

## Interview: Jason Segel on the Origins of 'The End of the Tour'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on August 5, 2015 - 3:30pm

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CHICAGO – Jason Segel is a real mensch. The tall and angular actor is open, active and caring about his career, and he fulfills another part of his performance evolution in director James Ponsoldt's "The End of the Tour." Segel portrays author David Foster Wallace, when he appeared on behalf of his 1996 novel "Infinite Jest."

"The End of the Tour" focuses on four days in the life of Wallace, as a Rolling Stone magazine reporter named David Lipsky (Jesse Eisenberg) follows Wallace around as he makes one last stop on his book tour for "Infinite Jest." It's basically about the two men as they interact, jousting upon the issues in the book, Wallace's choices in his modest lifestyle and how some encounters on the tour in Minnesota add another dynamic to their relationship.



Jason Segel as David Foster Wallace in 'The End of the Tour'

Photo credit: A24

Jason Segel is one of most familiar and popular actors of the current era. He was born in Los Angeles, and caught the acting bug while in high school (see story below). He made his TV debut on one of the most endeared cult shows in the medium's history, "Freaks and Geeks," produced by comedy titan Judd Apatow and created by Paul Feig ("Bridesmaids"). After TV roles in "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" and "Undeclared," he landed on the sitcom he's best known for, "How I Met Your Mother," which ran from 2005 to 2014 on CBS.

Segel also remained part of the "Judd Apatow gang" and had a role in the Apatow-directed "Knocked Up" (2007). From there, he wrote and

starred in "Forgetting Sarah Marshall" (which later spawned "Get Him to the Greek"), and was featured in "I Love You Man," "Despicable Me" and "The Five Year Engagement." He also was instrumental in the revival of Jim Henson's beloved gang when he and writing partner Nicholas Stoller produced a reboot of "The Muppets." Segel also is an author, having released last year his first Young Adult novel – written with Kristen Miller – entitled "Nightmares."

HollywoodChicago.com spoke to Jason Segel during a promotional stop for "The End of the Tour," and his sincerity and care regarding the legacy of David Foster Wallace is evident in his perspective.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** When portraying a real person, there has to be a moment in your research in which you find a key element of that person to base your performance on. What was that moment for you in regards to David Foster Wallace?

**Jason Segel:** It was about reading 'Infinite Jest.' and the knowledge that I have about press tours myself, because I've done a lot of them. I know that what I'm thinking and talking about on a daily basis is what the press tour is for – I'm a different guy doing a tour for 'The Muppets' than I am doing this.

I also knew this wasn't a biography picture, it's the last four days on the book tour for his novel 'Infinite Jest.' I knew that what Wallace was thinking about and talking about actively for the last few months – let alone writing for the three years previous to that – was 'Infinite Jest,' and the themes were in that book. And to me it was about what we've been told will make us feel satisfied, is leaving a lot of people feeling empty.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What did you find specifically in the book that spoke about that theme for you?

**Segel:** It led to this idea that if it's about achievement – which is paralleled in the book in the 'Tennis Academy' passages – that for Wallace it's about the book itself. It is a thousand pages long, and if achievement is for an author to write and publish a book, then it should be a satisfying achievement. But he still feels the same as a person, and that's a scary point – that's what some people would call a midlife existential crisis.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How was director James Ponsoldt the right choice to tell this story, as you observed the process of production with him? What do you admire about the way he handles a set?

**Segel:** The way he handles a set is an easy answer. Everyone involved is an equal, and especially when shooting a movie at this budget level, is a feeling that is essential. Because nobody there was working for a paycheck. There are some environments, when I'm doing a bit studio movie, that you can tell that some people care, and others are just there because it's a good job. There's nothing wrong with that.

We shot this movie in negative 15 degree temperatures in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with many scenes outside. And you're there because you love it. James treats everyone in that way, we were there because we love it. That keeps crew morale up even in times, honestly, when it shouldn't be that way.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How did that translate into his appropriateness for telling the story?

**Segel:** The reason that James is right for telling this story is that similarly in 'Smashed' and 'The Spectacular Now' [previous Ponsoldt films], this movie in particular doesn't have big plot movements. What James is a genius at is creating tension in subtle character dynamics. When I saw the film, there were moments where I thought, 'you're just going to stay on Jesse's face while my character was talking?' But that was smart, because you see something registering in Jesse's eyes. If the audience doesn't see that, then nothing has happened in the scene.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Going back into the recent past of 1996 had to be interesting, since you experienced as a teenager. What did you, Jesse and James talk about in regard to that recent past, as a setting and circumstance for the characters?

**Segel:** We spent a lot of time being personally devastated that 1996 was 20 years ago. [laughs] Honestly, it came up more than once – it breaks my heart. One of the things James has cited, which was really interesting, was that oftentimes in period movies, especially ones that occur in the recent past, there is a tendency to only play music from that year, or only reference stuff from that year, as if that year wasn't build on any past except what was in 1996.

It was important for James to have it be realistic, for example having cars on the road before the 1996 model year, and music from other years. Although it is reflective of pop culture at that moment, we also tried to make it a slice of life.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You recently published a book of Young Adult fiction, and are a screenwriter of note. What experiences as a working writer were you able to relive in your portrayal of Wallace?

**Segel:** I think one of things that 'being a writer' helped with – and nobody would think of this unless they were a writer – was the fact that the process of writing is a very lonely business, unless you have a partner. It's a lot of nights where you have to say, 'no, I can't meet you for dinner.' Those are lonely nights. For a script, it's a couple of months of lonely nights.

To write 'Infinite Jest,' this thousand page book, it's so many nights of 'no, I can't meet you for dinner.' And the other thing about that is about clinging to the belief that what you are writing is worth it. That people are going to want to read it, that there is value in it. To hold onto that feeling for years takes a very particular personality type.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What led you to that conclusion, based on your life as a creative person?

**Segel:** What I've thought about the arts in general, that despite all the different types of people, there is one common thread – what you are privately thinking, and what you have to express in the creative process, is worth enough so other people will eventually pay attention to it when it's done.



Jason Segel Photographed in 2014 on the Book Tour for his Novel "Nightmares"

*Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is your opinion on Wallace's depression, and what is your opinion on the state of psychotropic medications that are used to mainline a person's state of being?

**Segel:** My answer is my actual opinion – I don't think I am educated enough to really have an intelligent opinion about the pharmaceutical drug aspect of depression. It's an incredibly easy thing to have an opinion, it's a much harder thing to have an informed opinion.

What I do think David Foster Wallace expressed exceptionally about depression is beautifully written in 'Infinite Jest, and that passage in the book was even in the movie. He makes the metaphor about people jumping out of a burning building. And he asks, in terms of defining suicide, what could be so terrifying about jumping out of burning building as an escape from it? That's a very poignant way of describing the depth of depression.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Were there other passages in the book that spoke like that?

**Segel:** There is a part where a girl in the book gets brought to the hospital after a failed suicide attempt, and the doctor asks her why she wanted to hurt herself. She says you don't understand, I wasn't trying to hurt myself, I was trying to end the pain. I think both of those instances illuminate what people with depression go through.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What play or performance in your early years convinced you that would attempt acting as a career, and what was it

about that particular instance that spurred the thought?

**Segel:** That's an easy one for me. The way I got started was a confluence of circumstances. I went to a high school that had a great drama department. I was an athlete at the time, but I also had a talent for memorizing things.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** That's a good tool to have in your profession.

**Segel:** Yeah! [laughs] But I wasn't acting at this point, I was going to school. I would pass by the theater department on the way to art history class – and I found art history class to be boring – so I would take a play off the shelf and read it during art history class. I read this play called 'The Zoo Story' by Edward Albee, and it had a 20 page monologue in it. I had this thought, 'I'd like to see if I could memorize that.'

So I asked the head of the theater department if I could perform the entire play, and I put it on for two nights. Without telling me, the head of the theater department invited the President of Casting at Paramount Pictures. The next thing I knew, I was an actor.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What satisfies you the most regarding the cult status of 'Freaks and Geeks,' given how hidden the show seemed to be in its initial run, and how would you envision a reunion of those characters, based on who they were?

**Segel:** What I like most about the show is the same thing I like about The Muppets, the particular concept that a group of weirdos make a family. Somebody said that in The Muppets, and that's how I felt when I did 'Freaks and Geeks.' We were a bunch of underdogs coming together, with the naivete of youth – we were kids – and we just said to each other we're going to make this awesome. We didn't realize at the time that this was a hard thing, and that there are a million moving parts.

It's interesting, because of that point of view, that show is awesome. And then of course we were hit with the hard reality that it was canceled before we finished the full season. [laughs] The reunion would be an interesting thing.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The creator of the show, Paul Feig, told me he couldn't afford it now.

**Segel:** [Laughs] That was a terrific answer. As for me, in terms of a reunion, the show was really honest. I don't know if there would be a happy ending for some of those characters. Where those characters end up twenty years later, might be sadder than people anticipate.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** It's not often asked of notable folks in show business, but who is the coolest person you personally have got to meet because of your status in the business?

**Segel:** I got to meet President Barack Obama. That's about as cool as it gets. When he came into the room, the first thing he said to me was, 'I love you man,' because I had just done that film. And I somehow responded, 'I love you too, Mr. President.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Given the circumstances and person as you know him to be, do you think that the suicide of David Foster Wallace was inevitable, given his state of being?

**Segel:** I just didn't know Mr. Wallace well enough to answer that question.

*"The End of the Tour" continues its nationwide release in Chicago on August 7th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Jason Segel, Jesse Eisenberg, Anna Chlumsky, Ron Livingston and Joan Cusack. Screenplay by Donald Margulies, based on a book by David Lipsky. Directed by James Ponsoldt. Rated "R"*



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**Source URL (retrieved on Sep 21 2024 - 7:17am):**

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