Book Review: *The Bonfire of the Vanities*

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**Recommended Citation**
Flame," crazy old alcoholic E. L. may yet come to Jesus at the revival meetings, thinks Dovey, a devout woman who has befriended him. But Dovey is plagued by a dream in which she was "flooded with pleasure" when E. L. began to fondle her breast.

And we see blacks in these stories. "The Cure" depicts a tough old black woman determined to hang on to life. In "Fruit of the Season," a black boy picking dewberries for the white woman his mother works for cannot control his veiled rage when he sees the white woman's magnificent house and thinks of his own two-room hovel. "His eyes seemed to darken. Without a word, he gathered up the saliva in his mouth, leaned over, and spit on the berries."

When there is affection between blacks and whites, it sometimes comes more from one side than the other, as is subtly shown in a final scene in "Beyond Two Forks." An old black woman, Queen, has accompanied her former mistress all day trying to help the white woman find someone to clean for her. They sit in the black woman's cabin. "Don't look so pitiful, Miss. I'll come back up there and help you," Queen says at last. The white woman, the narrator, graciously refuses (Queen is too old) and gets up to leave.

I put my arms around her. Like Mannie, she accepted but did not return my displays of affection. She did not open her arms, for instance, and hug me back but only patted lightly with one hand.

In my embrace her flesh gave way and the bones beneath felt bare and brittle. Old. She freed herself as from a child, and opened the door.

"Done got dark out there," she said.

A housewife for thirty-one years, Mrs. Brown reminds us of other women authors who have had to put off writing until the children were grown up. Let us hope Mary Ward Brown writes more, for her stories are masterful — rich, beautifully crafted, with lives that speak to all of us.

Margaret Proctor


It was a surprise when this novel appeared last year — the first novel by Tom Wolfe. The author, after all, has sometimes been blamed for the death of the modern serious novel.

One of the developers of the "new journalism" in the 60s and 70s, Wolfe believed that the techniques of fiction should be applied to journalism — that truth was not only stranger than fiction but also truer than fiction and more interesting, provided it was presented in the best way, which happened to be the fictional mode as it has been developed over the past 250 years.

So Tom Wolfe had produced hundreds of magazine articles and a string of successful non-fiction books, including The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Steamline Baby, Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers, The Right Stuff, and From Bauhaus to Our House. They often read "like fiction," with novel-like dialogue, narration, character description, and figurative language, particularly sequences of images and patches of offbeat jargon.

The success of the new non-fiction paralleled a decline in fiction sales, so many people saw a causal relationship. By the early 80s, the only way you could make a living at fiction writing was to produce soap-opera novels that could easily convert into television mini-series. The serious, professional writers were amateurs and tried to take the easy road.

So what had he sold the pre-marketed excerpter, a nine-month Johnny Carson/Dan Donahue? It turns out...

Bonfire of not a great novel that characterized the quality fiction as an attempt on the surface but also on an artistic and "good read," with your attention...

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writers were doing non-fiction. Only the
amateurs and the academics stuck with the
old form.

So what was with Wolfe writing a novel? Had he sold out, with a hype-generated book
pre-marketed to publisher, book club, Redbook
excerpter, and tv network producer, with
nine-months of promo appearances on
Johnny Carson, Oprah Winfrey, and Phil
Donahue?

It turns out, not at all.

Bonfire of the Vanities is a serious novel. It's
not a great novel, but Wolfe attempts in-depth
characterization — the prime requisite for
quality fiction. And his language is serious —
an attempt to make the prose work not only
on the surface level of description and action
but also on the subliminal, imagistic level as
an artistic and thematic unifier. It's also a
"good read," an interesting tale that catches
your attention and is exciting.

Most important, unlike all the pop novels
today and even unlike most of the academic
and serious novels, it turns out to have social
and moral significance. Not quite as good as
Dickens but in the same vein. Currently
novels tend to take one of two tacks. Most
often they will take no moral position at all,
wallowing in the sexual gratification typical
of the television evening soap opera — like
Dallas or Falcon Crest. The serious novel today
is usually little better. Typically, the author
will develop the main character's attitudes
into the "world view" of the novel, in the
process promoting a self-centered relativism in
moral and social matters.

Wolfe resists the current tendency.

His main character, Sherman McCoy, has
all the outward trappings of the television
ideal — scion of a wealthy family and hot-shot
bond trader who privately thinks of himself
as one of the "Masters of the Universe,"
mostly because of his astounding success with
money in the 80s. He makes a million dollars
a year and moves in the world of the rich and
famous, an outward ideal for the yuppies.

But Wolfe shows us he is privately moral
scum — thoughtless, a poor father, a lousy
husband, and a disappointing son.

The central incident occurs early in the
novel during a side-trip through the Bronx
slums. Alongside Sherman is a sex-hungry
socialite with whom Sherman is having an
affair. Two black kids stop Sherman's Mer-
cedes and try to rob him. He fights one kid
off and, in speeding away from the scene, hits
the other with his car.

Sherman and his lover decide to hide the
truth, and the hit-and-run turns into a cause
celebre, inflamed by an ambitious district
attorney and a black minister/revolutionary
who is using religion to redistribute the wealth
in his own direction.

From that point on, the interest in the
novel is Sherman's breakdown. Much as in
Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, the main
character brings on his own retribution,
afflicting himself with appalling thoughts of
what he has done and what will come. His
mental anguish is worse than anything
society could do to him, and he finally loses his
$1 million a year job. And, of course, his
apartment, his Mercedes, his mistress, his
daughter, his wife.

Yet, by the end of the novel we are able
to empathize with Sherman McCoy. Through
agonizing over his losses, he does come to
some awareness that his materialistic existence
was shallow, that what he originally thought
was the worst is unimportant. By the end of
the book, most readers will like him.

Beyond the major character, much of the
interest of the book is Wolfe's depiction of life
in New York City. The primary stages are the
high society of Sherman McCoy and the low society of a Bronx courthouse where the leading man is Larry Kramer, a sub assistant prosecuting attorney who aspires to McCoy’s wealth and status even as he is prosecuting him for the hit-and-run accident.

As he has done in his non-fiction, Wolfe uses the catalog of detail to describe. But in this book, more than in his non-fiction, the description serves multiple purposes — characterizing, furthering the plot, making social commentary.

Wolfe is at his best depicting high-society’s social life — the biggest bonfire of the vanities. In the middle of the book is a thirty page description of a dinner party that is riveting. Upon entering, Sherman surveys the crowd:

He immediately sensed a pattern...presque vu! presque vu! almost seen!...and yet he couldn’t have put it into words. That would have been beyond him. All the men and women in this hall were arranged in clusters, conversational bouquets, so to speak. There were no solitary figures, no strays. All faces were white. Black faces might show up, occasionally, at fashionable charity dinners but not in fashionable private homes. There were no men under thirty-five and precious few under forty. The women came in two varieties. First, there were women in their late thirties and in their forties and older (women “of a certain age”), all of them skin and bones (starved to near perfection). To compensate for the concupiscence missing from their juiceless ribs and atrophied backsides, they turned to the dress designers. This season no puffs, flounces, pleats, ruffles, bibs, bows, battings, scallops, laces, darts, or shirs on the bias were too extreme. They were the social X rays, to use the phrase that had bubbled up into Sherman’s own brain. Second there were the so-called Lemon Tarts. These were women in their twenties or early thirties, mostly blondes (the Lemon in the Tarts), who were the second, third, and fourth wives or live-in girlfriends of men over forty or fifty or sixty (or seventy), the sort of women men refer to, quite without thinking, as girls. This season the Tart was able to flaunt the natural advantages of youth by showing her legs from well above the knee and emphasizing her round bottom (something no X ray had). What was entirely missing from chez Bavardage was that manner of woman who is neither very young nor very old, who has laid in a lining of subcutaneous fat, who glows with plumpness and a rosy face that speaks, without a word, of home and hearth and hot food ready at six and stories read aloud at night and conversations while seated on the edge of the bed, just before the Sandman comes. In short, no one ever invited...Mother. (p. 333)

One is tempted to quote Wolfe endlessly, for he is a lover of the English language and plays with it as a good poet often does. It will be a rare reader who isn’t sent to the dictionary at least once during the book.

As with any good novel, it is difficult to specify a single theme. But — much as Dickens did — Wolfe constantly points out the vacuum of worthwhile human values in a materialistic and monied society. Unlike Dickens, Wolfe shows us few examples of warm family relationships, even though he implies their importance throughout.

The major weakness of the novel is in plotting, as it sprawls on for 650 pages. Wolfe uses a three-page epilogue to sum up the action, to tie together all the loose ends by updating the status of the major characters one year after the final chapter. It’s lame, but about the only way he could end the action properly.

While Wolfe succeeded at real-life characterization, from reports on point-of-view style which until now are rare. And most of the non-fictional characters — and moral — are quite realistic. Though he is a better novelist than non-fiction writer — and more so it suggests that he be truer than he was. WolfeNotes to the Good Novel

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If a powerful computer endowed with artificial intelligence programming could interface with Marion Montgomery and enter everything from his mind into its memory, could it write this book? Montgomery's association of the recipe for cooking possum with the Latin possum, representing for him the ability or potency of the individual person, seems arbitrary enough that the computer might arrive at it. But the machine would be unable to see a way of fleshing out this strange connection to make of it a compelling discourse. Why? Because the computer has no heart, which is, as Montgomery claims, the only way he could terminate the book, since the action points toward no natural conclusion.

While Wolfe failed at making the transition from real-life action to fictional plot, he has succeeded at making the other transitions—from reports of real people to fictional character, from personal narration to fictional point-of-view, from self-conscious language to style which undergirds the rest of the fiction. And most of all from the personal statement of non-fiction to the representation of reality and moral position—of the best fiction. Though he hasn't said it in public, Wolfe's novel suggests he has decided that fiction may be truer than real life—the basic belief of all good novelists.

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