

*A Man in Full*

By Thomas Wolfe

Review by David Eaton Mauk

Overall, I liked the tragic story of one man's fall from power and wealth, and in so doing gaining recognition of his redemption and salvation. Unfortunately, I found the story itself lacking an emotional core. This inability to evoke a deeper feeling for the characters and their plights made the book more of a labor than a love. That said early, here is the review in full.

Tom Wolfe writes with a pen I find too heavy with obvious devices of a writer who knows better. A more subtle approach would have sufficed. By way of example: "Roger Too White" with each reference to this character, instead of "Roger", "White", or "Fanon's attorney." Wolfe's writing affectations seem a reflection of his actual ones, such as his continuous attention and detail to apparel and decorative ornamentation (he being known for his white suits & broad rimmed hat). After a while it wears thin. There are many areas like this in describing a scene, where less could have been more.

Charlie Croker, the story of a man possessed by power, wealth and paternalization. Does he exist in our world? You bet. Is his an accurate portrait of a business persona still active today? Absolutely (i.e. the obvious model of Ted Turner and today's Wall Street tycoons). I found Charlie to have an air of tragedy even early in the book, when his cocky self-assurance, arrogance and boorishness were in full gear. As a reader, I like a writer signaling later developments with some type of foreshadowing. The anticipation built by this is a hook keeping us going in an especially thick book as *A Man in Full*. This is particularly the case regarding Charlie and Conrad. I never felt that sense of surprise or excitement as the drama played out in their collapses.

The falls taken by those two men lacked emotional drama despite their suddenness and epic proportions. This barrenness of feeling was the biggest problem I found in the story. It was difficult to care about anybody because of not being able to look past the one dimensional nature of their characters as portrayed by Wolfe. Charlie was the only character with any complexity at all, yet his behavior, absence of sincerity and lack of growth for 99% of the book limited the ability to get emotionally engage him any more than anyone else. There just wasn't enough character to these characters.

A few of the elements of *A Man in Full* ring true and were effectively portrayed. The trophy wife phenomena is all too real among today's successful elite, where their values don't measure up to displays of status and money. The rise of real estate empires built on mountains of debt by charismatic egos is part of the American business fabric. The role of gratuitous bankers impressed by charm and their ability to rub shoulders with it, then run for cover as the house of cards collapses, is equally visible in the history of commerce (ie: S & L crisis). Lay-offs in favor of releasing company planes is another game played in board rooms across the land (ie: RJR). Racism, big time sports clichés as portrayed in the book are a fabric of our society. There is nothing subtle in Wolfe's treatment of these subjects. However, he does a nice job bringing these elements into the tale as a way to show the selfish nature of the beasts.

Finally, the conclusion of the book was a little too fast and neat for me. Is this how we all get our just desserts, while achieving our equally just reward? I found myself wanting something at the end, as throughout the book, that wasn't there. It wasn't Charlie's transformation, though challenging to believe as it was, nor his fall in parallel with Conrad's, but the way it was presented. The whole thing was wrapped in too much self-consciousness, when I was simply wanting consciousness. Tales of transformation, where the protagonist occupies the same body, but has a different soul as the

antagonist, have been brought to life with such fine craftsmanship by so many writers. The characters that have been created in this manner are among literature's most memorable. I think Wolfe missed the chance to join their ranks with *A Man in Full*, which, like Charlie, seemed to be reaching beyond his grasp.