

A Man in Full

by Tom Wolfe.

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Let me take the unseemly step of commencing a review of another author's work by offering several paragraphs from my own book *Cannibals and Christians*, published in 1965.

The people who were most American by birth, and who had the most to do with

managing America, gave themselves a literature which had the least to say about the real phenomena of American life, most particularly the accelerated rate, the awful rate, of growth and anomaly through all of society. That sort of literature and that sort of attempt to explain

America was left to the sons of immigrants who, if they were vigorous enough, and fortunate enough to be educated, now had the opportunity to see

that America was a phenomenon never before described, indeed, never before

visible in the record of history. There was something going on in American

life which was either grand or horrible or both, but it was going on-at a dizzy rate-and the future glory or doom of the world was not necessarily divorced from it..

No American writer succeeded, however, in doing the single great work that would clarify a nation's vision of itself as Tolstoy had done perhaps with War and Peace or with Anna Karenina and Stendhal with The Red and the Black, no one novel came along which was grand and daring and comprehensive

and detailed, able to give sustenance to the adventurer and merriment to the rich, leave compassion in the icechambers of the upper class and energy as alms for the poor. Dreiser came as close as any, and never got close at all, for he could not capture the moment, and no country in history has lived perhaps so much for the moment as America. After his heroic failure, American literature was isolated-it was necessary to give courses in American literature to Americans. [Otherwise] it was not quite vital to them. It did not save their lives, make them more ambitious, more moral, more tormented, more audacious, more ready for love, more ready for war, for charity, or for invention. No, it tended to puzzle them.... The

American novel gave up any desire to be a creation equal to the phenomenon of the country itself. It settled for being a metaphor. Which is to say that each separate author made a separate peace. He would no longer try to capture America, he would merely try to give life to some microcosm of American life, some metaphor. The vision would be partial, determinedly so.

One must not try to save. Not souls, and not the nation. The country be damned. Let it take care of itself.

And of course the country did. Just that. It grew by itself. Like a weed and a monster and a beauty and a pig. And the task of explaining America was taken over by Luce magazines.

Now, I have no idea whether Tom Wolfe ever came across this piece, but he didn't have to. The Zeitgeist was there for all of us. In 1989, Wolfe wrote an article for Harper's after the appearance of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and I discovered (to my astonishment) that we were comrades in arms:

The introduction of realism into literature in the eighteenth century by

Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett was like the introduction of electricity into engineering. It was not just another device. The effect on the emotions of an everyday realism such as Richardson's was something that had never been conceived of before. It was realism that created the "absorbing" or "gripping" quality that is peculiar to the novel, the quality that makes the reader feel that he has been pulled not only into the setting of the story but also into the minds and central nervous systems of the characters....

Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Zola, and Sinclair Lewis assumed that the novelist had to go beyond his personal experience and head out into society as a reporter. Zola called it documentation, and his documenting expeditions to the slums, the coal mines, the races, the folies, department stores, wholesale food markets, newspaper offices, barnyards, railroad yards, and engine decks, notebook and pen in hand, became legendary.... My contention is that, especially in an age like this, [reporting is] essential for the very greatest effects literature can achieve. In 1884, Zola went down into the mines at Anzin to do the documentation for what was

to become the novel *Germinal*. Posing as a secretary for a member of the French Chamber of Deputies, he descended into the pits wearing his city clothes, his frock coat, high stiff collar, and high stiff hat (this appeals to me for reasons I won't delay you with), and carrying a notebook and pen....

At this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American literature, we need a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas to head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hog-stomping Baroque country of ours and reclaim its literary property.... The answer is not to leave the rude beast, the material, also known as the life around us, to the journalists but to do what journalists do, or are supposed to do, which is to wrestle the beast and bring it to terms.

Of one thing I am sure. If fiction writers do not start facing the obvious, the literary history of the second half of the twentieth century will record that journalists not only took over the richness of American life as their domain, but also seized the high ground of literature itself....

America today, in a headlong rush of her own, may or may not truly need a literature worthy of her vastness. But American novelists, without any doubt, truly need, in this neurasthenic hour, the spirit to go along for

that wild ride.

Three cheers. One has to applaud his moxie. Only an innocent or a simpleton

could fail to recognize that a live hornet was being deposited in the crevice of every literary seat in town. If *The Bonfire of the Vanities* had excited envy and outrage, Wolfe was now upping the ante. It was the equivalent of a large raise in the World Series of Poker. Could he bring off the huge novel he was obviously suggesting, or was he riding on an outsize bluff?

Well, the years went by and Wolfe went through a quintuple heart by-pass and the towering depression that ensued. His writing life had to pass through some of the highs and lows of the exalted and the damned. It is not routine to bring off a long novel when your ambition is more than major, when you will settle for nothing less than an attempt to write a great novel, and when you are into your sixties and not all that well.

Given the stakes he set, the tension in reading *A Man in Full* never quite ceases. Is one encountering a major novel or a major best seller?

Wolfe's salient characteristic as a first novelist, the element that raised *The Bonfire of the Vanities* above all considerations of its merits and

vices, was that it sold 750,000 copies in hardcover. The book was thereby emblazoned as the literary phenomenon of the Eighties. His finest literary impulses of that era and his pecuniary needs had come together. Naturally, it became somewhat more difficult to conceive of a major novel that would not also be a commercial blockbuster. The flavor of *A Man in Full* suggests a creator who is being obliged to live with a double motive.

Writing a best seller with conscious intent to do so is, after all, a state of mind that is not without comparison to the act of marrying for money, only to discover that the absence of love is more onerous than anticipated.

When a putative and modest writer of best sellers finally becomes professional enough to write a winner, he or she thinks that a great feat has been brought off, even as a man void of love (and money) will see a wealthy marriage as a splendid union. The point, obviously, is that Tom Wolfe has, in advance, the talent to do either-embark on a major novel or calculate, nay, eyeball the musculature of a huge best seller. And so the real interest is in Wolfe's search for the answer to his own deep question of motive. Is he to deal with major literary matters or adroit commercial counterfeits? The answer to the question vibrates back and forth in this work like a reed in a woodwind, keeping both possibilities alive-not only

in each chapter, each page, but sometimes in the shift itself from good writing to cash-check writing in the same paragraph.

This much said, one has to add that *A Man in Full* is a much better book than *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The earlier novel ran like an express for the first third of its pages, but by the middle, it was slowing up. At the end, it pissed out.

The beginning of *A Man in Full* is the reverse. It gets better as it goes. On the early stretch, you have to pay for endlessly detailed descriptions of every room you find yourself in (cataloguing rooms may yet prove to be Wolfe's most ubiquitous talent). And for the first couple of hundred pages, most of the chapters are virtually separate short stories employing one or another group of characters. Some of these stories are very good indeed; some not worth reading. It takes a while to recognize that the real audacity of the book is in its architecture-Wolfe laid it out on three separate foundations, two of which are in Atlanta, our modern, post-Olympic

Atlanta. We follow a mighty arriviste, Charlie Croker, a former great football player at Georgia Tech who has amassed a fortune in real estate by

virtue of his overwhelming life force. Up from southern Georgia, a
monument

of a self-made man, Croker is in prodigious financial trouble without being
quite aware of it, so confident is he of his outsize energy and strength.

Soon enough his travails will begin and Wolfe takes him through an
enforced

descent over many hundreds of pages.

The second element of the novel follows the efforts of the black mayor of
Atlanta and a black lawyer to solve a race problem that could result in
riots and national humiliation for the city.

The last track takes us along on the odyssey of a sweet, decent young man
named Conrad Hensley, who works in Oakland and eventually, after an
unjust

stint in prison (shades of Jean Valjean!), a most dramatic escape, and many
ensuing exceptional adventures, arrives in Atlanta to bring a species of
catharsis to the many turns and twists of the plot.

None of the above offers even a remote hint to the complexity of the
scheme. For example, Atlanta, high society and low, lives in the book as
vividly as did New York in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The difference is

that Wolfe appreciates the complexities of Atlanta's social issues with a subtlety that was absent from the earlier novel, and one of the surprising virtues of this second novel is how well he has captured the speech and airs and wit and sophistication of the black mayor and the upper-class anxieties of the black lawyer. Indeed, he is so sensitive to the nuances of their situation that it is as if he is making amends for the simple-minded outrage he exhibited against ghetto leaders in the first novel.

The major surprise in the book, however, is the young protagonist who emerges, the starry-eyed, innocent, honorable working man, Conrad Hensley.

He is married (somewhat unhappily) and living out in the Oakland area, where he labors in a frozen-food warehouse owned by no one less than the man in full, Charlie Croker. It takes literally half the tome for the separate sections to start coming together and a good many readers may never make it to the middle. Too bad! For when the book starts to collect, Wolfe suddenly becomes startlingly good. All of a sudden you don't want to stop. And on you go for a couple of hundred most enjoyable narrative pages with some fine feats of writing en route. Many problems have, of course, also accumulated, and by the end,

Wolfe succumbs to too many quick solutions as the elements of plot come crowding in together. The end of the book is a mess, a tidy mess (which makes it worse), and it ends as badly as Dickens, who, at his lowest, would cash in his hand, offers sweet remarks, and get out the door. Are we ready to cite *A Christmas Carol*?

Most of the ending is too complicated to summarize in less time than it took Wolfe to tell it, but one termination takes place through Charlie Croker, who has hitherto and for the bulk of the book been a totally dependable stock character despite his heavy sufferings. Toward the end, having landed in a weighty depression, he is extracted only and uniquely by Conrad Hensley, who encourages him (by way of the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus) to become an honest man. Yet, Charlie is not even present in the last chapter. It is an epilogue, and he is only there through hearsay. We learn that he is on the road and has become a minister in Florida, out in the mangrove roots preaching the maxims of Epictetus. So just as Charlie shows signs finally of becoming interesting (and difficult to write about), he is relegated to a short paragraph. Another paragraph, also hearsay, takes care of Conrad, who decides to turn himself in and go back to jail, but is put on probation by a kindly judge. Good

novels are being lost on every page of the epilogue.

Be it said. The book has gas and runs out of gas, fills up again, goes dry.

It is a 742-page work that reads as if it is fifteen hundred pages long.

This is, to a degree, a compliment, since it is very rich in material. But, given its high intentions, it is also tiresome, for it takes us down the road of too many overlong and predictable scenes. 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.

At certain points, reading the work can even be said to resemble the act of making love to a three-hundred-pound woman. Once she gets on top, it's over. Fall in love, or be asphyxiated. So you read and you grab and you even find delight in some of these mounds of material. Yet all the while you resist-how you resist!-letting three hundred pounds take you over.

After a time, I simply began to groan within each time there was a new description. It was not that they were badly written. Taken on its own, the tenth description was as good and certainly as detailed as the first, but

quantity, as Engels once remarked, changes quality. Finally, the descriptions became not unequal to a politician declaring: "I gave my stump speech ten times last night, and the tenth was as good as the first."

Repetition kills the soul, and the narrative élan of Wolfe's novel is injured by the sheer quantity of his descriptions. They convert a stylistic virtue into a vice, then lock us up in an addiction. It is dispiriting to witness. A pall comes over one's happy attention when a brilliant conversationalist turns into a monologist, only to deaden us further by revealing the true passion-logorrhea.

So much is there, so much is missing. How then does one pass clear judgment

on a novel that is as rich and as poor, as genuinely exciting and as seriously disappointing, as observant and blind, as brilliantly written and as slovenly in its final execution as *A Man in Full*? It is Tom Wolfe's best book by far, it begins to promise that he is ready to become a great American novelist, and then it loses its air and settles (with all the canniness of a hard-nosed business judgment) for being a Mega-bestseller. At the highest level, it's a failure-at a more modest plateau (which is to say, at the corrupt level), it is bound to prove a resounding success with

its large popular merits.

Some might now assume that the judgment has just been rendered. Not so. Only the lineaments. The body of the judgment still eludes one-how can a book be so good and so empty all at once, able to tell us so much about America at its best and be so criminally flawed at its worst?

What is bound to create an ongoing argument over the objective merits of this book is that for all of its major faults, it has undeniable major virtues of which the most notable are the set pieces. Every defender of the book will end with his favorite episodes and chapters, but there will probably be

a consensus on the inquisition of Charlie Croker by his creditors at the PlannersBanc, the mating of the thoroughbred horses at his plantation, his barehanded capture of a six-foot rattlesnake there, and the "Freaknic" celebration of black college students in Atlanta, as well as the first meeting between the two top-level black principals, Roger Too White and the mayor Wes Jordan. Most particularly, the hundred pages of writing about Conrad Hensley in prison and escaping from prison light the book up in the

middle. Extraordinarily good writing forces one to contemplate the uncomfortable possibility that Tom Wolfe might yet be seen as our best writer. How grateful one can feel then for his failures and his final inability to be great-his absence of truly large compass. There may even be an endemic inability to look into the depth of his characters with more than a consummate journalist's eye.

Perhaps there is good reason for this. His strategy, when in doubt, is to cook up new ingredients and excursions for his plot. He relies on this to such a degree that we can perceive all over again the vices of plot.

For plot is equal to a drug. It can stimulate a novelist into hordes of narrative energy, and it certainly will keep a reader on the page, but, sooner or later, plot presents its bill, and dire exigencies come down upon the writer. Even one's best characters have to be ratcheted away from believability. Wolfe has resources to attempt to offset this, and the first is dialogue. Indeed, he often succeeds in getting you to believe an improbable reaction by the speed and color of the dialogue-particularly among his black and ethnic characters. He manages thereby to take them around the trickiest corners. If, however, the scene finally fails to produce enough credible turns to convince us of their inner conversion, why

then a harsh novelistic law comes into force. Since motivation has to be believable in a serious novel, the writer burdened with a plot is sometimes obliged to enter the character's mind.

Right here is where Wolfe bogs down. How it costs him! A reader's confidence in what he is reading will be subtly betrayed or even squandered should a novelist choose to enter the mind of a character but fail to bequeath the indispensable gift, that the reader can now know more about the character than before. The internal monologues of Wolfe's people are surprisingly routine and insist on telling us what we know already. There is almost no signature quality of mind.

For one instance-there are many- we have been provided with a detailed catalog of Charlie Croker's fall. We are living in the depths of his depression, brought there by the novelist's adroit and serial presentations of surrendered hopes, new blows, and obsessive dilemmas. We know in detail

how Charlie must feel. Nonetheless, we are given the following soliloquy: He was precisely where he had dreamed of being as a young man: living in a

mansion in Buckhead, the master builder of metro Atlanta, creator of a

gleaming tower named after himself, a man whose footsteps made the halls of

the mighty vibrate...and how hollow it all was! It meant only that when your egomania and the defects in your character finally plunged you into ruin, your collapse would provoke more and tastier gloating. That would be it! They'd chuckle, rub their hands together, and smack their lips-and that would be the great Charlie Croker's entire legacy. What a fraud he was!-sitting here in his oxblood leather throne as if any of it were still...his...Why couldn't he put an end to it all by...disintegrating, by smashing, by walking out into the woods and never coming back?...Oh sure...With his knee, he'd be lucky to walk a hundred yards...

If there is nothing splendid or new right there, Wolfe can console himself with the alternative: the internal ruminations of the characters in most Mega-bestsellers are about what you would expect. Mega-bestseller readers want to be able to read and read and read-they do not want to ponder any truly unexpected revelations. Reality might lie out there, but that is not why they are reading.

Nonetheless, this formulation is too severe. Sometimes Wolfe is ready to

work for his best characters, sometimes they can surprise us as they move from caricatures into literary reality. It is just that at other times he is all too ready to let them work for him, and moves them back from the possibility of deeper characterization into caricature again. How can he not when plot obviously appeals to him more than the real complexity of men and women? Worse, he appears incapable of creating a vital and interesting woman. He couldn't do it in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and certainly doesn't here. If all we knew about wives, for example, were to come from Tom Wolfe, we would have to assume that they are without soul, and their greatest strength is to nag.

Perhaps he could do more. Wolfe is not incapable of describing carnality. To the contrary-no one will ever be the same after reading his set piece on the massive copulation of a prize stallion with a thoroughbred mare (after she has been readied for this momentous event by the lucubrations produced in her by the mouth and nose of a third horse, Sad Sam!). Wonders might befall us if Wolfe were ready to make the transition from *Equus* to *Anthropos*, but as of now, one has to complain that in neither of his two novels is there a carnal relationship that will give the reader any new sense of what it is all about.

It is his right as a novelist to ignore such stuff, but he ignores too many other possibilities as well. If only he would work half as hard on his characters as on the social gears and levers of his story. Dispirit hangs over him, however, when he is alone with his protagonists exactly as if they were isolated in a room and he doesn't know what to say or what they might be ready to offer him.

A harsh verdict ensues. It is not only the women who are weak. Once we read

these interior monologues, we come to realize that Wolfe doesn't begin to understand enough about his two main male characters. We are not given one

moment in Charlie Croker's mind that tries to capture his inner life as an athlete. Football has to be the center of his personality, his feats in college have shot him into orbit, but the only way we know that Croker played football is because we are told he did. And once when he does talk about a great play he made, he describes it about the way a sports reporter might, which is to say, from the outside.

Conrad's part of the story, as already stated, is far and away the most readable and the most virtuoso element throughout the length of the prison

and escape scenes. Unfortunately, these episodes are not quite believable.

Prison is a culture, and you violate its canons at your peril. Wolfe poses a question: How is a young, good-looking prisoner to endure when he belongs

to no clique and will not submit to becoming a playmate? Wolfe, in the obligatory showdown, uses a martial war trick. Conrad Hensley has powerful

hands and forearms from toting eighty-pound cartons of frozen chickens around in the Croker Global warehouse. So when he is sounded by a prison wolf named Rotto (who has a build like a WWF wrestler), he grabs the monster's hand with both his hands and crushes the man's fingers, breaks his wrist. There is no recognition that there are magnum responses available to Rotto, who, after all, is a weathered con who has lived for years with the arts and tricks of dirty fighting. At the least, Rotto could whack Conrad with his free fist, or wrap his forearm around Conrad's windpipe, or knee him in the groin. Whatever! Cons live as close to martial response as Shakespeare scholars to the variant texts.

Nonetheless, Conrad wins an uncontested battle from a man much stronger and

more combat-seasoned than himself. That night he lies in terror on his bunk. Rotto is the head of a clique, and the clique will hardly let Conrad get away with it. Yes, his honor and his sphincter are still in deadly peril.

Wolfe is not a classicist for too little. He employs a *deus ex machina*. The mightiest of California earthquakes commences. Prison cells break apart, prison walls crash open, and Conrad (after a very nice piece of action writing) manages to escape. The ducks all fall into line and a friend whose life he saved once in the ice-cold warehouse takes care of getting him out of town. From Oakland to Atlanta. Lo! The book comes together. Conrad, lowly worker out in Oakland in Charlie Croker's ice-cold warehouse, will hook up with his old and hitherto invisible boss, and will do it well enough and close enough to yet save Charlie's life now that Charlie is in a terminal depression. In the course of enabling the two principals to meet, a highly improbable set of twists and turns conducts Conrad through several sub-worlds (Vietnamese boat-folk and poor genteel whites among others). Yet

here Wolfe is at his best. He is wonderful at capturing the English of

Vietnamese illegals (as he is also for Pakistanis, Hawaiians, ghetto blacks, down-home Georgians). Indeed, he is so good on such matters that you forgive the phony combat, the earthquake that solves all pressing auctorial problems, the convenient underground railroad of the story line-you accept it as Dickensian to the max! Wolfe is only in trouble when he has to slow down and allow his characters to react with one another, to enter-perish the outrageous requirement-a relationship.

Then, even his dialogue, so full of snap, crackle, and pop whenever embattled experts are expounding on a touchy situation (as, for example, the executives at PlannersBanc in the course of giving Charlie Croker a psychic workout over the abominable condition of his loan), alters into speech that is singularly flat as soon as husbands and wives are in battle mode. Whether it is Charlie Croker's new trophy wife, Conrad Hensley's young disgruntled wife, Roger Too White's near-invisible wife, or the cantankerous former wife of Raymond Peepgass (an executive at PlannersBanc), they all sound the same. The dialogue reads as if it had been written by a hack turning out scripts for the afternoon soaps. In part, that may be true because Wolfe's inclination is usually to return

to what he sees as the iron hand of society. Martha Croker, Charlie's ex-wife, is ignored totally by all their old friends once she is divorced from Charlie. While this kind of quiet ostracism is true enough generally-Charlie, after all, has provided the action for their friends-surely it is not as absolute as here portrayed. If the Crokers had a hundred social friends, might we assume ten of that number would have remained loyal to Martha, ten anyway, unless Martha was a monster-which she is not? Society is powerful precisely because its unwritten laws weigh upon us heavily enough to be palpable. But the laws are not absolute-if they were, the less endowed party in a marriage would never allow himself or herself to agree to divorce.

This small vice in Wolfe-to go, when in doubt, for the exaggerated note -was the ultimate reason why *The Bonfire of the Vanities* self-destructed by its end. It certainly injures *A Man in Full*. How difficult it becomes, for another example, to believe in the moral dilemma that the plot presents to Charlie Croker. Wolfe places him in a position where Croker has to defend a black All-American Georgia Tech football player against a rape charge. But

such a defense would require Charlie to betray his close friend, Inman Armholster, who comes from one of the most established families in Atlanta.

Inman's daughter is the alleged rape victim, and Charlie has promised that he will stand by him any way he can. The black mayor of Atlanta, meanwhile,

has come to decide that this rape case, if it ever breaks into the media, would not only sully Atlanta's image nationally, but would probably incite serious riots. Ergo, he needs someone like a former great white athlete from Georgia Tech to stand up in public for the black star.

In return, the mayor will convince PlannersBanc to radically restructure Charlie's half-billion dollars of debt. How can the mayor put such pressure on a huge bank? Well, the mayor has tools, never quite defined to a nicety, that he can use to twist the bank around. So Charlie is now presented with a moral dilemma. It comes near to destroying him. Is he ready to give away to the bank his mansion, his plantation, his Croker Global high-rise, his food warehouses, his private airplanes, and all the other installations of his accumulated fortune, or does he save them by betraying his friend Inman Armholster? We are back to the alexandrines of Racine: Love versus Honor.

Wolfe, however, doesn't get into the real complexities of this moral confrontation. He can be most insightful about the back-and-forth maneuverings of bank managers, but the dilemma upon which the moral heart

of his book is based never receives close examination. At one point we are told that Inman is Charlie's closest friend. It comes as a surprise. Up to that point, we have been given the impression that Charlie doesn't even like Inman much. We have no idea what makes them friends other than their social propinquity.

Betrayal, however, is no more than a concept unless we know exactly what is

being betrayed. We have to feel the antennae of the relationship that is soon to be cauterized. Nor are we prepared for Charlie to feel such responsibility. After all, how did he make his fortune in the first place? Did he betray no close friends on the way up to high wealth? That alone would make him one incredible rich man. In real life, when a tycoon comes to a point where he cannot betray a friend no matter how much money is involved, we have to assume that the sum of his former betrayals has caught up with him. The tycoon is in revolt against his own misdeeds. That is not

impossible. Fear of the grave has done as much to many a bucko. But there is nothing of such suggestion in Charlie. He is just a powerful good guy who is so proud of his own strength that, as far as we know, he never cut a dirty deal. For moral dilemmas of this vast size, we need Dreiser, rather than our Tom with his outsize moxie. Moral dilemmas that live only in the pure light of dilemma belong to best sellers where the readers want their moral conflicts standing clean and proud, ready to be resolved. That, of course, Wolfe is ready to provide.

DeLillo's *Underworld* is also full of moral choices, and one of them is between love and honor, but with a notable and salutary difference. The moral dilemmas become part of the mix of the details, projects, confusions, and contradictions that suffuse the lives of his characters.

Where, then, might be the root of Wolfe's faults? Can one say that his strength as a journalist contributes to his weakness as a novelist? It is likely. He was so good as a young reporter that he was promoted to feature writer. But even in the upper reaches of feature writing, you still move on quickly to another subject, another set of people. So you do not form those novelistic habits that are learned best when you are young, exactly the

need never to be satisfied with any of your characters just because they have come alive for you on the page. Indeed, the intoxication of creating a person on a page can prove blinding to an untried author's vision of what the character is going to need in his or her development through the narrative. What the young novelist learns, and it can take half a life, is that it is much easier to create a character than to understand a real man or woman. So an inner caution develops. Unless your literary figures keep growing through the events of the book, your novel can go nowhere that will

surprise you. Because if the character comes alive on one particular note and stays alive on that note, then there is nowhere to proceed but into the plot.

Part of the problem for feature writers is that they have to bring to life the figures they write about, and must not only do it in a few days or a few weeks but be sharp in every sentence and entertaining (if possible), and then on the next assignment they move on to another person in another occupation. Tom Wolfe became the best of them when it came to capturing the off-edge of each person's dialogue and all the details of their shoes,

asses, hairdos, and stomach rumblings. He saw a room in the way a shark sees prey. Details were ectoplasm to him and luminescence.

He worked for years doing bigger and better articles, then books, high-octane books, but he had formed bad habits. The basic pattern was to go right into new material, bring it off, and move on to the next job. Your characters had to come alive, but since you didn't stay with them, you hardly needed a second note. Johnny One-Note, if he is vivid enough, can always hold the reader for the length of a magazine piece.

Of course, a great many of Dickens's characters were also Johnny One-Notes.

Yet, what notes! Besides, one did not read at that time to explore into character in the way we feel is necessary today. The stakes are higher now. Given this century, so full of vast achievements and horrors, it is viscerally important that our understanding of men and women keep pace with the mechanisms of society. If Wolfe is as good as or better than any other American writer in his power to capture the surface of wholly diverse elements in America, he comes in last of all major American writers when it's a matter of comprehending a little more about men and women. Indeed,

this may be the most important and noble purpose of the novelist today.

Surely, we are not going to leave it to the jargon-ridden expertise of the oral guns for hire in the TV human relations media business, or the fundamentalists' search for the all-purpose power-grip over other humans.

We need only contemplate one more time how for the last nine months we have

been steeped in a nausea-broth of TV pundit-heads, coming to an intellectual climax every night. In parallel, Wolfe is too quick to capture his characters and then doesn't

always have an idea of what to do with them. He spent his early professional life writing too quickly and moving on. The following passage, which comes just after the earthquake has liberated Conrad from jail, may be appropriate here.

The very floor of the world had moved...with a power that still resonated in the bones of everyone who had been through the upheaval. A cliff now ran

straight through Santa Rita where none had existed before. A new wave of fear and hopelessness swept Conrad's nervous system. He felt as if the very last roots of his past had been ripped out. Zeus had done all this and he

was in Zeus' hands. He gave Five-O one last smile and a little wave and then began running alongside the escarpment, away from the remains of West Greystone.

The longer one reads *A Man in Full*, the more one comes to decide that no matter its large virtues, it was chosen by the author to be a best seller rather than a major novel. Nowhere is this more evident than with the younger protagonist. I can believe that there are people as angelic as Conrad Hensley, and most of us have known a few men who were as heroic as

Conrad, but never before have I seen both those qualities in one person-not unless I was looking at a movie.

It was Wolfe's job to transcend the film of *A Man in Full* before it went into production-which is to say his literary purpose was to make us believe on the page, now, that Conrad exists. And in this he is far from wholly successful. Conrad is too good to be true. What one can know with a sense of sadness as a novelist is that Conrad will become much more believable and moving in the movie. Will it be Matt Damon? Or can Tom Hanks still look

young enough to bail out the part?

But if we as readers are to be lectured by Wolfe, via Epictetus, on the honorable avoidance of shame that can and has to be achieved by the serious

Stoic, then what is to be said about the shame of writing a best seller when you are as talented as Wolfe and might at least have tried to bring off one of the most important books of the half-century?

Can we offer a final verdict? Tom may be the hardest-working showoff the literary world has ever owned. But now he will no longer belong to us. (If indeed he ever did!) He lives in the King Kong Kingdom of the Mega-bestsellers—he is already a Media Immortal. He has married his large talent to real money and very few can do that or allow themselves to do that. So, he will be king for a year, a year at least, and then in another ten years or less he will write another gargantuan best seller. Let us hope it is not about education but will be called *A President in Full*. For he is certainly the most gifted best-seller writer to come along since Margaret Mitchell. If her style was banal, she understood nonetheless how signally

perverse is the sense of romance in rich and beautiful women, and Mr.

Wolfe

is not up to that yet.

If this verdict denies him the long-term glory he seeks, let it at least be said that his adjuration to his fellow novelists to go out and dig harder for objective material may, given a whopping bounty in the bookstores for

A

Man in Full, may, yes, actually take root. If it does, let us novelists at least attempt to take back delineation of our country from the media who have held it too long and for much too little.