

[*I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Tom Wolfe, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 676 pages]

Bonfire of the Varsities

By Dana B. Vachon

THE LIGHT! Yellow. Bright. Streaming through the trees that tower up to but not above the gargoyles of the great Gothic campus. It had required three SAT tutors, two AP tutors, and one math tutor, but I had been accepted. I was a Duke Man, surrounded by other Duke men and women. They were hungover too, emerging from the residence halls, sticky with the shared oils of Friday night, pattering into Alpine Bagels to drink off beer with orange juice. Oh, the pain. I vaguely remembered coming to Duke for academics. Three hundred pages behind in *The Poetry of Lord Byron*. I was only doing well in *Introduction to Jazz*—and everyone did well in *Intro to Jazz*.

The students milled about the entrance to Alpine Bagels. Among them, standing beside his daughter, was a silver-haired gentleman in an immaculate gray suit. Tom Wolfe. I slowed to have a look, and his daughter introduced us. In 1989, Wolfe wrote a literary manifesto, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast,” in which he exhorted American novelists to go West, East, North, South—anywhere they pleased, so long as they placed the realities of American life at the core of their work. On a hung-over morning during my sophomore year, I was two of the Beast’s Billion Feet that Tom Wolfe had been stalking. I noticed his eyes: gathering, sorting, scanning, and finally reaching a conclusion as he read the lettering across my T-shirt. KAPPA SIGMA. In an act of hubris, we had printed 200 during the last spring’s big party, and we wore them like midshipmen with new tattoos.

“Kappa Sigma. I’ve heard that they are one of the best ...”

The best! Just last night I had lured a senior into my bunk. A sophomore and a senior! Triumph! Lauren ... somebody. Of course, it would be uncool to be excited about being so cool. Best to be self-effacing, but witty.

“For whatever that’s worth. I think it was started by a bunch of very angry Southerners after the Civil War ...”

He said something about necromancing and his *alma mater*, Washington & Lee. We parted ways. I went inside, and Wolfe continued his walk out on Duke’s campus and so many others.

It was quite a walk.

In *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Wolfe gives us a *tabula rasa* from the Blue Ridge mountains who attends prestigious Dupont University only to find herself caught in the prevailing cultural, moral, and human maelstrom of American college life at the turn of the century. We all walked past buildings at Duke, but Wolfe seems to have seen through them.

Each of the primary characters in this book represents a leading strain of youth, full of ambition and flaws. Adam Gellin is a scholarship student who has reduced all of life to SAT logic. Dupont:

TO BELONG IS TO SHARE IN PATTERNS OF SPEECH, BEHAVIOR, PLEASURE, AND THOUGHT, AND IN RETURN RECEIVE NOT ONLY PRESENT IDENTITY BUT A FUTURE VISION OF ONESELF AS HEIR TO A VAGUELY DEFINED PROSPERITY.

Rhodes Scholarship: Policy-Making Appointment: Personal Fulfillment: Happiness. There are co-signatories to this theory—the Millennial Mutants. With the Mutants, Wolfe pokes about at the self-defeating ambition of the late-stage meritocrats who occupy the bottom rungs of collegiate social ladders, believing that one day accounts will be righted and with wry commentary, solid credentials, and flawless transcripts, they will rise to the top. The life of the mind exists chiefly as conduit to a life of prestige and power.

One of these fellows used to edit me at the *Duke Chronicle*. He and his friends would bicker for hours to deter-

mine who would write the next day’s editorial, which is strange because the editorials never really said anything. Wolfe captures the style of these would-be polemics, always striving for outrage but never really attaining it. He also nails the rivalry between this group and the fratters, who had what they wanted. My editor loved Pub Quiz trivia. He would scribble away the correct answers to question after question, then leer across the room at the frat boys. They might beat him for women, they might throw big parties, but he had the answers. Who among them knew that Millard Fillmore was the 13th president? At the end of the night, he would claim his free bar tab and all the respect that came with it. This fellow graduates from a top-ten law school this spring. Watch out world.

In Hoyt Thorpe and the young elitists of Saint Rays fraternity, Wolfe uncovers the gremlins of a culture hopelessly obsessed with wealth and status; these are the warped grandchildren of the old guard, the most privileged men of the Republic. But in 2004, something has gone wrong. Nobility no longer obliges;

it entitles. Yet entitlement is addictive, and so it also enslaves. Wolfe offers an updated understanding of fraternities as social lockboxes far removed from their bawdy Animal House progenitors. To belong is to share in patterns of speech, behavior, pleasure, and thought, and in return receive not only present identity but a future vision of oneself as heir to a vaguely defined prosperity. Thorpe is the poster boy for the young man willing to do anything to take his place in the bourgeois pantheon, preferably along the path of least resistance.

If the book succeeds in describing the new, virulent strain of frat boy, it is weakest in depicting its protagonist’s interac-

tions with the men of Saint Rays. The cultural separating mechanisms of most universities are incredibly efficient, and if Ms. Simmons is half as green as Wolfe would have us believe, she would have been kept away from the frat scene altogether. Christian groups, reading groups, volunteer groups—lots of things to do. Moreover, were Hoyt Thorpe nearly as shallow as Wolfe correctly makes him out to be, it is hard to imagine him risking reputation and clout on such a back-water bride. But there is a larger point, and the payoff in cultural commentary more than compensates for any implausibility. The deflowering and dehumanizing end met by North Carolina's proudest daughter at the hands of Greenwich, Connecticut's most vulgar son vividly animates one of the great themes of this book—the corrupting role of corrupted language.

In prime form, Wolfe has sifted through the conversation of a generation, dusting off every verb, examining each noun, and reeling at the role of sarcasm and irony in casual discourse.

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Plato would write on this if he were alive, but the founder of New Journalism is the best we have and not entirely unqualified. Irony everywhere, thick and heavy. Stirred in with sarcasm then dripped upon every remark to the point that sincerity itself becomes ironic. That is when all is lost: morality and meaning become relative. Charlotte embodies these things, and along with them is doomed. Wolfe pulls no punches here. He lets us know where we stand in one of the most disturbing, chilling, mechanical, and dead-on-accurate descriptions of drunken collegiate coitus on record.

There are some hollow points. Jojo Johanssen is rather stupid for a character fated to experience an intellectual epiphany centering around a philosophy of justice. Yet if anyone has written a more compelling description of the pressures exerted on athletes by corporatized universities, I would very much like to read it. Wolfe is everywhere—the locker room, the coaches' office, the air-conditioned player suites. I often sat in the bleachers at basketball games and wondered what was going through the minds of Duke's basketball gods. You would see them driving about in \$60,000 cars, lurching with sunglassesed men months before the NBA draft, saying hello to your girlfriend and calling her "baby." I often noticed Tom Wolfe sitting courtside at these games, and his account of the action on Dupont's court is every bit as gripping as *A Man In Full's* meat-freezer brawl. White flesh, black pecs, muscle armor, sweat-soaked, trash-talking, kidney-poking, hard-fouling. The pimped-out, blinged-up booster Escalades. The ghostwritten term papers. The magnificent hubris, all set to a hip-hop beat. (It is only with his treatment of hip hop, a venture to the outer edges of pop culture, that Wolfe seems to be showing his age. He has an enduring fascination with rap music, but never gets it right. His fictional rap impresario has a penchant for ending each of his rhymes with the strangely mid-'80s sign-off "Know'm saying?") This fellow might have been rapping in Brooklyn during the *Bonfire* era but

would never get signed to a label today.) Other would-be cultural tags also fall flat: Diesel Jeans, Britney Spears, Manolo Blahniks. But the world has Candace Bushnell for these things.

Tom Wolfe isn't after jeans, pop stars, or \$600 shoes. He is, after all, *Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast*. It moves! It groans! It matters. With *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe cornered it on Park Avenue. There, in a classic eight-bedroom, Sherman McCoy traded his bonds and cheated on his wife. Day in, day out he shaved little bits of gold from big chunks of gold and spent those nuggets fueling a life so full of nonsense that it had to come crashing down before he had any chance of finding himself. In *A Man in Full*, Wolfe introduced America to the Big Southern Real Estate Developer Charlie Croker, who basked in machismo derived chiefly from office towers and quail hunting, while his lowest employee discovered just what it means to be human. *Charlotte Simmons* is less overt but no less important.

The nation's leading universities look nothing like they did even 40 years ago. Streaming media flows in through cables, wires, and the air itself. Meritocratic admissions policies clash with human vanities and the old aristocracy. Recruiters comb campuses to cull elites of all definitions well before those elites have ever gotten around to defining themselves. Students attempt character development amid constant opportunities to quench their most base desires. Even on campuses dominated by cathedrals, no one will go on record to tell you that you have a soul. It is the immaculate, intricate, devastating treatment of this fractured-mirror world and its warping influence that makes this book so worthwhile. Tom Wolfe has done it again. He has tracked the Billion-Footed Beast from Penn to Stanford to Harvard to Yale to Princeton to Duke and finally to Dupont University, where he caught and caged the damn thing—bucking, breathing, vile, gorgeous—on display for all to see. ■

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Fifth Columnists



They were originally Falangist sympathizers inside Madrid during the Spanish Civil War, prepared to side with General Franco's four columns that were

besieging the city. By 1939, as Germany and France were poised for war, French Fifth Columnists were busy undermining those who preached resistance to German demands. Until now, America has not had a Fifth Column in its midst, unless one counts the media during the war in Vietnam. (Roosevelt unfairly and needlessly detained Japanese-Americans during World War II as potential Fifth Columnists, when he should have been detaining some of his cabinet).

The first real case (Benedict Arnold aside) of Fifth Columnists inside America working for foreign interests are the neo-conservatives, the best known of whom include David Frum, William Kristol, Norman and John Podhoretz, Michael Ledeen, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and the egregious Douglas Feith, as close to being a foreign agent as is possible to be but still holding on to his job at the Pentagon. America's Fifth Columnists aim to shape United States foreign policy to suit Israeli interests. The gruesome carnage in Iraq is proof that this administration is ready to fight Israeli battles to the last American marine.

We have lost more than 1,200 dead, 30,000 wounded, and have killed an unknown number of Iraqis, not all of them insurgents or terrorists. We have military hospitals full of blind and crippled young men and women, while thousands of Iraqis and their children are mortared and shot daily. Despite the bloodshed, however, victory in Iraq is still up for grabs. Not only have the neocons not bothered to apologize, they want more blood. Mind you, there are no Frums dying among our troops. Instead, they are ensconced inside the Beltway appearing on television and egging the president on to Tehran and Damascus.

In a soundbite age, "War on Terror" has a good ring to it. Once upon a time, Christian missionaries tried to vanquish "evil savages" by teaching them religion. Now we try to teach them democracy. The way America's Fifth Column operates is a simple one. It uses the charge of anti-Semitism to smear honorable conservatives who do not believe that Uncle Sam's and Israel's interests are one and the same. (The most outrageous example was when Midge Decter accused the venerable conservative Russell Kirk of anti-Semitism.) David Frum, a sleazy self-promoter, infamously painted conservative writers like Pat Buchanan, Paul Gottfried, Samuel Francis, Tom Fleming, and others as unpatriotic Americans, forgetting to mention that in his book "unpatriotic" means not serving the interests of the state of Israel. Norman Podhoretz's "World War IV" is a blueprint for an endless campaign to destroy all of Israel's enemies. Why are these bogus patriots getting away with such stuff? Alas, it is a very easy question to answer.

With 85,000 members, a staff of 165, and a \$33.4 million annual budget, AIPAC, the American Israel Political Affairs Committee, is Washington's most influential and most feared lobby. It is forceful, extremely aggressive, and more or less calls the tune inside the Beltway where the Middle East is concerned. Woe to the politician who ignores its wishes. He will be targeted, his opponents showered with donations, his reputation immediately shredded by charges of anti-Semitism.

Neocons work closely with AIPAC and the Israeli embassy. As Philip Giraldi wrote in this magazine, "Principal neocons have been accused of illegally providing classified information to

Israel. None was ever prosecuted." Last I heard AIPAC was busy accusing the FBI and the CIA of pursuing a vendetta against Israel and the Pentagon, while neocon Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute alleges that the Franklin affair was motivated by anti-Semitism.

America's pro-Israel stand is nothing new. Israel is, after all, our closest ally in the region, despite the spying it regularly conducts on Uncle Sam. If there ever was a one-sided marriage, this is it. As Thomas Friedman wrote in the *New York Times*, "there is a steadily rising perception across the Arab-Muslim world that the great enemy of Islam is JIA—Jews, Israel and America, all lumped together in a single threat." Friedman goes on to say that Arab satellite television stations show split-screen images of Israelis bashing Palestinians and Americans beating up Iraqi insurgents. Nothing new here. Arab preachers, mostly paid by our other "allies," the Saudi rulers, explain all the world's ills by wrapping them up in JIA. But Arab lies and outrageous anti-Western propaganda aside, the Bush regime's total embrace of Ariel Sharon makes it impossible to know where American policy stops and Sharon's begins.

Now, with Colin Powell gone, my fears are that Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary Douglas Feith—two of the most bluster-prone cheerleaders of the Iraq War and of Ariel Sharon's brutal and expansionist strategy on the West Bank—will enjoy even more power and influence. Under normal circumstances, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Feith, and others would have been dismissed on the spot, and neocon propagandists such as Frum, Kristol, Podhoretz, Perle, and their ilk denounced as working for a foreign power. But we are not living in normal times. This is the time of AIPAC, and woe to those who oppose America's Fifth Column, starting with poor little me. ■