

What Happens at the End of Infinite Jest? (or, the Infinite Jest ending explained)

September 16, 2009

[Original link](#)

Herb: Is there no “ending” to “Infinite Book” because there couldn’t be? Or did you just get tired of writing it?

DFW: There is an ending as far as I’m concerned. Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an “end” can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book’s failed for you.

([Live Online with David Foster Wallace, May 17, 1996](#))

WARNING: This whole thing is one gigantic spoiler. Only read it if you’ve already tried to figure it out for yourself first.

Gately, having relived his bottom, begins to recover from his infection.

But at the same time, Hal’s condition deepens. Ever since Hal ate the mold as a child, he’s been a brilliant communicator but unable to feel. (694: “Hal himself hasn’t had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny ... in fact he’s far more robotic than John Wayne.”) JOI was the only one who could see it. In life, everyone thought JOI was just being crazy but in death (as a wraith) he can actually read Hal’s thoughts and thus confirm his view.

In life he created the Entertainment to draw Hal out (Hal moves outwardly but doesn’t feel inside; victims of the Entertainment feel—something—inside but don’t move outwardly). After all, as he tells Gately, he was willing to resort to desperate measures: “No! *No! Any* conversation or interchange [between father and son] is better than none at all.” (839)

JOI’s wraith is responsible for the strange disturbances around ETA — tripods in the forest, moving Ortho’s bed, ceiling tiles on the floor. He knocks the ceiling tiles down in an attempt to find the DMZ. Pemulis is too distracted with getting expelled to have Hal take it, so JOI needs to get it to Hal some other way.

JOI also created DMZ as part of an attempt to undo the effects of Hal’s eating mold as a child (recall: DMZ is a mold that grows on a mold). He left it along with the Entertainment (recall: ETA kids find JOI’s personal effects (670: “a bulky old doorless microwave...a load of old TP cartridges...mostly unlabelled”); the tapes and the DMZ are delivered together to the FLQ) which is about this

goal (it stars a woman named Madame Psychosis (a street name for DMZ) explaining that the thing that killed you in your last life will give birth to you in the next). The DMZ and the Entertainment were meant to go together for Hal. Now that the Entertainment has escaped, he needs to get Hal the DMZ.

Hal never leaves his toothbrush unattended (870), but that's no problem for a wraith. He places the DMZ on Hal's brush and Hal brushes his teeth (860) and immediately begins experiencing symptoms: Ortho thinks Hal's crying when Hal thinks he's speaking in a neutral tone (862).

Hal's symptoms indeed begin to reverse: he is now unable to properly communicate feelings (people see him as either laughing hysterically or terribly sad) but beginning to actually feel (like Gately, he spends a lot of time lying on the floor thinking about the past — the hero of nonaction from his essay (142)). While before, everyone could hear him *except* JOI; now *only* JOI can hear him (since, as with Gately, he can hear Hal's thoughts).

By the time of the match, his symptoms are so bad he's taken by ambulance to the hospital (16: "the only other emergency room I have ever been in [was] almost exactly one year back"), safely escaping the A.F.R.'s assault. Like fellow student Otis P. Lord, he gets the bed next to Gately. Joelle (who is at the hospital for a meeting) visits Gately on her way out and recognizes Hal. She tells them both about the hunt for the lethal Entertainment and the resulting Continental Emergency and they all go to dig up JOI's grave. They persuade John Wayne, a spy for the A.F.R., to become a double agent and help sneak them into JOI's Quebec burial site. Wayne presumably tells the A.F.R. he is actually a triple agent — that he will steal the tape as soon as Hal digs it up. But, as with Marathe, his loyalties are ultimately even-numbered (n40). The A.F.R. finds out and brutally murders him, which is why he can't win the WhataBurger (16f).

As Gately forsees:

he's with a very sad kid and they're in a graveyard digging some dead guy's head up and it's really important, like Continental-Emergency important, and Gately's the best digger but he's wicked hungry, like irresistibly hungry, and he's eating with both hands out of huge economy-size bags of corporate snacks so he can't really dig, while it gets later and later and the sad kid is trying to scream at Gately that the important thing was buried in the guy's head and to divert the Continental Emergency to start digging the guy's head up before it's too late, but the kid moves his mouth but nothing comes out, and Joelle van D. appears ... while the sad kid holds something terrible up by the hair and makes the face of somebody shouting in panic: *Too Late*. (934)

It's too late because someone got there first and took the anti-Entertainment cartridge (126) embedded in JOI's head (31). Whoever took it is presumably the

person who's made and mailed the extant copies. It couldn't be the A.F.R. or O.U.S. or they wouldn't still be searching for it. It probably wasn't the F.L.Q. because they didn't know how to read master cartridges—they just thought they were blank tapes in their displays were blank. (483n205) It couldn't be Avril acting alone; she has problems but she's not that kind of cold-blooded killer. It had to have been Orin.¹

Orin (who never attended his father's funeral) went to the gravesite and dug up his father, releasing the wraith in the process. (244: "After a burial, rural Papineau-region Québécois purportedly drill a small hole down from ground level all the way down through the lid of the coffin, to let out the soul, if it wants out.") Orin, who is such a partisan of his father that he feels the need to repeatedly ruin the lives of people like his mother, has been mailing the tapes to his father's enemies in revenge: disapproving film critics in Berkeley and the medical attaché (whose affair with his mother drove Himself especially wild) in Boston. It's possible he's being influenced by the wraith in these actions.

After the A.F.R. releases roaches into his giant glass tumbler, Orin cuts a deal with the A.F.R. and gives them the tape in return for letting him live. (He's apparently still alive on p. 14.) The A.F.R. uses the tape to set off some sort of intracontinental conflagration (16: "some sort of ultra-mach fighter too high overhead to hear slices the sky from south to north") which apparently topples the Gentle administration (n114: "[Y.G. is] the very last year of Subsidized Time").

As seen in Chapter 1, Hal's condition deepens until he literally can't communicate at all, but no longer feels like a robot anymore. (12: "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe.") The only thing he has left is tennis and he looks forward to playing Ortho Stice in the final match of the WhataBurger. But Stice is possessed by his father (in the manuscript, Stice is called "the Wraithster"), so the novel ends as Hal finally gets to really interface with his father — in the only way he has left.

Thanks to [Jeff Halley](#) and [Joe Giacona](#) for help with the part about the DMZ.

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1. Recall that "the padded mailer [received by the attaché] is postmarked suburban Phoenix area in Arizona U.S.A." (36) Also, Orin mentions being "in line in the post office" even though, as Hal points out, "You hate snail-mail. And you quit mailing the Moms the pseudo-form-replies two years ago." (244) Orin doesn't reply to that.

And: "There was reason to think M. DuPlessis had received his original copies from this relative, an athlete. ... [He] may have borne responsibility for the razzles and dazzles of Berkeley and Boston, U.S.A." (723) The other appearances of the Entertainment are New Iberia LA (Orin played football in New Orleans LA) and Tempe AZ (Orin lives in Phoenix AZ). (Thanks to [Greg Carlisle](#), p. 477, for catching these.)