

TOM WOLFE

"To me, the great joy of writing is discovering. Most writers are told to write about what they know, but I still love the adventure of going out and reporting on things I don't know about."

—Tom Wolfe, *Guardian*, 1/20/08

BY JESSICA TEISCH

FOR MORE THAN FOUR DECADES, Tom Wolfe has challenged the way Americans perceive themselves. No one—hippies, astronauts, California surfers, New York “aristocrats,” stock car racers, hip-hop rappers, Wall Street bankers, real estate tycoons—is immune to his witty, scathing, admiring, bloated, eloquent, and heavily exclamatory(!) and italicized journalistic exposés on American culture. Indeed, under Wolfe’s pen, “the right stuff,” “the Me Decade,” “good ol’ boy,” and “radical chic” became household words as he examined—and skewered—popular culture, architecture, fashion, politics, capitalism, and the transformation of postwar life.

Wolfe’s energetic and satiric vision lends a barbed lightness to much of his nonfiction and fiction—from his first collection of New Journalism essays, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965), to the best-selling social realism novel, *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987). But underneath his trademark dandyish ivory suit, pop journalism, and self-publicizing lies a deeply moral, traditional, and conservative ethos. It is this vision that informs Wolfe’s understanding of the obsessions, the politics, the pathos, and the vanities of our era.

Wolfe was born in Richmond, Virginia, a segregated city that informed the racial politics underlying much of his work. Wolfe’s father was an agronomist and an author, and his mother cultivated his interest in art, writing, and reading. After he graduated in 1947 from St. Christopher’s School, Wolfe attended Washington and Lee University, where he founded a literary magazine and majored in English. At age 21, after a failed tryout as a pitcher for the

New York Giants, he enrolled in Yale University’s American Studies doctoral program. He also pursued journalism, which allowed him to experiment with incorporating literary techniques into reporting. In 1959, he launched a decade-long newspaper career at the *Washington Post*, and in 1962, he became a feature writer with the *New York Herald Tribune*. He married Sheila Berger in 1978; they have two children and live in Manhattan.

NONFICTION The New Journalism

WOLFE’S FIRST BOOK, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965), evolved from a stream-of-consciousness article about Southern California’s hot rod and custom car culture for *Esquire* magazine. While critics both praised and panned the nonfiction collection, it brought Wolfe into the literary limelight and established his reputation as a leading figure of the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s. This movement combined the tropes of fiction (character development, dramatic scenes, dialogue, first-person perspectives of different characters) with factual, third-person reportage to create a new type of “literary” journalism. In dissolving the distinction between writer and subject, the New Journalism became a vehicle for social criticism while representing a fresh approach to daily reporting. (Contemporaneous practitioners of the



craft included Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, Gay Talese, and Norman Mailer, among others.)

A second collection of articles, *The Pump House Gang* (1968), which further explored the flamboyant 1960s, was published on the same day as *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968). The latter, a longer form of New Journalism, narrates the adventures of the drug-addled Merry Pranksters. Though highly experimental, it epitomized the hippie era and was well received. Other collections followed: *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (1970), which raised controversy for its depiction of racial tension in the United States; *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine* (1977), which contains Wolfe's famous essay, "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening," and other works. *The Right Stuff* (1979), an account of America's first astronauts and rocket experiments and the early space program, won the American Book Award for nonfiction.

FICTION Wolfe's "Full Blooded Realism"

IN THE EARLY 1980S, WOLFE TURNED toward the novel form in a desire to capture modern America's panoramic experience. Using the Victorian (and other period) novelists as his model, he embraced social realism. "It struck me that nobody any longer seemed to be writing novels of the city, in the sense that Balzac and Zola wrote novels of Paris and Dickens and Thackeray wrote novels of London," Wolfe told the *New York Times* (10/13/87). Furthermore, he believed that first-rate reporting was just as crucial to writing fiction as it was to nonfiction, which "the 19th-century novels used to do ... as a matter of course." Zola, for example, had visited the slums, coal mines, *folies*, department stores, markets, and engine decks to record the French experience, but no one seemed to be examining the American experience in quite the same way.

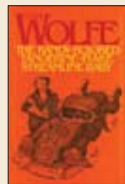
With these novelists in mind, Wolfe set out to document contemporary society. To conduct research into his topic—1980s New York—Wolfe talked to Wall Street brokers, rode the subways, and became acquainted with South Bronx. Between July 1984 and August 1985, *Rolling Stone* serialized, in the manner of Victorian novels, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987). In its depiction of simmering racial tensions amid a glistening, dissolute New York, it became a critical and commercial success—and made a strong argument for the resurrection of social realism. In November 1989, Wolfe defended "full-blooded realism" (embodied perfectly, he believed, in *Bonfire*) in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" in *Harper's*. The essay criticized mainstream American novelists' lack of interest in "the metropolis or any other big, rich slices of contemporary life" and argued that works of magical realism, postmodernism, and other styles had usurped big, important novels that captured the zeitgeist. In turn, jour-

nalists had been left to grapple with the "human beast" (a term taken from Zola) of late 20th-century America.

Wolfe's article hit a nerve with the literary establishment—John Updike, Norman Mailer, and John Irving in particular—and ignited a long-lasting, name-calling debate over Wolfe's journalistic techniques and the future of American literature. The controversy was never resolved, but during it, Wolfe worked on *A Man in Full* (1998), a best seller that provoked yet another fierce round in the debate over literature that he had started in *Harper's*. Wolfe's third novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (★★★ Jan/Feb 2005), about American college life, was not well received. His fourth novel, *Back to Blood* (2009), set in Miami, will focus on illegal immigration.

MAJOR WORKS

The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (1965)



These 22 essays—many of them fresh, satirical takes on American trends, celebrities, and pop culture of the 1960s that bucked the established old guard—showcase Wolfe's experimental nonfiction literary techniques. At the time, his use of colorful language, capitalization, unusual punctuation, and both colloquial and academic jargon seemed quite revolutionary, but it set the tone—and mannerisms—of his later works.

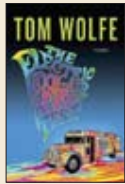
THE ESSAYS: The titular essay of this collection, published in *Esquire* under the title "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmm)...," discusses the custom car culture in Los Angeles. Other essays explore Las Vegas's extravagant customs, the nanny mafia, gay interior decorators, bouffant hairdos, Andy Warhol debutante Baby Jane Holzer, pop-culture musicians Murray the K and Phil Spector, and in the critically praised "The Last American Hero," Junior Johnson, a stock car racer for NASCAR. The collection explores American culture at its highest—and lowest—depths.

"He knows all the stuff that Arthur Schlesinger Jr., knows, keeps picking up brand new, ultra-contemporary stuff that nobody else knows, and arrives at zonky conclusions couched in scholarly terms. ... Verdict: Excellent book by a genius who will do anything to get attention." KURT VONNEGUT JR., *NEW YORK TIMES*, 6/27/65

"As always, the tone of the trumpet was strong, some might even say strident, and faintly discordant—Tom Wolfe never approves of anything about which he writes." JAY SCOTT, *GLOBE AND MAIL* (TORONTO), 4/13/78

THE MOVIE: *The Last American Hero* (based on “The Last American Hero”), 1973, starring Jeff Bridges and directed by Lamont Johnson.

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (1968)



In this classic account of 1960s hippie culture, Wolfe experimented with techniques of the New Journalism to chronicle Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters’ drugged-out, near-religious experiences. Through interviews, letters, film, and audio recordings, Wolfe captured the origin of their culture and the subjective reality of their adventures. (Wolfe himself declined the drugs, and he was never on the famous DayGlo bus.) “I would find myself under this spell,” he told the *Guardian* (1/20/08) about his interviews. “It was all very mystical and in the morning I would be driving back to San Francisco to get some sleep and all these people would be going to work; I felt infinitely superior to them because I had been up all night hearing truths. By noon, though, I would be thinking: ‘What the hell was that all about?’” Many critics saw the book as representing a changed ethics in American youth—from a valuing of work and social principles to an immediate need for “pleasure now.”

THE STORY: In the early 1960s, promising young novelist Ken Kesey, a creative writing fellow at Stanford University (and author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*), turns to psychedelic drugs, which he believes can transform society. After turning a family ranch in La Honda, California, into a communal experiment, he leads a group of followers, including Neal Cassady and others—the band of Merry Pranksters—along the California coast, across the country, and south to Mexico in a colorful school bus named “Further.” Soon, this hallucinogenic-inspired group discovers what happens when they encounter mainstream America. Wolfe retells their experiences partly through the lens of their LSD-induced acid tests.

“The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test is an astonishing book. It is to the hippie movement what Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* was to the Vietnam protest movement. ... Wolfe has written a marvelous book about a man I suspect is not so marvelous; and my reservations about his book stem from my feeling that some of Kesey’s dazzle-dust still lingers in Wolfe’s eyes.” C. D. B. BRYAN, NEW YORK TIMES, 8/18/68

“Where orthodoxy and pretension are the most frequent targets of Wolfe’s essay, it is unorthodoxy and folksy authenticity that most attract him in his reporting. Ken Kesey, the protagonist in the *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, epitomized those qualities—a man who could have coasted on his critical and financial success as a writer ... but chose instead to experiment on the outer edges, with LSD and anarchy.” TOM

SCHWARTZ, NEW YORK TIMES, 12/20/81

THE MOVIE: 2009 (projected), directed by Gus Van Sant.

The Right Stuff (1979)

♦ AMERICAN BOOK AWARD



Wolfe first became interested in the U.S. space program when he covered the launch of NASA’s moon mission, Apollo 17, in 1972. *The Right Stuff*, which became his best-selling book to date, delved into the risks these astronauts took. After he had inserted himself headlong into the story of the Mercury astronauts, the test pilots, and the space race of the 1950s, Wolfe concluded that these men needed *the right stuff*—the capacity to triumph over “a seemingly infinite series of tests ... a dizzy progression of steps and ledges, a ziggurat, a pyramid extraordinarily high and steep; and the idea was to prove at every foot of the way up that pyramid that you were one of the elected and anointed ones who had *the right stuff* and could move higher and higher.” *The Right Stuff* has a greater intellectual scope than much of Wolfe’s previous work.

THE STORY: This novelistic account of the U.S. space program starts with Chuck Yeager, an Edwards Air Force Base test pilot who, though he possessed “the right stuff” and broke the sound barrier in the late 1940s, couldn’t apply to the space program because he lacked a college degree. Wolfe then turns to NASA’s Project Mercury, the first operational manned space-flight program, to relate the personal stories of the Mercury Seven astronauts: Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, Scott Carpenter, and Deke Slayton. Wolfe explores their ambitions, achievements, and failures, the politics of their endeavors, and their race with the Soviet Union before returning to Yeager’s story.

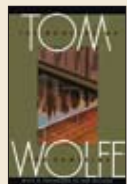
“In Wolfe’s previous books his posture was that of the skeptical outsider, the suave, somewhat distant and critical observer, content to move among his subjects with a slightly mocking smile. In *The Right Stuff* this pose has all but disappeared because Wolfe so obviously admires the test pilots and astronauts he encountered.” C. D. B. BRYAN, NEW YORK TIMES, 9/23/79

“If one can choke down Wolfe’s new-found patriotism, there is much compelling reading here: the graphic descriptions of the grisly results of air crashes, thorough discussion and analysis of the American military caste in relation to themselves and the rest of society, atmospheric descriptions of the scene at Cape Canaveral. ... While written in a easy-reading, fast-moving style or narrative, it is somewhat toned down from Wolfe’s previous extravaganzas.” NORMAN SNIDER, GLOBE AND MAIL (TORONTO), 10/20/79

THE MOVIE: 1983, starring Fred Ward, Dennis Quaid, Ed Harris, Scott Glenn, and Sam Shepard, and directed by Philip Kaufman.

The Bonfire of the Vanities (1987)

◆ NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST SELLER



Wolfe infused this composite portrait of racial, class, and ethnic hostilities in 1980s New York with a Zolaesque and Dreiseresque naturalism, which resulted in a satire combining scathing commentary with sociological detail. Wolfe's targets include the rampant greed of Wall Street, politics, the press, race, and the courts—anything is fair game. The novel originally ran in more than two dozen installments in *Rolling Stone* magazine, but was revised for book form.

THE STORY: In 1980s New York, the wealthy, arrogant WASP and Wall Street bond trader Sherman McCoy, a self-described “master of the universe” who lives in a world of debauched luxury, takes a mistaken night turn through the South Bronx with his mistress. When two black youths approach them, the couple panics, sideswipes one of the boys with their Mercedes, and flees. Peter Fallow, a ne'er-do-well British expatriate journalist, seizes the opportunity to exploit this hit-and-run. With the police on his trail, McCoy soon finds himself the object of hatred from sleazy politicians, a manipulative Harlem reverend, prosecutors, hustlers, muckrakers, and others who stand to benefit from his very public downfall.

“This is a post-modern Dickensian cast. Mr. Wolfe himself is calling himself a lot of names in interviews these days, among them Dickens, Thackeray, Addison, Steele. Only Tom Wolfe could get away with this, and he’s on rock-solid ground.”

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY, WALL STREET JOURNAL, 10/29/87

“The crippling failure, amid the wit, is Wolfe’s blind-side empathies. Sherman is a rich fool, but he is Wolfe’s fool and Wolfe makes him ours. ... It is murderously well-observed, but something is missing.” RICHARD EDER, LOS ANGELES TIMES, 10/25/87

THE MOVIE: 1990, starring Tom Hanks, Bruce Willis, and Melanie Griffith, and directed by Brian De Palma.

A Man in Full (1998)

◆ NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLER



A Man in Full sold more than 1 million copies in hardcover and headed the *New York Times* best seller list for ten weeks. However, the satirical novel raised controversy from “highbrow” American novelists, notably John Updike, Norman Mailer, and John Irving, who criticized Wolfe’s “journalistic hyperbole” and entertaining but quite unliterary style. Wolfe defended his novelistic reporting technique, arguing that his realism engaged the world far more than his critics’ own novels. Regardless of

WOLFE'S WRITING

In Defense of the Social Novel

From “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel,” in *Harper's Magazine*, November 1989

“Half the publishers along Madison Avenue ... had their noses pressed against their thermopane glass walls scanning the billion-footed city for the approach of the young novelists who, surely, would bring them the big novels of the racial clashes, the hippie movement, the New Left, the Wall Street boom, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam. But such creatures, it seemed, no longer existed. The strange fact of the matter was that young people with serious literary ambitions were no longer interested in the metropolis or any other big,

rich slices of contemporary life. ... [With *Bonfire of the Vanities* I wanted to prove] that the future of the fictional novel would be in a highly detailed realism

based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted, a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him.”

Capturing the 1960s

From “The Girl of the Year,” about society’s Baby Jane Holzer at a Rolling Stones concert, in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*

“Bangs mains bouffants beehives Beatle caps butter faces brush-on lashes decal eyes puffy sweaters French thrust bras flailing leather blue jeans stretch pants stretch jeans honeydew bottoms eclair shanks elf boots ballerinas Knight slippers, hundreds of them, these flaming little buds, bobbing and

screaming, rocketing around inside the Academy of Music Theater underneath that vast old mouldering cherub dome up there—aren’t they super-marvelous!”

From *Bonfire of the Vanities*:

“Sherman McCoy walked out of his apartment building holding his daughter Campbell’s hand. Misty days like this created a peculiar ashy-blue light on Park Avenue. But once they stepped out from under the awning over the entrance ... such radiance! The median strip on Park was a swath of yellow tulips. There were thousands of them, thanks to the dues apartment owners like Sherman paid to the Park Avenue Association and the thousands of dollars the association paid to a gardening service called Wiltshire Country Gardens, run by three Koreans from Maspeth, Long Island. There was something heavenly about the yellow glow of all the tulips. That was appropriate.”

the controversy, *A Man in Full* did for class and race issues in the South what *Bonfire of the Vanities* did for New York.

THE STORY: In 1990s Atlanta, the era of greed has given way to doubts about capitalism. Charlie Croker, a middle-aged successful real estate developer with a trophy wife, suffers a midlife crisis as he descends into bankruptcy. In Oakland, California, Conrad Hensley, a responsible but downwardly mobile employee at one of Charlie's conglomerates, is laid off and through a series of mishaps, lands in jail. When a black college football star from Atlanta's slums is accused of raping the white daughter of one of Charlie's old colleagues, Charlie has an opportunity to save his empire. Soon, these characters come together in a racially charged city where each has the chance to prove what it takes to be "a man in full."

"Like its predecessor, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe's new novel is fiercely and instantly addictive. It is intrinsically and generically disappointing, too, bringing with it an unavoidable hangover. But a generously mild one, really, considering the time you had." MARTIN AMIS, GUARDIAN (UK), 7/11/98

"The book has gas and runs out of gas, fills up again, goes dry. ... Electric at best, banal at worst—banal like a long afternoon spent watching soap operas—one picks it up each day to read another hundred pages with the sense that the book not only offers pleasure but the strain of encountering prose that disappoints as often as it titillates." NORMAN MAILER, NEW YORK REVIEW

OF BOOKS, 12/17/98

I Am Charlotte Simmons (2004)



Wolfe once again immersed himself in his subject to write his third novel, set on a college campus. He spoke to students and attended parties at Duke, Stanford, and other universities to cast fresh eyes on college life in the first decade of the 21st century. (His daughter graduated from Duke in 2002.) Although compulsively readable, the novel received lukewarm responses for its weak main character, well-shopped subject, and crude sexual references. As in Wolfe's other novels, issues of race and class simmer just beneath the surface. (★★★ Jan/Feb 2005)

THE STORY: Charlotte Simmons is brilliant, beautiful, and very naïve about life outside her small, poor Appalachian hometown. When she accepts a full scholarship to Dupont University, an Ivy League-caliber school outside of Philadelphia, she heads off to the would-be land of academic plenty. Upon arriving, however, she's assaulted by a privileged, boy-crazy roommate, coed dorms, and a campus culture ruled by sex, sports, alcohol, and political correctness. As Charlotte navigates college life, the campus becomes swept up in controversy over an indecent act seen taking place between a willing coed and an alumnus, who happens to be governor of California. It's college life in the 21st century, we guess.

"So many novelists write only about what they know. Wolfe finds out what he wants to know, then writes it up like a dream. To give Wolfe an A-plus on *I Am Charlotte Simmons* might seem like grade inflation, but it's really just extra credit where extra credit is due." CARLIN ROMANO, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, 11/14/04

"The book is an amalgamation, of sorts, of *Animal House*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *PCU* and *Old School*, minus the comic pratfalls and with a heavy dose of angst. ... The only real novelty in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is that it was written by someone as removed from the college scene as Tom Wolfe."

PRIYA JAIN, SALON, 11/10/04 ■

All Publicity is Good Publicity, Right?

When *Man in Full* was published, it was savaged by Norman Mailer in the *New York Review of Books* and John Updike in the *New Yorker*. Updike described the book as "entertainment, not literature, even literature in a modest aspirant form."

Wolfe called the authors/critics "two old piles of bones," which set off author John Irving (*The World According to Garp*) during an interview on the Canadian book program "Hot Type." As noted by Craig Offman on Salon.com (12/21/1999), Irving referenced Wolfe with contempt, "I can't read him because he's such a bad writer ... He's a journalist ... he can't create a character. He can't create a situation."



When asked about Irving's comments, Wolfe responded, "Why does he sputter and foam so? Because he, like Updike and Mailer, has panicked. All three have seen the handwriting on the wall, and it reads: *A Man in Full*."

Years later in 2006, Wolfe attained true icon status with his inclusion in the animated show, *The Simpsons*. Michael Chabon, Jonathan Franzen, and Gore Vidal were at least willing to appear with him—virtually.

