



Oblivion

David Foster Wallace

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In the stories that make up *Oblivion*, David Foster Wallace joins the rawest, most naked humanity with the infinite involutions of self-consciousness--a combination that is dazzlingly, uniquely his. These are worlds undreamt-of by any other mind. Only David Foster Wallace could convey a father's desperate loneliness by way of his son's daydreaming through a teacher's homicidal breakdown ("The Soul Is Not a Smithy"). Or could explore the deepest and most hilarious aspects of creativity by delineating the office politics surrounding a magazine profile of an artist who produces miniature sculptures in an anatomically inconceivable way ("The Suffering Channel"). Or capture the ache of love's breakdown in the painfully polite apologies of a man who believes his wife is hallucinating the sound of his snoring ("Oblivion"). Each of these stories is a complete world, as fully imagined as most entire novels, at once preposterously surreal and painfully immediate. *Oblivion* is an arresting and hilarious creation from a writer "whose best work challenges and reinvents the art of fiction" (Atlanta Journal-Constitution).

Oblivion Details

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From Reader Review Oblivion for online ebook

Nate D says

David Foster Wallace inspires many complaints -- he is overly self-conscious, he abuses the footnote, he is at times impenetrable -- but here happily, none of these are especially true. Even the post-modern playfulness is reigned in somewhat. Unlike the layered interviews and broken portraits of Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, these are more properly stories (or even novellas, perhaps, as many are quite lengthy), winding and carefully plotted, and fully invested in the narrative. Only a single selection was notable mostly for style and structure (the frivolous but hilarious "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature", actually one of my favorites for its concise insanity), and most managed to grapple with enough serious content to put most entire novels to shame. My personal favorite, "The Soul Is Not a Smithy", took several scathing routes to the heart of an unwell America, through a civics class gone wrong just before Vietnam, while "The Suffering Channel" spiraled endlessly around and through the combined fascination-terror-revulsion-obsession which we which we regard the human body, ours and those of others. At his best, as in those pieces, every seemingly disparate detail points unerringly to the whole.

I'm going to have to work backwards through Wallace's other short story collection, I think. Infinite Jest is perhaps his culminating work, but he's abundantly more digestible in these smaller doses.

Roula says

μολις τελειωσα την ιστορια "παλιο καλο νεον", μακρान η καλυτερη ως τωρα...τι βασανισμενο μυαλο αυτος ο ανθρωπος , ωστοσο μονο τετοια μυαλα και ψυχες ξερουν να γραφουν τετοιες ιστοριες...υποκλινομαι..

MJ Nicholls says

I don't think collections serve Foster Wallace well: it seems to me his stories would read better as stand-alones on some thoroughly modern internet webshite, with accompanying artwork or explanatory hyperlinks, rather than modishly festering on some fading acid paper alongside all the other fuddy-duddies. (PS Abacus, your paper is cheap and lousy). Case in point is 'Mister Squishy,' which seems to cry out for its own accompanying glossary, appended addenda and so on, but sits uneasily on the page in all its hypermodern dazzle. Nevertheless, the gang's all here, from the disquieting hometown horror of 'The Soul is Not a Smithy' to the absolutely staggeringly wonderful exploration of a mind locked in a recursive self-critical philosophy, 'Good Old Neon,' to the blithering incomprehension of 'Another Pioneer' which I did not understand AT ALL.

'The Suffering Channel' is a brilliant novella about a pretentious style mag based in the World Trade Centre a few months before impact, and explores the peddling of suffering and faecal matter under the guise of an acceptable counterculture. Like the other pieces in this collection, it mimics the language and tone of its world with beyond pedantic perfection, without losing the detached overlord tone that keeps Wallace's style distinctive. It is telling that the sentence that made me quiver the most was the unexpectedly direct insertion, on a one-word line of dialogue, of the simple statement: "She had ten weeks to live." Oh God, I think my

Jimmy says

If nothing else, this book really made me think. Maybe even over-think. This book invites it. There is a lot to mull over in each of these stories, and DFW is very rarely direct about anything, preferring to leave clues along the way.

I think it's interesting that each story has its own specific vocabulary and/or verbal tics from Mister Squishy's ad agency lingo to Oblivion's strange use of latin/*pace*'air-quotes' to Suffering Channel's magazine-speak; it's almost as if the characters in one story would find it impossible to cross over and talk with the characters of any other story--they live in a modern/urban world that is also strangely provincial, where everybody is cut off from everybody else because of the level of specialization and in-your-own-headedness.

The only other thing I can say about this book as a collection is that DFW is very much concerned with the demoralizing aspects of modern society--from corporate culture's obliteration of the personal (Mr. Squishy) to the reality-show aspect of pop culture and the vulture-like commercialization of every inch of genuine human feeling (Suffering Channel). What isn't always consistent is how he sees a way out of this bleak view. In some stories I see brief moments of light, of transcendence despite the conditions, but mostly I feel oppressed and saddened by it. Not that DFW really has to provide solutions, but I wonder if he really did provide glimpses of 'the answer' but that it is so hidden in the complexities of each story that I have not been able to see it. These stories are filled with so much minutiae that it seems entirely too easy to just be buried by that alone, which is also similar to the lives many of these characters lead. They don't reflect often because they are not allowed to. They are drowning in their own set of strange, often trivial particulars, and given no time to reflect.

My apologies ahead of time for the amount of detail (on a story-by-story basis) that I've included. It goes almost without saying that SPOILERS is the name of the game from here on out, so consider yourself warned. Here goes:

Mister Squishy 5/5: this story totally won me over. The way DFW progresses his story so organically as to be unnoticeable and the way he understands so clearly the sadness (and inherently, the dark humor also) of the inner workings of the modern corporate machine just devastates me. I have a friend who tells me of her days at work which reminds me of some of the passages in here (p44-45 in my hardback copy) and make me doubly glad that I work for the public library, and not the private sector. Just this whole thing about turning numbers around and not really doing anything concrete but fudging it so that it *appears* to be what the client wants... but work is work, right? no, it has consequences on a personal level: we see this corporate mentality affect the main character's inner psyche: his current feeling of helplessness and disillusionment is contrasted with his younger self's feeling of becoming someone important and making a change; this all really resonates but by resonates I mean devastates me. The story's conclusion was so ambiguous that I still wasn't sure what I was to make of certain things #1. who is the first person "I" character that pops up only twice that I can remember (once in a footnote) and #2 what exactly was the man scaling the skyscraper doing, (although later he inflates with a mask on, so I am guessing maybe he is the mr. squishy mascot? with an m-16?) and #3 the stuff about the two different types of poison that can be injected into the cakes... I suspect all of these things have something to do with manipulating the facilitators, but I'm not sure exactly the details, which is fine by me, but really makes me wonder if I'm a particularly dim reader or if it was meant to be ambiguous.

The Soul is Not a Smithy 4/5: have you ever tried to read a short story and not think of it as a short story,

but as a novel? It usually doesn't work, because a short story is like an arrow traveling to its destination, very one-minded, distilling a moment in time... it's pretty easy to tell from a few pages whether it's from a short story or from a novel, usually, just by the way it is written and how the narrative unfolds. But DFW manages to make stories that read like novels, with endless digressions and parallel elements working at the same time. Also novel-like is the multiple level of meanings you can put onto it. On the literal level it is a horrific event that happened in a classroom. But what is the story really about?

One thing that was funny/odd was how shocked I became at the story within the story: the one the narrator was making up in his daydreams. I found myself being horrified by it and then I caught myself thinking "it's okay, it's just a story this kid daydreamed, it's not even real." then I caught myself thinking "wait a minute, NONE of this is real, even this kid is made up, in a story by DFW". It was a very subtle way to be meta, I think, and one of the few times when some kinda 'meta' device by an author didn't feel heavy handed, (though I'm not even sure if it's a device, as that implies intention, whereas here it just feels like something weird I felt when I read it) partly because it arrives so organically. So on one level, I think this story is about the idea of fictions... this daydream and the movie (*The Exorcist*, interesting choice considering the idea that the substitute teacher in the real story seems to be possessed) happening side by side, and later: the narrator's Kafka-esque nightmares about adult life based on his father's ennuui.

Secondly, I think the story is about adult life more than about a child's life, as the narrator is already grown up and is retelling it from memory: also the details about the father and the parents in the daydream provide such a complete picture of adult frustration, so that the incomprehensible event of the substitute teacher's behavior (even though it is never explained or given the empathy of a backstory into the substitute teacher's inner life) seems to be totally understandable by conjecture. I feel like DFW is constantly revolving around the theme that modern life, with all its conveniences, makes the practical problems of being alive and staying alive increasingly easy, but makes *feeling* alive increasingly difficult. Emotionally, spiritually, we are demoralized, made to act like machines, our passions, individuality, quirks ignored or pushed to the background as distractions or, worse, undesirable traits.

That said, I did have a small problem with this story in that I had a hard time believing a 9 year old boy, however observant he is about his father's somber behavior at home, can come up with such a Kafka-esque vision of bureaucracy without ever having visited his father's workplace or having any frame of reference in the adult world. The terror of this world being something completely foreign to children (I believe) makes it seem all the more out of place, and because the story of the father is so central to the big message of the story, I felt it was less subtle, less organic than I expected it to be, especially since the first story was developed so organically. Then again, it really is a small flaw, not even a flaw in the story perhaps, but maybe a flaw in my ability to believe in the power of the subconscious mind of a 9 year old. Like any good novel, this short story leaves me with questions: 1. what is this story's relationship to the future grown-up adult lives of the pupils, referenced throughout, particularly the armed services 2. why does DFW choose to end on a less-than-climactic passage, essentially about a school play, was it to make you feel like things are going back to normal in the school? 3. or was it to slyly name-drop Ruth Simmons in the last paragraph thus making you wonder if the daydream was real or not; also, wtf? this seems like a cheap move...

Incarnations of Burned Children 3/5: very short, intense; escalating language; made me breathe faster.

Another Pioneer 3/5: In the beginning you have art that mirrored reality, taking as its goal to reproduce likenesses in a literal sense. Science also believed in absolute answers, with Newton's formulas supposedly being able to be drawn out into infinity to predict anything so far as we had the formula and the computational power. But ah, Modernism comes along and now instead of straight answers we have questions, we have doubt, we have art that tries to attack the viewer's own assumptions. We have discursive

rants (a la DFW). We have stories with ambiguous endings. Likewise in science we know that there are things we cannot know. We know that an electron can seemingly be at two places at the same time. Chaos theory tells us that it is impossible to predict things past a certain level. Is this story an allegory for modernism? It's a fun allegory, and it was enjoyable beyond an intellectual exercise. But it didn't go far beyond that enjoyable-ness into a kind of emotional connection as some of the other stories in this collection do.

Good Old Neon 2/5: This story didn't work for me, mostly because I found the voice annoying (and perhaps it was intentionally so). But it didn't help that I've thought most of these same thoughts before, so it made me annoyed with myself (or that part of myself), most of all. I think everyone probably has these thoughts to some level, i.e. am I a fraud? It comes out of not only life being hard but also out of our increasingly web 2.0 sharing your life/everything is a performance/appearances count more than what's actually there/what should I write in the ABOUT ME section of my profile?/oh, i'm gonna give this book 4 stars so everyone will think I 'get' DFW but then I'm gonna say I hate people who jump on the DFW bandwagon therefore people will think I'm smarter than the average DFW fanboy. I really don't think like this as often as the narrator of the story, but there is an element of it that is unavoidable for me, being an innate overthinker living in the year 2011.

I find that thinking about it just makes me more crazy though, it's SO CIRCULAR. So should I think about it more, in the hopes of figuring out a way out of it? The whole problem, though, is overthinking, so thinking about overthinking is only going to compound the problem. The opposite problem: ignoring it, isn't going to work either because then it could come out unexpectedly and devastate you. Perhaps the answer is to acknowledge that it's true, that appearances are a huge part of your life, and that despite this, it does not make you a complete fraud, and that everybody feels like a fraud, and that perhaps just keeping up appearances will somehow make the act itself genuine, not completely genuine (what is?), but something within the doing or the intending to do. You just have to trust yourself, that you are capable of being genuine despite what any of the crazy thoughts in your head lead you to believe; it comes down to self esteem.

I'm not sure how much this applies to anyone else, especially for a case like the narrator in this story, who seems to be concerned with appearances to an *exponentially scary* degree (it seemed a little overexaggerated). Another thing: this story doesn't seem to go anywhere, the problem is defined, and then it is defined some more, etc. etc. until he kills himself. I feel like I could've written this story, given the nature of the narrator's problem and how I've thought about all this before. It didn't really provide any new insight for me.

As for the meta quality at the end, I'm not sure what to think, other than maybe it was a stab at providing hope at the end of the story: that hope being that some brilliant writer out there named David Wallace (if he hadn't killed himself yet) would be capable of supreme empathy, at a level which makes it able for him to inhabit the mind of someone hopeless and see things from that bleak perspective—that there is still genuine empathy out in the world. But perhaps it is DFW showing us how empathetic he is that is the problem, perhaps it is DFW's own wish to convince us, the readers, of how empathetic he is that is a mirror to the narrator's own problems, and perhaps this is why DFW ended up killing himself in the end also. I don't really believe this, (the thinking in this story is too simplistic for DFW to have followed himself when he killed himself, and also, I don't believe he would write this story if it was really himself, it seems too personal) but this is the kind of conclusion overthinking leads to.

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature 2/5: I'm not sure what this story is about. I might have to read it again. It seems like he is doing what he does in other stories like Mister Squishy where he alternates between several different storylines within the same paragraph, so that the current sentence may have nothing to do with the last one. But whereas the other stories made sense, this strategy seems to lead to confusion in this

particular case. I did, however, find the mother whose face was plastic surgeried into a constant state of shock to be both hilarious and somewhat poignant.

Oblivion 2/5: wha? really? I thought DFW was 'above' the whole 'it-was-all-a-dream' sham 'ending' so popular with Creative Writing 101 students or perhaps he thought this was 'acceptable' in this case because the 'story' was explicitly about sleep, so the conceit/form was justified by how it folded back into the 'content' of the story, but no, just no. I thought about the possible 'excuses' that would make this shit-move alright but it still didn't work for me, it was awful and quite tacky. The story before the shit-ending was alright although at times its tedium and repetitiveness reminded me of a less funny and more 'boring' Bernhard. I wonder if DFW read Bernhard or what he thought of him. That asshole's influence was far-reaching, man.

The Suffering Channel 3.5/5: Perhaps it was appropriate that, while I was reading this story in my backyard one sunny day, I was suddenly shat on by a bird. The shit hit my left shoulder and it was the first time I had ever been bird-shat on. This story is about shit, but beyond that, it is about (I think) art, commercialization of art, suffering (of course), and spectacle... the spectacle of art and the spectacle of suffering, both. It is also interesting that the story was set in the WTC a few months before 9/11. It's almost like that Chekhov saying about the gun in the first act... You can see the shadows of the planes looming over this story, but it is never explicitly written into the story, just implied.

The last line of this story (and also of this book) should warrant further attention. Let's set the scene here first. They are trying to film an 'artist' while he shits. They, being the media (for all intents and purposes). One camera is on his face and one is coming up from under him to show his shit as it emerges (he is a shit-artist, in that shit comes out of him fully formed as sculptural art). Furthermore, the artist is set up so that he will be watching the live-feed of his own shit as it comes out, hopefully in the form of *Winged Victory of Samothrace*. Here is the sentence:

There's some eleventh hour complication involving the ground level camera and the problem of keeping the commode's special monitor out of its upward shot, since video capture of a camera's own monitor causes what is known in the industry as feedback glare--the artist in such a case would see, not his own emergent *Victory*, but a searing and amorphous light.

There is so much packed in here, so much... dare I say it: Symbolism! Strangely enough, DFW uses symbolism, but it is so fucked up you're not sure what it represents and how it works together exactly. We have the artist caught between these two, in-essence, mirrors. We have the artist's work which is either shit or a masterpiece (Victory!). Or both! We have a feedback loop between the camera and the monitor, which is essentially a not-so-veiled reference to self-reference. Self-reference being both a writing trick/device DFW (the artist, in this case) uses often as well as the basis of our whole conception of ourselves (I Am a Strange Loop). The former is sometimes a cynical, self-defeating, downward spiral (as in the story 'Good Old Neon' in this collection) whereas the latter is often seen as a searing and amorphous light known as consciousness.

Joshua Nomen-Mutatio says

From my favorite story, "Good Old Neon":

"What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant."

Oblivion is not as consistently solid as his first short stories collection *Girl With Curious Hair*, but hands down is amazing nonetheless.

Only slight complaint: The very first story is a bit difficult as it's loaded with corporate marketing, PR and advertising jargon, but it still unfolds eventually as being brilliant nonetheless. According to an interview Wallace spent quite a long time writing that one. My complaint is that it was not the best decision to place this story as the first in the collection. I have to wonder how many people were put off by it and then didn't get to the rest of the stories which are wonderful, top-notch DFW.

"Incarnations of Burned Children" is a mere 2.5 pages long but an example of perfectly condensed intensity.

"The Soul Is Not A Smithy" is tremendously suspenseful and melancholy. Also contains some of the most emotionally pointed descriptions of the mind of a young child playing mental games with themselves due to elementary school-daze boredom.

And the finale, "The Suffering Channel", is a wonderful example of the well-balanced surrealism, and the emotional and moral realism that is brought out when playing with the twin forces of sadness and hilarity that Wallace is widely celebrated for. It involves a man who shits perfect sculptures and the glossy magazine journalist who must cover the story and spin it appropriately.

My second favorite story is "Another Pioneer." It's just great. That's all I'll say about it for now.

Oriana says

Oh boy. Oh man, do I have a lot to say about this here book. I can't even begin to tackle it as a whole entity, so I'm going to do a review of each story, unless I get tired and have to smoosh.

Also: I am the kind of person who listens to all my music on shuffle, which means I clearly have no respect for the artist's conception of a complete work. Consequently I read these stories totally out of order, and will review them the same way.

"The Suffering Channel" and "Mister Squishy"

I think these are examples of DFW at nearly his best. They're certainly typifications of what I think of when I think of him. These long twisty stories with a fairly simple (though unique) plot, constellated with exhaustively depicted characters—to the point, sometimes, that it seems like the sort of pre-writing exercise you're taught to do in a creative writing class, where you jot down every single thing you can think of about your characters, from their appearance to their education to their mannerisms to their innermost fears and desires. Of course, those exercises are typically meant to be reference points only, a tool to help the writer really *know* his characters, so that they can be rendered more real on the page. But *pff*, DFW doesn't—didn't, oh god, pain in my heart—follow rules like that. Another rule he doesn't follow? The normal flow and rhythm of a story. Even pommo or trickerish authors tend to do things like group similar ideas or moments into the same paragraph, but not DFW. No, his stories (or his stories of the type exemplified by these two) have dense paragraphs that cover everything at once, with the interior monologue of one character tripping over a physical description of another character which is then pushed up next to the action the first was contemplating making a few pages ago. I want to make a metaphor about balls (ha), like juggling, but it's not like juggling, it's more like shuffling, like each part of the story is one suit in a deck, and he just swishes them all together so that everything is on top of something else, and you have to, um, count fucking cards or

something, or anyway work really hard to keep each running narrative in your head so you know whom he means each time he says "she" because, following the logical sentence structure, it does not refer to the person it ought to refer to. Gosh, did I manage to make that sentence as confusing as the thing I'm trying to explain? Maybe I should have said that DFW at his best claws his way into your brain and makes you think and write and sometimes even talk like him, which is amazing and thrilling and a little bit awful.

I should also have said that "The Suffering Channel" is a brilliant excuse to have a whole slew of different characters have long, involved conversations about shit and shitting and playing with shit and caring for shit and preserving shit and making art out of shit—all while maintaining his aura of brilliance and scholarly aplomb. And I know there's nothing new under the sun etc etc, but I would bet a large amount of money that no one ever, in the history of the world, has used the phrase "intracunnilingual flatus vignette" before. These two stories each get high B+, and for a lesser author would be the top of his achievements. (See "The Soul Is Not a Smithy" and "Good Old Neon" for why DFW, of course, can do even better.)

"Incarnations of Burned Children"

As MJ promised in the comments below, this story is fist-chewingly great. And devastating. In fact, *this* might be DFW at his best, but that's hard to claim, since it's so unlike what he usually does. It's short, it's too the point, it's sharply poetic, it's emotionally raw, it's essentially free of character description or background or intellectualizing. It's a short sharp stunning burst of beautiful horror.

"Another Pioneer"

This story was too much on the over-intellectualization. It's kind of what you'd expect from DFW telling you a fable, I guess, reinterpreted through his ridiculous brain and spat out by a weird narrator, shot through with obtuse Latin phrases and rendered much less moving by being made so so writerly. Stories like this are why the haters hate DFW.

"Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" and "Oblivion"

These stories can suck a dick. Lest you think I am just a mindless DFW fluffer, I want to stress that he can absolutely be just insufferable at times, which is why I always give his books the "too smart for their own good" tag. "Oblivion" in particular just made me furious, written as it is in this incredibly stilted style, with all kinds of "words" put in unnecessarily "quotation marks," as if the narrator were some kind of alien or moron who had never been in polite society. *Which he wasn't*. It was just a story about a dude who was having weird trouble with his wife, a story that should, in fact, have been a really interesting and engaging, involving sleep studies and intra-familial weirdness and strange manifestations of psychological trouble between long-married people after their kids leave home and the many, many layers of thought and self-doubt and self-assurance we use to fool ourselves and those we love. But he just fucking buried it all under this stupid conceit where everything was overexplained and mummified by weird constructions and stilted language and it was just awful. Ditto for "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature." *Fail*.

"The Soul Is Not a Smithy"

Spectacular. Hands down the best story in the book, and the reason why DFW is a consummate motherfucking genius.

***I'm still not done with this review, dammit. I have obvs a lot more to say about that one, and I haven't even gotten to the utterly wrecking "Good Old Neon." Why can't I just spend my entire life writing book reviews? Can someone pay me a million dollars for that please??

Samadrita says

Caution:- Long review ahead.

I finally understand what the word '*tedium*' means. Interestingly enough I have neither associated this particular term with books making use of the much revered and equally feared stream-of-consciousness as a narrative device nor with hefty tomes worth more than 1000 pages.

But getting through even 1 page of DFW's writing requires a Herculean effort on the reader's part. Wallace commands your undivided attention and let's say if you are demanding the luxury of a split second of thinking something unrelated in the middle of a page and then coming back to that same point in a page, resuming reading and achieving your former state of involvement with the story right away, you couldn't be asking for more.

Wallace's writing doesn't allow you breaks or breathers. His style is a modified form of stream of consciousness, one can say, where the endless stream of interior monologue combines with minutiae of character descriptions, frequent and abrupt digressions and everything else imaginable in excruciating detail. And once you lose the elusive thread connecting all the dots, you are doomed.

But even then, reading him is such a whole lot of fun. It's a challenging exercise where all your mental faculties are working at their full potential and strained to the extreme lest they miss out on that one crucial sentence amidst a sea of unnecessary details, that helps you understand what the narrative is about or what Wallace really wants you to know.

Mister Squishy

My first reactions to Mister Squishy bordered on impatient irritation:-

"Dude, stop showing off! I get that you are some kind of genius to be able to document everything with such painstaking precision."

"What in the world is this about anyway?"

"Lord please make this story end already."

That I happened to be reading this way past midnight, also fuelled my annoyance to a certain degree. But it's a good thing I plowed on stubbornly refusing to let Wallace get the better of me and put me to sleep. And finally it all clicked together.

I began to see the point in plodding through a mind-boggling volume of corporate jargon and specifics of everything starting from variations in one particular character's sexual fantasies to the alignment of cakes kept on a tray in a conference room.

Mister Squishy is a less-than-flattering commentary on corporate America and accurately highlights the mind-numbing boredom that entails a white-collar, corporate job in the most indirect manner possible. It has an undercurrent of Wallace's typical dry humour running throughout which aids the reader in tiding over some of the ceaseless monotony of the detailing of the most trivial things.

I give this 3/5.

The Soul Is Not A Smithy

This is a pure gem of a short story. But then again you have to wait patiently to peel off all the layering of digressions to get to the core of the story. A young primary school student day-dreams in panels, each one of them described in vivid details, and remains oblivious to a major crisis unfolding before his very eyes in his Civics class. But in retrospect what seems to affect him the most is not the memory of this one terrifying incident (of his teacher's supposed demonic possession) but the tragedy of surviving the day-to-day ennui of adult life.

I am probably not explaining this well but this short story seemed more like an exercise in story-telling than anything else since its metafictional qualities are way too obvious to be ignored.

3.5/5

I have just one bone to pick with this though - Sanjay Rabindranath is not a correct Indian name. Rabindranath is a name and not a surname (as per my knowledge). And I'm a little disappointed with Wallace for creating another stereotypical Indian character, albeit an unimportant one. (Not EVERY Indian boy is a nerd with glasses who likes nothing better than studying. Humph!)

Incarnations of Burned Children

This story came as a pleasant shock. It displays Wallace's incredible range as a writer. It is lyrical, agonizing, has some of his most exquisite prose (sans the insane detailing and abhorrent barrage of tough sounding words) and deals with a theme like parenthood which is so not your typical Wallace subject.

This is hands down my favorite story of the lot and worth being read and re-read.

5/5

Another Pioneer

A wonderful parable rife with symbolism and allusions to human foibles, but half concealed behind a mountain of Latin phrases and incomprehensible words which put my Kindle dictionary to shame.

I am going to make a list of the words here just to give the prospective reader an idea -

thanatophilic

puerocratic

oneirically

epitatic

peripeteiac

paenistic

thanatotic

phlogistic

extrorse

.....and so on

(oh look even GR spellcheck thinks these words do not exist)

4/5

Good Old Neon

A semi (or wholly?) autobiographical story which reminded me of Wallace's suicide again and again. I loved

the protagonist's voice (even though he is kind of a douche, really) and not even once did his ramblings bother me here, which goes to show how deftly Wallace handled the narration. The ending left me spell-bound.

5/5

Oblivion

A brilliant short story revolving around the dynamics of human relationships which appear to be normal on the surface but reveal complexities just beneath it and inter-familial troubles. But again this contains a generous sprinkling of unheard of words which are precisely there to make you feel a little stupid. But I almost did not mind.

This one has a bit of a cliched ending.

4/5

The Suffering Channel

By far the longest short story of the lot and this could also qualify as a novella. From what I could glean from this, it appears to be DFW's attempt at parodying the inner workings of media houses and revealing that thin line separating 'actual' news from pure bullshit being relayed under the pseudonym of news. Also you can take the word 'shit' literally here.

(Don't get what I mean? Read the damn book.)

4/5

(I have left out reviewing one story here because that did not make much of an impression on me.)

After finishing this book, I am experiencing a mad urge to laugh loudly at the burst of pride I felt for my own vocabulary at one point of time.

Reading DFW is a tiresome experience but it is also immensely rewarding and I simply cannot wait to learn more from him now.

P.S.:- A big thank you to **Garima** for linking me to DFW's now stuff-of-legends Kenyon commencement address. A reading of that speech full of amazing new insights helped dispel some of the negative sentiments I seemed to have developed in the earlier stage of my acquaintance with Wallace's writing.

Oscar says

Lo que está claro es que los libros de David Foster Wallace, o te gustan o no te gustan. Personalmente, prefiero cuando le da más importancia al fondo de la historia, que a la forma de contarla. Cuando no me gusta es cuando experimenta. En este sentido, 'Extinción' es el libro que más me ha gustado por ahora de DFW.

La característica más destacable de la escritura de DFW no es su calidad literaria, que la tiene y mucha, ni las historias que cuenta, que son magníficas, todo un prodigio de imaginación, agudeza y erudición; lo que

destaca por encima de todo es su visión del mundo, su inteligencia a la hora de abrirnos los ojos a la realidad que nos rodea. Su ojo, su mente, es como un bisturí con el cual disecciona todo lo que cae bajo su punto de observación. DFW narra como si tuviera un zoom, está contándote una historia, para a continuación pasar a otro sub-tema, y a continuación a otro sub-sub-tema, todo ello con la máxima minuciosidad. No se trata de historias dentro de historias, como hace Paul Auster. Lo que desea hacer DFW es contarnos la historia abarcando todos los puntos de vista y con todos los detalles posibles, utilizando para ello estadísticas, Historia, matemáticas, física, etc., pero siempre con unas dosis de observación extraordinarias. Creo que DFW sacaría un buen relato hasta del prospecto de un medicamento.

Esta manera de narrar tan singular puede dejarte exhausto en algunos momentos (desde luego, no se trata de una lectura de metro), pero merece la pena no rendirse y seguir leyendo porque al acabar de leer el relato te das cuenta de la profundidad de DFW como escritor y persona. Su prosa puede parecer aséptica hasta cierto punto, sobre todo cuando entra en algunos detalles, pero es sólo una sensación superficial. A un nivel más profundo llegas a conocer tan íntimamente a los personajes que deseas seguir acompañándolos en sus tribulaciones.

Otro detalle a destacar de las historias de DFW es que no tienen ni principio ni final. Al término de sus relatos, da la impresión de que prodría seguir y seguir *ad infinitum*. DFW quería abarcar la vida entera de los personajes. Quizá me guste DFW como también me gusta la música minimalista, con la que pienso tiene similitudes. Una composición de Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Wim Mertens o Michael Nyman, tiene la misma estructura que un relato de DFW. Empieza con fuerza, no posee aparentemente melodía y termina abruptamente, pero te mantiene en un estado hipnótico durante unos minutos. La prosa de DFW es igual, con esos párrafos interminables, al estilo de Marcel Proust o Thomas Bernhard, que te mantienen pegado a sus páginas, hasta que de repente se acaban, casi como si fuesen una partitura porque poseen una musicalidad propia.

Estos son los ocho relatos contenidos en 'Extinción':

- Seños Blandito. (***) Un Grupo de Discusión está realizando unos test para el lanzamiento de un nuevo producto, un pastelido de nombre "¡Delitos!" Se trata de una terrible crítica a los medios publicitarios. El relato más duro de leer del libro, con el que hay que armarse de paciencia porque cuando llevas leídas unas páginas, todo encaja.
- El alma no es una forja. (*****) El protagonista nos cuenta el trauma que sufrieron tanto él como sus compañeros en la clase de Educación Cívica cuando eran niños, al mismo tiempo que recuerda las fantasías que se inventaba en clase, y cómo trata de entender la vida que llevó su padre durante esos años. Un relato maravilloso, una obra maestra. Sólo por este cuento merece la pena leer este libro.
- Encarnaciones de niños quemados. (*****) En apenas tres páginas, el autor nos muestra un hecho puntual y trascendente en la vida de una familia.
- Otro pionero. (*****) El protagonista recuerda una historia que le contó un amigo de un amigo que iba en un vuelo y que escuchó por casualidad. Se trata de una fábula sobre un niño que nació en una tribu paleolítica capaz de responder cualquier pregunta.
- El neón de siempre. (*****) El protagonista nos quiere explicar como todo su vida es un fraude. Otra muestra de la genialidad de DFW.
- La filosofía y el espejo de la naturaleza. (***) La madre del protagonista, el cual acaba de salir de prisión,

está en juicios con unos cirujanos plásticos que le destrozaron la cara. Relato de humor negro con muy mala leche.

- Extinción. (****) Historia de un matrimonio, contada desde el punto de vista del marido, que pasa por un mal momento debido a los supuestos ronquidos de él. Gran relato, cuyo final me dejó francamente perturbado.

- El canal del sufrimiento. (***) Skip Atwater anda tras un personaje que podría darle el siguiente artículo en la revista para la que trabaja. Se trata de un "escultor" que "realiza" unas "figuritas" bastante curiosas. Otra crítica feroz, esta vez a la prensa amarillista y de cotilleo, pero también al mundo del arte, porque ¿quién tiene la potestad para decidir lo que es o no es arte? No cabe duda de que el sentido del humor de DFW era un poco especial.

Franco Santos says

2.5

Señor Blandito: No me gustó en absoluto. Creo que es el relato más pesado, insufrible y lento que he leído en mi vida. Admiro muchísimo la capacidad que tenía Wallace para analizar y describir hasta la más ínfima minucia; sin embargo, fue tanto lo que desmembró y analizó que mi voluntad para seguir pasando la página quedó gravemente herida. Pude terminarlo, pero el daño ya estaba hecho. No se lo recomiendo a nadie: un hastío interminable. (1.5/5).

El alma no es una forja: Me gustó. Es interesante el tema que trató el autor en este cuento: el miedo onírico; los tormentos internos y su poder dentro de nosotros. Principalmente, Wallace se centró en el temor a la rutina y al camino gris que nos transporta hacia la triste monotonía de la vida. (3/5)

Encarnaciones de niños quemados: Es de los mejores de este libro. Asimismo, es el más corto. Muy recomendable. (3.5/5)

Otro pionero: Es un cuento borgiano: se nota ostensiblemente la influencia de Borges. Tiene una inusitada cantidad de palabras que ignoro, sin embargo no llegó al punto de afectar mi comprensión del texto. A pesar de no tener diálogo, se lee rápido y engancha al instante. Me gustó. (3/5).

El neón de siempre: El mejor relato de este libro. Excelente. Es de esa clase de historias que dejan una cicatriz en nosotros; no se olvidan con la última oración leída. Se concentra en el suicidio y en la máscara que todos nos ponemos para agradar a los demás. El final le robó varios latidos a mi corazón. (4.5/5)

La paradoja de la fraudulencia consistía en que cuanto más tiempo y esfuerzo invertías en resultar impresionante o atractivo a los demás, menos impresionante o atractivo te sentías por dentro.

La filosofía y el espejo de la naturaleza: No me gustó. Un cuento sin sentido, del tipo de los que desaparecen de nuestras vidas a medida que vamos avanzando en su lectura. No le encontré nada de magia a este trabajo. Algo bueno que puedo rescatar es que no es tedioso. (2/5)

Extinción: Interesante, simplemente interesante. Wallace retrató a un matrimonio como cualquier otro, con sus sendos problemas relacionales. Al principio no sabía bien de qué iba, no obstante, conforme pasaban las

páginas la luz se hacía presente. El final es bastante cliché. (3/5).

El canal del sufrimiento: Un hombre que hace esculturas con mierda. (2/5).

Celeste - Una stanza tutta per me says

A proposito, lo so che questa parte è noiosa e probabilmente ti annoia, ma si fa assai più interessante quando arrivo alla parte in cui mi uccido e scopro quello che succede subito dopo che una persona muore.

Quanto a lungo si può descrivere un momento? Quanto dettagliatamente, finemente, esaustivamente si può sperare di raccontarlo? Soprattutto: a che scopo?

A tratti Foster Wallace in questo può sembrare pedante e logorroico - siamo onesti, lo è -, ciò non implica una scrittura meno magistrale o una creatività raggiungibile ad altri, anzi.

Questo genio si spinge al limite del proprio estro riuscendo a non perdere per strada il proprio sentimento, nascondendo sotto un muro di bellissime parole quel cuore pieno di paura, solitudine e confessioni sussurrate.

"Come un vecchio neon" e "Il canale del dolore" sono dei romanzi brevi stupefacenti; "Incarnazioni di bambini bruciati" è il racconto più vivido e atrocemente indimenticabile abbia mai letto.

Sentimental Surrealist says

Author's note: review and rating both subject to change. I've already bumped it a star; the second will depend on what a rereading of the title story brings.

You know, I hate to say this about my favorite author, but a lot of this book is just kind of... boring. "The Suffering Channel" and "Oblivion" are the two problem children here, taking up about 130 pages of space; they desperately need the human touch Wallace applies to his distinct brand of experimental fiction. I get that they're transitional pieces, and that they show him moving into the style he would use to more enlightening ends during the early drafts of *The Pale King*. However, since he can't find anything fascinating about the details (which he, oddly enough, manages on some of this collection's better pieces - the unfairly maligned "Mister Squishy" and the three I'm about to bring up nail it), they just end up being slogs so painfully dull that I end up losing the thread of the story. Furthermore, since I don't really connect with the characters in either of these pieces, their more postmodern touches just come off as too clever-clever for my liking.

Luckily, this is still a David Foster Wallace book, which guarantees that it'll have a few truly fantastic moments. The meat of this is found in three stories. First off, the neo-existentialist "Good Old Neon" is a total classic. I don't quite agree with the common line of thought that holds it up as his best story ever (I'd definitely take the second "Devil is a Busy Man," the one about diverting money, over this, and a few other pieces from the [much better, I'll add] *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* at least challenge it, for instance "Signifying Nothing" and "Octet"), but the psychological depth of it is astounding, and the metafictional twist he throws in at the end stuns. "The Soul is Not a Smithy" offers a repeat performance when it comes to Wallace getting into characters' heads, being an examination of a boy whose mind wanders away in class even as a substitute teacher holds them hostage. It's hard to go wrong with such a cool concept, but even

when you take that out, the story still excels - check out how the boy's circumstances and the movies he concocts in his head. The last of the classics is "Another Pioneer," about a child in a stone age society who can answer any question put to him; it's given to us thirdhand, which is always something I find interesting, and it's a fascinating study of how myths perpetuate themselves. "Mr. Squishy" is pretty good too - not in the same class of the three classics, but the way he contrasts the suspense of the climbing figure with the bored, wandering minds of the corporate meeting is classic Wallace. And I can really tell that he used ideas from both this and "The Soul is Not a Smithy" in the Pale King; the English major in me is going crazy over that.

Still, this is definitely the weakest and most disappointing Wallace book I've read yet. It has three brilliant long-form stories, one pretty good one, and two painfully dull ones. As for the two shorter pieces, they really represent the dichotomy at work here: while "Incarnations of Burned Children" is full of motion, suspense, and terror, "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" simply tries to mash too many elements together for eight pages. It's at least worth getting from the library, but don't make this your first time around with DFW.

Leo Robertson says

*For we die every day; oblivion thrives
Not on dry thighbones but on blood-ripe lives,
And our best yesterdays are now foul piles
Of crumpled names, phone numbers and foxed files.*
- from Nabokov's Pale Fire

RE-READ:

Read this for the third time recently. It wasn't pleasant. Not to say the stories were affecting; it was just tedious. Part stories, part phonebook. Nuts!

It's asking more of a book than most people would, that it holds up on a third reading. Certainly parts of Mr Squishy, The Soul Is Not A Smithy and Oblivion are still great—but they seem to start so far from where the stories are going (if the story is going anywhere at all), that it's very hard to work out what it's about even when it becomes apparent later on, because earlier scenes have given a different impression. It's so important to set the scene from page one, as at least Good Old Neon and Pretentious Titles of Inflammable Infants achieve (Weakest line in the book in the latter though: "If you've never wept and want to, have a child." Oh boo hoo hoo, 1) Who's never wept? 2) How the fuck would you know, ahaha.)

I often write stories that don't actually start until chapter three. It takes me the longest time to notice because I have such a difficult time divorcing what the story became from what my original vision for it was—I'm gonna say that's what's going on here. In need of further editing for sure.

FIRST REVIEW:

Okay! So here's some music to listen to while you read this review :)

But it's not really a review, as always.

I have this picture in my head of what a review would constitute, and it's not this.

Also, in the interest of improving my own writing, all "I think"s are removed from the below (...I think) but are obvs implied.

Anyways, The Field's music is repetitious, precise, and quite boring to listen to at first, near repulsively so maybe. But if you trust in it and lend it your ears, you can enter a kind of lucid trance. This principle is one DFW was aware of, the humanity within expanded repetitious blandness. Chekhovian grey language; stories told "the way one person relates to another the most important things in his life, slowly and yet without a break, in a slightly subdued voice." In Oblivion we find the universal fury of Notes from Underground, the omnipresent tedium of A Boring Story, but thrown under a steamroller, exclamation points removed, freshened up for a modern American audience. "The poet's job is not to tell you what happened, but what happens: not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place."

But why sit and read such sad bullshit? That's what I thought when I first picked this up last summer. And to be fair, I hadn't been in the white collar working world for very long, but now I am all-too accustomed to days of meetings and people that leave you near mesmerised by how bored the days would make you if you weren't so mesmerised by how boring they are! Have you ever stared at someone's stupid face and thought, 'Of all the many things we could be doing with our time, you chose to use it for this, so relentlessly so that I now feel paralysed', but it's kinda funny, too, because, oh my god, how is this happening? How are such levels of boredom possible?

So I left this book last summer confused, then I came back after reading a bit and looked at the puzzle with new eyes, and now I can tell you why we should sit and read such sad bullshit.

The reason horror films are enjoyed by teens is it's the worst thing they can think of: monsters under beds; violent unlikely death. High class literature + cinema+ art shows maturer folk that real horror is a life of pointless tedium, the grind of which will kill you before you meet the grave. It could happen to anyone after any significant degree of pure meaninglessness, which life is all too happy to provide. What will drive you mad is not a life in which so much tedium occurs, as this is near inevitable: what will drive you mad is if nobody talks about it but you know everyone knows it. That's why books like this exist. Books that make you slap the pages with the back of your hand and say, out loud, alone: 'Yes! Thank you!'

On top of that, there is this lucid trance idea I mentioned: the sheer volume of details Wallace could find in an "empty" room, how he could use those details to tell you what they revealed about the people associated with it, reveals to the reader the tools they need to cope with people and scenarios apparently devoid of content.

I devour all art related to this whole tedium schtick because I fear it so much and am so increasingly immersed in it in life. Simulated reality is the best we get to make us feel better by telling us "Even if your worst fears are real, you'll see it's not so bad" before, or if, it happens one day (comfort disturbed) or it will shock you awake again (disturb comfortable). It keeps everything in flux. If I understand the principle of the book Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (a title of a story within this book), it is similar to when Kundera said that the novelist's job is to show the reader that life is a question (can't find exact quote). It's been a big learning of mine that a writer's job is not necessarily to tell readers something they didn't already know. The hackiest writers will think they need to teach you something as if there was anything about human nature left to teach (is there?) when astute observations will do. The best writers show the reader things they already knew in a new way, as Wallace consistently does by recognising his job as refreshing the power of aphorisms and discouraging cynicism about their cliched nature by doing everything in his power to convince you they're more than bromides. Like a teenager watching the Evil Dead remake (pretty damn good!), we observe the horrors we are presented with through literature as if they are a reality.

DFW is a decidedly American writer, and these stories are as much an indictment of American culture as explorations of universal human truths.

Is Oblivion easy to read? If you push through the wall of repulsion, yes, it is: it becomes its own addiction. But I didn't manage the first time and had to toss it aside, thinking it without value, as there is a stark difference in Wallace's writing from this book onwards. There are NO jokes: I'll stand my ground on that. There are few big words. There are many details and even sparser plots as he pushes closer to a truer representation of life. And I think there is debt to be paid by that other favourite writer of mine whom I mention nearly every review now: Charlie Kaufman, whose masterpiece I won't write the name of another fucking time evokes a similar first-time repulsion, and contains a therapist whose shoes are so tight they hurt her, just as all of DFW's therapists make cages or circles with their hands, or have eating disorders or repressed sexualities. Therapists who need to therapise themselves (this is SO true of some therapists I know-jeezo! I wouldn't trust them to operate heavy machinery any time of day.)

I went to a therapist once but she was super pregnant so I didn't want to tell her sad stuff in case the baby heard me- how unfair would that be? (True, I likely would have found some other excuse!) It's exactly the same as me moving to Oslo now, and all the people in work who have lived there before are like "Oslo's not that great" and I'm all "Dude, would you tell me something nice about this place since I'm committed to going there?" That's what that therapist's baby would have said to me RE: life if he/she could even communicate, you know? So disadvantaged. And also, as I so convincingly played the part of well-together chap, therapist gave me clean bill (I'm about as okay as people generally get now btw)

Shame Beckett isn't alive any more to look at your form and go 'You're on earth: there's no cure for that.' Maybe I'm being flippant and I'm about to digress some, but that's always seemed to be a taboo about therapy or anti-depressants or any mental health issue, is that the things mental health problems get you hung up on are typically the helplessness in the face of the unknowable universal questions about whether or not there is any meaning to life, living in the face of knowing you're going to die and so on, and that was apparent to me that one time I went to a therapist as I get the impression it was for Wallace (it certainly is for his characters) is that notion of 'Well, how much of my worries do you really expect to alleviate, here? Exactly what of what I worry about can anyone prevent from being true, and how much are you really able to interpret what I'm telling you any more than I can anyway?' That's the permanent sour taste in the mouths of many people who seek psychiatric help I imagine, is, well, you stopped me thinking about it, but for how long? Therapists love to therapise, but do they do it well? The psychology-adjacent folk I know throw mental health conditions at the day-to-day people in my anecdotes like a game of Jeopardy: "So my boss is not a very talkative guy-" "WHAT IS ASPERGER'S FOR 500 LEO" (I've never seen Jeopardy also doubt Asperger's counts as a "mental health condition"... somehow I feel you'll get what I'm going for, though!) Like, when I was an ESL teacher, I was like, you guys could do this with a book: you don't need me. But what students needed in that case was more the routine of a person checking up on them to force them to study, as I imagine therapists can be a breathing space for people, like, yes, you are here because you want something fixed, so let's spend some time reflecting on it. But I was cheap, though: that's the difference... I don't think it's gonna make you sad to think that there's some things about life you're never gonna be okay with; rather, expecting to be okay with them despite any indication you should is what will lead to bigger disappointment, a paradox of acknowledging disappointment in order to feel more satisfied.

The best art (ie. therapy) says the following: look at this; I don't know the answer, but you're not alone. That's all I need from it. But I need it a lot and in as many forms as are available! Ebert quote: "An honest bookstore would post the following sign above its 'self-help' section: 'For true self-help, please visit our philosophy, literature, history and science sections, find yourself a good book, read it, and think about it.'"

Some notes on the stories (well, two of them):

First story: Mr Squishy. Teaches you how to read it and rewards your attention with badass corporate

slamming. You leave it feeling like you have the tools to defeat boredom (and the rest of the stories!) Again, first time I tried this, I wasn't ready.

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Overlapping thoughts as in The Pale King section 2. (TPK was really a bunch more short stories, and the best Oblivion-like story is the novella in the middle, which could well have been part of this set.)

Some conclusions:

Generally: none of these stories will leave you satisfied. It's the Hamlet-esque yawn-that-won't-yawn-properly feeling you'll be left with instead, which you will accept with reluctance because of its verisimilitude. These are stories about facets of the human condition that are inextricable no matter our efforts. The incapturability of all thought, inability to recognise which thoughts are important etc. A life that feels blown open, without Coupland-esque Safety net-ism. You're on your own and there's no guarantee you'll spend your years well. This fear being true of anyone, advertisers are really honing in on it to promise you individualism via capitalism, a fantasy they know you will always nurture because you need it to survive. In all the ways that really matter, it doesn't appear that we're individual in the slightest. How could we possibly be? There have been 100 billion of us: our ideas are not that great. You'll notice as I say this that this isn't the medium at all for it: art is. All the toughest things are best said through art. Otherwise it sounds didactic and reductive and is met with a kind of "yeah, I know" as it isn't a fully expanded argument, and this is big hard truths we're talking here: Oblivion, The Pale King, Something Happened, the stories of Chekhov, Oblomov apparently (cheers Tracy!) Wonderboy (whatever that is- I looked up the Norsk copy of Oblivion and it was compared this Norsk novel), Notes from Underground, Wilder's The Apartment...

It is Wallace's opinion that the soul is not a smithy; that there is no Proustian fountain of youth obtainable by having new eyes, as what our eyes see of the exterior is but a pinhole, and those other eyes we desire are but pinholes in our pinhole, and so we lack so much companionship almost by the definition of being human, a Heisenbergian uncertainty principle of love. Mummy can't keep you safe and she never could. And in the face of that, you are so, so brave. And in the face of that, use your fucking pinhole! And in the face of that, fuck it; let's dance. To what? If you followed my instruction, you're listening to it right now! In life we are alone, but today, we dance as one!!

Additional unstitchable thoughts:

DFW loved cinema. Said to Charlie Rose he wouldn't be happy writing a screenplay because someone could come in and change it. But as the Brief Interviews film showed, Wallace's power is in the written word (this should be self-evident: man can that guy write!) Enjoy here what I imagine would be a single line of DFW screenplay dialogue from a 5-hour film about a man and his wife having a conversation about how many times he takes his boat out, and how much this disturbs them both, also their toddler's eyebrows are constantly raised for some reason.

Pop culture is catching up to the importance of the universal incurables eg. through Wallace-fan-and-also-genius Tina Fey, whose latest series Kimmy Schmidt is pointedly dark beneath the glaze of jokes.

My cultural tastes summed up in one pic:

(Pic of Oblivion and a Burger King meal. Pretend it uploaded properly)

Patryx says

I racconti di *Oblío*, molto diversi per stile e per lunghezza (si va dalle quattro pagine di *Incarnavazioni di bambini bruciati* a brevi romanzi di un centinaio di pagine), sembrano avere come denominatore comune la disillusione e la rassegnazione dell'età adulta.

Se ne *La scopa del sistema* c'è l'onnipotenza giovanile di chi pensa di poter superare tutti problemi e di poter provare infinite sperimentazioni; se in *Infinite Jest* c'è la consapevolezza di chi di chi ha dovuto lottare e soffrire per giungere a un equilibrio psichico di cui si riconosce la precarietà, in *Oblío* l'elemento caratterizzante è la disillusione della vita adulta, la consapevolezza che alcuni obiettivi non verranno mai raggiunti e quelli che si riesce a raggiungere si trasformano spesso in noiosa routine perdendo tutta la loro attrattiva.

L'oppressione della quotidianità è resa ancora più gravosa dalla certezza di essere un elemento insignificante di un sistema che non tiene in nessuna considerazione i bisogni e i desideri dei singoli individui. Il rapporto di coppia appare come l'unica ancora di salvezza a chi non riesce a superare la cortina di solitudine all'interno della quale si è rifugiato (*Mr. Squishy*); per altri, invece, è solo una delle tante relazioni interpersonali in cui si indossa la maschera della desiderabilità sociale per ottenere l'approvazione degli altri (*Caro vecchio neon*). La cultura, i sistemi sociali ed economici ingabbiano le persone dentro personaggi che recitano la loro parte a uso e consumo di un pubblico fatto di altri personaggi che a loro volta recitano un copione che non si sono scelti; non è possibile essere veramente se stessi anche a causa del tempo e del linguaggio così come li conosciamo. L'autenticità è possibile solo con la morte che ci libera dai vincoli della logica e della sequenzialità ((*Caro vecchio neon*) e ci rende parte di tutte le cose (*Incarnavazioni di bambini bruciati*). La quotidianità è così gravosa che le persone, pur di dimenticarsene, finiscono per confondere i piani di realtà e a non distinguere più la veglia dal sonno, in un circolo di angoscia in cui precipita anche il lettore che non comprende più cosa è l'uno e cosa è l'altra (*Oblío*).

L'arte (*Il canale del dolore*) e la filosofia (*Un altro pioniere*), nonostante le loro potenzialità, non sfuggono alle regole ferree del marketing e della commercializzazione che mirano alla soddisfazione dei bisogni immediati (bisogni che vengono debitamente creati e manipolati, illudendo le persone che sono libere di scegliere e di trasgredire.)

I racconti non sono semplici nella loro articolazione, alcuni (*Mr. Squishy*, *L'anima non è una fucina*, *La filosofia e lo specchio della natura*) hanno più linee narrative che procedono parallele senza mai incontrarsi pur essendo parte integrante della trama, con una parte del racconto che riporta gli eventi (la conduzione di un *focus group* per le indagini di marketing; un insegnante che, nel bel mezzo di una lezione di educazione civica, si estranea e comincia a scrivere ripetutamente sulla lavagna Uccidili tutti; il viaggio in autobus di una donna sfigurata dagli interventi di chirurgia plastica) e con un'altra, apparentemente slegata dalla prima (un misterioso personaggio che si arrampica su un grattacielo polarizzando l'attenzione dei passanti e degli impiegati negli uffici sottostanti; la sfrenata fantasia di un alunno che si perde nei suoi pensieri dando vita a una storia angosciante di perdite e morte; la descrizione di alcune specie di ragni che un uomo porta sempre con sé in una valigia) che però contribuisce in maniera determinante al grado di tensione emotiva dell'intera vicenda narrata. Ogni racconto presenta una molteplicità di elementi, una ridondanza di descrizioni e di pensieri che rendono complicata la ricerca di un senso profondo, al punto poi da chiedersi se tale senso ci sia effettivamente o se piuttosto si tratti di razionalizzazioni del lettore che cerca di rendere sensato ciò che non lo è.

È difficile scrivere di D. F. Wallace, un autore controverso sin dal suo primo romanzo e che il suicidio ha trasformato per molti in un'icona da venerare o da disprezzare. A me piace la sua capacità di descrivere gli stati emotivi e quegli intricati percorsi mentali che chiamiamo pensiero; questa sua capacità è anche il suo punto debole: si perde nei rivoli delle emozioni e dei pensieri sino a diventare a volte ripetitivo e inconsistente; i periodi lunghi, le minuziose descrizioni, i dettagli del contesto sono paludi e pantani che spingono a una lettura frettolosa o a un abbandono più o meno definitivo. Un antidoto al desiderio di fuga è

una lettura tranquilla, cui si dedica tutto il tempo necessario, senza scadenze e senza alcuna frenesia di capire dove l'autore vuole andare a parare; una lettura che si sospende, e poi si riprende, quando pensieri ed emozioni si trasformano in buchi neri che risucchiano tutto il piacere di trascorrere del tempo con David Foster Wallace e si inizia a pensare che il suicidio era per lui l'unica strada percorribile.

Ubik 2.0 says

Tracce di informazioni annidate

Ancora non ho letto "Ogni storia d'amore è una storia di fantasmi" la biografia a cura di D.T.Max, ma immagino che quando Wallace pubblicò "Oblìo" (2004) fosse all'apice della carriera, disponendo di un potere editoriale sufficiente ad imporre l'ordine degli otto racconti da lui scelto, senza censure o interventi esterni.

Se ciò è vero, mi sono chiesto perché l'autore decise di introdurre il libro con Mister Squishy, una delle opere "wallaciane" più complicate, faticose e respingenti che io abbia letto e che per di più occupa un buon quinto della raccolta (un'ottantina di pagine, o così presumo dato che l'ho letto in e-book). Credo che l'impatto con questa storia, che poi una "storia" non è, svolgendosi quasi interamente intorno al tavolo di un Focus Group per il lancio pubblicitario di un dolce (dove un profluvio di termini tecnici e di acronimi tratti dal gergo pubblicitario e del marketing che sembrano soffocare qualunque intento narrativo...) sia alla base del rifiuto che Oblìo (vedansi i commenti) ha ottenuto da una parte dei lettori in misura ben superiore a "La ragazza dai capelli strani" e "Brevi interviste con uomini schifosi", impegnative come tutto Wallace ma non così ostentatamente.

In realtà all'interno di Mr. Squishy ci sono in sottotraccia parecchi spunti di interesse, benché quasi sospesi, come la strana figura che si arrampica all'esterno del grattacielo e che immaginiamo (invano) vada prima o poi ad interferire col gruppo in riunione all'interno del medesimo edificio; oppure l'ipotetica fantasia di sabotaggio (o è realtà?) del prodotto da parte del coordinatore del gruppo.

Ma a posteriori credo che l'elemento più significativo di questo pseudo-racconto sia l'introduzione del concetto di "informazioni annidate", termine mutuato dal marketing ad indicare una raccolta (ed elaborazione) di dati statistici, analisi di mercato e risultati di test che travalica l'obiettivo manifesto del Focus Group per scavare in direzioni non dichiarate, funzionali ad esplorare il subconscio del consumatore. Wallace sembra applicare questo stesso criterio sia all'oggetto del racconto "annidando" sottotrame, suggestioni, digressioni, riflessioni che sottendono il tema apparentemente principale, sia allo stile, inanellando subordinate, note, frasi tra virgolette o trattini, prolungando un gioco talora ininterrotto per pagine e pagine con effetti disorientanti sulla concentrazione del lettore e, non di rado, sulla comprensione del significato di un insieme ramificato in mille rivoli.

Ma questa tecnica si può ritrovare in molti altri lavori di W., benché qui la complessità stilistica e strutturale sia spinta all'estremo: la fruibilità della narrazione non costituisce una priorità per un autore già di per sé propenso alla sperimentazione ed alla polverizzazione del linguaggio. Certo è che l'impatto per il lettore (che pur dovendo recepire una raccolta in quanto tale e cioè nel suo insieme, è sempre un po' condizionato dall'approccio col racconto iniziale) sarebbe risultato diverso se la scelta del racconto iniziale fosse caduta su "L'anima non è una fucina", "Il canale del dolore" o il racconto che fornisce il titolo alla raccolta. Dei quali ci sarebbe almeno altrettanto da dire ma ho concluso lo spazio...

David says

“**People Prefer Electric Shock to Thinking: Study**” was the way they put it in the *New York Post* only a few days ago. Whether these click- and tenure-bait studies are worth the time and energy it takes read about them is an excellent question, but assuming that this particular one is, the world reaction could probably be divided into two categories: non-readers of DF Wallace, and readers of same. The former may have snorted derisively, rolled their eyes, or lamented (silently or aloud) the state of the human condition today. The latter said to themselves: Oh, yeah, sure, of course they do. I've read about them already in *Oblivion*.

DFW's stories in this collection are largely about people suffering from a serious case of what my Long-Suffering Wife (LSW) is pleased to call “monkey brain”. (Others, perhaps attempting to avoid confusion with the material which is eaten out of a hollowed-out monkey's skull, have termed it “monkey mind”.) Whatever you call it, it's the largely modern experience of useless thoughts ricocheting rattling uncontrollably around your mind like beebees in a tin can.

Your reaction to these stories many depend on (1) whether you yourself are in possession of monkey brain, (b) whether you acknowledge same, (iii) whether you, in personal possession of monkey brain or not, feel that accurate depictions of this mental state are a worthwhile object of the writer's craft (and the reader's time).

Some readers may not like DFW's stories because they (the readers) are not in possession of monkey brain themselves, and lack the empathy, desire, or imagination (or some combination thereof) to project themselves into the minds that do. These people are not necessarily dummies or bad. Some people find it difficult or impossible to imagine mental states different from the ones they find themselves in. They see these states portrayed in fiction (or even in real life) and they just don't get them, just like, no matter how long your dog looks at the doorknob, he won't be able to figure out how to open it. He's not a bad dog. He just can't understand doorknobs.

However, your dog, even if he doesn't understand doorknobs, would not (because dogs are famously earnest and truthful) say (if he/she could talk) that they (the doorknobs) don't exist. However, those who are not in possession of monkey brain might, here at Goodreads and elsewhere, deny that *anyone* is in possession of the mental states portrayed in this book, and DFW's attempts to portray same are just a bag of post-modern tricks, useful only to impress the other members of the graduate writing program and fiction-publishing elite. They are wrong. Monkey brain exists.

Others may not like these stories because they are **too** familiar with these mental states. They don't want to read about them. They read books to *get away* from monkey brain, since a good book provides a few blessed moments escape from monkey brain, in my experience. At this point, LSW (a brainy chick) might invoke aristotelian poetics, which, if I'm understanding her correctly, would say that reading fictional portrayals of your deepest and most annoying mental states might lead you to a catharsis, which would do you a power of good, sort of like a colonic irrigation for the brain (not the most elegant image but I hope you get my drift). Just as many are skeptical about colonic irrigation, the potential benefits of reading about your most unpleasant mental states are lost on certain monkey-brainers.

I've been trying to maintain as light and pleasant a tone as I can muster until now, but of course the future suicide of DFW hangs over this book like a ugly spectre, and that's a serious business. Reviewers here at

Goodreads and elsewhere have opined that this, DFW's last book before his death, was really a cry for help. (Try the following combination at Google yourself: "David Foster Wallace" Oblivion "cry for help".) There is very little one can write on this topic without appearing, at best, a clueless nimrod, so I'll just come out and say that it's a damn shame there seems to be such a positive correlation between talent and madness.

It's generally considered to be a very shallow response to fiction when a person says "I identify with that" or "That felt just like my life" or something similar. Still, that's how I feel. In this case, if you enthuse too, uh, enthusiastically about how DFW captures a part of your lived experience uncaptured elsewhere, you also run the possibility that your friends might begin to worry about you and your mental health. Still, I'm going to say it: DFW, like Guinness, reaches the parts that others don't reach. If reading him is sometimes an obligation instead of a pleasure, it's only because he's making you think about yourself and others in new ways, which even my monkey brain found itself able to do, if only for a few seconds before some other distraction came along.

Neil says

"Might there ever be any questions you yourself wish to ask?"

"Consciousness is nature's nightmare"

In the first two short stories DFW gave voice to the consequences born from living in the pressure cooker of boredom and routine. Following that was the theme of self-awareness and the powers it gives us along with the suffering that follows.

Challenges throughout the book ranged from having to keep track of three or more story lines at once to dealing with names like Ellen Bactrain. Is it pronounced Bass-Train or Back-train? (For the first half of the story I was pronouncing it Bacitracin like the ointment) Every time she was mentioned it was by her full name and that kept tripping me up. I'm convinced DFW did this on purpose to troll his readers.

"The American experience...the paradoxical intercourse of audience and celebrity. The suppressed awareness that the whole reason ordinary people found celebrity fascinating was that they were not, themselves, celebrities.

The conflict between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance...this was the single great informing conflict of the American psyche. The management of insignificance...it was everywhere, at the root of everything—of impatience in long lines, of cheating on taxes, of movements in fashion and music and art, of marketing. In particular...it was alive in the paradoxes of audience. It was the feeling that celebrities were your intimate friends, coupled with inchoate awareness that untold millions of people felt the same way—and that the celebrities themselves did not."

'The management of insignificance' and the behaviors which grow from it was something I always thought about but could never verbalize so eloquently. He should've added Road Rage to that list.

Great book: 4.5 stars rounded up.

Scribble Orca says

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Oblivion - consigned to, by some class act who deleted the pdf and the accompanying seven reviews and 103 ratings of *Good Old Neon* without the simple foresight to MERGE said pdf listing with the final collection (and for those of you who don't think it was sufficient as a standalone check out the **Mighty Jumbuck's** review of this listing) of join-the-dots-as-stories by DFW.

Read no further if you've read already (with apologies to the appreciated commenters who rest in the dustbin of moronic efficiency):

First, the reality that you haven't amounted to anything, and that you won't amount to anything. The simple logic based on analysing the world and your place in it, what you lack that is required to make an impact upon it, that leads to this realisation that you are a vessel not of unfulfilled dreams, but unattainable aspirations arising from a misinformed sense of your own self, your own capabilities. What you want to be, what you would like to imagine yourself to be, what you in millisecond fits of reverie lie to yourself about being, and what you are, equal all that which never moves beyond the mundane, no matter the craving for credit, the addiction to acceptance, the relishing of recognition.

Second, the knowledge that you are a coward, and worse, a hypocrite. That you know of the iniquities that pervade the planet, of the injustices that plague the poor, and you bleat banalities like weed your own lawn before mowing the neighbour's and poverty is relative and reduce, re-use, and re-cycle and only bite off what can be chewed and caring is sharing to excuse yourself from any action that might alter the privileged status quo of your own existence or re-dress the global imbalance between the haves and the have-nots—much less effort to be an almost-have than a deliberate have-not.

Third, the realisation that neither philosophy nor fear, love nor logic, reason nor reaction provides sufficient impetus to continue the farce of the quotidian, that the search for definitive meaning bears no fruit, that existence is nothing more than the animated collision and collusion of attracted atoms in a particular, momentary array, irrespective of whether by external design or internal happenstance. That the overwhelming sense of staleness, of weariness, of having exhausted the rationale not to break the bonds of those atoms and scatter these in the cosmic wind, is the natural result of that reality, that knowledge, that realisation. What remains is less a choice, more an implacable fact, the freedom to act.

With this, you consider, having seen the suffering created by those who depart and experienced by those who remain, how you can ameliorate grief and even exculpate guilt. You prepare documents, make transfers, ensure a semblance of stability, you create an unfolding fabrication to explain your disappearance which you hope will protect your beloved child, just entering high-school, from the imagined effects the actuality of your death might have. You consider whether to leave a letter for your spouse, or perhaps a video, a memento, an attempt to detail how you always believed that you could thwart the death drive by loving and being in love, by finding, according to that hoary old romantic folly, the one person with whom to spend the rest of your life. That the rest of your life was shorter than the length suggested by the emotional contract you signed was as much a surprise to you as it will be to that person, discovering first via credit card statement the hospital bill for a procedure undertaken in The Netherlands, when you were to have visited a friend in Rome, and the subsequent timed email with a link to a website about reviews of books.

Darwin8u says

"What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant."

- David Foster Wallace, Oblivion

Let me get my biases out in the open. I love DFW. I have to be careful somedays to not fall-down and worship his novels. Wallace's nonfiction talent also hits me as evidence that the universe is not even slightly fair. But, I've always been just a little unsettled (and occasionally freaked out) by his short stories. 'Oblivion', like his earlier story collections ('Brief Interviews with Hideous Men' and 'Girl with Curious Hair') is one of those tortured works of fiction that both attract and repel me at the same time. It is a little spooky how some of the stories ("Mister Squishy" and "Oblivion") anticipate his last unfinished novel 'The Pale King' while "Good Old Neon" was hard to listen even though it has been almost four years since his suicide. Anyway, these stories are quirky, stylized, experimental, and brilliant in their beauty and their suffering.
