

David Foster Wallace. *Infinite Jest*. New York: Hachette, 2009. Kindle e-book.

OK. I had to do it. Sooner or later I had to see what the fuss was about. Also, as a teacher, I look for works that sound related to things we study in class. Last summer, for example, I read [*The Double Bind*](#) because of its connection with *The Great Gatsby*. So *Infinite Jest* gets its title from *Hamlet*—the melancholy Dane meditating on death and remembering “poor Yorick,” the court jester. “A fellow of infinite jest,” he calls him. (5.1.191)

Infinite Jest is set in the near future. Technically, since the book was originally published in 1996, it is hypothetically set around 2014. Canada, the United States, and Mexico have united to form a single country, the Organization of North American Nations. And yes, there is a bad joke about the erection of ONAN. In fact, there are many jokes and humorous scenes in this serious novel.

The current president had been a popular singer before he united the three nations. He was apparently preceded in the USA by Jack Kemp (who in real history died too soon) and Rush Limbaugh, who in the novel had been assassinated. It appears that Wallace may have been somewhat prescient about this Organized Nation as we know today that many political leaders in the United States consider the American borders and even the definition of citizenship somewhat more flexible than is typical of most countries.

Television has been replaced by teleputers (TPs) which play solid-state cartridges or show programs from the Interlace—the next generation Internet. Movie theaters have closed. Even today we see more shows through “streaming,” and as I was reading this book we learned that Sony made a decent amount of money on a film that only played in fewer than 300 theaters, instead of the usual 2500 or so, but that they allowed people to download. We have not quite reached the political or technical stages portrayed in *Infinite Jest*, but the book is not too far off the mark.

One of the terms of the union of the three nations was made to alleviate environmental stress. The entire state of Maine and parts of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Quebec, and New Brunswick have been depopulated so that all the nation’s refuse, including nuclear waste, can be deposited there. Plum Island writ large. The book calls this region the Great Concavity. Rumors of giant, deformed squirrels, hamsters, and even baby humans abound—like the stories we used to hear of the giant rats and alligators in the sewers of New York.

Infinite Jest contains more or less three overlapping and converging plots. Much of the story is set in Enfield, Massachusetts, which corresponds to Boston’s Brighton, at the Enfield Tennis Academy. ETA is a boarding school whose goal is to develop professional tennis players or at the very least have its students get decent tennis scholarships from colleges. We learn about the junior tennis circuit and read about some fairly typical boarding school shenanigans, especially as they relate to illegal drugs. Much of this story line focuses on the ETA student Hal Incandenza whose widowed mother is the school’s current headmistress and whose late father was its founder.

James Incandenza, Hal's late father, also produced movies. The films sound very strange, even avant-garde. Wallace loves word plays so someone in the story calls them *post-garde*: They are beyond the avant-garde. (If he were writing today, he'd probably call them *meta-garde*.) Incandenza called his production company Poor Yorick, and his *chef d'oeuvre* is a film called *Infinite Jest*. We only get a few details about the film, but it starred a woman who at the time was the girlfriend of Hal's older brother Orin. Hal and Orin called her the PGOAT—the Prettiest Girl of All Time. She was so gorgeous, no one ever asked her out until Orin, who abandoned tennis in college for football and is now a punter of the Arizona Cardinals.

The *Infinite Jest* film is so entertaining that it lives up to its name. Everyone who watches it wants to do nothing except watch it again. They put it on an infinite loop on their TPs until they die. They do not eat, drink, or do anything except watch the movie. There is a suggestion that one of the characters survives the film because he sees it while heavily sedated or in great pain in the hospital and can only recall random snatches.

The second plot thread involves a group of radical Quebec separatists. Of course, now they have not only Canada but the rest of North America to deal with. These separatists are all legless (they “don't have a leg to stand on”?) so they use wheelchairs and call themselves the AFR, *Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* or Wheelchair Assassins. French students recognize that the last word should be spelled *Roulants*, but that is typical Wallace. He plays around with words in other languages, too.

Among other things, these radicals are trying to ingratiate themselves into the Incandenza family so they can get a hold of a master copy of *Infinite Jest* and broadcast it. This way, most of the population of North America will be too hooked on the film to do anything to stop them. There is also a transvestite agent for the government's Office of Unspecified Services who is trying to infiltrate the AFR. “Unspecified Services” suggests that this new government is not all that benevolent.

Besides the Wheelchair Assassins, many of the other characters in the story are also physically handicapped or deformed in some way. Indeed, it almost seems as though the only normal is abnormal. Some of these characters belong to another organization, a kind of support group called UHID, or the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed. Some of them wear a veil over their face to conceal their deformities.

The third plot thread involves various criminal types and associates who are drug addicts, drug dealers, and alcoholics in the Boston area. Many of them end up converging on the Ennet House, a halfway house for drug and alcohol rehabilitation not far from the Enfield Tennis Academy. They cross paths with some of the students from the ETA as well as some of the Wheelchair Assassins. The Assassins are surveilling both the Tennis Academy to see if one of the Incandenzas has a copy of *Infinite Jest* and a Cambridge video store that they have reason to believe bought out James Incandenza's video collection from his estate and may also have a copy of the film.

There are some notable themes or images (motifs?) that run through this novel. The author seems to have a middle school fascination with bodily functions. True, some of the characters are ETA middle schoolers, but it goes beyond that. Some scenes will turn the stomachs of many readers. Sex appears merely as one of those bodily functions. In *Infinite Jest*, these bodily functions are usually a sign of an underlying pathology, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. Orin, who otherwise seems normal, cannot have a committed relationship with a woman since he broke up with the PGOAT. He sees things simply as “The Excitement-Hope-Acquisition-Contempt cycle of seduction.” (12581)¹

Drug use and drug-induced stupors and hallucinations are described in great detail. One can read *Infinite Jest* as a literal pharmacopoeia. Footnotes explain not only Boston street slang but the chemical makeup of dozens of mind-altering drugs and drug mixtures. Depending on their experiences, the readers will either note how effective Wallace’s descriptions of drug and alcohol addiction are, or else they will be scared straight and go nowhere near drugs—even Tylenol for a headache. *Infinite Jest* also shows how drug sales support a truly perverse and degrading criminal culture.

Wallace writes well and carefully. Unlike traditional nineteenth century novelists like Scott or Hawthorne, he does not do much to set the scene with a detailed description. He includes descriptive details in the narrative. So, for example, a character does not merely look into a mirror, but a mirror with a polymer coating.

Infinite Jest has a lot of humor. There are word plays, many witty sayings, and funny situations. When Hal Incandenza becomes afraid that his marijuana smoking is beginning to create problems in his life, he goes to Ennet House for information on Narcotics Anonymous. However, the clerk just sees him as a nervous kid and directs him instead to a Robert Bly-type men’s meeting, so he ends up being spooked by a bunch of grown men crying and revealing secrets.

Still, *Infinite Jest* is serious. Its most intense and moving parts are its descriptions of depression. Some are positively scary. Characters struggling with melancholia are not uncommon in literature, but I can only think of two other works that compare to *Infinite Jest* in effectively presenting what it is like to be depressed: *The Bell Jar* and *Hamlet*.² Wallace gets it.

Ultimately, *Infinite Jest* is about escape and entertainment. Is there really such a thing as an infinite jest? An amusement so great, so entertaining, that it does not stop or cannot be measured? The novel devotes pages to Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs. They clearly help some characters in the novel to get their lives together. But the programs do not help everyone. What if, like Hal, you are too detached or you do not believe?

The novel details the backstories of many of the characters. Some of these are horrible, involving abuse, abandonment. Others seem clinically perfect, parents following the latest upper-class psychological techniques for child-rearing. But it seems like the TPs

and the drugs (including alcohol) seduce nearly all of them. We all have the Old Adam we need to overcome.

Is there any hope for humanity? Will we all end up subject to deformed terrorists and, in the words of Neil Postman, amusing ourselves to death?³ Will any of us grow up and come to our senses?

Because of the drug use, extreme situations, odd characterizations, and emphasis on bodily functions, Wallace has been compared to Thomas Pynchon.⁴ I can understand why, but those are more superficial features. Wallace is not as detached or indifferent as Pynchon. As I was reading *Infinite Jest*, I kept thinking of Neal Stephenson. His stories are clever and entertaining, may have some extreme behavior, but like *Infinite Jest*, there is what I can only call a science fiction element involving futuristic technology. I discovered that Stephenson actually has contributed an introduction to one of Wallace's nonfiction works.⁵

I hope I am not giving away too much by saying that James Incandenza's films were never widely popular. However, they did have a serious following among self-styled cinéphiles. We are told that one woman wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on his oeuvre. One of the characters—or is it the author?—tries to make a distinction between some of his films and X-rated “old chestnuts” like *Behind the Green Door* or *Deep Throat*, but we begin to realize that most of his films really do sound like pornography, too. Wasn't it T. S. Eliot who said that a mass culture is a substitute culture?

Sometimes for recreation, the kids at the tennis academy play a strategy game on the tennis courts called Eschaton. Each player represents a country or alliance of countries and they conduct diplomacy according to some pre-established rules. An imaginary map of the world covers several courts. It is something like Risk or Summit but on a larger game board. If war breaks out, they throw tennis balls. Of course, *eschaton* means “end of history.” Is that where we are headed? Vonnegut had his ice-nine. Wallace has the *Infinite Jest* film. Which is more likely scenario?

Infinite Jest is not for everyone. It has strong language. It is full of drug and alcohol abuse. It has weird violence and creepy sex. But what it does, it does extremely well. Eliot said about *Hamlet*, “Of all the plays it is the longest and is possibly the one on which Shakespeare spent the most pains.”

One could say the same thing about David Foster Wallace and *Infinite Jest*. Wallace bleeds on the pages. It is funny.⁶ It is scary. Even if it is not humane, it is intensely human.

¹ In homage to *Infinite Jest*, this review includes endnotes.^{a, b}

These are Kindle location references, not page references! The novel may be over a thousand pages, but it is not that long!

^a As has been noted in a review on Amazon.com, I, too recommend the Kindle version. With nearly 400 endnotes, some as long as a chapter, clicking back to the main text is a lot easier than turning pages and managing two bookmarks. Wallace has a very sophisticated vocabulary with many neologisms. Having the dictionary interface with the novel as the Kindle does also makes

reading *Infinite Jest* easier. When Wallace coins words not in the dictionary, finding another word with the same word root or affix can help us understand what the new word means.

^b “The Excitement-Hope-Acquisition-Contempt cycle of seduction” is nothing new. We see this same pattern in the Bible when telling about Amnon and Tamar in II Samuel 13. After having his way with Tamar, we are told “Then Amnon hated her exceedingly; so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her” (II Samuel 13:15).

² Hamlet is depressed. He has reason to be. He sees no way out and blames himself. Even his memory of the jester Yorick is a meditation on the morbid. Over the years I have seen dozens of *Hamlet* productions. The best one I ever saw, though, was the 1987 Hartford Stage production. They did a very good one recently (2014), but the eighties Hamlet was played by Richard Thomas (a.k.a. John-Boy Walton). As soon as he walked on the stage the audience *knew* he was depressed. When he spoke about how unprofitable life was, he was about ready to break. Hamlet was not stupid, slothful, or indecisive (I have seen him played those ways). No, he was *trapped*.

³ *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman is one of the finest works on the Western culture of entertainment. A must read.

⁴ This reviewer has only read one Pynchon novel—it had all those features and was also quite long—but I have no great desire to read another one. It was clever and stupid at the same time. (Since I wrote this footnote originally, I did watch a film based on a Pynchon novel. It was interesting and clever but ultimately fruitless, too.)

⁵ *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* is the name of the book. As others have, I also noted an affinity with Laurence Sterne, though both Sterne and Stephenson at their core are more lighthearted. (Since I wrote this footnote originally, I have [reviewed this book](#), but not the Stephenson edition.)

⁶ There are hundreds of examples of jokes, word plays, political skewering, moving scenes, many other organizations like the AFR and UHID, but check it out for yourselves.

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