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Medium-Type Friends

A Free Man: A True Story of Life and Death in Delhi

by Aman Sethi. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. Hardcover, 240 pp., \$24.95.

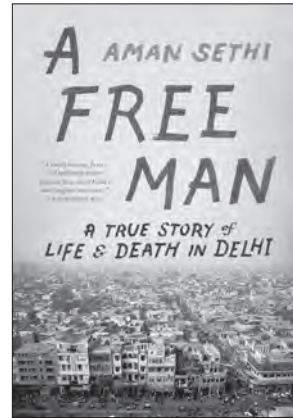
Reviewed by Jeff Sharlet, Dartmouth College, United States

Halfway through this subtle heartbreak of a book, Muhammad Ashraf, the “free man” of the title, phones Aman Sethi—author and co-protagonist, attentive ego to Ashraf’s titanic id—to tell Sethi that Satish is sick. Who is Satish? The one who is sick, of course. Why must you ask so many questions, Aman *bhai* (brother). And just like that, Sethi’s profile of Ashraf changes direction for thirty pages, becoming an account of sick Satish, whom Ashraf expects Sethi to look after. That’s the price of following Ashraf; sometimes Ashraf’s story is someone else’s story. Sometimes it’s Sethi’s.

A chronicle of the “*mazdoor ki zindagi*, or laborer’s life, in Delhi” (226), *A Free Man* will inevitably be compared to Katherine Boo’s third-person omniscient account of Mumbai poverty *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, winner of the National Book Award in 2012. But *A Free Man*—wittier, candid in its confusion, written in a style that might be called “first-person flummoxed”—is a far more intimate book, a romance of sorts. It earns its clichés: Ashraf and Sethi, subject and author, were made for each other; they complete one another. The book they made together is a love story, a document not just of “life and death in Delhi,” as the subtitle holds, but also of the power that inevitably flows back and forth between the narrator and the narrated—freely given and taken, sometimes resented, longed for when it disappears.

A homeless day laborer, Ashraf claims to have a “business-type” mind. But deep into a bottle of his spirit of choice, a rotgut aptly called *Everyday*, he sounds more like Joe Gould, the genius crank documented by Joseph Mitchell over two decades at *The New Yorker*. In *A Free Man*, Ashraf narrates his own oral history of the contemporary world, just as deceptive as Gould’s but seen from Bari Tooti Chowk, an intersection in a Delhi market that passes as Ashraf’s home. Sethi tries to write it all down. And Ashraf—unlike narcissistic Gould—tries to redirect him. “For you this is all research,” he scolds his biographer. “A boy tries to sell his kidney, you write it down in your notebook. A man goes crazy somewhere between Delhi and Bombay, you store it in your recorder. But for other people this is life” (114).

Like Gould, Ashraf can talk longer than Sethi can listen. Like Mitchell, Sethi sometimes dodges him. Fortunately, Ashraf has Sethi’s cell number. When he calls one night about Satish, Ashraf does not need to ask for help. Sethi’s obligation is implicit.



Aman *bhai* has become at least a “medium-type friend,” one who loans rather than gives aid. It is not a matter of stinginess but of mutual respect. “Get it?” Ashraf asks Aman *bhai*. “You’ll *lend* it,” help, that is, “and I’ll *return* it. So it’s contractual” (65). That way neither is ever forced to feel like a *chootiya*, a “pussy,” even if one is a “pavement dweller” and the other a *presswallah*, a journalist with a press card and a motorcycle.

But a motorcycle is no way to take the sick friend of a friend to the hospital. To get to Bara Hindu Rao, where Satish needs to go, you take a bus of the damned or, at least, severely distressed, their open wounds unbandaged, their skin fungus festering. “The driver plays his part in enforcing the no-talking rule; the person breathing down the back of his neck could be a pukka tuberculosis case” (134). That’s the problem here, “the two dark sails of Satish’s lungs” (141), revealed by X-ray to be afflicted by lesions. So it’s off by auto rickshaw to the tuberculosis hospital, an eighty-rupee ride. Extra for the risk of disease. How to win a bed once you arrive? Sethi assembles a chorus of nameless voices to answer: bring relatives, come alone, cry, don’t cry. It works! Satish is in.

Bhagwan Das, the barber, will shave him. His story begins with “the pipe, the pipe” (147), the one through which he had to piss for three years, installed by doctors after the minivan ran him over. A situation like that makes a man think, and while Bhagwan Das was laid up in bed, Ram Babu was there to help him. Who’s Ram Babu? A “virtuous man” (151). Perhaps a figment of Bhagwan Das’s imagination. But that’s not what’s important. Just like a *presswallah* to try to pin down the facts that don’t matter instead of the truths that do—such as Bhagwan Das’s divine calling as tuberculosis hospital barber. Ten rupees a customer for a shave and five minutes of friendship, eighty to 100 customers a day. Not a bad way to make a living, so long as you don’t catch tuberculosis and die. Satish does die. Poor Satish! We never really knew him. “Now there is only Singh Sahib in Bed 56.” Who’s Singh Sahib? Don’t ask. The sheets, meanwhile, “still bear unwashable traces of their many previous occupants. A man-sized sweat stain darkens the length of the bedsheet—a trailing after-image of countless coughing, sweating, retching bodies” (157).

I know; you see what I just did there. I aped the free-associating style of *A Free Man*. That’s usually a cheap trick in a book review, but here I mean it differently, or differently enough, I hope. Mimicry, in the practical rather than theoretical sense, has long been a strategy of particular importance to literary journalism, one of the means by which writers establish their own contractual relationship with readers. The writer-as-mimic proposes a kind of authenticity or, at least, fluency. The writer-as-mimic says, “Look how well I speak the local language. That means you can trust me.” At its worst, as in, say, Tom Wolfe’s “Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers,” it borders on minstrelsy. At its best, as in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, it becomes a form of crossing over into the world of the subject, still intact as one’s self and yet identified as a worthy student of another’s life, not as ethnographer but as a “creative” writer whose loyalty—to her own story—is made clear.

A Free Man belongs in this latter category. The book begins with Sethi sitting in while Ashraf shares a joint with his chief cronies, Lalloo and Rehaan. Sethi, de-

terminated to keep his wits about him, has imbibed heavily as cover for not taking a toke. Now his wits are gone and it's his turn. "This joint," he writes, "like everything else that follows, shall be for research purposes only" (5). It's a gonzo beginning, seemingly in the tradition of Hunter S. Thompson, but Sethi takes a hit and then veers outward to context. The background that in a more formulaic book would constitute the second chapter gets a page and a half here: Sethi had met Ashraf in 2005 while reporting for *The Hindu* on a proposed health insurance plan for construction workers. "Ashraf had been a terrible interview," Sethi writes (6). Instead of answering Sethi's questions, he told stories, spun theories, pronounced on the world. Sethi knew what to do: Get himself a fellowship and a book deal and return to Ashraf, this time to listen.

Sethi spent much of the next five years in the company of Ashraf and his friends. He gets high with them, yes, and drunk, and once almost arrested. He loans money and on one occasion borrows it. He confesses to dutifully asking "undeniably boring questions" (37) and revels in those moments when Ashraf rescues him from his shallow pop sociology with an implausible story. "I often toy with the idea of verifying Ashraf's stories," he writes toward the end, "but why should I? How would that change anything between us, except convince Ashraf that I mistrust him and that his story is more important to me than he is?" (195)

Of course, it is; we wouldn't have this book before us if Sethi had not ultimately given his loyalty first of all to *his* story, not Ashraf's, but the one Sethi tells about him. Sethi crosses over into Ashraf's world, but he never pretends to be Ashraf. He learns a great deal from Ashraf about telling stories through digression and distraction, but he mixes Ashraf's methods with his own and those of the literary journalists who come before him. Hunter Thompson, sure; and probably Joseph Mitchell. (Sethi spent a year in the midst of his research at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, over which Mitchell justly looms.) There are echoes of Ben Hecht's *1001 Afternoons in Chicago* here, too, in the way Sethi folds his stories-within-stories up into bittersweet fables that end abruptly. But perhaps that's Ashraf's influence: He is a master of the unresolved vignette. Sethi is his understudy.

Together, Ashraf and Sethi return many times to Ashraf's self-styled creation myth, his almost-life as a medical student. His mother, a widow, had taken work in the house of a Dr. Hussain. "Depending on which interview tape I consult, Ashraf came to Dr. Hussain's house when he was five/eight/ten," Sethi writes (24). *No*, the reader can imagine Ashraf saying as he peers over Sethi's shoulder, watching him type. *LISTEN, Aman bhai*. Aman *bhai* does. For a page he writes as if watching teenage Ashraf, sent to school by the good doctor, attend to his lessons. Then comes the book's only real villain, the doctor's tenant, a gangster named Taneja, who tries to steal the doctor's house from him and in so doing, Ashraf speculates, sets into motion the chain of events that led him to Bara Tooti Chowk.

"Of course," writes Sethi, finding the right rhythm for the story, a series of rapid-fire point-of-view shifts. "Ashraf knew all along that Taneja was not to be trusted. Because Ashraf knows everything. 'I told Dr. Hussain when they made out the lease: never trust Punjabis. But no one? listens to me.' Except for me, it seems" (27). First,

we are with young Ashraf; then, in the present, with all-knowing Ashraf, who is mildly mocked by Sethi. Ashraf speaks to Sethi; Sethi speaks in an aside to the reader. *A Free Man* spirals out to Bara Tooti Chowk and beyond in similar fashion, through the days and nights of Ashraf and his friends, some of them seemingly born to lose, others tragic heroes, none left with much of a chance.

Through their eyes—or rather, through the eyes of Sethi, sitting beside them, we see medicine, market, and law, Delhi from the bottom up. This is not how the other half lives, it's how these men live, no more, no less. Sethi writes not with the telescope of theory and social science or with the calm gaze of the journalist observing. His view is close-up and blinking. What he sees changes shape before his eyes. He attempts to construct a timeline of Ashraf's life, but not until he has known Ashraf for several years does Sethi realize that Ashraf had led a respectable life until his late twenties—until, that is, he was as old as Sethi is at the time of writing.

Could Sethi wind up like Ashraf? It seems a reasonable question. And if Sethi were a less-honest writer, or a more paternalistic one, he might let us wonder. But *A Free Man*—in ways that Boo's resolutely third-person *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* can never be—is a book about class. Not the underclass, but class as a current in every relationship, class as a press card, a book contract, a reluctance to taste Everyday liquor and the ability to see Satish through to the hospital. It is a matter of wit—how one tells a story, how one disassembles a building, how one tells another to go to hell—and, of course, resources. When Ashraf is robbed he must borrow two rupees from a friend to use a pay toilet; when a pickpocket steals Sethi's wallet, Ashraf spots him some tea money until he can connect with a family friend who loans him 6,000 rupees.

That we see these negotiations is what sets this book apart from Boo's magisterial narrative. That Sethi resists drawing conclusions about a "new India" is what sets *A Free Man* apart from much of the recent wave of big-picture Indian literary journalism—Siddhartha Deb's *The Beautiful and the Damned*, Atash Kapur's *India Becoming*, Suketu Mehta's lyrical *Maximum City*. Fine books, all. But each is bound to its time as *A Free Man* is not. Even when Sethi gives voice to his anger in a passage on the geography of the Delhi of the poor—the name of each neighborhood followed by a drumbeat, "before it was demolished by the Municipal Corporation," "before it was demolished," "before it was demolished" (66)—it's not so much a sociological indictment as a roll call of the missing, neighborhoods razed, *chootiyas* gone.

In the end, only Ashraf survives. Maybe. One scheme after another collapses for Ashraf and we begin turning pages with the expectation of coming upon his dead body. Instead, thankfully, Sethi loses sight of him. His vanishing is a blessing; the entire book turns out to be a vignette without resolution. Sethi's American publisher has categorized the book as biography, but that slights its great achievement as a book made to honor a free man. It is anti-biography, a book that feels closer to life itself than to the after-the-fact business *presswallahs* and critics like to call a story.

Exploring the Intersection of Literature and Journalism

Literature and Journalism: Inspirations, Intersections, and Inventions from Ben Franklin to Stephen Colbert.

by Mark Canada. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Hardcover, 246 pp., \$85.

Reviewed by Thomas B. Connery, University of St. Thomas, United States

A book with the imposing title *Literature and Journalism* and that purports to range over almost 300 years implies a rather grand undertaking. But that's not the case with this relatively slim volume that consists of nine chapters by nine different contributors, plus an introduction by Mark Canada, author of *Literature and Journalism in Antebellum America: Thoreau, Stowe, and Their Contemporaries Respond to the Rise of the Commercial Press* (2011).

But regardless of a book's page length, it still may be impressive in its design and intent, and because of the fresh insight its contributors together bring to its topic. That's not necessarily the case here, because the collection lacks coherence in purpose or theme and is pretty much a hodgepodge of perspectives, considerations, and subtopics. In other words, it doesn't hang together and provide an overarching meaning or perspective. This doesn't mean, however, that the individual entries aren't well researched or valuable or interesting. Each clearly can stand on its own in making a contribution to its individual topic. But I suspect that their value would be mainly found among those already interested in the specific topic of a chapter and a few may be of use to those interested in the U.S. roots of literary journalism.

Canada's introduction, "A Brief History of Literature and Journalism," provides a broad and, as he says, brief overview of the "intersections" of literature and journalism, which is the book's principal unifying element. He takes readers through "four kinds of intersections" in the four major eras he has identified: Colonial Co-existence, Antebellum Rivalry, Postbellum Apprenticeships, and Modern Hybrids, largely focusing on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century journalistic influences on the writing of fiction and poetry (for example, Whitman), generally reflecting the subjects of his contributors.

Although he says the "blended" work of Stephen Crane, such as "An Experiment in Misery," anticipated Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Wolfe's "New Journalism," there is no mention or acknowledgment of the literary journalism discourse that has emerged over the past thirty or so years, other than in a bibliographical endnote that concludes



his introduction. In the Modern Hybrid period, Canada discusses several of the usual suspects of the New Journalism but makes no connection to writers over the past forty years. Instead, he leaps from the New Journalism to “the combined journalism and imaginative writing” of Jon Stewart (*The Daily Show*) and Stephen Colbert (*The Colbert Report*). That big jump was probably made because the final chapter in the book is “Stephen Colbert’s *Harvest of Shame*,” by Geoffrey Baym, a legitimate topic for exploration. But it just sits out there at the end, suggesting other potential multimedia areas of literature-journalism inquiry but only connecting to Murrow’s *Harvest of Shame* documentary and not the broader topic.

Each author is an accomplished scholar and is clearly a fine fit for the chapter’s subject. But readers of this book probably would be especially familiar with two of the contributors, Karen Roggenkamp and Doug Underwood, and perhaps with Andie Tucher, a journalism historian, as well.

Roggenkamp, author of the excellent study *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction* (2005), extends and builds on that work by pulling from the pages of the *New York World* the “True Stories of the News” articles by the largely forgotten Elizabeth Garver Jordan. The series of articles, says Roggenkamp, “magnifies the finely webbed intersections between journalism and literature at the turn of the twentieth century,” and she demonstrates that “Jordan’s story line, appearing first in a newspaper article and then in a short story, reflects the shifting—and shifty—nature of how ‘true stories’ could unfold in journalism and literature alike at the turn of the twentieth century.” (119, 120)

Underwood is another experienced and productive toiler in the field of journalism and literature (*Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700-2000*, 2008, reviewed in *Literary Journalism Studies*, Fall 2009). In “Fame and the Fate of Celebrity: The Trauma of the Lionized Journalist-Literary Figure,” he begins with fame’s effect on Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone with the Wind*, and then dances rather quickly across several writers and several decades. He touches on or mentions an array of familiar writers, including Stephen Crane, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Richard Harding Davis, Jack London, Theodor Dreiser, James Agee, Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and George Plimpton, among others. It’s an enjoyable read that suggests several potential research paths. Of particular note is the last part of the chapter, “The Consequences of Celebrity throughout the Centuries.”

Anyone trying to understand the major shift in newspaper journalism in the United States that came with the penny papers has to read Andie Tucher’s 1994 book *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America’s First Mass Medium*. The absolutely solid reporting and lively writing that gave us a fresh perspective on not only the journalism of *that* period but also the journalism that would follow are evident in her chapter here. “The True, the False, and the ‘Not Exactly Lying’: Making Fakes and Telling Stories in the Age of the Real Thing” introduces us to and digs deeply into “the age of the ‘fake,’” a time during “the high tide of America’s romance with facts that the word *fake* itself emerged from netherworlds that had

previously been its main habitat to become a part of the public discourse” (91–92). Ultimately, she concludes that “the efforts of the ‘fakers’ to invent and embellish their way to a more true-to-life portrayal of the real world went too far” (111).

Although Tucher doesn’t specifically connect the “fake” story type that burned briefly in the second half of the nineteenth century to the roots of what we call literary journalism, readers interested in the development of U.S. journalistic style and the fact-fiction discourse will find much to chew on and ponder in her chapter.

The book’s other chapters cover a variety of topics:

- The impact of Walt Whitman’s journalism on his poetry, particularly how the major themes in his poetry are found in his journalism, by David S. Reynolds.
 - A consideration of the use of poetry in Washington, DC, hospital newspapers during the Civil War, including how the poems, written by soldiers, doctors, nurses, wives, and children, “attempted to make sense of death, to heal the souls of soldiers as well as their bodies, and to translate what were often horrific scenes into less terrifying, if not always comforting, ones.” The author is Elizabeth Lorang.
 - An exploration of connections between American newspapers and fiction, with a chapter title that nicely summarizes its intent: “Where the Masses Met the Classes: Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century American Newspapers and Their Significance to Literary Scholars.” It’s a very practical overview of the topic by Charles Johanningmeier that includes research sources and suggestions for future research.
 - An investigation of “Ernest Hemingway in *Esquire*: Contextualizing Arnold Gingrich’s Posthumous Portrait(s) of Man and Artist, 1961–73” certainly is about Hemingway through his relationship with editor Gingrich and specifically Gingrich’s personal assessments of Hemingway, which created “multiple Hemingway likenesses,” according to the chapter’s author, John Fenstermaker.
 - The book’s first chapter, “Benjamin Franklin, Literary Journalism, and Finding a National Subject,” by Carla Mulford, is a bit puzzling. While its exploration of Franklin’s writing “as a political instrument” is certainly a worthy topic, literary journalism is never defined or fully explained and the writing under consideration bears little to no resemblance to what we now call “literary journalism.”
 - Although the range of writers and works under consideration is much narrower than suggested by this book’s title, and the parts are only held together by the slim thread of literature-journalism intersections, the book undoubtedly contains some particularly valuable insights for the right reader or scholar.
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What the Receptionist Knew about Joe Mitchell

The Receptionist: An Education at The New Yorker

by Janet Groth. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2012. Hardcover, 230 pp., \$21.95.

Reviewed by Miles Maguire, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, United States

Anyone who knows anything about literary journalism knows about Joseph Mitchell, and anyone who knows anything about Joseph Mitchell knows about the way he spent the final thirty-two years of his career at *The New Yorker*, coming to the office on a regular basis but unable to publish anything more in the magazine. As Roger Angell described it in an often-quoted remembrance published in the magazine June 10, 1996, a few weeks after Mitchell's death:

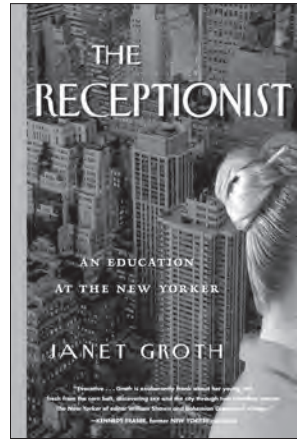
Each morning, he stepped out of the elevator with a preoccupied air, nodded wordlessly if you were just coming down the hall, and closed himself in his office. He emerged at lunchtime, always wearing his natty brown fedora (in summer, a straw one) and a tan raincoat; an hour and a half later, he reversed the process, again closing the door. Not much typing was heard from within, and people who called on Joe reported that his desktop was empty of everything but paper and pencils. When the end of the day came, he went home. Sometimes, in the evening elevator, I heard him emit a small sigh, but he never complained, never explained.

Somehow the phrase “writer’s block” seems inadequate to describe whatever it was that was holding Mitchell back. Writer’s block is what you have when you sit down in the morning at your computer keyboard and nothing comes, or when you have a piece framed out but can’t quite find the words to start filling it in.

But over the course of more than three decades, Mitchell’s condition seems to have been something else, something much more. But what?

In that same issue of *The New Yorker* where Angell’s recollections appeared, Calvin Trillin offered his own remembrances, including a theory he had heard that Mitchell’s writing was going along just fine “until some professor called him the greatest living master of the English declarative sentence and stopped him cold.”

Janet Malcolm had a different take. She was sure that Mitchell was simply rising to greater heights, taking on greater challenges and therefore taking longer to finish. “Joe himself progressively risked more and more,” she wrote. “As his pieces got more complex and profound, they took longer to write.” The fact that he hadn’t



published in the magazine for more than thirty years was “not remarkable,” at least to his friends, she added.

The last piece that Mitchell published in *The New Yorker* was “Joe Gould’s Secret,” about the nine-million-word oral history that turned out to be a fantasy. As a result there have been psychological explanations that purported to show how master prose stylist Joe Mitchell ended up identifying so strongly with bohemian bamboozler Joe Gould that the former wound up like the latter, unable to commit to paper the words and ideas that were swirling around in his head.

Mitchell gave some credence to this idea after the publication of his collection *Up in the Old Hotel*. According to Mark Singer’s account in the February 22, 1999, issue of *The New Yorker*, Mitchell thanked William Zinsser for a “deeply understanding review” in which Mitchell’s extensive engagement with Gould was blamed for the ensuing literary drought. “Gould just plumb wore Mitchell out,” Zinsser had written in *The American Scholar*, Singer noted.

Other theories to explain Mitchell’s inability to write have also been put forward. They include the possibility that kicking his smoking habit impaired his ability to concentrate and that an old grudge about meager paychecks in the early days of the magazine made him want to even the score.

One reason why the mystery continued for so long is that Mitchell’s personal presence—a mix of Southern charm, unfeigned kindness, and deep empathy for the individuals he was with, and for humanity generally—made it difficult for colleagues and interlocutors to ask him plainly what was wrong. Philip Hamburger, who spent sixty-five years at *The New Yorker*, told Singer that inquiring about Mitchell’s writing life was like looking into his sex life, “not merely gauche but also ‘prurient.’”

Ben Yagoda, an English and journalism professor whose publication credits include a history of the magazine called *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, had his chance to ask “the question” during a lunch a few months before Mitchell’s death but decided to pass. “I sensed the subject was painful to this extremely gracious, courtly, and generous man, and I didn’t have the heart to bring it up,” Yagoda wrote on the website of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

In February *The New Yorker* published a previously unknown piece by Mitchell in its anniversary issue, and to mark the occasion devoted one of its monthly roundtable talks at Joe’s Pub in the East Village to the writer, his legacy, and the ongoing literary mystery of what he had been doing all those years.

The participants up on the stage were David Remnick, the magazine’s editor; two longtime staff writers who had known Mitchell, Singer and Ian Frazier; and Thomas Kunkel, who has published a biography of Harold Ross, the magazine’s founding editor, and who is close to finishing a biography of Mitchell. The four men talked for about half an hour and then opened the floor to questions. A video recording of the session is available on the magazine’s website, and it’s well worth watching. But it’s incomplete, because at least one of the questions that the panelists got has been edited out.

The person who asked that question told me earlier this year that it was “probably ill-advised” and that it drew a gasp from the audience. But it was a simple question, and it needed to be asked: “Why am I not up there?”

The person who wanted to know was Janet Groth, who spent twenty-one years as a receptionist at *The New Yorker* and in 2012 published her memoirs as *The Receptionist: An Education at The New Yorker*. It turns out that Groth, who came to New York to become a writer but was never given any serious consideration for such a role at the magazine, is apparently the one person who has first-hand knowledge of Mitchell's writer's block. For six years, from 1972 to 1978, the two of them had a standing date for a "literary lunch" on Friday afternoons, during which they discussed many things, including what he was working on and why it was so hard to bring the material under control.

Groth's chapter on their relationship provides a thoroughly convincing, at times painfully so, explanation of Mitchell's struggles on the page. It isn't the only reason to read Groth's memoir, but it is the reason why anyone who is serious about understanding Mitchell will want to have this book close at hand. Mitchell's newly discovered works, which *The New Yorker* plans to publish in two more installments, provide textual support for Groth's account.

Scholars of literary journalism or any other discipline will also want to give some thought to Groth's question at Joe's Pub: "Why am I not up there?"

When she arrived in New York, Groth was, in her own words, a babe—a shapely blond fresh out of the University of Minnesota. She went on to become a party girl, high spirited and high strung, who tried to commit suicide in the wake of a failed love affair. But make no mistake—she has become a person of substance, professor emeritus of English at SUNY Plattsburgh, whose doctoral dissertation at New York University was on the critic and *New Yorker* contributor Edmund Wilson, and who went on to publish four books on Wilson.

Groth was the one who knew Joe Mitchell's secret. She had the answer to the question that capable journalists were too uncomfortable to ask and that has lingered for these so many years. Her story should stand as a reminder to us all of the need to keep asking hard questions—and to keep looking for the right people to answer them.

Learning the Craft

You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Nonfiction from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between

By Lee Gutkind. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2012. Paperback, 270 pp., \$16.

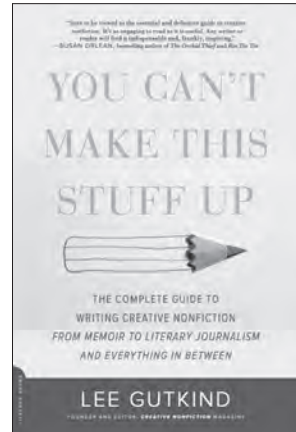
Reviewed by Nancy L. Roberts, University at Albany, SUNY, United States

In the sea of how-to-write tomes, this one is a gem. Each of the book's thirty-plus personal essays is itself a small work of art: fresh, informative, and inspiring. Together, they illuminate the genre of creative nonfiction, which Gutkind, the founder and editor of *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, calls "true stories well told." He explains that the adjective "creative" references the use of literary techniques implicit in the genre, while "nonfiction" refers to its factual basis. In other words, he seems to be talking here about literary nonfiction, which includes literary journalism.

In fact, the book is dedicated to Gay Talese, whose accomplishments as a literary journalist are well known. And another literary journalism heavy hitter, Susan Orlean, has contributed a jacket blurb. There is, as well, considerable emphasis on literary journalism in part one, which defines and discusses the broader genre of creative nonfiction through consideration of writers such as George Orwell, Talese, Sheehan, John McPhee, and Joan Didion, among others. Part one also addresses some of the genre's key ethical, legal, and moral issues. These include concerns about composites and about portraying characters fairly, with respect for their privacy, as well as concerns about the potential for libel and defamation.

In part two, Gutkind's plethora of examples, tips, and exercises forms a comprehensive how-to guide to writing and revising creative nonfiction. He starts off with a primer on how to read thoughtfully—one's own and others' writing—in order to become a better writer. The next step is in-depth examination of a half dozen pieces of creative nonfiction included here, such as Talese's classic "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" and an excerpt from Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Each piece is included to illustrate a particular aspect of writing, such as effective framing/structure and scene writing, deep characterization, evocative description and detail, and point of view.

Above all, "the first and most important lesson to learn is writing in scenes," counsels Gutkind. "Scenes are the building blocks of creative nonfiction, the foundation and anchoring elements of what we do. . . . The lazy, uninspired writer will tell the reader about a subject, place, or personality, but the creative nonfiction writer will show that subject, place, or personality vividly, memorably—and in action. In scenes."



The book is enriched throughout by practical exercises that engage and challenge. For instance, an early one directs the student to recreate a situation or scene from the past that led to a larger, more significant one—that could be grist for a broader conceptualization of an issue or problem.

Even nonwriters will likely find *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* compelling. For students who are new to the genre of literary journalism, this book is rich and deep enough to serve as a bible. Always informative, it's entertaining and often humorous. It would be an excellent choice for a writing-intensive course on literary journalism.

A Review Essay

The Fine Print: Uncovering the True Story of David Foster Wallace and the “Reality Boundary”

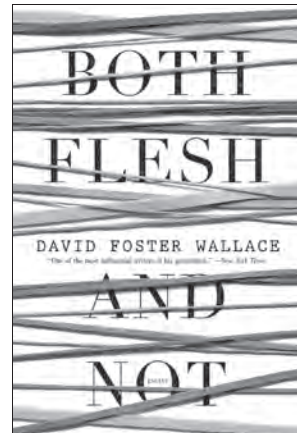
Both Flesh and Not: Essays

by David Foster Wallace. New York: Little, Brown, 2012. Hardcover, 327 pp., \$26.99.

Reviewed by Josh Roiland, University of Notre Dame, United States

Before he sat down with the best tennis player on the planet for a noonday interview in the middle of the 2006 Wimbledon fortnight, David Foster Wallace prepared a script. Atop a notebook page he wrote, “R. Federer Interview Qs.” and below he jotted in very fine print thirteen questions. After three innocuous ice breakers, Wallace turned his attention to perhaps the most prominent theme in all his writing: consciousness. Acknowledging the abnormal interview approach, Wallace prefaced these next nine inquires with a printed subhead: “Non-Journalist Questions.” Each interrogation is a paragraph long, filled with digressions, asides, and qualifications; several contain superscripted addendums. In short, they read like they’re written by David Foster Wallace. He asks Roger Federer if he’s aware of his own greatness, aware of the unceasing media microscope he operates under, aware of his uncommon elevation of athletics to the level of aesthetics, aware of how great his great shots really are. Wallace even wrote, “How aware are you of the ball-boys?” before crossing the question out.¹

Wallace choreographed social cues and professional reminders throughout the interview. The end of the Federer conversation comes with the caveat “Qs the Editors want me to ask [w/Apologies].” And a later discussion with Federer’s then-coach, Tony Roche, begins, “Honor to meet you,” with a reminder that Roche suffered from chronic tennis elbow and used Yonex rackets. Never comfortable in his role as a reporter, Wallace printed a preface to the Roche questions: “I’m not a journalist—I’m more like a novelist with a tennis background.” Wallace had a history of anti-credentialing himself both in person and in print, and while this reportorial and rhetorical maneuver may have disarmed sources, it also created a calculus for Wallace to write under.² He saw clear lines between journalists and novelists who write nonfiction, and he wrestled throughout his career with whether a different set of rules applied to the latter category.³



Initially, sources reported that Federer was flummoxed by the unconventional encounter, feeling that the “questions were inane, the dude weird, and the whole exercise a complete waste of his time.”⁴ But several years later when he was asked about the resultant story—“Roger Federer as Religious Experience,” which ran in *Play* magazine, a short-lived sports supplement to *New York Times Magazine*—Federer recalled the interaction more fondly, saying, “I had a funny feeling walking out of the interview. I wasn’t sure what was going to come out of it because I didn’t know exactly what direction he was going to go. The piece was obviously fantastic.”⁵

Recently during an Ask Me Anything session on the social media platform Reddit, he reiterated his admiration for the story: “The thing that struck me is that I only spent 20min with him in the ATP office at Wimbledon, and he was able to produce such a comprehensive piece.”⁶ Federer unknowingly hits on a significant aspect of Wallace’s literary journalism: his ability to imbue a story with larger significance beyond the ostensible subject. Several tangential topics emerge in the *Play* cover story beyond the standard profile of the Swiss phenom. Wallace addresses the physiology of the human body, the transcendence of athleticism to the sublime, the difference between live spectatorship and televised tennis, the engineering and effectiveness of modern tennis rackets, and the reconciliation of divine grace and mortality. When the story was published on August 20, 2006, “the acclaim that greeted the piece was nearly instantaneous. It was among the most discussed stories of the year in the journalism industry.”⁷

Last November, “Roger Federer as Religious Experience” was republished in *Both Flesh and Not*, a posthumous collection of Wallace nonfiction. The book’s fifteen pieces span nearly twenty years of his writing life, with the earliest essay, “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” published in 1988 (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*) and the latest ones written just a year before his suicide: “Deciderization 2007—A Special Report” (introduction to *Best American Essays 2007*) and “Just Asking” (*Atlantic*). Of the fifteen works of creative nonfiction, only two can rightfully be called literary journalism: the retitled “Federer: Both Flesh and Not” and “Democracy and Commerce at the US Open,” the longest piece in the book. Although it contains only two works of literary journalism—stories that have been reported and sourced and then told using a variety of literary devices—this book is useful for the ontological questions it raises about the nature of genre formation, literary categories, and “the reality boundary.”⁸ Moreover, the collection offers clues on Wallace’s thoughts about the genre and these attendant issues—a topic that has garnered modest attention since his death, with charges of embellishment and exaggeration made by his close friend Jonathan Franzen and repeated by his biographer D.T. Max.

Although there was a correction appended to the *Play* piece, it is hard to find any evidence of embellishment.⁹ Going through Wallace’s voluminous papers at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, it is unmistakable that he was meticulous to the point of compulsiveness about every aspect of this story, from pre-interview preparations to final layout. His research comprised printouts, including eBay listings, on the particulars of Ivan Lendl’s 1980s-era GTX Pro-T racket, including its dimensions, strung weight, balance, swing weight, and stiffness.¹⁰ Wallace also

collected several Federer features from publications across the globe, including “Spin Doctors,” by Tom Perotta, an account of how modern rackets have changed the game of tennis, which ran in the July/August 2006 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Wallace underlined and annotated much of Perotta’s piece, and used information from the article to augment his own aside on how the true revolution in racket engineering was not merely increased pace on of? the ball, but rather the degree and depth of topspin it engendered, especially during the service return. Other bits of research included a printout of the Wikipedia entry for “proprioception,” which he used for a riff on an athlete’s “kinesthetic sense,” and a Q&A transcript between Federer and a Wimbledon moderator after Federer’s straight set victory over Mario Ancic in the quarterfinals (the day before Wallace conducted his rare mid-tournament one-on-one with Federer).¹¹

Wallace begins the story with a brief anecdote about experiencing “Federer Moments” before reversing course and proclaiming there’s nothing newsworthy about his subject: “Journalistically speaking, there is no hot news to offer you about Roger Federer.”¹² Wallace proves this point by listing the blandest of biographical details—age, family, personality, achievements: the bedrock of every banal sports feature—and concluding the paragraph dismissively: “[I]t’s all just a Google search away. Knock yourself out.”¹³ Similar to his anti-credentialing, Wallace often approximated this type of journalistic indifference, and this particular example echoes a line from his story “Consider the Lobster” (*Gourmet*, 2004). Early in that piece Wallace acknowledges, “For practical purposes, everyone knows what a lobster is. As usual, though, there’s much more to know than most of us care about—it’s all a matter of what your interests are.”¹⁴ Wallace used that story, set amid the 2004 Maine Lobster Festival, to explore the murky relationship between consciousness and what it means to be a gourmet. Similarly, he uses the Federer piece, with Wimbledon as his backdrop, as a vehicle to raise questions about grace and the grotesque, and the reconciliation of the two in both mind and body.

He juxtaposes Roger Federer, “a creature whose body is both flesh and, somehow, light” with William Caines, a seven-year-old from Kent, stricken with liver cancer at age two and serving as the honorary coin-tosser for the 2006 Wimbledon final.¹⁵ For Wallace, the corporeal realities of these two bodies in such close proximity have “a tip-of-the-tongue-type quality that remains elusive for at least the first two sets.”¹⁶ Wallace structures the story around that delayed epiphany by mapping the Federer/Caines dialectic onto the championship match between Federer and Rafael Nadal, where, in the course of dissecting both men’s games (“Federer’s forehand is a great liquid whip”¹⁷), he also discusses media attention, racket technology, the horizontal plane of live spectatorship compared to the vertical angle seen on TV (“and the truth is that TV tennis is to live tennis pretty much as video porn is to the felt reality of human love”¹⁸)—the shape of the story follows closely the contours of the questions he scripted back at the All England Lawn and Tennis Club. The consociation of Federer’s elegance and Caine’s illness does not predominate, but it is, ultimately, what animates the story and gives it lasting significance.

Near the end of the narrative, in the match's third set, Wallace experiences what a cab driver had earlier promised: "a bloody near-religious experience."¹⁹ But it does not result from Federer's beauty alone; rather, when Wallace contrasts that sublimity with Caines's fragility, he experiences "literally, for an instant ecstatically" a sensation that is "hard to describe" and "like a thought that's also a feeling."²⁰ The physicality of these two bodies, though not in equipoise, is nonetheless connected, causing a sort of transcendence in Wallace, as he concludes: "But the truth is that whatever deity, entity, energy, or random genetic flux produces sick children also produced Roger Federer, and just look at him down there. Look at that."²¹ This double imperative underscores a genuine sense of wonderment, and yet, as he did in "Consider the Lobster," Wallace buries this conclusion in the second paragraph of a late footnote.²² What initially seems like an unorthodox finish to the feature actually sets up a larger conclusion in the main text. Wallace counters conventional wisdom about modern tennis by saying that the "speed and strength of today's pro game are merely its skeleton, not its flesh."²³ The game's grace—for Wallace, its flesh—has been "re-embodied" by Federer, and it is with this understanding of Federer's seeming otherworldliness—"on the sacred grass of Wimbledon,"²⁴ no less—that Wallace ends the main text, telling readers, "Genius is not replicable. Inspiration, though, is contagious, and multiform—and even just to see, close up, power and aggression made vulnerable to beauty is to feel inspired and (in a fleeting, mortal way) reconciled."²⁵ What is restored in this moment at the end of the story is nothing short of faith. The reconciliation of sacred and profane causes Wallace to come to terms with his own powerlessness and existential insignificance.²⁶ He feels redeemed, and this is the religious experience promised by the cab driver and offered as the initial title of the piece.

The collection's other work of literary journalism is also tennis-themed (Wallace once said that tennis "was the one sport I know enough about to be truly beautiful to me"²⁷). "Democracy and Commerce at the US Open" was originally published under the same name in *Tennis* magazine in 1995. Wallace explores the relationship between the two titular topics over the Labor Day weekend in Queens, New York City. The story is significant for being one of Wallace's earliest pieces of his journalism to employ footnotes. The article, however, is more directionless than the other "floating eyeball" journalism of this era (for example, "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" and "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again"), and his thesis is more overt. He juxtaposes the democratic spirit of the Open with the aristocratic reality of the attendees, noting, "In sum, the socioeconomic aura here for the day's headline match is one of management rather than labor."²⁸ The labor, as it turns out, is working on the day set aside for their *fête*, and Wallace spends a good amount of time surveying the sad irony of the vendors and their patrons. The event's eponymous egalitarianism is supplanted by crass commercialism; moreover, it is lacking the sense of *noblesse oblige* tradition that at least pervaded Wimbledon. The Open is closed to many, and the spirit of democracy, so prominent in its advertising, only exists to sell products. Wallace's conclusions on capitalism are rather obvious, and the attendant tennis analysis is not nearly as strong as in the Federer piece or his 1995 profile of Michael Joyce.

More interesting than its cultural commentary is what *Both Flesh and Not* reveals about Wallace's complex relationship with genre classification and the fact/fiction divide. It contains his 2001 review of the anthology *The Best of the Prose Poem: An International Journal* for the literary journal *Rain Taxi*. The publication limited him to 1,000 words, which Wallace elided by transgressing the traditional review format. He composed the entire piece as a series of bullet points, each beginning with a dependent clause followed by a colon (which functions as a verb)²⁹ and then a predicate. His rhetorical reasoning was both innovative and ironic: "Tactical reason for review form: The words preceding each item's colon technically constitute neither subjective complement nor appositive nor really any recognized grammatical unit at all; hence none of these antecolonial words should count against *R. T.*'s rigid 1000-word limit."³⁰ He called this "new, transgeneric critical form: the Indexical Book Review."³¹ Wallace's grammatical formula may have emancipated him for the strictures of a word limit, but there is more to this maneuver than his usual solipsism and smartassery. He was mimicking the genre-bending proclivities of the prose poems he was reviewing and calling attention to the benefits of genre subversiveness. His review highlights the motivations and guidelines not just for the prose poem but for all alternative literary forms, including the "[o]ther, better-known and/or currently fashionable transgeneric literary forms: the Nonfiction Novel, the Prose Poem, the Lyric Essay, etc."³² Literary journalism can surely be mapped onto that list, which then allows critics to understand how conflicted Wallace was about genre classifications and how contradictory his thoughts and actions were at times.³³ It is important to understand these angles at which Wallace approached his journalism because he has been attacked to some degree since his death about his less-than-fervent fidelity to facts.

During a public conversation at the 2011 New Yorker Festival, Wallace's close friend and literary competitor, Jonathan Franzen, told David Remnick that he and Wallace disagreed about whether embellishment was an acceptable journalistic trait. Unsolicited, Franzen tells Remnick, "David and I disagreed on that." Surprised, Remnick then randomly picks Wallace's 1996 story "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" and asks Franzen, "He said it was okay to make up dialogue on a cruise ship?" To which Franzen replies, "For instance, yeah." Franzen, who regularly contributes to Remnick's magazine, then posits that one reason Wallace never published any nonfiction in the *New Yorker* was because of its historically rigorous fact-checking process. Remnick admitted Wallace tried, but he never says why the proposals were turned down.³⁴

D.T. Max, himself a *New Yorker* staff writer, picked up this fabulist thread in his 2012 biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*. Max uncovers problems of various degrees in selected pieces of Wallace's journalism, especially the early work. For example, he points out that Wallace misrepresents his hometown in the 1990 *Harper's* essay "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes."³⁵ In the story, Wallace says he grew up in the small town of Philo, IL, when in fact he was raised ten miles northwest of there in Urbana-Champaign.³⁶ Max also provides evidence of Wallace's most egregious error, which occurred in his 1994 *Harper's* story "Ticket to the Fair."³⁷ In that story Wallace returns home to his native Illinois, after a decade on the East Coast, to

investigate its state fair. One day he brings the “shrewd counsel of a colorful local” whom he dubs “Native Companion.”³⁸ Wallace describes his guide as someone who used to detassel “summer corn with me in high school” and a “native Midwestern, from my hometown. My prom date a dozen years ago.”³⁹ The problem, as Max points out, is that “Native C.” never attended Urbana-Champaign High nor was she really much of a companion. Her name was Kymberly Harris, a woman Wallace had recently begun dating but whom “he barely knew.” And her salty-tongued country twang—the perfect foil for Wallace’s neurotic East Coast persona—wasn’t even the voice of Kymberly Harris, but rather that of poet, memoirist, and former Wallace love interest Mary Karr. Max says Wallace’s editor at *Harper’s*, Colin Harrison, “was aware that Wallace sometimes embellished” and admitted he “drank the Kool Aid” in service to Wallace’s comic vision.⁴⁰

Another problematic situation occurred in 1998, when *Premiere* assigned Wallace to cover the Adult Video News Awards. The magazine enlisted Evan Wright of *Hustler* to coreport the piece with Wallace. Max notes how Wallace—with Wright’s permission—excerpted material from an earlier article Wright authored and incorporated it, with embellishments, into his *Premiere* piece. However, when “Neither Adult nor Entertainment” was published in the September 1998 issue, the article did carry a double byline (though both were pseudonyms).⁴¹ The double byline is not enough to excuse the embellishment, but it does complicate the overall understanding of the situation. Much like Tom Junod satirically fabricating parts of “Michael Stipe Has Great Hair” (*Esquire*, 2001) as an intentional send-up of the celebrity profile genre, the Wallace/Wright (né Willem R. deGroot and Matt Rundlet) report offers itself as a surreal study of a Las Vegas porn expo (not unlike another hallowed piece of hallucinatory literary journalism set in Sin City).⁴²

Although Max does provide damnable evidence of wrongdoing in these two stories, he carelessly projects their offenses onto several other articles, thus raising suspicion about Wallace’s overall relationship to the truth in his nonfiction. The wariness is warranted, but suspicion alone is insufficient. Max fails to back up much of his speculation with concrete evidence of wrongdoing. Instead, he breezes through Wallace’s nonfiction and flags everything that *sounds* fishy. Without offering any physical proof, he dismisses details that “improved on reality” and says that one scene “was likely Wallace’s invention” and another story “was likely made up” while another “one suspects. . . was invented.”⁴³ Max especially overreaches when he makes much ado about Wallace eating two lobsters while reporting from the Maine Lobster Festival. He intimates that this is, once again, evidence of Wallace’s duplicity. But as I’ve pointed out elsewhere, Wallace never said he was averse to the delicacy, and the story “Consider the Lobster” is about the complexity of consciousness, not animal rights. The fact that Wallace consumed crustaceans while reporting further solidifies his point near the story’s end, in the second paragraph of footnote 20: “[I]t all seems to come down to individual conscience, going with (no pun) your gut.”⁴⁴

Max’s objective in writing a biography is to provide a story of Wallace’s life, and that telling often involves softening edges and smoothing the corners of complication. Unlike in an academic appraisal, he does not dwell on Wallace’s ambivalence

about genre guidelines. But what is maddening about the biography is that despite dismissing large chunks of Wallace's journalism as "fanciful" and not his "real work," Max nonetheless mines these stories for primary source material that he then uses in his own biographical retelling. If certain facts are buffered by a "layer of myth," as Max asserts, then doesn't he undermine his own credibility by relying on those same stories for diaristic details?⁴⁵

Another problem with Max's treatment of Wallace's nonfiction isn't just that he makes broad generalizations regarding Wallace's fidelity to facts; it's that Max, himself, gets some of his facts wrong. For several semesters in the late 1990s, Wallace team-taught a class called "Creative Nonfiction" with Doug Hesse while a member of the English department faculty at Illinois State University. The course was a workshop devoted to the practice of writing what the syllabus defined as "a somewhat problematic term for a broad category of prose works such as personal essays and memoirs, profiles, nature and travel writings of a certain quality, essays of ideas, new journalism and so on." It then goes on to define the two components of the course: *creative* and *nonfiction*. An explanation of "nonfiction" emphasizes: "[I]f an event is claimed as having happened, it must happen." But its adjective's definition hedges: "And yet, the 'creative' half of the title suggests an impulse other than Enlightenment perspicuity motivates the writer and shapes the writing."⁴⁶ Max, ever dubious of Wallace's commitment to accuracy, surmises in a chapter seven endnote: "But in the classroom Wallace was known to be the less dogmatic of the two teachers when it came to literal accuracy, and one senses his hand in a later sentence on the syllabus."⁴⁷ Here is an instance where Max's speculation is identifiably false. He interviewed Hesse extensively for the biography, but Hesse, who is now the director of writing at the University of Denver, told me, "[Max] got that part wrong. [He] never asked who did what. Dave did write the 'rules' for workshopping, though, and we both chose readings." But otherwise, Hesse said, he was responsible for the syllabus.⁴⁸ Hesse also said that Wallace was "pretty invested in nonfiction" during the semesters they taught together and that, at the time, Wallace was "tired of teaching fiction." Although this error is literally a note appended to the back of the book, the Hesse inaccuracy illustrates the danger of speculation and calls into question the legitimacy of Max's other suspicions.

Max's mistake does not excuse Wallace for exaggerating certain details in selected works of literary journalism, but Max does a disservice to his, and Wallace's, readers by painting the fabulist charges with such a broad brush. He gives inadequate attention to Wallace's own remarks on the subject, both embedded in his work and offered during interviews. For instance, in "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," Wallace confesses how betrayed he felt upon learning that his favorite memoirist, Frank Conroy, deceived readers by essentially writing an advertisement for the cruise ship company.⁴⁹ Nor does Max consider the reply letters that Wallace wrote to students in Anne Fadiman's advanced nonfiction writing classes at Yale University, where he told one student—Daniel Fromson, who is now, in a brilliant bit of irony, a copyeditor and web producer at that bastion for all that is true and accurate, the *New Yorker*—"the root challenge here is to form and honor a fairly rigorous contract with the reader. . . [s]o that the reader gets the overall impression that here's a narra-

tor who's primarily engaged in trying to Tell the Truth."⁵⁰ Neither does Max consider Wallace's answer to a WBUR listener who called into an interview between himself and Michael Goldfarb to ask about his maturation as a nonfiction writer, to which Wallace replied, "I know I don't do as much nonfiction as I used to as a writer, and I think part of it is that I don't have the heart or stomach to say even truthful things that might hurt somebody's feelings."⁵¹ These examples illustrate a writer committed to capturing the truth ("You know, in a weird way, there's really only one basic problem in all writing—how to get some empathy with the reader"⁵²) but who was at times unsure—despite a compulsion to constantly consider these categories—about what was allowed in telling it. Admittedly, during an 1998 interview with Tom Scocca for the *Boston Phoenix*, Wallace answered the question: "How do you handle being responsible for facts—after writing fiction, coming to a genre where the things you say have to be on some level verifiably true?" by saying:

The thing is, really, between you and me and the *Boston Phoenix's* understanding readers, you hire a fiction writer to do nonfiction, there's going to be the occasional bit of embellishment. Not to mention the fact that when people tell you stuff, very often it comes out real stilted, if you just write down exactly what they said. You sort of have to rewrite it so it sounds more out loud, which I think means putting in some likes or taking out punctuation that the person might originally have said. And I don't really make any apologies for that.⁵³

But, he also told a French interviewer in 2005, "For me, there is only one difference between fiction and what you call 'journalism.' But it's a big difference. In nonfiction, everything has to be true, and it also has to be documented, because magazines have fact checkers and lawyers who are very thorough."⁵⁴ The takeaway seems to be that Wallace believed, at times, in the porousness of certain borders when it came to genre formation, which is incongruent with contemporary literary journalism's dogmatic allegiance to facticity. This paradox plays out in two other essays from *Both Flesh and Not*: "The Best of the Prose Poem" and "Deciderization 2007—A Special Report."

In "The Best of the Prose Poem," Wallace states that the reason alternate literary forms exist is to "comment on, complicate, subvert, defamiliarize, transgress against, or otherwise fuck with received ideas of genre, category, and (especially) formal conventions/constraints."⁵⁵ And it is not a stretch to argue that Wallace, with his continual assertions that he was not a journalist and that there was, in fact, a special category for fiction writers who crossed over into the realm of reportage, felt buoyed by his ability to recognize—and theoretically justify⁵⁶—the possibilities inherent in his journalistic transgressions, if they were in the name of creating reader empathy. But Wallace also understood that such subversiveness was rooted in a mainstream understanding of categories with well-defined boundaries: "[T]hese putatively 'transgressive' forms depend heavily on received ideas of genre, category, and formal conventions, since without such an established context there's nothing much to transgress against. Transgeneric forms are therefore most viable—most interesting, least fatuous—during eras when literary genres themselves are relatively stable and their conventions well established and codified and no one seems much disposed to fuck

with them.”⁵⁷ With the right kind of ears it is not hard to hear this statement as an echo of John Hartsock’s claim that each distinct period of literary journalism history arose because of an epistemological crisis within the profession with regard to the ability to cover a rapidly changing phenomenal world.⁵⁸

In one of the book’s final essays—and one of the last pieces of nonfiction that Wallace wrote—he trades in his job as a “professional writer” for a new designation, “professional reader,” while serving as guest editor for *Best American Essays 2007*. The article’s title “Deciderization 2007—A Special Report” is a pun on then-President George W. Bush’s penchant for verbal mishaps. Despite being commander-in-chief of the anthology’s selections, Wallace admits he “isn’t sure what an essay even is” and says he would enjoy the collection’s first story (“Werner,” by Jo Ann Beard) regardless of categorization: “It’s a narrative essay, I think the subgenre’s called, although the truth is that I don’t believe I would have loved the piece any less or differently if it had been classed as a short story, which is to say not an essay at all but fiction.”⁵⁹ These examples would seem to illustrate Wallace’s utter ambivalence regarding genre variance (he later says he’s “not really even all that confident or concerned about the differences between nonfiction and fiction, with ‘differences’ here meaning formal or definitive”⁶⁰), yet a few pages later he says, “There are, as it happens, intergenre differences that I know and care about as a writer, though these differences are hard to talk about in a way that people who don’t write both fiction and nonfiction will understand.”⁶¹ But then despite indicating an interest in these differences he sweeps aside such classifications several pages later: “Personally, I find taxonomic arguments like this dull and irrelevant.”⁶² Tedious as it may be to parse these disparate and contradictory threads, they illustrate that Wallace’s thinking about genre was complex, multifaceted, and that it evolved during his writing life.

In an interview with the *Atlantic*, Max offers a more subtle take on Wallace’s transgressions than he provides in his biography: “But I don’t think Wallace’s very last pieces have very much embellishment. . . .As he got older, I think he begins to play it a lot more straight-forward.”⁶³ He then shared an excerpt from a letter Wallace wrote in 2007 to another former Illinois Street colleague, Becky Bradway. The letter is revealing for Wallace’s sober reevaluation of the enhancement of facts. Max included part of it in *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*: “We all knew, and know, that any embellishment is dangerous, and that a writer’s justifying embellishments via claiming that it actually enhances overall ‘truth’ is *exceedingly* dangerous, since the claim is structurally identical to all Ends Justify Means rationalizations.”⁶⁴ Unfortunately, Max tucks this revelation into the book’s 169th and very last endnote on page 325. A more prominent placement would have offered a more complete picture of Wallace and his relationship with nonfiction.

The best critique of Max and his biography may come from Wallace himself. A final essay from *Both Flesh and Not* helps readers understand what Wallace may have thought of *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* and provides contextualization for future Wallace criticism. “Borges on the Couch” is a scathing review of Edwin Williamson’s literary biography *Borges: A Life*, wherein Wallace accuses the author of employing the intentional fallacy throughout the work: “It is in these claims about personal stuff

encoded in the writer's art that the book's real defect lies."⁶⁵ Wallace goes on to say that the text "is at its very worst when Williamson is discussing specific pieces in light of Borges's personal life."⁶⁶ Furthermore, Wallace argued that most biographical projects "are shallow, forced, and distorted—as indeed they must be if the biographer's project is to be justified."⁶⁷ For as much as Max marginalized Wallace's nonfiction, he just as readily read his fiction as nearly mimetic of Wallace's life. The review "Borges on the Couch" reveals just how much Wallace would have disliked that treatment.

After "Borges on the Couch" reappeared for public debate upon the publication of *Both Flesh and Not*, Max composed a blog post on the *New Yorker* website that sought to defend his biography and neutralize critics from employing this kind of attack. He correctly noted that in addition to his hypercritical review, Wallace also published a glowing tribute to Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoyevsky in *Consider the Lobster*. Max admitted that "biography explains a lot but it does not explain everything, indeed it may not explain the most important things" before concluding "So, in the end, what you think of a biography, to paraphrase D.F.W., may depend less on what's in the biographer's heart than what's in yours."⁶⁸ If there are any problems to be found in *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, no matter how small, Max is essentially saying: "It's not me, it's you." Nonetheless, the recursive battles fought out in Wallace's name are evidence that his literary legacy continues to grow each year after his death.

Writing about David Foster Wallace reanimates his spirit and momentarily suspends the reality that there will be no more words from him. Perhaps such a selfish sentiment helps explain why there have been so many words written—both formally in books and magazines and informally on countless blogs—since his death in 2008. In the five years since his suicide, more than ten books have been published that either posthumously carry his name as author or place him at the center of critical study.⁶⁹ Nearly all of the critical works focus exclusively on Wallace's fiction. The first collection to come out, *Consider David Foster Wallace* (Sideshow Media Group, 2010), grew out of a July 2009 conference at the University of Liverpool. Although the pieces tread heavily in literary theory and have an oralish, conference-paper quality to them, the collection's editor, David Hering, is to be commended for spearheading the project and starting the sustained conversation on Wallace's literary legacy. The second collection, *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (University of Iowa Press, 2012), offers a blend of academic appraisals (including my own) and personal tributes from writers and friends like Don DeLillo, George Saunders, and Jonathan Franzen. The scholarship/remembrance bifurcation takes some getting used to, but the memorials are achingly raw and personal, and the articles' arguments, perhaps owing to more distance between Wallace's death and the book's publication, feel more developed. The most recent collection, *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) continues that maturation process with a thoughtful, dense collection that spans the entire oeuvre of Wallace's fiction. In fact, besides my own article, "Getting Away from It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion," the only other collected essay dedicated to Wallace's nonfiction is Christoph Ribbat's "Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism" in *Consider David Foster Wallace*. Ribbat seeks to situate Wallace in an

American journalistic tradition; however, his history is incomplete, only extending back to the New Journalism era of the 1960s and Tom Wolfe's famous formulations. Moreover, his article examines a too-small sample of Wallace's work (mostly stories collected in *Consider the Lobster*) and insufficiently concludes that his reportage is of a type Robert Boynton (problematically) dubbed "the new, new journalism."

The most acute assessment of Wallace's journalism comes, perhaps unsurprisingly, from a journalist. When Wallace's unfinished novel *The Pale King* was published in 2011, John Jeremiah Sullivan reviewed it for *GQ* magazine. Sullivan's appraisal begins with a consideration of Wallace's nonfiction, including a humorous backstory about how *Play* magazine had actually asked him to do the Federer story—after Wallace had initially turned them down. At one point seemingly stunned, Sullivan says, "Here's a thing that is hard to imagine: being so inventive a writer that when you die, the language is impoverished. That's what Wallace's suicide did, two and a half years ago. It wasn't just a sad thing, it was a blow."⁷⁰ And perhaps that's the difficult, lasting takeaway of *Both Flesh and Not*: the knowledge that that's it. The reader must reconcile the vitality of the words on the page with the mortality of their author.

NOTES

1. David Foster Wallace, "R. Federer Interview Qs," container 27.10, David Foster Wallace Archive, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

2. I've written before about Wallace's penchant for distancing himself from being called a *journalist*. See pages 38–39 of "Getting Away from It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, eds. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 25–52.

3. In a 2005 interview, Wallace said: "Nobody here is quite sure how to classify the writing that results when novelists and poets write nonfiction for magazines." Didier Jacobs, "Interview with David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 153–154.

4. David Higdon, "Strokes of Genius," *ESPN The Magazine*, September 19, 2008, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?id=3596140>.

5. Matt Bucher, "D.F. Wallace Both Flesh and Not," *Simple Ranger* (blog), November 16, 2012, <http://www.simpleranger.net/d-f-wallace-both-flesh-and-not/>.

6. Roger Federer, "I'm Roger Federer, a Professional Tennis Player from Switzerland. AMA!," Reddit, May 24, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/IAMa/comments/1ezaf/im_roger_federer_a_professional_tennis_player/.

7. Michael MacCambridge, "Director's Cut: Federer as Religious Experience," *Grantland.com*, September 9, 2011.

8. In the inaugural issue of *Literary Journalism Studies*, Norman Sims identified "the reality boundary" as one of four key issues facing future scholars in this field. Norman Sims, "The Problem and Promise of Literary Journalism Studies," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 7–15.

9. The correction, which appeared on August 27, 2006, concerned Wallace's intricate description of a point played out between Federer and Andre Agassi. Copping an almost *New*

Yorkerish tone, the correction said, in part, that the writer had “incorrectly described Agassi’s position on the final shot of the point. There was an exchange of groundstrokes in the middle of the point that was not described. And Agassi remained at the baseline on Federer’s winning shot; he did not go to the net.”

10. It was at this time when Kevlar and graphite composites started to supplant wood as the racket’s raw material. Wallace pegs Lendl as the forerunner in the game’s transition to power baseline play.

11. Proprioception: “The unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself.”

12. Federer Moments: “These are times, watching the young Swiss at play, when the jaw drops and eyes protrude and sounds are made that bring spouses in from other rooms to see if you’re OK.” David Foster Wallace, “Federer Both Flesh and Not,” in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 5, 7.

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

14. David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 236–237.

15. Wallace, “Federer Both Flesh and Not,” 20.

16. *Ibid.*, 13.

17. *Ibid.*, 14.

18. *Ibid.*, 7.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 8.

21. *Ibid.*, 32.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 7.

25. *Ibid.*, 33.

26. The idea of the “sacred and profane” in religious studies originates with French sociologist Emile Durkheim and saw its clearest articulation in the work of Mircea Eliade.

27. David Foster Wallace, “David Foster Wallace,” interview with Laura Miller, *Salon.com*, March 8, 1996, http://www.salon.com/1996/03/09/wallace_5/.

28. David Foster Wallace, “Democracy and Commerce at the US Open,” in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 131.

29. In a similar way Ezra Pound uses the semicolon in his modernist masterpiece “In the Station of the Metro.”

30. David Foster Wallace, “The Best of the Prose Poem,” in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 243.

31. *Ibid.* .

32. *Ibid.*

33. Wallace told a Wisconsin Public Radio program: “These various classifications are important for critics, right? You have to form different things into groups or you have to talk about a trillion different particulars.” Steve Paulson, “To the Best of Our Knowledge: David Foster Wallace Interview,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 149.

34. Michelle Dean, “A Supposedly True Thing Jonathan Franzen Said About David Foster Wallace,” *TheAwl.com*, October 11, 2011, <http://www.theawl.com/2011/10/a-supposedly-true-thing-jonathan-franzen-said-about-david-foster-wallace>.

35. Reprinted as “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 3–20.

36. D.T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012), 319.
37. Reprinted as “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown 1997), 83–137.
38. *Ibid.*, 90.
39. *Ibid.*, 92, 100.
40. Max, *Every Love Story*, 186.
41. *Ibid.*, 245. Reprinted as “Big Red Son,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 3–50. In the fine print of the book’s colophon Wallace explains that “the article appeared bipseudonymously and now for odd and hard-to-explain reasons doesn’t quite work if the ‘we’ and ‘your correspondents’ thing gets singularized.”
42. Wallace, it should be noted, disliked Hunter S. Thompson’s gonzo style of journalism, calling it “naïve and narcissistic,” though he acknowledged *Hell’s Angels* was an exception that he enjoyed. He was also not a fan of Tom Wolfe. He did, however, admire the nonfiction of James Baldwin, Joan Didion, John McPhee, Annie Dillard, Cynthia Ozick, and others. Jacob, “Interview with David Foster Wallace” in *Conversations*, 155.
43. Max, *Every Love Story*, 319, 320, 186, 320.
44. Wallace, “Consider the Lobster,” 252.
45. Max, *Every Love Story*, 185.
46. Syllabus, “English 447.02: Creative Nonfiction, Professors David Wallace and Doug Hesse,” container 32.6, David Foster Wallace Archive, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin..
47. Max, *Every Love Story*, 322.
48. Doug Hesse, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2013. It should be noted that when Wallace taught the course at Pomona College in the early 2000s, he adopted Hesse’s course description on his own syllabus.
49. David Foster Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 287.
50. David Foster Wallace, “It All Gets Quite Tricky,” *Harper’s*, November 2008, 32.
51. Michael Goldfarb, “The Connection: David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press), 149.
52. Caleb Crain, “Approaching Infinity,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press), 124.
53. Tom Scocca, “David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012): 85.
54. Jacob, “Interview with David Foster Wallace,” 154.
55. Wallace, “The Best of the Prose Poem,” 244.
56. In a back-and-forth volley with his editor, Michael Pietsch, over suggested cuts to his mammoth novel *Infinite Jest*, Wallace returned a Pietsch suggestion about a change on page 785 by saying, “I can give you 5,000 words of theoretico-structural arguments for this, but let’s spare one another, shall we?” David Foster Wallace, “Always Another Word,” *Harper’s*, January 2009, 26.
57. Wallace, “The Best of the Prose Poem,” 244.
58. John Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 15.
59. David Foster Wallace, “Deciderization 2007—An Special Report,” in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 300.
60. *Ibid.*, 301–302.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid, 311.

63. Eric Been, "David Foster Wallace: Genius, Fabulist, Would-Be Murderer," *Atlantic*, September 6, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/david-foster-wallace-genius-fabulist-would-be-murderer/261997/>.

64. Max, *Every Love Story*, 325.

65. David Foster Wallace, "Borges on the Couch," in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 287.

66. Ibid., 288–289.

67. Ibid., 289.

68. D.T. Max, "D.F.W.: The Biographical Enterprise W/R/T Fiction," "Page-Turner," *New Yorker* online, December 20, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/12/dfw-the-biographical-enterprise-wrt-fiction.html>.

69. In chronological order: David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (Little, Brown, 2009); *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (SSMG Press, 2010); David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Roadtrip with David Foster Wallace* (Broadway Books, 2010); David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity*, reissue (W.W. Norton, 2010); David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, eds. Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (Columbia University Press, 2011); David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (Little, Brown, 2011); Stephen J. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd ed. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2012); *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (University of Mississippi Press, 2012); *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, eds. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (University of Iowa Press, 2012); D.T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* (Viking, 2012); David Foster Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not* (Little, Brown, 2012); *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Melville House, 2012); *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, eds. Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell (Palgrave Macmillan 2013); Karen Green, *Bough Down* (Siglio 2013); David Foster Wallace and Mark Costello, *Signifying Rappers*, reissue (Back Bay Books 1990; Little, Brown, 2013).

70. John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Too Much Information," *GQ*, May 2011, <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/books/201105/david-foster-wallace-the-pale-king-john-jeremiah-sullivan>.
