

Tom Wolfe's Right-Stuff-Acid-Test

The novel as big as New York

by David Deaton

O irony of ironies. That it should fall to a *journalist* to remind the world of how good fiction can be.

Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a masterpiece. How it failed to win a single major award for fiction when it was published in 1987 will be a subject of wonderment for future English scholars.

Bonfire does for the 1980s what *The Great Gatsby* did for the 1920s. It captures a time, a place, a class. Should the world live so long, it will be a definitive slice of social history.

The whispered charge that it is all "thinly veiled journalism" is simply *not true*. But how many fiction practitioners will wish it were, having been beaten fairly at their own game. Wolfe's book is a bestseller, soon to be a movie, that stands irrefutably as *literature*. How! How!

Anyone who's read it will tell you that *Bonfire* is a great, gripping read. Its narrative shuttles

depicting fear and loathing in New York: the mutual antipathy between blacks and whites, an all-pervading anti-Semitism, the contempt and envy Jews feel toward Gentiles, the unassailable loyalty the Irish feel toward their own. It's a picture of various tribes, sometimes allied but usually at war, in the jungle.

This note is sounded in the novel's opening chapter, in which the white Jewish mayor of New York flees from his furious audience at a public meeting in Harlem. The mayor, in turn, reflects on his real adversaries:

Cattle! Birdbrains! Rosebuds! Goyim! Do you really think this is *your* city any longer? Open your eyes! The greatest city of the twentieth century! Do you think *money* will keep it yours? Come down from your swell co-ops, you general partners and merger lawyers! It's the Third World down here! How long do you think you can stay insulated from the *Third World*?

Bonfire is the harrowing story



Tom Wolfe outside Bronx County Court House. He spent some time inside there, too.



accident, activates the merciless machinery of fate and state. For the wealthy, *Bonfire* is a tale to inspire pity and fear; it could happen to you.

Wolfe's abilities as a journalist serve him very well indeed here. His unfailing eye for detail and uncanny ear for dialogue make for a story of hallucinogenic vividness. To identify with Sherman McCoy is to *live* the novel.

Let it not be thought, though, the *Bonfire* is an exercise in unrelieved grimness. Far from it! Wolfe laces his narrative with hilariously dead-on satire. No one is spared.

New York's upper crust, gutter press, liberal politicians, black leaders, bond traders — all are shown to be crusaders for one thing only: their own presentation.

Ironically, this belated self-

sion of him — appearing at his arraignment in khaki fatigues and hiking boots! — leaves little doubt as to the real McCoy.

What Wolfe has to say about the mind of modern man would drive the squeamish from psychology. The psyche of the healthy American male is mapped out along the coordinates of fear and lust, servility and ambition, vanity and greed, on a continent of primeval corruption. When Wolfe takes us inside his characters, behold, a sewer-of-consciousness!

Notwithstanding his ravages on self and society, Wolfe is not without compassion. He is blessed with something still rarer, *empathy*, the faculty that distinguishes man from beast, literature from journalism.

No hard-bitten journalist could have written the scene in which Sherman tells his formidable father of his impending arrest (see excerpt). There are many such scenes in *Bonfire*, of such powerful emotional truth you have to put down the book and collect yourself.

Wolfe brings a stratosphere of society down to earth. He humanizes it. His greatest revelation is that the rich are people, too.

What Wolfe has trouble with, honestly confessed, is fathoming the lower depths. "Who are these people?" he asks. Elsewhere he has an assistant D.A. lament:

The press couldn't even see these cases. It was just poor people killing poor people. To prosecute such cases was to be part of the garbage-collection service, necessary and honorable, plodding and anonymous.

One thing Wolfe makes frighteningly clear. Confrontation looms inevitable as New York's "two nations" drift further apart and the rich seek with increasing desperation to insulate themselves from the "righteously angry" multi-coloured multitude.

Liberal-progressive efforts to heal the rift, enact social justice, are dismissed as *steam control*. Short of prophesying, Wolfe hints that one day, the whole seething metropolis is going to blow.

And what a novel that will be!

from track to track, never losing speed, taking us to places where novelists fear to tread.

Wolfe leads us in style. He performs the paradoxical feat of mixing social realism with stream-of-consciousness. This glorious club sandwich of a novel manages to be Dickensian in sweep and Proustian in scope. Has there ever been anything quite like it?

Only in a few over-played scenes, does the hand of the novice novelist show. *Bonfire* verges on 700 pages and could have been shorter.

But who's complaining? Here is not merely a story, but a sensibility, and the intelligence guiding it is breathtaking.

Imagine a novel that takes all of New York City as its subject. Nothing on this order has been attempted since Balzac tackled Paris in his 30-volume *Comedie Humaine*. In the space of one volume we're treated to New York society, high and low.

But Wolfe does more than flesh out opposing ends of the social spectrum; he takes on the far riskier subject of race. Doing so has unleashed a storm of controversy.

of one man, Sherman McCoy, who is forced to take the plunge.

McCoy has it all. A dapper 37-year-old investment banker who works on Wall Street and lives on Park Avenue, his life is the purest distillation of the American Dream.

But oh, how swiftly, how easily, that dream turns into nightmare.

By mere mischance, McCoy misses a turn-off to Manhattan and ends up lost in the Bronx. A skirmish ensues with two black youths. One of them, named Henry Lamb, is mortally injured.

Thus Sherman McCoy becomes the Great White Goat of the New York criminal justice system, a sacrificial offering to the smoldering black electorate. His career collapses, his fortune evaporates, his family falls away.

Worst of all, his life becomes a media circus. Journalists swarm upon McCoy as "maggots and flies, and he was the dead beast they had found to crawl over and root into".

All because he missed a turn-off!

McCoy's fall from place has the elements, if not the magnitude, of a Greek tragedy. One error, one