



The Bonfire of the Vanities

Tom Wolfe

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Tom Wolfe's modern American satire tells the story of Sherman McCoy, a Wall Street "Master of the Universe" who has it all - a Park Avenue apartment, a job that brings wealth, power and prestige, a beautiful wife, an even more beautiful mistress.

Suddenly, one wrong turn makes it all go wrong, and Sherman spirals downward in a sudden fall from grace that sucks him into the ravenous heart of a New York City gone mad during the go-go, racially turbulent, socially hilarious 1980s.

The Bonfire of the Vanities Details

Date : Published October 30th 2001 by Dial Press Trade Paperback (first published November 1st 1987)

ISBN : 9780553381344

Author : Tom Wolfe

Format : Paperback 690 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Literature, Novels, Contemporary

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From Reader Review The Bonfire of the Vanities for online ebook

Rajat Ubhaykar says

This book was a refreshing change from the introspective, thoughtful books I'd been reading. It had been a while since a book had me glued to the bed all day, lying on my right side or lying on my left side, with the A/C turned on or with the A/C turned off, wearing my shirt or not wearing my shirt, with the book in hand or without the book in hand, marveling at a particular turn of phrase or dreaming about juicy jugs and loamy loins (a Wolfism). This lengthy novel at 700 pages was a page turner to say the least and this wasn't because the plot was wildly inventive or the characters were oh-so-adorable. I turned the pages for Wolfe. Oh, bloody Wolfe!

Reading Tom Wolfe's prose is akin to subjecting your nostrils to heavy grey diesel fumes from the rear end of an ancient goods carrier truck; acidic, overwhelming but also strangely, perversely pleasant if you are inclined towards such guilty pleasures.

He is a lyrical impressionist. He uses unconventional adjectives and innovative phrases which make sense only at the end of a sentence. And then too, not completely. You only have the impression of what he means. A very fertile impression I sowed and watered to reap a colorful picture of 1980s America.

He possesses the elusive qualities of an excellent satirist, that of unsparing, sharp observation. In other words, he is the reigning king of the suave smartasses. He brandishes a sword from his slovenly sheath every time he introduces a character and cuts him into delicious little literary pieces until all that is left behind is the most shameful of desires and the most hideous of hypocrisies. As a result, most of his characters seem like arrogant, selfish little twits at the outset. It is one of Tom Wolfe's great achievements as an author that by the end of the book, he had me sympathizing with most of them. It's not their fault they are that way. We are all hypocritical, we are all terrifyingly materialistic. We're all the tightest of assholes. Our inner worlds are equally fucked up. These are the just the ones he chose to write about, the news-worthy assholes. But it is in no outright cynical vein that he writes about these buggers. He finds them endearing, these cogs and kings scrambling for their own wants, using each other shamelessly. Quid pro quo. The New York spirit of bonhomie.

The Bororo Indians, a primitive tribe who live along the Vermelho River in the Amazon jungles of Brazil, believe that there is no such thing as a private self. The Bororos regard the mind as an open cavity, like a cave or a tunnel or an arcade, if you will, in which the entire village dwells and the jungle grows. In 1969 Jose M.R. Delgado, the eminent Spanish brain physiologist, pronounced the Bororos correct. For nearly three millennia, Western philosophers had viewed the self as something unique, something encased inside each person's skull, so to speak. "Each person is a transitory composite of materials borrowed from the environment," said Delgado. The important word was transitory, and he was talking not about years but about hours. He cited experiments in which healthy college students lying on well-lit but soundproofed chambers, wearing gloves to reduce the sense of touch and translucent goggles to block out specific sights, began to hallucinate within hours.

This excerpt merely hints at it and the title pretty much screams it out, but The Bonfire Of The Vanities is a lesson in humility, it's underlying theme being the lack of control we exercise over our lives irrespective of

our wealth, intelligence, power or success, its distilled message being “The Man can get to you before you can get your pants on.” It’s an examination of the axes of conflict that run through a society; class, caste, language, religion and gender. Through its characters, it irreverently assesses the different realities we partake of, how our prejudices and our beliefs which no matter how we justify it, are nothing but a product of our station in society. Man is inseparable from his environment, says Wolfe in loud, clear, refreshingly original words.

We have the protagonist: bond trader Sherman McCoy, self-titled Master Of The Universe, star asshole of Pierce and Pierce, an exclusively white Wall Street firm. He is wedged between a Social X Ray wife whom he despises not-so-secretly (he can drop a ball from the top of her head and hit the floor without encountering anything in between) and a Southern Lemon Tart endowed with luscious lips, undulating hips and exuberant breasts. After a clandestine meeting with his Lemon Tart at the airport, he mistakenly drives into the Bronx. Mean kids Pimp Roll down its grimy streets at night and men beat their wives with glorious abandon, certainly not a place for an eminent upstanding citizen like himself to be loitering around after sundown. A stray tire is thrown in the way of his shiny Mercedes and he screeches and skids the car to a halt. A fierce scuffle ensues after two African-American boys slouch suggestively towards their car. As they make their sweet escape from this attempted carjacking (so they think), his mistress runs down one of the boys. None of them bother to inform the police hoping the thing will magically disappear. Of course it doesn’t.

The aftermath is a circus courtroom trial that takes us through the lives and minds of an ensemble cast of characters firmly hitched to the wagon on their individual roads to greater success; a seedy alcoholic journalist Peter Fallow looking for the big scoop to revive his sagging career; a Bronx assistant district attorney with rippling muscles and an inferiority complex Larry Kramer; canny black political leader Reverend Reginald Bacon; all of whom gleefully use this incident to further their own selfish interests. Through these characters, Wolfe writes about a selfish, behind-the-back—badmouthing America obsessed with image. He cuts through the gloss and grime and reveals the petty minds of rich folk, poor folk, White folk, Black folk, Irish folk, Jewish folk, people who say doesn’t, people who say don’t, people who say tawkin’, people who call Sherman Shuhmun, bros who Pimp Roll, people who laugh hack hack hack hack, people who go heh heh heh heh, people who go ho ho ho ho, people who go haw haw haw haw. Ah, but then it’s all so funny ain’t it? Wolfe certainly makes it seem so.

Paul Bryant says

Well well, I find I never reviewed this one. It wooshed back into my mind yesterday when I came across the hangover scene in *Lucky Jim* – Tom Wolfe was clearly trying to go one better with the various hangover scenes suffered by his slimy English journalist character. This is something that happens in art. You like a thing, could be a movie or a novel, and then you find a chunk of it was an artful homage or riff on or nod toward or blatant ripoff of something you hadn’t come across yet. I would give you ten examples of this but it’s late.

This novel has a few problems, let’s mention two obvious ones – the movie, which is a hideous wreck, that is going to put you off, and the author, who can be a pain in the arse with his white suit posing and annoyingness. Also, Tom Wolfe’s writing style will not be everyone’s decaffeinated macchiato, this perpetual

speedy hipster high level ranting, it will be a problem if you don't like it. Well, you might like it in small doses (his great early essays) but this is a whopping dose. Also, he does kind of get a big idea about American society (hey, it's really racist and class-ridden) and beat that idea dead, page after page. Also, all said and done, this book is a cartoon, Tom Wolfe writes in cartoons. It's not grown-up. It's a comedy. Also, it's very passe, you know, we've had Rodney King and OJ Simpson and Trayvon Martin, we've seen all Spike Lee's movies, even the bad ones, it's all old hat. This hat is old.

But I thought this was a great top-of-division-two novel, for all that. If you have room in your reading for guilty pleasures, you could do much worse. If Tom Wolfe gets you on his wavelength you will be lolling for a whole week.

Noce says

Ove la recensionista si rianima e decide che potrebbe ancora diventare qualcuno.

Ok sono pronta:

prima guardate questa foto.

<http://i874.photobucket.com/albums/ab...>

Ora questa.

<http://i874.photobucket.com/albums/ab...>

Ora quest'altra.

<http://i874.photobucket.com/albums/ab...>

Chi è l'intruso?

Troppo difficile? Ok, cercherò di rendervi il gioco più facile.

Un attimo che mescolo le carte. Non guardate eh?

Ok, potete girarvi. Prima foto:

<http://i874.photobucket.com/albums/ab...>

Adesso guardate questa:

<http://i874.photobucket.com/albums/ab...>

E infine questa.

<http://i874.photobucket.com/albums/ab...>

Ripeto: qual è l'intruso?

Qual è quel signore che probabilmente altro non sa fare se non contare le sue carte di credito, e l'unica penna che ha preso in mano, è quella d'oro massiccio che tiene nella tasca interna della giacca, per firmare gli assegni del suo coiffeur? Qual è quell'uomo che probabilmente passa le giornate in piscina assieme alle conigliette di Playboy mentre il maggiordomo gli legge impassibile il giornale? Qual è quell'uomo che pensate abbia più probabilmente un jet privato?

Bravi!

Quello con la faccia da dandy, esatto! Quello con l'atteggiamento radical chic, quello con l'aria dell'uomo che i soldi non fanno la felicità, ma figuriamoci la miseria! Giusto? Quello che se gli passate davanti, solo a guardarlo vi sentireste degli straccioni, nevvvero?

Ebbene quest'uomo qui (vi prego dategli un'ultima occhiata)

<http://i874.photobucket.com/albums/ab...>

ha scritto qualcosa. Ma non la lista della spesa, non un racconto, non una poesia. Non l'elenco dei Picasso e dei Lichtenstein che ha in casa.

No cari miei, quest'uomo è riuscito a scrivere un libro possente, portentoso, universale, che ha un titolo altisonante come quell'altro che gli assomiglia tanto scritto da Thackeray. Ebbene questo damerino vestito di bianco, con la puzza sotto il naso, ha scritto “ IL FALO' DELLE VANITA' ”.

Ora, a me piacerebbe davvero parlarvi della trama, di come questo ometto usi la penna, di quanto l'immedesimazione coi personaggi sia empatica; di quanto poco onore faccia al libro l'omonimo film di De Palma, che ha un doppiaggio che fa rimpiangere il cinema muto; di come si respiri a pieni polmoni l'atmosfera della New York anni '80; di come fino ad oggi, fossi convinta che per leggere avvincenti gialli giudiziari fosse necessario comprare qualcosa di Grisham; di come per fortuna il libro non sia uscito nell'era degli Indignados; di come nello spazio fra l'ascesa e la caduta di un uomo ciò che fa la vera differenza è l'ipocrisia di chi lo circonda; di come certe scene siano talmente scenografiche che pensi che mister *Puzza sotto il naso* sia vissuto per decenni nel Bronx; di quanto sia possibile morire dentro prima che fuori; di quanto la vergogna da sola, sia capace di muovere il mondo; di quanto il senso di colpa sia dietro di lei a sostenerla quando nota un suo cedimento; eppure non ve ne parlerò, giuro che non lo farò: lascerò che sia il libro a catapultarvi in questo sublime affresco della società americana. E vi assicuro sarà un'esperienza memorabile. Da passeggiata sui carboni ardenti e brividini per la schiena.

A voi chiederò invece solo tre minuti di raccoglimento per omaggiare il trionfo del *combinato disposto* tra il detto: “Le apparenze ingannano” e “L'abito non fa il monaco”.

Quindi, buffoni di tutto il mondo unitevi a me. Non tutto è perduto. Un giorno, nonostante le nostre recensioni da “burlesque”, nonostante le nostre vite parodistiche, nonostante l'attitudine a trasformare ogni giornata in un enorme passo falso, in realtà siamo delle persone serie. Forse da vecchi scriveremo persino un libro. E un giorno tutti, ma proprio TUTTI saranno costretti a riconoscere che siamo personcine a modo. Speriamo magari mentre siamo ancora in vita come Wolfe. Che sarebbe meglio.

Matt says

This is one hell of a book.

When the Eastern Nebraska Men's Bibliophile & Social Club (a.k.a. my book club) picked *The Bonfire of the Vanities* by Tom Wolfe, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what it was about and, ultimately, how it'd make me feel. New York! The 80s! Wall Street and *Wall Street*; big hair and bigger cell phones; Masters of the Universe and "Greed is Good". That's what I expected. Frankly, it did not intrigue me all that much.

Well, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is all those things. But it is also much, much more.

This is a big social satire on wealth, class, and race. It is a legal drama. It is – at times – a character study. It is a snapshot of a pre-Giuliani New York City, a New York City not that far removed from *The Warriors*. Parts of this novel are blackly funny, but a real strain of sadness - bordering on melancholy - runs through it as well. This is 659 hardcover pages written at an exhilarating, exhausting pace, in Wolfe's trademark style that relies on repetitious phrasing, homophonic speech, internal monologues, plenty of ellipses, and more exclamation points than one cares to count.

The story at the center of this swirling storm is rather simple, and rather relevant. Sherman McCoy is a wealthy white bond trader making close to a million per. He has an attractive, interior designer wife, a young child that he loves, and a mistress that he tells himself he deserves. One fateful night, while driving his mistress back from the airport in his Mercedes, he takes a wrong turn and ends up in the Bronx. There is an incident – one that leaves a young black man in a coma, a community baying for blood, a DA looking for votes, and an ambitious prosecutor looking to impress a girl.

That ambitious prosecutor is Larry Kramer, a Columbia Law School grad who lives in a tiny apartment, takes the subway to work, and wonders where it all went wrong, how his classmates all ended up in white shoe law firms while he shuffles to a Bronx courthouse.

There is a Dickensian sweep to *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Wolfe overstuffs his plot with colorfully-named and memorable supporting characters, from Reverend Bacon, a Harlem activist (and seeming Al Sharpton stand-in), to Thomas Killian, a tough Irish lawyer who has forgotten more criminal law than all the fancy firms know combined. Despite the lengthy list of characters (all of whom make impressions), Wolfe focuses on three: McCoy, Kramer, and Peter Fallows, a drunk Brit journalist looking for a sensational story to save his career (and always, in a running gag, looking for someone to buy him dinner and wine). We only get inside these three men, meaning that despite Wolfe's attempt to give us a broad swath of society, we only see out the eyes of upper and middle class white males. In a book that felt quite modern, the restriction of viewpoints felt like a throwback.

The Bonfire of the Vanities is probably most remembered for its sly dissection of New York City's upper crust. That tends to undersell Wolfe's achievement. His reportorial effort is this novel's real success. There is, for instance, a bleakly hilarious dinner party that feels wildly surreal, but is so acutely observed that you're left believing Wolfe probably experienced something just like it. And he isn't just focused on Park Ave. There is a wonderful scene set at the courthouse where the prosecutor Kramer is musing on "the Chow," the bus loads full of black and Hispanic criminals that are daily fed into the criminal justice system. Wolfe's forensic probing of American criminal law is magnificent, and reads like something penned by famed street chronicler David Simon. He takes you on an acutely detailed journey through the booking process that is savage, funny, and tense.

One of the wonders of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is its tonal shifts. It elicits chuckles one moment, chills the next. At some points it is intimate and subtle; at other points, it is broad to the point of a lampoon. Take, for example, two separate scenes centered on Sherman McCoy. In the first, he has an internal dialogue about not being able to survive on a million a year:

The appalling figures came popping into his brain. Last year his income had been \$980,000. But he had to pay out \$21,000 a month for the \$1.8 million loan he had taken out to buy the apartment. What was \$21,000 a month to someone making a million a year? That was the way he had thought of it at the time – and in fact, it was merely a *crushing, grinding burden* – that was all! It came to \$252,000 a year, none of it deductible, because it was a personal loan, not a mortgage...So, considering the taxes, it required \$420,000 in income to pay the \$252,000. Of the \$560,000 remaining of his income last year, \$44,000 was required for the apartment's monthly maintenance fees; \$116,000 for the house on Old Drover's Mooring Lane in Southampton (\$84,000 for mortgage payment and interest, \$18,000 for heat, utilities, insurance, and repairs, \$6,000 for lawn and hedge cutting, \$8,000 for taxes). Entertaining at home and in restaurants had come to \$37,000...The Taliaferro School, including the bus service, cost \$9,400 for the year. The tab for furniture and clothes had come to about \$65,000; and there was little hope of reducing that, since Judy was, after all, a decorator and had to keep things up to par. The servants...came to \$62,000 a year. That left only \$226,000, or \$18,850 a month, for additional taxes and this and that, including insurance payments (nearly a thousand a month, if averaged out), garage rent for two cars (\$840 a month), household food (\$1,500 a month), club dues (about \$250 a month) – the abysmal truth was that he spent *more* than \$980,000 last year.

This passage is supposed to make us sneer at Sherman McCoy and his absurd 1%-er problems. And we do. There are several scenes pointing out the ridiculousness of Sherman's life; how his career as a bond trader adds nothing to the world.

But Wolfe is not content with hammering this single dimension of Sherman's character. Later, in a much different scene, we come along with Sherman as he visits his aging father to tell him that he is in trouble. His father, a once-successful lawyer Sherman refers to as "the Lion", wants to help. But time has passed his father, and Sherman recognizes that all his dad's old boy connections, his once-vaunted reputation, none of it matters.

[I]n that moment Sherman made the terrible discovery that men make about their fathers sooner or later. For the first time he realized that the man before him was not an aging father but a boy, a boy much like himself, a boy who grew up and had a child of his own and, as best he could, out of a sense of duty and, perhaps, love, adopted a role called Being a Father so that his child would have something mythical and infinitely important: a Protector, who would keep a lid on all the chaotic and catastrophic possibilities of life. And now that boy, that good actor, had grown old and fragile and tired, wearier than ever at the thought of trying to hoist the Protector's armor back onto his shoulders again, now, so far down the line.

The Bonfire of the Vanities is studded with poignancies along with the social criticism. It makes for a much

richer literary experience, and one that grounds the more ridiculous elements (such as a man dying at a fancy restaurant, and the maître d' forcing the police to take the body out a bathroom window) in an elemental truth.

This is by no means a perfect book. As I mentioned above, it is short on developing black and female characters. The end is also far too farcical for my taste. There are a lot of storylines that end rather abruptly, or are never resolved at all.

The imperfections pale in comparison to the accomplishment. A panorama of an American city at a very specific time that nevertheless feels utterly timeless.

Meredith Holley says

I hope Tom Wolfe has gotten so laid because of this book. I hope women have put down this book, thrown on some lingerie, and walked over to his apartment – unless Wolfe is gay, in which case, I hope men have done the lingerie thing. I hope women (or men) invented a time machine to travel back in time and lay young Tom Wolfe because of this book. I hope Tom Wolfe has gotten anybody he's ever wanted – x-ray, lemon tart, girls with any shade of lipstick imaginable, men with impressive sternocleidomastoid muscles. Anybody! Not that I'm recommending everyone start stalking him. Consent first, of course. But, I wish on Tom Wolfe a lifetime supply of sex and ice cream because of this book. I'm pretty sure he's gotten it, but just in case, my wish is out there. The idea of writing such a beautiful book kills me. How does it happen? How does someone put something this perfect together? And I don't even want to know. I just want to read it over and over again, mystery intact.

This book made me scream and gasp and stop, sit, and stare. This is one of the audios I listened to while I walked to work, so the neighborhoods of Eugene had the dubious privilege of waking to my shrieks and hysterical cackling for many mornings in April because of Tom Wolfe. Towards the end, I had to listen in private, so that my sobbing wouldn't embarrass the neighbors or lead to a meltdown at work. Mixed results.

Wikipedia told me that Wolfe modeled his writing after Thackeray and Dickens. It seems so obvious after you say it, but rather than realizing that, I just kept thinking, I've never read anything like this before. It was something entirely new to me. And it is because it is a book that feels so current and urban, while it clearly has classical structure and the involved plotting of Dickens and Thackeray. When I started, I thought it would probably be too dick-lit for me because it was clearly shaping up to be so hardboiled and because I think of Wolfe being in a whole gaggle of male authors who want to talk about how tough it is to have a penis and be so emotionally unavailable. Boo hoo. I have very little attention for that type of thing. But, this, *this*. This was wonderful. And it *was* dick-lit, but it was not in the least self-indulgent. It was even cruel, it looked so hard, and so carefully, at masculinity and cowardice. But, the structure of the plot was like a machine, just in the way that the plots of Thackeray and Dickens are. I could feel the sweat and grease of the writing process on the page, or, rather, hear it in the audio track. This book lives in the foundries of humanity; it is crafted from the fires and steel of the human heart.

For the most part, this book looks at three horrible men and how their egos and senses of puffed-up worthlessness control and destroy their lives. There are a few brilliant recurring themes in the book that I could not love more – the white whale, the Masters of the Universe. This book actually uses *He-Man* as a recurring metaphor to this beautiful moment where a character, steeped in his own awesomeness yells out in his head, "I have the power!!" So, so, so, so, so, so, so, so wonderful.

And the courtroom scenes!! Oh, the courtroom scenes. Devastating swoon over those. They made all the hairs on my body stand on end. How can a person describe what happens in a courtroom? Like THIS! This book is what happens in courtrooms. This book is what happens in criminal justice. It got everything just right. The belts and shoelaces, the defendants demanding rights, the defense attorneys running in late because they were in another courtroom, the hot jurors, the underpaid DA. And oh my god, Kramer's sternocleidomastoid muscles! Remember that?? It made me die laughing every time that came up. I swear to god there is a DA like that in Lane County.

And the part where Martin and Goldberg have to give Sherman his rights. Oh my god. So wonderful.

And Judy.

So, I have nothing insightful to say about this book because . . . just read it. Practically the minute I started reading it, it made me think of a dear friend of mine because of its urban steel and fire, so I will say something about that association because I can clearly only swoon and sigh and flail about when it comes to the book itself. Like the men in this book, there is something strikingly normal about my friend when you first meet him. He is white office shirts, a neat haircut, and clean hands. He is success: a house in the suburbs, two blond children, and a wife who, with a stern hand, makes the family take annual pictures in matching clothes. And then you talk to my friend and find out that he is an evil genius, who has an opinion about everything and a hilarious story about everyone he's ever met. But, you also know that the suburban thing, the normalcy, is true, too. The layers of his personality include fire and steel, and also funfetti cake, white office shirts, and Kraft singles. I think this book captures something of that kind of layered humanity in Sherman's office decorum, American aristocratic habits, and bloody knuckles. It shows Kramer's powerful sternocleidomastoid muscles with his shopping bag and running shoes, Peter's head in an egg and landing of the white whale, Reverend Bacon's noble speeches and greedy maneuverings.

I think what I'm trying to say is that it struck me recently, probably at least partly because of this book, that the characteristics we show the world are us, and are not us all the same. None of us are inherently suburban or aristocratic, but our choices to appear those ways reveal something about who we actually are, who we are in the caves and recesses of our souls. Sherman is equally the shallow, self-involved Master of the Universe and the jungle fighter, but he is neither of those. My friend is urban fire and steel, and he is suburban success, and he is neither of those. Wolfe writes the show of humanity in a way that hilariously stages the show, and then digs and hammers into the caves and fiery core of who people are beyond it. Are we the dog trained to fight or the social x-ray in a party hive? The little girl sculpting a rabbit or the little boy commanding an office? Yes and no to all of that. Who we are is something different entirely, but always there, underneath the show - the force behind it. And the way Wolfe builds it all and then tears it all apart - I would never ask so much of a writer, but I am so glad this exists.

Paul Christensen says

This **vicious satire on multiculturalism** would never be published by a mainstream publisher today.

The only reasons it was in 1987 were that:

- (a) Wolfe was already famous;
- (b) Wolfe has a BASED Jewish judge (lol!) laying down the law in the penultimate chapter (though the judge's real motive seems to be misanthropic hatred of the mob);

and

(c) It is written so cleverly that many readers will read into it whatever they want...some leftists even interpret it as a satire on 'white corporate greed'.

Wolfe's sprawling novel has many themes, some of the more important ones are:

1. **White ethnic disloyalty**...more accurately, WASP ethnic disloyalty, as Catholic whites like Irish and Italians are shown as having ethnic networks, while the WASP central character loses all his friends as soon as his name is dragged through the mud (this is the true meaning of the Savonarola reference in the book's title).
2. The **lying media**. One of the chief villains is a British journalist called Fallow (supposedly modelled on Christopher Hitchens), and nearly all journalists in the book are treated as the baying, slaving pack animals they are.
3. The **Black-Jewish rift**. Jews spearheaded the Black Civil Rights movement of the 60s, and were pissed when certain blacks like Farrakhan turned against them.
4. The degeneracy of big cities like New York.
5. The 80s stock and bond trading bubble, which burst right after this book was published (Oliver Stone's 'Wall Street' came out the same year).

A truly fantastic novel! Highly recommended.

Manny says

A terrific book! I remember reading a review where someone called him "a day-glo Dickens". I am not personally a big Dickens fan, but presumably the person who wrote this was, and I agree with his sentiment. Wolfe takes apart late 80's US society in the same way Dickens did with British society a hundred years earlier... all the characters are larger-than-life parodies, but that's the charm of it. Both the narrative and the dialogue are hysterically funny. Or at least I thought so - I can see from the other reviews that there are different opinions about the book.

Let me give you some examples of passages I enjoyed. Appalling egomaniac Sherman McCoy (horribly miscast as Tom Hanks in the movie) spends his life trading bonds, an occupation that has suddenly become very hot. His son likes the He Man series, and Sherman goes around thinking of himself as a "Master of the Universe". He drives to the airport to pick up his equally dreadful mistress, who's in a foul mood.

What happened? he wonders. She tells him about the snotty English scriptwriter who sat next to her on the flight. He's on his way to Hollywood to work on a movie treatment of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Will Mr. Marlowe be helping you? wonders the mistress. "I shouldn't think so," says the snotty scriptwriter, "He's been dead for 400 years." The mistress is indignant - she was hurt by the "I shouldn't think so". Are you supposed to know who Christopher Marlowe was? Sherman thinks about it, but the only thing he can remember about Christopher Marlowe is that you're supposed to know who he was.

The mistress is married to a much older, extremely wealthy man. Her motives for marrying him are

transparently obvious. Another character is speculating about how she picked him. "You know, I bet she studied the actuarial tables," he says disgustedly. "I bet she actually went and studied the fucking actuarial tables."

Well... it's that kind of humor. Don't read it if you expect the author to be nice to anyone, or show them an inch of mercy. He won't.

Perry says

R.I.P., Tom Wolfe (March 2, 1930 – May 14, 2018)

Seer of Hippy Culture then the Insatiable '80s U.S.A./N.Y.C.,

Satirist of Avarice and the Cognoscenti *Soi-disant*, and

Chronicler of America's Race to Space on the Heels of Its Jet Pilot CowboyQuest for Record Supersonic Speeds

"Bullshit reigns."

The Bonfire of the Vanities, Tom Wolfe

A brilliant, shrewdly constructed satire of the 1980s in America, and particularly in New York City. The Bonfire of the Vanities is big, biting and humorous. Wolfe belted NYC/USA with jabs, one after another--each simultaneously ruthless and delightful--burning the excesses of Wall Street, tabloid journalism, the social set in the Big Apple, high profile racial violence such as that in Howard Beach, Queens in 1986, the justice system, men's egos and their insatiable appetites for sex and their infidelities to get it, politics, politicians, vigilante justice a la Bernie Goetz (who in 1982 shot up a group of black men who attempted to mug him on the NY subway) and exploitative narcissists who parade as "reverends," seeking self-promotion and fingers in all pots flowing to and from community redevelopment.

On satire, Thackeray so mordantly observed in *Vanity Fair* that "*The wicked are wicked, no doubt, and they go astray and they fall, and they come by their deserts; but who can tell the mischief which the very virtuous do?*" He was no doubt using the word "virtuous" loosely, in setting out to satirize European society in the late 18th Century. Wolfe, who used *Vanity Fair* as a model here, did the same to 1980s America.

I love E. L. Doctorow's definition of satire, that its "*nature is to be one-sided, contemptuous of ambiguity, and so unfairly selective as to find in the purity of ridicule an inarguable moral truth.*" Wolfe audaciously accomplished this in *Bonfire*, mounting a mirror in front of New York City.

The novel follows three primary characters:

Sherman McCoy is the chief character, an arrogant WASP bond trader who lives in a \$3 million co-op (today, it would be about \$6M) on Park Avenue. Sherman runs into trouble when he gets lost at night in the Bronx with Maria Ruskin, his 20-something voluptuous and sinerous Southern mistress. Of him and just about every other heterosexual male in America, Wolfe notes, "*In this little room full of people he was suffering the pangs of men whose egos lose their virginity—as happens when they overhear for the first time*

a beautiful woman's undiluted, full-strength opinion of their masculine selves."

Peter Fallow is a has-been, acarine British expat journalist, an alcoholic who is trying to tread water at a NYC tabloid until he is fed a story about a good black kid in a coma, a victim of a hit-and-run in the Bronx by a white couple in a rich man's car. The suilline Right Reverend Reginald Bacon--a mix between the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton--is trying to manipulate the tabloid into exploiting the racial aspect only. Fallow is along as more of an outside observer of the Manhattan and American culture, to wit:

"Like more than one Englishman in New York, he looked upon Americans as hopeless children whom Providence had perversely provided with this great swollen fat fowl of a continent. Any way one chose to relieve them of their riches, short of violence, was sporting, if not morally justifiable, since they would only squander it in some tasteless and useless fashion, in any event."

Last, Larry Kramer is a Jewish assistant district attorney assigned to the Bronx. He is being pushed by the media-hogging District Attorney to make an arrest that will make a splash for his upcoming re-election campaign, such as maybe arresting a Wall Street bond trader living on Park Avenue for running over a black kid in the Bronx and then running away. Larry constantly questions his career path in public service and seeks recognition for something other than the obscure, low-publicity cases he prosecutes every day in the Bronx. Larry also seeks ardor in dallying around with an affair with an attractive female juror, right after the conclusion of a criminal trial. (SMH---SMH).

Nabokov observed that "*satire is a lesson [and] parody is a game.*" Yet, in *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe has created a splendid satire that felt like a game, in being both **fun and funny**, as well as an **enlightening** lesson on the excesses of American culture, particularly in the 1980s.

Chris says

Dear Mr. Wolfe,

While I agree that your insistence upon wearing your white suits incessantly allows you to cut a rather eccentric figure, and while I too would have relished the opportunity to cavort with the Merry Pranksters while remaining resolutely sober--in short, sir, as much as I respect and admire your air of debonair Protestant abstemiousness--I must protest. Your prose is by turns flavorless and overbearing, and your endless and unnecessary recourse to ellipses and the exclamation points in your delineations of interior monologue is frankly amateurish. This is, of course, to say nothing of the lamentable content that this jake-legged prose trots across the page--the less said about that, the better. Honestly, I expected more from someone of your stock.

Upon picking up your intriguingly titled (alas, the titles that sing, but what wastelands between the covers!) first foray into fiction, I must admit I had my reservations. Upon the publication of *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, I had (how could one not?) seen your body raked over the smoldering coals of public opinion by the ink-stained hands of rough journalists. But, I reasoned, what man holds the right to excoriate his fellow who, with the daring and panache of intrepid explorers past (Cousteau, Hillary, and Shackleton among them), plunges head first into that swirling dross known laughably as "youth culture," for the anthropological benefit of his peers? And, I mused, if he got it wrong, if he, perhaps, took literary license that was perceived

as misrepresentation, who gives a shake about the just representation of these feral children with their boom-bap, boom-bap music?

Alas, my trepidation proved well-founded. This book--your prose, the flaccid arc of its plot, your graceless stabs at the Dickensian--bored me straight to tears. Perhaps, sir, if there is to be a *Bonfire of the Vanities*, I submit to you that it should be one fueled by a tower of your books--whose ashes, sir, I would gladly wipe upon your blanched lapel.

Gravely,
A Reader

Lyn says

What an amazing book.

Wolfe not only tells a great story but is a master of the English language and his prose is rich with multi-layered metaphors, symbolism, allusions, and I was fascinated by the various references to Edgar Allan Poe.

I was sorry to finish it. I must now watch the movie again if nothing else to highlight how pale a medium is film when compared to literature.

A modern classic.

Jan-Maat says

[one character gets burnt, a couple of others mildly singed, and there is no Savonarola on sin-inducing luxury goods action either (hide spoiler)]

Shovelmonkey1 says

Bonfire of the Vanities is not so much one massive pyre but several large and closely situated camp-fire like conflagrations.

Conflagration 1: Master of the Universe, bond baron and archetypal WASP Sherman McCoy, has reached the top of his particular tree and is enjoying the view from on high while ensuring that his chin is always seen at the right angle. It is nice being at the top of things because well, let's face it, no one wants to be at the bottom. The problem with being at the top of the tree is that there is always someone eager to knock you down. In Sherman's case his particular tree is on Wall Street which means that there is a pack of suited and suspended wolves baying at the bottom of the tree and even if they can't knock Sherman down themselves, well at least they'll be in line for a tasty treat when he eventually falls. And fall Sherman does. Although admittedly he does aid and abet his own downward trajectory by stepping out on the thinnest possible limb and has an ill-concealed affair with a high class floozy who bangs about more than a barn door in a high

wind. Add into the mix a hit-and-run after a wrong turning in the Bronx and it is surely game over Sherman.

Conflagration 2: Hot on his heels, in pursuit of justice for the underdog and a quick lay, is Jewish Assistant D.A Larry Kramer, a man whose ego is a lot bigger and brain is sadly a lot smaller than his sternocleidomastoid muscles. But that is not going to deter him from making a big name for himself in the Bronx. And why should he want to make a name for himself? A pay rise so he can continue to provide for his wife and child? Nope he's all about bagging himself a date with the girl with the brown lipstick (it is little details like this that remind you this book was set in the 1980s). Sadly its a case of non cogito ego sum for Mr Kramer.

Conflagration 3: Pitching in at ringside for the Bronx is Reverend Reginald Bacon, black activist, money spinner and all round voice for the people. He wants many things, among them £350,000 in tax free money from the Episcopalian church which he is in no hurry to return and justice for poor young Henry Lamb, the victim of the hit and run (or more accurately, some careless reversing). Bacon is probably the most canny of all the players and while he doesn't get what he wants, he comes off lightly toasted and not totally roasted.

Completing the racially and economically diverse, self-serving quartet of protagonists is

Conflagration 4: Peter Fallow, the seedy Brit hack who is shallower than a paddling pool. Fallow has lost his literary mojo and allows himself to be manipulated through the coverage of the McCoy case as a way of reinvigorating his career. His all time personal highlight is when Arty Ruskin, aged socialite and man about town dies at the dinner table of a high-end eatery while he's in the process of interviewing him. Shallow Fallow refuses to pay the bill, scoops the death story as an exclusive and outs the staff as heartless bastards who stepped over the dead man to carry on serving exclusive yuppie mini food. Fallow's end game is a new blazer and a Pulitzer and he gets both so he's probably the real winner.

The principle characters in this book are all men. The women are either Lemon Tarts (slutty blondes), mistresses (normally a Lemon Tart), gold diggers, Social X-rays (ageing, thinning over-toned skeletons in designer garb who were once Lemon Tarts) or the stay at home, expanded-ass, drab house frau. Ladies, in this respect you may not find a lot to love. On the other hand you can watch the gentlemen make fools of themselves which is fairly good value for money.

On the whole I zipped through this book faster than a yuppie in a Porsche 911 and much like being in a Porsche it was quite a nice ride. Slick, shiny and satisfying. The end was a bit of a cop out though and I am not sure that I approve. If I had to summarise this book, I'd say that this is what American Psycho wants to be when it grows up.

Jonathan Ashleigh says

This book was good but, as are all Tom Wolfe books, it was long winded and there were too many pages and it could have been cut down drastically. And even though it was too long, the ending seemed as though all those pages don't even tell the whole story.

Chelsea says

Wow. I started off feeling very lukewarm about this one, mostly because I couldn't get over my distaste for some of the characters. But about 100 pages in I started to feel confused about whom I actually felt sympathetic toward (the only truly good character never gets to speak). 200 pages in, I couldn't stop reading anymore. This book is hilarious in a bitter and infuriating way. It's a study of how people will use each other and not even notice how they are routinely used by other people until they're of no use to anyone.

The book explores racial and class tensions in New York City in the 80's, but from a distinctly white male point of view (there are plenty of female and black characters; Wolfe just doesn't get into their heads). That's the premise, though... we see New York from the perspective of all these white men, in different places in the NYC food chain, who all see themselves as Masters of the Universe for various petty reasons. The question is whether the biggest Master of them all will end up questioning his role in the social order after he gets caught up in the political and criminal machine of the Bronx.

K.D. Absolutely says

This book is noisy. Too noisy that it makes it painful to read. The characters are always talking as if they are all suffering from dialog diarrhea. Not only that. Wolfe likes to capture every single sound from either human or non-human entities in the novel. Take this as an example:

Haw haw haw haw haw haw haw, sang the Towheaded Tenor...Hack hack hack hack hack hack hack, sang Inez Bavardage....Hock hock hock hock hock hock hock hock hock hock hock, bawled his own wife.

or this:

The elevator starts down. It's overpowering hot inside. All jammed together. *Aaah, aaaahh, aaaaaaah, aaaaaaaahhhh*. Sherman realizes it's himself, gulping for air, himself and Quigley, too and Brucie and the other court office, the fat one. *Aaaaah, aaaaahhhh, aaaaaaahhhhhh, aaaaaaahhhhhhhh, aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh*.

There are many, many of those in the novel and they all make me dizzy and I want to vomit. I have been busy and a bit pressured last week and this 690-page painful-to-read novel did not help in anyway. Wolfe's writing reminds me of the many kids plays I used to share with my now *in the overseas* elder frugal brother:

Kuya: (while holding an old paint brush) *Meron akong airplane! Woouooooo.... tsouooooong.....weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee* (and the paint brush flies)

Me (while holding a broken flashlight) *Ako naman ay barko! Tsug tsug tsug tsug wuuuuuuuuuuuuu pot pot!* (and the flashlight sails)

Kuya:: (the paint brush goes near my flashlight) *Bobombahin daw ng airplane ko ang barko mo para lumubog! Swissssssh.... Ratatatatatat..... KABOOOM!* (and he kicks my flashlight).

Me: (i run to the kitchen and shout) *Nanay, o si Kuya!*

If I were a teenager or a lot younger, this novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (first published in 1987) could have been an enjoyable read. It tells us about New York in the 80's at the time when the racial discrimination

cases were still rampant. Go to Wikipedia and read the historical background of this novel:

In 1982, there was black guy Willie Turks, who was murdered in the Gravesend section of Brooklyn and in 1986, another black guy Michael Griffith in Howard Beach, Queens. Both guys were killed by whites. In another episode was a reversal of role and it that became a subject of much media attention, white guy Bernhard Goetz became something of a folk-hero in the city for shooting a group of black men who tried to rob him in the subway.

I could make a long litany of how the characters in this novel participate in the circus trial. How the 39-y/o WASP, Yale educated, Park Avenue resident, Wall Street financier **Sherman McCoy** losses everything when his Mercedes car sideswipes an 18-y/o black honor student, dreaming to enter college but poor **Henry Lamb**. How Sherman's mistress **Maria Teresa Ruskin** tries to evade her responsibility (she is the driver at the time of the incident) by going to Italy. How the black preacher **Reverend Bacon** is planning to make money out of black communities' anti-racial sentiment. How a lowly report **Peter Fallow** wins the Pulitzer award by being always in the right place and time releasing scoops about the case no matter how devious are the ways he gets his information. How the second-rate District Attorney **Lawrence Kramer** rises to fame and fortune by manipulating the black community and turning it into a mob heckling the court proceedings. I could write a nice anti-apartheid review and use big words to express my sentiments and flatter my Goodreads friends who care to read my review.

However, I will not do that because I hate this novel. Reasons:

1. This came into a time when I was not in the mood for this kind of noisy novel. My head is dizzy from working at extended hours and reading 690-page noisy novel when I come home is a torture.
2. I could not relate to this novel's setting. I have not been to New York so I have no idea of the locale. How could Sherman missed a turn, from picking up Maria at the airport, and found themselves in the Bronx. Then they tried hard to find the Manhattan Bridge that would be their only way to go back to downtown New York. Neither do I have any idea of how Park Avenue and those high-class apartments look like.
3. I could not relate to this novel's characters. I have not been into a court and I am no lawyer. I have not had any real interactions with black people. I have not been into a trading floor. I only have Petron stocks that I bought through SSS loan many years ago and I don't know what to do with those. I have not been incarcerated but only saw those gruesome filthy pens in the movies or read in the books, recently for example in Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy*.

However, because of Wolfe's writing style, I think this is one of the cases when I think a movie adaptation (1990 starring Tom Hanks, Melanie Griffith and Bruce Willis - see how young they were in the book cover) will be a lot better than its book. Sounds will be real and each shriek, each bang will only last for few seconds. Unlike in the book that it lasts until you are done with the particularly scene.

I only regret the 6 days that I spent reading this long novel. However, I don't regret spending PHP30.00 (US\$0.55) when I bought this in Booksale Megamall in March 2009. In fact this is one of the first 1001 books that I bought. This novel and Laura Hillenbrand's *Seabiscuit* are two of the books that I almost always see when I visit any Booksale outlets. Now if you see this book and you care about New York in the 80's go and grab a copy and if you are in the mood for bang-bang non-war related noise that will linger in your ears for days, be my guest - read this book.

