

David Foster Wallace on aestheticizing values

From an interview with Laura Miller on Salon.com, 9 March 1996

Miller: The characters [of *Infinite Jest*] have to struggle with the fact that the AA system is teaching them fairly deep things through these seemingly simplistic clichés.

Wallace: It's hard for the ones with some education, which, to be mercenary, is who this book is targeted at. I mean this is caviar for the general literary fiction reader. For me there was a real repulsion at the beginning. "One Day at a Time," right? I'm thinking 1977, Norman Lear, starring Bonnie Franklin. Show me the needlepointed sampler this is written on. But apparently part of addiction is that you need the substance so bad that when they take it away from you, you want to die. And it's so awful that the only way to deal with it is to build a wall at midnight and not look over it. Something as banal and reductive as "One Day at a Time" enabled these people to walk through hell, which from what I could see the first six months of detox is. That struck me.

It seems to me that the intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values in this country is one of the things that's gutted our generation. All the things that my parents said to me, like "It's really important not to lie." OK, check, got it. I nod at that but I really don't feel it. Until I get to be about 30 and I realize that if I lie to you, I also can't trust you. I feel that I'm in pain, I'm nervous, I'm lonely and I can't figure out why. Then I realize, "Oh, perhaps the way to deal with this is really not to lie." The idea that something so simple and, really, so aesthetically uninteresting — which for me meant you pass over it for the interesting, complex stuff — can actually be nourishing in a way that arch, meta, ironic, pomo stuff can't, that seems to me to be important. That seems to me like something our generation needs to feel.