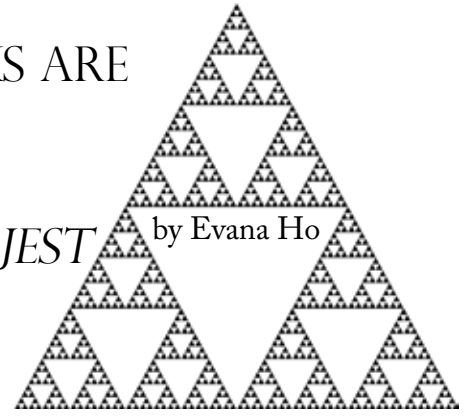


WHY SOME HARD BOOKS ARE WORTH READING

or

HOW I READ *INFINITE JEST* IN 30 DAYS

by Evana Ho



In this piece:

Multiple bookmarks . The Howling Fantods . Feeling both smarter and dumber . The encyclopaedic novel . Not throwing books at walls . The Sierpinski gasket . Making readers work hard . What David Foster Wallace can teach us about writing fiction .

Fiction offers us a continuum. Books tend to fall somewhere between anything by Dan Brown to *War and Peace*. There are the sort that go down without any fuss and offer transient, but instant, gratification. And then there are the books you have to work at, which often have a more lasting impact and are more rewarding.

After watching the episode of *New Girl* where Jess Day ends a seemingly perfect relationship with the line, 'I want passion, even if it's harder and it hurts more', I have tried to adopt this as my personal philosophy. Applying it to fiction has turned out to be a bit more of a struggle than applying it to life, but I decided to start with one book that has, for a long time, hovered on my periphery. I would read, and write about reading, *Infinite Jest*, by David Foster Wallace. And I would read it in 30 days, which was how long I had to write this article.

Ordinarily, 30 days would be more than enough time to read a single book. But this isn't an ordinary book. Printed in 8 point font, it spans 1,079 pages, including 96 pages of "endnotes and errata" in even smaller print. *Infinite Jest* jumps back and forth chronologically, features a massive cast of interconnected characters, and is best read using two bookmarks and with the Oxford English Dictionary secure in your lap.

Somehow, I felt that I would emerge a better person at the end of the 30 days for my toil. At the time of

writing this, on Day 29 with fewer than 100 pages to go, I can say that I feel both smarter and dumber. And yes, in ways I can't properly define, I am much better for my introduction to the work of the late David Foster Wallace and the dizzying universe that is *Infinite Jest*.

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There are reams and reams of information online about *Infinite Jest*, to say nothing of David Foster Wallace and the rest of his work. Books have been written about the book, to help elucidate its complex themes and construction. *Infinite Jest* is the topic of numerous theses and essays. What this all amounts to is that, while I might be able to get through the book in a month, I undoubtedly would not arrive at a sophisticated understanding of the tome in such a short time span.

"...I found a faithful guide in the form of Nick Maniatis, founder and maintainer of the first fan website about David Foster Wallace... it just so happens that he lives in Canberra, where he teaches English at Campbell High."

Fortunately, I found a faithful guide in the form of Nick Maniatis, founder and maintainer of the first fan website about David Foster Wallace back in 1996, *The Howling Fantods*. And it just so happens that he lives in Canberra, where he teaches English at Campbell High.

On his website, Nick describes *Infinite Jest* as being his "favourite book of all time" and the reason his website exists. When I caught up with him, I asked him to expand on this.

"...it became clear to me that it's the kind of book that evolves with you, where your relationship to it changes as you go through life. In short, it's the sort of book many writers wish they could write."

'After I read this book, I wanted everybody to read it—I'd never read anything like it,' Nick said. 'There were a lot of things I discovered about writing and what an author can do and what one is allowed to do with language. But also, as a reader, I engaged really differently with *Infinite Jest*.'

Infinite Jest pushed the boundaries of fiction. It was loved and it was hated, but the fact of its ambitiousness and vast accomplishments could not be ignored. Within its pages, Wallace covered tennis, avant-garde cinema, addiction, philosophy, mathematics, the cult of entertainment, geopolitical conflict, and much more.

'It's an encyclopaedic novel,' Nick said. 'But I don't think he's throwing that in there to show that he's smart.'

Reading the book, you get a sense of watching a movie where the camera is tracking one person, then swivels to track someone else who walks past, then ducks into a store that that person passes to find out what the grocer is doing. But unlike your regular movie, many of *Infinite Jest*'s minor characters also get their due.

This unconventional method of storytelling contributed to Nick's false start in his first reading of the book: 'There are so many fascinating, amazing passages in the first 300 pages, but then they stop. And there's a new story and a new character and I had just never faced a novel where I felt unsure of what was happening.'

Much of this comes down to how the book is constructed. Wallace modelled the book on the Sierpinski gasket; a type of fractal that takes the form of a triangle. In interviewing Wallace in 1996, Michael Silverblatt described the book in these terms:

'...the way in which the material is presented allows for a subject to be announced in a small form, then there seems to be a fan of subject matter, other subjects, and then it comes back in a second form containing the other subjects in small, and then comes back again.'

Nick said encouragingly, 'By the time you're in those last couple of hundred pages, a lot is fitting together that didn't fit together in the first few hundred. And then you re-read and there's so much there for the second reader.'

'It's also been said that that you shouldn't have to

read a book twice to get the most out of it. But with those structural elements, in the second read you suddenly understand why he's using those devices and why it's more powerful to present it in this way than in any other.'

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David Foster Wallace does make the reader work hard, but it's in service of a number of worthy goals, amongst them enjoyment. As he told Judith Strasser in one interview: 'I wanted it to be both long and difficult but also fun enough so the reader wouldn't throw it at the wall at page 100.'

The stories within the story are tragic, comic and touching—much like its many, many characters. Somehow, Wallace manages to make a book that encompasses so many people intimately, inspiring a unique level of empathy.

'I wouldn't be the first person to say that he writes like the voice in your own head,' Nick said. 'He's also very good at tapping into one's fears and phobias and self-doubt.'

In speaking to Nick, who has read *Infinite Jest* more than four times, it became clear to me that it's the kind of book that evolves with you, where your relationship to it changes as you go through life. In short, it's the sort of book many writers wish they could write.

I was only up to page 383 at the time of meeting Nick, and we talked about how I had gotten past a crucial point in the book that helps the reader make sense of its chronology.

'That's where I found I was given the tools to apply more order to it, and with the application of order, more came out,' Nick enthused. 'But Wallace waited until then to give you that information, almost like he was testing you and teaching you to deal with it and keep going.'

I nodded, but mildly bemoaned that the fragments still weren't quite falling into place.

Nick replied, almost sagely, 'It will later on.'

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