A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments Study Guide

A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments by David Foster Wallace

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

This book is a collection of essays by David Foster Wallace written between 1992 and 1996. These essays cover a wide range of topics from tennis to film and literature and even a luxury cruise in the lengthy titular essay.

The first essay details Wallace's career as a junior tennis player. Wallace explains that he was a very good tennis player when he was young because he could take advantage of the geometry of the court and the strange irregularities of playing in Illinois. Wallace plays well by simply returning his opponent's volleys until the opponent makes a mistake or has an emotional breakdown on the court. Wallace finds this method of play successful until his opponents develop much faster than him physically and are able to simply overpower him.

The second essay is a criticism of contemporary television and postmodern fiction. Wallace believes that television is not inherently bad, but people watch it too much, and it is too self-referential. Wallace relates television self-referential quality to the meta-fiction on the 1960s. Wallace argues that television relies heavily on an irony that forces viewers to watch continuously so they can always be in on the joke instead of the butt of it. It is nearly impossible to attack this irony because it can simply insult the attacker. Wallace thinks that the only way to unseat this irony is for artists to be willing to risk authentic feelings.

In the third essay, Wallace is commissioned to attend the Illinois State Fair and write about the experience. Wallace argues that people in rural areas like Illinois take vacations to be with other people while people in cities vacation to get away from people. Thus the fair is about the state as a kind of large community. However, Wallace discovers that the fair itself is divided into different sorts of communities such as the as the agriculture professionals and people who come for the carnival rides. Wallace further argues that ultimately the fair is all about food at some level or another, which is fitting for Illinois as its economy is based around agriculture.

In the fourth essay, Wallace discusses the literary criticism of H. L. Hix, who tries to save the notion of the author from poststructuralist critics.

The fifth essay previews David Lynch's new film "Lost Highway" and contextualizes it with Lynch's other work. Wallace summarizes "Lost Highway's" convoluted plot and describes the few scenes he saw being filmed. Wallace explains that what makes a work "Lynchian" is the constant presence of the macabre in the mundane. Wallace argues that Lynch's films are so emotionally effective because they implicate the audience in the evil that they witness on screen.

The sixth essay is a biographical piece on professional tennis player Michael Joyce. Wallace goes to watch Joyce at the Canadian Open and is overwhelmed by how much better all the professionals are than he had imagined. Joyce himself plays a "power-baseline" style of tennis in the tradition of Andre Agassi. Wallace argues that like many

other professional athletes, Joyce has forsaken all other paths in life to play a game that he loves. In many ways that choice was made long ago and it may have never been Joyce's choice at all.

The last essay details Wallace's experience on a seven day luxury Caribbean cruise. Although the cruise is meant to be a form of relaxation, Wallace discovers that it fills him with despair. Wallace analogizes the pampering given to cruise passengers to the care given by a mother to her infant, so in many ways a cruise is a way for adults to revert to the status of children. Wallace also quickly grows accustomed to the level of luxury of the ship and finds that he only desires more because there is no way to satisfy the childish impulse to want everything. Wallace concludes that people go on cruises but do not feel that they deserve such treatment and so in some way resent the people who give it to them.

Pages 1-41

Pages 1-41 Summary and Analysis

The first essay in the collection describes Wallace's childhood tennis playing in Illinois.

Wallace begins his first essay, "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley," by explaining that he studied mathematics in college because the subject reminded him of the straight lines of Midwestern geography. This leads Wallace into a discussion of his briefly successful junior tennis career. Wallace attributes his success in the game to his ability to use the small imperfections in Illinois' tennis courts as well as the strong Illinois wind to his advantage even though he was one of the physically smallest and slowest players. Wallace writes that in Philo, Illinois, the wind became like silence to him, and it took him months to adjust to the much quieter wind of New England. Central Illinois appears to be laid out by design, which Wallace compares to a tennis court. Wallace believes tennis is a game dominated by geometry much like billiards. This fact gives Wallace an advantage as a tennis player because he is comfortable with straight lines, which Wallace attributes to moving to Illinois from Ithaca at a very young age. Wallace plays tennis not by trying to hit near the corners of the court as most of his competitors but by constantly hitting back to the center and waiting for his opponent to make a mistake or the wind to knock the ball out of bounds. Wallace admits that his style of play is boring to watch but that it is creative because it accepts the natural surroundings as they are. As Wallace gets older, he is invited to a number of tennis tournaments across the state, usually accompanied by his friend and frequent opponent Gil Antitoi. Antitoi plays a completely different style of tennis than Wallace by simply hitting the ball as hard as possible. Originally, Wallace and Antitoi are the best players their age in the area, but by the time they are fifteen, Wallace is falling behind his peers physically. By the time Wallace reaches college, he barely makes the tennis team at a college smaller than his high school, while many of his friends receive scholarships to large universities. Wallace attributes this in part to the use of windscreens on the courts.

Wallace notes that Philo, Illinois is located directly in Tornado Alley and explains that either a Tornado Watch or Warning occurred almost day in the area during the summer. Wallace writes that if a Tornado Warning is sounded while at an outdoor tennis tournament, people are supposed to take refuge in a nearby irrigation ditch, but they usually just gather together with their loved ones until the storm passes. Wallace believes that tornadoes do not obey any rules of geometry, which is why Wallace is fascinated by them. Wallace recalls playing a game of tennis against Antitoti when a tornado comes upon them very briefly. The two are so engrossed in the game that they ignore the signs of the approaching storm. Eventually, they are both knocked into the fence surrounding the court, which puts two large indentations into it.

Wallace starts the second essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" by noting that most fiction writers enjoy watching other people but do not enjoy being watched themselves. Wallace hypothesizes that this enjoyment at watching others

explains why so many writers and average Americans watch six hours of television a day. Wallace distinguishes the television watching experience from voyeurism by showing that the subjects being watched on television are completely aware that they are being watched. However, even if writers enjoy watching television, it does not make good subject matter for writing because it is totally illusory. Television only seems to be real because the actors are incredibly skilled at not seeming self-conscious while being watched. Wallace argues that television gives viewers the impression that being watched is the most important quality a person can have, and in order to be watched a person must act naturally while being watched.

Wallace believes that people watch so much television because it is enjoyable, but he also maintains that other writers underestimate television's cultural power. Wallace writes that most of television's critics merely complain that it is too unrealistic but continue to watch it anyway. Critics present no plan to change the audience's relation to television. Wallace discusses an episode of the show of "St. Elsewhere," which contains almost only references to "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" in support of the idea that television has become completely self-referential. Consequently, it is impossible to criticize television because it does not need to relate to the outside world.

Wallace argues that eventually we will start watching ourselves watching television and relates the changes in television to the metafiction of the 1960s that was about fiction itself. Wallace believes that fiction and television combine to make a "self-conscious irony." Television relies on irony because it features both sound and vision, but irony also undercuts the believability of television. Wallace emphasizes that he is not attempting to blame television for all societies problems. However, Wallace argues that television appeals to people lowest tendencies because those are the ones most similar across the population. Wallace believes that Americans are "malignantly addicted" to television and that television is isolating people from each other. Television constantly assures viewers that there is a more interesting life out there than the average one and that the best way to see it is on television. Wallace shows that even when television makes fun of itself, it reassures the viewer that it is worthwhile.

Pages 41-83

Pages 41-83 Summary and Analysis

Wallace continues that postmodern fiction is distinctive in part because it uses multiple pop-cultural references. Wallace believes these references work because while everyone recognizes them everyone is also somewhat uncomfortable with them. Furthermore, pop culture references are now necessary for a work to be realistic. Wallace describes an argument in one of his graduate seminars between the professor who believes works of art should not make reference to specific time periods, but the students find this position incoherent because all works must be situated in a certain time. Wallace defends contemporary literature from the charge that the dialogue is often unimportant by pointing out that if everyone is watching six hours of television a day, very little of substance is being said. Wallace gives examples of contemporary works that not only reference pop culture but make the consumption of that culture, especially television, their theme.

Wallace's thesis is that irony and ridicule are simultaneously entertaining and cause for great despair in American society. Wallace goes on to describe a new kind of fiction called Image-Fiction, which uses pop-culture as its subject. Image-Fiction is an attempt to respond to television and the hold it has on American culture. However, Wallace maintains that Image-Fiction typically fails in this role and succumbs to the same trappings as television itself. Wallace again reemphasizes that television is not some evil force, but that it is detrimental to people in the levels Americans watch it. For instance, Wallace argues that television makes everyone have higher than reasonable standards of beauty that most people cannot fulfill, so they stay in and watch more television.

Wallace notes that commercials in the early days of television were all about being part of a group, but commercials now attempt to appeal to a sense of individuality. This leads viewers to believe that the most important thing is to be a part of television instead of a viewer. Also, because cable allows people to view many more channels, commercials must be nearly as entertaining as television shows. Viewers also are becoming aware that they should not be watching so much television, so television must convince them that they are part of a smart crowd that rejects outmoded values. Consequently, commercials and television shows must become self deprecating to assure the audience that they are seeing the in-joke. This use of irony makes people constantly worry about the ridicule of not understanding the in-joke and more self-conscious, which forces them watch more television to know the in-jokes. Wallace argues that irony has become the new ruling force in hip American life, and irony is impossible to fight because it insults anyone who even dares to question it.

Wallace questions what the solution to the irony imposed by television is and entertains the idea that it may be some version of conservatism. In this spirit, Wallace analyzes George Gilder's book "Life After Television: The Coming Transformation of Media and

American Life." Wallace criticizes Gilder for believing that the technological problems of television can be solved with more technology. Gilder believes television's top-down framework will be replaced by a system where viewers can choose exactly what they would like to view at any given moment. Gilder terms the device that will be used for this process the "tele-computer." People will even be able to experience faraway places without leaving their homes, Gilder predicts. Wallace does not believe Gilder's solution gets to the heart of the problem because it is still a fantasy like television, and if it is even more enjoyable than television, it will just make the problem worse. Wallace then analyzes the Image-Fiction novel "My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist" by Mark Leyner. Wallace argues that Leyner solves the problem of television's irony by simply embracing it. Leyner's novel consists almost entirely of pop-culture references and raises the question if that is all people have become. Wallace concludes that in order to rebel against the new ironic orthodoxy, writers might have to return to the sincerity of an earlier era and risk the mockery of those who uphold irony as a value.

Pages 83-111

Pages 83-111 Summary and Analysis

In "Getting Away From Already Pretty Much Being Away From It All" Wallace describes being sent to the Illinois State Fair on assignment from Harper's Magazine. Wallace believes the magazine sent him because he is a native of the area and can offer some insight into the place's anthropology to the mainly East Coast audience.

A week before the fair opens, Wallace arrives to pick up his press credentials. Before the press briefing, he encounters two older woman who report for a horticultural magazine and believe Wallace is there from Harper's Bazaar instead of Harper's and tell him they love the magazine's recipes.

On the tour, Wallace and the rest of the press are driven around the fairgrounds on an ethanol powered tractor. Eventually they are taken to a tent where the First Lady of Illinois, Brenda Edgar, and Ronald McDonald discuss their charity for children at risk for abuse. Wallace discusses the feeling he had as a child that the world existed purely for him, and special events like carnivals were the world trying to make itself special for him.

During the opening ceremony, Governor Jim Edgar discusses the struggle the state is experiencing with the terrible floods of 1993. The governor's speech impresses Wallace with its sense of the state as a large community. Wallace further hypothesizes that in the Midwest people are somewhat alienated from the land because it is more like a factory than a home.

Later in the day, Wallace visits the livestock barns with an old friend from the area he refers to as Native Companion. Wallace finds the horses sort of noble and the cows somewhat smelly. When Wallace visits the swine barns, he sees a pig gasping for air and is distressed by the sight of it and the fact that none of the agricultural professionals do not seem to care. Then Wallace recalls that he ate bacon for breakfast and is looking forward to a corndog and realizes he is being somewhat hypocritical.

Wallace and Native Companion next visit Happy Hollow, the carnival area of the fair, where Native Companion is allowed to test ride the Zipper. The carnies running the ride flip her around and around at the top of the ride so that they can stare up her dress. Wallace confronts Native Companion about this sexual harassment, but Native Companion dismisses his complaints saying that if she complained every time someone ogled her, she could never have any fun. Wallace sees a distinction between Midwestern and Eastern women in Native Companion's statement in that Eastern women enjoy complaining about sexual harassment.

As they eat lunch, Wallace marvels that people can eat much of this food in the extreme heat of the fair. Wallace himself drinks a milkshake and a Hawaiian Ice for lunch.

Wallace and Native Companion attend the Junior Livestock Competition where farmers' sons show off their livestock that have all won county fair competitions. Wallace notices that the other people in attendance are completely different than those in Happy Hollow or at the food stalls. The mother of one of the boys in the competition tells Wallace that they enter the competition for pride.

As they walk to the Poultry Building, Wallace is struck by the idea that the state fair exists not for any individual but for the people of Illinois as a whole. However, even at the fair different people frequent different attractions and don't really intermingle. Since people in the Midwest are relatively isolated, they take their vacations to be around other people, while people on the East Coast live in crowded conditions, they take their vacations in isolated areas. Wallace believes that the ultimate outsiders are the carnies, and this opinion is supported by old man Wallace encounters who calls the carnies trash.

Pages 111-137

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In the second half of the essay, Wallace uses the mistaken belief that he is from Harper's Bazaar to get into the fair's Dessert Competitions where he eats too much and becomes ill for the rest of the day.

Wallace begins the next day attending church services in the tent of a Pentecostal church and eating breakfast in the press room. Due to his massive consumption of food the previous night, Wallace is forced to use the public restrooms repeatedly, which he finds disgusting. Next, Wallace attends a Draft Horse Show and Illinois State Junior Baton-Twirling Finals. Wallace quickly discovers that the baton-twirling event is one of the most dangerous at the fair because so many of the competitors throw their batons into the crowd.

Wallace did not plan on visiting the Expo Building but finds it incredibly interesting once he is inside, not least because it is air-conditioned. Many of the booths sell items that are also advertised on television infomercials. Inside the expo, Wallace also encounters a type of Midwestern resident that he had forgotten existed and refers to as "Kmart People." Wallace describes them as a type of low class people who wear shirts that either brag about the wearer's sexual prowess or insults others around the wearer. Wallace realizes his description seems elitist but stands by it nonetheless.

Attending the Prairie State Cloggers Competition, Wallace finds himself actually enjoying the fair. While Wallace had imagined the dancers to be like characters out of the "Beverley Hillbillies," he discovers that the dancing is extremely high energy and enjoyable. Wallace notices the competition is attended almost exclusively by agriculture professionals and believes it is another expression of more specific community. Wallace later sees people dancing at a rock concert and is sure they are not having as much fun as the cloggers.

Wallace moves on to a car race, which he finds nearly unbearable because of the noise. When a wreck happens, the crowd carefully observes through binoculars and listens for news over the PA, but Wallace is not sure what kind of news everyone is hoping for.

Wallace notices that the entire fair revolves around food and its consumption and expulsion, which is appropriate as Illinois' economy is based on agriculture. This leads Wallace to again investigate Happy Hollow because many people throw up on the rides. Jogging around Happy Hollow, Wallace realizes that he is no longer Midwestern and does not enjoy any of the aspects of a carnival, especially the purposefully terrifying rides. Wallace tries to experience one of the rides for himself, but only succeeds in getting kicked off a ride meant for small children. When Wallace goes to view the most terrifying ride of all, the Sky Coaster, which is an enormous swing, he cannot even bring himself to watch someone else ride it.

Pages 138-183

Pages 138-183 Summary and Analysis

In "Greatly Exaggerated" Wallace analyzes "Morte d'Author," a piece of literary criticism by H. L. Hix. Part of Hix's work is a summary of the dispute between European poststructuralists, who believe that the concept of an author does not make sense, and their American counterparts, who believe the concept has some validity. Poststructuralists believe that while a writer's historical situation is important to understanding a text, it cannot be all of the understanding because a text's meaning is also constructed by its readers. Hix avoids a direct conflict into this dispute by analyzing how people actually use the term "author." However, Wallace believes Hix only saves the concept of the author by bringing including everything in the concept, making it empty. In the end, Wallace believes the whole question of whether the author is real is somewhat pointless.

In the article "David Lynch Keeps His Head," Wallace describes his time on the set of Lynch's most recent movie "Lost Highway," previews the film, and contextualizes it within Lynch's other works. Wallace is invited to observe the set of the film but rarely sees Lynch as Lynch is extraordinarily busy. The first time Wallace ever sees Lynch, Lynch is urinating on a tree in the middle of Los Angeles because he does not have time to go to the actual bathrooms.

Wallace explains how Lynch went from a celebrated director after the success of "Blue Velvet" and the first season of "Twin Peaks" to being critically reviled after the show's second season and an even worse show entitled "On the Air." Wallace defends Lynch's choices to an extent because Lynch has stayed loyal to an artistic vision—or might just be attempting to control every detail of his work—despite the personal costs to Lynch. Wallace writes that after the success of "Eraserhead," Lynch was miscast as the director for the incredibly expensive science fiction epic "Dune," and the movie flopped terribly. After this failure, Lynch makes the decision to stay in film but work on smaller films that he can control more directly.

Wallace then attempts to summarize the plot of the cut of "Lost Highway" he has seen. Bill Pullman is married to Patricia Arquette, and they begin to received videos in the mail of them in their home. Later at a party, Pullman encounters Robert Blake known as the Mystery Man, who claims not only to have been in Pullman's house but to be there presently. Pullman confirms this by calling home and speaking to the Mystery Man even as the Mystery Man is standing in front of him. Pullman and Arquette get a final tape in the mail, which shows Pullman murdering Arquette. After arrest and trial, Pullman is put on death row but transforms into Balthazar Getty. The police cannot figure out how Getty got into Pullman's cell or where Pullman is and so release Getty. Getty is a motorcycle mechanic and does a great deal of work for a mobster played by Robert Loggia. Loggia is romantically involved with a character played by Arquette, now a blonde, but not the same one that was married to Pullman. Getty also becomes

romantically linked with this Arquette character. Wallace does not attempt an explanation of the movie's third act and admits that it can be interpreted in numerous ways. In fact, Wallace argues that Lynch might not intend the film to make any sense at all.

This leads Wallace into a discussion of the concept "Lynchian." Wallace believes that key element to Lynchian is the presence of the macabre in the mundane, but it can also only be identified when you see it. Wallace further believes that Lynch's influence can found all over contemporary outsider cinema. Wallace argues that the scene where Michael Madsen cuts off another character's ear in "Reservoir Dogs" is a direct reference to "Blue Velvet." Wallace compares Lynch's cinematic achievements in the 1980s to the first noir films of the 1940s. Wallace next considers the issue of whether Lynch's movies are "sick" and concludes that they are sick because they bring out dark elements in the viewer he would rather forget. Lynch's films are at their most successful when the characters are well developed even if the plot is not because then the viewer can sympathize most with that particular kind of sickness. Wallace argues that Lynch's films are neither art films nor commercial films because they require explanation and only seek to affect the viewer psychologically.

Wallace proceeds to describe the filming of one of the small scenes of "Lost Highway" he was present for. Originally, Wallace had misgivings about setting the film in Los Angeles, but after being in the city he is convinced that it is thoroughly Lynchian in its contradictions. The particular scene Wallace sees filmed is shot in Griffith Park, which is a series of desert canyons with an eerie desolate feeling due to a unique weather phenomenon called the Santa Ana Wind. The scene concerns Loggia's character driving down what is supposed to be Mullholland Drive in a Mercedes. Wallace explains that at any given time, about half of the crew and cast are standing around waiting to play their parts. Wallace describes Lynch himself as looking like a geek but one who is comfortable with being a geek.

Pages 183-212

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Wallace next discusses each actors role in the film. Pullman's role will force audiences to reconsider his ability to play serious parts. Arquette might actually play a decent role and earn some respect within the film industry. Wallace predicts the film will rehabilitate the career of Robert Blake. However, Wallace is unsure if Lynch's casting of Richard Pryor is exploitative or supportive of the movie's central theme of identity crisis. This leads Wallace into a short tangent on Lynch and race, where Wallace notes there are almost no minorities in Lynch's films. Wallace concludes that this absence is due to the fact that racial interchange is inherently political while Lynch's movies seek to avoid politics. Wallace believes that what makes Lynch so special as a director is that he does not care what his audience wants.

Wallace explains that the headquarters for Lynch's studio Asymmetrical Productions is next door to his own home. Although Lynch himself paints for recreation, Wallace finds the paintings by Lynch's ex-wife much more interesting. Three of these paintings are featured in "Lost Highway" in Pullman and Arquette's home. One in particular shows a woman reading a letter from her child, which makes Wallace wonder if there is not some personal point to Lynch for its inclusion in the film.

Wallace wonders why critics have not explored Lynch's training in painting, specifically of the expressionist school. Critics often note the Freudian themes in Lynch's films, but Wallace believes what makes these elements so successful is that Lynch presents them in an expressionist way without irony. Wallace explains that it was this very non-ironic feel to "Blue Velvet" that made the film so effective when he first saw it.

Wallace argues that much of the criticism of Lynch's work hinges on the idea that it is either "sick" or "infantile" and that both misunderstand Lynch's work. Lynch does not celebrate in his movies but rather diagnoses it and shows it to be everywhere including within each of us, which makes for a more uncomfortable viewing experience than the morality plays Americans are used to. Wallace illustrates this point by pointing out that the most important moment of "Blue Velvet" is when the supposed villain Frank Booth tells the supposed hero Jeffrey Beaumont that "You're like me." Lynch is showing that evil is part of each of us. Wallace further explains that Lynch's most "morally ambitious" act as a director was his attempt to transform Laura Palmer from the mysterious and dualistic murder victim in the show "Twin Peaks" to a living character in the film prequel "Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me." Wallace argues that while Lynch probably failed in his attempt to show evil and good wrapped up in one person, the criticism of the movie was based more on the attempt. Finally, Wallace says that if "Lost Highway" is a critical failure, it will be for the same reason.

Pages 213-255

Pages 213-255 Summary and Analysis

Wallace begins the fourth essay "Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Limitation, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness" by describing Michael Joyce easily serving a ball in a qualifying match for the 1995 Canadian Open. Wallace assumes that although Joyce is in the top one hundred tennis players in the world, the reader has never heard of him.

Wallace explains that tennis tournaments have numerous corporate sponsors, and the sponsor of the Canadian open is du Maurier cigarettes, who has placed red flags around Stade Jarry Stadium Court. While there are numerous matches going on, few people are there to watch them except other players. The stadium is mostly empty because matches like Joyce's are qualifying matches in which players who are ranked relatively low must play in order to gain entrance into the main tournament. Joyce is ranked higher than some of the people entered into the tournament because some of the "Wild Card" positions were given to Canadians by tournament officials, but Joyce does not complain about the situation. Wallace compares Joyce's current status in the tennis world as being like a baseball player on the verge of leaving the minor leagues for the majors.

Wallace describes Joyce as a short, stocky player who looks very young. However, the determined expression he wears during tennis matches makes Joyce seem noticeably older. In his match against college student Dan Brakus, Joyce easily returns Brakus' powerful serves to win handily. Joyce says that Brakus did not belong playing with professionals, which Wallace believes is not so much an insult as a pure statement of fact similar to a picture produced by a camera.

Wallace writes that for most of tennis' history there have only been two styles of play: offensive best represented by John McEnroe and defensive best represented by Bjorn Borg. Currently, most players use a new style usually called "power-baseline," which emphasizes ferocious groundstrokes and returning serves. Andre Agassi is the most famous of the contemporary power-baseline players, and Joyce plays in a similar fashion as Agassi with a powerful forehand stroke. Agassi is also Joyce's hero, and Joyce takes great pride in the fact that his coach frequently flies to Agassi's home in Las Vegas to practice with Agassi. The major differences between Joyce's game and Agassi's are that Agassi hits the ball with more spin, has no hitch in his backhand, is much faster, and sees the ball far better than Joyce. Tennis requires a player to see both the ball and the other player very quickly all while moving very fast. Wallace argues that tennis is the most beautiful and demanding of all sports because it requires incredible calculations of multiple variables whose causes are also variable. Wallace believes that most people do not understand how difficult it is to play tennis incredibly well. Wallace also marvels at the sacrifices that are necessary to become a highly

ranked tennis player and argues that although people often praise athletes for the difficulty of the training, most people do not want to think about the process too deeply.

Because it is the qualifying matches, Joyce is forced to play a second game on the same day against an Austrian named Julian Knowle. Joyce defeats Knowle easily by never allowing him time to launch his more powerful shots. Wallace realizes watching this match that even though he played tennis competitively for many years, a player like Joyce is on a completely different competitive level. The second day of the qualifying matches it rains heavily, so Joyce does not have to play his scheduled match.

Wallace briefly describes his experiences growing up playing tennis across the Midwest. Wallace writes that his style of play was to simply return volleys until his opponent either made an unforced error or had a nervous breakdown on the court. Wallace acknowledges that this style of play grew less effective as he got older, but Wallace before coming to the Canadian Open, Wallace still believed he could compete against some of the lower ranked professionals. After seeing the professionals play live, Wallace admits that his style of play simply would not work against them.

Wallace explains the environment of the tennis tournament. Unlike at baseball or football games, the crowd must be completely quiet and only get up to leave at certain times. The stadium itself is in disrepair and is scheduled to be replaced the following year. There are numerous tents where food or tennis souvenirs can be purchased, and since the tournament is in Quebec and sponsored by a cigarette company, attendees can even buy cigarettes by the carton and smoke at the tournament.

Wallace believes that watching tennis live is much better than watching it on television, and the experience is made even richer if Wallace watches with Joyce's coach Sam Aparicio. Aparicio explains aspects of the game that other people do not even see. Joyce himself seems to have no interests outside of tennis. Even at age twenty-two, Wallace argues that Joyce no longer has a choice about what he is going to do in his life because the choice to be a professional tennis player was made long ago.

Pages 256-290

Pages 256-290 Summary and Analysis

Wallace begins his seventh and last essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" sitting in the Fort Lauderdale Airport remembering his experiences after a week long cruise. Wallace feels surprised that he was given an assignment with such a large budget with the only requirement being that he write about his experiences on the cruise. Despite the fact that a cruise is supposed to be a pleasurable experience, Wallace experiences it as despair. This despair is not due to the physical conditions of the ship, which Wallace describes as incredibly clean and pleasant, or the numerous activities on board. Wallace connects the frequent use of the term "pamper" in the cruise's brochure with the diaper brand of the same name in the sense that people come on cruises to be treated like children.

Wallace also argues that it makes sense that older people take so many cruises because their bodies are in disrepair while the ocean eats away at the ship itself, so both require a tremendous amount of upkeep. Wallace is fascinated by the cruise's brochure, which tells people on the ship exactly what to do. The brochure's frequent use of the second person is extremely important to Wallace because it shows how the brochure attempts to create a fantasy for the passengers. This contrasts with regular advertisements which only suggest that a person buying the product might have a certain experience, while the brochure attempts to dictate exactly what kind of experience people will have. The brochure suggests people can do "absolutely nothing" on the cruise, and Wallace again relates this to being very young, specifically as a fetus in the womb.

When Wallace arrives at the Fort Lauderdale Airport to leave for the cruise, he follows a woman holding a sign for Celebrity Cruises to buses that take all the passengers to the pier to leave for the cruise. Wallace arrives at the pier where he must wait for several hours in a hangar before being able to actually board the ship. Wallace eavesdrops on a number of the other passengers and discovers that the main subject of conversation is why people are taking the cruise, and Wallace wonders why people seem to need to justify their self-indulgence.

The first two days of the cruise are almost totally consumed by bad weather. Wallace is surprised to discover that he does not get seasick because he struggles with all other kinds of motion sickness. Wallace writes that even in bad weather, the ship does not move radically, but that it gives walking a dreamy kind of feeling. Wallace also notices that people sleep very well while out at sea in bad weather, which Wallace attributes to the sea replicating the feeling of a baby being rocked to sleep by her mother.

As part of Celebrity Cruises' promotion for the cruise, writer Frank Conroy wrote an essay about his experience on the boat for the company, and Wallace is fascinated by this essay. Wallace recognizes it as a good piece of writing but maintains that it is bad

because it is another attempt by the cruise line to create people's expectations about the cruise. Even worse for Wallace is that there is no acknowledgment that the essay is a piece of advertising for which Portnoy was paid. This is especially terrible for Wallace because an essay presents itself as being for the benefit of the reader while an advertisement is acknowledged to be for the benefit of the advertiser, and people understand these things when reading both. However, Wallace believes that Conroy's essay reveals a deeper truth about the cruise, which is that the cruise wants something from the passenger.

Pages 290-318

Pages 290-318 Summary and Analysis

Wallace concedes that the brochure for the cruise does not exaggerate the ship's luxurious service and accommodations. Wallace illustrates his point by describing an incident that occurred between him and a porter shortly after boarding the ship. Wallace attempts to bring his own bag to his cabin, but the porter tries to stop him. When Wallace is observed carrying his own bag, the porter's superior is alerted and the porter is disciplined. An officer from Guest Relations is dispatched to Wallace's room to apologize, and Wallace eventually explains the situation and makes the officer promise to erase any negative marks from the porter's work record. Furthermore, Wallace explains that he can order room service (called "cabin service" on the ship) twenty-four hours a day and the price is included in the cruise ticket. The food is also exceptionally good and there is a wide variety to choose from. At first, Wallace feels guilty for ordering room service, so he spreads his writing materials on the bed to give the impression that he is working very hard and is too busy to leave his cabin. Finally, Wallace notes that his room is cleaned every time he leaves for more than thirty minutes but never when he leaves for fewer. Wallace attempts numerous times to catch a maid in the act of cleaning his room but is always unsuccessful. Wallace initially enjoys having his room cleaned so frequently, but it eventually gives him the feeling that he is simply a burden on some unseen force that does not want him on the ship.

Being somewhat agoraphobic, Wallace comes to love the coziness of his cabin. Wallace is even more taken with his bathroom, which has an extremely powerful hair dryer and a shower with great water pressure and a massage sequence. Wallace is somewhat frightened by the vacuum toilet and considers its power in disposing of waste to be something of a hazard.

On Wednesday morning, the ship docks at Cozumel, Mexico, and most of the passengers disembark, but Wallace stays on board and observes things from the deck. Part of the reason Wallace stays on the ship is his agoraphobia, but he decides that he is even more stricken by his fear of seeming like a normal American tourist to the locals. Wallace tries to make himself separate from all the rest of the Americans by being kinder to non-Americans both on and off the boat, which he realizes is itself motivated by concern for how he appears to others, so Wallace ultimately cannot separate himself from the group. As Wallace sits on the deck, a Norwegian Cruise Line ship, the Dreamward, docks next to the Nadir. Wallace notices that the Dreamward is a brighter white than the Nadir and has more pools. Wallace imagines that every aspect of the Dreamward is similarly better than the Nadir, and it makes Wallace jealous of the Dreamward's passengers. Wallace attributes this jealousy to the fact that all the Nadir's pampering has only made him want more. Wallace is now no longer satisfied with his current level of luxury and must move up to stay happy.

Pages 319-353

Pages 319-353 Summary and Analysis

Wallace devotes the last and longest section of the essay to his attempt to experience as many scheduled activities on the ship on Thursday, one of the two days when the ship never pulls into port. Wallace organizes his activities by using the Nadir Daily, which is the ship's tiny newspaper that is left in every passenger's room each night.

Wallace begins the day at Early Seating Breakfast where he sits alone because all of the other passengers assigned to his table stayed up late the night before. Wallace lovingly describes his table's head waiter, Tibor, a Hungarian who dreams of returning to Budapest to start a sidewalk cafe. At breakfast, Wallace is able to make small talk with Tibor since there are no other diners, leaving Tibor relatively free.

Next, Wallace attends a Catholic mass, which is followed almost immediately by wedding vow renewal, of which no passengers take advantage. Wallace notes that the communion wafers at this mass are tastier than those at a normal church, in keeping with the cruise's general level of luxury.

Wallace then heads to the library where he begins to play games of chess against himself. Eventually, he is approached by a nine-year-old girl who asks to a play a match against him. Wallace accepts, and the girl mates him in twenty-three moves. Somewhat humiliated, Wallace decides to take part in the ping pong tournament but finds no one there except the ship's ping pong pro, Winston, who Wallace has played numerous times since the cruise began. Wallace is very good at ping pong and beats Winston handily. While playing, Wallace subtly makes fun of Winston, but Winston does not seem to notice.

Wallace moves from ping pong to a lecture by one of the ship's chief officers on the mechanical operation of the ship. Wallace finds the experience overwhelming because of the sheer number of facts the officer explains to the audience and also because the members of the audience all seem vastly more knowledgeable about ships and sailing than Wallace himself. When Wallace asks a question, the officer answers him somewhat sarcastically, which elicits laughter from the audience.

Wallace stops the organized activities to go to lunch, where he drinks too much coffee, which causes his notes to become more scrambled from this point on.

After lunch, Wallace takes part in the "Poolside Shenanigans" where he is accidentally punched in the face by another man in a competition. Wallace believes the resulting black eye causes him to only take third place in the male best legs contest, whereas he would have won if uninjured.

Wallace attends an session with the cruise director Scott Peterson, who Wallace finds to be somewhat annoying. The session primarily consists of Peterson describing his own

life and work. Eventually Peterson introduces his fiance and tells what appears to be an embarrassing story of her getting stuck on the toilet but actually ends up being a long, crude joke.

The last organized activity Wallace takes part in is skeet shooting, which he initially believed would be easy. However, when Wallace finally attempts to shoot, he can barely hold the shotgun and sends observers scattering for cover when swings it around wildly.

Finally, Wallace attends the Thursday night Celebrity Show, which is a hypnotist named Nigel Ellery. Wallace does not take part in Ellery's tests to determine who is susceptible to hypnotism because Wallace already knows he is extremely sensitive to hypnotism. When Ellery brings his six subjects onstage he makes them say and do a variety of embarrassing things, and Ellery also is rude to the audience in the same way Don Rickles is. Wallace believes that Ellery's performance symbolizes the cruise itself in that the passengers enjoy but simultaneously resent the abuse Ellery administers to them.

Characters

David Foster Wallace

Although these essays are not primarily about Wallace, he is an important character in almost all of them. Wallace grows up in the small town of Philo, Illinois, and spends most of his time as an adolescent playing tennis. Wallace is very good at tennis in his early adolescence because he exploits his natural understanding of geometry to return volleys until his opponents make an error or breakdown on the court. However, as Wallace's opponents develop faster physically than him, he discovers that this style of play is no longer successful. Wallace's roots in Illinois help to earn him a job covering the Illinois State Fair in 1993. Returning to Illinois, Wallace discovers that he is no longer a Midwesterner and has fully become an Easterner after his collegiate and post-graduate studies in the East. The article Wallace writes on the Illinois State Fair leads to the same magazine commissioning him to write an experiential essay about a luxury cruise, which becomes the titular essay of the book. In that essay, Wallace describes himself as something of an agoraphobe and notes that interaction with the other passengers is extremely exhausting. Wallace much prefers to hide away in his cabin but forces himself out to gather stories for the essay, and he frequently embarrasses himself through his awkward behavior. Wallace finds that the cruise satisfies his every desire, but this ultimately leads Wallace to a feeling of despair because it causes him to feel like a child who only wants more than he already has.

David Lynch

David Lynch is the director of such films as "Blue Velvet," "Eraserhead," "Wild at Heart," and "Lost Highway" and the television show "Twin Peaks." Lynch is also the subject of the fifth essay in the book. Lynch's early movies are enormous critical successes, but when he is hired to direct "Dune" it is a critical and financial disaster. Lynch is able to return to stature after creating "Blue Velvet" for a tiny budget. However, by the time Lynch is producing "Lost Highway," he is again on the outs with critics and audiences. Wallace describes Lynch as being extremely nerdy but not caring about it and having an extremely funny voice which sounds "like Jimmy Stewart on acid" (Wallace, p. 185).

Although Wallace was on the set of "Lost Highway" for several days to write his article on Lynch, Wallace never interviews Lynch and rarely sees him. Wallace explains that this is because Lynch is incredibly busy on the set of the film and writes that the first time he saw Lynch, Lynch was urinating on a tree in the middle of a Los Angeles park because going to the restroom trailer was too time consuming. Wallace argues that Lynch's films are unique in that they find the macabre to be omnipresent in even the most mundane aspects of life. Furthermore, Wallace celebrates Lynch for forcing audiences to confront the evil inside themselves through the expressionist way he shows evil on screen.

Michael Joyce

Michael Joyce is a twenty-two year-old professional tennis player that Wallace profiles for the sixth essay of the book. During the essay, Joyce competes in the Canadian Open tournament. However, before the tournament even officially begins, Joyce must compete in the qualifying rounds because the wild card spots have all been given away to lower ranked Canadian players by tournament officials. Joyce does not get upset about this injustice because he realizes that getting upset about it will not change anything. Wallace attributes some of Joyce's tennis success to his ability to accept what he cannot change. Joyce easily defeats his opponents in the qualifying rounds, mostly by easily returning their volleys and never allowing them to setup their good shots. Joyce's style of play is called "power-baseline" and is typified by Andre Agassi, who is Joyce's personal hero.

Wallace argues that Joyce has made such tremendous sacrifices to become a professional tennis player that most people would rather not think about them. As a child, Joyce practices until dark every day after school, which severely limits his personal life. In many ways, this schedule is forced upon Joyce by his father. Joyce is now so deeply committed to life as a tennis player that Wallace believes he can do nothing else. Wallace writes that this makes Joyce simultaneously very complete man but only in a very limited way.

H. L. Hix

H. L. Hix is a philosopher and the author of "Morte d'Author: An Autopsy," which is the subject of Wallace's fourth essay. Hix's work attempts to save the concept of the author from its poststructuralist detractors. However, Wallace believes Hix only succeeds in saving the concept of the author by expanding it to the point where it becomes meaningless. Wallace does find Hix's writing to be entertaining and readable, even if the question he attempts to answer is a wholly academic one.

Native Companion

Native Companion is a female friend of Wallace who accompanies him to the first day of the Illinois State Fair. Native Companion grew up in Illinois with Wallace and was his date for prom but serves as something of a guide for Wallace at the fair. At one point at the fair, Native Companion rides The Zipper, and the carnies operating the ride keep her at the top for an extended period so they can look up her dress. When Wallace asks Native Companion about this harassment, Native Companion argues that if she worried about every guy who might harass her, she could never have any fun.

George Gilder

George Gilder is the conservative author of "Life After Television: The Coming Transformation of Media and American Life." Gilder argues that television is too controlled by top-down mechanisms, but he foresees a system of computers that will allow the users to view whatever they wish at any time. Wallace does not find this a good solution for the problems of television because people will become even more attached to these electronic devices than television.

Mark Leyner

Mark Leyner is a medical-ad copywriter from New Jersey and the author of the Image-fiction novel "My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist." Leyner's novel is littered with pop-culture references to suggest that is all people have become. Leyner solves the problem of irony by embracing it.

Balthazar Getty

Balthazar Getty is one of the stars of the David Lynch film "Lost Highway." In the film, Bill Pullman's character transforms into Getty while sitting on death row, but Getty's character is a separate person from Pullman who works as an auto-mechanic. In Wallace's interactions with Getty, he finds that Getty is very friendly to Lynch when Lynch is around, but Getty makes fun of Lynch whenever Lynch is gone. Getty also frequently borrows people's cell phones for emergencies, which turn out to be nothing more than him asking a friend what a girl thought of him.

Andre Agassi

Andre Agassi is a professional tennis player who employs a "power-baseline" style. Agassi is a hero to fellow tennis professional Michael Joyce, but Wallace does not like him. Wallace describes Agassi's style of play as "thuggish."

Gil Antitoi

Gil Antitoi is a childhood friend and frequent tennis opponent of Wallace. Wallace frequently rides to tennis tournaments with Antitoi and his parents. When they are both in early adolescence, Wallace can occasionally beat Antitoi, but as Antitoi develops physically faster than Wallace, Antitoi becomes a much better tennis player and rises to compete in regional tournaments.

Trudy

Trudy is Wallace's favorite tablemate at Table 64 on the cruise in the titular essay. Trudy is the mother of Alice, and she tries to interest Wallace in her daughter. Trudy laughs very hard at all of Wallace's jokes but literally screams before she does so.

Alice

Alice is Wallace's tablemate at Table 64 on the luxury cruise in the titular essay. Alice is the daughter of Trudy, and she has a serious boyfriend named Patrick that she mentions at every available opportunity. Wallace and Alice form an alliance against another tablemate that they dislike named Mona.

Tibor

Tibor is the waiter at Table 64 on the luxury cruise in the titular essay. Tibor is very serious about making sure the food is excellent for the guests. Tibor is Hungarian and hopes to save up enough money working on cruises to return to Budapest and open a cafe.

Winston

Winston is the ping pong pro aboard the Nadir. Winston is not nearly as good as Wallace at ping pong but is also Wallace's only competition. Winston has been a college student at the University of South Florida for seven years. Winston often speaks as if he were a young, urban black male, but he is white. Wallace occasionally makes fun of Winston as they play, but Winston never seems to notice.

Objects/Places

Philo, Illinois

Philo is the small town where Wallace grew up and played competitive tennis.

Television

This is the subject of Wallace's second essay. While Wallace believes television is not inherently bad, people watch too much television and thereby limit their interactions with other people.

Happy Hollow

Happy Hollow is the area of the Illinois State Fair where the carnival rides are housed.

Expo Building

This is the building at the Illinois State Fair where there are multiple booths mostly selling items also advertised on television.

Los Angeles

Wallace visits Los Angeles to write his article on David Lynch and discovers it lives up to the the stereotypes he had heard about it.

Griffith Park

This is a park in Los Angeles where Wallace is allowed to watch David Lynch shoot a scene for "Lost Highway."

Stade Jarry Tennis Complex

This is the Montreal venue that hosts the 1995 Canadian Open where Michael Joyce competes.

Cabin 1009

This is Wallace's cabin aboard the Nadir, which he finds exceptionally cozy.

Five-Star Caravelle Restaurant

This is the restaurant aboard the Nadir where Wallace eats dinner with other passengers at Table 64.

Dreamward

The Dreamward is a Norwegian Cruise Line ship that docks next to the Nadir in Cozumel, Mexico, which seems much nicer than the Nadir to Wallace.

Celbrity Show Lounge

This is the venue on the Nadir where Wallace watches the hypnotist Nigel Ellery.

Themes

Rejection of Irony

In "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" Wallace argues that because it appeals to both the senses of vision and hearing it must employ a great deal of irony. Although Wallace believes that irony is in many ways entertaining, it also leads to detachment and despair and holds an iron grip on American culture. For instance, in order to appeal to customers, commercials must now show that they are ridiculous and make the audience believe they are on the inside of the joke instead of having the joke played upon them. This need to be in on the joke forces people to watch more and more television so that they do not miss any jokes. Whereas irony was originally used to attack outmoded values, it is now used to insult anyone who attempts to attack irony itself. Wallace believes that in order to unseat irony as a ruling cultural force, artists must be willing to be sentimental and expose themselves to ironic criticism.

Later in his essay on David Lynch, Wallace seems to have found an artist who is willing to do just that. Wallace believes that Lynch's use of Freudian themes in his films is only effective because they are used without irony. Instead, Lynch employs Expressionism, which allows true emotion to come through on screen. Because he does not use irony, Lynch is able to show the audience the evil that lurks within every person, which Wallace believes is Lynch's true talent.

The Emptiness of Consumption

In the titular and final essay, Wallace goes on a luxury cruise because a magazine pays him just to write about the experience. Wallace is impressed by the all luxury the ship has to offer. The meals are all extremely good, and passengers can eat as much as they desire. Wallace loves the size of his room and is amazed by water pressure in his shower. Everyday there are a multitude of activities for passengers to take part in. The ship, including passengers' cabins, is also kept immaculately clean by the ship's staff.

However, by the fifth day of the cruise, Wallace discovers that even this level of luxury does not satisfy him. Wallace finds small imperfections with all aspects of the ship. A drawer in his room makes an annoying rattling sound every night. The waiter never gets all the crumbs off the table at dinner. When the Dreamward, a Norwegian Cruise Line ship, pulls up next to Wallace's ship, Wallace notices that it is whiter than his ship and has more pools. Wallace proceeds to fantasize that he can get on the Dreamward and experience an even higher level of luxury. This leads Wallace to the realization that no matter how much pampering a person receives, the childish part of him will always want more. Because of this constant trap, the cruise leaves Wallace with a feeling of intense despair and that the point of a cruise is for adults to be treated like children.

Sacrifice as Necessary for Greatness

In "David Lynch Keeps His Head," Wallace explains how Lynch went from making the extremely low budget independent film "Eraserhead" to directing a forty million dollar Hollywood production in "Dune." After the film is a terrible commercial and critical failure, Lynch easily could have retreated from make movies, but instead he decides to return to making smaller films in which he can control every aspect of their production. Wallace is unsure if this decision is heroic because it allows him to make more meaningful art or if it is symptomatic of a psychotic desire to control everything. Regardless, Wallace points out that this is a necessary sacrifice an film director must make if he wants to retain control of his films. Lynch sacrifices higher budgets for control over his films and authenticity.

Similarly, in his biographical article on tennis player Michael Joyce, Wallace learns that even though he was a very good junior tennis player, he is completely unaware of the sacrifices that are necessary to rise to the professional level. When Joyce is a child, his father forces him to practice every day until past sunset and likely spends hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years for training. This training dramatically limited Joyce's personal life growing up. Furthermore, Wallace believes that Joyce is so deeply committed to tennis that he cannot do anything else and is now stuck with a choice he never actually made. Wallace concludes that as a society we may praise professional athletes for their sacrifices, but we do not really like to think about them.

Style

Perspective

David Foster Wallace is a native of Illinois, but Wallace left the Midwest to attend college at Amherst in Massachusetts. Wallace later receives a Master in Fine Arts in creative writing from the University of Arizona and studies briefly at Harvard. These travels leave Wallace feeling more like an Easterner than a Midwesterner, a theme which he explores when he returns to Illinois to cover the Illinois State Fair for Harper's Magazine.

Wallace is by his own admission an agoraphobe and dislikes interaction with most people. In order to gather material for stories, Wallace must go through extensive psychological preparation and take multiple breaks from crowds. This social handicap frequently make Wallace's interactions with people in his articles awkward and even painful. Although Wallace dislikes people in general in the abstract, there are some groups of people and individuals that Wallace singles out for specific criticism. For instance, Wallace discusses what he calls "K-Mart people" in his essay on the Illinois State Fair as being low class, uncultured and generally stupid. Wallace is aware that his description of these people seems mean-spirited but still defends it on the grounds that it is still a fair assessment from having been around the group in his youth.

Furthermore, Wallace frequently attacks the extensive use of irony in contemporary culture. Wallace argues that artists need to return to sentimentality to continue creating great art.

Tone

Wallace's tone is frequently condescending to many of his subjects and occasionally even arrogant towards the reader. Wallace openly mocks many of his subjects. For instance, when Wallace is on the cruise in the titular essay, plays many games of ping pong against the ship's ping pong pro, Winston. Wallace is much better at ping pong and frequently pokes fun at Winston and the cruise in general while they are playing, but Winston never seems to notice or understand that he is being made fun of. In the same essay, Wallace describes watching other passengers go ashore in Cozumel, Mexico from the ship, and Wallace describes them as cattle. However, Wallace is aware that he stayed on the boat so that he would not appear like the other Americans, so he is still acting out of concern for his image. Though Wallace frequently pokes fun at his subjects, Wallace is usually aware of his own shortcomings and points them out to the reader.

Wallace also appears to have a need to show off his skills as an unconventional writer to the reader. Several times, Wallace uses the term "Kafkan" to refer to the works of

Czech novelist Franz Kafka, but the term for this is "Kafkaesque," suggesting that Wallace felt it necessary to invent a wholly new word instead of sticking to convention.

Structure

The book is divided into seven different essays. Most of these essays are fairly lengthy with only one being fewer than twenty pages and only two with fewer than forty pages. The two shortest essays are the fourth essay, "Greatly Exaggerated," at eight pages and the first essay, "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley," at nineteen pages.

Each of the longer essays is itself subdivided in different ways. The second essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," is divided by sections that each have their own titles like "The Finger" and "Guilty Fictions." The third essay, "Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away from It All," is divided like a log with each entry telling the date and time. In the fifth essay, "David Lynch Keeps His Head," the article is divided into seventeen sections with both numbers and titles, many of which have sub headings. (Also in this essay, Wallace begins using footnotes extensively, which continues to the end of the book.) The sixth essay has no specific method of dividing different parts of the essay from the others except for breaks in the text. Finally, the seventh and titular essay is divided into thirteen different sections only marked numerically. The thirteenth and longest section is also divided as a log like the third essay.

Quotes

"It is billiards with balls that won't hold still. It is chess on the run. It is to artillery and airstrikes what football is to infantry and attrition."
Chap. 1, Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley, p. 7

"These scholars are like people who despise—I mean big-time, long-term despise—their spouses or jobs, but won't split up or quit. Critical complaint seems long ago to have degenerated into plain old whining. The important question about U.S. television is no longer whether there are some truly nasty problems involved in Americans' relation to television but rather what might possibly be done about them. On this question pop critics and scholars are resoundingly mute."
Chap. 2, E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction, p. 29

"But it is not I the spy who have crept inside television's boundaries. It is vice versa. Television, even the mundane little businesses of its production, has become my—our—own interior."
Chap. 2, E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction, p. 32

"That is, television's real pitch in these commercials is that it's better to be inside the TV than to be outside, watching."
Chap. 2, E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction, p. 56

"Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval."
Chap. 2, E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction, p. 81

"And this is maybe why a little kid so fears the dark: it's not the possible presence of unseen fanged things in the dark, but rather the actual absence of everything his blindness has now erased. For me, at least, pace my folks' indulgent smiles, this was my true reason for needing a nightlight: it kept the world turning."
Chap. 3, Getting Away From Already Pretty Much Being Away From It All, p. 90

"This is just a smaller and specialized rural Us—bean farmers and herbicide brokers and 4-H sponsors and people who drive pickup trucks because they really need them."

Chap. 3, Getting Away From Already Pretty Much Being Away From It All, p. 125

"It ends up being a kind of philosophical Westmorelandism: Hix destroy the author in order to save him."
Chap. 4, Greatly Exaggerated, p. 144

"An academic definition of 'Lynchian' might be that the term 'refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter.'"
Chap. 5, David Lynch Keeps His Head, p. 161

"Quentin Tarantino is interested in watching somebody's ear getting cut off; David Lynch is interested in the ear."
Chap. 5, David Lynch Keeps His Head, p. 166

"Other postmodern things about him are his speaking voice—which can be described only as sounding like Jimmy Stewart on acid—and the fact that it's literally impossible to know how seriously to take what he says."
Chap. 5, David Lynch Keeps His Head, p. 185

"Lynch's movies are not about monsters (i.e. people whose intrinsic natures are evil) but about hauntings, about evil as environment, possibility, force."
Chap. 5, David Lynch Keeps His Head, p. 204

"Michael Joyce is, in other words, a complete man (though in a grotesquely limited way)."
Chap. 6, Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Limitation, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness, p. 254

"By week's end, when we'd had all manner of weather, I finally saw what it was about heavy seas and marvelous rest: in heavy seas you feel rocked to sleep, with the window's spume a gentle shushing, the engines' throb a mother's pulse."
Chap. 7, A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again, p. 285

"There's something crucially key about Luxury Cruises in evidence here: being entertained by someone who clearly dislikes you, and feeling that you deserve the dislike at the same time that you resent it."
Chap. 7, A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again, p. 352

Topics for Discussion

Do you agree with Wallace in the sixth essay that as a society we do not like to think about the sacrifices made by professional athletes to rise to the top of their games?

Why does Wallace believe that television has a corrosive effect on our culture? What does Wallace propose to do about it?

What does Wallace see as being the key elements in a successful David Lynch film?

Why does Wallace find his luxury cruise in the seventh essay to be such a source of despair?

Why does Wallace see irony as such a detrimental influence on American culture?

For Wallace, what is required for a person to become truly great in his or her field?

What does Wallace think of H. L. Hix's attempt to salvage the notion of the author from its poststructuralist critics?

What does Wallace believe is the purpose of the Illinois State Fair?