

BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES

TOM WOLFE'S BLOCKBUSTER NOVEL HITS THE SCREEN



After a hit-and-run accident, things get tense for Sherman McCoy (Tom Hanks, above right) and his mistress (Melanie Griffith). Bruce Willis (bottom right) plays a reporter snooping for scandal.

The *Bonfire of the Vanities*, the most talked-about novel of 1987, will shortly attempt to become the most talked-about movie of 1990, starring Tom Hanks, Melanie Griffith and Bruce Willis.

Why was *Bonfire* originally such a *cause célèbre*? Well, to begin with, it was the first novel by Tom Wolfe, who as a journalist and all-around wit has made a habit of being controversial. Such earlier nonfiction books as *The Right Stuff*, *From Bauhaus to Our House* and (way back) *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* had established him as a meticulous researcher with unpopular opinions (some said he

was just plain arrogant) and a flamboyant prose style.

Then came *Bonfire*, in which Wolfe used his keen eye for detail and his delight in satirizing establishment icons to take on nothing less than the entire upper-class social structure of Manhattan — Wall Street, City Hall, the newspapers, the judicial system, the whole kit and caboodle.

The "hero" of the book is Sherman McCoy (Hanks), a Park Avenue WASP and hotshot bond trader who considers himself one of the Masters of the Universe. Why not? He graduated from Yale, has a demure wife who devotes herself to dinner parties and remaining thin, wears custom-tailored \$1,800 suits and is having a torrid affair with a smart society

dame (Griffith). Then one evening McCoy's mistress takes a wrong turn while driving Sherman to the airport, and before she knows it she has hit a young black man on a deserted ramp.

"The intent is, of course, satiric," as Terrence Rafferty observed in his *New Yorker* review of *Bonfire*. "The central joke is that Sherman, who has lived his whole life in ignorance of the Universe he thinks he's Master of, now finds himself, thanks to this messy accident, at the mercy of the very system that has been propping him up."

McCoy's former footmen — the underclass, the courts, the media — turn against him, and even the people his crisis forces him to rely on, like his Irish lawyer, don't treat him with the respect he's used to.

"They're all playing by the arcane rules," noted Rafferty, "of sub-universes barely known to Wall Street and Park Avenue, and Sherman is as powerless as a pinball."

The book immediately spent 56 weeks on the *New York Times* hardcover best-seller list. In the *Times* Frank Conroy called it "a big, bitter, funny, craftily plotted book." In *The New Republic* Frank Rich thought Wolfe's nightmarish urban vision was conveyed "by scenes of brilliant high comedy and farce."

Clearly, many enjoyed the book. Equally clearly, many had reservations. Conroy thought that after a while the fun of watching Wolfe satirize one group of New Yorkers after another began to turn sour and Rich thought the author had given short shrift to Manhattan's lower classes.

Exactly what director Brian De Palma and his screenwriter, Michael Cristofer, will manage to do with such a huge book, not to mention the huge canvas, remains to be seen. But certainly the film, like the novel, will not lack for authentic detail. De Palma and his company of actors — which also includes Morgan Freeman, F. Murray Abraham, Kim Cattrall and Saul Rubinek — spent 10 weeks filming in four Manhattan boroughs before completing an additional six weeks of principal photography in Los Angeles.

As for Wolfe, he has initiated yet another revolution — the return to respectability of the realistic novel. "I was quite shocked to see that writing fiction wasn't all that easy," he has said. "I thought that once you could make up things there was nothing to it, but it's not easy to make up things effectively. The imagination needs material. I had to put everything aside and do some reporting."

— Lyle Slack

