

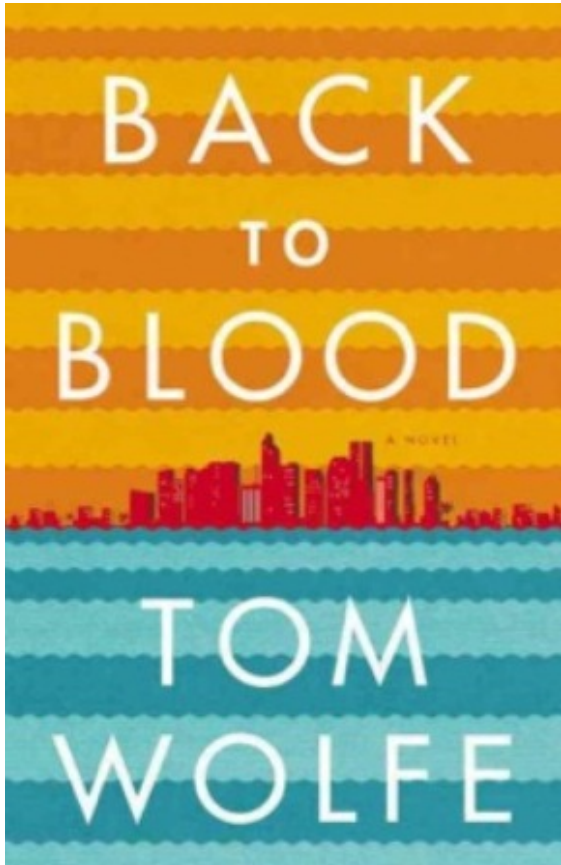
BOOK REVIEW: Sunburn - “Back to Blood” by Tom Wolfe

November 4, 2013

by James Croak

“SPEAK ENGLISH YOU PATHETIC IDIOT” screamed the last WASP in Miami in a losing fight to slot her planet-saving “Green Elf” into a rare parking space. “No mia malhablada puta gorda,” coos the winning Ferrari driver, its 12 cylinders whining down, “we een Mee-ah-mee now!” “You een Mee-ah-mee!

So screeches a distillation of the prologue of Tom Wolfe’s latest racial and class mash-up *Back to Blood*, set in the city of Miami. If his *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) profiled New York as a simmering melting pot, this fourth novel is the pot boiling over with Cubanos, Russians, Haitians, Latinos, and *Americanos* baking in a town where “everybody hates everybody.”



Back to Blood by Tom Wolfe. 720 pages.
Little, Brown and Company

All his characters are oversized, typed in a raucous onomatopoeia in a layered tale of scattered madness centered on things Wolfe knows well: Cubans and fine art. It's been so long since the 82-year-old Tom Wolfe was a reporter most have forgotten that he was embedded in Cuba during that country's revolution for *The Washington Post*—an assignment given him after writing a doctoral thesis at Yale describing communist organizing among American writers.

Wolfe joked upon returning to the USA that since he was the only reporter who could read Spanish, most his articles came from the Castro-controlled newspapers. Wolfe would receive the 1961 Newspaper Guild award for foreign reporting, and, prophetically, the Guild also gave Wolfe an award for humor.

Wolfe's knowledge of the language, culture, and life of that island nation—and those who escaped Castro's dictatorship by emigrating to Miami—gives him special insight into their character and desires, allowing him to write on these topics with fluent authority.

The line "back to blood" was lifted from *Bonfire* and is applied to the power struggles of the largest city in the sunshine state; a subplot throughout is the phoniness of contemporary art, a subject that he skewered in his 1975 *Painted Word*.

It was Wolfe's subtle migration to fiction writing that left us with the '60s term "New Journalism," wherein literary techniques were applied to reporting and influenced everyone from Norman Mailer to Hunter Thompson. His "saturation style" of research was un-objective hanging out with the subjects until one began to think like them, a kindness and honoring of world-view.

This method led him to novel writing in the tradition of his heroes John Steinbeck and Emile Zola, who also illuminated their respective societies. Wolfe enjoyed a great career as America's most popular writer but seemed to peak with *Bonfire*. His writing waned with the solid but less colorful novel *Man in Full* (1998), wherein a failing businessman adopts the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus, and seemed over with the largely ignored *My Name Is Charlotte Simmons* (2004).

Ten years later, Wolfe is back at the top of his game, telling the story of "Mee-ah-mee" through the eyes of the hapless but likeable cop Nestor Camacho and his social climbing girlfriend Magdalena, both from the "concrete prairie" of the Hialeah immigrant neighborhood.

The story begins as a refugee in Biscayne Bay climbs the mast of a passing sailing ship hoping to jump onto the Rickenbacker Causeway meeting the "dry feet" exception to immigration rules. However the boat drops anchor, the coastal police are called, and Officer Camacho heroically climbs the mast and wrestles down the stowaway "18 meters from freedom," making him a pariah in his Cubano neighborhood.

Magdalena dumps him for an Anglo psychiatrist who treats "pornography addiction" and again bails upwards for a handsome Russian who had just donated \$70 million of art to the Miami Museum. The museum pro forma changes its name to that of the Russian, the "Korolyov Museum of Art" despite the donation's suspicious provenance, and all of it involving recent immigrants. Along the way Wolfe has fun with sideshow vignettes on strip clubs, rescue boats, Olympic rope climbing, art forgery, the bawdy Columbus Day regatta, retirement homes, reality TV, Yentas and others, each a New Journalism essay unto itself.

The plot turns thick as a newspaper reporter investigates the art donation—this seems colored and informed by a real event that was happening in New York City at the time Wolfe was writing *Blood*: Knoedler Gallery of NYC, open since 1846, was selling fake Rothko, Motherwell and Pollocks totaling \$80 million to hedge fund operators and the like. Paintings they acquired improbably from a Mexican immigrant, one Glafira Rosales, who had paid a Chinese immigrant, one Pei-Shen Qian, to manufacture after—wait for it—spotting him selling his paintings on Canal Street. Wolfe probably wanted to insert this into his novel verbatim, but it was beyond the suspension of disbelief.

Wolfe dedicates an entire chapter to Art Basel Miami Beach, “the Superbowl of the Art World,” wherein every winter solstice the one-percenters “squirm like maggots” waiting to pile into a vast tent full of the latest offerings from international art dealers. It is the lodestone of the new to be touched every year by the cognoscenti, and indeed careers are both started and stopped during this annual party.

Wolfe goes for their throat the way he went after that of New Yorkers in his *Bonfire*.

He coins the term “No-Hands art,” the current mode in which artists don’t actually make objects but instead direct their making, “No artist touches materials or instruments ... paintbrushes, clay, shaping knives, chisels ... all that’s from the Manual Age.” Wolfe got it right, as if the Brooks Brothers clad Jeff Koons would sully his hand at a foundry casting stainless steel balloon animals; he is about as close to that process as the CEO of Ford is to making an automobile engine. From the writer who added “social x-ray” “statusphere” and “radical chic” to the patois, we will have to see if “no-hands” sticks.

Good wordsmiths are able to take anyone’s point of view and Wolfe’s saturation reporting pays off after Magdalena spends her first night with the Russian Korolyov. In the morning through blunt events she realizes that the relationship she wanted was just a one-night stand. It seems improbable that an octogenarian male could write this scene, but Wolfe excels at it, over the next five pages a reader watches Magdalena’s mind break in the wretched despair and self immolation of the “scalding shame” of a woman who gave herself to someone in hope. “A used coño waiting to be swept out like the rest of the filth.” It’s a heartbreaking piece of writing.

Tom Wolfe changed publishers for this latest novel, moving from Farrar Straus & Giroux after 40 years—reportedly because they lost money on *Charlotte Simmons*—to Little, Brown, and Co., who advanced Wolfe a large sum of money. Ultimately, it seems a good investment on their part because Wolfe’s fourth novel, about Miami, ranks right up there with his first novel, *Bonfire*, about New York City. It’s a stunning and intense comeback for a writer many thought was over.