themselves reasonable) in which the barber is said to shave "all and only those who don't shave themselves." The dilemma then is whether or not the barber shaves himself. Here the barber represents the human condition, and in particular Lenore, who tends to see herself as nothing more than a linguistic construct and, thus, not real.

What follows in the discussion between Lenore and Stoney is complex and intentionally taxing for the reader. In brief, the barber is symbolic of ourselves and shaving is symbolic of our own thinking. For both Lenore senior and junior, thinking about our thinking is a valid exercise, but is inherently solipsistic and thus dangerous. For Stoney, who explains the philosophical "game" for Lenore, "all thinking requires an object, something to think of or about."

Thus, the only valid objects of thought are the "things that are not that act of thought, that are Other." To think of our own thinking is to fulfill the game's rules by making ourselves an Other—"we are ourselves Other," but doing so is still an infraction: "So if we can think ourselves, we can't; and if we can't, we can. KABLAM . . . There go the old crania."

By having numerous doubled characters, Wallace underscores the serious nature of thinking only of ourselves as objects of otherness. The characters that do so are thus little better than Lenore's parrot, Vlad the Impaler, who stares at his grimy reflection in his cage's sullied mirror's reflection— ironic self-consciousness becomes a symbolic cage of our own design and isolation, Wallace seems to be saying here. Ultimately, this philosophical aspect of The Broom of the System serves to aggravate the reader's sensibility, and to make us aware of our solipsistic habits of mind that contribute to mental isolation, despair, and, potentially, dementia.

Thus, Wallace's aesthetic of having the artifact (the novel itself) act as a form of "conversation" between writer and reader in the service of remedying existential despair is here evinced.

Social Concerns

Although David Foster Wallace is a staggeringly imaginative and erudite novelist, essayist, and cultural critic with wideranging interests and often profound, sober convictions, his fiction has converged on a very few, specific, though important, concerns. Typical, perhaps, of both an English and philosophy major (Amherst College during the mid-eighties), Wallace has infused these two disciplines into his fiction in unique ways. What is particularly invigorating and forms the foundation between the marriage of these disciplines in Wallace's work is his unflagging belief that literature is a "living transaction between humans." He made this remark in an interview with Larry McCaffery for the Review of Contemporary Fiction, noting that the contemporary artist, or novelist, must endeavor to touch, or "converse" with, the reader— without pretension. In interviews Wallace repeatedly returns to his guiding aesthetic; as he told McCaffery: "real art-fiction's job is to aggravate [a] sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny."

Wallace contends, in an interview with Salon's Laura Miller, that millennial America suffers from a paradoxical condition of existential "lostness" brought on by an exaggerated climate of pleasure or, as he calls it in his second novel, Infinite Jest (q.v.), "happification" (1996). For Wallace, a culture of heavy irony—initially employed and articulated by early American postmodern writers ("Fiction became conscious of itself in a way it never had been," he told McCaffery) and later co-opted by television, the Internet, advertising, and other commercial arts—informs contemporary American society, and has resulted in a form of cultural deadening, or "death in life," as he terms it. As Wallace sees it, contemporary (American) fiction has continued this ironic trend of general, worldweary cynicism and dead-pan ridicule ("a hatred that winks and nudges you and pretends it's just kidding," he asserted to McCaffery) to the point where it has now become difficult to discern whether authors, or anyone for that matter, actually mean what they say, or write. This artistic "Ar mageddon," as Wallace diagnoses it, peaks when fiction writers no longer attempt to reach their readers in a manner that differs from the prevailing cultural norms of ironic cynicism. As TV and the other commercial arts have now co-opted this ironic discourse, American fiction writers now, more than ever, need to engage readers in a fresh and vigorous mode that impacts readers and awakens them from their docility and complacency. In his interview with McCaffery, Wallace claimed: "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 world-view as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it."

Wallace argues that readers are already very familiar with commercial art's slick, ironic contrivances, and are also prodigally familiar with American materialism. Now we need

new fictions that refrain from recasting familiar things, and that instead, he told McCaffery, "restore strange things' ineluctable strangeness, to defamiliarrze stuff."

In other words, to defamiliarize the everyday familiar that contributes to reader lethargy and existential lostness. We are all, Wallace noted to McCaffery, "marooned in [our] own skull[s]" and, consequently, are potentially lonely, requiring some form of linguistic nourishment that the novel is ideally suited to provide. In the same interview, he asserted: "If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still are human beings, now. Or can be."

As such, Wallace often takes it as his aesthetic program to merge his ideas on art and fiction with the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (and that philosopher's claims of language being fundamentally relational and communal to have any value), to produce labor-intensive fiction that rewards the reader with what he termed an "accessible payoff" in the interview with McCaffery.

Wallace's first novel, The Broom of the System (1987)—originally written as an honor's undergraduate thesis—is an artifact that displays the novelist's aesthetic ideas while at the same time acting as an entrancing conversational read. That is, this novel (as metafiction) itself subtly comments on the apparatus of itself as a "Novel"; and it at all times probes at the ideas of existential loneliness and severed communicational ties that Wallace finds contemporary Americans to be suffering acutely from. Part of the charm of The Broom of the System is that it simultaneously operates on the dual levels of, first, a sophisticated philosophical language game and, second, as simply an engrossing and entertaining read, full of humor and gags. No knowledge of Wittgenstein's philosophy is necessary to enjoy the novel; at the same time, however, readers are implicitly encouraged to expand their knowledge base by refreshing themselves on the work's philosophical allusions in order to fully appreciate the more complex elements of the narrative. That is, readers are encouraged to think—and think hard.

Techniques

Wallace's aesthetic ideas regarding the purpose of the novel fuse with his stylistic strategies. In fact, Wallace deploys literary techniques only in the service of his novels' central concern of writer-reader communication—excepting, perhaps, for some of his more overdetermined gags! Wallace's novels are at times less novels than they are composites of fragmented discourse. The Broom of the System itself is comprised of hospital duty logs, an evangelical Christian television show dialogue, journal entries, transcripts of meetings between politicians, transcripts of meetings between a psychologist and his patients, newspaper articles, and even fictional submissions to Rick Vigorous's creative-writing journal, which stories Vigorous faithfully retells to Lenore.

All of which combine to make an incredibly engaging and entertaining read, although in turn make it correspondingly complex and difficult to follow.

Again, however, Wallace contends that reader exertion is central to serious fiction's purpose of literary redemption. As noted above, Wallace considers serious fiction to be a "living transaction between humans," and that for fiction to do its job it requires serious reader input as fiction is: "a relationship between the writer's consciousness and [the reader's] own, and that in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship, [the reader's] going to have to put in [the reader's] share of the linguistic work."

Much of this so-called "linguistic work" relates integrally to Wallace's narrative techniques. In the interview with McCaffery, Wallace contends that his narrative style is "nothing terribly sophisticated," but is, rather, simply the opposite of TV's strategy of soothing the senses and rewarding "passive spectation." The Broom of the System is therefore "uneasy"; that is, it causes unease— or "dis-ease"—by making readers confront what they would ignore, and by making the task of apprehending the novel's message an activity of their own making. Wallace, by his own admission, uses lots of cinematic "flash-cuts," interrupts his own narratives with "digressions and interpolations," uses discontinuous chronological sequences, light punctuation and long sentences, and many narrative voices. These techniques imply a chaotic and disordered work; however, the opposite is the case: Wallace leaves the marshaling of this information up to the reader to piece together.

Once the hard work is accomplished, enjoyment follows. Thus it is up to the reader to fight through these sometimes distracting stylistic techniques, to connect fragmented elements, to ultimately obtain the latent linguistic message or, as he explained to McCaffery, achieve the "accessible payoff" to participate in and profit from this potentially vibrant linguistic relationship.

Themes

As is typical with Wallace's work, The Broom of the System is at once immensely complex, yet extremely simple, though never simplistic. The novel focuses principally on one Lenore Beadsman and her efforts to understand herself in relation to the external world, not experientially but rather existennally. Although from a wealthy family and well-educated herself, Lenore chooses to work as a minimum-wage, receptiondesk phone operator for "Frequent and Vigorous Publishing, Inc." (or "F and V" for short, which potentially translates into "Effin Vee" when read quickly—just one of many puns and gags), operated by Rick Vigorous, who also happens to be Lenore's partner. The primary theme of the novel is that of communication or, more precisely, severed communication. Early on in the novel, F and V's switchboard suffers a malfunction of sorts, or "line trouble," making it impossible for the company's phone operators to receive appropriate incoming calls; that is, they only receive wrong-number calls. A mix-up of the lines in the tunnel of the office building's bowels is the source of the problem, resulting in a shared, single number with establishments that share the communications labyrinth and are close to F and V's phone number. As a result, F and V receives calls from people trying to reach such humorous entities as "Enrique's House of Cheese" and "Bambi's Den of Discipline." This theme merges nicely with Wallace's aesthetic ideas on the sundered relationship between reader and writer in contemporary fiction, and the core existential premise from which he operates, that we are all essentially alone even as we are surrounded by others, and that commercial art only fools us into thinking that we are less alone, when in fact, it re-enforces a sense of entrapment and isolation because these arts only provide the simulacrum of the real thing.

Lenore Beadsman's crisis is purely existential, and she is typically withdrawn and inward throughout the novel. In fact, her defense mechanism when pressed to sincerely express her feelings, or in moments of crisis, is to retreat to the shower: "I would kill for a shower"—she (like Wallace himself, admittedly) is an obsessive bather.

The shower itself serves as a fine symbol for society's millennial condition: the retreat to the isolated, warm, and soothing condition of the shower is representative of our own retreat from difficult problems of human existence to easy, consoling commercial art that rewards what Wallace termed "passive spectation" in the McCaffery interview, and never challenges as Wallace says the novel must do. Furthermore, the district of Cleveland that Lenore lives in, from the air, resembles "the profile of Jayne Mansfield"—Lenore's grandfather, Stonecipher II, infatuated with the actress and an "amateur urban planner," designed the Mansfield cityscape plan. What is significant about this is that Lenore's apartment is located in Mansfield's genitals; that is, Lenore literally and figuratively lives in Mansfield's womb (an image that Wallace returns to in Infinite Jest). Like the shower, Lenore's dwelling place then is another place of warm, wet, soothing isolation that she retreats to.

The Broom of the System is part "coded autobio" and part "funny little poststructual gag," as Wallace claims in his conversation with McCaffery. He goes on to assert that hidden beneath the "sex-change" (the writer's) and "gags and theoretical allusions" is a

"sensitive little . . . bildungsroman." The Broom of the System emerged from Wallace's own personal existential crisis experienced during his time at Amherst College, where he made the transition from a talented math and logic whiz to an English major. Wallace has remarked that this extremity was brought on by the sudden loss of reward and joy from his sophisticated engagement with math; the discipline, in a sense, became hollow and empty for him. After this "midlife crisis," Wallace devoted himself to letters and revived the special feeling of worth and value that he had formerly known in his manipulation of math and logic; however, this too was fleeting and was accom panied by further crisis, as he remarked to McCaffery: "[T]hink of The Broom of the System as the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who's just had this mid-life crisis that's moved him from coldly cerebral analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction . . . which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6{Â°} calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct."

And this is precisely Lenore Beadsman's fear, that she is "really nothing more than a character in a story" (as Wallace described his predicament to McCaffery) without meaning and alone, defining herself as linguistic against the backdrop of an indifferent external world. To her pompous and unethical therapist, Dr. Jay, Lenore, applying her grandmother's (also named Lenore Beadsman) ideas on language—borrowed from Wittgenstein as Lenore senior was a student of the Austrian philosopher—attempts to understand her situation within language: "[S]uppose Gramma tells me really convincingly that all that really exists of my life is what can be said about it?"

Lenore further articulates her situation of despair to be that "the living is the telling, that there's nothing going on with me that isn't either told or tellable, and if so, what's the difference, why live at all?" But it is not that we are comprised of language, Wallace remarked to Larry McCaffery, rather, that we are "in language": "it's not that language is us, but we're still in it, inescapably." This, for Wallace, is the dilemma, borrowed from Wittgenstein: that if we consider ourselves to be no more than functioning linguistic constructs (as detached from the external world), and thus as heavily self-conscious, then we regress to almost complete solipsism—the theory or view that the self is all that exists or can be known. We are thus further entrenched in existential despair, and our solipsism is further compounded by the popular commercial arts, like TV, that has for its basic premise isolated viewing without any form of legitimate, two-way communication. Following Wittgenstein, Wallace argues to McCaffery that "for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons." Hence, Wallace makes it his underpinning premise for the novel to be constantly and unpretentiously communicative, to be, as he described to McCaffery, "a relationship between the writer's consciousness" and the reader's, although difficult. But as with any conversation, or "real full human relationship," the reader is required "to put in her share of the linguistic work."

This is why The Broom of the System is so fixated on human relationships, or rather failed connections and failed human relationships. Rick Vigorous, as a diminutive person with a diminutive sex organ and consequently low self-esteem, continually demands declarations of love from Lenore.

However, what he really desires is to be Lenore's absolute, her everything—he attempts to penetrate her consciousness (as he cannot adequately connect with her physically) quite literally and to be her only thought, day and night, "truly completely and finally to take Lenore Beadsman inside myself." Norman Bombardini operates in the opposite fashion—with Lenore as his fixation as well—as he attempts to escape his loneliness by literally eating his way to infinite size, thereby incorporating everyone and everything—but his strategy (doomed to fail for logistical reasons) inevitably terminates in a similar solipsism: both Vigorous and Bombardini require fulfilling human relationships, but are unprepared to obtain them in a selfless and unselfconscious fashion. Thus nearly everyone in the novel has phony or one-way relationships. Lenore's brother, Stonecipher IV (a.k.a. Stoney, LaVache, and the Antichrist) has a similarly solipsistic relationship with his hollow prosthetic leg, in which he stores goods obtained for providing illegitimate academic services for college students. And to avoid contact with his father, Stonecipher III, Stoney tells him that he does not own a telephone, instead christening it a "lymph node" to avoid lying. Mr. Bloemker, manager of the Shaker Heights Nursing Home, has a one-way relationship with a life-sized, anatomically correct, and very human-looking inflatable doll that he takes out in public for cocktails. Lenore's sister's family have weekly "family theater night," a heavily solipsistic activity in which family members perform before an audience generated from an "audience disc" on their TV. During this performance, family members wear masks of themselves, so that Alvin wears an "Alvin-mask," Clarice, a "Clarice-mask," and cavort until they feel "alone and invisible and unhappy." Even Lenore's pet, a Cockatiel named Vlad the Impaler is said to be "schizophrenically narcissistic" as he sits atop his perch in his cage, staring at himself in his excrement-encrusted mirror, narcissistically entranced by his own shabby image. All of whom directly underscore Wallace's conviction that the novel, in an age of almost toxic cultural irony and solipsistic art, is failing to engage readers and to awaken them to their isolated lives even as The Broom of the System seeks to break this societal pattern by demonstrating the effects of solipsism on its own characters.

Adaptations

As of yet, neither of Wallace's novels has been released as audio books. This, however, is understandable because of their extraordinary difficulty and use of many narrative strategies and voices; such vicissitude and complexity does not lend well to the audio medium. Moreover, their enormity and proclivity to footnotes similarly cancels any likelihood of a Wallace audio book in the near future. One suspects that Wallace's aesthetic of active engagement with a literary text would be eroded if his novels were converted to audio format: the simple movement between text and Wallacean footnotes (of which there are none in The Broom of the System) could not be adequately accommodated by the audio medium.

In interviews Wallace has admitted to having sold the film rights to Infinite Jest, but not his earlier The Broom of the System.

However, as with audio books, the probability of seeing either novel in film format is again extremely improbable. In fact, Wallace rather humorously allowed in an interview that he sold the rights to his second novel knowing full well the impossibility of translating that work to the silver screen.

And translation of media is precisely the crux, for to do so would inevitably lead to sacrificing his novels' tremendous philosophical content and other subtleties and peculiarities that simply cannot be represented in the celluloid medium, like footnotes, for example. The sole exception is Wallace's Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, which is available as an audio book (read by the author himself in fact) but is abridged, which seems to underscore the difficulty in re-presenting Wallace's works in differing media.

Key Questions

It is a commonplace that literature, particularly the novel, is a venue for examining societal trends, to force readers and members of such societies to confront the difficult problems of their times. And with art, a pursuit that is often mistakenly equated with entertainment, this goal is often a difficult one to achieve without losing the intended audience: to make people look at what is harmful and wretched in themselves, what they would rather ignore, is an extremely arduous task, particularly in the world of art, a place where we often come to "escape" our problems. In The Broom of the System Wallace takes great care to force the reader to countenance the conflicts of late millennial America. The rigor of Wallace's self-imposed effort is compounded when we consider the near-infinite amount of entertaining and stimulating choices available to us in the world of entertainment.

The novel, especially as Wallace envisions it, would have us work to obtain its message — and an unsettling message it can often be— making it difficult for the novel to compete in an age of instant and easy gratification.

This, however, makes Wallace's work so rare; his ability to engage and transfix, while simultaneously transforming readers adds an extra dimension to American fiction.

1. If, as Wallace contends, fiction allows the reader to identify with a character's pain and suffering, how does that enrich the reader? How do you see this to be a positive, or mentally nourishing, exercise?

2. What are the consequences of cultural irony as Wallace sees it? Does it lead to a mentality that implies that we never have to mean what we say? If so, then how is this detrimental to our communications and relations with others?

What are some remedying alternatives?

3. Why do you think that Wallace includes so many gags and jokes in The Broom of the System? What about the characters' humorous names—do they reveal anything? Are these gags at times tiresome? If so, is there a potential for these gags to focus attention on the writer of The Broom of the System more so than on the text itself? What are the consequences of this?

4. Wallace asserts that TV has now adopted fiction's strategies of ironic undermining. How is television portrayed in The Broom of the System (paying close attention to the Reverend Sykes's Christian Broadcasting Network)? Why do you think that Wallace satirizes this particular type of program? Does he poke fun at it for a purpose, or just for the sake of a very well-known gag? If it is just for the sake of a joke, and one that we are all very familiar with, does this go against much of what Wallace contends about the novel?

5. What is the missing final word of the book? Why is it missing, and what is significant about its absence? Does it have anything to do with who is speaking?

6. What is significant about the GOD (Great Ohio Desert)? Why do the politicians decide to create a blank, arid wasteland in the midst of an otherwise fertile region? What is significant about the acronym—and how is this related to consciousness and communication, as Wallace sees it?

7. Why does Wallace include the subplot regarding Stonecipheco's top-secret, advanced baby food that promotes advanced cognition and language acquirement for infants, but does not really resolve it or return to it? What is symbolic about Stonecipheco's latest development? Is it harmful, and how does it work in the context of fulfilling human relationships?

Literary Precedents

Wallace is coy about literary influences, although his reticence does not imply secrecy. In fact, Wallace is a true and voracious reader, one who gladly and openly comments on literature that has deeply affected him. However, it is difficult to precisely classify his work and, for that matter, any type of literary movement that his work might be said to emerge from. In his quest for originality and sincerity, Wallace dismisses literary "schools" as slavish and sycophantic, relegating them to what he calls the "crank-turners," novelists who adopt a visionary novelist's program and produce similar works thereafter, capitalizing on literary fads. It is perhaps more useful—though perhaps still vague—to see Wallace's work emerging simply out of the whole tradition of literature written in English instead of any one movement. Diverse writers such as John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins (whom Wallace particularly reveres and suggests that the poet be a "touchstone" for American fiction writers), Philip Larkin, Stendhal, Shakespeare, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Manuel Puig, and Julio Cortazar, among many others can be said to inform Wallace's work in subtle and innovative ways.

Because of Wallace's broad education, knowledge of math, fine sense of humor, and heavy use of acronyms (see The Broom of the System's "GOD," for the "Great Ohio Desert"), his work is often compared to that of Thomas Pynchon, although he claims not to have read the elder novelist until after composing Infinite Jest. The Broom of the System (and Infinite Jest, for that matter) can, nonetheless, be generally classified as an encyclopedic novel in the tradition of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick and James Joyce's Ulysses for its length, wide-ranging concerns, cultural satire, humor, and linguistic games.

Related Titles

Wallace's other novel, Infinite Jest (1996), can be said to be a more refined extension of many or all of The Broom of the System's concerns, with slightly less philosophical content, but with a much greater level of difficulty—Infinite Jest weighs in at 1079 pages with some 388 endnotes (with some endnotes containing their own footnotes).

In Infinite Jest, similar examinations of The Broom of the System's considerations of toxic irony, solipsism, existential despair, communication, and art as a healer of existential isolation appear, though with a greater emphasis on aesthetic ideals.

Other collections of short fiction include Girl with Curious Hair (1989) and Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (1999). As well, Wallace has published a collection of originally published journalistic essays entitled, A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again (1997). These essays themselves are every bit as entertaining, enjoyable, and enriching as Wallace's fiction, and offer similarly prescient and acute analyses of American culture, on such diverse topics as tennis tournaments, cruise ship liners, state fairs, and the film director, David Lynch. A recent essay for Rolling Stone magazine, now published complete as a full-length electronic-book, titled Up Simba! 7 Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate (2000), is a fine exploration of politics and sincerity in which Wallace traveled with GOP primary candidate and senator, John McCain. Wallace has one primary focus in all of these essays, however, and that is his concern or unease at the current state of American cultural irony that he finds to be so pernicious and pervasive.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

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Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994