The New York Times

Tom Wolfe, 88, 'New Journalist' With Electric Style and Acid Pen, Dies

By Deirdre Carmody and William Grimes

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Tom Wolfe, an innovative journalist and novelist whose technicolor, wildly punctuated prose brought to life the worlds of California surfers, car customizers, astronauts and Manhattan's moneyed status-seekers in works like "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby," "The Right Stuff" and "Bonfire of the Vanities," died on Monday in a Manhattan hospital. He was 88.

His death was confirmed by his agent, Lynn Nesbit, who said Mr. Wolfe had been hospitalized with an infection. He had lived in New York since joining The New York Herald Tribune as a reporter in 1962.

In his use of novelistic techniques in his nonfiction, Mr. Wolfe, beginning in the 1960s, helped create the enormously influential hybrid known as the New Journalism.

But as an unabashed contrarian, he was almost as well known for his attire as his satire. He was instantly recognizable as he strolled down Madison Avenue — a tall, slender, blue-eyed, still boyish-looking man in his spotless three-piece vanilla bespoke suit, pinstriped silk shirt with a starched white high collar, bright handkerchief peeking from his breast pocket, watch on a fob, faux spats and white shoes. Once asked to describe his get-up, Mr. Wolfe replied brightly, "Neo-pretentious."

It was a typically wry response from a writer who found delight in lacerating the pretentiousness of others. He had a pitiless eye and a penchant for spotting trends and then giving them names, some of which — like "Radical Chic" and "the Me Decade" — became American idioms.

His talent as a writer and caricaturist was evident from the start in his verbal pyrotechnics and perfect mimicry of speech patterns, his meticulous reporting, and his creative use of pop language and explosive punctuation.

"As a titlist of flamboyance he is without peer in the Western world," Joseph Epstein wrote in the The New Republic. "His prose style is normally shotgun baroque, sometimes edging over into machine-gun rococo, as in his article on Las Vegas which begins by repeating the word 'hernia' 57 times."

William F. Buckley Jr., writing in National Review, put it more simply: "He is probably the most skillful writer in America — I mean by that he can do more things with words than anyone else."

From 1965 to 1981 Mr. Wolfe produced nine nonfiction books. "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," an account of his reportorial travels in California with Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters as they spread the gospel of LSD, remains a classic chronicle of the counterculture, "still the best account — fictional or non, in print or on film — of the genesis of the '60s hipster subculture," the media critic Jack Shafer wrote in the Columbia Journalism Review on the book's 40th anniversary.

Mr. Wolfe, second from left, at New York magazine in 1967 with, from left, George Hirsch, Gloria Steinem, Clay Felker, Peter Maas, Jimmy Breslin and Milton Glaser.
Photograph by Jill Krementz; all rights reserved

Even more impressive, to many critics, was "The Right Stuff," his exhaustively reported narrative about the first American astronauts and the Mercury space program. The book, adapted into a film in 1983 with a cast that included Sam Shepard, Dennis Quaid and Ed Harris, made the test pilot Chuck Yeager a cultural hero and added yet another phrase to the English language. It won the National Book Award.

At the same time, Mr. Wolfe continued to turn out a stream of essays and magazine pieces for New York, Harper's and Esquire. His theory of literature, which he preached in print and in person and to anyone who would listen, was that journalism and nonfiction had "wiped out the novel as American literature's main event."

After "The Right Stuff," published in 1979, he confronted what he called "the question that rebuked every writer who had made a point of experimenting with nonfiction over the preceding 10 or 15 years: Are you merely ducking the big challenge — The Novel?"

'The Bonfire of the Vanities'

The answer came with "The Bonfire of the Vanities." Published initially as a serial in Rolling Stone magazine and in book form in 1987 after extensive revisions, it offered a sweeping, bitingly satirical picture of money, power, greed and vanity in New York during the shameless excesses of the 1980s.

The action jumps back and forth from Park Avenue to Wall Street to the terrifying holding pens in Bronx Criminal Court, after the Yale-educated bond trader Sherman McCoy (a self-proclaimed "Master of the Universe") becomes lost in the Bronx at night in his Mercedes with his foxy young mistress, Maria. After the car, with Maria at the wheel, runs over a black man and nearly ignites a race riot, Sherman enters the nightmare world of the criminal justice system.

Although a runaway best seller, "Bonfire" divided critics into two camps: those who praised its author as a worthy heir of his fictional idols Balzac, Zola, Dickens and Dreiser, and those who dismissed the book as clever journalism, a charge that would dog him throughout his fictional career.

Mr. Wolfe responded with a manifesto in Harper's, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," in which he lambasted American fiction for failing to perform the time-honored sociological duty of reporting on the facts of contemporary life, in all their complexity and variety.

His second novel, "A Man in Full" (1998), also a whopping commercial success, was another sprawling social panorama. Set in Atlanta, it charted the rise and fall of Charlie Croker, a 60-year-old former Georgia Tech football star turned millionaire real estate developer.

Mr. Wolfe's fictional ambitions and commercial success earned him enemies — big ones.

"Extraordinarily good writing forces one to contemplate the uncomfortable possibility that Tom Wolfe might yet be seen as our best writer," Norman Mailer wrote in The New York Review of Books. "How grateful one can feel then for his failures and his final inability to be great — his absence of truly large compass. There may even be an endemic inability to look into the depth of his characters with more than a consummate journalist's eye."

"Tom may be the hardest-working show-off the literary world has ever owned," Mr. Mailer continued. "But now he will no longer belong to us. (If indeed he ever did!) He lives in the King Kong Kingdom of the Mega-bestsellers — he is already a Media Immortal. He has married his large talent to real money and very few can do that or allow themselves to do that."

Mr. Wolfe in 1988 at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan with, from left, Barbara Walters, Brooke Astor and Liz Smith. Bill Cunningham

Mr. Mailer's sentiments were echoed by John Updike and John Irving.

Two years later, Mr. Wolfe took revenge. In an essay titled "My Three Stooges," included in his 2001 collection, "Hooking Up," he wrote that his eminent critics had clearly been "shaken" by "A Man in Full" because it was an "intensely realistic novel, based upon reporting, that plunges wholeheartedly into the social reality of America today, right now," and it signaled the new direction in late-20th- and early-21st-century literature and would soon make many prestigious artists, "such as our three old novelists, appear effete and irrelevant."

And, he added, "It must gall them a bit that everyone — even them — is talking about me, and nobody is talking about them."

Cocky words from a man best known for his gentle manner and unfailing courtesy in person. For many years Mr. Wolfe lived a relatively private life in his 12-room apartment on the Upper East Side with his wife, Sheila (Berger) Wolfe, a graphic designer and former art director of Harper's

Magazine, whom he married when he was 48 years old. She and their two children, Alexandra Wolfe, a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, and Tommy Wolfe, a sculptor and furniture designer, survive him.

Every morning he dressed in one of his signature outfits — a silk jacket, say, and double-breasted white vest, shirt, tie, pleated pants, red-and-white socks and white shoes — and sat down at his typewriter. Every day he set himself a quota of 10 pages, triple-spaced. If he finished in three hours, he was done for the day.

"If it takes me 12 hours, that's too bad, I've got to do it," he told George Plimpton in a 1991 interview for The Paris Review.

For many summers the Wolfes rented a house in Southampton, N.Y., where Mr. Wolfe continued to observe his daily writing routine as well as the fitness regimen from which he rarely faltered. In 1996 he suffered a heart attack at his gym and underwent quintuple bypass surgery. A period of severe depression followed, which Charlie Croker relived, in fictional form, in "A Man in Full."

As for his remarkable attire, he called it "a harmless form of aggression."

"I found early in the game that for me there's no use trying to blend in," he told The Paris Review. "I might as well be the village information-gatherer, the man from Mars who simply wants to know. Fortunately the world is full of people with information-compulsion who want to tell you their stories. They want to tell you things that you don't know."

The eccentricities of his adult life were a far cry from the normalcy of his childhood, which by all accounts was a happy one.

A Professor's Son

Thomas Kennerly Wolfe Jr. was born on March 2, 1930, in Richmond, Va. His father was a professor of agronomy at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, editor of The Southern Planter, an agricultural journal, and director of distribution for the Southern States Cooperative, which later became a Fortune 500 Company. His mother, Helen Perkins Hughes Wolfe, a garden designer, encouraged him to become an artist and gave him a love of reading.

Young Tom was educated at a private boys' school in Richmond. He graduated cum laude from Washington and Lee University in 1951 with a bachelor's degree in English and enough skill as a pitcher to earn a tryout with the New York Giants. He did not make the cut.

Tom Wolfe in 2016 at the New York Public Library's gala commemorating the 50th anniversary of Truman Capote's "Black and White Ball." Erin Baiano for The New York Times

He enrolled at Yale University in the American studies program and received his Ph.D. in 1957. After sending out job applications to more than 100 newspapers and receiving three responses, two of them "no," he went to work as a general-assignment reporter at The Springfield Union in Springfield, Mass., and later joined the staff of The Washington Post. He was assigned to cover Latin America and in 1961 won an award for a series on Cuba.

In 1962, Mr. Wolfe joined The Herald Tribune as a reporter on the city desk, where he found his voice as a social chronicler. Fascinated by the status wars and shifting power bases of the city, he poured his energy and insatiable curiosity into his reporting and soon became one of the stars on the staff. The next year he began writing for New York, the newspaper's newly revamped Sunday supplement, edited by Clay Felker.

"Together they attacked what each regarded as the greatest untold and uncovered story of the age: the vanities, extravagances, pretensions and artifice of America two decades after World War II, the wealthiest society the world had ever known," Richard Kluger wrote in "The Paper: The Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune" (1986).

Those were heady days for journalists. Mr. Wolfe became one of the standard-bearers of the New Journalism, along with Jimmy Breslin, Gay Talese, Hunter Thompson, Joan Didion and others. Most were represented in "The New Journalism" (1973), an anthology he edited with E. W. Johnson.

In an author's statement for the reference work World Authors, Mr. Wolfe wrote that to him the term "meant writing nonfiction, from newspaper stories to books, using basic reporting to gather the material but techniques ordinarily associated with fiction, such as scene-by-scene construction, to narrate it."

He added, "In nonfiction I could combine two loves: reporting and the sociological concepts American Studies had introduced me to, especially status theory as first developed by the German sociologist Max Weber."

It was the perfect showcase for his own extravagant and inventive style, increasingly on display in Esquire, for which he began writing during the 1963 New York City newspaper strike.

One of his most dazzling essays for Esquire, about the subculture of car customizers in Los Angeles, started out as a 49-page memo to Byron Dobell, his editor there, who simply deleted the words "Dear Byron" at the top of the page and ran it as is. It became the title essay in Mr. Wolfe's first collection, "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby," published in 1968.

"Girl of the Year," his 1964 portrait of the Manhattan "it" girl Baby Jane Holzer, opened with the literary equivalent of a cinematic pan shot at a Rolling Stones concert:

"Bangs manes bouffants beehive Beatle caps butter faces brush-on lashes decal eyes puffy sweaters French thrust bras flailing leather blue jeans stretch pants stretch jeans honey dew bottoms éclair shanks elf boots ballerinas Knight slippers, hundreds of them these flaming little buds, bobbing and screaming, rocketing around inside the Academy of Music Theater underneath that vast old moldering cherub dome up there — aren't they super-marvelous?"

'Radical Chic' Skewered

In June 1970, New York magazine devoted an entire issue to "These Radical Chic Evenings," Mr. Wolfe's 20,000-word sendup of a fund-raiser given for the Black Panthers by Leonard Bernstein, the conductor of the New York Philharmonic, and his wife, the Chilean actress Felicia Montealegre, in their 13-room Park Avenue penthouse duplex — an affair attended by scores of the Bernsteins' liberal, rich and mostly famous friends.

"Do Panthers like little Roquefort cheese morsels rolled on crushed nuts this way, and asparagus tips in mayonnaise dabs, and meatballs petites au Coq Hardi, all of which are at the very moment being offered to them on gadrooned silver platters by maids in black uniforms with hand-ironed white aprons?," Mr. Wolfe wrote, outraging liberals and Panthers alike.

When a Time reporter asked a minister for the Black Panthers to comment on the accuracy of Mr. Wolfe's account, he said, "You mean that dirty, blatant, lying, racist dog who wrote that fascist disgusting thing in New York magazine?"

The article was included in Mr. Wolfe's essay collection "Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers," published in 1970.

Storms did not seem to bother Mr. Wolfe, as his forays into the art world demonstrated. He had always had an interest in art and was indeed an artist himself, sometimes illustrating his work with pen-and-ink drawings. He was a contributing artist at Harper's from 1978 to 1981 and exhibited his work on occasion at Manhattan galleries. Many of his illustrations were collected in "In Our Time" (1980).

Earlier, in "The Painted Word" (1975), he produced a gleeful screed denouncing contemporary art as a con job perpetrated by cultural high priests, notably the critics Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Leo Steinberg — "the kings of cultureburg," as he called them.

The art world, en masse, rejected the argument, and the book, with disdain.

"If someone who is tone-deaf goes to Carnegie Hall every night of the year, he is, of course, entitled to his opinion of what he has listened to, just as a eunuch is entitled to his opinion of sex," the art critic John Russell wrote in The New York Times Book Review.

Undeterred, in "From Bauhaus to Our House," Mr. Wolfe attacked modern architecture and what he saw as its determination to put dogma before buildings. Published in 1981, it met with the same derisive response from critics. "The problem, I think," Paul Goldberger wrote in The Times Book Review, "is that Tom Wolfe has no eye."

Mr. Wolfe's later novels earned mixed reviews. Many critics found "I Am Charlotte Simmons" (2004), about a naïve freshman's disillusioning experiences at a liberal arts college fueled by sex and alcohol, unconvincing and out of touch. In "Back to Blood" (2012), Mr. Wolfe created one of his most sympathetic, multidimensional characters in Nestor Camacho, a young Cuban-American police officer trying to navigate the treacherous waters of multiethnic Miami.

In the end it was his ear — acute and finely tuned — that served him best and enabled him to write with perfect pitch. And then there was his considerable writing talent.

"There is this about Tom," Mr. Dobell, Mr. Wolfe's editor at Esquire, told the London newspaper The Independent in 1998. "He has this unique gift of language that sets him apart as Tom Wolfe. It is full of hyperbole; it is brilliant; it is funny, and he has a wonderful ear for how people look and feel.

"He has a gift of fluency that pours out of him the way Balzac had it."

Correction: *May 15, 2018*

An earlier version of this obituary misstated Mr. Wolfe's age and birth date. He was 88, not 87, and he was born on March 2, 1930, not 1931. The earlier version also misstated the title of a novel he published in 2004. It is "I Am Charlotte Simmons," not "I Am Charlotte Curtis."

***Correction:** May 15, 2018*
An earlier version of this obituary referred incorrectly to Mr. Wolfe's book "Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers." It was his third essay collection, not his second.

Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.

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