

AN ARGUMENT FOR AUTHENTICITY

a review by Elaine Thomas

Daniel Wallace. *This Isn't Going to End Well*. Algonquin Books, 2023.

ELAINE THOMAS grew up in rural Richmond County and has lived in North Carolina towns across the Piedmont and on the coast. Her home currently is Wilmington. With an MDiv from Duke and a BA from St. Andrews Presbyterian College, she's been a hospital chaplain, journalist, and college communications director. She's the 2018 winner of the Rose Post Nonfiction competition of the North Carolina Writers' Network. She also received second prize in the 2022 short story contest for Living Springs Publishers' *Stories Through the Ages*. Her short stories, essays, and book reviews have appeared in numerous publications.

DANIEL WALLACE is the author of eight novels, including *Big Fish* (Algonquin Books, 1998), which was made into a motion picture by Tim Burton in 2003. (Barbara Bennett published an essay about the film adaptation in *NCLR Online* 2019). His short stories have appeared in more than fifty magazines and periodicals and have been included in a number of anthologies. He is also the J. Ross MacDonald Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at UNC Chapel Hill, his alma mater. Born in Birmingham, AL, he was awarded the Harper Lee Award for Alabama's Distinguished Writer of the Year in 2019 and was inducted into the Alabama Writers Hall of Fame in 2022. Read a short story by him in *NCLR* 2013.



COURTESY OF JEN WHITE

Loss brings grief, and Daniel Wallace's *This Isn't Going to End Well* deals with a particularly complicated form of grief. The facts of what happened aren't a mystery. He tells you right up front, in an author's note, that this is a story of the life and death (by suicide, at age forty-eight) of his brother-in-law, close friend, and boyhood hero, William Nealy. But, as implied by the subtitle, "The True Story of a Man I Thought I Knew," mystery aplenty lies beneath the surface facts. A cool exterior and surface success hid much, even from those who seemed to know Nealy best. Who, *really*, was William Nealy? Wallace's

search for a bearable answer to that question provides a psychologically compelling tale, written by a master storyteller. (Wallace, after all, is the guy who gave us *Big Fish*.)

Wallace was twelve years old the first time he saw William Nealy, the boyfriend of his older sister Holly. Unaware that he was being observed, Nealy climbed onto the roof of the Wallace house and leapt into the swimming pool below, about twenty-five feet away. "Then he got out of the pool, climbed the house, and did it again" (5). This opening scene establishes the tone and tenor of the friendship that would develop between

them. The epitome of cool and the embodiment of action without hesitation, Nealy instantly became young Wallace's hero: "William was so alive, more alive than I was or would ever be. He flew, and I, who couldn't, just watched" (7).

The boy is soon accepted and befriended by this larger-than-life hero. The two of them eventually become family. Wallace grows into manhood watching Nealy navigate cultural experiences that represented hip masculinity in the early 1970s. He observes and learns, from simple things such as smoking pot and drinking beer, to far more complicated cultural expectations of emotional detachment and hidden sensitivity: "I thought of him as the child of James Dean, Albert Camus, Ernest Hemingway, Keith Richards, Satan, G.I. Joe, and of course, Clint Eastwood." William, with Holly, takes young Daniel to his first rock concert (Alice Cooper) and to movies, including *The Man with No Name*, which features Clint Eastwood in top squinting, unreachable, unreadable form. "What was going on behind Eastwood's eyes?" he asks himself, looking back (41).

Wallace viewed Nealy as a talented Renaissance man, one who could still fly, a model he himself wanted to become. Nealy found success publishing books of original drawings, cartoons, and maps. He became an icon of sorts, "a star in the subculture of adrenaline sports aficionados throughout the

Southeast and, eventually, across the globe" (108). No one seemed to detect any signs of a coming suicide.

This Isn't Going to End Well raises some unusual, and in this case poignant, whose-story-is-it questions. Though it centers on William Nealy's choices and actions, there are four principal characters: William, his wife (and Wallace's sister) Holly, Wallace, and their friend Edgar Hitchcock. Holly, who suffered from severe arthritis, diabetes, and a host of other physical challenges, died in 2011, ten years after Nealy. Hitchcock died far earlier in an unrelated incident. All the principals are deceased except the author, who is left with the unanswered questions of the larger story that by default has become his. Make no mistake, it is solely from his own perspective that Wallace writes. The puzzlement and the pain and anger live on with him, and it is in trying to resolve them that he delves into the details of Nealy's life from childhood through adulthood.

Is it even possible to understand the hidden inner workings of another person, particularly one who wishes not to be fully seen? Only the discovery of Nealy's journals – and wrestling with extremely difficult ethical questions about whether or not to read them – eventually revealed Nealy's lifelong desire to kill himself: "[T]his had been William's struggle from the beginning. He was most alive when he was closest to death" (223).

A shiny veneer may obstruct one's view of what's inside: "[W]ho was I really following: William, or his shadow?" (155). In the struggle to understand his friend (and, by extension, himself), Wallace exhibits an authentic interior courage. It's easy to feel empathy for both men. In the end, though, this is indeed Wallace's story, and the reader awaits the author's recognition and acknowledgment that, despite the impact of Nealy on his own life, their inner realities differ.

Wallace writes so smoothly and with such engrossing descriptive skill that *This Isn't Going to End Well* reads quickly. That, too, can serve as a kind of metaphor for a surface that doesn't necessarily reveal all that's hidden in the heart, in this case the heart of the story. Or perhaps it reflects how quickly life goes by. You may finish this book faster than you expected, but I predict you'll find yourself thinking about *This Isn't Going to End Well* long after you've finished. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY LERA SHAWER; COURTESY OF BOOKMARKS

ABOVE Daniel Wallace and Lee Smith at the Pack Memorial Library in Asheville, NC, 2 May 2023

RIGHT Daniel Wallace reading at Bookmarks in Winston-Salem, NC, 25 Apr. 2023