

STOIC DETERMINISM

Tom LeClair

A MAN IN FULL

Tom Wolfe

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

742 pages; cloth, \$28.95

Five-million-dollar advance! 1.2 million press run! Half-million-dollar ad campaign! 742 pages! Big numbers from a big press. *Time* cover story! National Book Award finalist before it was published! “Great American Novel!” Big news from the big city. “Bigger and better than *Bonfire of the Vanities*,” reviewers are enthusing, as if that book were a literary giant.

By now it’s hard not to know the basic story of *A Man in Full*: an Atlanta real-estate developer, a good ole boy named Charlie Croker, overextends his empire, becomes impotent, crashes and burns like the Hindenburg. I won’t use up valuable small-press space to illustrate how the novel is like a blimp, distended by Wolfe’s tell-all journalism and inflated by his exclamatory hot air.

Balzac, Zola, and Lewis were authors Wolfe invoked in his self-promoting 1989 *Harper’s* essay, subtitled “A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel.” Novelists should get out of their university offices, their Provincetown studies, their Brooklyn garrets. From the evidence of *A Man in Full*, Wolfe visited a Georgia plantation and a California prison, an executive suite and a food-processing freezer room. He listened to crackers and bluebloods, black mayors and black inmates. He now knows how to make a shiv out of cardboard and how to put saddlebags of sweat across a debtor’s shirt. Chapters of the novel would make entertaining feature writing, welcome diversions every six months in a dentist’s-office magazine.

All the surface detail might even reveal

complex characters in a realistic social novel. But *A Man in Full* is a naturalistic novel. Not the postmodern naturalism of *Gravity’s Rainbow* or Powers’s *The Gold Bug Variations* or Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, which combine knowledge from various natural sciences that measure and are measured by other kinds of knowledge, but the deterministic naturalism of Dreiser in his neurology-influenced *Sister Carrie* or of Norris in his craniology-dominated *McTeague*.

Wolfe’s protagonists have been or want to be thoroughbreds like the huge racing stallion that the author painstakingly describes mating with a mare on Croker’s farm. Bloodlines, turf performance, and sexual dominance make money, although the stallion doesn’t know how much his foals are worth. The next best thing to a horse is an athlete. When low-Georgia Charlie Croker used to play football for Georgia Tech forty years ago, his high-South girlfriend couldn’t resist his “powah.” Now Fareek Fanon, a black Tech halfback, may have date-raped a white girl from a leading family. Wolfe’s plot brings the two runners together across the decades, but it’s the same story of biological atavism: “Sex! Lust! Desperate! Irresistible!”

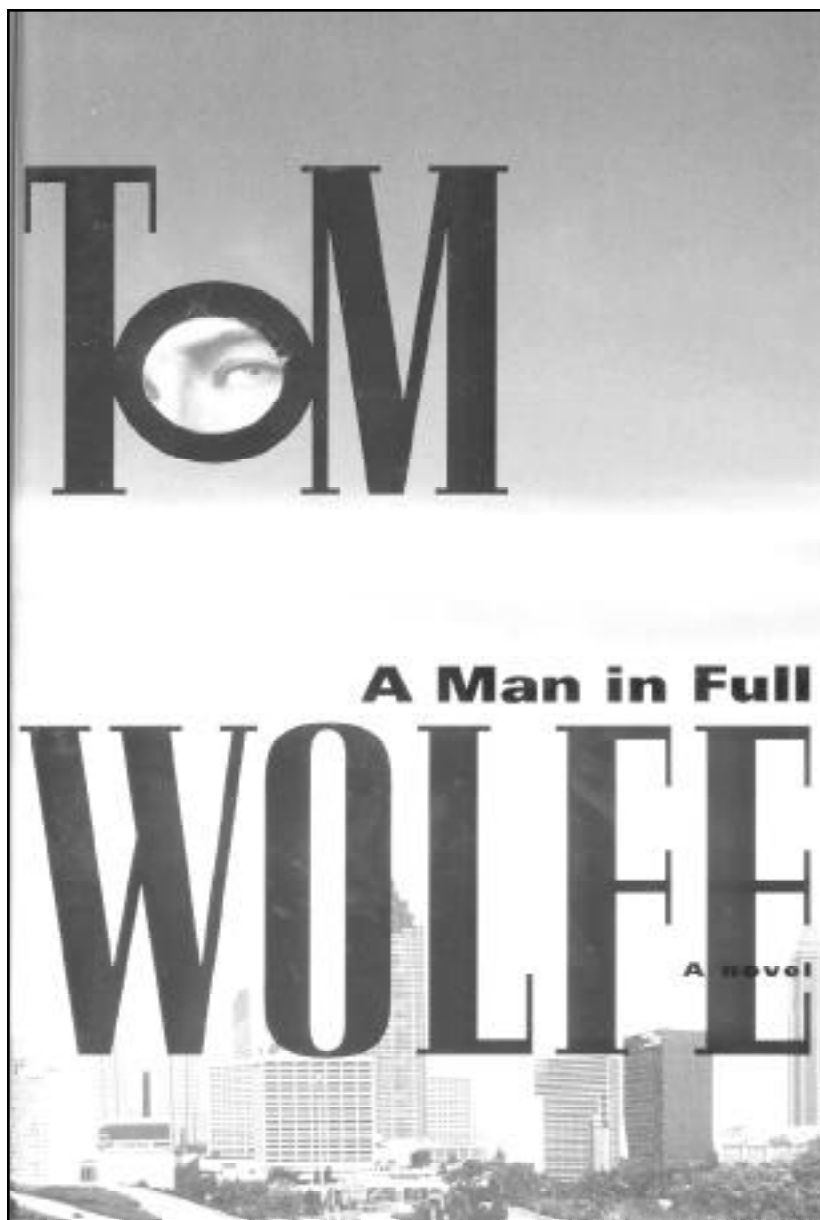
Other characters aspire to the athlete’s force or magnetism. Inmates buff up to perform homosexual rape, women work out to become “boys with breasts.” A banker named Peepgass wonders why his colleagues “turn everything into sex,” momentarily forgetting how his erotic needs ruined his marriage and finances. Later he gets in the sack with Croker’s former wife. I’d like to believe *A Man in Full* satirizes America’s body-crazed, athlete-obsessed, OJaded culture. But there is no alternative to the novel’s sexual reductivism, no informed perspective from which it is measured.

Late in the novel, a young man named

Conrad—who impregnated his girlfriend in high school, suffered economically, was thrown in jail, watched a raped inmate go crazy, and barely escaped being raped—offers Croker and readers Epictetus and belief in Zeus, as if the wisdom of Greece and the Roman Empire could countervail Wolfe’s reductivism. In fact, Stoicism reinforces Wolfe’s determinism: the Olympic athlete whom Epictetus discusses would rather be killed than castrated. In the last third of *A Man in Full*, desires such as greed and political power move characters, but

these motives seem like the epiphenomena of the sex that got the four male protagonists in trouble. For Wolfe, sex is not erotic. It’s not religious, as for Updike, or mystical, as for Mailer, but a god-like tyrant hiding beneath uniforms or suits.

The book becomes a pathology one investigates for its source. When Croker attends an exhibition of a gay painter named Lapeth, the museum’s director says the painter’s “sexual orientation was the engine—the driving force—the font, if you will—of a genius he felt compelled to hide



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from the world. This did not demonstrate a lack of courage on his part. It merely demonstrated that he was a realist.” Maybe it’s sexual sublimation that generated the large-scale realism of Lapeth’s paintings and Wolfe’s fiction. Perhaps the pencil-neck author in the white suit wants to attract attention like a black athlete.

Another possibility: a huge Pacific Islander sits in a cramped cell “drawing stupendously muscular men and women, after the fashion of comic-book superheroes. They were grotesque in their extreme muscularity, and yet the big Hawaiian knew his human anatomy. The gods and goddesses kept pouring out of his fingertips.” Is this the author in fantasy form, almost as full as his characters? If Wolfe is winking at us, it’s not nearly enough to offset the super-realism of his less than superheroes. A lot of reviewers are taking these cartoon figures as realistic characters.

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In his *60 Minutes* interview, Wolfe smugly discussed the selfish gene theory, how men were engineered for polygamy, women for monogamy. Grin and bear it, fellas. Accept your fate and bear those children, gals. Try to keep alive the “spark” placed in you by Epictetus’s Zeus, a notorious and forceful fornicator.

Whatever engorged *A Man in Full*, it’s a stupid or dishonest work. Wolfe either ignores non-sexual human motivation or panders to a mass audience that believes all behavior can ultimately be reduced to sex. When Don DeLillo’s *Libra* was published, George Will called the author a “bad citizen.” Not surprisingly, Will celebrates Wolfe’s “deeply conservative temperament” and the “rooftop yawp” of *A Man in Full*. The comparison of Wolfe to Whitman is as mendacious as Wolfe’s novel. “Always the

procreant urge,” Whitman said in “Song of Myself,” but also always other desires, other visions.

Since reading is not necessarily determined by sex, you can resist *A Man in Full*. You even have the freedom to avoid a publisher that spends millions to make millions from ignorance or the pretense of ignorance—and nominates the product for a National Book Award.

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