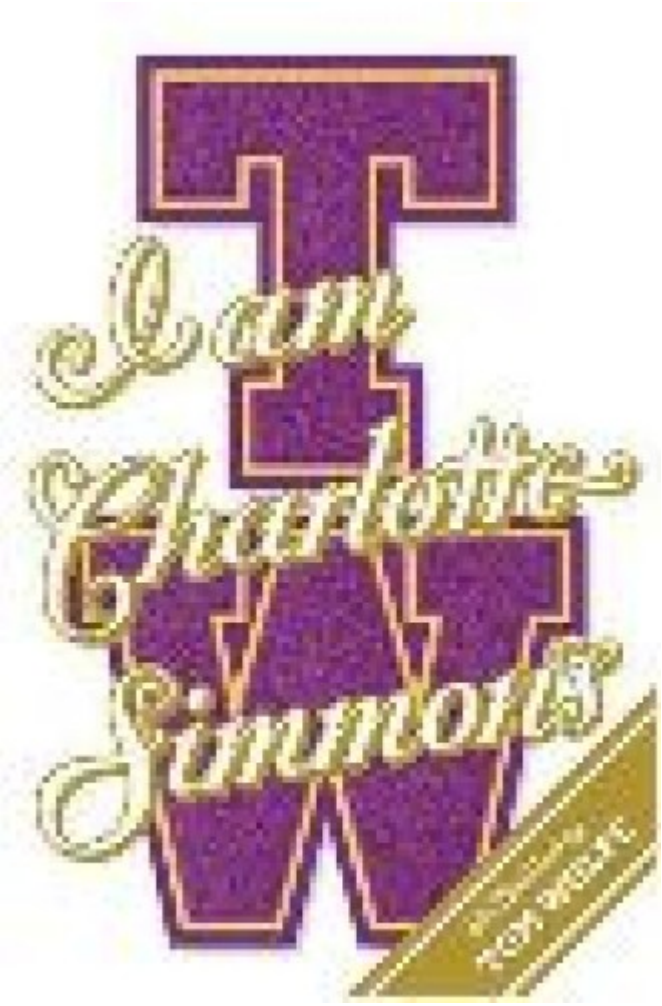
Recreational sex

by William H. Willimon in the April 19, 2005 issue

In Review



I Am Charlotte Simmons

Tom Wolfe
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Tom Wolfe may deny that his novel is about Duke, but having spent 20 years there I know a few things about the school. Wolfe's "Dupont University" has the same

number of undergrads as Duke, the same fraternity-sorority dominance of the social scene, the same veneration of basketball, and a dozen other similarities. For almost 700 rollicking, mocking pages, Wolfe nails university life—or at least a segment of it.

At Dupont, mechanistic, positivistic neuroscience is the queen of the sciences. Teachers are irrelevant in this collegiate world where late adolescents are in the hands of the most totalitarian group of all—their peers. When faculty do appear, they are inconsequential, hypocritical old people who are engaged in mostly trivial pursuits that they pass off as intellectual.

This is the setting for Wolfe's morality tale about Charlotte Simmons, a naïve freshman—so naïve it is barely believable. Her story begins at her high school graduation celebration in small-town North Carolina. She expects college to be a place where you go to think deep thoughts. She finds out it is mostly a place where you go to rut like rabbits. Everybody's doing the dirty at Dupont. About two thirds of the novel deals with sex. Some of the funniest, most drippingly ironic passages are about sexual self-expression.

Sex at Dupont is mostly recreational, but sometimes, as Charlotte discovers, sex is about power, the power to define other human beings and their worth. The ersatz undergraduate rebellion against parents through sex is, in reality, a sure sign that the morality of the old folks has triumphed.

I got tired of Wolfe's attentiveness to the lives of vacuous young adults (if these losers were the only students one encountered at a college, any self-respecting member of the faculty would blow his or her brains out). Wolfe's carnal carnival includes none of the other folks one finds on campus: the grimly driven but relentlessly focused pre-professional students, the tree huggers, the bloggers, the computer geeks, the feminist revolutionaries, the short-haired neocons, the long-haired antiestablishmentarian throwbacks to the 1960s, the idealistic community servants—and the spiritual seekers and adventurers.

An exception to the general aimlessness is Adam Gellin, a scholarship student who, by following all the rules and acing every test, hopes to ride a Rhodes scholarship to the top of the capitalist heap. Adam is smitten with Charlotte, but she fails to notice him. Adam isn't so much an intellectual as an opportunist who counts on college for his ticket to success. (At Duke the most popular undergrad major is economics.)

Hoyt Thorpe is the chief representative of that elite class known as the men of the Saint Rays fraternity. There is a gloominess about his demanding frat world where all must dress, talk, guzzle and hump alike. Someday their parents may hand them off to a world of wealth and privilege, but for now college is a grim boot camp where the frat teaches them how to get and to stay on top, particularly on top of the women. It's a Darwinian universe in which the big fish eat the little ones, or at least hook up with them.

Much of the novel follows Hoyt's caddish attempt to get atop Charlotte, followed by Charlotte's self-constructed redemption ("I, Charlotte Simmons, will now ascend forever above the cheap, sordid, vulgar milieu"). I found this plot twist implausible. It's unlikely that a poor country girl like Charlotte would have the opportunity to speak to, much less have sex with, a blue-blooded Connecticut dandy like Hoyt. College life is more ruthlessly segregated than that.

Still, Wolfe's depiction of Charlotte's fall is worthy of Flaubert, though it's more disgusting and vulgar, in a smirking sort of way, than any story Flaubert would have written. Big fish like Hoyt must stamp out any signs of independent life, and little fish like Charlotte eventually submit to the ruthlessly enforced authority of the in crowd.

The book demonstrates Wolfe's lifetime fascination with and gift for language. Charlotte succumbs to Hoyt's syntax rather than his physique. The novel is a brilliant demonstration of the power of language to define groups, to warp character, and to empower some people over others. Wolfe has a marvelous ear for patterns of speech and details of dialogue (except for his strained references to rap lyrics and basketball jive, which sound like an old guy's rendition of the way young guys talk). He takes profanity to new heights, or depths. You don't know the power of four-letter words to demarcate territory and to assert dominance until you hear Wolfe's characters cuss.

The novel has some major flaws. Jojo Johanssen, Dupont's one white basketball player, is transformed from the stupidest of all jocks into a decent human being who is interested in French literature and the philosophy of justice. Though I believe in miracles, I found this redemption incredible. Wolfe's references to Britney Spears as a campus cultural icon are anachronistic. In places, he seems to be talking about campus life of ten years ago. Wolfe also makes a number of snafus in his description of that religion known as basketball—though he captures the way collegiate athletics

are big business.

Most of the characters in the novel are types who border on being stereotypes. At times I couldn't decide whether the problem was Wolfe's superficial treatment of a person or his dubious judgment in expending so much artistry upon so superficial a person.

Still, an awful lot of the book rings true. Though Wolfe has been at great pains to assert that no one is supposed to learn anything from *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, permit this preacher and sometime campus pastor to say what it teaches me:

Having long ago abandoned in loco parentis, the university has forsaken any parental role in the lives of the young. The originating vision of higher education as a place where the young are initiated into the wisdom of the past has turned into a place where the old abandon the young to their own meager resources because the old have nothing of value to say to them.

Because the university lacks the conviction or the vision to suggest to the students any rules or moral structure, students are forced to make them up as they go. The university mouths platitudes like, "We trust our students to make their own good decisions," or "This is a place where you come to question everything and accept nothing." The students, at least the brightest among them, know that this means, "We really don't care if your life ends up being as superficial as that of your parents."

The title raises the question of identity. The irony of the novel is that the late modern world, in which we ask the self to be the sole source of meaning, value and purpose, is a world in which the survival of the self has become problematic. The self has become increasingly insubstantial and vulnerable. Sex becomes our only means of periodically experiencing ourselves as selves.

Sometimes it's the best and brightest who are the most vulnerable in this world. Admission into the university means not only that one has talent but also that one is good at fulfilling social expectations. Charlotte has been trained to perform, like a lab animal. In high school she performed in academics. At Dupont she attempts to perform sexually to meet the expectations of others. She has a brain and a body, but lacks the soul that is the seat of judgment and courage. She is around young women who have been liberated, but for what?

After her deflowering, her “moral suicide,” Charlotte has enough self-awareness to know that she has been abused by Hoyt. But she has no community strong enough to help her stand up to it, and so she simply gets depressed. As she attempts to reconstruct her life after the Fall, she is left to her own devices. Fortunately, moving through that cafeteria line that is called the curriculum, cobbling together a life worth living, she makes it out of the maelstrom alive. Growing up ought not to be that difficult or that lonely, considering what she is paying in tuition.

When Charlotte comes home miserable for the Christmas holidays, alienated from school and even from her family, she is unable to tell her mother how horrible her first semester has been. Her grades tell the story. Charlotte has made a mess of college, and college has made a mess of her. Momma’s homespun wisdom kicks in: “Sounds to me like what you need right now is a talk with your own soul, an honest talk.”

Yet the life of the soul is part of the problem. Charlotte’s narrow-minded neuroscience professor, Dr. Starling, uses the word “soul” only in quotation marks. He has achieved fame by experiments in which, after removing the amygdalae from the brains of cats, he observed that the cats veered “helplessly from one inappropriate affect to another, boredom where there should be fear . . . sexual arousal where there was nothing that would stimulate an intact animal.” Starling’s cats copulate inappropriately with one another, which leads him to the conclusion that environment means everything.

It’s time that modern higher education check out its environment and the effect that it is having upon our best and brightest. Although he surely didn’t mean it this way, Wolfe’s novel is an eloquent call for campus ministry. In a world in which liberation, purpose, vision and truth have become problematic, Dupont is a fertile field for anyone attempting to rescue a few for the One who is the way, the truth and the life.

Wolfe’s daughter went to Duke, and walking out of Duke Chapel one day, Wolfe said to me, “You have a lovely chapel here. Who are the statues at the front door?”

I informed him that they portray Duke’s “saints”—on the one side are great southerners like Lee, Jefferson and Lanier; on the other side, great preachers of the past.

“That explains St. Francis,” said Wolfe.

“No, that’s not St. Francis,” I explained. “That’s Savonarola.”

“What?” asked Wolfe in astonishment.

“You know, Savonarola, the friar of Florence, the fire-filled preacher who was burned at the stake,” I said.

“Only the church would pull a stunt like that,” muttered Wolfe as he walked away.

I thought it a strange reaction. Only the church would pull a stunt like that? What did he mean?

That evening, I sat straight up in bed and exclaimed, “I get it!” Wolfe got the title for his book *The Bonfire of the Vanities* from Savonarola, the 15th-century preacher who called on the citizens of Florence to cast their books and artworks into a “bonfire of the vanities.”

Only the church would greet these upwardly mobile young adults with a reminder of Savonarola. This crazy monk is the first one to welcome them to Duke Chapel. “Boys and girls, don’t let investment banking lead you to hell! Don’t sell out to the Republicans! We’re going to have a bonfire of the vanities after service today. Throw all that trash on the fire!’”

The university, according to this novel, badly needs a church with enough guts to pull a stunt like that.