

A review of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*

In the fall of 1995, while he was waiting for his editor, Michael Pietsch, to work through the 1,000 pages and 388 footnotes of *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace kept busy by writing an essay on Dostoevsky. The Russian novelist still mattered, Wallace argued, because he wrote with “passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we—here, today—cannot or do not permit ourselves.”

Wallace offered several reasons for this divide: postmodernism's mandatory self-consciousness, pop culture's corrosive irony, and the literary tradition's valuing of difficulty over real belief. Wallace had struggled with each of these reasons in his first, whiz-kid novel, *The Broom of the System*, and he couldn't quite overcome them in his second, *Infinite Jest*. Now, in *The Pale King*—*An Unfinished Novel*, as the subtitle puts it, since Wallace committed suicide in 2008—he takes his last, best shot at the kind of serious issues that drove Dostoevsky.

Wallace sets *The Pale King* in the 1980s and at the I.R.S.'s Midwest Regional Examination Center in Peoria, Ill. It seems like a sadomasochistic choice, for the writer as much as the reader, until you start to see Wallace's themes: empathy, democratic selflessness, and the choices that lie behind what we pay attention to and what we care about.

You can't miss these themes. Wallace was always a novelist of ideas, piling up dozens of characters, styles, metaphors, and details in order to get across his latest larger point. In *The Pale King*, this starts with a series of disconnected sketches: a compulsive do gooder who bounces around with a “smile so wide it almost looked like it hurt”; a boy who sweats so heavily that he begins obsessing about not obsessing about sweating; a hardened and horrifically abused girl (her chapter includes the most literary description of a trailer park I've ever seen); a Christian who forfeits his independence to raise an accidental child with a woman he doesn't love; and more. Each of these back-stories relies on complication: starting with a stereotype or silly joke and ending with a rich and surprising character. They also rely on the difficulty of really looking inside someone else—or of looking outside yourself.

After 65 pages of this, *The Pale King* arrives at its “Author's Foreword.” There, in a voice that comes closest to Wallace's celebrated nonfiction, a character named “David Wallace” insists that we've really been reading a “vocational memoir,” disguised as fiction for legal reasons. This lets Wallace riff on our age's lack of filters and boundaries. (“I can't think anyone really believes that today's so-called ‘information society’ is just about information.”) But it also gives him another angle on his major themes: the memoir promises to cover the I.R.S.'s internal battles between hiring more computers or more humans—and between operating as a group of virtuous citizens or a for-profit corporation.

The Pale King spends a lot of time on the I.R.S.'s larger implications, including its responsibility for “one of the great and terrible PR discoveries in modern democracy”: that the best way to hide something is to make it widely available but incredibly dull. Still, the novel spends just as much

time on its entry-level examiners and their daily quest to survive the grind of white-collar work. In one of his more inventive scenes, Wallace sticks several agents on a broken elevator and lets them philosophize. “There’s something very interesting about civics and selfishness, and we get to ride the crest of it,” says one agent. “We think of ourselves as citizens when it comes to our rights and privileges, but not our responsibilities.” A second agent keeps blurting out history’s greatest hits (“Ask not . . .”). A third complains that the other two are “talking like a civics class.”

It’s a terrific scene packed with slapstick humor and provocative argument and opportunities for Wallace to do what he does best: advance moral ideas while also qualifying them and registering the anxiety they produce. In an “unfinished novel,” though, is this scene even in the right place? In an “Editor’s Note,” Pietsch explains that he assembled *The Pale King* out of 12 polished chapters and several boxes full of squibs and drafts. The final book includes 50 chapters, with Pietsch deciding what to keep—and even how to order it. (For example, Wallace never indicated that he wanted the novel’s opening, a lyric little invocation of Illinois’s landscape, to come first.) *The Pale King* doesn’t include much more plot than what’s been summarized above. Then again, that may have been Wallace’s biggest idea of all. Pietsch also appends a few pages of Wallace’s “Notes and Asides,” one of which finds the author mulling “a series of setups for things to happen but nothing ever happens.”

Because of lines like that, it’s become popular to say *The Pale King* is about boredom. But that’s not quite right. *Infinite Jest* was not about entertainment, but it used entertainment to tackle loneliness and addiction. In the same way, *The Pale King* uses boredom to tackle its own bigger issues. Another way to say this is that if *Infinite Jest* diagnosed a problem, *The Pale King* reaches for a solution. Wallace completed only one of these books, but they both work as well as anything in the last two decades of American literature.

There’s a nasty urge, after an artist commits suicide, to rummage through his work, looking for autobiographical echoes. So how about this one, again from Wallace’s essay on Dostoevsky, where he notes that the novelist evolved from “a typically vain and trendy young writer—a very talented writer, true, but still one whose basic concerns were for his own literary glory—into a person who believed deeply in moral/spiritual values.”