

*Introduction: Books and Culture*

from THE BOY WHO COULD CHANGE THE WORLD: THE WRITINGS OF AARON SWARTZ

After I wrote a draft of this introduction, I asked the Aaron in my head about it, and he yelled at me. *All you can say is that he liked books? How unoriginal! You need more This American Life-type details, things that sound irrelevant but aren't.* So I threw out that draft and started again.

Aaron was unafraid to throw things out and start again—laws, ideas, essays. You will not be surprised to know that he was obsessed with the craft of writing. (He was obsessed with a lot of things. That was Aaron.) He held Malcolm Gladwell the “scientist” in contempt, but he pored over Gladwell’s *Outliers* to understand how it worked. Writers he loved got even more attentive treatment. When Aaron found a passage he admired, he read it aloud “to get a feel for the sound of the voice.” His own literary voice was like his personality: nerdy, focused, funny, and a little pushy. No, very pushy: *Why are you wasting your time on things you’re good at? Lean into the pain.*

Aaron’s book reviews—and he wrote a lot of them—are pushy, too: *This book shocked and confused me. Read it.* Even when he loved a book, he argued with it, or told the author about the book she should have written. The reviews are funny, too. His gut punches come wrapped in punch lines. (Aaron’s entire review of *On Writing Well*: “This book is really dreadful, mostly because the author actually cannot write well.”)

Hyperarticulate, hyperkinetic, attuned to the black comedy of America’s contradictions, and with plenty of contradictions of his own, Aaron would have been the perfect subject for a David Foster Wallace profile. As it was, Aaron found a literary lodestar in the wordy moody warmhearted maddening saddening uplifting brilliant DFW. As a writer, Aaron played with imitating Wallace’s digressive footnote-freckled voice, but he quickly fell back into his own. As a reader, though, Aaron latched on to this grandmaster of seeing people as they really are and loving them nonetheless. Aaron maintained comprehensive Wikipedia bibliographies of DFW’s works and is responsible for the only truly convincing explanation I have seen of what happens at the end of Wallace’s thousand-page novel *Infinite Jest*: a masterful close reading he penned while busy with his usual million other things.

Later, Aaron would write, “DFW’s suicide hit me very hard. I ended up coping by reading every piece of nonfiction he’d ever published. He was a brilliant, tortured man and I see so much of myself in him. His nonfiction was fantastic and I will consider my life a success if I can do half of what he did.”

I would say that Aaron was the David Foster Wallace of his generation, but you already know how that story ends.

– James Grimmelmann