Born February 21, 1962, two years after the publication of John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*, David Foster Wallace came into the world at more or less the moment American postmodern fiction came into its own. Astounding as it may seem, Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) is as far away chronologically from Barth’s groundbreaking work as Barth’s book was from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). As a result, although Wallace is often labeled a “postmodern” writer, in fact he might best regarded as a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism. He confidently situates himself as the direct heir to a tradition of aesthetic development that began with the modernist overturning of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism and continued with the postwar critique of modernist aesthetics. Yet Wallace proceeds from the assumption that both modernism and postmodernism are essentially “done.” Rather, his work moves resolutely forward while hoisting the baggage of modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on its back.

David’s parents, James Donald and Sally Foster, were both teachers and writers: his father, a philosophy professor, is the author of *Virtues and Vices* (Cornell University Press, 1978), a slim yet provocative work of moral philosophy, while his mother—a community-college English professor who, in 1996, was selected by the Council for Advancement and Support of
Education as the National Professor of the Year and who, in 1998–99, was the recipient of a Pew National Fellowship from the Carnegie Mellon Foundation—is the author of the remedial writing textbook *Practically Painless English* (Prentice Hall, 1990), a now standard textbook in the field. David was born in Ithaca, New York, where his father was completing his Ph.D. at Cornell University, alma mater of Wallace’s great literary forbear Thomas Pynchon and one-time employer of grand master Vladimir Nabokov. Sometime later, while David was still an infant, the family moved to Philo, Illinois, so that his father could begin work as an assistant professor at nearby University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Wallace’s most extensive fictional treatment of his native Midwest can be found in the novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” most of which takes place in “Collision, Illinois,” a windswept hill-less expanse of dust and corn, “the most disclosed, open place you could ever fear to see.” Elsewhere he has said that his native topography, when “seen from the air, strongly suggests a board game . . . laid down special, as if planned.”

David and his younger sister, Amy, grew up amid the rambunctious middle-class bohemia of modern-day academia, in a house full of books and afghan blankets where dinner conversation was a coded affair of private jokes and insular slang. One can possibly glean faint hints of Wallace’s childhood via the family portraits he has placed at the center of his two major novels thus far: both the Beadsmans of *The Broom of the System* and the Incandenzas of *Infinite Jest* are comically dysfunctional, fiercely self-involved, and engagingly cerebral. In a recent *Harper’s* essay on language and usage, Wallace, in a footnote, provides a funny and self-mocking portrait of his family as a group of SNOOTs, where SNOOT stands for the
reviewer’s nuclear family’s nickname à clef for a really extreme usage fanatic, the sort of person whose idea of Sunday fun is to look for mistakes in Safire’s column’s prose itself. This reviewer’s family is roughly 70 percent SNOOT, which term itself derives from an acronym, with the big historical family joke being that whether S.N.O.O.T. stood for “Sprachgefühl Necessitates Our Ongoing Tendance” or “Syntax Nudniks of Our Time” depended on whether or not you were one.3

In addition to being an acknowledged math and verbal whiz, David, like Hal Incandenza, his youthful protagonist in *Infinite Jest*, was also a tennis prodigy, spending the bulk of his middle- and high-school years competing in junior tennis tournaments. In “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” an insightful autobiographical essay about his childhood career as a “near-great tennis player,” Wallace reports that, at fourteen, he “was ranked seventeenth in the United States Tennis Association’s Western Section.” He also describes how, in 1977 at the age of fifteen, he realized his athletic development had suddenly and inexplicably plateaued. “My vocation ebbed,” he writes. “I felt uncalled.” This event Wallace calls his “initiation into true adult sadness.” Fortunately, his tennis game, as he describes it, was enhanced by a preternatural gift for geometric thinking, that is, “the ability to calculate not merely your own angles but the angles of response to your angles”: hence, just as he was realizing his career as a “near-great” juniors tennis champion was coming to an end, he “discovered definite integrals and antiderivatives and found [his] identity shift from jock to math-wienie.”4

In 1980, Wallace began his studies at Amherst College, his father’s alma mater. While there he pursued a major in
philosophy, with a specialization in math and logic. He has affirmed that he was particularly gifted at technical philosophy and was for a short while convinced that he had found his calling. During this period he also first encountered the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose philosophical ideas would exert a lasting influence on his later fiction. Then, quite unexpectedly, as with junior tennis, he abruptly lost interest in his new calling—this despite the “buzz” he once got from solving mathematical or logical problems. This sudden change threw him into “kind of a mid-life crisis at twenty,” because, as he puts it, “I was suddenly not getting joy from the one thing I was clearly supposed to do because I was good at it and people liked me for being good at it.” Depressed and confused, he took a leave of absence from college, went home to Illinois, and began writing fiction. He quickly found that he got the same sort of buzz from writing fiction that he once got from doing technical philosophy, a conflation of apparently competing experiences he explains thus: “What I didn’t know then was that a mathematical experience was aesthetic in nature, an epiphany in Joyce’s original sense.”

By the time he graduated from Amherst in 1985, Wallace had completed the rough draft of a novel. This draft manuscript was instrumental in securing his admittance into the M.F.A. program at the University of Arizona, where, on a basketball court, he met fellow fiction writer Robert Boswell, author of such critically acclaimed novels as *Crooked Hearts* and *Mystery Ride*. Boswell encouraged Wallace to start submitting his novel to agents and even showed the young author how to write a cover letter. That cover letter, plus the writing sample Wallace included, caught the eye of New York literary agent Bonnie Nadell, who instantly took on the book and sold it to Penguin.
Books, which was still flush with the recent and surprising success of another twentysomething writer, Bret Easton Ellis. Wallace’s completed book eventually came out in 1987 under the title *The Broom of the System*. Unlike the thin, anemic work of Wallace’s fellow “brat pack” novelists, *Broom* was a five-hundred-page declaration of independence by a young writer who considered himself not the peer of the decade’s media darlings but rather the inheritor of a venerable literary tradition stretching back at least to the William Gaddis of *The Recognitions*. Wallace has also called the novel “a coded autobio that’s also a funny little post-structural gag.”

Meanwhile, the short stories he produced while at Arizona began to appear in such high-profile journals as the *Paris Review*, *Playboy*, *Conjunctions* and *Harper’s*. “Little Expressionless Animals,” the piece he published in the *Paris Review* won the John Traine Humor Prize in 1988, while “Here and There,” originally published in *Fiction*, was selected for *Prize Stories 1989: The O. Henry Awards*. These stories, plus a groundbreaking novella, formed his second book, the story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (Norton 1989). Because of its repeated and insistent use of “real-life” celebrities as fictional characters—Jack Lord, Pat Sajak, Merv Griffin, David Letterman, Keith Jarrett, among others—the book’s publication was delayed for a little over a year while lawyers secured copyrights and Wallace made revisions. The book’s concluding novella, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” set in a writing workshop and at an amusement park, enacts a rewriting of John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” and thereby outlines a way, possibly, to transcend mere self-reflexivity. It remains Wallace’s clearest, most programmatic explanation of the next step he is proposing to take.
While working on *Girl with Curious Hair*, and watching his first novel catapult him into fame (in 1987, the book won the prestigious Whiting Writers’ Award from the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation) Wallace apparently fell victim, once again, to doubt and depression. A second novel, set in a prep-school tennis academy, refused to come alive on the page, and Wallace kept restarting and then abandoning the project. According to some reports—variously affirmed and denied by Wallace himself—this period was also marked by excessive drug use and sexual promiscuity. He carried these doubts and destructive habits with him to Harvard University where, in 1989, he began graduate work in philosophy, studying logic, semantics, and math. Uninspired and adrift, he left Harvard after a year of course work. In 1990, he moved back home to the significantly named Normal, Illinois, where he accepted the post of assistant professor of English and located the creative life current for the once stillborn followup to *The Broom of the System*. He also took time out during this period to publish, with old Amherst friend Mark Costello, a nonfiction book on hip-hop culture titled *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (Ecco Press). In 1993 he moved to Bloomington, Illinois, with his two Labrador retrievers, Jeeves and Drone, and continued his duties as an English professor at Illinois State University. Now teaching and writing full time, Wallace directed the bulk of his creative energy to his new novel project.

In 1996 the 1,079-page novel *Infinite Jest* finally emerged. It instantly became a publishing phenomenon. The book’s publication spawned the overnight creation of a constellation of Wallace-oriented Web sites, a high-profile appearance on *The Charlie Rose Show*, and a flurry of magazine puff pieces, including a major spread in the *New York Times Magazine*. Before the
book even had a chance to go into its first paperback printing, Wallace learned that he had been awarded a six-figure “genius grant” from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

While working on *Infinite Jest*, Wallace continued to publish award-winning short stories in the *Paris Review, Conjunctions*, and elsewhere, while on the strength of *Signifying Rappers*, Harper’s magazine began sending him out on unconventional journalistic assignments. In 1995, Harper’s named him a contributing editor. These pieces, as well as a few others, he gathered together to form the bulk of his 1997 nonfiction collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. Two years later, he issued his second story collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Little, Brown, 1999), a somewhat uneven assortment that nevertheless served as the touchstone for a lengthy career-spanning appraisal by A. O. Scott in the February 10, 2000, issue of the *New York Times Review of Books*. The essay even featured a David Levine cartoon of the Celebrated Author: Wallace is portrayed as an unwashed, grunge-era bookworm, complete with his characteristic razor stubble and his trademark bandana, his unkempt hair falling in a chaotic cascade across both his glasses and the pages of a massive dictionary over which he is wearily poring. Without question, Wallace had arrived.

After *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Wallace involved himself in a number of unconventional side projects that served to keep his name firmly planted in the public consciousness. In winter 2000 he climbed aboard Senator John McCain’s “Straight Talk Express” to cover, for *Rolling Stone* magazine, the Arizona Republican’s presidential campaign. The resulting essay was a by-now typically entertaining and insightful Wallace
journalistic effort, with characteristically Wallace-like meditations on pundits, cable network news coverage, spin, and political cynicism. Behind the sophisticated analysis lay a passionate call to Wallace’s young readers to overcome their own cynicism and indifference and get out there and vote. *Rolling Stone* published the piece in the magazine’s April 13, 2000 issue; later that summer, in an effort to get the essay widely disseminated before the November 2000 elections, Wallace sold an expanded version of it to TimeWarner Books, which published it as a cheap, downloadable “eBook” titled *Up, Simba! Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate.*

Finally, in February 2001, in an intriguing example of Wallace’s professional career imitating his quirky art, Pomona College announced that Wallace had been hired as the college’s Disney Professor of Creative Writing. The endowed chair was established by Roy Edward Disney, Walt Disney’s nephew and a 1951 graduate of the college. Few journalists could resist noting the delicious irony of such a position going to the pop-culture obsessed author of *Infinite Jest*—a novel that, among many other things, parodies corporate sponsorship in all its forms, even creating an alternative near future in which calendar years are no longer assigned numbers according to the Roman calendar but are rather named after the companies that “subsidize” them. Wallace also contributed a brief essay in *Rolling Stone*’s October 25, 2001, special issue commemorating the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. In spring 2002 Wallace sold his third short story collection to Little, Brown, with publication planned for 2004.

Like most serious—and even less serious—accounts of Wallace’s work, A. O. Scott’s *New York Times Review of Books* essay
attempts, somewhat tentatively, to explain exactly how Wallace’s distinctive work moves beyond postmodern self-reflexivity. Scott follows in the wake of a number of public declarations of Wallace’s innovative importance. In 1996, for instance, upon publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace edited a special edition of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* titled “The Future of Fiction.” Similarly, in 1997 *Time* magazine published an article titled “Fiction’s New Fab Four,” in which Wallace was elected as the most visible member of a new literary vanguard, if not a coherent new literary movement.

Though neither of the above two treatments arrives at concrete definition of this new movement, Scott comes very close with his probing analysis of Wallace’s 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” originally published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* and later collected in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. This essay, one of the most important pieces in Wallace’s growing corpus of nonfiction, preceded the publication of *Infinite Jest* and in many ways prepared the way for that career-making book. In intent and subject matter, it functions as one of the most direct articulations of Wallace’s particular take on postmodernism and the unique challenges facing writers of his generation. As such, the essay has the same centrality in unfolding the shape of Wallace’s career as John Barth’s famous 1968 essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” had in shaping the career of Wallace’s primary fictional father. Indeed, “E Unibus Pluram” is in many respects a “response,” one generation later, to Barth’s “response” to his modernist forbears. Before addressing “E Unibus Pluram” directly, then, it is important to outline how Barth’s essay conceives of the relationship between these two heterogeneous literary movements.
Modernism refers to the literary dominant of the first half of the century, a dominant often defined as an expression of crisis, specifically the crisis of the Word, as George Steiner has it. Modernism confronts the world that emerged following Friedrich Nietzsche’s “death of God”: meaning and certainty had been severed from their long-held metaphysical grounding, while all the old certainties of Western culture had been destroyed, from Darwin’s unseating of the Hebraic creation myth to Freud’s replacing of the soul with the internal combustion engine of the three-part psyche. In the absence of objective certainty, modernist writers, like their painter contemporaries, abandoned the outdated mode of nineteenth-century “objective” realism in favor of a new valorization of individual subjective experience. The new subject became the individual in isolation, the new agenda the intense tracing of consciousness in all its contingent manifestations.

Brian McHale argues that modernist fiction is essentially epistemological: it inquires into the mechanics of knowing and privileges perceived over objective truth. In rejecting Victorian/Edwardian conventions of linear, cause-and-effect narrative, modernist fiction affirms the discontinuous, the private, the subjective. Still, modernism regards this shift toward epistemology as a crisis, for in valorizing the subjective and the provisional it also, by extension, announces the loss of transcendent universals. In response to this loss, modernist writers propose new universals that are paradoxically allied to subjective experience. Marcel Proust’s inquiry into the transcendent nature of memory, Joyce’s much-lauded mythic method, William Faulkner’s Bergsonian distinction between time and durée: all of these innovations stand as courageous artistic attempts to connect private experience with some nontemporal universal.