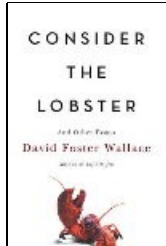


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Book Review
Consider the Lobster
And Other Essays
by [David Foster Wallace](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
Posted: May 16, 2006

I'd been hearing about David Foster Wallace for a long time, but somehow I wasn't quite ready to tackle his 1,000-page novel [Infinite Jest](#), described by Publishers Weekly as a "brilliant but somewhat

bloated dirigible." Instead I picked up [A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again](#).

Good choice. *A Supposedly Fun Thing* was full of the cerebral riffs and footnotes-with-footnotes that helped make *Infinite Jest* such a doorstop, but packaged more accessibly. *A Supposedly Fun Thing* was a collection of essays and articles that you could browse among, and the author's stylistic antics were grounded in something something resembling real life. Presented this way, I found Wallace to be insightful, ingenious, and often very funny.

Consider the Lobster is more of the same, which I mean as a compliment. As in his earlier collection, some of these pieces go on a bit too long. Forty-eight pages on the annual porn-video awards ceremony, and 79 pages on John McCain's run for president in 2000, may be a bit more than we need. But even in these pieces, you can see Wallace turning over some interesting and important ideas. In the case of the McCain essay these are questions about voter apathy and the meaning of leadership and the fine line between being a straight talker and exploiting the image of oneself as a straight talker.

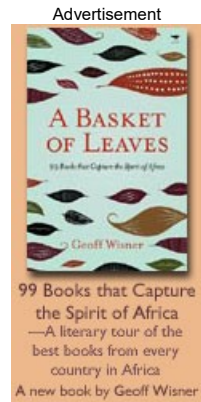
Based on his earlier collection, and a jacket photo in which he resembles the Dude from *The Big Lebowski*, I had formed a mental picture of Wallace as a self-absorbed guy with countercultural leanings and a dedication to refining his own clever turns of phrase. The contents of this book changed that picture. "Authority and American Usage" reveals the heart of a stickler for correct English, and evidence of an education in the classics. And Wallace's review of one of Updike's lesser novels (he groups Updike with Mailer and Roth as the three Great Male Narcissists or GMNs of American literature) makes it clear that his allegiance is to plot and character.

But what about the lobster? What starts out as a travel article on a summer lobster festival in Maine turns into a careful and searching discussion of the practice of boiling lobsters alive. Do lobsters feel pain like us? Do they feel pain at all? Do they feel pain, but not the emotional response that makes it "really" pain?

Though he recognizes the philosophical difficulty of these questions — a real philosopher, it seems, wouldn't even know if his wife feels pain — he makes it abundantly clear that the lobster would prefer not to be boiled. "If you're tilting it from a container into the steaming kettle, the lobster will sometimes try to cling to the container's sides or even to hook its claws over the kettle's rim like a person trying to keep from going over the edge of a roof." By the time the author has finished describing the sound of the kettle's cover, "rattling and clanking as the lobster tries to push it off," you may decide there are better ways to fix dinner.

About the Reviewer

[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.



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