Fit for a ‘King’

Though unfinished, unstructured and unpolished, David Foster Wallace’s posthumously published novel is an appropriate epitaph for a brilliant writer who had an abiding curiosity about ‘the gift of being alive’

• GLENN C. ALTSCHLER

When he killed himself in September 2008, after a lifelong struggle with depression, David Foster Wallace left behind hundreds of pages of a novel in-progress. Set in an Internal Revenue Service examination center in Peoria, Illinois, in 1985, the novel, like most of Wallace’s work, is full of footnotes, multiple narrators, shifting points of view, structural diffusion, ambiguites, inconsistencies and incongruities. As it describes mind-numbing, unpopular jobs — and the threat of replacing “distractible” and ethical agents with revenue-maximizing computers — The Pale King seeks to examine nothing less than modern consciousness and human connection.

Clearly the manuscript was not yet in final form. Set in an Internal Revenue Service examination center in Peoria, Illinois, in 1985, the novel, like most of Wallace’s work, is full of footnotes, multiple narrators, shifting points of view, structural diffusion, ambiguites, inconsistencies and incongruities. As it describes mind-numbing, unpopular jobs — and the threat of replacing “distractible” and ethical agents with revenue-maximizing computers — The Pale King seeks to examine nothing less than modern consciousness and human connection.

Nonetheless, there is enough — far more than enough — to merit publication. Assembled masterfully by Michael Pietsch, the editor of Wallace’s opus, Inifite Jest (1996), The Pale King is an ambitious and audacious, funny and philosophical novel, an appropriate epitaph for a brilliant writer who had an abiding curiosity about “the gift of being alive.”

Explored microscopically, with the perfect cast of characters (IRS agents) in an almost infinite regress of permutations and combinations, and a tone that is at once serious and satiric, Wallace’s theme is that happiness — a second-by-second curiosity about “the gift of being alive.”

A series of setups for a brilliant writer who had an abiding curiosity about “the gift of being alive.”

Wallace’s signature style, their exchange is packed with insights about conversation and communion, suppressed and expressed meanings, feelings and signals, lust and love, loneliness and longing. Convinced that she’s attractive to men only because she’s pretty, Rand, a self-mutilator, wonders whether “in reality everything is the surface.” Drinion, the consummate IRS man, has learned to “function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human,” to breathe while under water by concentrating on one thing only — his work. Anything but self-reflective, he doesn’t think he’s ever had “what you mean by a sexual attraction.” But as Rand tells her story (in what may be the first emotionally laden conversation he has ever had), it becomes clear that Drinion’s “expressionlessness” does not reflect a lack of interest. He is actually levitating slightly, with his bottom “floating slightly above the seat of his chair.” As if he is scrutinizing a complex tax return.

The Pale King is not for the faint-hearted, the action-oriented, the foes of clever self-referential paradoxes or postmodern metaphysical fiction. Although they are essential to a novel about boredom, Wallace’s digressions and ostentatious displays of knowledge, are, at times, boring. But make no mistake: In The Pale King, Wallace addresses head-on one of the most pressing and perplexing subjects in our contemporary world: the fate and the future of those of us who “till pre-existing forms.” And he pulls it off — imperfectly, to be sure, but in a work that is thought-provoking, side-splitting, terribly honest and deeply moving.

The writer is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin professor of American Studies at Cornell University.