

of this article, an *n+1* editor.

Some have celebrated this new economic cushion as liberation for the writer from the profit-driven marketplace of publishing. But any writer who leaves NYC for MFA will find that freeing herself of one market's pressures just places her under another's. In MFA-land, a prospective writer will first experience pressure to publish short stories in literary quarterlies, followed by a race to publish her thesis, and finally, the necessity of continuing to publish more stories, all while teaching a fresh crop of literary hopefuls.

For writers traveling in the world of MFA production, from classroom workshops to literary journals to anthologies, the form that gets studied and published is the short story. "At first glance," says the author, "this may seem like a kind of collective suicide, because everyone knows that no one reads short stories." But what "everyone" reads is not as important in MFA culture—the incentives to publish for a large audience aren't there. What matters is to get read by other MFA students and to have one's stories assigned as course work year after year. In the publishing world, by contrast, novels lose their spots at the bestseller table in a matter of weeks. ("The contemporary New York canon tends to be more *contemporary* than *canon*," the author smirks.) Paradoxically, the obscure short stories of a professor teaching in an MFA program may find a more enduring readership than an NYC writer's novel.

It remains to be seen, but MFA may have more staying power than NYC. "A business model that relies on tuition and tax revenue (the top six

MFA programs, according to *Poets & Writers*, are part of large public universities); the continued unemployment of twenty-somethings; and the continued hunger of undergraduates for undemanding classes does seem more forward-looking than one that relies on overflow income from superfluous books by celebrities, politicians, and their former lovers."

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## Crazy for Caravaggio

**THE SOURCE:** "Caravaggiomania" by Richard E. Spear, in *Art in America*, Dec. 2010.

IS THERE ANYTHING THAT wouldn't be improved by a dash of Caravaggio? No, apparently. In recent years Caravaggiomania has ripped and roared across the art world, reaching explosive proportions in 2010, the 400th anniversary of the Italian Baroque artist's

death. One exhibition in Rome drew more than 5,000 visitors daily and kept its doors open around the clock in the days before it closed. Marketers splash Caravaggio's name on everything, sometimes plausibly (for example, a "Caravaggio" canvas and painter's easel), but at times less so (Caravaggio-branded eyeglasses and Caravaggio "velvet effect decorative stucco"). And, of course, there is a Caravaggio iPhone app.

Art historian Richard E. Spear writes that Caravaggiomania was preceded by a period of increased scholarly interest beginning in the middle of the 20th century that has now spread to mass audiences. This, in Spear's opinion, is "positive," but he is not impressed with the reasons behind the public's adoration.

To begin with, many people confuse interest in Caravaggio's compelling life story with interest in his art. Michelangelo Merisi (his birth name) was born into



Caravaggio's cinematic style makes him a darling of modern viewers. Above, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*.

poverty in northern Italy in 1571. He murdered a rival in Rome, was imprisoned in Malta, escaped, took refuge in Sicily, and died in 1610 while making his way back to Rome in hopes of winning a papal pardon. His sexuality, education, and religious beliefs all remain subjects of speculation. Spear says that our culture “fetishizes” biography, and that it’s typical that artists who rise to star status have interesting backgrounds.

Though Caravaggio’s biography could draw crowds on its own, the “immediate and easy” nature of his work also plays a role. “This is not to imply that Caravaggio’s work fails to reward sustained looking, which surely it does, or that it appeals only to the populace or the 100 million who communicate in tweets,” Spears contends. The artist employs dramatic lighting and framing to lend a mystical quality to his human subjects, imbuing his paintings (about 60 exist that are definitively attributed to him) with a cinematic quality. Vittorio Storaro, a celebrated cinematographer, called Caravaggio “a great filmmaker.” Direc-

tor Martin Scorsese says that Caravaggio’s work has been influencing filmmakers since the late 1960s.

Spear believes that Caravaggio-omania will fade, as fads do—there’s just no telling when. Until that time, the masses can enjoy their Caravaggio T-shirts, key chains, and art exhibitions.

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## DFW 101

**THE SOURCES:** “The Afterlife of David Foster Wallace” by Jennifer Howard, in *The Chronicle Review*, Jan. 6, 2011, and “Our Psychic Living Room” by Rebekah Frumkin, in *The Common Review*, Fall–Winter 2010–2011.

WHEN THE CELEBRATED WRITER David Foster Wallace committed suicide in September 2008, at the age of 46, scholarship on his dense, footnote-laced fiction and nonfiction was sparse. Since then, academics have been hard at work filling the void, essentially making Wallace “the next canonized American writer.”

Academic studies of the literary lion have proliferated for a number of

reasons, writes Jennifer Howard, a senior reporter at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. One is that Wallace’s writing—typified by the 1,100-page *Infinite Jest* (1996), an “epic, ironic, lonely-in-the-crowd, cri de coeur of a novel”—has all the makings of scholarly fodder.

Wallace’s work also broke the prevailing literary mold. In the opinions of some ivory tower denizens, he moved beyond the abstruse post-modernism of Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Don DeLillo—American novelists who seemed to own the future of the canon in the 1970s and ’80s. Unlike these bleak writers, Wallace did not seek to unmask “the hollow hypocrisy of the bourgeois social order,” Marshall Boswell, an English professor at Rhodes College, tells Howard.

Writing in *The Common Review*, Rebekah Frumkin agrees, arguing that Wallace’s allure derives in part from how earnestly he writes about moral questions present-day American novelists have been reluctant to address directly. His fiction and essays take on a range of complex subjects (mathematics, drug addic-

## EXCERPT

## Try, Try Again

*As with the scientist, the chef, the parent, as with anyone caught up in the practice of art—that distillation of the human enterprise, which is, at its simplest, a business of paying attention—failure instructs the writer. Every novel, in the moments before we begin to write it, is potentially the greatest, the most beautiful or thrilling ever written; but in the*

*long dying fall after we have finished it (if we finish it), every novel affords us, with the generosity of a buffalo carcass affording meat, hide, bone, horn, and fat, the opportunity to measure precisely, at our leisure, the distance between it and that L’Enfantesque dream. Our greatest duty as artists and as humans is to pay attention to our failures, to break them down, study the tapes, conduct the postmortem, pore over the findings; to learn from our mistakes.*

—MICHAEL CHABON, author of six novels, including the Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier* and *Clay*, in *McSweeney’s* (Issue 36)