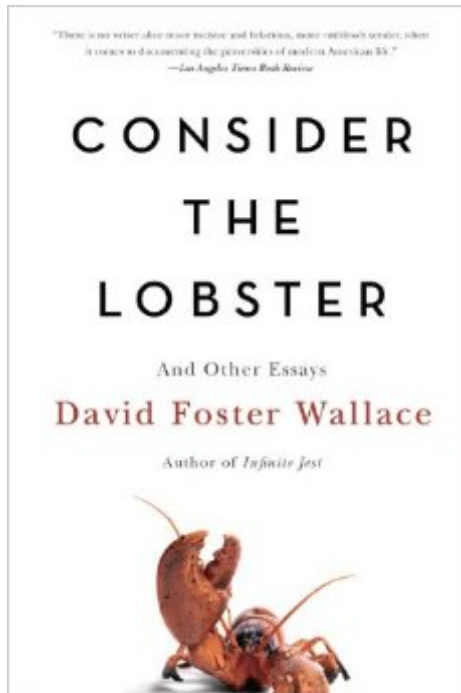


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Consider The Lobster And Other Essays



Synopsis

Do lobsters feel pain? Did Franz Kafka have a funny bone? What is John Updike's deal, anyway? And what happens when adult video starlets meet their fans in person? David Foster Wallace answers these questions and more in essays that are also enthralling narrative adventures. Whether covering the three-ring circus of a vicious presidential race, plunging into the wars between dictionary writers, or confronting the World's Largest Lobster Cooker at the annual Maine Lobster Festival, Wallace projects a quality of thought that is uniquely his and a voice as powerful and distinct as any in American letters.

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Customer Reviews

I've never read Wallace, mostly because his best known work ("Infinite Jest") is so long. But I tend to like writers that digress and use footnotes for asides, so I thought maybe this collection of ten essays would give me enough of a taste to know if I should check out his other stuff. Ranging in length from 7 to 80 pages, the essays all appeared previously (albeit often truncated) in various magazines such as Harper's, The Atlantic, Gourmet, Rolling Stone, Premier, etc. They can be roughly categorized into three categories: brief review, personal piece, and long in-depth topical examination. The brief reviews generally tend to take an item and use it as a staging area for discussing something more interesting than the given subject. For example, in "Certainly the End of Something or Other", Wallace uses his review of John Updike's novel *Toward the End of Time* to highlight the general narcissism and shallowness of writers such as Updike, Philip Roth, and Norman Mailer. His 20-page review of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky is largely dedicated

to making a larger point about literary criticism, and his 25-page review of tennis player Tracy Austin's autobiography is similarly dedicated to identifying the fundamental problem of sports memoirs. I have to admit that the essential point of the shortest piece, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness", eluded me. The two more personal pieces are strikingly different, but in each one gets a vivid impression of Wallace working through his own feelings. In, "The View From Mrs. Thompson's", he uses 13 pages to recount his own September 11 experience in Bloomington, Indiana.

I was introduced to DFW by the classic essay "A supposedly fun thing I'll never do again," but stupidly lost track of him until picking up "Lobster" on a whim a few weeks ago. Let me say this first: even though DFW is a freak for the correct use of language, I love him because he can break all the pesky little rules we've all learned about clear writing (eg, no fifty-cent words, limit footnotes, limit adverbs, two simple sentences are better than one complex sentence, etc), and write vividly, clearly, engagingly, etc (see, he's already liberated my long-caged drive to adverbize.) Perhaps even better, he writes so that it feels we are in his head, and doesn't patronize his reader by tidying up messy internal disputes, which is damn refreshing. Many of the essays are similarly conceived (it somehow all seems to do with marketing to the least common denominator, and the way this marketing glosses over so much that is complex and difficult and important to think about, and the author's simultaneous fascination with and revulsion regarding said marketing, in an "I'm revolted but I can't look away... and in fact am I actually that revolted?... Gosh, should I be more revolted? Am I actually falling for this?" kind of way). At this point, I'm thinking that my favorite is the title essay, which is among the shortest in the collection but definitely the most visceral and, at many points, just plain sad. I have a neuroscience background, and can vouch for the moral and biological complexity of the question over whether animals without cerebral cortices "experience" pain. Warning: yes, the essay's description of a lobster's behavior during the boiling process dissuaded me from eating lobster ever again.

Full disclosure: I have a major intellectual crush on David Foster Wallace. Yes, yes, I know about his weaknesses - the digressions, the rampant footnote abuse, the flaunting of his amazing erudition, the mess that is 'Infinite Jest'. I know all this, and I don't care. Because when he is in top form, there's nobody else I would rather read. The man is hilarious; I think he's a mensch, and I don't believe he parades his erudition just to prove how smart he is. I think he can't help himself - it's a consequence of his wide-ranging curiosity. At heart he's a geek, but a charming, hyper-articulate

geek. Who is almost frighteningly intelligent. The pieces in "Consider the Lobster" have appeared previously in Rolling Stone, The Atlantic Monthly, the New York Observer, the Philadelphia Enquirer, Harper's, Gourmet, and Premiere magazines. Among them are short meditations on Updike's 'Toward the end of Time', on Dostoyevsky, on Kafka's humor, and on the 'breathtakingly insipid autobiography' of tennis player Tracy Austin. An intermediate length piece describes Foster Wallace's (eminently sane) reaction to the attacks of September 11th. Each of these shorter essays is interesting, but the meat and potatoes of the book is in the remaining five, considerably longer, pieces. They are: Big Red Son: a report on the 1998 Adult Video News awards (the Oscars of porn) in Las Vegas. Consider the Lobster: a report on a visit to the annual Maine Lobster Festival (for Gourmet magazine). Host: a report on conservative talk radio, based on extensive interviews conducted with John Ziegler, host of "Live and Local" on Southern California's KFI. Up Simba: an account of seven days on the campaign trail with John McCain in his 2000 presidential bid (for Rolling Stone).

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