

JESSE EISENBERG (LEFT) AND JASON SEGEL IN *THE END OF THE TOUR*

JUST A REGULAR GUY

A portrait of the writer as a celebrity in *The End of the Tour*

There was a time, not all that long ago, when writers could become cultural icons in this society — endangered emissaries who, like canaries in a coal mine, sniff out the poison seeping from the rank spigots of our popular culture. The late, great David Foster Wallace was such an author. Wallace's prose, a kind of rococo thicket that belied deep veins of compassion and understanding, acted as a funhouse mirror reflecting back our malaise in a discursive, catch-all style that was frustrating, assaultive, revelatory and liberating, often all at once.

Wallace is the subject of director James Ponsoldt's wonderfully observed new film, *The End of the Tour*. Based on David Lipsky's memoir *Although of Course You*

End Up Becoming Yourself, the movie is little more than a chamber piece for two: Lipsky (Jesse Eisenberg) is sent by *Rolling Stone* during the winter of 1996 to join Wallace (Jason Segel) at the tail end of a book tour for his epic novel *Infinite Jest*, which has become a huge (figuratively and, at 1,000-plus pages, literally) hit with the literati.

Despite the narrowness of the film's focus and the seeming singleness of its intent — i.e., reporter profiles famous writer — what ensues between Wallace and Lipsky is intricately fascinating and oddly moving. As Lipsky doggedly, and a bit enviously, peppers Wallace with question after question about writing and fame, the two engage in a complicated jujitsu of understanding, part baffled discovery, part struggling self-definition.

Lipsky, who just published his first novel to little acclaim, wants to unearth the intimate secrets of Wallace's genius; Wallace, uncomfortable with his newfound celebrity, insists he's nothing special, just a regular guy with a knack for portraying the confusions of his own mind. "There's nothing more grotesque than somebody going around saying, 'I'm a writer, I'm a writer, I'm a writer,'" Wallace says at one point, revealing his discomfort with the sudden attention he's getting.

And, over the course of a handful of frustrating, assaultive, revelatory and liberating days, a tentative yet tender friendship develops.

The End of the Tour is the unlikeliest of cinematic endeavors: a film about a pair of very interesting guys sitting around — at home, in cars, in hotel rooms — talking about art, fame, the wages of creativity, the pitfalls of success and the delights of *Die Hard*, junk food and Alanis Morissette.

And it's riveting. Ponsoldt, whose 2013 film *The Spectacular Now* was one of the sleeper hits of the year, has the perfect touch for this stuff; he treats the evolution of the two writers' relationship as a really smart buddy film. The dialogue, culled from Lipsky's memoir, is both sharp and full of unreconstructed vernacular. When Wallace teasingly calls Lipsky a "dick brain," the combination of deprecation and warmth is just right.

Wallace killed himself in 2008 at the age of 46. *The End of the Tour* captures the bittersweet sadness of this loss, but the movie never mucks about in the easy tragedy of yet another suicided artist.

Rather, the film celebrates Wallace's humanity: his playfulness, his fears, his eccentricity, his ordinariness and, yes, his brilliance. It neither dismantles nor construes a myth. And by staying so close to the ground, and thanks to strong performances by Eisenberg and especially Segel, it triumphs as a work of art. ■

The End of the Tour opens Friday, Aug. 21, at Bijou Art Cinemas.

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Sun	12:30, 2:50, 5:10, 7:30
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