

In a section of Wallace's essay on cruise ships, he provides an insightfully accurate discussion on the difference between Advertisements and Essays.

David Foster Wallace

A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again (287-290)

Did I mention that famous writer and Iowa Writers Workshop Chairperson Frank Conroy has his own experiential essay about cruising right there in Celebrity's 7NC brochure? Well he does, and the thing starts out on the Pier 21 gangway that first Saturday with his family:

With that single, easy step, we entered a new world, a sort of alternate reality to the one on shore. Smiles, handshakes, and we were whisked away to our cabin by a friendly young woman from Guest Relations. Then they're outside along the rail for the Nadirs sailing:

Then they're outside along the rail for the Nadirs sailing.

... We became aware that the ship was pulling away. We had felt no warning, no trembling of the deck, throbbing of the engines or the like. It was as if the land were magically receding, like some ever-so-slow reverse zoom in the movies.

This is pretty much what Conroy's whole "My Celebrity Cruise, or '*All This and a Tan, Too*' " is like. Its full implications didn't hit me until I reread it supine on Deck 12 the first sunny day. Conroy's essay is graceful and lapidary and attractive and assuasive. I submit that it is also completely sinister and despair-producing and bad. Its badness does not consist so much in its constant and mesmeric references to fantasy and alternate realities and the palliative powers of pro pampering-

I'd come on board after two months of intense and moderately stressful work, but now it seemed a distant memory.

I realized it had been a week since I'd washed a dish, cooked a meal, gone to the market, done an errand or, in fact, anything at all requiring a minimum of thought and effort. My toughest decisions had been whether to catch the afternoon showing of Mrs. Doubtfire or play bingo.

- nor in the surfeit of happy adjectives, nor so much in the tone of breathless approval throughout -

For all of us, our fantasies and expectations were to be exceeded, to say the least.

When it comes to service, Celebrity Cruises seems ready and able to deal with anything.

Bright sun, warm still air, the brilliant blue-green of the Caribbean under the vast lapis lazuli dome of the sky

The training must be rigorous, indeed, because the truth is, the service was impeccable, and impeccable in every aspect from the cabin steward to the sommelier, from the on-deck waiter to the Guest Relations manager, from the ordinary seaman who goes out of his way to get your deck chair to the third mate who shows you the way to the library. It is hard to imagine a more professional, polished operation, and I doubt that many in the world can equal it.

Rather, part of the essay's real badness can be found in the way it reveals once again the Megaline's sale-to-sail agenda of micromanaging not only one's perceptions of a 7NC Luxury Cruise but even one's own interpretation and articulation of those perceptions. In other words, Celebrity's PR people go and get one of the U.S.A's most respected writers to pre-articulate and -endorse the 7NC experience, and to do it with a

professional eloquence and authority that few lay perceivers and articulators could hope to equal.³⁶

But the really major badness is that the project and placement of "My Celebrity Cruise ... " are sneaky and duplicitous and far beyond whatever eroded pales still exist in terms of literary ethics. Conroy's "essay" appears as an insert, on skinnier pages and with different margins from the rest of the brochure, creating the impression that it has been excerpted from some large and objective thing Conroy wrote. But it hasn't been. The truth is that Celebrity Cruises paid Frank Conroy up-front to write it,³⁷ even though nowhere in or around the essay is there anything acknowledging that it's a paid endorsement, not even one of the little "So-and-so has been compensated for his services" that flashes at your TV screen's lower right during celebrity-hosted infomercials. Instead, inset on this weird essaymercial's first page is an author-photoish shot of Conroy brooding in a black turtleneck, and below the photo is an author-bio with a list of Conroy's books that includes the 1967 classic *Stop-Time*, which is arguably the best literary memoir of the twentieth century and is one of the books that first made poor old yours truly want to try to be a writer.

In other words, Celebrity Cruises is presenting Conroy's review of his 7NC Cruise as an essay and not a commercial. This is extremely bad. Here is the argument for why it's bad. Whether it honors them well or not, an essay's fundamental obligations are supposed to be to the reader. The reader, on however unconscious a level, understands this, and thus tends to approach an essay with a relatively high level of openness and credulity. But a commercial is a very different animal. Advertisements have certain formal, legal obligations to truthfulness, but these are broad enough to allow for a great deal of rhetorical maneuvering in the fulfillment of an advertisement's primary obligation, which is to serve the financial interests of its sponsor. Whatever attempts an advertisement makes to interest and appeal to its readers are not, finally, for the reader's benefit. And the reader of an ad knows all this, too - that an ad's appeal is by its very nature *calculated* - and this is part of why our state of receptivity is different, more guarded, when we get ready to read an ad.³⁸

In the case of Frank Conroy's "essay," Celebrity Cruises³⁹ is trying to position an

ad in such a way that we come to it with the lowered guard and leading chin we properly reserve for coming to an essay, for something that is art (or that is at least trying to be art). An ad that pretends to be art is-at absolute best-like somebody who smiles warmly at you only because he wants something from you. This is dishonest, but what's sinister is the cumulative effect that such dishonesty has on us: since it offers a perfect facsimile or simulacrum of goodwill without goodwill's real spirit, it messes with our heads and eventually starts upping our defenses even in cases of genuine smiles and real art and true goodwill. It makes us feel confused and lonely and impotent and angry and scared. It causes despair.⁴⁰

At any rate, for this particular 7NC consumer, Conroy's ad-as-essay ends up having truthfulness about it that I'm quite sure is unintentional. As my week on the Nadir wore on, I began to see this essaymercial as a perfect ironic reflection of the mass-market-Cruise experience itself. The essay is polished, powerful, impressive, clearly the best that money can buy. It presents itself as for my benefit. It manages my experiences and my interpretation of those experiences and takes care of them in advance for me. It seems to care about me. But it doesn't, not really, because first and foremost it wants something from me. So does the Cruise itself. The pretty setting and glittering ship and dashing staff and sedulous servants and solicitous fun-managers all want something from me, and it's not just the price of my ticket-they've already got that. Just what it is that they want is hard to pin down, but by early in the week I can feel it, and building: it circles the ship like a fin.

FOOTNOTES

³⁵ Conroy took the same Luxury Cruise as I, the Seven-Night Western Caribbean on the good old Nadir, in May '94. He and his family cruised for free. I know details like this because Conroy talked to me on the phone, and answered nosy questions, and was frank and forthcoming and in general just totally decent-seeming about the whole thing

³⁶ E.g. after reading Conroy's essay on board, whenever I'd look up at the sky it wouldn't be the sky I was seeing, it was the vast lapis lazuli dome of the sky.

³⁷ Pier 21 having seasoned me as a recipient of explanatory/justificatory narratives, I was able to make some serious journalistic phone inquiries about how Professor Conroy's essaymercial came to be, yielding two separate narratives:

(1) From Celebrity Cruises's PR liaison Ms. Wiessen (after a two-day silence that I've come to understand as the PR-equivalent of covering the microphone with your hand and leaning over to confer w/ counsel): "Celebrity saw an article he wrote in *Travel and Leisure* magazine, and they were really impressed with how he could create these mental postcards, so they went to ask him to write about his Cruise experience for people who'd never been on a Cruise before, and they did pay him to write the article, and they really took a gamble, really, because he'd never been on a Cruise before, and they had to pay him whether he liked it or not, and whether they liked the article or not, but ... [dry little chuckle] obviously they liked the article, and he did a good job, so that's the Mr. Conroy story, and those are his perspectives on his experience."

(2) From Frank Conroy (with the small sigh that precedes a certain kind of weary candor): "I prostituted myself."

³⁸ This is the reason why even a really beautiful, ingenious, powerful ad (of which there are a lot) can never be any kind of real art: an ad has no status as gift, i.e. it's never really *for* the person it's directed at.

³⁹ (with the active complicity of Professor Conroy, I'm afraid)

⁴⁰ This is related to the phenomenon of the Professional Smile, a national pandemic in the service industry; and noplac in my experience have I been on the receiving end of as many Professional Smiles as I am on the *Nadir*: maitre d's, Chief Stewards, Hotel Managers' minions, Cruise Director- their P.S.'s all come on like switches at my approach. But also back on land at banks, restaurants, airline ticket counters, on and on. You know this smile- the strenuous contraction of circumoral fascia w/ incomplete zygomatic involvement- the smile that doesn't quite reach the smiler's eyes and that signifies nothing more than a calculated attempt to advance the smiler's own interests by pretending to like the smilee. Why do employers and supervisors force professional service people to broadcast the Professional Smile? Am I the only consumer in whom high doses of such a smile produce despair? Am I the only person who's sure that the growing number of cases in which totally average-looking people suddenly open up with automatic weapons in shopping malls and insurance offices and medical complexes and McDonald'ses is somehow causally related to the fact that these venues are well-known dissemination-loci of the Professional Smile?

Who do they think is fooled by the Professional Smile?

And yet the Professional Smile's absence now *also* causes despair. Anybody who's ever bought a pack of gum in a Manhattan cigar store or asked for something to be stamped FRAGILE at a Chicago post office or tried to obtain a glass of water from a South Boston waitress knows well the soul-crushing effect of a service worker's scowl, i.e. the humiliation and resentment of being denied the Professional Smile. And the Professional Smile has by now skewed even my resentment at the dreaded Professional Scowl: I walk away from the Manhattan tobacconist resenting not the counterman's character or absence of goodwill but his lack of *professionalism* in denying me the Smile. What a fucking mess.