Jobz Are Us: The Ethical Dilemmata of the Humble Scrivener

Toiling away here in the bloggy vineyard, Your Narrator finds himself in near-constant search of gainful, remunerative scribbling. Oh sure, regaling the tens of loyal ***i2b*** followers with insight, pith<fn>Yeth. Pith.</fn>, and *tres bon mots* in return for your undying adulation is all the reward an inky wretch could hope for. But the family has this annoying tendency to, you know, eat, so I expose my tender talents to the cruel world in hopes that someone will toss a few shekls my way.<fn>That Donate button over to the right has not brought the expected riches, needless to say.</fn> <fn>The mere mention of which – the Donate button, that is – is of course, a classic example of shameless whoring, one which allows the reader a choice between casting judgement on Your Narrator or of empathizing with his plight.</fn> <fn>And, also too, this mentioning – re: the judgement v. empathy conflict – potentially instantiates a *frisson* of guilt in the freeloading reader, which pointing out represents a further, and perhaps more pathetic, instance of Narratory whoring.</fn>

So I troll, I dig. I hustle. And occasionally, I am rewarded beyond my wildest dreams when I find an inducement like this:

> *Do you love essential oils? Do you love to write about them and take pictures?*
> *[….] Essential Oil company is looking for someone who is*

> *passionate and knowledgeable about essential oils. We currently have a blog and we are looking to add guest editors/bloggers to our mix. Will will pay per post which will need to include general information about essential oils, DIY projects, recipes or other ideas. Posts must include images.*

The photo at the top accompanies this hustle, which appeared on Craigslist,<fn>Pro tip. Job ads on Craigslist are maximum sketchy.</fn> I love this: in itself, it appears to have been written by a 7-year old ESL student. "Will will pay…" But scoreboard! They realize they need a writer!<fn>A plight more common that most would think, and one that goes unrepaired despite the glut of folks like me who stand at the ready to make your communications shine!</fn> <fn>Too much hard sell? Sorry, got a little over enthused.</fn>

Further, its appeal to the aspirant writer's *passion* for essential oils bears all the earmarks of a near-empty paycheck for the writer's work. Come for the oil! Stay for the love! Plus, photography!!!

Really, Your Narrator chortled heartily at this one, not even needing to get into the 4th grade trick of mis-attaching the modifier in a way that throws shade as to which is truly *essential* in their minds: the oil or the blogger.<fn>Fun fact: if you are picky and priggish about language and its (mis)use, you will never find yourself unamused in our culture. You may also never find yourself invited to parties and the like. Is that trade-off worth it?</fn>

But this is far from the funniest/oddest job description I've ever heard. Travel back through the misty clouds to last fall….

The result of a hot tip, I found myself a-phone with a marketing agency that specializes in providing ghost-bloggers/tweeters for various publishers and their author

list. This allows the tormented author of *belle lettristic* masterpieces (as well as authors of, let us say, non-*bl* titles) to maintain a daily presence on the Internet tubes as a witty, friendly, 'hey-I'm-your-old-pal here sharing recipes and anecdotes and asides as I take frequent (up to ten a day) breaks from my *bl* and/or non-*bl* musings', when in fact, a writer working under deadline, regardless of the relative *bl* and/or non-*bl* merits of the work, definitely does not have surplus time/wit/inclination for such base-level whoring.<fn>That's for guys like me!</fn> Thus does it fall to schlockingly underpaid ghost writers to maintain the illusion of your favorite author as an active and engaged *pal* with her readers, when in fact, she is likely cranking out sub-mid-list potboilers at a rate that would have made Elmore Leonard quail.

And let's go ahead and get out of the way any illusion re: the *bl* and/or non-*bl* divide. The authors/titles are decidedly down the prestige meter here; we're not talking anyone/thing you'd likely read about in the NYRB or NYTBR. In fact, what we had in this case was a stable of ghost-writers churning out mass-pulp fiction under specific trade names, kind of like the *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* titles of my youth, but without quite as much class.

So, here I am, spinning myself as the perfect fit for the job of ghost-writing social media *content* for someone who does not exist but is rather being made manifest by a gaggle of scribblers who, like myself, are ghost-writing for some *nom de plume* who does not really exist.<fn>This delightfully meta recursion could go on forever, like one of those Nam June Paik installations with video cameras and monitors replicating into infinity. Could I get so many (imaginary) authors assigned to me that I would have to sub out the daily Intertubes witticisms to yet another level of people pretending to be someone pretending to be a person who does not exist anywhere other than a book catlague?</fn> <fn>Even more challenging:

assuming the level of one's persona-creating prowess – maybe even to the point where you've really devised some seriously recognizable and individuated character traits and proclivities for these authors who do not truly exist – would one also be able to deploy the epic juggling chops one would need to keep each of the various non-extant "people" sorted out in one's daily creation of "witty, friendly, 'hey-I'm-your-old-pal here" dispatches, or would eagle-eyed readers be able to detect your various fabricated personae bleeding one into another, thereby undermining the, not integrity, no, but the structural resilience of the whole facade. Say it with me, people, this thing is getting fraughter by the minute.</fn>

It turned out that this agency had two specific clients. One is a publisher of potboilerish steampunk thrillers, but, said the agency rep, they had plenty of people to keep that social media illusion rolling. The other publisher, said the rep, presented a little more of a challenge, and this is where she hoped I "might be able to help, but, ah, it is, well, a little delicate."

Interest engaged! Do tell, what is this mystery challenge?

> *Please don't be offended…*

Offended? Damn, I'm dying to find out! Tell me, tell me, please!

> *…but how would you feel about ghost blogging for authors of gay male erotic fiction?*

Ya gotta admit: as job-related questions go, this beats out even a gold standard like "Do you love essential oils?" by a country mile.

You would have been proud of Your Narrator. He was silky, unruffled, and decidedly unoffended. This was some kind of challenge. Could I do it? Who knew? So I exuded that reliable

and unearned confidence that served me in good stead all these years.

> *Yeah, I'm pretty sure I could handle that. I love new challenges. But you should know that I'm a 30-year married hetero with two kids.*

There was a relieved sigh at the other end of the line (apparently, the agency rep<fn>Who, as it happened, was breast-feeding her child during our call, a fact that she had shared early on in our telephonic relationship for reasons that were not completely clear. But I don't judge. I was likely in boxers at the time, myself, though there was no human creature attached to me.</fn> had borne the brunt of more than a few churchy/homophobic rants), and she said:

> *That's ok. Most of the authors aren't gay, anyway. In fact, most of them are straight women.*

I allowed that this was a fascinating tidbit. Please, do go on.

> *Yeah, in fact, we did some market research and discovered that 85% of all our sales were to married women between the ages of 40-55. Almost all of the authors fall in that group, too.*

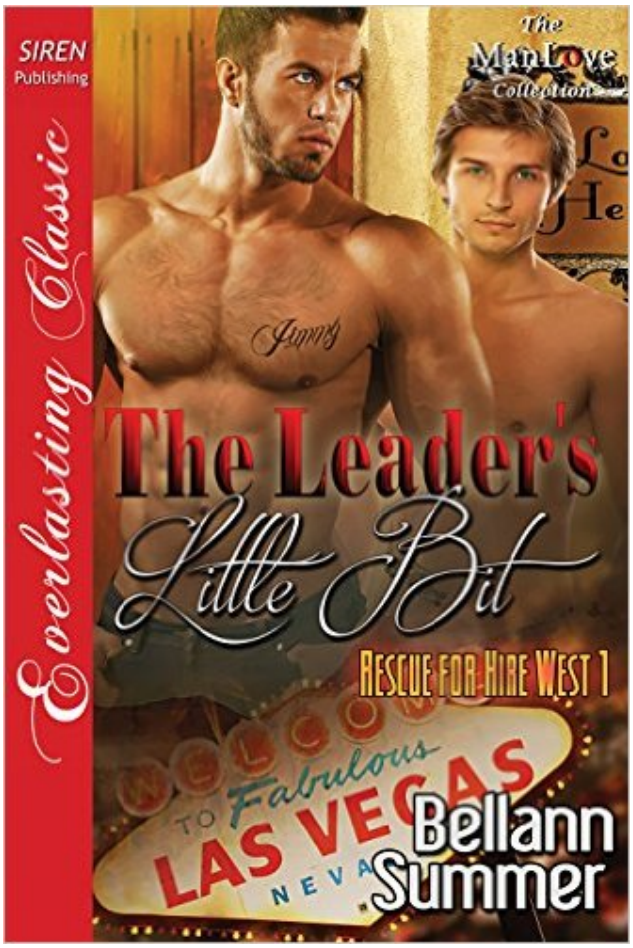
You know what they say (and of course, *they* are always right): You can't make this shit up.

So to re-cap: the job was to provide ghost writing services to authors who were in fact ghost writers themselves, writers pretending to be differently gendered *and* gay; straight women writing pornography (excuse, erotica) about man-on-man/men encounters for other straight women. And my role was to execute the friendly/witty/your-good-pal online personae to provide the so-called authors' fans with a sense of connection

one-to-the-other. I believe this is a situation for which the word *simulacrum* was specifically coined.

I did not get the gig. I guess things were already confused enough without dropping an aging, hetero, patriarchal penis person into the mix.

So next time you are spot a book like this, keep this little tale in mind. It may not be quite what you think. Or, if you are a married woman between the ages of 40-55, it might be exactly what you think.

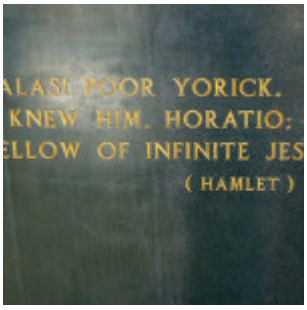


This is not from the publisher in question, but it is pretty representative of the title list I saw.

Who needs a Jade Helm conspiracy when this kind of thing is going on?

My. Favorite. World.

Infinite Quest



Sept 12 – David Foster Wallace died 7 years ago today. Maybe died isn't the right word, though it's at least partly true. He killed himself; took his own life. This fact still makes me sad and angry and scared all at once.

The best way to counter these feelings is to read some of his work.<fn>If for no other reason than that his work is the only part of him that we have any legitimate claim to. Angry at the guy? Shit. I owe *him*.</fn> His essay from the January, 1996, issue of *Harper's*, which became the title piece from his collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, is the single funniest and most "readable"<fn>Readable here connoting 'something not too weird or difficult'. In fact, everything I've read by DFW – which is pretty much everything that's been published plus a glimpse of a few of his notebooks at the Whitney Biennial – is terrifically readable and worth every second it takes to look up unusual words, refer to yet another footnote, or just to re-read certain sentences over and over because they are just too wonderful to take in at once.</fn> piece in his entire output. I've just finished it for the eleventieth time and it's got me hungry for more. "*E Unibus Pluram*: Television and U.S. Fiction" is up next,and it's sort of an essential piece for anyone interested in culture and the challenge of retaining our humanity amidst a dazzling array of shiny objects.

I find it by turns amusing and annoying that DFW is characterized as a fetish object of a hipster crowd way younger than me, that he somehow is the prototypical voice of 'this' generation. This is bullshit: DFW is of my generation. Our lives tracked more or less the same time span, though mine has endured a tad longer. In *Infinite Jest*, he wrote of a future that is more or less now; really, though, he was writing about a *present-then* that was the product of the culture of our childhoods.

It also pisses me royally that *Infinite Jest* is known as *that* book that everybody bought and nobody ever really read, save for a few precious bookish beardos. This tired trope likely arose from critics and other malcontents who felt the need to have/express an opinion but were too lazy to bother reading the actual book – thus inoculating themselves from accusations of laziness, because duuuuude, it's like *Finnegan's Wake*, knowhatimean?<fn>Pass the Bret Easton Ellis and the McInerney. It's easier to chew.</fn> I grant the first 60-80 pages are little disorienting, but after that, it's a roller coaster thrill machine that is every bit as addictive as *The Entertainment* that serves as the book's macguffin. A book about addiction that is thoroughly addicting? Even better, a book that has its characters agonizing over and within their addictions while you, the reader, begin to wonder if maybe you ought to put the book down and eat or shower or go to work or something, but no, screw that, keep reading. That's some badass legerdemain right there, people.

DFW is enjoying something of a mass(ish) cultural *moment* right now. There's that movie with Jason Segal as Wallace, based on an interview transcript from the mid-90s, that has DFW's surviving family suffering their own case of the fantods, suggesting with no small amount of justification that this kind of filmifaction of DFW is exactly the kind of mediated nonsense that he, DFW, would have hated and mocked with relentless passion. But no matter: it is, as the DC

punditocracy like to say about every fabricated scandal, “out there”, and it thus seems to have generated a strange<fn>Strange because he died only 7 years ago, though it feels much longer, likely because he had been mostly silent for so long.</fn> *renaissance* in DFW fandomry and scholarship.<fn>Which, if you’ve read any of the scholarly work to emerge so far, is barely distinguishable from the fandomry, save a certain highly recognizable tone of pedantry apparently essential for academic publication.</fn>

Curiously coincident with the movie was the publication this year of an enormous brick – suitable for a guy who wrote the epically brick-like *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* – called *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, which presents around 1000 pages of essays, articles, short stories, and novel excerpts, and, most importantly, a few hundred pages of previously unreleased and obscurely published early works. My favorite part of the book are the notes and class syllabi he used for teaching. But mostly, I think, the people who bought it were, like me, yearning to place another DFW brick on their shelf, knowing full well that this was the closest we were going to get ever again.

I know there are other writers out there who deserve as much attention as I give Wallace. In fact, there are several who actually do get even more because of the relatively small output Wallace left behind.<fn>Rushdie, Moseley, Delillo to name a few. When do these guys ever sleep?</fn> But there is something about Wallace that drills right into my core.

Years ago, long before his death, someone asked me why I liked DFW’s writing so much. I said it was because reading him was like hearing my own voice inside my head if I had a better vocabulary and were much smarter. We were roughly the same age, grew up with the same general atmosphere of teevee, consumption, weird conformist culture, and tennis. Reading him felt like reading myself.

That was a pretty comforting thing, having someone out there grappling with the same kinds of angsty, middle-class, white boy problems, taking things on from a somewhat nerdly perspective but also bringing that weird Carlinesque outlook to the absurdities that our cossetted upbringing seemed to cultivate like mushrooms. Well, it was comforting right up until the day he killed himself. Then it became fucking terrifying.

Because here was the crux: here's this guy, representing my mutant tribe of people who grew up inside the privilege and the comfort and the sheer whiteness of it all and *knew* that there was something amiss, that this incessant anomie was no accident, was actually not just a product *but was actually a feature of* the environment. And he saw it and got it and reported on it in a way that let us hold our deformity up for inspection and find some kind of strategy for dealing with the back-and-forth of we-have-no-right-to-complain-but-jesuschrist-things-sure-are-a-bundle-of-fuck. And in doing so, he won accolades, received a Guggenheim and a truck full of other awards. Had a fucking endowed Roy Edward Disney Chair in Creative Writing created just for him at Pomona College – dude looked like he had the world on a string.

And so one hears the news and goes, damn, that guy had it going <u>on</u> and I'm barely stringing a decent sentence or two together outside of my little whore gigs where I'm crafting allegedly pithy messages that are making the world a safer place for insurance adjusters or some such. And we're the same age and have to wonder, his voice sounded just like my voice (if I were smarter &c.), and my shit's nowhere near as together as his shit (the imagination at this point has its own engine and power source), but he took a look at it all and decided, nope, too much to bear, and took lights out. How do I measure into this equation?

Add to this that so far in that year two of my friends had taken the same way out, and that less than two months

later *another* friend – all of us around the same damn age, mind you – made the same choice, and I gotta tell you: I was terrified.

We pretty quickly started hearing about how his was the end battle of a long life struggling with clinical depression, and that his family were not all that surprised by the event. I re-read *Infinite Jest* that fall and was struck by how much sadness was there. It was just bone-breakingly sad to read, so I read it again to see if I had been insane to recall the book as so wickedly funny. Turns out it was both – both incredibly funny and horribly sad and filled with almost too much truth about how we try to deal with a world that serves up both sad and funny in such apparently random and heaping servings. And that – crucially – that the only apparent strategy that made any sense was to find some way of connecting, really, with someone else. And then, to accurately describe how fucking hard that can be, to make that connection, not matter how much you know you should.

And so what does he – or at any rate, his thoughts that made it to a page – what do these ideas do for me *now?* I mean, crafty fking christ, if the guy who wrote the way you thought you'd like to write ends it all so gruesomely, what's left?

Well, first I was left confused and scared and, frankly, pretty depressed. <fn>His death was not the cause of my depression, per se, but that this should have come along at a time when life was what h/we would refer to as *fraught* made things even more, well, fraught.</fn> But later – and especially after *The Pale King* came out, unfinished warts and all – I saw something else. Instead of thinking I might write that way if I were a "real" writer – and not just some ho for hire – I started to think about maybe, sort of, maybe actually being a real writer, maybe doing the hard work required to figure out if you have anything to say and the ability to say it.<fn>The jury remains forever out on this question. Ask any writer sitting in front of a blank page.</fn> But then time

passed and nothing came of it and I ignored this kind of insistently annoying Epiphany-like thing that refused to be ignored. Which of course, the trying to ignore that which refuses to be ignored, only engenders more angsty fraughtness, &c.

And then, I endured My Apocalypse, and a couple of weeks after I left hospital, I was lying on the sofa in a dark room when – and I shit you not – when an entire written piece started to appear full-blown on the ceiling.<fn>And yes, there were footnotes on the ceiling, and complete sentences, too.</fn> And I rushed to the computer for like the first time in 4 months and sat down and wrote *The Chronicle* in its entirety and started "publishing" it in pieces on the Facebook machine. And lo, it was rough and sloppy and funny and tender, and my Epiphany-like thing just smiled quietly to itself.<fn>Some of you have read *The Chronicle*. It is under revision, but you got the bloggy first draft blast. You'll tell your grandkids someday.</fn>

And here we sit, faithful denizens of this here bloggy vineyard – which by no coincidence whatsoever takes its title and *raison d'ecrir* from *The Pale King* – the words tumbling down like a poorly constructed simile on a shifting foundation of soft metaphors. And I thank DFW for his words – his Work, for it was truly some audacious labor – and for his ability to stave off his demons for as long as he did. He gave us what he had. I can miss him and wish he were still writing for us, but I can't be angry at him for checking out. Just sad. And, oddly and thankfully, a little inspired.

So today, hot on the heels of National Suicide Prevention Week<fn>Which irony would not be lost on D.</fn>, I'll thank all of you to remember, also, too: shit's never as dark as it may seem. When the imagination creates it's own dark engine and gloomy source of power, reach out. Keep going. The quest, it is infinite.

My Favorite World #37

Eagle-eyed readers of this here bloggy pontificatory nonsense are well aware of Your Narrator's affection for professional tennis. It's what makes the two weeks that wrap around Labor Day my favorite sporty time of the year. Yep, it's US Open time.

It's not just that your guide has attended the US Open – once at the venerable Forest Hills Club, where he had the great fortune to have the great Pancho Gonzales take a leak in the urinal next to his, and where the legendary Alan King deigned to sign his player program *and* flick a cigar ash in his, Your Narrator's, general direction.

"Have fun kid, don't get drunk."

Such a sweet man. Nah, I’m kidding. He was an arrogant asshole. But he did sign my program.

Later, at the grandly named US Open Tennis Center out in Flushing Meadows, Young Narrator watched Laver and Connors and Rosewall and Stan Smith and some perky little blond named Chrissie playing her first big match against Billie Jean, &c.

The last visit in 1985 found Your Narrator yelling for/against Wilander and Edberg, Connors, McEnroe, and that guy who sounded like a disease. Gerulitis. Yeah.

And it’s not just because that stadium<fn>Specifically, Louis Armstrong Memorial Stadium, nee the Singer Bowl. By another turn of fate, someone who looked just like me and had my acne attended his first-ever bigtime rock and roll show in LAMS, nee Singer. The bill was Jo Jo Gunne, the James Gang, and the frankensteinian Edgar Winter Group. The world, it is small.</fn> in Flushing Meadows sits across the concrete plaza from Shea Stadium<fn>Where, as it happens, Narrator saw Game 4 of the 1969 World Series, but did not, repeat, did not see either The Beatles *or* Grand Funk Railroad.</fn>, and in the shadow of the 1964 World’s Fair tower/needle/useless phallic

appendage, the selfsame place where the pre-elementary Narrator discovered *It's a Small World* in the Disney Pavillion. To his parents' everlasting despair.

Nope, it's none of this. It is that Your Narrator is a kneeling, evangelical mendicant at the Shrine of the One True Sport. You can have your teams of people running around like noggin-deficient chickens, your behemoths beating each other senseless between the ropes, your vroom vroom, hyper-steroidal go carts spinning round in circles, your various stick and ball fiasci. As much as one may like these games (some more, some less), it's the well played tennis match that makes the Narrator's heart fly like a vicious down the line forehand screamer.

One could go on here about Andre Agassi, or Roger Federer, or Ashe or Steffi or any of the others whose games have made the world a better place for years. One could talk about the epc amalgam of grace, power, speed, and brute physical endurance that makes this *the* sport worth watching above all others. But not tonight.

Because tonight, since Venus and Serena are about to face off in the quarterfinals – with Serena on a path to the first true Grand Slam in almost 30 years – well, let's make do with one curious observation.

After years of debating the visual acuity of every linesman and umpire, of disputing and arguing furiously over close line calls ("You CANNOT be SERIOUS!"<fn>All linesmen insults are the intellectual property of one J McEnroe</fn>), we have all gone gently into that good night wherein an impossible technology automates line calls so effortlessly that the "integrity of the game" has been purified to its most error-free essence.

It's not that the added drama and strategy around line challenges are lost on us. It's that we've been robbed of the

drama and spectacle of one of our favorites being literally robbed of a point, a set, a match, all because a human being blinked or had a bee fly by or simply lacks the visual acuity to make a decent call ("ARE YOU BLIND?"). And that we have simply acquiesced, in an act of faith as deep as any Road to Damascus moment, to the power of the machine to determine our destinies. Even the most Luddite of tennis fans turns to the Chase Official Review as the Diviner of Truth. It is, in its childlike way, almost touching.

It may be more fair, but is it better? Alas, the jury is not out, but rather has bellied up to the bar to watch the Sisters battle it out. And that's where we should all be.

Why We Is So Dumb #1

After a sweaty August in which our local guardians of moral probity beat down a book that contained a few naughty words, and in which an arriving freshman at Duke University pounded nails into his own palms at the prospect of reading a book that featured two women *in flagrante*, Your Narrator hoped that cooler weather and cooler heads might roll in with the new month.

Alas, it was not to be. Comes today news of yet another college freshman taking a noble stand against a bunch of books he has never – and never will – read. Read his complaints if

you want; there’s really nothing behind it other than a ploy for attention, a cynical career move.

This wannabe George Will knockoff<fn>Really, just look at that smirking cockknob and tell me he didn’t stand in front of a mirror to practice looking like George Effing Will.</fn> takes an impassioned stand on something he knows nothing about and paints a picture of crazed liberalism running amok on our campuses where poor, besieged patriots like him are cowering in terror. The usual array of far-right websites picks up his story, leading other people who never read these books to fulminate against the atrocities inflicted by liberalism on our once-great nation. And a bunch of people who desperately wish to believe that they are under assault from mean old liberals find another reason to live another day. Never mind that his description of the books bears no semblance to reality, or that the course is one of several dozen *optional* seminars offered to University of North Carolina freshmen. He’s here to tell you that he’s suffering, and you should, too.

In an upcoming installment of *We Is So Dumb*, Your Narrator will find himself uncharacteristically generous in his assessment of human nature, freely stipulating that most people really do want to understand the world around them. In this sad case, such benevolence is inappropriate: this freshly-scrubbed whiner embraces blinkered ignorance with aggressive enthusiasm. But even worse, he zealously works to create stupidity among his readers by assuring them that not reading something because you think it might bother you is a good and proper choice.

It doesn’t matter that his thinking has as much heft as a flea fart in a hurricane. The news stories about his column take that bland both-sides-have-a-point tone that makes most journalism as useless as a urinal in a convent, leaving most casual observers with the idea that his complaint has equivalent intellectual validity as the books he claims offend

him. And thus does the notion that universities are hotbeds of liberalism grow stronger, and the desperate fantasy that “we” need to “take our country back” from some amorphous “them” attains another level of certainty.

The past 35 years have witnessed a mushroom-like spread of conservative “thinkers” like our boy Alec Dent, and it’s no mystery why. Conservative punditry is a big business, and for someone with a more or less clever wit and a willingness to stand tall in defense of pure bullshit (at best) or grotesque misanthropy<fn>See, for example, Ann Coulter, among many.</fn>, staking a claim to right-wing outrage at an early age is a pretty savvy career move. Because no matter how low or outrageous, there is a network of think tanks and foundations and new media outlets that are more than willing to pay for whatever depredatious hairballs the hustling pundit wishes to spit up. With great and inexplicable luck, our brave sycophants might end up with a sinecure at the *Post* or the *Times*; at worst, a talk radio gig at 6 a.m. in a mid-tier market awaits the pundit who is willing to say anything without regard to veracity or simple human decency.

We Is So Dumb because people like this — anti-intellectual and cock-struttingly proud of his ignorance — are the recipients of approbation instead of fierce mockery and ridicule. In a sane world, someone would take this boy aside and let him know, gently, that he is displaying his ass in public, and should perhaps reconsider such juvenalia. Alas, such juvenalia has become a profitable business.

Be on the lookout soon for this Tar Heel putz — along with his kindred spirit from Duke<fn>What the hell is going on in the Research Triangle, anyway?</fn> — to publish a followup wherein he describes how hard it is for a sanctimonious humbug to find acceptance on a libertine campus while the jackboot of secular humanism has his neck pinned to the floor.<fn>He will, if he’s smart, describe an almost-consummated sexual encounter which throws shade and shame on some loose-moraled wench

against whom he resists Galahadishly, and boy is he glad he saved himself, though most people will read that he protests way, way too much.</fn> Which of course the “legitimate” media will cover, because these kids are now famous thought leaders who speak for a generation. In 30 years, one of these guys will replace the retiring Ross Douthat on the *NY Times* op-ed page, while the other will probably be running the *Breitbart Sanitarium for the Chuzzlewitted,* and people will read their twaddle and assume that their presence in a newspaper or on their Internet machine means that they are in fact “legitimate”. Thus will this plague of Dumb pass from one generation to the next.

So cooler heads are in short supply, and it remains hotter than a sac of Balinese monkey balls, despite the almost change in season. It is to despair, no question.