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## Book Review: Nada Yada

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## BOOK REVIEW

NADA YADA

Charles F. Angell

David Foster Wallace  
*A Supposedly Fun Thing  
 I'll Never Do Again*

Little, Brown and Company, 1997

**D**isciplined as always about selecting my reading matter, I was idling along the Wordsworth shelves not long ago and found myself staring at the cover photo (reproduced here) of David Foster Wallace's *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. I bought the book. I suppose as a teacher of writing and inveterate reader of essays I should have previously encountered Wallace's efforts, but they appeared in periodicals I don't happen to subscribe to. I enjoy reading thoughtful, informative, and entertaining essays. Far too many that I read aren't. Student expository efforts—I read a lot of them—often inform me about things I wish I didn't know and entertain me in weirdly unexpected ways. Most academic prose nowadays seems written with “fit audience, though few” as the guiding principle, audience size considered an inverse ratio to readability. Happy to report, Wallace informs and entertains his readers most satisfyingly.

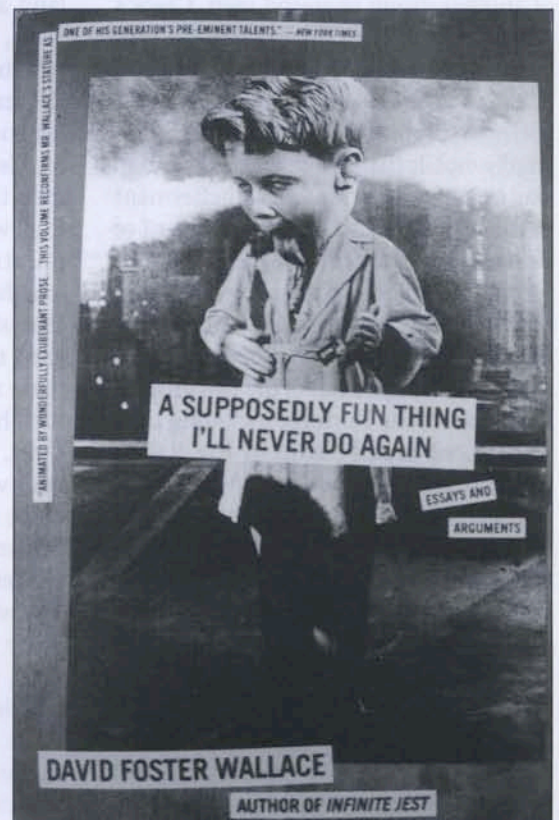
In the course of an interview with Laura Miller of the on-line magazine *Salon*, Wallace observed that “a lot of us privileged Americans, as we enter our early thirties, have to find a way to put away childish things and confront stuff about spirituality and values.” Wallace under-

stands the commercial trivializing of America and its corrosive effect on our more important values. He wonders during the course of the essay I'm about to examine “whether or not 1990's youth culture seems as grim to you as it does to me,” a culture where TV has taken “the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion—and [bent] them to the ends of spectation and consumption.” Wallace asserts that irony, the rhetorical trope and stance preferred by moderns of whatever persuasion, has become “an agent of despair and stasis in U. S. culture.” Young people's ‘whatever’ and ‘yada yada yada’ response to any question requiring serious answer encapsulates this “sardonic fatigue” and boredom.

Wallace weaves his ideas about TV and irony together in one of his rather more argumentative essays. “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U. S. Fiction” provides the key to understanding where Wallace locates the fracture point in contemporary American culture. He essentially argues that TV culture is contiguous with American culture, pointing out that on average Americans watch TV six hours a day which has it functioning in our lives much like “the overlit bathroom mirror before which the teenager monitors his biceps and determines his better profile.” TV forms us into voyeurs, but voyeurs of the sort who watch TV performers who know they're being watched and who, because they know this, can flatter the audience with in-jokes and self-referentiality. (As an example, think of any newscast where the focus is not so much the news, the what's happening, but how the newspeople are reporting what's happening.) Consequently, Wallace speculates, viewers who “spend enough time watching, pretty soon. . . start watching [themselves] watching.” This watching grows into an extreme

form of self-consciousness where to avoid being caught flat or uncool, the viewer perfects ironic responses that persistently undercut everything seen or spoken, the brand of irony that *Seinfeld* epitomized.

Wallace minces no words about six hours exposure a day to this irony being bad for us. “Television,” he says, “engages without demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation. Receive without giving.” Some pages later, as he arrives at his thesis, Wallace says “I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective and at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U. S. culture. . . .” Wallace maintains that ultimately “irony's singularly unsuccessful when it come to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks.” TV's irony and the corresponding ironic stance it imposes upon viewers produces exhaustion. “Anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like a hysteric or a prig. And herein lies the oppressiveness of institu-



tionalized irony, the too successful rebel: the ability to interdict the *question* without attending to its *subject* is, when exercised, tyranny." TV imposes this tyranny on U. S. culture.

I have condensed Wallace's argument to leave myself space to consider other of his essays. I do think it's useful to suggest, however, that the other essays be viewed in terms of what Wallace argues about irony and self-referentiality. In "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," Wallace, raised in the Midwest and educated in the East, visits the Illinois State Fair, ostensibly to research an article for "a swanky East-Coast magazine." "I suspect," he says, "that every so often editors at these magazines slap their foreheads and remember that about 90% of the United States lies between the Coasts and figure they'll engage somebody to do pith-helmeted anthropological reporting on something rural and heartlandish." Wallace casts his editors as hip easterners and himself as their agent, but as a native mid-westerner he can't quite bring himself to adopt the stance of the bored sophisticate aloof from the rurals. "And this Fair—the idea and reality of it—does seem to have something uniquely to do with state-as-community, a grand scale togetherness." Like all fairs today, the Illinois State Fair relies on major corporate sponsors. Wallace conveys how out-of-place corporate McDonalds seems amid the baking contests, animal shows, clog dancing, and tractor pulls that form the Fair's core activities. It's the 'carnies' who figure as the Fair's real sophisticates. The essay, a long one, finds Wallace exploring the Fair with a high-school friend he refers to a 'Native Companion.' She functions as the counterpoint to his mock-anthropological disquisitions on the meaning of it all and provides, in her earthiness and openness to the Fair's attractions, a good deal of humor. Wallace shows us those who are in

and of the Fair and those who will forever remain strangers to its place. The essay, in its clash of cultures, introduces us to people who are serious, engaged with their world, and most surely not victims of ironic despair.

Not quite the case with the participants on the Caribbean cruise which forms the subject for the essay which gives Wallace's collection its title, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." "A certain swanky East-Coast magazine approved of the results of sending me to a plain old simple State Fair last year to do a directionless essayish thing. So now I get offered this tropical plum assignment w/ the exact same paucity of direction or angle. But this time there's this new feeling of pressure: total expenses for the State Fair were \$27.00 excluding games of chance. This time *Harper's* has shelled out over \$3000. U. S. before seeing pithy sensuous description one." I don't know myself quite what *Harper's* expected from Wallace, but I think the essay he delivered, a long meditation on why people sign up for cruises and what happens to them, probably surprised his editors. This essay uses footnotes, lots of them, to counterpoint Wallace the tourist experiencing the cruise to Wallace the reporter commenting on the cruise's anomalies. Wallace contrives to tell the reader a great deal about what transpires aboard a cruise liner, much of it sounding very akin to 'forced fun.' But when Wallace the tourist picks up a glossy brochure and comes across a Frank Conroy essay extolling the wonder of the Celebrity Cruise without acknowledging the essay had been written as an advertisement, his gloves come off. Saying that "an essay's fundamental obliga-

tions are supposed to be to the reader," Wallace argues that "in the case of Frank Conroy's 'essay,' Celebrity Cruises is trying to position an ad in such a way that we come to it with the lowered guard and leading chin we properly reserve for coming to an essay, for something that is art (or that is at least trying to be art). An ad that pretends to be art is—at absolute best—like somebody who smiles warmly at you only because he wants something from you. This is dishonest. . . . It makes us feel confused and lonely and impotent and angry and scared. It causes despair." The Celebrity Cruise in its final and full effect tyrannizes its participants much as TV tyrannizes its viewers. Wallace, seeing an admired and established writer like Conroy become an agent of this tyranny, refuses the ironic shrug and declares outright his sense of violation.

Wallace's essays are difficult, sometimes hard to follow, and occasionally a bit prolix. Regardless, he's a sharp observer, very thoughtful, and quite funny. Wallace is mindful of the great essay tradition but also of contemporary taste in prose style. He examines America's popular culture with a generous spirit and fondness. His refusal to seek refuge in dismissive cheap shots or superciliousness makes his voice refreshing, his engagement welcome, his vision worthwhile. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* challenges its readers in a most fruitful way. One finishes Wallace's collection having had serious fun and desiring more. ❧