

KINO LORBER

# Radical Wolfe



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## SYNOPSIS

From a beat reporter at the Washington Post to an overnight sensation as the leader of the New Journalism movement, Tom Wolfe was at the forefront of reshaping how American stories are told. Recognizing the importance in overlooked micro-cultures and people, Wolfe documented everything, from rural stock car drivers to hippies in Haight Ashbury to the Apollo Astronauts, and his ability to bridge cultural and class divides while tackling stories central to American life was unique in fiction and non-fiction. With a distinctive and oft-imitated style all his own, Wolfe's body of work includes some of the most memorable and culturally impactful stories of the 20th century, including *The Right Stuff*, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. *Radical Wolfe* is a deeply personal and illuminating look at the man inside the famous white suit, featuring conversations and interviews with those who knew him best including Michael Lewis, Gay Talese, Lynn Nesbit, Terry McDonell, Tom Junod, Christopher Buckley, Niall Ferguson, and Alexandra Wolfe.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The first time I read Tom Wolfe was when a friend handed me a dog-eared copy of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Ten pages in and I was consumed with one thought: "Who is Tom Wolfe?" I devoured the rest of his work over the next few months, delighting in his inimitable style work and perplexed with how he could infiltrate so many different worlds and their central characters. Tom inspired me to seek my first writing job at Rolling Stone and a decade later to make this film.

It turns out Michael Lewis had the same question twenty years earlier as a twelve year-old in New Orleans reading *Radical Chic*. In 2015, Michael answered his question (and mine) in the celebrated *Vanity Fair* article: "How Tom Wolfe Became...Tom Wolfe". Tom became a touchstone for Michael as he filled his hero's shoes as America's leading non-fiction writer, with an eye for the stories that shape our culture.

Michael's *Vanity Fair* profile is the blueprint for telling Tom's life story in *Radical Wolfe*. Adapting the article into a documentary allowed us to hear from more voices including Tom's friends, family, colleagues, collaborators, and rivals alike, and breathe new life into his writing through the voice of Jon Hamm.

In making the film I was able to explore the real life consequences of Tom's writing on people such as former Black Panther and Columbia University professor Jamal Joseph, while younger writers like Emily Witt, Tom Junod and Christopher Buckley shared how Wolfe shaped and influenced their work. And it was moving to meet and hear from his closest friends, hearing anecdotes and reminiscences from people like Lynn Nesbit and Paul McHugh who knew about Tom's sensitive side and often guarded personal life.

From his beginnings as a Washington Post beat reporter to his later celebrity status as the leader of the New Journalism movement, Tom Wolfe was at the forefront of reshaping how American stories are told and what stories are important. Unlike many of his peers, Tom recognized the importance in often overlooked micro-cultures and people: teenagers customizing cars in Southern California garages, stock car racers in rural North Carolina, hippies in Haight Ashbury. Fusing a conservative upbringing in Virginia with a cultural antenna honed at Yale's PhD program in American Studies, Tom went on to write some of the most memorable and culturally impactful stories of the 20th century. His ability to bridge racial, cultural and class divides and recontextualize the most important events in American life was unique in both fiction and non-fiction. As Michael Lewis recalls: "Tom Wolfe shined a light on people in a way that made you take notice...and there's power in that."

After years in the making we're thrilled to release this film, which gives cinematic life to Michael Lewis' seminal article and will introduce Tom's work to a new generation of readers, while revealing the stories behind the stories to his longtime fans.

– Richard Dewey

## How Tom Wolfe Became ... Tom Wolfe

By Michael Lewis

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I was 11 or maybe 12 years old when I discovered my parents' bookshelves. They'd been invisible right up to the moment someone or something told me that the books on them were stuffed with dirty words and shocking behavior—a rumor whose truth was eventually confirmed by *Portnoy's Complaint*. The book I still remember taking down from the shelf was *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*. The only word in the title I understood was "the." The cover showed a picture of a bored-looking blonde housewife nestled in the lap of a virile black man. It seemed just the sort of thing to answer some questions I had about the facts of life. It didn't. Instead, it described a cocktail party given in the late 1960s for the Black Panthers by Leonard Bernstein in his fancy New York City apartment. I'd never been to New York City, or heard of Leonard Bernstein, the conductor of the New York Philharmonic, and had only a vague notion of who or what a Black Panther revolutionary might be—and none of that turned out to matter. The book started out with this weird old guy, Leonard Bernstein, rising from his bed in the middle of the night and having a vision of himself delivering a speech to a packed concert hall while being heckled by a giant black man onstage beside him. I remember thinking: How would anyone know about someone else's bizarre private vision? Was this one of those stories that really happened, like Bart Starr's quarterback sneak to beat the Dallas Cowboys, or was it made up, like The Hardy Boys? Then, suddenly, I felt as if I were standing in Leonard Bernstein's apartment watching his waiters serve appetizers to Black Panthers:

*"MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM. THESE ARE NICE. LITTLE Roquefort cheese morsels rolled in crushed nuts. Very tasty. Very subtle. It's the way the dry sackiness of the nuts tiptoes up against the dour savor of the cheese that is so nice, so subtle. Wonder what the Black Panthers eat out here on the hors d'oeuvre trail? Do the Panthers like little Roquefort cheese morsels rolled in crushed nuts this way, and asparagus tips in mayonnaise dabs, and meatballs petites au Coq Hardi, all of which are at this very moment being offered to them on gadrooned silver platters by maids in black uniforms with hand-ironed white aprons?"*

Were the books grown-ups read supposed to make you laugh? I had no idea but ...

*"But it's all right. They're white servants, not Claude and Maude, but white South Americans. Lenny and Felicia are geniuses. After a while, it all comes down to servants. They are the cutting edge in Radical Chic. Obviously, if you are giving a party for the Black Panthers, as Lenny and Felicia are this evening, or as Sidney and Gail Lumet did last week, or as John Simon of Random House and Richard Baron, the publisher did before that; or for the Chicago Eight, such as the party Jean vanden Heuvel gave; or for the grape workers or Bernadette Devlin, such as the parties Andrew Stein gave; or for the Young Lords, such as the*

*party Ellie Guggenheimer is giving next week in her Park Avenue duplex; or for the Indians or the SDS or the G.I. coffee shops or even for the Friends of the Earth—well, then, obviously you can't have a Negro butler and maid, Claude and Maude, in uniform, circulating through the living room, the library, and the main hall serving drinks and canapés. Plenty of people have tried to think it out. They try to picture the Panthers or whoever walking in bristling with electric hair and Cuban shades and leather pieces and the rest of it, and they try to picture Claude and Maude with the black uniforms coming up and saying, 'Would you care for a drink, sir?' They close their eyes and try to picture it some way, but there is no way. One simply cannot see that moment. So the current wave of Radical Chic has touched off the most desperate search for white servants."*

At some point came a thought that struck with the force of revelation: this book *had been written by someone*. Some human being must have sat down and scribbled the Hardy Boys series, along with the *Legends of the NFL*—how else would I have ever known that Dallas Cowboys defensive lineman Bob Lilly lifted a Volkswagen by himself? I'd never really stopped to ask who had written any of those books, because ... well, because it didn't matter to me who had written them. Their creators were invisible. They had no particular identity. No voice. Now rolling around a living-room floor in New Orleans, Louisiana, howling with laughter, I asked a new question: Who wrote this book? Thinking it might offer a clue, I searched the cover. Right there on the front was a name!!! Tom Wolfe. Who was Tom Wolfe?

## Parachuting In

'Is he, like, really old?' Dixie asks. Dixie is my 13-year-old daughter, who, a few days earlier, had been told that her special trip with her father needed to be interrupted for the better part of a day so that he might pay a call on Tom Wolfe.

"Eighty-five," I say. "But he's a *very young* 85." As if that helps. To a 13-year-old, 85 might as well be 2,000. She doesn't like the idea of this trip at all. "Look," I say, or something like it. "I want at least one of my children to meet him. I think he's a big reason it ever occurred to me to do what I do for a living. Because the first time I ever thought 'writer,' I also thought 'delight.'"

She's not listening. She knows we're going to see Tom Wolfe for reasons that have nothing to do with her. She doesn't care what I do for a living. She doesn't care who Tom Wolfe is—it was all she could do to drag herself to click on his Wikipedia entry. What she cares about, intensely, are plane crashes. She hates flying, and, in this case, I can't say I blame her. So I try all over again to explain why, to travel quickly from Martha's Vineyard to Long Island, you can't fly in a normal plane, only a small one or a helicopter, and that the weather's too dicey for a helicopter. That's when our pilot finally appears. He's got a swagger about him, which might be reassuring, or the opposite, depending on your feelings about male confidence. He leads us onto the Martha's Vineyard airport runway and into a maze of

Gulfstreams and Lears and Hawkers. The sight of the jets perks Dixie up—private planes aren't nearly as small as she imagined. They're sleek and indestructible, like the chariots of visiting gods. When our pilot stops, though, it is not beside a Hawker or a Lear or a Gulfstream. It's not clear what it is. When I first spotted it I thought it might be a drone. I half expected the pilot to pull out a remote control and show us how to play with it. Instead he produces a step stool and shows us how to climb up on the wing without breaking it. My child looks at me like, well, like a 13-year-old girl being taken on a suicide mission to visit a 2,000-year-old man—and then crawls on all fours across the wing, to squeeze into the doggy door on the side.

“Where's the other pilot?” I ask, before following.

“It's jes' me,” the pilot says, with a chuckle. It's a reassuring chuckle. A faintly *southern* chuckle—though he's not from the South. “Something happens to me, here's what you do,” he says as he straps himself in. “This lever here.” He grabs a red knob beside his seat. “This shuts down the engine. Jes' pull that back and you shut it down. And this lever here ...” He grabs a bright-red handle on the ceiling over his head. “Yank down on this with 45 pounds of pressure. That'll release the parachute.”

“*The parachute?*”

“No sense having the engine running with the parachute open,” he says, ignoring the 10 questions that naturally precede the one to which this is the answer.

“What did you say your name was?” I hadn't paid attention the first time. Now that I was going to be parachuting into the ocean with his inert body I needed to be able to explain to the authorities who he was.

“Jack Yeager,” he says.

“Yeager?”

“Uh-huh.”

“As in—”

“I get that all the time. People think we're related.” He fires up his toy propellers.

“You know who Chuck Yeager is?”

“Everyone knows who Chuck Yeager is.”

Dixie doesn't know who Chuck Yeager is, but her brain is on tilt. One day, perhaps, she'll want to know.

“You know why—right?” I holler.

“He broke the sound barrier.”

“No, I mean, you know why anyone knows Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier, or cares?”

He shakes his head. He’s busy declaring to the airport authorities his improbable intention to take off from their runway in his toy plane.

“It’s because of Tom Wolfe,” I shout.

“Who’s Tom Wolfe?”

There’s a new answer to that question. Back in November 2013 the New York Public Library announced that it would pay \$2.15 million to acquire Wolfe’s papers. It wasn’t until earlier this year that they became available for inspection. It’s not hard to see why it took them so long. Wolfe saved what he touched—report cards, tailors’ bills, to-do lists, reader letters, lecture notes, book blurbs, requests for book blurbs, drawings, ideas for drawings never executed (“Nude Skydiver Devoured in Midair by Ravenous Owls”), and dozens of sexually explicit and totally insane letters from a female stalker, including one consisting chiefly of 17 pages of red lip prints. He just tossed all this stuff in steamer trunks and hauled the trunks up to the attic, where some of them had sat undisturbed for 50 years. He kept postcards from friends with hardly anything written on them; he kept all the Christmas cards; he kept morning-after notes from New York society ladies:

*“Dear Tom, I wouldn’t blame you for thinking I am a prevert [sic] or a sex fiend or something but actually, I have never tried to give anyone after dinner gropes before. Well not at the table anyway...  
Don’t be mad at me.  
Please.” [Dated November 17, 1964.]*

There’s a thrill to be had in an old-fashioned archive—of poking around letters and papers and reporter notepads stuffed with random scribblings while the lady behind the library desk glances over to make sure you aren’t doodling on the papers. It’s the thrill of entering a private space, where the characters are unaware they are being watched. When some poor sucker’s e-mails or texts wind up in public they offer everyone a thrill, but it isn’t really the same—who writes an e-mail these days entirely free of the thought that he’s being watched? The other pleasure of an old-fashioned archive is the pleasure of words on paper. Letters are different from e-mails and texts. They have stuff jotted in their margins; they reveal a bit more about the writer. And with nothing in them to click on, the words have to do a lot more work, to enable the reader to *see* what you mean:

*“I hate to say this but David McDaniel is the most devlish looking and the most devlish acting person I’ve ever seen. He looks like the typical “comic book” Jap. He is short—not over 4’2”—has a very, very, very, very short monkey’s shave—high cheekbones—squinted*

*eyes—wears glasses—a stubby nose—a toothy grin—and to top it all, he actually has pointed teeth!!!!!!!!!!!!!! He is as mean as he can be, he has no consideration for anyone, he acts spoiled to death. he is terribly babyish, unhumanly babyish for anyone 12 years old. This is what he looks like [see drawing on page 185, top right] ... The description and drawing seem terribly exaggerated I know, but every bit of it is true—and the picture is one of the most perfect likenesses I've ever drawn.” [Tom Wolfe, aged 12, letter to his mother and father, 1943.]*

The documents tell the story of the leading journalistic observer and describer of American life, in a time of radical cultural transformation, and of the sensational explosion in American literary journalism that occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s—on which the ashes and the dust are just now settling. But it's a bit different from the story Wolfe has long told. That story shifts the focus away from his particular self and stresses his techniques. The unaided imagination—Wolfe's story goes—is a poor substitute for reporting and experience. At some point in his checkered career *The American Novelist* forgot that he needed to venture into the world and learn how it worked before he wrote about it, and left the field wide open for *The American Journalist*.

In the late 1960s a bunch of writers leapt into the void: George Plimpton, Joan Didion, Truman Capote, Gay Talese, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and the rest. Wolfe shepherded them into an uneasy group and labeled them the New Journalists. The New Journalists—with Wolfe in the lead—changed the balance of power between writers of fiction and writers of nonfiction, and they did it chiefly because of their willingness to submerge themselves in their subjects, and to steal from the novelist's bag of tricks: scene-by-scene construction, use of dramatic dialogue, vivid characterization, shifting points of view, and so on.

I doubt I was ever alone in failing to find the whole New Journalism story entirely satisfying. (Hunter Thompson, for instance, wrote Wolfe, “You thieving pile of albino warts.... I'll have your goddamn femurs ground into bone splinters if you ever mention my name again in connexion [*sic*] with that horrible ‘new journalism’ shuck you're promoting.”) For a start, there wasn't anything new about the techniques. Mark Twain used them to dramatize his experiences as a riverboat pilot and a gold miner. George Orwell set himself up as a destitute tramp and wrote up the experience as nonfiction. Virtually every British travel writer who has ever left an unpaid bill might be counted a New Journalist. When you look at that list of New Journalists, what pops to mind is not their common technique. It's their uncommon voices. They leapt off the page. They didn't sound like anyone else's.

## **Out of the South**

Thomas Kennerly Wolfe Jr. was born on March 2, 1930, and grew up in Richmond, Virginia, the son of a conservative, God-respectful southern editor of an agricultural trade magazine. Home was never something he was looking to get away from; it was never even something he was looking to pretend he was looking to get away from. He was accepted at Princeton but chose to attend Washington and Lee, to remain close to home. Every now and then one of his teachers would note that he had a way with



words, and some artistic talent, but artistic ambition, for a conservative southern male in the 1950s or really any other time, was too vague and impractical to indulge. After college, he took the advice of his professor and went to Yale, for a doctorate in American studies—and right up to this point in his life there isn't a trace of institutional rebellion in him. He pitches for the baseball team, pleases his teachers, has an ordinary, not artistic, group of pals, and is devoted to his mother and father.

The moment he leaves the South, something comes over him. Whatever it is, the feeling seems to be heightened by the sight of a blank sheet of paper. For instance, he creates (while he's meant to be writing a Yale dissertation) an elaborate parody of a Beat poet, "Jocko Thor," complete with a small book of poems and a short biography. Jocko Thor has given birth to a "new poetic genre called Bonkism." In his preface he explains: "Most of these poems were composed beneath a Coca-Cola sign in the town of Accident, Maryland, in February of 1956. They are dedicated to my childe bride whom I first met on that very spot." There follows what is essentially a book of short poems written, it seems, purely for Wolfe's own amusement—he never mentions them to anyone.

*"Regular Fellows*

*We walk the sidewalk brick by brick*

*We climb the brass-clapped stairs*

*We spit into each other's faces*

*And never put on airs."*

*"The Martyr*

*... A Freudian Poem*

*In a moment I'll resume my martyrdom*

*In a moment, ready to trick myself,*

*Goad myself, to vex myself*

*With expert taunts,*

*I'll exhale and open my eyes.*

*Small designs will writhe*

*Behind my eyelids*

*Like bullwhips."*

And so on. For the first time in his life, it appears, Tom Wolfe has been provoked. He has left home and found, on the East Coast, the perpetual revolt of High Culture against God, Country, and Tradition. He happens to have landed in a time and place in which art—like the economy that supports it—is essentially patricidal. It's all about tearing up and replacing what came before. The young Tom Wolfe is intellectually equipped to join some fashionable creative movement and set himself in opposition to God, Country, and Tradition; emotionally, not so much. He doesn't use his new experience of East Coast sophisticates to distance himself from his southern conservative upbringing; instead he uses his upbringing to distance himself from the new experience. He picks for his Ph.D. dissertation topic the Communist influences on American writers, 1928–1942. From their response to it, the Yale professors,

who would have approved the topic in advance, had no idea of the spirit in which Wolfe intended to approach it:

*“Dear Mr. Wolfe:*

*I am personally acutely sorry to have to write you this letter but I want to inform you in advance that all of your readers reports have come in, and ... I am sorry to say I anticipate that the thesis will not be recommended for the degree.... The tone was not objective but was consistently slanted to disparage the writers under consideration and to present them in a bad light even when the evidence did not warrant this.” [Letter from Yale dean to T.W., May 19, 1956.]*

To this comes appended the genuinely shocked reviews of three Yale professors. It’s as if they can’t quite believe this seemingly sweet-natured and well-mannered southern boy has gone off half cocked and ridiculed some of the biggest names in American literature. The Yale grad student had treated the deeply held political conviction of these great American artists as—well, as a ploy in a game of status seeking. This student seemed to have gone out of his way to turn these serious American intellectuals into figures of fun. “The result is more journalistically tendentious than scholarly.... Wolfe’s polemical rhetoric is ... a chief consideration of my decision to fail the dissertation.” To top it all off ... he’d taken some license with the details. One outraged reviewer compared Wolfe’s text with his cited sources and attached the comparison. Sample Wolfe passage: “At one point ‘the Cuban delegation’ tramped in. It was led by a fierce young woman named Lola de la Torriente. With her bobbed hair, leather jacket, and flat-heeled shoes, she looked as though she had just left the barricades. Apparently she had. ‘This is where our literature is being built,’ exclaimed she, ‘on the barricades!’” Huffed the reviewer: “There is no description of her in the source, and the quotations do not appear in the reference.”

Which is to say that, as a 26-year-old graduate student, just as a 12-year-old letter writer, Tom Wolfe was already recognizably himself. He’d also found a lens through which he might view, freshly, all human behavior. He’d gone to Yale with the thought he would study his country by reading its literature and history and economics. He wound up discovering sociology—and especially Max Weber’s writings about the power of status seeking. The lust for status, it seemed to him, explained why otherwise intelligent American writers lost their minds and competed with one another to see just how devoted to the Communist cause they could be. In a funny way, Yale served him extremely well: it gave him a chance to roam and read and bump into new ideas. But he didn’t immediately see that:

*“These stupid fucks have turned down namely my dissertation, meaning I will have to stay here about a month longer to delete all the offensive passages and retype the sumitch. They called my brilliant manuscript ‘journalistic’ and ‘reactionary,’ which means I must go through with a blue pencil and strike out all the laughs and anti-Red passages and slip in a little liberal merde, so to speak, just to sweeten it. I’ll discuss with you how stupid all these stupid fucks are when I see you.” [T.W., aged 26, letter to a friend, June 9, 1956.]*

## Offbeat Reporter

He re-writes his thesis. He lards it up with academic jargon and creates a phony emotional distance from his material (he refers to “an American writer E. Hemingway”), and it is accepted. Then he flees Yale as fast as he can. He’s entering his late 20s with only the faintest idea of what he might do to earn a living. But he’s ambitious, eager to find his place in the world. His father introduces him to business associates. Wolfe writes to the head of a sales institute and sends “excerpts from work I have done on the subject of Communist activity among American writers and other ‘intellectuals.’” He applies for jobs in public relations. He writes to American Airlines to inquire about a post. He even considers, briefly, a position teaching economics.

In short, he doesn’t have any clear idea of what to do, although he has long liked the notion of being a writer or an artist. In May of 1955 he had written to the dean of Washington and Lee University, “I am thinking very seriously of going into journalism or a related field,” but he was slow to pursue it, as he was sure it would disappoint his parents. He writes to one of his father’s friends and confesses what he really wants to be is a *sportswriter*. Finally, he sends letters and curricula vitae to newspapers, offering his services as either a journalist or a graphic artist. (As a child he had enjoyed drawing and still seems at this point in his life as interested in drawing as in writing.) Only one newspaper writes back to express interest: the *Springfield Union*, in eastern Massachusetts. In 1956, at the age of 26, he takes the job.

A young man who had once assumed he’d become a professor now roams the streets of small-time America looking for car accidents or house fires or “color” stories—and he doesn’t seem at all troubled about it. There’s not a peep in his papers that suggests his parents are disappointed or that Wolfe is anxious about his career. Just the reverse: when he writes a story about the new fad of scuba diving and gets his picture in the paper in scuba gear, he is thrilled. He mails the clippings to his parents.

Still, he hasn’t figured out who he is, at least on paper. When his byline is not merely “a staff reporter,” it’s “Thomas Wolfe,” and the stuff that appears under it could have been written by anyone. He’s a good daily journalist—first for the *Springfield Union* and then, two and a half years later, for *The Washington Post*. But there’s nothing special about his work. The *Post* sends him to be the Latin America correspondent, and from Havana he sends dispatches that read just like the dispatches of the guy he replaced. But in Washington, when he’s in his early 30s, come the first signs that he isn’t entirely satisfied with the path he’s on. He writes to his parents to complain of the *Post*’s “chronic mania for bleeding heart stories on the poor and downtrodden.” He writes a 10-page single-spaced letter to interest the editor of *The Saturday Evening Post* in a piece for which there is no place in *The Washington Post*, on “status-seeking in Washington D.C.” “I don’t believe there is any subject, with the possible exception of the neighbors’ finances, which people enjoy having lugged out into the open more,” he writes. In his notebooks he catalogues his careful observations of the locals, in their hand-over-hand status climbs: the way the black Lincoln has replaced the Cadillac as the status car (because Jack Kennedy drove a black Lincoln); the way they used Cabinet members as cocktail-party status objects (“bagging a cabinet member”); right down to the way they had turned dog licenses into

status symbols—by handing out low-number licenses to the dogs of high-ranking officials. Wolfe appears to have walked back and forth across Washington to determine which neighborhood said which things about which people. His notebooks list the addresses of all the important people and the high-status buildings. (The street with all the African embassies on it he labels “Cannibals Row.”)

But he never writes the piece, maybe because his heart is only half in it: he is genuinely convinced that status concerns are at the heart of most human behavior. But the human behavior in Washington doesn’t strike him as all that interesting. When people think about writers they notice the things they have chosen to write about. What writers choose *not* to write about is worth noticing, too. The man who would become the foremost chronicler of American life for a generation would decide, from his position inside *The Washington Post*, that Washington wasn’t all that important. Decades later he writes a letter to a young friend in which he explains, in an aside, why:

*“The Republican Party as now constituted is obviously too stupid to survive.... What is to be done? Of course, that was Lenin’s line and the only lucid one he ever wrote. The answer is nothing. America’s position is unassailable. We are the imperial Rome of the 3rd Millennium. Our government is a CSX train on a track. People on one side (the left) yell at it, and people on the other side (the right) yell at it, but the train’s only going to go down the track. Thank God for that. That’s why I find American politics too boring to write about. Nixon is forced from office. Does a military junta rise up? Do the tanks roll? Give me a break.” [February 28, 2000.]*

## The Joker Is Wild

The Washington subject that catches Wolfe’s fancy, at some deep level, is Hugh Troy. Hugh Troy is the first documented case in which Tom Wolfe set out into the world looking for one thing and found another, much more interesting thing. He’d been assigned to write a story about practical jokes in England and America. Someone told him there was a man living in Washington named Hugh Troy, who was “the most fabulous practical joker in the history of America.” Wolfe had no interest in any of this—he was just doing his job—but he dutifully went off to meet Hugh Troy. The piece Wolfe wrote on practical jokes could have been written by anybody. The long obituary Wolfe foisted unbidden upon a New York newspaper after Troy’s death three years later could have been written only by Tom Wolfe.

*“Troy wasn’t the fat little Shriner I had figured him for. He was huge, almost six feet six.... He must have weighed close to 240 pounds. He was in his mid-fifties. He dressed in soft white shirts, hard worsteds and boned leather shoes, like a lawyer in the financial district. He had the charm, voice, manners ... the whole business ... of the kind of individual who grew up in the right schools, clubs, fraternities, cotillions ... they hadn’t raised little Hugh to go around goosing the universe.”*

Troy didn't see himself as a practical joker: he didn't even really understand the impulse to think up practical jokes. He was, at heart, a social satirist. His jokes were responses to stuff that bothered him. During the Depression, for instance, he'd been bothered by the sight of New York City police officers harassing the homeless sleeping on benches in Central Park. He bought a bench, took it to the park, and lay on it until the cops came—whereupon Troy picked up the bench and ran. "This was just a buildup for the vignette he was waiting for ... in court ... the look on their faces as he whipped out his bill of sale and demanded the return of his bench." Or another time, in the early 1950s, Troy found himself bothered by the boom in "ghost writing."

*"Dignitaries no longer even thought of writing their own speeches. The new president of a leading university had been caught delivering an inaugural address lifted by his lazy hulking ghost writer from an article in an educational journal by another university president.*

*"One night it just came to Troy: Ghost Artists Inc. He placed an ad in the Washington Post & Times Herald of February 5, 1952: 'Too busy to paint? Have the talent but not the time? Call on The Ghost Artists, 1426 33rd Street N.W.... We paint it—You Sign It! Any Style! Impressionist, Modern, Cubist, Primitive (Grandma Moses), Abstract, Sculpture ... Also, Why Not Give an Exhibition?' Immediately orders began coming in, which Troy turned down, saying the firm was swamped with work. Then the newspaper and wire service reporters started calling up. In the most sincere and courtly tones he told each reporter that he would break down and tell the whole story if they would only please not use his name.*

*"The next day the story was going out all over the country: of how this ring of ghost artists had been operating for three years in New York and was now opening a branch in Washington to fill many orders from 'high in government circles.'"*

Tom Wolfe had found his first kindred spirit. When he describes him he might as well be describing himself:

*"I had the feeling Troy never wanted to explore himself that deeply, as if he weren't sure what he would find.... At every juncture there seemed to be two Hugh Troys—the one, well-brought-up, courtly, serious, concerned, sympathetic, and the other one riding off like hell, like Don Quixote in the Land of Logical Lunacy."*

In the summer of 1962, Wolfe quits his job at *The Washington Post* and moves to New York City, where he takes a job as a daily reporter at the *Herald Tribune*. There's a doubleness about Tom Wolfe, too. In person he is courteous and considerate and polite and teacher-pleasing: a nice boy of whom everyone would say, "His parents raised him right." He holds doors open for others, stands until the ladies are seated, and listens politely to the dullest conversation, and he always will—even when he's 85 years old and has earned the right to ignore idiots and take the first open seat. But something comes

over him when he stares at a blank sheet of paper and is forced to contemplate other people, especially people convinced of their own brilliance or importance. Thoughts he'd never utter in public come bursting out of him. So long as he was a newspaper reporter, there was not much risk his private thoughts would get him into trouble. There are limits to what a reporter can say about people in a daily newspaper; there is the need to at least seem objective. And so Tom Wolfe, as he enters mid-career, finds himself wearing handcuffs: he's just good enough at writing for newspapers that he doesn't need to do anything else. And he doesn't have the money to stop writing for newspapers, even if the job keeps his inner dog on a leash.

## The Man in the White Suit

Money is actually an important part of his story. When he moved to New York he owned two sports jackets. *Herald Tribune* reporters all wore suits, and so he went out and bought a suit: a white suit. The suit wasn't some kind of statement; it was what you wore in the summer in Richmond, Virginia. The first time he wore it, however, he realized the suit wasn't of summer weight. It was thick enough to wear in cold weather, too. That's how strapped for cash he is: he wears his white suit into the fall so he doesn't have to buy another.

Then comes a glorious accident. On December 8, 1962, every newspaperman in New York went on strike. Tom Wolfe is a newspaper journalist without a paper to write for. He would soon turn 33: he was no longer a young man. He had no real savings, and now he had no paycheck. He put out feelers to see if he could find work writing ads. He wrote to his father, seeking advice:

*"I'm not terribly anxious to be writing ads, but they pay very well.... As yet, of course, no money has come rolling in from all this. Until it does I wonder if I should apply for state unemployment benefits? This perplexes me, and I would like your advice, because I have a great loathing of the idea of going on the dole. Perhaps it is only false pride." [T.W., letter to his father, January 13, 1963.]*

His father wrote back to say he saw no shame in unemployment benefits. For some reason Wolfe didn't agree. Instead of going on the dole he went looking for work, and the work that naturally presented itself was magazine work. *Esquire* hired him to fly to California and explore the strange new world of custom-made cars. Wolfe wrote a letter to his parents to describe what he'd seen there:

*"The trip was one of the most interesting I ever took. Los Angeles is incredible—like every new suburb in America all massed together in one plain.... Everyone drives, and drives and drives. Twenty-five miles for a hamburger is nothing....*

*The car-o-philes, or whatever they ought to be called, were an intriguing lot, especially the custom car designers. They starve for their art, such as it is, have many of the mannerisms*

*and anti-social attitudes of artists, and, in general, are the Pentecostal version of High Culture's Episcopal, if I may make such a comparison." [April 1963.]*

To his parents he has no trouble describing what he has seen. Putting the words onto paper for *Esquire* proves more problematic. He's written hundreds of thousands of words in newspapers. He has a subject that interests him intensely—it's not just about cars, it's about the sincere soul of American life. He sits down to write and ... he can't do it. The words simply won't come. In the end he calls up his editor, Byron Dobell, and tells him he just can't get the piece out of himself. Dobell tells him that *Esquire* desperately needs something, and soon. They've spent \$10,000 on a photo spread and they need the text to explain it. *Just write up your notes in a letter to me tonight*, says Dobell, *and I'll have someone hammer out the text for the piece.* And that's what Wolfe does. "Dear Byron," he writes—though he might just as easily have written "Dear Mother and Father:"

*"The first good look I had at customized cars was at an event called a 'Teen Fair,' held in Burbank, a suburb of Los Angeles beyond Hollywood. This was a wild place to be taking a look at art objects—eventually, I should say, you have to reach the conclusion that these customized cars are art objects, at least if you use the standards applied in a civilized society."*

A few pages in and he's not just relating what he's seen in a matter-of-fact way, the way you would if you were just trying to supply some poor editor with information to use in captions to some photos. He's letting it fly.

*"Things have been going on in the development of the kids' formal attitude toward cars since 1945, things of great sophistication that adults have not been even remotely aware of, mainly because the kids are so inarticulate about it, especially the ones most hipped on the subject. They are not from the levels of society that produce children who write sensitive analytical prose at age seventeen, or if they do, they soon fall into the hands of English instructors who put them onto Hemingway or a lot of goddamn-and-hungry-breast writers. If they ever write about a highway again, it's a rain-slicked highway and the sound of the automobiles passing over it is like the sound of tearing silk, not that one household in ten thousand has heard the sound of tearing silk since 1945."*

When he was done, his letter ran 49 pages. The exotic punctuation, the ellipses, the rococo mannerisms that sometimes enhance and sometimes detract from his later work aren't yet there, but his ability to see what others have missed, or found unworthy of attention, is sensational. The effect is of an opaque protective gauze being peeled back from the surface of the society to expose what's really under it. What really matters. In the morning, he walked his letter over to *Esquire*. "It was like he discovered it in the middle of the night," Dobell now recalls. "Wherever it came from, it seemed to me to tap a strain of pure American humor that wasn't being tapped. He didn't sound like Truman Capote or Lillian Ross ... or anyone else." Dobell scratched out the *Dear Byron* salutation and ran the letter as the piece, called

“There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm) . . . . .”

In Wolfe’s papers there is a copy of a letter from early 1965—less than 18 months after he first got his voice on the page, and after he’d published a dozen or so magazine pieces, mostly for the *New York Herald Tribune*’s new color supplement, *New York* magazine. The letter came from Rosser Reeves to the president of the *Herald Tribune*. Reeves was the splashiest adman in the 1960s; he’s been fingered as a model for *Mad Men*’s Don Draper. He begins,

*“There is a man named Tom Wolfe who is currently writing for the Herald Tribune. He is one of the sharpest and most perceptive talents that has appeared on the scene in many, many years.... I discover that he is becoming the object of a cult.” [Rosser Reeves to Walter Thayer, March 30, 1965.]*

## Status Update

Eighteen months! That’s what it took for Wolfe, once he’d found his voice, to go from worrying about whether or not to go on the dole to a cult figure. By early 1965, literary agents are writing him, begging to let them sell a book; publishers are writing to him, begging him to write one. Hollywood people are writing to ask if they might turn his magazine pieces into movies—though really all they want is to rub up against him. Two years earlier his fan letters had come mainly from his mother. Soon they came from Cybill Shepherd. He’s booked on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. He’s now as likely to use the margins of his notebooks to tally his lecture fees as to accommodate drawings of nude skydivers. He has a stalker. He also has a strange new kindred spirit, and pen pal:

*“Dear Tom: I just got back from a quick shot in the East, and called from the airport but you weren’t home again. Who are these old crones who answer your telephone? I have a picture of some gout-raddled old slattern on her knees in your hallway, waxing the floor when the phone rings and rising slowly, painfully, resentfully, to answer it and snarl ‘He ain’t here.’ ... What stage is the Kesey book in?” [To T.W. from Hunter Thompson, February 26, 1968.]*

Wolfe’s response to his new status—like Hunter Thompson’s—is to create a public persona as particular and distinctive as the sounds he’s making on the page. Once he becomes famous, people start to notice and remark upon his white suit, in a way they don’t seem to have done before: they take it as one of those eccentricities that are a natural by-product of genius. He bought the thing because it was just what you wore in Richmond in the summer and kept on wearing it because it kept him warm in winter. Now it becomes this sensational affectation. He buys an entire wardrobe of white suits, and the hats and canes and shoes and gloves to accessorize them. His handwriting changes in a similar way—once a neat but workman-like script, it becomes spectacularly rococo, with great swoops and curlicues. In his reporter notebooks he tries out various new signatures and eventually settles on one



with so many flourishes that the letters look as if they are under attack by a squadron of flying saucers. The tone of his correspondence becomes more courtly and mannered, and, well, like it is coming from someone who isn't like other people. Nine years after he bursts onto the scene he receives an honorary doctorate from Washington and Lee. "While a feature writer for *New York* magazine he, like Lord Byron before him, awoke one morning to find himself famous," said the college president. And, like Lord Byron before him, Wolfe had a pretty good sense of what the public wanted from its geniuses. Yet the elaborate presentation of self never really interferes with the work or the effort he puts into it—at least not in the way it would do with Hunter Thompson. It doesn't even seem to interfere with his ability to report on the world. Wolfe gets himself on the psychedelic school bus Ken Kesey and his acolytes are taking cross-country to proselytize for LSD. There, in his white suit, he sits and watches Kesey and his groupies more or less invent the idea of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. No one who reads Wolfe's take on it all, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—at least no one whose letters or reviews are preserved—asks the obvious question: How the hell did he do that? How did he get them to let him in, almost as one of them? Why do all these people keep letting this oddly dressed man into their lives, to observe them as they have never before been observed?

And it's not just attention seekers, like Kesey, who throw open the doors to the man in the white suit. Wolfe writes a piece on the origins of this new sport called stock-car racing and its greatest legend, Junior Johnson. Junior Johnson doesn't talk to reporters. He's famously reticent: no one outside his close circle of family and friends has any idea who he really is. Without a word of explanation, Tom Wolfe is suddenly describing what it's like to be in Junior's backyard, pulling weeds with his two sisters and watching a red rooster cross the lawn, while Junior tells him everything ... and the reader learns, from Junior himself, that NASCAR racing basically evolved out of the fine art, mastered by Junior, of outrunning the North Carolina federal agents with a car full of bootleg whiskey. Wolfe's *Esquire* piece about Junior Johnson, "The Last American Hero Is Junior Johnson. Yes!" is another sensation—and still no one writes to ask him: How did you do that? How did you get yourself invited into the home of a man who would sooner shoot a journalist than talk to him? (This fall, 50 years after Wolfe introduced the world to Junior Johnson, NASCAR Productions and Fox Sports released a documentary about the piece. That's the effect Wolfe routinely has had: to fix people and events in readers' minds forever.)

New York City was—and still is—the only place on earth where a writer might set himself up as a professional tour guide and attract the interest of the entire planet. That's mainly what Wolfe was, at least in the beginning: his job was to observe the sophisticates in their nutty bubble for the pleasure of the rubes in the hinterlands, and then, from time to time, venture out into the hinterlands and explain *what is really going on out there* to the sophisticates inside the bubble. He moves back and forth like a bridge player, ruffing the city and the country against each other. He occupies a place in between. He dresses exotically and is talented and intellectually powerful, like the sophisticates in the bubble. But he isn't really one of them. To an extent that shocks the people inside the bubble, when they learn of it, he shares the values of the hinterland. He believes in God, Country, and even, up to a point, Republican Presidents. He even has his doubts about the reach of evolutionary theory.

None of this really matters. What matters is his X-ray vision. By the early 1970s it was as if there were, in the United States, two realities. There's the reality perceived by ordinary people and the reality perceived by Tom Wolfe—until Wolfe writes his piece or book and most people just forget their original perception and adopt his. He might be forgiven for believing that he is in the possession of some very weird special power. The entire planet might be fixated on some event and fail to see an essential truth about it—until he files his report on the matter.

Then, on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong stepped out of Apollo 11 onto the moon.

Like everyone else, Wolfe took an interest in the moon landing, but less in the mission than in the men. The early astronauts had some traits in common, he noticed. They tended to be born oldest sons, in the mid-1920s, named after their fathers, and raised in small towns, in intact Anglo-Saxon Protestant families. More than half of them had "Jr." after their names. In other words, they were just like him. What was it about this upbringing, he wondered, that produced these men? It was another way of asking: *What strange sociological process explains me?*

The more famous Wolfe became, the less often he wrote to his mother and father—at least to judge from his archives. His father still wrote to him, however, and it's clear that he still felt listened to, and consulted. At the end of a letter written after the moon landing he adds a note to his son:

*"Apropos ... astronauts*

*A hamlet breeds heroes*

*a city breeds eunuchs. —Socrates"*

*[To T.W. from his father, 1969.]*

Chasing that idea, Wolfe spends the better part of a decade crisscrossing the country. He pays for his research by publishing several other books. Some of these are forgettable (*Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine*); some are long essays that still hold up amazingly well (*The Painted Word*); all of them are less important to him than the astronauts. Reducing their story to a narrative proves to be incredibly difficult. The archives here tell the story of a writer working his ass off. Never mind what percentage of genius is talent; this feels like all perspiration. There's no main character. There are the seven astronauts scattered across the country, plus a lot of other people to track down. The reporting alone takes him seven years. His original idea of the story, he decides, is wrong. The astronauts were all drawn from the officer ranks in the U.S. military. They were indeed invariably Wasps; men born before the Great Depression; and often oldest sons. So of course they shared his basic background. But so did everyone else in the pool from which the astronauts were drawn. So, that alone was not interesting.

At great expense—and this is just about the best example a nonfiction writer could set for others—he abandons his first theory of the case. But because he is looking so hard, and so well, he finds another.

The story Wolfe discovers isn't precisely about the forces that made him possible. On the other hand, it isn't precisely not:

*"This is really a book not about the space program but about status battles between pilots in the highly competitive world of military flying. To be successful the book should not expand our view of man into the dimensions of the cosmos—but draw the entire cosmos into the dimensions of man's love of himself or, rather, his ceaseless concern for his own standing in comparison to other men. This should not seem like a cynical discovery, but it should be amusing."* [T.W. letter, Box 126.]

This from a long letter Wolfe writes, as much to himself as to his editor, to explain what he thinks he's up to. *It's not really a book about the space program.* It turns out that it's not even, really, about flying. It's about the importance of status to men, and what happens when the rules of any status game change. There had been a status structure to the life of U.S. fighter jocks before the space program, and it was clear to everyone involved. At the top of the pyramid were combat pilots, and at the tippy top were the combat pilots who found their way to Edwards Air Force Base, in the California desert, to test new fighter planes. The courage and spirit required not just to get to Edwards but to survive the test flights, the pilots themselves never spoke of, but it's at the center of their existence. That unspoken quality Wolfe calls *the right stuff*. The embodiment of the right stuff—everyone knows it and yet no one says it—is Chuck Yeager. Hardly anyone outside the small world of combat pilots has ever heard of him. Here is how Wolfe, in a single sentence, will change that:

*"Anyone who travels very much on airlines in the United States soon gets to know the voice of the airline pilot ... coming over the intercom ... with a particular drawl, a particular folksiness, a particular down-home calmness that is so exaggerated it begins to parody itself (nevertheless!—it's reassuring) ... the voice that tells you, as the airliner is caught in thunderheads and goes bolting up and down a thousand feet at a single gulp, to check your seat belts because 'it might get a little choppy' ... the voice that tells you (on a flight from Phoenix preparing for its final approach into Kennedy Airport, New York, just after dawn): 'Now, folks, uh ... this is the captain ... ummmm ... We've got a little ol' red light up here on the control panel that's tryin' to tell us that the landin' gears're not ... uh ... lockin' into position when we lower 'em ... Now ... I don't believe that little ol' red light knows what it's talkin' about—I believe it's that little ol' red light that iddn' workin' right' ... faint chuckle, long pause, as if to say, I'm not even sure all this is really worth going into—still, it may amuse you ... 'But ... I guess to play it by the rules, we oughta humor that little ol' light ... so we're gonna take her down to about, oh, two or three hundred feet over the runway at Kennedy, and the folks down there on the ground are gonna see if they caint give us a visual inspection of those ol' landin' gears'—with which he is obviously on intimate ol'-buddy terms, as with every other working part of this mighty ship—'and if I'm right ... they're gonna tell us everything is copacetic all the way aroun' an' we'll jes take her on in' ... and, after a couple of low passes over the field, the voice returns: 'Well, folks, those folks down there on the ground—it must be too early for 'em or somethin'—I 'spect they still got the sleepers in their eyes ... 'cause they say they caint tell if those ol' landin' gears are all the way down or not ... But, you know, up here in the*

*cockpit we're convinced they're all the way down, so we're jes gonna take her on in ... And ob' ... (I almost forgot) ... 'while we take a little swing out over the ocean an' empty some of that surplus fuel we're not gonna be needin' anymore—that's what you might be seein' comin' out of the wings—our lovely little ladies ... if they'll be so kind ... they're gonna go up and down the aisles and show you how we do what we call "assumin' the position" '... another faint chuckle (We do this so often, and it's so much fun, we even have a funny little name for it) ... and the stewardesses, a bit grimmer, by the looks of them, than that voice, start telling the passengers to take their glasses off and take the ballpoint pens and other sharp objects out of their pockets, and they show them the position, with the head lowered ... while down on the field at Kennedy the little yellow emergency trucks start roaring across the field—and even though in your pounding heart and your sweating palms and your broiling brainpan you know this is a critical moment in your life, you still can't quite bring yourself to believe it, because if it were ... how could the captain, the man who knows the actual situation most intimately ... how could he keep on drawlin' and chucklin' and driftin' and lollygaggin' in that particular voice of his—*

*Well!—who doesn't know that voice! And who can forget it!—even after he is proved right and the emergency is over.*

*That particular voice may sound vaguely Southern or Southwestern, but it is specifically Appalachian in origin.... In the late 1940's and early 1950's this up-hollow voice drifted down from on high, from over the high desert of California, down, down, down, from the upper reaches of the Brotherhood into all phases of American aviation.... Military pilots and then, soon, airline pilots, pilots from Maine and Massachusetts and the Dakotas and Oregon and everywhere else, began to talk in that poker-hollow West Virginia drawl, or as close to it as they could bend their native accents. It was the drawl of the most righteous of all the possessors of the right stuff: Chuck Yeager." [From Chapter 3, *The Right Stuff*.]*

Such was the grip Chuck Yeager held on the imaginations of brave young men. Then came the Russians, and the seemingly existential need to beat them to the moon. NASA's rockets required none of Yeager's skill or nerve. The astronaut's job could be done—was done—by a monkey. By the old standards—the true standards—the astronauts weren't even flying. The job was to sit still and cooperate with technocrats—and not alert the wider public that whatever you were doing required any less of the right stuff than it had before. The space program vaulted the astronauts to the top of the heap and reduced Chuck Yeager to an afterthought. The world needed them to be heroic pilots, and so they played the part, but no one (except for one American writer) thought to look more deeply into the matter. No one noticed the best story. Process had replaced courage. Engineers had replaced warriors. A great romantic way of life, a chivalric code, had been trampled by modernity. Not for the first time! (As Wolfe might write.) It's the story of the American South in the 20th century—or at least the story a lot of white southern men told themselves.

Anyway, it resonated with Wolfe, to incredible effect. Never mind journalism, new or old. *The Right Stuff*, in my view, is a great work of American literature. It's also the last nonfiction story Wolfe ever tells. The book sells well enough that it provides him with the financial cushion to avoid jobs as difficult as this one. He'll use the cushion to prove a point he has always wanted to make, to High Culture but also to himself, that he can *report* a novel. That novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, will sell nearly three-quarters of a million copies in hardcover and another two million in paper. The marketplace will encourage Wolfe to write nothing but novels. And a funny thing happens. The moment he abandons it, the movement he shaped will lose its head of steam. The New Journalism: Born 1963, Died 1979. R.I.P. What was that all about? It was mainly about Tom Wolfe, I think.

## Going to the Source

'Long Island's jes' ahead," says our Yeager, with his faint, yet still detectable, drawl. The drone descends, and soon Dixie and I are back on the ground, in the Hamptons, and driving to the house in which Wolfe now spends a lot of his time.

We find the writer in his kitchen, with his wife, Sheila, whom he met when she worked as the art director at *Harper's*. The streets near his house are teeming with people in shorts and T-shirts, but he still wears his white suit and has it dressed out with a white fedora. Dixie meets him and sweetly hides her alarm ("When I saw him I was like, Whoa! That's a very outgoing fashion choice," she says later), then takes off for the beach with his dog. The next couple of hours Tom Wolfe supplies the answers to questions I've had since I was a child, along with some new ones.

*Radical Chic* was all *Legends of the NFL* and no Hardy Boys. Leonard Bernstein's weird private vision of the giant black man protesting the maestro's speech as he delivered it actually happened: Wolfe plucked it from an interview Bernstein had given. "Jocko Thor" was more Hardy Boys than *Legends of the NFL*. "I don't know what I was doing with Jocko," Wolfe says. "I never showed them [the poems] to anybody." He harbors no ill will toward the professors who failed his thesis, and thinks, in retrospect, that "Yale was really important for me." He recalls the epiphany of reading the sociologists—and especially Weber—on the subject of status. "I kept saying that's right. That's exactly the way it works. I honestly think that everyone—unless they are in danger of losing their lives—makes their decisions on status."

The idea that leaving Yale and becoming a beat reporter at a small-town paper should have created anxiety—well, he doesn't even understand my question. He had no student debt—no one did—and no sense that he had to make his way in the world immediately or be devoured by it. He seems to have been entirely free of pre-professional angst. The notion of roaming the earth and groping toward a purpose in life now seems ridiculous to 22-year-olds, but that's the notion Wolfe more or less embraced. By waiting until his late 40s to marry and have children he eluded his generation's tool for sacrificing the freedom of youth. He'd had time to figure out what he really loved to do. He'd written 20 letters to newspapers, and the *Springfield Union* was the only one to write back and offer him a job.

“On the train to Springfield I was so happy that I just sang, over and over, “Oh, I am a member of the working press ... Oh, I am a member of the working press.” He did indeed worry that his parents would be disappointed with him, but they turned out, instead, to be relieved. “They just wanted me off the payroll.” The memory of Hugh Troy brings a smile to his face, but he has no immediate memory of writing Troy’s obituary. He doesn’t recall his stalker either—or any of the many long letters she sent, along with her (surprisingly well done) pornographic drawings of him in various situations with her. He must have just tossed them into the steamer trunk along with everything else. He does recall, vividly, the dilemma of taking unemployment benefits. “If you wanted the benefits you had to march,” he says. “I thought it was so demeaning to be out there picketing.” He also recalls the night he spent writing his letter to Byron Dobell, and finding his voice. At that stage of his career he always kept the same books near at hand when he wrote: Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night* and *Death on the Installment Plan*, plus some of Henry Miller. “I thought they put me in the mood,” he says, “but maybe I was fooling myself.” Even after paging through Céline he couldn’t get the words out of himself. “There are two kinds of writer’s block. One is when you freeze up because you think you can’t do it. The other is when you think it’s not worth doing.” His was not the second kind. The material, and what he had to say about it, caused him to freeze up. “I suppose I kind of feared doing something different,” he says, “because I was doing this other thing perfectly well,” meaning newspaper journalism. “But pretend you are writing a letter and you are all right.”

Fame, to him, didn’t come naturally. The world expected him to be a character he wasn’t. “I was so used to interviewing other people,” he says. “I had never been interviewed by anyone. People were expecting me to be a ball of fire. They felt so let down!” His gaze had been relentlessly outward-looking—one reason he saw so much, so well—and he didn’t respond well when he was required to respond to the gaze of others. He wasn’t like Hunter Thompson or even Norman Mailer or George Plimpton, all of whom seemed to enjoy playing themselves, maybe even more than they enjoyed writing about it. Hunter Thompson played his character so well and so relentlessly that he eventually *became* his character. Wolfe recalls a lunch he had with Thompson in New York. “He comes into the restaurant. He’s got this bag. ‘Hunter, what’s in the bag?’ Hunter says, ‘I’ve got something in here that will clear out this restaurant.’” What’s in the bag, it turns out, is a marine distress signal. “Hunter says, ‘This thing can travel 20 miles across water.’ He blows it and the restaurant clears out. Now, to Hunter, that was an event.”

The Great White Males of that moment had decided that rather than be bus-tour guides they’d become *stops* on the bus tour. George Plimpton set himself up as New York City’s fireworks commissioner, Norman Mailer ran for mayor, and Truman Capote hosted masked balls at the Plaza hotel. Wolfe now recalls a conference at which both he and Hunter Thompson were paid to speak. Hunter failed to show. He’d made it to the conference, but then had gone off on a bender and never made it to the podium, resulting in all manner of trouble. The organizer tracked down Wolfe, who he knew was Thompson’s friend. “He was outraged. I said, ‘Sir, you don’t schedule Hunter for a talk. You schedule him for an event. And you just had yours!’”

Tom Wolfe wasn't like that. For years after he became famous for his writing he was unable to stand up and give a talk without writing it out first. He simply hadn't been raised for the job of being a famous American writer circa 1970. "I got by on the white suit for quite a while," he now says. The white suit reassured people that he was busy playing a character when he was in fact busy watching them. In truth he had no sense of himself as a character; he thought of himself as a normal guy in an abnormal world. That he had no great ability to attract attention to himself except through his pen proved to be a huge literary advantage. He wanted status and attention as much as anyone else, but to get them he had to write. His public persona he could buy from his tailor.

His career, he suspects, is no longer possible. I also think that is true, for all sorts of non-obvious reasons—the career turned on the distinctiveness of his voice, and he found that voice only because he was given lots of time to do it. The voice also came from a particular place, now dead and gone. Not New York in the 1960s and 70s but Richmond, Virginia, circa 1942, when he was a boy and figured out what he loved and admired. Wolfe thinks his career would no longer be possible for a more obvious reason: the Internet. Electronic media aren't as able or as likely to pay for the sort of immersion reporting that he did. And the readers of it aren't looking—or at least don't think they are looking—for a writer to create their view of the world. "I wouldn't have the same pathway from the bottom to the top," he says. "At some point you get thrust into the digital media. God, I don't know what the hell I'd do."

Then he surprises me. Looking back on it, he says, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* is his favorite book. His second novel, *A Man in Full*, published in 1998, sold the most copies, but *Radical Chic* was the one he wouldn't change a word of. In the same breath he says that he recalls his father's reaction to the book. "I remember him saying, 'God, you're really a writer.'"

Then there's this:

*Mrs. Leonard Bernstein*

*requests the pleasure of your company*

*at 895 Park Avenue*

*on Wednesday January 14 at 5 o'clock*

*To meet and hear from the leaders of the Black Panther Party.*

The invitation is right there, in one of the files stuffed with party invitations and thank-you notes and Christmas cards, without comment. Tom Wolfe is at this point the leading satirist of his age. That age appears intent on staging events for his benefit. He seems simply to stroll off Park Avenue in his white suit and into Leonard Bernstein's party for the Black Panthers, as if he belonged.

I now admit to him that I still wonder: How the hell did he get himself invited to Leonard Bernstein's cocktail party? He smiles and surprises me again.

He'd gone to *Harper's* magazine one day in late 1969, to pay a call on Sheila, then his girlfriend. Sheila was busy, and so he went looking around the offices, to see what he could see. He came upon the office of the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Halberstam. Halberstam wasn't in it. The door was open; Wolfe walked in. On top of a great pile on Halberstam's desk he spotted an invitation—how could he not? It came from Mrs. Leonard Bernstein. He picked it up and read it ... and had an idea ... How could he not ... These people ... they had no idea ... it was as if they were determined to insult the Gods ... how could they not see themselves the way others would see them ... all you would have to do is tell everyone in Richmond or anyplace else outside of a certain Manhattan zip code about this and the entire country would soon be collapsing in laughter ... or outrage ... but ... really, when you think about it ... laughing or screaming: does it even matter which?... Oh God ... This really is too good.... He called the number to R.S.V.P. "This is Tom Wolfe," he said, "and I accept." And they just take his name down, and he's on the guest list. He never tells Halberstam what he's done. He simply takes out a brand-new green steno notebook with the spirals on top and writes on the cover, in his new rococo script: *Panther Night at Leonard Bernstein's*. And then he's off, to see the world, anew.



## BIOS

### **Richard Dewey | Director**

Richard Dewey is a New York based writer and filmmaker. His first film, *Burden*, was a feature documentary about the art world provocateur Chris Burden. *Burden* premiered at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival and was the special selection at Art Basel. It was purchased by Magnolia Pictures and received a global theatrical release in May 2017.

His student film, *The Leisure Class*, was adapted into a feature film produced by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck as part of Project Greenlight. He also directed the short film *Larry Bell: Artist*, narrated by John McEnroe. Rich's writing has appeared in *The Economist*, *Bloomberg*, *BusinessWeek*, *Rolling Stone*, *Ralph Lauren Magazine*, *Whitewall* and *Modern Painters*.

### **Michael Lewis | Writer, "How Tom Wolfe became... Tom Wolfe"**

Michael Lewis is the best-selling author of *The Undoing Project*, *Liar's Poker*, *Flash Boys*, *Moneyball*, *The Blind Side* and *The Big Short*. The latter three books were all adapted into Academy Award nominated films. He is a contributor to *Vanity Fair*, *Bloomberg* and hosts the podcast *Against the Rules*. Michael works and lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife, Tabitha Soren, and their three children. He was a long-time friend of Tom Wolfe.

### **Jon Hamm | Readings**

Jon Hamm's nuanced portrayal of the high-powered, advertising executive Don Draper on AMC's award-winning drama series "Mad Men" has firmly established him as one of Hollywood's most talented and versatile actors. He has earned numerous accolades, including an Emmy Award in 2015 for Outstanding Actor in a Drama Series, Golden Globe Awards in 2016 and 2008, Television Critics Association Awards in 2011 and 2015, a Critics' Choice Television Award in 2011, as well as multiple Screen Actors Guild nominations.

Most recently, Hamm could be seen in the John Slattery directed film, *MAGGIE MOORE(S)*, opposite Tina Fey. The murder mystery premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in June 2023. In 2022, Hamm starred, and executive produced *CONFESS, FLETCH*. Hamm also starred in the highly anticipated *TOP GUN* sequel, *TOP GUN: MAVERICK*.

Next, Hamm will return his talents to the small screen, reprising his role as Gabriel in the second season of Neil Gaiman's "Good Omens" for Amazon Prime Video. Hamm will also lend his voice to the animated detective comedy series "Grimsburg" for FOX, which he will also executive produce.

Hamm will also be seen on the third season of “The Morning Show” for AppleTV+ and on the fifth season of FX’s critically acclaimed anthology series, “ Fargo”, alongside Juno Temple and Jennifer Jason Leigh. Both shows will be airing in Fall 2023.

Once again, Hamm will be teaming up with Tina Fey in the upcoming film adaptation of the musical MEAN GIRLS, coming to Paramount+. Other highlights of Hamm’s work include Noah Hawley’s directorial debut, LUCY IN THE SKY, opposite Natalie Portman, Scott Z. Burns’ THE REPORT, RICHARD JEWELL, directed by Clint Eastwood, and John Patrick Shanley’s WILD MOUNTAIN THYME. He has also starred in Drew Goddard’s BAD TIMES AT THE EL ROYALE, Tony Gilroy’s BEIRUT, Edgar Wright’s hugely successful heist thriller BABY DRIVER, and Michael Almereyda’s independent film MARJORIE PRIME. Hamm’s previous film credits include Disney’s MILLION DOLLAR ARM, based on a script by Thomas McCarthy and directed by Craig Gillespie, FRIENDS WITH KIDS, written and directed by Jennifer Westfeldt; BRIDESMAIDS with Kristen Wiig; Ben Affleck’s THE TOWN, Zack Snyder’s fantasy thriller SUCKER PUNCH, HOWL with James Franco, SHREK FOREVER AFTER, in which he voiced the character ‘Brogan,’ THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL with Keanu Reeves, Jennifer Westfeldt’s IRA & ABBY and KISSING JESSICA STEIN, and WE WERE SOLDIERS.

On the small screen, Hamm appeared as a guest star in seasons ten and eleven of “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” with critics calling his impersonation of Larry David “inspired” and a “highlight of the season.” His work on the Emmy-winning comedy, “30 Rock,” from 2009-2012 earned him three Emmy nominations for Outstanding Guest Actor in a Comedy Series. He has also hosted “Saturday Night Live” three times. In addition to “Mad Men”, Hamm also appeared in the second season of Netflix’s “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt” created by Tina Fey and Robert Carlock, for which he earned an Emmy for Outstanding Guest Actor in a Comedy Series. His additional television credits include, “A Young Doctor’s Notebook,” a BBC miniseries in which he stars opposite Daniel Radcliffe and also executive produced, the Larry David film CLEAR HISTORY for HBO. Hamm first came to audience’s attention in the NBC series “Providence.” Signed for a cameo role, he impressed the producers so much that he ended up with an 18-episode run on the series.

A native of St. Louis, Missouri, Hamm received his Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of Missouri-Columbia and currently resides in Los Angeles.

## **CREDITS**

### **Directed and Produced by**

Richard Dewey

### **Based on the article by**

Michael Lewis

### **Readings by**

Jon Hamm

### **Executive Producers**

Gerry Ohrstrom, David Light, Nathan Epstein & Brian Kaufman

### **Producers**

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### **Editors**

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### **Graphics**

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### **Co-Editor**

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### **Consulting Editor**

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### **Associate Editors:**

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### **Associate Producer**

Howard Krulewitz

### **Associate Producer**

Joan Dewey

### **Archival Producer**

Rich Remsberg

**Production Consultant**

Ira Deutchman

**Appearing**

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Christopher Buckley

Ron Charles

Daniel Everett

Niall Ferguson

Ed Hayes

Jamal Joseph

Tom Junod

Michael Lewis

Terry McDonnel

Paul McHugh

Lynn Nesbit

Gail Sheehy

Gay Talese

Peter Thiel

Alexandra Wolfe

Emily Witt

Greg Zuckerman

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Howard Krulewitz

**Special Thanks**

Morgan Neville

Robert Weide

Ira Deutchman

Joni Sighvatsson

Mike Gallo

Chris Wiegand

Susan Ward

Chad Scarborough

Tom Hayes

Marian Masone

Chris Perez

Hamish Berry  
Chris Andrews  
Matthew Snyder  
Jann Wenner  
John Micklethwait  
Leonard Logsdale  
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Victoria Thompson  
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Alex Fishman  
John Cino  
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Pete Muller  
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Jason Mann

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Jesse Beecher  
Oscar Corral/Explica Media

**Still Photography**

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**Grip**

Dave McGinn

Howard Krulewitz

Zoe Gregoric

**Legal Services**

Donaldson, Calif and Perez

Bruns, Brenna Berry

**Sound Design**

Dungeon Beach (graphic)

**Post-Production Services**

Different by Design