

The Monsters Are Due On Maple Street



UPDATED 11/23: Correcting one grammar error that allows me to add a gratuitous Trump insult; correcting one misplaced footnote that made Gwen Graham look worse than she is; and adding one detail that makes Trump look worse, but not quite all the way as bad as he is.

There be dragons, and they're coming to get you. Hide! Be afraid!

Many nights I wake up, between 2.30 and 3.30, and endure an hour or so of free floating terror. I'll never again write a good sentence or play the guitar well. Maybe I'm completely out of ideas. I'll never get hired again. Or if I am working, they'll hate what I'm doing and they'll never hire me again. My children will starve, my wife and I will live in a refrigerator box under a bridge. My dog will die. My dog will get sick, and because I don't have enough work, I won't have the money for treatment, and she will die. My kids will...

So you get the idea. After an hour or so, I'm so exhausted with worry and fear that I fall asleep for a couple more hours. Then I wake up, pull on my pants, and set out to find work, do good work, attempt creativity, strive. It's not that I forget the various terrors that plague me, but I still try. It ain't over til you quit.

And so, Paris.

People are terrified that it will happen here. A reasonable fear, but one that has been ginned up by various actors who stand to profit from our fears.

Be afraid. And CNN/Fox/MSNBC will be here around the clock to be sure you stay that way.

Be afraid. Only the stalwart leadership of {insert name here} can keep you safe. That other guy is going to let the evil-doers kill you in your sleep. Stalwart leader will keep them out! If only he can figure out how to tell the difference between a good guy and a bad guy.

Be afraid. Buy guns, more guns, and carry them everywhere, because you never know when you need to be a good guy with a gun who needs to stop a bad guy with a gun. As long as everyone can figure out how to tell the difference between a good guy and a bad guy.

Be afraid. Go ahead and assume that everyone is a bad guy until proven otherwise. Stand your ground! Ban everyone who looks/thinks/comes-from-somewhere different. Open fire if you feel threatened by someone who fits your idea of what a threat looks like. Sort out the bodies later. You can't make an omelet...

And so, Paris. They could come here next! They might be here already! You know that they hate us for our freedoms, so how about you give up a bunch of those freedoms so we can keep you safe.

Lock the doors! Pull up the ladder. You can't give a 100% guarantee that you can screen out evil-doers? Don't let anyone in. That'll fix everything.

Some of the pandering is not so extreme. Some of it is "moderate". Maybe let in only the refugees who can prove they are Christian. That way we'll be safe, because Christians never use violence to achieve a goal. Or maybe, as one pundit

suggested, only let in the women and children. That's the compassionate approach, to break up families.

But then we hear from Uber Panders who not only think letting women in would be unsafe (they blow themselves up, too!), but that letting in "orphans under the age of five" is also too risky. You can't be too careful.

Round 'em up and ship 'em back. Build fences. Bomb the whole dang shebang.<fn>"Trump: "I would bomb the shit out of them."</fn> All under the guise of "keeping us safe".

Lots of terrible ideas are floating around, and the goatfuckers of ISIS are laughing their asses off.

Paris. Now we are supposed to be afraid of going to a great city, or to Europe overall. Cafes and concerts? Jesus, a guy could get killed there. Swarthy immigrants who may or may not believe in the god of our fathers? Round em up and ship em back. You can't be too careful, amirite?

Now we are supposed to refuse basic humanitarian considerations, to abandon our purported national ideals and values. We are asked, in the name of fear, to do exactly what the terrorists hope for: overreaction, cruelty, inchoate violence.

We keep hearing about ISIS being an "existential threat". It's a stupid phrase, but people who speak it seem to believe it affords gravitas, a seriousness of purpose. But it's bullshit. There is no threat to our existence from a ragtag army of lunatics. Sure, they can disrupt, sow fear. And then they rely on us to lose our collective shit. If history is any guide, they will not be disappointed.

ISIS cannot destroy our civilization, our "way of life", much as they might wish otherwise. But we certainly have the means to do it. They need us to do the dirty work of abandoning the very elements of our society that make it worth protecting. On

Saturday, “[a]bout a dozen protesters – most carrying long guns, some masked and one with his mother” marched outside a mosque in Irving, TX. Calling themselves the Bureau of American Islamic Relations, these brave protectors of the Fatherland insisted their guns were not to threaten, but merely a means of protecting themselves from the evil musselman within.

Also on Saturday, at a rally in Birmingham for the increasingly inexcusable Donald Trump, Tribble Top declared, “I want surveillance of certain mosques if that’s OK. We’ve had it before.” A week earlier he had called for shutting down mosques, so perhaps this is Trump being ‘moderate’.

We won’t shut ya down, but we’ve got our eyes on you. And maybe a few yahoos with hunting rifles patrolling the perimeter.

(Also at that rally, a Black Lives Matter protester was beaten, knocked down, and kicked as their Fearless Leader shouted, “get him the hell out of here”, followed by Trump mocking the man as “a loser.” Just another conveniently identifiable *other*.) *UPDATE: In a interview the following day, Trump said the guy deserved to “get roughed up”. Very mid-century retro, nein?*

The news is full of stories like these. They all have one, or both, of the key ingredients: ill-informed (and perhaps sincere) people engaging in dangerous and counter-productive behaviors and/or the demagogues using the fear to enhance their own personae and power.

As Winston Churchill said, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.”

As usual, the things we end up freaking out about (ebola, immigrants from wherever, terrorism, bacon fat) are typically not that big a threat in the scheme of things. We are all more

likely to experience injury or death in these United States due to reckless driving (our own or someone else's) or falls in the bathtub (around 50,000 deaths or hospital-level injuries per year). Texting while driving claims 6000 lives per year. Shit, 450 people die each year from falling out of bed. Even sleeping in you own bed is more likely to do you in than a terrorist attack.

But there's no political upside in making you afraid to take a shower or a nap.

Last week, the GOP house – the same group of bedwetters who passed a cruel and useless bill to make it harder for refugees to come to America – attached two riders to the new budget bill that would cut the CDC's anti-smoking budget in half. Nobody<fn>I think even the tobacco companies have quit fighting this.</fn> disputes the carnage caused by tobacco. Tobacco deaths in the US each year outnumber terrorist related deaths worldwide by a factor of about fifteen. In 2014, almost a half-million people died in the US – more than 40,000 from secondhand smoke. Terror-related deaths in 2014 totaled around 33,000, up from around 18,000 in 2013. That's a lot of death, and the rising toll is something to be concerned about. But.

Most of those terror deaths occurred in places like Kenya and Mali and other places that most Americans don't care about. No demagogue worth his salt is going to try to gin up the rubes over a place like that.

But Paris is different. Western. White. So it's easy to conflate fear of terrorists with generalized fear of dark skin. It also makes them easy to target, to separate them from the core. It's why we imprisoned Japanese-Americans during WWII, and not German-Americans and other overt Nazi sympathizers like Charles Lindbergh.<fn>Or Prescott Bush.</fn>

It's an easy fissure point for a clever communicator like Trump. In the mouths of less-skilled demagogues, maybe not so

much; the execrable David Vitter tried to salvage his gubernatorial campaign over the past weeks with blatant fear mongering and lies<fn>He even threw Catholic Charities under the bus; his wife is their General Counsel. Nice guy.</fn>, but got thumped anyway. But here's the thing: his loss was because of his other "qualities", not because he played the racist/terror card. I'm frankly surprised it didn't work out for him. After all, what are a few tawdry prostitute scandals compared to the good old boogity boogity?

Some of our political figures are keeping their heads on straight in all this. Obama is demonstrating an admirable resolve to not let the hysteria drive his policy over the refugees. (The decision to send more troops back into the desert shitshow is more troublesome, as is the flow of arms we keep pumping into the Middle East.) As far as the vote in the House last week to punish refugees – because reasons – I guess I should be happy that only 47 Dems<fn>Just a few dozen quisling Democrats like our local congresscritter, Gwen Graham.</fn> joined the wannabe revanchists, especially compared to the cowardice on display post-9/11.

Locally, our Governor has predictably pandered to his bible banger base of rubes. In response, our Mayor was asked his thoughts on the refugees, and he admirably said that we should welcome them with open arms. This naturally led the comments section of our local fishwrapper to explode in a veritable orgy of fantasy hypotheticals and nativist bigotry more-or-less openly expressed. It is to weep.

This is not going to get better any time soon. Recall post-9/11, how every rumor led to panic led to changes in the color-coded oh-my-god-we're-fucking-doomed Official Terror Alert system. It's back. Last time, it led us into a war that has still not ended. And with a dozen-plus power hungry nitwits trying to win the Republican nomination (not to mention all the House/Senate numbnuts up for re-election), the calls for extremist reaction are not going to slow down.

Because, as always, they're only selling what they know people will buy.

I might crawl under the bed myself. It's not the terrorists that scare me. It's us.



Validation is Not Just a River in Egypt



Validation. Some people crave it. Some could care less. Most of us probably fall in the muddy middle, swinging willy nilly between craving and caring less.

Sometimes, Your Narrator is reasonably content – yea, even fully satisfied – to do something well and enjoy the doing for its own sake. A well-written post. A nicely turned phrase. A lyrical, melodic line on the guitar. Mastering a new tune. That sort of thing.

Sometimes, YN is r/c – yea, even f/s – with a household chore done well. A clean toilet. A well trimmed hedge. Freshly cut grass. And so on.

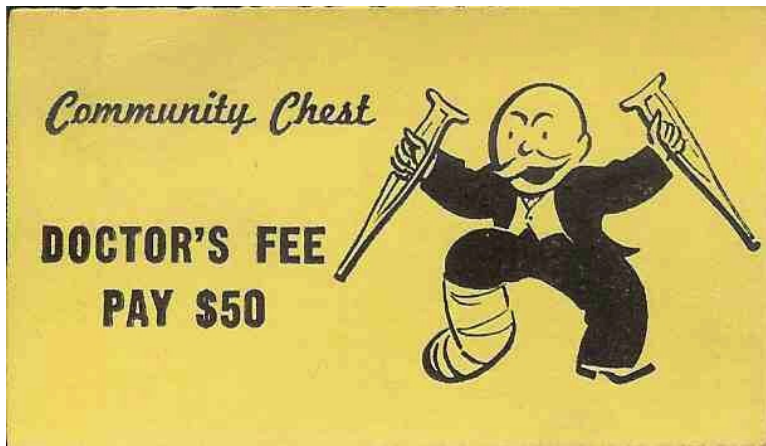
Doing something well truly offers its own rewards. Really. No, really.

Usually.

Other times, invisibility seems to have taken over. The good post, the nicely turned melody, the simple chore...if a positive act falls alone in the forest, has it really happened? And even if it has...so the fuck what? Somebody pay attention!

So knowing well that the doing should be sufficient, what swings me to the opposite pole of neediness, of craving the validation? Is this a fundamental weakness? Or is a core need to be *seen* – and dog forbid, maybe even appreciated – a natural part of the human condition, something as inevitable as hunger or thirst or lust or a desire to lay on the sofa and watch old movies with bags of chips and such?

Whichever is true, the need for validation combined with an ongoing absence of validation is one of my triggers, that set of conditions that puts you off your game, in a funk, down the hole, around the bend, {your preposition here} the {wherever}. And then it gets dark.



It's been a rough year. The remnants of that damned tick have at last receded into the memory mist, but employment remains elusive. (The news stories we've heard about how tough it is for someone over 50 to get work are not fairy tales. It just plain sucks out there.) Some plans and hoped-for outcomes fell to the ground. Other plans and h/f/o hang like undropped shoes. Hope began to feel banal and futile; at best, hopelessly naive. Pessimism became its own reinforcement.

The prescribed remedy – go ahead and do the work anyway – is easier said than done. Some people always seem to be able to muster the energy to persevere. (Or perhaps it only seems that way?) I'm not one of them. Sometimes, despair wraps its bony fingers around my neck and stops me in my tracks.

But.

Things are looking up, it's always darkest just before the dawn, I can see clearly now, &c. The feelings of dread pass, and of course they always have, so no big surprise there. It's not as though I've been lying on the floor counting ceiling tiles. Life has been pretty busy. There is an article commission – a musicological exposition that has never been made in such detail or with such care – that has occupied most of my writing time. It's going to be pretty great. I know this because I've had two good readers give me the reality check. Validation! I knew (or thought) it was good, but the doubt crept in. The Greek Chorus knew just which tune to call

to undermine confidence.

I really sweat blood on this article. A true labor of love, very important to me in so many ways. And now that it's turned the corner, I've got my belief back. I can't wait for everybody to see it.



Along with that, a couple of other h/f/o have turned my way. And even though none of it amounts to a nickel of income – yet, anyway – there are glimmers of light down the tunnel that might not be an oncoming train. Not gonna get too far out on the optimist limb just yet, but there might be, dare we even whisper it...hope.

Maybe even for the i2b blog. Or maybe not.

My first post at this little bloggy vineyard went up around a year ago. My last post went up about two months ago. Up until that last one, Your Narrator had been doing pretty well, keeping the entertainments rolling and the rants roiling. And then...

And then, the well just seemed to run dry. The Writer could not. Or did not. It's unclear.

One of a thousand cuts: it seemed that there was no real interest in the blog. A handful of visitors here and there, the gears wouldn't catch. Attention must be paid!

Mostly, the blog has been a great experience. My writing improved week to week, and at its (my) best, the knowledge that I had to generate something more or less reasonably kind of readable and interesting triggered me to be more engaged with the world, always on the eagle-eye to spot another cool story.

But dammit, now I needs me some validation.



Who? Lil ol me?

I had to turn off the Comments function on the blog because I was getting 50-60 spam comments on every post. Actual reader comments averaged well below one per post. Not validating!

But strangely enough, the most validating of all comments ever posted here actually came from a spam bot. To wit:

What i don't understood is in reality how you are not actually a lot more neatly-appreciated than you may be right now. You are so intelligent. You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga! Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it up!

That was from Tanya3756dc from Uzbekistan. God, how I miss her unwavering support.

Eventually, I added a **Donate** button to allow grateful readers to show their love – measured in dollars, naturally. That generated exactly zero responses. Zee. Row. Along with the other rejections and dead ends (real and perceived), it all just felt pointless. I was a young Alvy Singer facing the inevitable outcome of an expanding universe. Homework? What's the point?

But I'm open to reasonable persuasion. This is your chance to ensure that the hard-hitting social commentary and enlightening cultural musings that you've grown accustomed to over the past year keep on coming. After all, as Tanya3756dc reminds us: "At all times care for it up!"

Do you, patient reader, love me the way my T3756dc does?

If you send me an email (rob at jakelegg dot com) – imploring me to, for god's sake, don't stop the blog, the world will be a bitter and barren place without it – I will take your plea under advisement and perhaps send you a commemorative tote bag. (No, I won't.) The more you beg, the more you fawn, the more your vote will count.

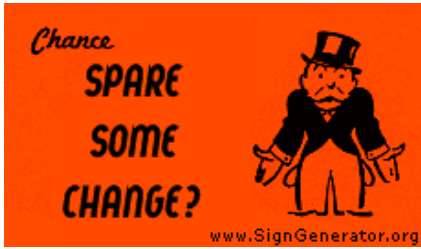
If you really want your vote to count, click on that **Donate** button at the top of the right column and drop a few shekls in the tip jar, I will come to your house and recite a blog post written specifically for you while I massage your neck and shoulders with essential oils. (Much as I'd love to, no. Not really.) Remember, the more you give, the more you truly love me.

I've done some calculating, and I figure if ten of you donate about \$5000 each – or if 50 of you donate \$3246 (that's less than ten dollars a day!) – everything is gonna work out fine, the blog will continue, my dog will get to eat again, and I can get a new coffee mug that does not leak.

Give, or the blog gets it.



Operators are standing by.



Actually, the jangle of coins makes me nervous. Quiet folding money only, please.

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 catalogue?</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.

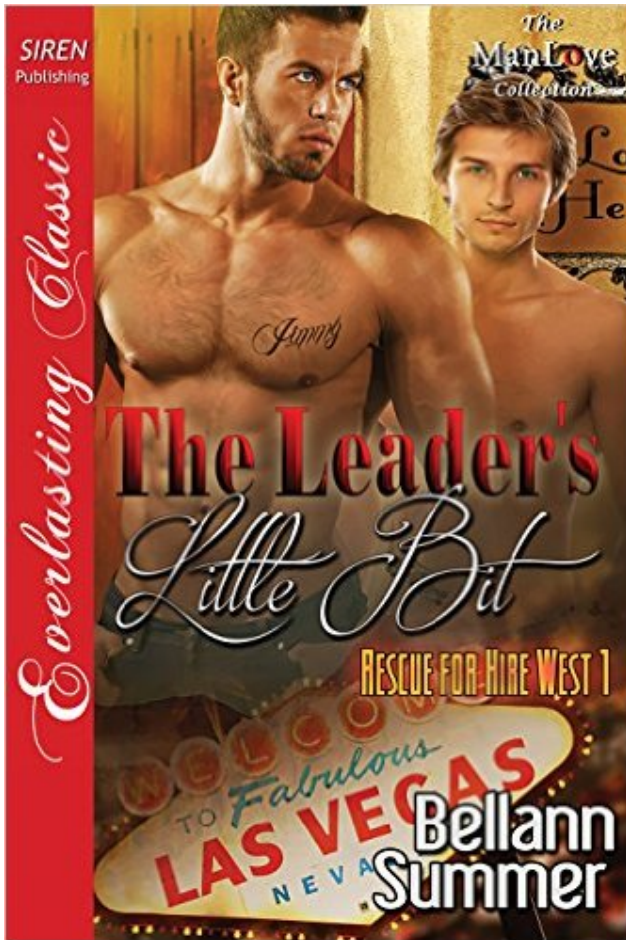
Yeah, in fact, we did some market research and discovered that 85% of all our sales were to married women between the ages of 40-55. Almost all of the authors fall in that group, too.

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.

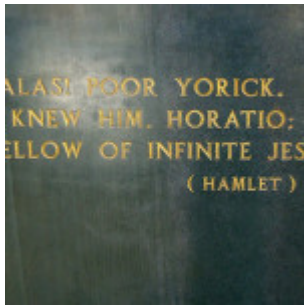


This is not from the publisher in question, but it is pretty representative of the title list I saw.

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. 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*. 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" 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. 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 duuuude, it's like *Finnegan's Wake*, knowwhatimean? Pass the Bret Easton Ellis and the McInerney. It's easier to chew. 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 Strange because he died only 7 years ago, though it feels much longer, likely because he had been mostly silent for so long. *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 on 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.</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.