



“The Bonfire of the Vanities” by Tom Wolfe

reviewed by Steve Reilly and Julie Peake

Steve Reilly’s review

I read this book when it was first published and then again in March of 2004 and thoroughly enjoyed it both times – gave it a 9. I still believe it’s a masterpiece and remains one of my favourite novels. However, although it is certainly a powerful, insightful and entertaining tour de force of New York back in the heady days of the 1980s, packed with well described characters and marvellous vignettes of life in New York at all levels, it is perhaps over-packed with over-described characters and unnecessary - to the storyline that is - small back stories. I must confess I got a little annoyed with Tom’s constant description of every character’s clothing, even minor characters, every time they came on stage. All these years later I think Tom’s writing could have been a little tighter. However, regardless of my minor downgrading, I still believe this book has earned a place on anyone’s list of the top 100 fiction novels published in the 20th century. It stands as a taste of the times.

The dinner party at the Bavardages’ apartment alone was worth the effort of reading the whole novel. What a masterful piece of writing so filled with wonderful things like, boiling teeth, impeccably emaciated, juiceless ribs, ‘he could see lamplight through her rib cage’ and many more. But overall, throughout the book, what a delight to see Tom Wolfe skilfully use a literary scalpel to dissect, not just the upper crust of 1980s society, but all levels – no one was spared.

Tom Wolfe knows the difference between boring navel gazing and revealing, enlightening character introspection.

Tom followed up this work with another fiction novel called “A Man in Full” which is well worth the read but not quite in the same class this effort.

Tom is well known for his Social Commentary pieces such as, “The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby” – probably the best known – and smaller works such as “The Painted Word”. All worth a look.

The Movie with Tom Hanks, Melanie Griffith, Morgan Freeman and others came out in 1990 and I was first in line to see it but found it disappointing. I realise now I was expecting too much. I heard that Tom Hanks, Melanie Griffith and others went to Tom Wolfe to apologise. I had another look just a few days ago and would suggest it is worth a couple of hours of your time.

Tom Wolfe died in 2018 at 88.

Steve Reilly

Julie Peake's review

I'm sure that this novel is very well written as the author manages to paint a very clear picture of the people and the culture of the city of New York.

But what a dreadful picture this is!

I hated the entire 682 pages and often was forced to skip paragraphs.

There was not one likeable, honest character among them and if this is a true account of New York society then I don't want to be forced to confront them. The society crowd were only interested in money and appearances. Not one of them offered any true friendship as Sherman soon discovered when he fell from grace.

The falsity was superbly portrayed in the segment about the untimely death of Ruskin at an exclusive restaurant. One minute he is being fawned over by the maitre d' because he was known to be very wealthy and a powerful figure but when his dead body lies on the floor the waiters just step over his body and just want it removed so as not to embarrass the diners. The one amusing episode in the entire book is when the paramedics try to get the stretcher through the revolving doors and then through the window in the lady's room. True to form Ruskin's funeral is a grand occasion---what hypocrisy.

The conversations in the police precinct were particularly disturbing. The list goes on. Peter Fallow, the drunk reporter who is only after a scoop and a free meal. The Police chief and district attorney who want to prosecute Sherman, innocent or guilty, to further their own ends, the corrupt Mayor and worst of all the Reverend Bacon who uses his influence to enrage the black community who he really doesn't care a hoot about just to improve his image and line his own pockets. Does this sound familiar? Black Lives matter!!!

Sherman thought he was Master of the Universe until he was seduced by the wealthy, young Maria Ruskin who was really no more than a prostitute and who, true to form, denied being the driver of the car when Henry Lamb was killed

The Epilogue makes interesting reading.

Due to corruption, coercion, and greed everyone except, Sherman and the poor judge who tried to overturn the arraignment, won.

Fallow won, Reverend Bacon won, the mayor won, the police Chief won, Maria Ruskin won and the MOB won.

But the biggest loser were the justice system and the right of innocent victims to get a fair trial.

I give this book 6 for writing and 1 for enjoyment

Julie Peake