

Abstract

In 2018, author Mary Karr tweeted about her abusive relationship with David Foster Wallace. This was at the height of #MeToo and cancel culture, where the phrase ‘problematic fave’ was commonplace. Wallace, dead for ten years but still alive in the public imagination, was suddenly brought into the conversation. Wallace’s fans, too, were implicated in his bad behaviour, emphasising their reputation for being ‘lit-bros’. This thesis, a collection of six essays on Wallace and his fans, reckons with his complicated legacy. We all have our problematic fave. What do we do about it?

This thesis moves through online, academic, and fan communities to show how these worlds feed into each other and into movements like #MeToo and cancel culture. Reflecting the breadth of each essay’s content, my approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on postcritical literary theory, theories of social psychology, feminist, cultural, fan, and, of course, Wallace studies. With a matter as charged and subjective as your problematic fave, personal experience is an inevitable and useful source of information. My experience as a reader and fan of Wallace is the through-line of these essays. Reading Wallace helped me recover from my eating disorder, and, consequently, my attachment to him and his work is strong. Across this thesis, I reassess my relationship to Wallace, accounting for my responsibilities as a woman, a scholar, a fan, and an active member of the fan community.

In one of Wallace’s interviews, he claimed that: ‘Interesting and true stuff in my life seems to involve double-binds, where there is a decision between two alternatives, but neither is acceptable’.¹ As a thematic frame for this collection, the double bind captures the emotional and intractable complexity of choosing whether or not to keep loving and endorsing our problematic faves. The double bind feels irresolvable, thereby leaving a productive tension in issues that we want to insist are black and white. In embracing this tension in these essays, I conclude that the double bind is not the problem, but my answer to whether I can still love Wallace.

¹ Wallace qtd. in Adam Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction’, in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131-47 (p. 138).