

Interview with Daniel Wallace (first posted 5/29/08)



DS: This latest DSI is with a novelist who has had success, by most standards, but one who is not yet a household name, in the way that novelists of a few decades past (Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, Irwin Shaw, etc.) were. He has had a major Hollywood film made of his first published novel, *Big Fish*, and gotten good reviews for his next three novels. This interview is with Daniel Wallace, whose website is: <http://www.danielwallace.org/>. In email exchanges you expressed to me a bit of hesitancy on your part in regards to earlier interviews of mine you've read, claiming that you fear you are not as deep nor philosophical as some past interviewees, and more of just a regular guy. Thus, I'll aim more of my queries at the functionary side of both the craft of writing, generally, and your experiences on your own books, as well as trying to pick your brain as an online primer to younger, unpublished writers on how to best get their own works published. However, let me just briefly ask, is your reticence to speak on deeper or more philosophical things because you feel you simply lack the capacity, or does it simply not concern you and your art? I.e.- are you just a 'simple storyteller,' willing to leave the reception of your stories to others? And what is the core reason you write, the demiurge?

DW: I'd like the stories to speak for themselves. I guess I *could* discuss them; I mean, I wrote them. I'm just not that interested. It may be different with more practical applications of craft: for instance, if I built a car, it would be a good idea to be able to explain why I did it they way I did, why using this carburetor is better than using that one. But a story is all affect. Coming back after the fact and talking about it is like talking about your sexual technique. It doesn't make the sex any better.

DS: I always allow my interviewees to introduce themselves to potential readers who have not heard of them nor their work, so could you please distill a bit of who you are, what you do, what your aims in your career have been? And, where on the track of your projected career arc do you see yourself? Are you about where you hoped to be, or what?

DW: I've been writing for a long time. After leaving college I worked for a trading company in Nagoya, Japan. It was called Nikko Boeki. My father got me the job. His company, Wallace International, was their biggest client. A trading company acts as the middle man between the buyer (Wallace) and the maker, or producer. In our case, we were buying stoneware and china, importing it to America, and selling it primarily in supermarkets. This was in the early 1980's. I was there to learn the business from the bottom up. After my apprenticeship there I'd come back to America and work in the Birmingham office. I loved Japan and the Japanese people, but not so much the job, and

when my time there was up I told my father I wouldn't be able to work for him in Birmingham.

That's when I thought I'd give writing a try. I don't know why I decided to do this. I wasn't a good writer. I didn't have any obvious talent for it. No one ever took me aside and told me I was talented, or that writing – or any art, for that matter – was something I should consider pursuing. It wasn't a calling. I didn't feel, and never have felt, that I have something 'to say,' or anymore to say than anybody else. Why I wanted to do it, or ever thought I could do it, is the greatest mystery.

After ten years of writing, I'd published about a dozen short stories. This is after ten years of writing every day, hours a day. I'd also written three novels, all of which were bad in about a thousand different ways. Then I wrote two more bad novels. When I wrote my first published novel, *Big Fish*, I was closer to 40 than 30, and I'd been writing for fourteen years.

I am very happy with my life now, personal and professional. I write stories and novels and the occasional screenplay. I teach at the University of North Carolina. I earn a living writing and teaching writing. In all honesty, I never expected to do as well as I've done. I wake up every morning shocked.

DS: I know you've written short fiction, published in magazines and online, but I don't believe you've published a book's worth of short stories yet? Are the short stories thus random pieces you've done here and there, between longer works, or have you just not had a thematic focus in enough tales to cohere a book?

DW: I have more than enough stories for a collection, and it's my great hope (even as I write this) that my next book will be a collection of short fiction. The problem is not the art part; it's the business part. Short story collections as a rule do so poorly in the marketplace that they're almost vanity projects. But I'm vain so I don't have a problem with this.

DS: Let's speak of the short story process vs. longer fiction. I know when I've done both, I tend to follow the same patterns, which work for me. The chapters of a longer novel become like de facto short stories, and I do drafts of each one in waves, and then do the next draft, and so on. The same is true with short stories. I will think of an overarching theme- such as tales about slow death by drudgery or about cats, etc., then I will do each draft of whatever number of tales (ideas/story arcs) I want to include. However, most writers I know of, especially of short fiction, tend to do one tale at a time. They get the idea, hammer it out, do a first draft, revise through successive drafts, and then move on to another story. I feel this leads to one of the manifest flaws of most short story collections- even the relative handful that are well written enough; and that is there is no overall unity in theme nor style. In short, they are a rag tag collection of disparate tales rather than a real and connected 'book' of compelling and related tales, and this is why so many people prefer to read novels rather than short story collections; the collections are scattershot, whereas most readers lack the ability to jump around and 'get into' a tale that is wildly different in content or style from the last one they may have liked. They need to be going in a general direction or theme; it soothes them the way a

cliché does, save that it is not an example of poor writing nor art. Comments on this idea? And what process do you follow? If a different one than the two outlined, please describe.

DW: The innate problem with a collection of short stories is that they're short stories. This is a huge generalization, but I think readers get tired of always having to start something, over and over and over and over, the way you have to do with stories; a novel, especially a really long novel, has the virtue of only having to be started once, and the end is far, far away. Reading a novel is a serious project; reading a story is a pleasant diversion. The world is full of pleasant diversions competing with the short story for your time. A novel is like nothing else in the world.

So judging a short story collection as wanting because it doesn't reflect the unity of theme or style one finds in a novel is misguided, I think. Say my next book is a collection of stories. I have thought about the general tenor of the work I want in it. For instance, I don't want to include any of my 'father stories,' because I have written about fathers enough and don't want readers coming to the collection to think of me as a one-trick pony. Instead, I think they'll be love stories: good love, bad love, sick and unfortunate love. But love stories. That being said, a few of them were written fifteen years ago, and one just last week. How can they cohere? I don't know if they can. But I hope, if they don't, other virtues will present themselves. Coherence from story to story is not, for me, the aim.

Why is a story a story? Why doesn't it become a novel? You could say some ideas are bigger than others and deserve a bigger canvas, and I'm sure that's true. In general, though, novels deal with life, and stories deal with a moment from a life. A collection by definition is a collection of moments. I don't think in terms of a collection when I'm writing a story; I'm only thinking of that story. And I never think in terms of theme when I'm writing anything. I wouldn't know a motif if it ripped my ear off (though why a motif would ever to do that to me is a mystery). All I'm trying to do is tell a compelling story. *What happens next?* This is the only question I want the reader to have in his head. *I have to know what happens next.*

DS: I just mentioned how readers tend to get turned off by a story they do not 'like,' regardless of its quality, and this is a major problem in the arts, and especially with criticism. People simply cannot separate their emotional and subjective likes and dislikes from an intellectual and objective recognition of whether something fails or succeeds qualitatively. After all, everyone, you, me or a reader of this interview, will like some bad art and dislike some good art. Why do you think this is such a barrier for so many readers and critics?

DW: Taste? I don't know. Given a variety of things to choose between, we tend to those things that bring us pleasure. There's a lot of literature (and music and art) that someone will tell me is good and important and I won't like it. I used to think it was because I was stupid. I'm not stupid but I'm not that smart either. What are you going to do? I can't help it.

DS: Many of my essays on Cosmoetica are very critical of the MFA creative writing mills, to which I've had many experiences with, almost all negative. To sum up the arguments against them, let me lead off with this: there simply are not that many quality writers out there. In 1950, as example, there were about 4 or 5 dozen literary magazines (and high profile places like *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, etc.) where poetry or fiction could be published. This was at a time before the rise of writing mills and when the U.S. population was about 160 million. Three generations, and 60 years later, the population has not even doubled, but the number of print and online outlets for written work is likely somewhere in the 20,000 range, and growing. That's at least a 400 fold increase with a barely doubled population. In other words, there are about 200 times as many places to get published and work out there, but even in 1950 the vast majority of stories and poems published were not of high quality. Expanding the pool had diluted down the process so that even the few agents, editors, and publishers out there that truly want and can appreciate quality have a near impossible time sorting through the reams of crap. Comments?

DW: There are a lot of reasons not to like MFA programs, I think. My main complaint is that much of the work coming out of them tends to resemble much of the work coming out of them. But if there's a chance that you are a real writer, or have a chance of becoming one, an MFA program offers a couple of years when all you have to do is write and read. The chance of becoming a professional writer is less than that of becoming a professional basketball player, but that doesn't mean most of us should stop playing the game. I wouldn't want to deprive anyone from the opportunity to write one good story, even if it's the first and last they ever write.

DS: Another argument against the writing mills is purely ethical. Writing is clearly the highest of the art forms, as it takes squiggles that denote ideas, and coheres them into high art. In short, it does the most with the least, therefore it requires the best minds. Clearly, most people in these programs have no real talent, and I've met thousands of them at events, readings, benefits, workshops, groups, in my nearly quarter century in the world of the arts. On the poetry side of the ledger I can name so many bad published poets who 'made it' by playing games rather than working on their art, that it's easier to name the handful of quality poets, rather than detail all the dreck, like a James Tate, Nikki Giovanni, or Donald Hall- all feted poetasters. On the fiction side there are 'name' writers who indulge in clichés: Joyce Carol Oates and T.C. Boyle, as well as those who are published for their sexual or racial status: Jhumpa Lahiri, Nell Freudenberger, and those who are published simply because 'the game' allows them connections: David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, James Frey. So, the ethical argument is why charge such outlandish costs to people who have no real talent just to further clog the pool of available real talent. 1) it hurts the pocketbooks of the poor deluded folk without talent, and 2) it provides an ever-growing mass of bad writing that wears out the people who pick and choose (and I won't even go into the lack of qualifications most of them have). What of this? And, have you ever taken students aside and told them that they were

wasting their time and should pursue something else? If not, why not, for surely you've run across many talentless students.

DW: I would never encourage a student of mine to pursue a career in writing, no matter how talented she/he was. That's a choice only the writer can make, because he's the only one who truly cares. No one will miss the stories he never writes -- no one but him.

DS: Let me return to one of my opening points, when I spoke of your shyness to get 'deep' on subject matter. In a similar vein, in some of our emails, you expressed a sort of modesty when I stated I thought your writing was clearly superior to some of the people I named above. Yet, I think that's a no-brainer to anyone who really appreciates reading quality writing. I also think this lack of expressing what one thinks is bad writing leads to the 'I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine' mentality of the writing mills, which are more for making connections than learning and polishing craft. Surely you must look at books that are published and shake your head at the dreck out there, and the fact that the sheer mass of it literally means some of your work is going to not even be noticed, much less read. So why the modesty?

DW: There are things I like and things I don't like. If I'm modest about my own work it's because, in part, I feel there's a lot of room for improvement. I'm glad you and other people find something to admire in what I do, but I am always happily surprised when this happens. I'm not interested in getting into a pissing match with anyone. If someone wants my seat, they can have it; I'll stand. I'm happy.

DS: The creative writing mills also homogenize writing of all sorts. I've read tens of thousands of poems and hundreds of fiction works (for *Cosmoetica* and not) by people who send along two or three page resumes larded with BFAs and MFAs, publications in big and small magazines, and filled with blurbs, and yet their work is atrocious, and horrid for three reasons: 1) no real talent with words to begin with, 2) simply bad technical skills and 3) utter genericness. There is absolutely nothing that sets one writer apart from another, the way one could never mix up the prose of Ernest Hemingway and Marcel Proust, Herman Hesse and Stephen Crane, nor Dorothy Parker and William Kennedy. A maxim I've coined is that *'to be a good writer one needs to learn all the rules, but to be a great writer one needs to learn when the rules need to be broken.'* Few mills even emphasize the former half of that maxim, and none are remotely capable of even desecrating the latter half. Comments?

DW: I touched on this earlier. My feeling, in general, is that a good writer can get better the more time he spends writing and reading. Matriculation into an MFA program is not necessarily a disastrous move. Would you rather, as a young writer, spend two years working a nine to six job, getting up every morning at five to get a few minutes of writing in, coming home exhausted, going to bed at nine in order to start the whole thing over again? Or have two years to write your heart out, every day all day – *then* go get that job? It's possible that, given that time, you could get past a lot of the mistakes every writer makes, only more quickly. The whole thing is just irrelevant though. Very few

writers achieve greatness (including me). MFA programs supply contacts that enable you to get a story placed here and there, they get your foot in the door, but long term it's all about the work.

DS: Also, the few writers of quality I have known, few who've passed through the creative writing mills, all speak of what a dreadful experience it was, how the homogenization process worked, and how they resisted it, and had to go back to their instincts so to not lose their ability. In short, if an Emily Dickinson or Sylvia Plath or Franz Kafka went to one of these mills, there would be attempts to severely disabuse them of the very qualities that set them apart. In short, one either has 'it' or not, and no amount of training, especially from most professors who are failed writers themselves, can change that. I've always averred that reading and mimicking a great writer is the best way to get into their skin. Do that with enough good writers, and soon their techniques, by osmosis, become second nature, and an individual style can be learnt. One cannot be imposed on high via a course taught by someone who is usually not good themselves. Comments?

DW: I think too much attention is being paid to MFAs here. Writers need to do their own work, and not worry about anything else.

DS: Let's switch gears and get more personal. Are you still a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill? Are you involved in creative writing programs, and if so, how do you steer away from some of the pitfalls that I've described above?

DW: I'm a distinguished professor at UNC, where I teach a number of creative writing classes. Teaching undergraduates is a much different than teaching graduate or post-graduate students. My job is to foster an appreciation for the art of writing. Showing a student what's behind the curtain, so he'll at least be able to see and appreciate these things when he reads a book. If he chooses to write himself – and of course, very few undergraduates pursue writing beyond this level – he knows some of the very basic devices used to creating a compelling story. Rarely does a student leave our program homogenized: even if that were something we wanted to do, we just don't have them long enough. And the department itself has so many different kinds of writers in it, it's impossible.

DS: On a tangent, I've read that you wrote a number of novels before you had your first published novel, *Big Fish: A Novel Of Mythic Proportions*. You've also stated that you knew that those prior novels were not good, and that *Big Fish* was a breakthrough. The query is, did you realize this all then- that you were writing pabulum, or only in retrospect, after you raised your game? And how does your own insight into the failures and successes of your writing, as it has arced forward, relate to my prior comment about the lack of value of creative writing mills on people who have genuine writing talent? I ask this because your writing is not generic. For good or ill, no one will mistake Daniel Wallace's writing with David Foster Wallace's; and I'd vote that's a very good thing for you. Comments?

DW: I thought I was a much better writer then than I do now. I loved the stories I was coming up with, and was really amazed I could put enough sentences together to make a paragraph. It was like magic, seeing the little black marks all come together. I sound like I'm making fun of myself but I'm not. If a writer writes I was a writer. I couldn't see very far beyond that though. The pure pleasure of invention, of making stuff up, clouded over everything else. I couldn't tell the difference between a good story and a good story told well. I wrote three hundred pages about a pair of billionaire twins, each weighing just over 500 pounds, who 'rent' the mistress of one of their friends. What did I think was going to come of that? Nothing much did. And I wrote a few other books equally as promising. As I wrote I was learning to write (having not gone to school) and I was learning what not to write as well. I also finally figured out that I was writing the kind of books I thought other people wanted to read, not the kind I wanted to write. That's when *Big Fish* happened, and why it was a breakthrough for me. I wanted to publish it, of course, but I liked it so much that if it was never published I'd decided to publish it myself. That's the test I use to this day: if I'm asking someone to pay me publish this (novel/story/whatever) I should be willing to pay to publish it myself. I've been lucky so far that all of my books since *Big Fish* have been published – but one. *O Great Rosenfeld!* Which I published.

DS: A friend of mine named Jason Sanford, who founded the storySouth online magazine, opines that more people think they can become writers than painters or photographers because writing requires only a pen and paper, and not paint, brushes, canvases, nor expensive film or photographic equipment, so it's seen as something 'anyone can do.' Do you agree? And is this sort of the gullibility that MFA creative writing mills prey upon?

DW: I agree. Almost everyone can write or type and since that's what writers do I guess I'm a writer as well. More importantly, everybody has a life and a story. Most people don't end up writing about it, though; they just live it. And sometimes they'll ask me to write it for them. I don't think this has much to do schools that offer an MFA, however, because by that time some separation has occurred. Kids know that getting an MFA guarantees them absolutely nothing. But a deeply ingrained hope is difficult to dislodge. And who knows. Nobody knows.

DS: What is your take on the 'art is truth' mantra put out by some PC Elitists? I would think, given the Paul Bunyanesque quality of your work, you'd find that laughable. And, since fiction is art- which derives from the same root word as *artifice*, tell me some 'truths' have you discarded in favor of narrative 'lies' to make your stories work better as a story?

DW: I can't answer this question. I've never thought about it, even for a second. My aim is to tell a good story, something to keep the reader engaged, and that's all.

DS: What is your opinion on art, in regards to its ability to distill the essence of a situation, be it in a poem, film, play, story, photograph, painting, piece of music?

DW: Art is a distillation of experience.

DS: I've always laid the blame for what is wrong with the publishing industry at the feet of the editors, not the writers, for editors have to know what needs work, even if from a name author, and what work should not be touched, even if from an unknown. We just spoke of writing's ills, but what the hell has gone wrong with editing?

DW: I've had three wonderful editors. Not everybody is so lucky. Publishing is a business, though, and most of what they publish is there because they hope it's going to make someone some money. It's a product, like anything else. It's show business.

DS: And, by extension, since most editors now 'farm out' the task of recruiting promising writers to agents, they pass the buck down to college aged new hires or coed interns seeking college credits. Simply put, no twenty year old is qualified enough to discern the quality if a *Huckleberry Finn* or *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn* comes across their desk. This is how hacks like a Chuck Palahniuk or David Foster Wallace get an 'in,' because their deliterate prose is no better nor worse than that the college aged readers of manuscripts can produce. After all, most agents (and editors) I, and my wife, submit to, cannot even tell the difference between run-on and complex sentences, a preposition and a conjunction or even the proper usage of a comma vs. a semi-colon. Even in the overall paring down of books they seem inadequate to even recognizing quality. All that is cared for is saleability, yet I've had agents admit to me that neither they nor the publishers have a clue what will sell or not. Would it, given this ignorance of saleability, be a perfect reason to publish only quality writing? Then, again, most literary agents today- much less editors, are simply not equipped to evaluate good writing, as evidenced by the utter lack of quality writing that is published. Even worse, most literary agents do not even read the work submitted to them. Any thoughts?

DW: Though I can't in any way agree with your estimation of the writing skills of Mr. Palahniuk or Mr. DF Wallace, I do think it's true that no one knows what will sell. But I do think, looking at it over the long run, it would be a safe bet to say that quality literary fiction sells less than a steamy yarn.

DS: My wife, Jessica, insists that literary agents should be called 'book agents' since they seem to lack any real concern for the quality of what they help get produced. In the old days, however, literary agency was a different beast. What were some of the things done when you first started which have been abandoned now? And what is this generic rejection ploy, where an agent claims they did not 'fall in love' with a book? As I mentioned earlier, this is clearly an emotional not intellectual response, much less a business response. Why not simply state that your agency is not looking at submissions, or that they skimmed two paragraphs and lost interest? I seriously doubt, after all, that any agent could fall in love with Captain Ahab or Holden Caulfield. Thoughts?

DW: There may be some truth to that, although it's unclear to me whether we simply remember the great agents from the past because they were great, not because they represented a whole pack of great agents. Were they really more common back then? I don't know. I have to say, I have an amazing agent. I'm very lucky. He's literate, a great editor, and truly cares about the work. He cares about the KIND of work he has a part of putting out into the world. I've been publishing for ten years. I haven't seen a big change. But I've been with the same agent all that time.

DS: Lastly, in the same vein, what is wrong with criticism today? Yes, there are some film critics who will diss a film, but this is usually based upon liking or disliking the film. I can like a bad work of art- like a *Godzilla* film or the poetry of Richard Brautigan, and not like great art- the poetry of Robert Frost or the films of Ingmar Bergman. But I recognize the difference, unlike, say, a Michiko Kakutani or Harold Bloom. Why do you think criticism today is so wretched? Is it Political Correctness or a confluence of many factors? If the latter, what are those factors and how to reverse the baleful influence?

DW: I don't currently have an opinion about literary criticism.

DS: What do you think of some of the big name literary critics of today: Harold Bloom, Helen Vendler, Marj Perloff? To me, they are walking, talking reminders of all that is wrong with literature and criticism today, and the great need for Mark Twains, Ambrose Bierces, Oscar Wildes, H.L. Menckens, and Dorothy Parkers. I contend that America's current collective Attention Deficit Disorder makes a critic's job all the more important, especially to save good books from a swift oblivion. Thoughts?

DW: I don't currently have an opinion about literary critics.

DS: What do you think about the cliché of the suffering artist (Hemingway, Plath, Rimbaud, Capote)? And what of mediocre artists who are more concerned with striking an image, or impressing others with their persona or cult of personality? How much do you think these artistic clichés play into the public's view of artists? What about those who are unable to critique a work without the biography at hand? Should not the work stand alone, aside from any personal neuroses an artist might have had?

DW: Not much. Some artists suffer, some don't. Some drink, some don't. Some are assholes, some aren't. In other words, artists are like everybody else. Being an artist, having that ability, doesn't make you a better person. Or worse. I bet insurance salesman could say the same thing.

DS: Before we switch gears into more of your views on things and current projects, let's start out at the very beginning, biographically. You were born in 1959, in Birmingham, Alabama. Let me ask the obvious, given your date of birth. What

effect did the Civil Rights Movement have upon your childhood, for you must have been in the first wave of integrated school classrooms, no? Second, you would have hit your preteens right at the height of the anti-Vietnam War and Hippy movements. Did that have an effect on you, or were you more insulated from such being raised in the Deep South?

DW: I missed both, really.

DS: Who were your parents, and what did they do? Were they of a creative bent? Did you express a creative streak as a child, and were they supportive? Often you hear of parents chiding such nonconformist dreams as being unrealistic. Did they want you to ‘be reasonable,’ and get a job where you could ‘make money’? Or did they encourage your pursuit of the arts?

DW: My father wanted me to work with him in his company, an import/export firm, and to that end I lived in Japan for a couple of years. But it didn't work out. It didn't make me happy and the truth is I wasn't that good at it. I wouldn't have been a good businessman. I tried. So I quit – or, if he were alive and you could ask him, fired – and started writing. He wasn't for it but then it's hard to support a child in an endeavor for which he has shown absolutely no promise. My mother loved the idea of it because being a writer is such a romantic idea and because it hurt my father, and if he was hurt she was happy.

DS: Did you grow up only in Birmingham, or did you ever live in a rural part of the state? Did you ever work on a farm? What was your first job?

DW: Grew up entirely in BHM. My first job was at a vet, cleaning cages and squeezing anal glands. A good job to have because from there every job is a step up.

DS: Your wife's name is Laura. Is she creative? How did you meet her and what is her career? You have a son named Henry. Was he named after the famed former Vice President under Franklin Delano Roosevelt? If so, would it be fair to say you are of a liberal political bent?

DW: My wife is a creative social worker, and Henry was actually named after no one in particular. We (my first wife, his mother, and I) liked the name is all. It's old-fashioned but not too old-fashioned. A sturdy name. With integrity. It is fair to say that I'm left of center. Far left.

DS: Any siblings? Did any of them go into the arts? Do they share your views on life, politics, religion, etc.?

DW: I have three sisters. We share a lot of the same political beliefs. My little sister just became a Republican because she was a Hillary supporter and her heart was broken when she lost NC. My older sister, Rangeley, is a lawyer and a writer; she actually published a book, NO DEFENSE, before I published my first book. I pretended to be happy for her

but as she now knows, it killed me inside. I gave up writing the day she told. Took all of my work to the curb to be thrown out. It was a sign, I thought. Two people in my family were not going to become novelists; we're not the Brontes. It was time to get that job at the Copy Place. But after pouting for a few hours I brought it all back in and got to work. Writing is hard and pouting is okay if you can limit it to one day. Get it all out. All the frustrations, the sense of unfairness, the growing hatred one feels for that guy who got the front cover of the NYTBR again. Feel it and let it go. Then come to the screen with a fresh, open, positive mind. That's the writer's world: when other things impose themselves onto it, insinuate themselves into it, the writer isn't happy and the writing isn't good.

DS: What was your youth like, both at home and in terms of socializing with other children? Were you smarter than average? The classic bored gifted child?

DW: I was completely average in every way. My childhood was the most uneventful part of my life, I think.

DS: You came of age during the 1960s, which was sort of a Golden Age for magazines in sci fi, detective tales, and other genres. Did you read these sorts of tales?

DW: Not really. I did like DUNE a lot, though. I don't think I ever read a single magazine until I was in my 20's. But when does a person come of age? At the end of the sixties I was 11.

DS: When I interviewed novelist Charles Johnson he mentioned a fondness for pulp style writers, stating: *'What I love about Serling, the prolific Ray Bradbury, the pulp writers of the '30s who pounded away at their typewriters for less than a penny a word until their fingers bled (an anecdote I read about the primary pulp writer for the "Shadow" stories), and my friends today who are pop writers, is that they are, first and foremost, storytellers. Bradbury didn't even bother to call himself a "writer." For all my emphasis on "literary art," I was weaned on the work of pop (and pulp) storytellers, those heroes who could whip out a new story as quickly as medieval troubadours--- journeymen all---traveling from one town to the next. (Just as I try to do every year for Seattle's "Bedtime stories" event.) Here's Johnson Rule About Writing: "All great art entertains, but all entertainment is not art." No matter what we say about the greatest writers---Homer, Shakespeare, the Beowulf poet, Dickens---they knew, as John Gardner once said, everything about entertainment and the powerful depiction of character and event. Some of our pop writers are better at this---plot---than our so-called literary writers, for whom plot is a word that makes them tremble. But plot is the writer's equivalent to the philosopher's argument (Gardner). All the technique and craft exercises I've given my students are for one purpose: namely to give them the means to deliver the baby undamaged when the fiction gods drop onto their laps a rousing, great, imaginative story.'* **What are your thoughts on this?**

DW: I agree with this absolutely. I might go farther and say that I'm not as interested in literature as I am in entertainment, in being entertained and entertaining others. It'll kill you as a writer to sit down and say, *Today I'm going to produce some art*. Don't even think about that. Make me (the reader) want to turn the page. That's all a writer can do for me. That's all I want a writer to do for me. If, along the way, it turns into art, all the better. A writer and a reader are in the same boat: both of you have to want to know what happens next. That's all. That being said, a really poorly written sentence is going to make me care less about what happens next because I cease to trust that the author can deliver.

DS: Did and do you read a lot? If so, what were some of your earliest favorites? Name some of your favorite books- be they science or not, fiction or nonfiction, as well as those you think among the best ever published.

DW: I've never been a huge reader and I'm sure that explains a lot of the problems I have as a writer. When I have read I have to admit, it's been a Dead White Man curriculum. Mea culpa! Kafka, Nabokov, Calvino, Vonnegut, Faulkner.

DS: You studied business at Emory University and UNC, not creative writing. How did you end up making the transition over to teaching writing?

DW: No. I actually studied English and philosophy. Even closer to the truth is I didn't study much of anything at all. I never finished college then, but this past semester returned and got my B.A. on May 10 2008.

DS: After your college years, you then worked in Japan. What did you do there? Do you think this 'real world' experience has aided you in ways many MFA track students never can match? I ask because I've found that the best prose writers tend not to come out of the writing mill backgrounds, but have a varied background; people like Charles Johnson, who worked as a cartoonist, or William Kennedy and Pete Hamill, who have worked in journalism. Ideas?

DW: There are very few of us who successively avoid real world experience. I think you may be referring to people locked forever in academia, who go from school to school, never experiencing the sort of life most of us (Americans) do. I think it helps to have a varied experience. I used to wonder if I'd have anything important to say, since I'd never fought in a war. Then I realized the problem wasn't that I hadn't been in a war, it was because I thought I needed to say something important.

DS: I've read that after you came back to the United States, you worked, of all places, in a bookstore. Were you just a grunt stacking books?

DW: I was a grunt selling books. I worked in three stores; all of them went out of business. I'm bad luck.

DS: Lastly, you also worked as an illustrator. Was this an illustrator of books, comic books, or what? How long did you do that?

DW: My first wife and I started a business selling, of all things, refrigerator magnets. Turns out there's a real need for refrigerator magnets. We sold a lot of them. She did the business part of things and I drew the pictures. People liked them because I had the ability to draw like a talented 8 year old. Here's a sample:



DS: Let me switch gears, and toss out that old question: if you could sit down and break bread for an evening with folks from the past- writers or not, which folk would you most like to engage with, and why?

DW: I really don't know.

DS: We spoke of your politics, but what of your religion? Have you any, what is it?

DW: I don't count myself as a member of any religion. I'm a non-believer.

DS: I am an agnostic and artist, and notice that many artists seem to deny their own creativity, pawing it off on God, or some other force or demiurge? I call this the *Divine Inspiration Fallacy*. There is no Muse. For better or worse, it's all me, or you, or any artist. Comments on its existence, origins, verity?

DW: I think a lot of people default to Jesus when something inexplicable happens. I write things I didn't know I was capable of writing, and sometimes that feels like magic. It isn't; it's just me. A similar thing happens when a tornado blows someone's house

away, but their cat is found unscathed in an oak tree: God must have been looking out for Pooky. We're hard-wired to do this, I think, because we've been doing it since the beginning.

DS: I coined a neologism- *deliterate*. It's a term I came up with in opposition to *illiterate*. By *deliterate* I mean the willful choice to not read great nor compelling writing. To avoid the classics in favor of reading blogs. To write in emailese rather than proper grammar. Basically, I claim that deliteracy is far more a problem than illiteracy is. Do you agree?

DW: LOL! :/

DS: One of the reasons I started this interview series is because of the utter dearth of really in depth interviews, in print or online. With the exception of the *Playboy* interview, such venues are nonexistent. Furthermore, many people actively denigrate in depth and intelligent discourse, such as this, preferring to read vapid interviews with 10 or 12 questions designed to be mere advertisements for a work, sans only the page numbers the canned answers are taken from. Why do you think this is? What has happened to real discussion, from old tv show hosts like Phil Donahue, David Susskind, David Frost, Dick Cavett, Tom Snyder, even Bill Buckley? Everything nowadays is celebrity-driven, and the celebrities are mostly people 95% of the public knows nothing of. Comments?

DW: The world is too noisy and distracting.

DS: Let me now turn to your novels. I've read two of your four published novels, and thought well of both. Let me start with the first, *Big Fish*. But before we break it down technically, let me ask how it came to be published? You had earlier books you likely sent around. So, other than your acknowledgement of the qualitative difference, what was different in the minds of the agent or publisher that took it on, since likely their acceptance was based upon an idea that this book could 'sell,' rather than it being a quality work of 'literature?' Or was it just pure luck that your novel was pulled out of the slush pile, over hundreds or thousands of others, and some nineteen year old screener liked the first page, and passed it on, irrespective of its qualitative content?

DW: I think luck plays a big part in a writer's career. But my first five novels didn't get published because I was unlucky; they didn't get published because they were bad. I had the same agent for three of those books. So *Big Fish* was definitely a better book than the others. It was turned down by 16 houses before Algonquin took it. Still, here, there was luck involved. Algonquin had been expected a book by one its established writers and it didn't come in. They needed a book to take its place, and quick. They opened that day's mail and what was in it: my book.

DS: *Big Fish* was published in 1998, by Algonquin Press. Walk the novice through the process of how it went from completed manuscript to published book: agent

submissions, direct submission to publisher, how much was added or excised, how different your completed manuscript was from the published book, etc. Also, how long, in terms of years and months did that process take, and what about the process could have been bettered, or at least speeded up?

DW: It took me about 15 months to write BIG FISH, after which my agent began submitting it to publishers. It garnered a lot of praise, but no one really knew what to do with it. But my agent believed in the book and wouldn't stop sending it around. He thought the publishers who passed on it weren't being open enough to something a little different. Algonquin turned out to be the best place for it: they were small, creative and really pushed the book, sending me on a big tour, selling the foreign rights, getting me interviews and reviews etc. The book wasn't changed that much after the editor got a hold of it. It was a short book. It was a long process, getting it published, but I don't know how it could have been bettered. You send the book to an editor you think will like it and hope for the best. Sometimes you score and sometimes you don't.

DS: Once the book was accepted, were there any hassles about the contract? Oftentimes, young writers, especially, see themselves as 'creators' not 'businessmen,' and can really screw themselves. Was it a standard royalty contract? And what about rights for other media? After all, your book became a feature film, directed by Tim Burton. Did the film do well financially, and do you feel you got remunerated enough for it?

DW: I didn't get screwed because I had a good agent. A writer *must* have an agent, even if they sell the book themselves. Before they sign *anything*. I made a lot of money on the movie and book sales associated with it. I am very happy.

DS: Who were the publishers for your other novels, and to what extent did your initial success with *Big Fish* translate into your getting any better royalty terms, or other rights that a first time writer would not get? Have any of them been optioned into films or stage plays?

DW: RAY IN REVERSE was published by Algonquin, WATERMELON KING by Houghton, and MR. SEBASTIAN AND THE NEGRO MAGICIAN by Random House. I think I get slightly better deals now than I would if there had never been a movie, but nothing out of this world. There's been only moderate interest in my other books as movies, and nothing has as of yet happened in that regard.

DS: If you could go back in time, what things would you do differently in regards to your published novels- not just in creative terms, but in interesting publishers in them, negotiating a deal, seeking input into any adaptations, etc.?

DW: I have the greatest agent and I leave all the business to him. It's important to separate them, otherwise you'll get all mixed up in something that has nothing to do with your real work, which is producing a quality narrative. Whenever you find yourself, as a writer, overly involved in the business aspect of it the work suffers.

DS: Before I get into the technical aspects of the two novels of yours I've read, let me speak of the Tim Burton adaptation of *Big Fish*. I'm not a Burton fan, as too many of his films seem childishly fetishistic. However, I thought *Big Fish* was the best of the handful of films of his I've seen- the first *Batman* was about as good, but a wholly different animal. As is usually the case, the book was better, and I read it after seeing the film. In reviewing the film I wrote: *'In order for 'magical realism' to work you have to have a 'reality' base. If you start off in fantasy you have no realism to ground the film in. This is why even such renowned writers as Gabriel Garcia Marquez are vastly overrated. One could accept the mythic tales of giants, witches, etc. more easily were they grounded in a real Alabama. For example, Ed Bloom is born in the 30s yet he was delivered by a black doctor, palled around with a black kid, went to church with blacks- in what USA was that? This relentless PC is a serious rot in what could be a strong foundation. Another problem is that most of the tales Ed told Will as a boy were clearly fantasies, yet most good tale tellers learn to gauge their audience and adjust accordingly. Ed does not, so his son is somewhat right in feeling his dad is an egocentric blowhard. Yet, nothing changes that dynamic by film's end- Will merely decides to give in to the delusions and the essential problem between father and son is not resolved, just ignored. The reason is obvious- TB is far more interested in the fantasy sequences than the human element, for he's still the junior high schooler content at doodling fantasy characters in the margins of his notebooks rather than a mature director of film. Ed Bloom is not so much a real person as a device to freeform a fantasia.'* **In short, I felt Burton put too much Burton into the film, and removed too much Wallace.**

Comments?

DW: Well, if he'd left me in it, or too much of me, it wouldn't have been a Tim Burton film. When a writer gives his book over to the show business he has to let go. It's apples and oranges.

DS: I also wrote: *'This brings me to probably the main problem with the film- its narcissistic and masturbatory need to 'tell' its audience that 'stories are important and powerful' to humans, rather than 'showing' that fact with a helluva good yarn! The film's dictum is 'if a man tells his stories enough he becomes the stories'- well, DUH! When one speaks of Shakespeare the odds are about 99% that the reference is to the plays or sonnets, not the stiff under Stratford!'* **This harkens back to the oldest of workshop clichés, show don't tell. While that is cogent at time, and not at others, Burton's film seemed to condescend to a Lowest Common Denominator, as if the audience intended was pre-teen or younger. The book, however, was clearly aimed at adults. Surely, there had to be some disappointments in the adaptation. Was this one of them? What were the things you wish had been included or not changed, and what changes worked? To what degree did you have any say so in the film? Or, were your rights totally bought and paid for? And did you have any objections to the screenplay by John August.**

DW: I'm a writer. All I thought about when the book was optioned was that even if they made the worst movie ever in the history of the world, I would sell more books than I

ever have. And that's the truth. But: the experience of reading a book is so much different than the experience of watching a film. A book you can savor, and read over many days, while a movie has to be apprehended on the spot. They had to water it down a bit to make accessible to a large number of people, something that's required when you spend ten of millions of dollars to make it. John August is a wonderful writer and I didn't really have an objection to what he wrote. I thought he did a wonderful job. That being said, I think I would have been happy with it under almost any circumstances, because I wasn't looking at it as real artistic endeavor. For me it was a vehicle to sell my book, which remains the same.

DS: When *Big Fish*, the novel, was reviewed by me, I wrote, 'It's all told through colorful chapters with titles like In Which He Speaks To Animals, How He Tamed The Giant, and His Immortality, wherein Edward Bloom meets two-headed ladies, giants, and lost souls. This fairy tale techniques only heightens the real moments of emotional contact between the two men, as Edward's death is told four different times, each with slight differences that build on the earlier versions, and which are the 'serious' underpinnings of the tale. And the book avoids bathos by having Edward be a scoundrel right up until his apotheosis at book's end, into literally the titular character. He says, for example, 'If I shared my doubts with you, about God and love and life and death, that's all you'd have: a bunch of doubts. But now, see, you've got all these great jokes.' And, in the end, the son becomes the father by succumbing to myth's spell. This is foreshadowed by the way William always talks about his father's dreams. Any son will tell you his mother's lessons were learned by rote, but his father's were absorbed by osmosis, and William tells this to the reader by not telling us.' Do you agree with my assessment that the book, in a sense, is a primer on male relationships, specifically father and son? Also, I scried the idea that men learn from their fathers via osmosis whereas their mothers teach them via rote means. Do you agree, and was this based upon your own family dynamics?

DW: I think it was based on my family's dynamics, although there is no real character of a mother present in the book.

DS: I had not read the Evan S. Connell novels *Mrs. Bridge* and *Mr. Bridge* at the time I reviewed *Big Fish*, but in retrospect it seems to me that you took much of the picaresque style of those two books for both *Big Fish* and *Mr. Sebastian And The Negro Magician*. Am I imbuing, or is there a connection? If not, what works and writers most influenced the vignette setting style you use, and what advantages do you feel that gives you, in terms of narrative? Or, is this simply the easiest way to write, or covering up a stylistic deficiency?

DW: I read and loved those books. But when I write I'm not thinking of any form or style, and certainly of no other writer. All that stuff I've read and studied comes to play unconsciously. I don't really know how it works. Probably a muse sent by God.

DS: In my review, I mention Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a possible influence. Is Vonnegut a writer you have read? Any opinions on his work and career

arc. I mention the arc aspect because his last book of significance was published twenty years or so before his death, *Galapagos*. Many older writers (Norman Mailer, Joyce Carol Oates) seem to feel a need to just churn out stuff to milk their readership. What are your views on the book as mere product? Surely you would not want to be an old man living off the better work you did in your thirties or forties? Yet, so many artists, like pro athletes- writers, musicians especially, and visual artists, do just that. If you ever got to a point where you felt you had shot your load, creatively, would you just move on, or exit gracefully, rather than lard down the best of your work with subpar stuff?

DW: Vonnegut was a big influence when I was a kid. I actually bought the LP of Vonnegut reading that book when I was fifteen. As far as continuing to publish after your best work is behind you . . . I think the problem here is that we don't know that our best work is behind us until we look back at it all after we're dead. I may never write another good book, but how will I really know that if I don't keep writing? I don't want to publish subpar stuff, but more than that I don't want to *write* subpar stuff. On the other hand, imagine I'm 75 years old, I got no insurance or real income but I do have a crappy novel someone wants to buy for a million dollars. Sold.

DS: Let me move on to your latest novel, *Mr. Sebastian And The Negro Magician*. Overall, I thought it a very good book, although, vis-à-vis *Big Fish*, I wrote: 'a good lighthearted 'easy read' (in the best sense)- although its highs are not as high as *Big Fish*'s and its lows not as low, that takes some risks and succeeds-sort of like the underrated Woody Allen film *Broadway Danny Rose*.' Do you think that it's a better book, or at least a more consistent one, in terms of its tone and narrative excellence? If so, what specific things have you done in the years and books in between these two works to excel at just that?

DW: I do think it's better in that way. I think it's my first real novel, in that there's nothing (or very little anyway anyway) that could be left out and it still makes sense. In all of my other books you can switch chapters around, leave a couple out and who knows? Maybe no one will notice. I have no idea how I did it though. Maybe I'm older and have a better sense of story? Could be.

DS: Earlier in that review I commented on my feeling that your writing has been dissed in comparison to other writers I consider not as good as you, but who command much greater 'literary respect': 'compared to what is consistently published by houses that are clueless as to how to edit a book, his books should have a larger audience than they do. Whether this inattention is due to the failings of agents and editors, publishers and critics, or simply due to the backhanded bigotry that consigns writers into ghettos- Wallace is in the 'white Southern male writer of quirky tales' genre, I cannot say with metaphysical verity, but something's askew.' Have you been ghettoized? And was that your doing or the readers or critics? And, are you capable of breaking out, either perceptively, or really, by writing something 'deeper,' along the lines of a Herman Melville or Herman Hesse? Or, do you just consider yourself an old-fashioned tall tale teller?

DW: I wouldn't say ghettoized. I'm happy to have the success I've had.

DS: I once read that you said you would 'never write a book longer than the page at which you stopped reading James Joyce's Ulysses.' While said in jest, do you simply feel compelled to be more picaresque and patchwork in a narrative vein?

DW: I like short books. I like to read short books and write short books. I do believe most longer works could be shorter. That being said, I wrote a lot of novels with a traditional format before BIG FISH and none of them were any good. For better or worse, we're all stuck with our own styles, at the desk or at a bar or in the bed. Discovering and accepting who you are is the trick.

DS: I also felt the book's best and worst part was in the same section: 'The book is not really a picaresque, the way Big Fish was, but rather a parallax view of life. Bad critics often like to use big words like 'picaresque,' without really understanding them. And note, I wrote 'life,' not 'a life,' because, despite there being a main character, we get to learn much of the secondary characters via the ways they think of Henry and the ways they narrate his tale, even if we see little of them from a more objective point of view. This parallaxing of Henry, however, is the book's biggest flaw, even as it is the book's biggest plus. This is because, save for the chapter narrated by Carson Mulvaney, the detective, all the rest of the chapters, told by disparate characters within the narrative, and without (in the form of a seemingly omniscient voice), are disappointedly off the rack; in terms of diction (whether words spoken by a narrator or 'written' journal entries) and observational power. As for their observations, Wallace describes things well and convincingly, but different people simply do not experience reality in the same ways, and this coherence is a sign, to an astute reader, that the fiction is baring its artifice.' Do you agree that the multiple narrators of the tale could have been more differentiated? Or did you have a reason for not doing so? Also, as the Carson Mulvaney section was, I felt, the best chapter in terms of style, have you ever thought of doing some satiric gumshoe sort of novel? I think you'd do it well, but I think it could have some real appeal in terms of the market, where 'lighter'- aka humorous works that spoof genres, seem to go over big.

DW: They could have been more differentiated. But I wanted all of them to tell the story *as if* Henry were telling it (I say this at the beginning of every chapter) sort of as if they were channeling him. I'm not drawn to books in which you have a new 'voice' to get used to every other chapter. Thanks for enjoying the Mulvaney chapter. The first take on that was much closer to the Chandler-esque hardboiled style I love, but it was so close that it was clear how much better Chandler is than me. So I had to change it up. I haven't thought about pursuing that style though in a bigger way. Until now . . .

DS: Finally, let me ask what advice you would give to young writers, and what is in store, in the next year or two, for you?

DW: Write, young writers. Enjoy writing. Love every word of every sentence as though it were a warm, living thing. Read widely. Have a life. Dig a ditch. Be kind to others.

DS: Thanks very much for this discourse, and let me allow you a closing statement, on whatever you like.

DW: Thank you very much for the opportunity to share some of my thoughts with you and your audience.