

**Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (eds.), *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. xii + 250 pp.**

## **EDWARD JACKSON – THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM\***

For a writer so neurotically aware of the lures of mass-entertainment, the past few years have seen David Foster Wallace seep into popular culture at a startling rate. Indie group The Decembrists based a music video on a scene from *Infinite Jest*, the author's 1079 page doorstopper; Jason Segel will play Wallace in the film *The End of the Tour*, adapted from an interview he did for *Rolling Stone* in 1996; and in the ultimate pop-culture accolade, Wallace briefly appears in a *Simpsons* episode itself loosely based on one of his essays. *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* can be seen as an attempt to redress this pop dilution - to wrest Wallace, in editors Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn's words, from 'journalists, intrepid fans, bloggers' (xi) and 'submit his work to more rigorous study' (xi). Boswell and Burn are more than qualified to oversee such a task, as their respective *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, and *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (a second edition of which was published in 2012) are in many ways foundational texts in Wallace studies. Exploring Wallace's entire career in fiction, *A Companion's* academic rigour is a welcome contribution to the study of this most influential of contemporary U.S. writers.

The volume aims to move beyond the atomistic nature of much established Wallace criticism, which has focussed on specific aspects of individual works at the expense of a more systematic analysis of the writer's achievements. In their preface Boswell and Burn promise a 'stereoscopic take' (xi) on Wallace's oeuvre that pays attention to its centripetal pull (toward formal experiment and linguistic density) as well as its centrifugal focus (most notably in Wallace's obsession with 'connection' through literature). With the exception of Chapters One and Two, which concern Wallace's first novel and short-story collection, the essays in *A Companion* thus alternate between studies of single texts and broader thematic readings. By enshrining this stereoscopic perspective in the book's organization, the editors have shaped an excitingly diverse study of Wallace's fiction that still retains a sense of cohesion in its movement from his early works to the posthumously assembled *The Pale King*. No doubt the author's death in 2008 - and so the lack of any new fiction

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to come - lends itself to the book's endeavour to take stock of where critical appreciation of Wallace as a writer now stands.

Yet *A Companion* is not an attempt to monumentalize the late Wallace's art, in the way that 2012's *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, with its interspersed obituary tracts between essays, regrettably was. Contributors to *A Companion* open up his fiction to an eclectic range of critical perspectives, from historicist readings like Kasia Boddy's chapter on *Girl with Curious Hair*, to Roberto Natalini's look at Wallace's use of mathematics. Such a multifarious approach gives credit to Wallace's dialogism as a writer, his kaleidoscopic texts often invoking plural levels of interpretation. By virtue of its size and complexity *Infinite Jest* is the touchstone here, but refreshingly this volume steers away from overemphasis on Wallace's magnum opus, and spotlights works long overdue for scholarly attention. Boswell's unpicking of *Oblivion*'s 'insistent tug of nihilism' (162), for example, is a valuable counter image to Wallace's much touted 'hopeful posthumanism' (162). Elsewhere Brian McHale's unravelling of how *The Pale King* torques aspects of *Gravity's Rainbow* makes significant steps in the largely (and perhaps, shamefacedly) unexamined topic of Wallace's great indebtedness to Thomas Pynchon.

There are nevertheless a few hiccups that stall *A Companion*'s attempt to push Wallace studies forwards. In maybe her reluctance to cast the author in a negative light, Clare Hayes-Brady argues that Wallace's lack of developed female characters is a 'matter of mystery rather than dislike' (134). She tries to pre-empt charges of misogyny by stressing Wallace's 'acute consciousness of issues of gender' (133), which compelled him to depict women from the predominantly male viewpoints in his work as 'beyond the human Other' (134). It is unclear why silencing women out of a hyperawareness of gender politics is less misogynistic than doing so out of ignorance. A more general stumbling block is the book's decision to exclude analysis of Wallace's non-fiction. Essay collections such as *Consider the Lobster* arguably showcase Wallace at his best, and their relative absence here (contributors make passing references) is notable. That Wallace's essays are the most accessible part of his corpus may point to the reason for their exclusion: this is a study for the scholar, not the enthusiast.

Of course distinguishing between the two is harder than it sounds, and Wallace himself wrote in registers as obverse as theoretical jargon and slapstick. *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* is a major contribution to analysis of his fiction, even if its prioritization of an academic audience belies how Wallace continues to resonate throughout larger culture.