

DFW's iron pen

By [Lawrence Wood](#)

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Job describes “an iron pen” with which words could be “engraved on a rock forever.” Few writers have such a pen. Even C. S. Lewis might well have been surprised that *The Screwtape Letters* has enjoyed such a long life.

Among those who loved that little novel was a large, shaggy, overeducated man-child in Bloomington, Illinois, named David Foster Wallace. One of the most admired writers of his generation, Wallace won a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” on the publication of his comic novel *Infinite Jest*. Infinite, indeed; it goes on for almost 1,100 pages, with still more jokes crammed into endnotes. Apparently this doorstop of a book weighed most heavily on Wallace, for he never could quite follow it up.

Wallace’s home in Bloomington was the opposite of Lewis’s. He painted his study entirely black. A glass of Lewis’s sherry would not have been a good idea, for he had a drinking problem. Wallace found the order and sustenance that he really needed in church, and he forever talked about religion to interviewers who wanted to change the subject. Fiction, he said, was “a conversation between me and God.”

Young readers seemed to worship Wallace; he found himself beloved by a generation for being serious and funny, but didn’t think himself worthy as he struggled with the next novel. He was much more concerned with nagging doubts. Would his books live? Would he? The more he brooded, the more *Screwtape*—or the screwed-up tapes in his head—took hold.

To the shock and dismay of all his friends, Wallace took his own life at the age of 46.

Perhaps an iron pen can be too heavy. The most influential storyteller of all time published nothing. Even a slender book seems huge compared to Jesus' stories, which he told in just a few words. Humor was a big part of his effect. He had a knack for turning situations inside out and springing surprises—for infinite jest.

Jesus fashioned some of the most provocative words the world has ever known, but he did not rely on words to do his most important work. How we deal with our mortality, in the light of faith, is our art. It is the most creative and dramatic thing about us.