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High for a time

Tom Wolfe's latest is addictive, says Martin Amis.
But you have to pay for the pleasure
A Man in Full by Tom Wolfe
742pp, Cape, £20

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This book will be a good friend to you. Maybe the best you ever had - or so it will sometimes seem. I read A Man in Full during a week of lone travel, and it was always there for me: nestling in my lap on planes and trains, enlivening many a solitary meal, and faithfully waiting in my hotel room when I returned, last thing. Like its predecessor, The Bonfire of the Vanities, Tom Wolfe's new novel is fiercely and instantly addictive. It is intrinsically and generically disappointing, too, bringing with it an unavoidable hangover. But a generously mild one, really, considering the time you had.

We begin with the bovine figure of Charlie Croker, out shooting quail on his vast South Georgia plantation with an old-money Atlanta pal, Inman Armholster. Although Croker is a semi-literate redneck from 'below the gnat line', he has amassed a volatile real-estate fortune that now rivals Armholster's. But now retributive justice - known hereabouts as capitalism - stands ready in the wings. Croker's empire is haemorrhaging money on a 'dead elephant' called Croker Concourse: 'You could take somebody into the lobby and the sheer 'curb flash' would bowl him over . . . the Henry Moore sculpture out front, the marble arch over the doorway . . . the Belgian tapestries, the piano player in a tuxedo playing classical music from 7.30 am . . .' As always, Wolfe is very good at evoking the unreality and weird onerousness of colossal expenditure. It brings out the sadist in him. Croker, like Sherman in Bonfire, is about to be hideously denuded.

Now we switch to a spiffy black lawyer, Roger White, as he drives to an urgent appointment with Buck McNutter, coach to the local football team. McNutter, a Mississippi Cracker with a neck that seems to be 'unit-welded' to his shoulders,

has a problem in the person of his star player, Fareek Fanon, an ex-ghetto boy who now wears a gold chain 'so chunky you could have used it to pull an Isuzu pickup out of a red clay ditch'. Fareek has just been accused of raping the 18-year-old daughter of a white Atlanta bigwig - Croker's old buddy Inman Armholster! The next chapter, mysteriously entitled 'The Saddlebags', is the best thing in the book. Croker has been called in for a breakfast meeting with the 'workout team' at PlannersBanc, where he owes half a billion dollars.

The stage has been lovingly set. Croker is seated facing the unbearable glare of the early sun, with a paper mug of coffee smelling of 'incinerated PVC cables' and a 'huge, cold, sticky, cheesy, cowpie-like cinnamon-Cheddar coffee bun that struck terror in the heart of every man in the room who had ever read an article about arterial plaque or free radicals'. For the 'orientation' of the workout team is now 'post-goodwill'; and Croker, once so eagerly wined and dined has descended to the status of 'shithead': 'Shithead was the actual term used at the bank and throughout the industry. Bank officers said 'shithead' in the same matter-of-fact way they said 'mortgagee', 'co-signer', or 'debtor', which was the polite form of 'shithead', since no borrower was referred to as a debtor until he defaulted.' As the grilling continues ('This here's the morning after, bro'), we approach the moment devoutly anticipated by the whole team. This comes when the two patches of sweat from the shithead's armpits finally converge on his sternum, and his breasts look like saddlebags.

With the appearance, now, of the black Mayor, we seem ready for a most welcome reheat of Bonfire: a smug nabob will crash and burn across the racial fault line. But here the novel lurches off in an unexpected direction - and it depresses me to have to report, for instance, that the mouthwatering duo of McNutter and Fareek will absent itself for 500 pages. Instead we meet Conrad Hensley, an entirely (and entirely improbably) wholesome young man employed as a 'product humper' or 'freezer picker' at a Croker meat warehouse near Oakland, Calif. Charlie Croker's snap decision - 15 per cent layoffs - sets the wronged Conrad on a course that will lead him, over several chapters, to one of the greatest anti-epiphanies that American life can offer. Imagine: you're in the 'reeking lizard cage' of Santa Rita Rehab Centre, and the big ponytailed shot-caller named Rotto comes strolling across the pod room to ask you for a date. And not nicely.

All the prison stuff is so harrowing and comic and above all thorough that you feel that Wolfe, going about his famous 'research' must have served at least a five-year term. Still, the fight with the excellent Rotto is effectively the novel's climax. Hereafter A Man in Full is afflicted by a strange tristesse. As almost invariably happens in the Big Picture narrative, the second half becomes a zestless hireling of the first. Our author has so many structural chores to get done (like the transfer of Conrad from Santa Rita to Croker's house in Buckland, Atlanta: real product-humping,

this) that there's little room or energy for the incidental pleasures of Wolfe's satire. And besides, for all the scaffolding he throws up and for all the grunting menials he sets to work on it, the plot just doesn't stay standing. The destiny cobbled together for Croker is both implausible and sympathy-forfeiting. And Conrad, the other half of 'the man in full', is a 2D, for-younger-readers creation, and one sentimentally conceived.

You also have the leisure, around now, to inspect Wolfe's dependency on mannerism and iteration. 'Sullenly, sulkily, surlily, Roger sank back . . .'; 'he had suffered a dreadful, shameful, humiliating defeat'; within half-a-dozen lines a dancing girl is described as 'salacious', 'lubricious' and 'concupiscent'. Well, they're all in my Thesaurus too. Later on, it occurs to Wolfe that a crowded party is like a sea; so, in ten pages, we get a 'regular typhoon', a 'roaring sea', a 'shrieking sea', a 'roaring swell' and a 'boiling social sea' (complete with 'boiling teeth' - a steal from Bonfire). There would also appear to be something wrong with Wolfe's typewriter: a faulty repeater-key, perhaps. Or maybe he meant to write 'Ooooooooooooo' and 'Ahhhhhhhhhh' and 'Nahhhhhhhhh' and 'Hmmmmmmmmmmmmm'.

In an oft-quoted manifesto for the 'new social novel' Wolfe advised writers to go easy on the inspiration and buckle down to some real 'research'. The great stories were out there, not in here; and the future of the novel lay with 'a highly detailed realism' based on journalism. Journalists, obviously, were much taken with this notion, and still use it as ammunition against more 'literary' efforts. It seems to me equally obvious, indeed tautologous, that if you take a journalistic approach then you will write a journalistic novel. In other words, local ephemera will tend to de-universalise your prose.

Tom Wolfe, with his bright architectural eye, writes so well about institutions that he forces you to compare him with his beloved Dickens. Dickens was a great visitor of institutions and no doubt he 'researched' his Marshalsea, his Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and so on. But he also dreamed them up, and reshaped them in the image of his own psyche, his own comic logic. That is perhaps why they have lasted and why Wolfe's edifices look more trapped in time. All rights reserved.

