



The Last Interview and Other Conversations

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Dan says

DFW is a famous author. Over the last 20 years lots of people have interviewed him. This book collects 6 of those interviews, the earliest from 1996. It also includes, as you would expect from the title, his last interview from 1998 (about four months before his suicide).

This last interview is a short one discussing the release of McCain's Promise (in book form). While interesting to hear DFW talk politics, it was a bit of a letdown since it was so brief, and all too final. It's certainly not the fault of Melville House or DFW. The fault lies with me, and my hope that there was some grand, insightful, and unseen interview waiting to be read.

I am happy to have this slim volume of interviews sitting among the other books on my DFW shelf.

Christopher says

Very interesting, of course, but not strictly necessary. I like watching clips on YouTube of him more. The actual last interview with Wallace is a bit of a letdown, as it's very short and mostly about John McCain.

Skyler says

It's interesting to hear DFW in these interviews. I found about 1/3 of them to be really interesting. The others, not so much. I think the best part of these interviews is not that it's a peek inside DFW's mind, which, if you think this book's is going to provide, it may only a little, but rather the book recommendations and when Wallace rambles off what it is he's reading, or what his 'influences' are.

James Smith says

The irony is that, for me, David Foster Wallace interviews are The Entertainment. I could lose days in their plush, welcoming sincerity, even their tortured self-consciousness. He's like Garth Brooks--you know the aw-shucks-ism is an act, but it's the pose of someone who really wants to be humble and sincere and so you can't help but love him.

Ritinha says

Selfish thought of the day: I can never forgive DFW for not staying around long enough for him to get to write about Trump as POTUS.

Hadrian says

Exactly what it says on the cover. Although I do recall reading most of these already, they're still good.

Proustitute says

The latest in Melville House's Last Interview series, this collection compiles several interviews that David Foster Wallace gave—including the last before his death. I certainly make no claims to be a DFW expert, so I'm unsure whether these pieces are collected here for the first time or if they're just reprinted from other sources: the only information Melville House offers in the press release is that this is "a unique selection of [DFW's] best interviews."

For the DFW completist, here are the interviews collected in this volume:

- "Something Real American": Interview by Laura Miller, *Salon*, 9 March 1996
- "There Can Be No Spokesperson": Interview by Tom Scocca, *Boston Phoenix*, 20 February 1998
- "A Brief Interview with a Five-Draft Man": Interview by Stacey Schmeidel, *Amherst Magazine*, Spring 1999
- "To Try Extra Hard to Exercise Patience, Politeness, and Imagination": Interview by Dave Eggers, *The Believer*, November 2003
- "Some Kind of Terrible Burden": Interview by Steve Paulson, *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, 19 June 2004
- "The Last Interview": Interview by Christopher Farley, *Wall Street Journal*, May 2008

In these interviews, DFW speaks about a range of subjects, but the ones to which he keeps returning (along with some quotes of his):

- His teaching career: "I was hired to teach creative writing, which I don't like to teach."
- Pop culture: "I use a fair amount of pop stuff in my fiction, but what I mean by it is nothing different than what other people mean in writing about trees and parks and having to walk to the river to get water a hundred years ago. It's just the texture of the world I live in."
- Magazine editors: "God love magazines, but the editor picks the title [of the piece], and they don't even really consult with you about it. And if you protest, they'll invoke house style, blah blah blah blah..."
- Writing book reviews: "In my opinion it's far more difficult to write a review of something that you don't like because if you're a fiction writer you know how hard you work even on something that seems really crummy to somebody else."
- The film *Good Will Hunting*: "I think it's the ultimate nerd fantasy movie."
- The role of footnotes in *Infinite Jest*: "the footnotes were an intentional, programmatic part of *Infinite Jest*, and they get to be kind of—you get sort of addicted to 'em... And in a way, the footnotes, I think, are better representations of, not really stream-of-consciousness, but thought patterns and fact patterns."

- The difference between his fiction and nonfiction: "Fiction's more important to me. So I'm also more scared and tense about fiction, more worried about my stuff, more worried about whether I'm any good or not... I guess nonfiction seems a lot more like play. For me."
 - Loneliness and alienation: "... there is this existential loneliness in the world. I don't know what you're thinking or what it's like inside you and you don't know what it's like inside me."
 - Writing for an audience: "The project that's worth trying is to do stuff that has some of the richness and challenge and emotional and intellectual difficulty of avant-garde literary stuff, stuff that makes the reader confront things rather than ignore them, but to do that in such a way that it's also pleasurable to read."
 - The role of fiction in our lives: "I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction and poetry in a way that I don't with other art."
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Cynthia Tolson says

This man had such a brilliant and fascinating mind. It is sad and incredible to think about what else he might have created.

Benoit Lelièvre says

It's been almost ten years since David Foster Wallace tragically took his own life and, well... I miss him.

I truly do. I miss having new material from him to read, whether it's fiction to break my brain to or non-fiction to expand my mind. So, I bought this book hoping to dull the ache of his absence and, I must say, it was utterly satisfying. These interviews are utterly simple and it's refreshing to read Wallace's word when he's not asked to reinvent the world by a fanboy interviewer. He's asked questions about his relationship to his work, mostly and it's still as breathtaking as it's ever been to read him rack his brain for simplicity.

One issue I had is that the collection is rather front-loaded. The first half is a lot more interesting than the latter, except for the interview he gives about his collection OBLIVION. This might be a spoiler, but I think you need to know that his last interview was him talking about John McCain for four pages. By far the least interesting piece in the collection. I'm also surprised it didn't have the thunderous interview he gave to Larry McCaffery from Dalkey Archives Press, which is by far the best interview he's ever given. He was young and angry back then. I read it at least once a year since I found out about it in 2010.

Justin Evans says

In which I learn that DFW must have been a total pain in the ass to interview, unless you were his buddy. Here's a condensed version of the book:

Q: Interesting question.

DFW: This isn't the right format to answer that, because I'd have to go into detail.

Q: What's your writing process like?

DFW: I don't really have one. [Note: when Eggers asks this question, DFW asks him to describe his (Eggers') process, then goes into some detail on his own].

Q: I really like your work.

DFW: I'm really boring.

It doesn't help that the general subjects of these interviews are, in reverse chronological order, his essay on McCain, the short stories in *Oblivion*, his readable but otherwise moderately bad book on Cantor, Amherst college, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, and *Infinite Jest*, i.e., the first interview is interesting because it's about the important book; the other four are about things that are fairly interesting (stories), a'ight (essays/Cantor), and utterly uninteresting to the general reader (Amherst). And as time goes on, Wallace gets better and better/worse and worse at his 'aw-shucks golly who me?' silliness.

The interviewers themselves vary in quality, too--the second guy is unbearably Wallacian, all self-conscious scene-setting that isn't funny or interesting; the Amherst woman is an undergrad conducting an email interview; Eggers is unbearably Eggersian.

So it's up and down. A couple of things stand out: first, *all* of these people are obsessed with word length. You already knew that about Wallace, but it's interesting to see everyone else playing the game. The quantification of everything continues apace. Second, as time goes on and DFW's aw-shucksness reaches nigh-'50s levels, he becomes less and less willing to answer any questions, because of the inherent complications in explaining to people what he thinks about anything. This is not deep, it's potentially not even genuine. It's a laziness that you can see in much of his fiction, and it's a real flaw.

All that said, the book's a great airplane read.

lit.erary.britt says

"If it looks chaotic, good, but everything that's in there is in there on purpose." - DFW on *Infinite Jest* [SALON, 1996]

This small collection of interviews grants a glimpse into David Foster Wallace's writing, opinions, and personality. I look forward to diving into his short stories and essays once I'm finished with *IJ*.

I'm sad he's gone.

Ailsa says

"For me, art that's alive and urgent is art that's about what it is to be a human being."

A slim volume bringing together six interviews with David Foster Wallace from 1996 to 2008. My favourite is the first, 'Something Real American'. I'd recommend this compilation to fans of DFW rather than any casual reader unfamiliar with his work. My level of interest fluctuated considerably while reading but there are some nuggets that I had to write down to be able to come back to later.

On what is uniquely magical about fiction:

"A really great piece of fiction for me may or may not take me away and make me forget that I'm that I'm sitting in a chair. There's real commercial stuff that can do that, and a riveting plot can do that, but it doesn't make me feel less lonely. There's a kind of Ah-ha! Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do... I feel unalone-intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction and poetry in a way I don't with other art." [12]

"a contempt for the reader, an idea that literature's current marginalisation is the reader's fault. The project that's worth trying is to do stuff that has some of the richness and challenge and emotional and intellectual difficulty of avant-garde literary stuff, stuff that makes the reader confront things rather than ignore them, but to do that in a way that it's also pleasurable to read." [10]

"I like stuff that sounds intimate to me, and that sounds like almost there's somebody talkin' in my ear. And I think at least some of the stuff that I do tries to sound out-loud, aural, you know, with an A-U. R-A-L." [41]

On footnotes:

"the way I think about things and experience things is not particularly linear, and it's not orderly, and it's not pyramidal, and there are a lot of loops... And in a way, the footnotes, I think, are better representations of, not really stream-of-consciousness, but thought patterns and fact patterns." [43]

On his process of writing:

"What anybody else ever gets to see of mine, writing-wise, is the product of a kind of Darwinian struggle in which only things that are emphatically alive to me are worth finishing, fixing, editing, copy-editing, page-proof-tinkering, etc." [73]

"maybe being able to communicate with people outside one's area of expertise should be taught, and talked about, and considered as a requirement for genuine expertise." [90]

On realism:

"I mean, a lot of stuff that's capital-R Realism just seems to me somewhat hokey, because obviously realism is an illusion of realism, and the idea that small banal details are somehow more real or authentic than large or strange details always seemed to me to be just a little crude." [100]

Fascinated as I am by what literary giants consider to be great books, here is a list of what DFW mentions throughout the course of these interviews (or "the stars you steer by"):

- Socrates funeral oration
- The poetry of John Donne, Richard Crashaw, Keats (shorter stuff), Philip Larkin (more than anybody else), Louise Gluck, Auden.
- Arthur Schopenhauer
- Some of Shakespeare
- Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *Discourse on Method*
- Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*
- William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*
- Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*
- Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
- Hemingway
- Flannery O'Connor
- Cormac McCarthy

- Don DeLillo
 - A.S. Byatt
 - Cynthia Ozick ('Levitations')
 - Pynchon (25% of the time)
 - Donald Barthelme ('The Balloon')
 - Tobias Wolff
 - Raymond Carver (the famous stuff)
 - Steinbeck (occasionally)
 - Stephen Crane (35%)
 - *Moby Dick*
 - *The Great Gatsby*
 - George Saunders
 - A.M. Holmes ('A Real Doll')
 - Kathryn Harrison
 - Mary Karr
 - Cris Mazza
 - Rikki Ducornet
 - Carole Maso
 - Joan Didion
 - Pauline Kael
 - McPhee
 - Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology*
 - Annie Dillard
 - *The Lord of the Rings* (a bitchingly good read)
 - Charles Seife's *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*
-

Shivani Sharma says

This. man. is. tedious. I could hardly make till the second interview. I thought I would take away something better but the second interview drained me so bad that I'm dropping this book here for now. The interviews have not been compiled properly, in my opinion. Or maybe they are compiled simply as they were, and the man himself made an absolute mess of them by making them sound like an extended babble. Anyway, too many books to read, too little time.

Tomas Psorn says

The book is everything but complex, anyway, it reveals little by little a tiny piece of Mr. Wallace's inner picture, which complex works might fail to deliver. It reveals incredible stories (like a bag of pot for a bus driver), as well as it brings a unique point of view on many things just by the way. Also, the interview format, which appears quite raw after a while, helps here. It exposes his thinking in a different way than his polished, edited, many times rewritten work. Even if he fully understands the question and answers it in a very complex, yet comprehensible way, he mostly ends up saying his classical "I doubt, it does make any sense at all". Good read.

Brian DiMattia says

An interesting idea for a series of books. On the one hand, it looks like they might be part of the increasingly dark "let's cash in on the tragic death of a famous author" mini-industry that's sprung up around David Foster Wallace's memory. When you look at it closer, it's actually a series of interviews, each taking place near the time of one of his books being published, or having some other connection to a biography of his writing life.

(In other words, only the title is blatantly opportunistic. Mostly.)

I'm a big fan of Wallace's, so I was torn about this book. I didn't know if I *wanted* to like it or not. That continued the entire time I was reading it. Truthfully, I was so closely on the lookout for sensationalism, for any forced "foreshadowing" moments where something meaningful about Wallace's eventual suicide might rear their ugly heads (the sort of moments that on TV would include a orchestral brass section suddenly playing "DUH DUH DAAAAAAA!"), moments that would prove this book to be an effort to cash in on a tragedy.

I held onto that nagging suspicion almost the entire book (not hard, it's only 113 pages and took me about an hour) while I stood in a Barnes and Noble. But if there is any indication of my final opinion, of the eventual resolution to my suspicions, it's that after finishing the entire book I decided to buy it anyway.

As to the interviews themselves, they're a mixed bag. They mostly go to prove the old adage about an interview letting you know almost as much about the interviewer as the interviewee (I'm not sure that's an actual adage, but it seems pretty accurate!). But they do seem somewhat well chosen, and by someone who wanted to not only represent a history of Wallace, but to paint a picture of his interaction with the outside world.

For example, the first piece was from March, 1996 following the publication of *Infinite Jest*, the novel that put Wallace on the map in a big way. Laura Miller, working for *Salon* conducts a somewhat rote interview that one might of a first time author. Wallace isn't on his game yet either. It's an interesting picture of a mind full of great ideas that hadn't fully fleshed them out yet.

The second is much better: Tom Scocca writing for the *Boston Phoenix* in 1998 following up on the publication of *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, the first collection of Wallace's long non-fiction magazine articles. Not only is the David Foster Wallace "voice" much closer to what fans of his will recognize, but it's got really wonderful behind the scenes stuff, about his process but also about the way some of his most beloved pieces of writing came to exist, and how the long form magazine article industry/machine works.

The 'famous alumni' type interview done with his college newspaper could easily have been stilted, having been done by letter, but has some interesting material about his writing process and his feelings about, and approach towards, interviews. And the interview by Dave Eggers for the November 2003 *Believer* is actually great fun. Not only does it swing wildly from high concept mathematics, to the process of writing and planning one's writing, to the increasingly ugly, partisan political discourse in America led by self serving pundits on both sides (yes, this was apparently a scary problem as far back as 2003, [sigh]), but it also has one of those great tones of 'two writers talking.' It's fun watching Eggers bounce back and forth between journalist, trying to nail down a good piece for his own magazine, and young writer enjoying a conversation he's having with a colleague!

I won't say that this book left me with any new revelations on one of my favorite authors. I can't say there was anything really earth shattering contained here, or any interviewing masterpieces that show how it's really done. But at the end of the day, despite my suspicions and misgivings, I enjoyed this book. And it helped me to expand my understanding of David Foster Wallace, who meant a great deal to me. Three and 1/2 stars.
