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FREE

END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS

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IN DEFENSE OF WILLIAM SHATNER

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JAZZ LIKE A KITTEN IN A BOWL OF SPAGHETTI

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PROOF IS PERFECT

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Rotten houses

The housing boom has spawned a wave of construction-defects lawsuits. Some blame the lawyers. Others say they just don't build 'em like they used to.

BY R.V. SCHEIDE 20



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WORDS

Consider the writer

Consider the Lobster and Other Essays

David Foster Wallace
Little, Brown and Co.

The appeal of David Foster Wallace writing about the

by
Shawn Miller

Academy Awards of porn, which he does in his new essay collection, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, is the incongruity. Here we have Wallace—an endowed professor of creative writing and professor of English at Pomona College, the author of the 1,088-page novel *Infinite Jest*, a member of the Usage Panel of the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, and an esoteric essayist extraordinaire—delving into the nitty-gritty of the adult-film industry with its money shots, shady characters and prolapsed anuses. It is the ultimate in highbrow meets lowbrow.

Of course, Wallace is anything but stuffy as he demonstrated in his previous essay collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. And the book under review culls material from work Wallace did for *Premier*, *Harper's*, *Rolling Stone*, *Gourmet*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and the *Village Voice Literary Supplement*. So, though Wallace can't accurately be dubbed a populist—too many footnotes and words not found in any dictionary I

had at arm's reach for that—he isn't afraid to apply his smarts and wit to non-intellectual and, indeed, vulgar matters.

The essays in *Consider the Lobster* fall roughly into two categories: reportorial journalism and book reviews, though these characterizations don't fully encompass Wallace's range. His essay on the annual Adult Video News Awards mentioned above falls into the former category and really requires no elucidation. Wallace observes that "the typical porn starlet really is the lady in Lycra evening-wear with tattoos all down her arms who's both smoking and chewing gum while telling journalists how grateful she is to Wadcutler Productions Ltd. for footing her breast-enlargement bill. And meaning it." In short, Wallace is funny and insightful but doesn't overreach and attach too much meaning to the spectacle.

His chronicle of Senator John McCain's 2000 presidential run for *Rolling Stone* provides more depth and puts into perspective better than anything I've come across the heroism and deprivation McCain endured as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. His insights are spot on ("It's hard to get good answers to why Young Voters are so uninterested in politics. This is probably because it's next to impossible to get someone to think hard about why he's not interested in something.")

The least interesting of Wallace's reporting is the book's title selection, for which he traveled to the Maine Lobster Festival for *Gourmet* magazine. The most interesting is when it comes to his book reviews, though they are really long essays that use books as launching points.

Perhaps my favorite review in *Lobster* is of tennis star Tracy Austin's autobiography *Beyond Center Court: My Story*. Wallace, once an accomplished junior tennis player himself, finds with great disappointment that Austin has produced a "breath-takingly insipid autobiography." But instead of merely taking the book apart page by page—a task below Wallace—he asks the larger question of why athletes (who are "profundity in motion") are so incapable of saying anything interesting or meaningful about their athletic prowess or performance.

"If it's just that we naively expect geniuses-in-motion to be also geniuses-in-reflection, then their failure to be that shouldn't really seem any crueler or more disillusioning than Kant's glass jaw or Eliot's inability to hit the curve," Wallace writes.

Wallace's book isn't without flaws, of course. He footnotes mercilessly and at length, and the digressions sometimes feel like a chore to get through. Further, Wallace has a strange habit of abbreviating without any rhyme or reason, which, in itself, wouldn't be much to bridle at. But he's such a self-described snob about the correct usage of American English that the habit seems capricious.

Those trifling matters aside, Wallace has shown again in *Consider the Lobster* what a unique and skilled essayist he truly is. □

CONSIDER THE LOBSTER

And Other Essays
David Foster Wallace

Author of *Infinite Jest*



POET'S CORNER

Baptism

Have you asked the water
If it wants the burden
of your sins?

If your spiritual pollution
will taint its purity?

You might come out clean
but will the oil slick
of your sins
stain the next sinner
who believes this water
will make them innocent?

The weight of water
coupled with the weight of sin
does not give birth
to grace.

—Kimberly White
Sacramento