

# "You Understand I'm Not a Journalist"<sup>1</sup>: The Creative Non-Fiction of David Foster Wallace

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David Foster Wallace has had his brilliant and idiosyncratic creative non-fiction published in industry giants such as *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*. Unlike the author's at-times enigmatic fiction, these essays represent his more accessible works. Using a blend of intimacy, humour, self-perception and reflection, this immensely talented writer bends the creative non-fiction genre to his will, displaying the depths of his literary prowess.

There is no doubt Wallace's essays exemplify all the traits of classic creative non-fiction, such as "personal presence, self-discovery/self-exploration, flexibility of form, facts/veracity, and literary approaches to language" (Van Luven vi). We find this evidence in two brilliant Wallace articles, "Federer as Religious Experience" and "9/11: The View from the Midwest."

"Federer as Religious Experience" reads as part catharsis (Wallace was a tennis star in his youth) and part sports journalism. Wallace's take on Roger Federer's play conveys his passion for the game of tennis, while simultaneously critiquing our sports-obsessed culture in an utterly subversive way. "Federer moments," he says, occur "when the jaw drops, and eyes protrude and sounds are made that bring spouses in from other rooms to see if you're okay" ("Federer" 1). Then, buried within the 6,000-word essay, we find a brief, tangential story involving a seven year-old cancer survivor in attendance at the 2006 Wimbledon Final: "There's a feeling of something important, something both uncomfortable and not, about a child with cancer tossing this dream-final's coin. The feeling, what-all it might mean, has a tip-of-the-tongue-type quality that remains elusive for at least the first two sets" (4). Wallace goes out of his way to highlight that this bit of theatre is not included in the television footage. Despite the potential power of this image, the boy's story is quickly left behind, while the essay meanders on in a lengthy passage detailing Federer's history, the history of tennis (specifically the racquet), and Wimbledon itself (5-9), before coming back to the young boy's story:

One day, when he was 2½, his mother found a lump in his tummy, and took him to the doctor, and the lump was diagnosed as a malignant liver tumor. At which point one cannot, of course, imagine ... a tiny child undergoing chemo, serious chemo, his mother having to watch, carry him home, nurse him, then bring him back to that place for more chemo. How did she answer her child's question—the big one, the obvious one? And who could answer hers? What could any priest or pastor say that wouldn't be grotesque? (9-10)

The 95 most profound words in the article hit us like a Federer serve in the gut. Just as suddenly this scene is left behind, followed by a detailed description of a 16-stroke point between the two combatants. This sudden change is no coincidence. The story subverts its essence and becomes a comment on how unimportant sport is in the face of incredible human tragedy and suffering. Wallace artfully reflects societal tendencies to selfishness and distraction, simultaneously exulting and critiquing his own love of sport.

These reflections are also on display in Wallace's "9/11: The View from the Midwest," a recounting of the author's experiences during and after the World Trade Center attacks. In what I might describe as "Seinfeldian" fashion (I don't think it would be a stretch to assume he was a fan), Wallace makes light of the terrible tragedy in a way only he can. After noticing his home is the only one on the block without a flag, and realizing the uncomfortable position this puts him in, Wallace heads to a convenience store on the outskirts of town. His hopes of rectifying this awkward situation are dashed when he finds the store sold out of American flags:

All those people dead, and I'm sent to the edge by a plastic flag. It doesn't get really bad until people ask if I'm OK and I have to lie and say it's a Benadryl reaction.... Until in one more of the Horror's weird twists of fate and circumstance it's the Qik-n-EZ proprietor himself (a Pakistani by the way) who offers solace and a shoulder... ("9:11" 3)

The passage is touching and hilarious, and deftly navigates the immensely sensitive themes inherent within. Wallace's ability to bring humour to such a dark time, and to allow his readers to share these intimate memories with such sincerity are what make him such a gifted and unique creative non-fiction writer. The essay is a touching reminder that humour and levity can be found in even the darkest moments.

Wallace's short but illustrious career (he committed suicide in 2008 at the age of 46) straddled the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. There is little question many of his finest works belong in the creative non-fiction canon. Passion and comedy, self-perception, and reflection are the tools Wallace uses to build rich, textural, true-to-life stories that might otherwise seem uninteresting or banal. Wallace was an innovator, never content to use conventional essay forms or traditional journalistic language, adding to the accessibility of these pieces. Together these stories can be included among some of the best contemporary creative non-fiction, securing Wallace's place alongside the giants of this genre.

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace made this comment to Harper's magazine before his assignment to cover the Illinois State Fair (Freeman 1).

## References

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