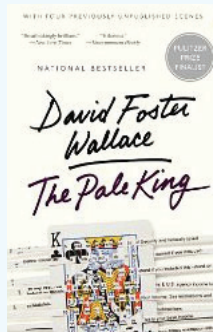


The Pale King
by David Foster Wallace
Reviewed by Santo Randazzo

This 540-page posthumously published novel was constructed by the editor from roughly a thousand pages of manuscript, notes, and false starts. The author, David Foster Wallace, committed suicide in September of 2008. The monumental acclaim surrounding Wallace's magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, established him in many ways as the literary voice of a generation. *The Pale King* is the long-awaited follow-up novel, one of three unanimous finalists for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.



There is no denying that this novel is unfinished, as its subtitle declares. Yet *The Pale King* does not read like an unfinished novel. In previous works Wallace rejected linear story arches, tidy beginnings and ends; *The Pale King* follows suit. Considering plot, very little ultimately happens—a group of men and women, each through their organic paths, come to work at a fictional IRS Regional Examination Center in Peoria, Illinois, in 1985. In the novel, 1985 is a significant time for the IRS, which is undergoing a revenue-minded overhaul of ideology and policy that Wallace satirically refers to as “The Initiative.” There is no pinpoint rise to conflict and then resolution. That absence by no means compromises the majesty of the story, because the story lies not in the plot, but in the motley crew of characters, the majority of whom end up as employees at the 047 REC in Peoria—a place Wallace establishes as a type of primary hell of tedium and crippling bureaucracy.

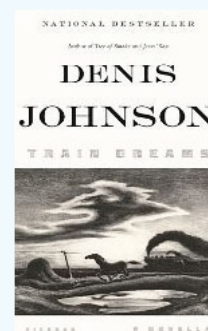
In his notes Wallace described *The Pale King* as “tornadic.” The novel’s fifty chapters read appropriately. Each chapter jumps character and often setting, most taking place in Peoria, Illinois, in 1985 or at some tangent point in the respective character’s life prior to working at the 047 REC. Some chapters are self-contained vignettes centered on characters that range from a high school boy who develops superhuman concentration to fight off fits of socially unacceptable sweating, to a young girl in a stolen car with her possibly schizophrenic mother, or a boy who is such an overzealous do-gooder that he garners absolute annoyance and hatred from his entire community. Other chapters are small still-framed moments, like a chapter of nothing but people in a room turning pages, a conversation, or impressions of *The Exorcist* on speakerphone: “Dimmy. Why you do this to me Dimmy?”

The majority of the novel is told from a third person perspective, though a handful of chapters are narrated by one of two characters, the primary of whom is a fictionalized David Foster Wallace. The web work of episodic chapters develops the scaffolding of the story on which the primary and recurring themes become truly evident. Three hundred pages into the novel it is clear that Wallace has written a powerful and philosophical narrative, packed with Kierkegaardian references and images of solipsism. Wallace makes real statements about work, life, government, and corporations.

David Foster Wallace is very much alive in *The Pale King*. This is a postmodern novel, and the world presented is bleak. It is a novel about boredom and bureaucracy, a novel about hamsters on a wheel. How then is *The Pale King* not inherently boring? The answer is simple: because Wallace approaches the subject with tenderness and satire and in a manner so characteristically his that it is almost beyond comparison. His is a true literary voice in peak form, and he offers up a masterpiece—albeit an unfinished one.

Train Dreams
By Denis Johnson
Reviewed by Santo Randazzo

Denis Johnson has built his reputation as a contemporary powerhouse with works such as *Jesus' Son*, and the National Book Award winning *Tree of Smoke*. *Train Dreams* delivers in similar fashion. This 116-page novella was one of three finalists for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize. Though no award was ultimately given, had *Train Dreams* been selected, the novella would have replaced Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* at 140 pages as the shortest ever to receive the honor.



Train Dreams is a poignant, tragic novella. The story opens in 1917 and follows the life of Robert Granier, a railway worker in the Idaho panhandle, through the burgeoning twentieth century. He loses his family—a wife and infant daughter—in a devastating wildfire. Afterwards, Granier is forced to find his way and struggles to discover a new life in an ever-changing American West. Through various trials and interactions with symbolic characters, Granier's life undergoes a metamorphosis while the world around him similarly shifts. By the end of the novella the reader finds Granier in a completely new America.

This novella was meant to be read in one sitting. Every sentence has been written with an energy that propels the story forward, giving the narrative a true locomotion that stirs the audience as well. From the first word Johnson's prose reads like a siren song, luring the reader, as Robert Granier's life unfolds like a dream. In *Train Dreams* Johnson examines man and nature, and their constant relationship. There are images of folklore, wolf-people, and superstition. Johnson's signature dark humor runs throughout the novella, making hilarity out of the attempted murder of a “Chinaman” and humorously treating bestiality in conversations between men about “jiggering” a cow.

Denis Johnson is among the best living American authors, and it is his almost otherworldly writing that makes this novella. Johnson is firing on all cylinders in *Train Dreams*. Though your experience with this novella may last only a couple of hours out of your entire life, do not be surprised when you set the story down and find yourself altered, affected in some profound way.

If you should see / a man walking / down a crowded street / talking aloud / to himself / don't run / in the opposite direction / but run toward him / for he is a POET! —Ted Joans, “The Truth”