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INTERVIEW

A Critic in Full: A Conversation with Tom Wolfe

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Editor's Note: *Tom Wolfe first came to national attention in the 1960s as one of the proponents of the "New Journalism," in which the writer employs literary techniques to report on actual events in precise and accurate detail. His works in this mode include* The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby *(1965) and* Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers *(1970). His book on the growth of America's space program and the Project Mercury astronauts,* The Right Stuff, *won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Book Award for 1979. He once declared that the New Journalism "would wipe out the novel as literature's main event," but in 1989 he issued a manifesto in* Harper's Magazine *aimed at rescuing the novel from such irrelevance. In that article, he criticized the insularity of much contemporary fiction and called for novelists to return to the broad social canvas of such writers as Dickens and Thackeray. His own first work in this vein was the hugely successful* Bonfire of the Vanities *(1987), followed by* A Man in Full *(1998), and most recently,* I Am Charlotte Simmons *(2004), in which he casts his uncannily accurate eye over higher education. Mr. Wolfe kindly agreed to an interview in his New York apartment where, wearing his customary white suit, he entertained questions for well over an hour.*

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Iannone: **Today is February 28, 2008, and we are privileged to begin a conversation with Mr. Tom Wolfe. I want to start by saying how impressed I was by your novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. I can't believe how much of the contemporary university you have captured. How did you get interested in higher education?**

Wolfe: Easiest way in the world—all the wacky stories I started hearing! Most of them had to do with coed dorms and political correctness. This must have been about 1990, 1991. The term political correctness was in the air by then, but I had never seen it in print. At the time, I was working on a long novel called *A Man in Full*. *Struggling* with it, to be more accurate. More than once I was tempted to throw it under a bus and do a college novel. But I kept slogging away until I finished it. In hardcover it weighed exactly three pounds. *Then* I headed off to do the research for what became *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. Stanford was my first stop. I must have visited a dozen colleges across the country after that.

Iannone: **I see.**

Wolfe: I was amazed from the beginning how little literature there was about contemporary college students and how they actually live. You would have thought somebody would have gone out and exploited the salacious potential of the coed dorm, if nothing else. There were some faculty novels, and a couple of them, David Lodge's *Changing Places* and John L'Heureux's *Handmaid of Desire*, were pretty funny. A few lonely souls who were so reactionary as still to believe in objective scholarship were decrying political correctness in books like *Tenured Radicals* and *The Diversity Myth*. But these were faculty books, too. Full takeouts on undergraduate campus life simply didn't exist—despite the fact that the coed dorm was a moral earthquake, when you think about it.

Iannone: **Yes. Yes. It was absolutely staggering.**

Wolfe: And it all happened with no debate! None! Roaring battles among outraged politicians? Among college trustees? Waves of protest by parents? Never happened. The prestigious Ivy League colleges were among the last to convert, but they didn't have debates either. You wake up one day and—

Shazammmmm!—coed dorms! Boys and girls in the season of the rising sap with juicy shanks akimbo living in the same buildings, along the same hallways in most cases, in the same beds, as it turned out, buck naked, with the odd sets of handcuffs and black leather restraints on the bedside table. Adult supervision? How do you supervise an orgy? And up to then America had been famous, or at least mocked, for how strictly we insisted upon religious moral codes.

Iannone: **Absolutely. I was amazed. A friend of mine converted to the Episcopal Church. He was invited to a dinner with the rector and some members of the church. This particular church is supposed to be extremely conservative. And he happened just to mention that he found this really appalling, that there were coed dorms, coed bathrooms, and instead, all of them disagreed with him vociferously. They had all got on this bandwagon that this was the greatest thing that could happen, that it had to happen.**

Wolfe: Ah, the Episcopal Church! If you enjoy the human comedy, you gotta love it! I grew up in Richmond, Virginia, and went to an Episcopal school. Our family was Presbyterian, but I went to this Episcopal school, St. Christopher's. It was great. When it came to academics, nobody could ask for a more rigorous and advanced curriculum. We all had to take a course in formal rhetoric in our sophomore year. Not just simple figures of speech such as simile and metaphor and oxymoron but also the really beautiful stuff, such as metonymy, litotes, anaphora, periphrasis—Dickens loved that one—epanados, as in "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country," tropes, figurae dictionis, figurae sententiae... And religion—every morning we had chapel, with prayers and hymns. You couldn't beat the Episcopal hymns. "God of our fathers, known of old—/ Lord of our far-flung battle line—/ Beneath whose awful Hand we hold/ Dominion over palm and pine—": Kipling's *Recessional* for the Diamond Jubilee celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's reign in 1897, no less. That was the Episcopal Church when I was in school. The Episcopalians were completely confident in their devotion. My God, today—as I was saying, you gotta love it!—today there's absolutely no comparison. I had to chuckle when one of the first high-ranking Episcopalians in the current call for female and homosexual priests turned out to be from Richmond—Bishop Spong.

Iannone: **Him? Oh my gosh. So, you knew him when.**

Wolfe: I can't say I really knew him, but we did spend an afternoon together as featured authors at a book fair—inside the field house at St. Christopher's, as a matter of fact. Very nice guy, thoughtful, friendly, but I'm telling you, it's a laugh and a half, the bitter battles going on right now within America's most socially prestigious religious body, the Episcopalians. You gotta love it...if you're a writer, anyway.

Iannone: **And what has happened with Spong, still calling himself an Episcopal priest while he overturns every doctrine of the church. It's amazing. But it was the idea of the coed dorm that especially intrigued you?**

Wolfe: I wouldn't put it quite that strongly. I was also intrigued by the fact that new moral standards were coming out of the universities instead of the churches. Churches like the Episcopal Church were really just tagging along behind the college faculties. Take feminism. It involves a huge change in moral standards. There's the feminist doctrine of freedom of predation. It says a woman should be just as free as a man when it comes to the role of sexual aggressor. She can hit on the *guy*, if she feels like it. And if a female student wants to do the old in-and-out with one of her professors or anybody else, that's her business. Think about it for a second. That's a *huge* change in morals, and it was incubated in the universities.

Iannone: **Feminism was introducing the new morality?**

Wolfe: Feminism and other isms. All of them are subsets of the overarching theme of political correctness, which is tolerance. "Faith, Love, and Charity, but the greatest of these is Charity," saith St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Well, the feminists—they say, "Job equality, social justice, and tolerance, but the greatest of these is tolerance." You'll notice that all the virtues of political correctness are passive. What politically correct faculty members—and their number is legion—*legion*!—mean by justice and courage is not what Aristotle meant by justice and courage. Aristotelian justice could be severe as well as fair. "Social justice" is nothing more than a secular rephrasing of "the last come first and the meek shall inherit the earth." Aristotelian courage includes the courage to take up arms to fight in battle to defend your people.

Politically correct courage includes the courage to pick up a placard in a campus demonstration to protest the war.

But political correctness can take credit for one great achievement. It is not "social justice." I am talking about the respect that is now shown to what had been, to use Max Weber's term, "pariah people": Jews, blacks, homosexuals, and today's equivalent of lepers, namely, AIDS sufferers. I'm not saying everybody now feels sympathy for them, much less embraces them and sheds tears for them or has the slightest desire to have them over for dinner. I'm talking about respectful treatment in public encounters and in public utterances. This is an enormous change, and it's of utmost importance. It's more important than higher wages, professional advancement, bigger houses, or any other worldly improvements. It's about the most important thing in the life of any human being: his status.

Political correctness is, as I say, a faculty obsession. It rarely changes the political outlook of an undergraduate. It just rolls off his hide, unless he comes from a family that felt that way to begin with. But it has created a certain new social atmosphere. Among educated people throughout the United States it has become a blunder, a gaffe, to show open disrespect toward any group classified under the heading "minority." It makes one seem ill-bred. That's all to the good.

Iannone: **Civility, respect, goodness toward each other, good will. Yes. But do you think we needed political correctness to teach us these things? (I feel I learned those things from my parents.)**

Wolfe: No, but that was the way it happened.

Iannone: **And you think that is what happened? That the university, via feminism in a way, started changing the morality, the interrelations between men and women—what was expected?**

Wolfe: The novelty of feminism as a concept, its ingenuity as a theory was what impressed me. It was like two other recent—recent at least as the grand sweep of history goes—two other recent and highly influential theories, Freudianism and Marxism. In each case, some bright individual—or in feminism's case a handful of them, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Betty Friedan—discovers something that has been under everybody's nose since time was, and yet no one has ever *seen* it before in theoretical terms. In

Marx's case, he's the first to see the hierarchy of social classes; in Freud's, he's the first to see the extraordinary power of the sex drive—and in the case of feminism, de Beauvoir and her sorority are the first to see the dominion men have held over women forever, in every area of life outside the kitchen.

Iannone: **Did you believe then that feminism represented something good or freeing as you first saw it?**

Wolfe: Good and bad never concerned me. I was just impressed with the fact that in this day and age somebody had come up with a new theory and a new movement on the order of Marxism and Freudianism based on something so obvious but never before put into words. What really struck me happened one day when I was leaving my lawyer's office as he walked me to the elevator. Somehow we got on the subject of *Ms*. magazine, which had just started up. And I was saying, "I don't see how it can possibly succeed. It has such a narrow focus." Suddenly the receptionist, a super-polite young woman who I am sure had never uttered a word indicating she was even remotely aware of a conversation between one of the firm's partners and a client, piped up and said to me, "Oh, you are so wrong!" That was my first realization that feminism might actually amount to something.

Iannone: **That there was something there. So, perhaps there was something to it, at the beginning, but maybe it's gone off the rails?**

Wolfe: Good question...in light of the fact that today everyone who cares about the subject at all knows that Marx and Freud have turned out to be utter quacks—Mesmers, Cagliostros, phrenologists, astrologists, palm readers, fortune tellers—although their melody lingers on. I bet that around the world, right now, as we sit here, several million orgasms are in that rapturous instant of full spasm...orgasms that wouldn't be occurring at all, had Freud never lived. He managed to implant the idea that we are all like steam boilers, like the boiler down in your basement, and the steam is your sex drive, and if you don't equip the boiler with valves that will release the steam whenever the pressure builds up to a certain level, then your whole psyche and central nervous system will explode like a boiler, and you will end up a wreck, a twisted geek, a "perv, "to use the *New York Post*'s word for it. Is it possible that the feminists will be known to history one day as quacks? I don't know. Could be. Feminism has

lost a lot of momentum over the past five years. Maybe it's worth noting that *Ms.* has already tanked. This is anecdotal, but in my experience more and more women here in the year 2008 look upon "having it all"—namely a career *and* motherhood—as trench warfare rather than a soaring flight to freedom.

Iannone: **Yes, the war of the sexes has a new meaning nowadays. How about such things as having female police officers?**

Wolfe: One thing you can't change, I'm afraid: men are bigger and stronger.

Iannone: **It's true. And some might say that the physical and other inherent differences mean that men will naturally tend to have more of the leading positions in society. The emphasis has got to be "equality, equality," and maybe there are some differences that have to be respected.**

Wolfe: Come on, Carol, that's a very unfashionable thing even to inquire about! People get in a lot of trouble over that. Take the case of Edward O. Wilson of Harvard, the best known of the current genetic theorists. Back in the seventies he was asked about the feminist movement, and he said, "I'm all for it. Women deserve every break they can get, but I'm afraid the last 300,000 years of evolution militate against their assuming certain roles." That did it. At the annual conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, he was about to get up to speak when protesters barged in and poured ice water, the cubes and everything, over his head and started chanting, "You're all wet! You're all wet!" His classes at Harvard were picketed for a year. Two of his well-known Harvard colleagues, Stephen Gould and Richard Lewontin, accused him of replanting the seeds of Nazi eugenic theory. The poor man was a *blasphemer*!

Just three years ago Larry Summers got bounced as president of Harvard over the same heresy as Wilson's. He's at a small academic conference, fifty people, and the question is, why are there so few women in high-level positions in science and engineering? And Summers brings up—not advocates—just brings up—the theory that it's due to evolutionary differences between men and women, which was exactly Wilson's assumption. Genetic theorists had had this idea lying on the table, out in the open, for

forty years. Nevertheless, a stone-cold feminist from MIT, a biologist named Nancy Hopkins, bangs her laptop shut and storms out as noisily and obviously as possible, complaining that she has only three choices, blacking out, throwing up, or escaping the sound of Summers's voice. I couldn't believe what happened next. The Harvard faculty mutinies in a Burning of the Reichstag riot—if we *must* bring the Nazis into it—howling, "SUMMERS MUST GO!" The next thing you know he capitulates, caves in completely, apologizes for his sins—and gets bounced anyway. Unbelievable stuff.

Iannone: **Yes. You think he could have resisted? He should have stood up more forcefully?**

Wolfe: No question about it. They weren't attacking him on intellectual grounds but on religious grounds. They were treating him as a heretic, a transgressor. They were assaulting his character. We learned how to deal with that one in our sophomore year at St. Christopher's. If someone impugns your character, you can't waste time trying to defend it. You'll just end up sitting there wringing your hands and bleating something lame like, "I am, *too*, a good person."

Iannone: **So you should do what instead?**

Wolfe: Attack the attacker. Attack *his*—in this case, *their*—character. All he had to say was, "I cannot...*believe*...what I am now witnessing...members of the Harvard faculty taking a grossly anti-intellectual stance, violating their implicit vow to cherish the free exchange of ideas, going mad because a hypothesis that has been openly discussed for almost half a century offends some ideological passion of the moment, acting like the most benighted of Puritans from three centuries ago ransacking all that is decent and rational in search of witches, causing this great university to become the laughingstock of the academic world here and abroad, sacrificing your very integrity in the name of some smelly little orthodoxy, as Orwell called beliefs like the ones you profess. I'm more than disappointed in you. I'm ashamed of you. Is that really how you see your mission here? If so, you should resign...now!... forthwith!...and take to the streets under your own names, not Harvard's, and forbear being so small-minded and egotistical as to try to drag Harvard down to your level. Ladies, gentlemen...kindly do not display your ignorance...on these hallowed premises...while holding aloft the flags, the standards, of this university. Be honest with yourselves, even if you can't be honest with

Harvard. Look...think...and see...what you have become." That would have taken care of the whole thing.

Iannone: **It feels good just to hear *you* say this. Imagine if Summers had said it. So is all of this—feminism, changes in attitudes about men and women, about sexual behavior, about sexual difference, and so on—what focused you in on writing about the campus? And perhaps also that you thought it would be fun?**

Wolfe: I never thought it would be fun, but I knew it was a hot subject, one oddly ignored. I don't find anything about writing fun. After you've finished, it's fun to get a round of applause, if in fact you get one. No, I wanted to find out the status considerations that created all this, as I say, hot stuff.

Iannone: **So the idea of status—that became very important to you as a means of understanding the academic scene?**

Wolfe: Absolutely. That was thanks to the Yale graduate program in American Studies. It was interdisciplinary, emphasizing American literature and history. But you were also required to take economics and sociology. I had just graduated from Washington and Lee as an English major, and like most English majors I looked down upon the social sciences. Professors who taught literature and history at Yale were grand three-name figures, Norman Holmes Pearson, Samuel Flagg Bemis, William Lyon Phelps. Economists and sociologists had only two names. But then one of them, a sociologist named John Sirjamaki, introduced us to the work of Max Weber, the German who had founded status theory.

Before Weber, the term status had never referred specifically to social position. All at once the scales and motes fell from my eyes—I think that's the expression—and I felt I could see life clearly for the first time. I soon realized that this concern about social status, about where you rank, absolutely saturates life. And it's not just in the big things that had been so expertly mined by W. Lloyd Warner and all the other great American sociologists of the 1950s, the whole business of what sort of job you had, where you lived, where you were educated, what the things around you looked like, the house, the car, the furniture, the china—bone or earthenware?—the silverware—if any—but also the most private areas of

your life such as sex. Lights on or lights off? Naked or partly clothed? Covers or no covers? Kinky or missionary?

The sociologists of the 1950s were fabulous. They broke all these matters down into status ranks. For example, when it came to sex, the upper orders—this was fifty years ago—were far kinkier, far more "experimental," than the lower orders. Even solitary conduct, such as going to the bathroom—they went into that, too. For a start, there were bathrooms that had ceramic bowls with hinged seats and those that had a hole in the ground. There were men who always closed the door when they urinated and those who left it open so they could talk to other people in the house by lifting their voices above the burble of the water. There is no end to it—this concern about your status—in any area of life, not as long as you're conscious, at any rate. By the time I received my doctorate in 1957 I was convinced there must be some center in the brain that monitored your status in all things great and small. That was the origin of my interest in neuroscience, even though neuroscience as we think of it today didn't exist. Brain physiology, the overwhelmingly complicated business of figuring out how the brain works at the physical, neuronal, level had come to an all but dead stop thanks to the success of Freud. If you could go straight to the bottom line with Freud's approach, then why waste a career studying all the tedious mechanics involved?

Iannone: **What was your dissertation on?**

Wolfe: It was on the League of American Writers, which was a Communist front. That was a very hazardous subject for a dissertation at that time. We are talking about the 1950s, when the debate over McCarthyism was still going strong. Most of the major writers in the country belonged to the League from 1935 to 1939. On the surface it was merely one of many anti-Fascist organizations and had nothing to do with the Communist Party directly.

Iannone: **Or it said that it didn't or you believed that it didn't?**

Wolfe: Oh, no, a Communist fraction ran it. The party used the word "fraction," not "faction." I did a lot of reporting for that dissertation. I interviewed the principals, Communist and non-Communist, and they told me exactly how it was done. You should read it—or maybe you shouldn't. Talk about a dry piece of sociology. It dealt with political issues only insofar

as they affected how the fraction ran the front. That dissertation is so diligently dull and puritanically objective, it'll dry up your skin and make your teeth fall out. But I got my Ph.D. My sole interest was in how the Party could turn writers, people who pride themselves on their independence, into what they called "a manipulable mass." I combed through census figures, biographical yearbooks, newspaper files, and found out that—this was no surprise—most lived in New York and Los Angeles but came from other places all over the country. They were adrift socially. Their whole social life depended on friendships with other people in the same line of work. Offer them an organization devoted to a cause they believe in, namely anti-Fascism, and it wasn't all that hard to manipulate them...in behalf of Soviet foreign policy.

Iannone: **About neuroscience, though, I thought I was getting from *I Am Charlotte Simmons* the idea that we're resisting that, resisting that we are just impulses and synapses and so on?**

Wolfe: There's neuroscience the science and there's genetic theory. They are two entirely different things. José Delgado, the Spanish neuroscientist, son of the Copernicus, the Galileo of neuroscience, José M.R. Delgado, puts it very clearly: "The human brain is enormously complicated. We have made only a few small steps in finding out how it works. All the rest is literature." Delgado mentions no names, but if he has noticed them at all, "all the rest" probably includes some of the best known genetic theorists, such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, a zoologist and a philosopher. They are not neurologists. They know precious little about the human brain. They seem to have captivated a big following, especially Dawkins, but not with anything that could be called neuroscience. They're writing speculative literature. Their theory is that the human brain is nothing but a machine, after all, a form of computer, and therefore it has no free will. In any situation we find ourselves we can only do what our evolutionary software—they love computer talk like "software," meaning genetic makeup—has programmed us to do.

So at a recent conference on the implications of genetic theory for the legal system—five distinguished genetic theorists are up on stage—I stood up in the audience and asked, "If there is no free will, why should we believe anything you've said so far? You only say it because you're programmed to say it." You've never heard such stuttering and blathering in response to

anything in your life. But I have to confess that I made the mistake of conflating science and genetic theory in the first piece I wrote about neuroscience, "Sorry, but Your Soul Just Died"...

Iannone: **I think I remember that. And then when I first heard about *I Am Charlotte Simmons* I thought it was going to be about that, but instead I took it as more of a humanistic declaration on the part of an individual who is going to live and demand to be treated with respect and learn about life and make decisions and so on.**

Wolfe: Well, I brought the subject into the novel because genetic theory is another immensely important novelty incubating in the universities. It tends to make you feel that the fix is in. You are born already programmed, and that's that. It makes you think of Nietzsche's prediction—in the 1880s—that the twenty-first century would see the total eclipse of all values. I wanted to show Charlotte Simmons wrestling with that subject rather than just spelling it all out.

Iannone: **That's what's nice about being a novelist, I guess. You can bring things in and you don't necessarily have to tie up all the knots, you are surveying the whole canvas of contemporary life.**

Wolfe: I still think nonfiction is more important.

Iannone: **You do? But you are having too much fun with the novel?**

Wolfe: When I decided to write my first novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, it was partly because I knew that there were a lot of people in the literary world who thought I was writing my "New Journalism," my "nonfiction novels," about hippies, astronauts, radically chic socialites, and other real people, as a way of avoiding the ultimate test: the *real* novel, the fictional novel.

Iannone: **So it was sort of like, well, just the one more kick and you are over into fiction, may as well go the whole way?**

Wolfe: Originally, instead of a fictional *Bonfire of the Vanities* about New York, I was going to do it as a nonfiction novel. And the reason I went to a party given by Leonard Bernstein and his wife Felicia for the Black Panthers

was because I thought this would make a nice chapter. But it was such an incredible evening that the old fire bell rang and the old horse couldn't resist going to the fire and writing it immediately. It became "Radical Chic."

Iannone: **And it came complete with characterization and narrative...**

Wolfe: Well, that was the whole point of this so-called "New Journalism." I did not invent the name, by the way. It used all the devices of fiction that absorb the reader and make him feel that he's inside the minds of the characters. He feels like he's *there*, where things are happening. It's not remote in tone. It's not like reading history. Yet it is totally, faithfully factual, like *The Right Stuff*.

Iannone: **Which became a movie, too.**

Wolfe: *The Right Stuff*? Yes, it did, and for the first time in my life I had a financial cushion. I mean, as a free-lance nonfiction writer, I was scrambling from magazine assignment to magazine assignment. In order to write a long, complicated nonfiction novel like *The Right Stuff*, I had to turn out three books of magazine pieces, some of them enlarged, just to maintain a cash flow. Anyway, I figured now was the time. But frankly, I had no idea that *Bonfire of the Vanities* was going to be so successful. And that kind of went to my head, and I thought, well, maybe I'll just do one more... Nevertheless, I still think that nonfiction is a much higher form.

Iannone: **You do? Really?**

Wolfe: The novel is sinking into its kneecaps.

Iannone: **You think so? Really, because you yourself have written about how the novel had become so insular and so self-centered...**

Wolfe: Yes, I said that the novel is about to die, the same way epic poetry did in the nineteenth century. Nonfiction will never die.

Iannone: **...and you wanted to see a more Dickensian kind of opening out to the social fabric and such. This implied that there was still important work for the novel to do.**

Wolfe: Well, in effect, I've said, unless you do the novel that way, you face extinction.

Iannone: **Yes.**

Wolfe: Naturally, people think that's just me trying to pat myself on the back. Could be, but if I didn't write according to what I believe about writing, I'd be pretty foolish. It's just what's happening to the novel right now, even in the hands of very talented writers. I blame it on these master of fine arts programs. Writers, important writers, used to come from all kinds of backgrounds. In the 1930s they went to great lengths to stress their proletarian origins. The cover of one of Faulkner's novels boasts that he is a former dishwasher and a former shoe clerk at Saks Fifth Avenue. These were terrible exaggerations, but it's true that if you lumped together all of Hemingway's, Faulkner's, and Steinbeck's college educations you would barley reach spring break in the freshman year.

Iannone: **Now it has become overly refined, everyone learning and studying how to write...**

Wolfe: MFA programs are subject to the influences of what I call "the charming aristocracy." That was a term coined by a French poet in the 1880s, Catulle Mendès. He said "All this business of naturalism"—Zola, Flaubert, Maupassant, and the rest—"is really finished. Today, no real writer wants to write for the masses. Today, one writes for a charming aristocracy." Of course, that means an aristocracy of higher taste. To prove you have it, you have to praise things the masses wouldn't understand or would consider too boring or weird for words: Joyce, Proust, Kafka, the early Faulkner, on up to Beckett, Pinter, Robbe-Grillet.

Iannone: **The late nineteenth century is when this began.**

Wolfe: Yes. Catulle Mendès was extolling Baudelaire and Mallarmé and Rimbaud. They disdained meaning. They were writing wafts of sensibility.

Iannone: **Yes. This sounds like the dawn of modernism.**

Wolfe: That it was. It was the 1880s. In 1890 the first modernist compound is formed, the Berlin Secession. In 1896, the Vienna Secession. After 1900 the modernist movements come thick and fast: cubism, fauvism, futurism, expressionism, abstract expressionism. In every case it's important that only the charming aristocracy can comprehend it. That is the mental atmosphere of the Master of Fine Arts programs in creative writing today. And they are like standing water—and that is where mosquitoes breed.

Iannone: **Good metaphor.**

Wolfe: All of these French "isms," absurdism, fabulism, concretism, minimalism, structuralism, magic realism—they're the mosquitoes.

Iannone: **Yes, and often it's not that the writing is bad, it's often very refined, but it's not telling us much. It doesn't have much vision.**

Wolfe: It becomes removed in a lot of ways. To the charming aristocracy, writing about the muck of everyday life is considered vulgar, which is another way of saying it's too easy to understand and appeals to ordinary readers. Psychological sensitivities should be what it's all about. Whereas, I think if you look back at the novelists who are remembered from ages past, practically every one of them wrote about his own time in a thoroughgoing way. Fielding, Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Tolstoy... And they are so "accessible," that being the charming aristocratic euphemism for readable. *Anna Karenina* is clear as a raindrop, but in no time you find yourself out in some very deep water. You feel the agony of an adulterous affair in the nineteenth century, even though today Anna and Vronsky would be nothing more than a Page Six item.

Iannone: **I think Flannery O'Connor said it, that adultery was once a sin but is now just an inconvenience. But then you managed to make a novel about the new looser morality. That seemed to be, from what you've said, the central idea for you, that we now have this whole new way of the sexes relating, the coed dorms and bathrooms, and so on, and what that was going to bring to the campus and to academic life. Add to that what you are saying about status and the need for kids to belong, and the need for kids to fit in—all that is what you are exploring.**

Wolfe: Oh, to me, that subject, status, is everything. It's the key to understanding everything humans do.

Iannone: **Status is everything?**

Wolfe: Even in *The Right Stuff*. It's about astronauts and the space program, but the exploration of space is merely the setting. The real subject is status competition within the small, enclosed world of military flying. That is what drove the first seven astronauts and most of the first seventy-two astronauts. The real hero of the book, insofar as it has one, isn't even in the program: Chuck Yeager. The truth was that excellence in combat outranked anything an astronaut could possibly do. Yeager shot down thirteen German airplanes in the Second World War, two of them jet fighters he went up against in his propeller-driven P-47, and he shared credit for a fourteenth. Even his most famous exploit, breaking the sound barrier in the X-1 in 1947, was minor league compared to his combat record.

Iannone: **And in its own way, status figures in *Charlotte*, too. Wasn't it that she eventually just wanted to fit into this new scene, even though it was tearing her up, she wanted to be part of this new campus scene?**

Wolfe: She had worked it out that she was going to go to college for a "life of the mind," because that was what had made her so remarkable in high school. She rejected the fast set, the cool set, and they rejected her as an uncool tool of the powers that be. In the very moment she is giving the valedictory address at her commencement, at the beginning of the book, she is conscious throughout of rejection by other seniors who are seated right in front of her.

In her hometown she could brave it out and take satisfaction in being the school's academic superstar. She wasn't going to drink. She wasn't going to ride around late at night in fast cars. Above all, she wasn't going to, as the phrase went in her high school, "give it up," meaning her virginity. Then she gets to college, and discovers it is so much a part of a girl's status that if you want to be the girlfriend of an attractive guy, you can't go much more than two weeks without "giving it up."

Iannone: **Yes, terrible, the new mores. How to resist that?**

Wolfe: There is no conception today of why lust is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. All seven are sins against the self, the idea being that you are wasting your energy, your spirit, your very self if you surrender to these sins. Shakespeare wrote a sonnet about lust that says it all, Sonnet 129, I believe it is.

Iannone: **The expense of spirit in a waste of shame?**

Wolfe: Yes, exactly. And it says, you are wasting yourself.

Iannone: **Your substance.**

Wolfe: You are sacrificing your life for this pleasant little momentary spasm, the orgasm. But today the idea that you are harming *yourself* doesn't exist. Today the philosophy is there's no victim. What's wrong with drugs if they're not hurting anybody else? What's wrong with getting a little on the side, as long as it's with a consenting adult? The old idea that you're hurting yourself has vanished.

Iannone: **What is it that Dostoyevsky said? Anything goes. Everything is possible.**

Wolfe: Dostoevsky is another example of someone whose writing was very much socketed into the age in which he lived. He was right in the thick of a hot debate in Russia in the late nineteenth century. Were the upper orders guilty because they had serfs? Was the feudal nature of Czarist rule intolerable? He just would not have written what he wrote without that milieu and those political concerns. Or think of Balzac. My God, whose genius could possibly be more woven into the society in which he lived?

Iannone: **Gosh, everything, the human comedy, the human condition.**

Wolfe: Or Zola. Balzac was his idol, and he moved methodically from one area of French life to another. He wanted to record it all. He even wrote a novel about department stores, *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Zola does not have nearly the prestige today that Balzac has, but *he's my boy.*

Iannone: **Do you think then that we could recover? That seems to be the situation, things have gone amok, the old traditional values have been**

overturned, and kids are left to find their own way, to create these new status rankings, these new rules. Would you be for the elimination of coed dorms, the elimination of coed bathrooms? Talk about scatological, your novel features a memorable scene of that, and suggests differences in male and female nature in approaches to many things, even the bathroom.

Wolfe: Well, let me say first that it is conceivable that the whole moral climate could change. I mean, after all, when you look back at Regency England, there's a period much like this. Women of considerable status would go around in see-through dresses and so forth, and the equivalent of LSD was being taken in the higher orders. This was laughing gas, nitrous oxide. There were the same beliefs about it, that it opened up doors of the mind, and so forth. All that was followed by the Victorian period. I do not know why or how that happened, but it happened.

This is a different period, and I don't see any reason why things would turn back, in no small part thanks to the technological invention that most affected all industrial countries in the twentieth century, the high-speed internal combustion engine. Thanks to that—Gustav Daimler's invention—families tend to explode geographically. I grew up in Richmond, Virginia. I am living in New York. My sister lives in North Carolina. I have first cousins who live in Atlanta, Texas, Tennessee, and Raleigh. I have nieces and nephews who live in Washington State, Birmingham, Charlotte, and Massachusetts. These days it is hard to keep communal traditions intact. It can be done, but it is much harder.

In New York, morals have always been much looser, because this is a place you run to where there is almost nobody looking over your shoulder who cares or has any influence on you. If you read O'Hara in something like *BUtterfield 8* you can see this. But in the south, when I was growing up, you always had lots of people looking over your shoulder.

Iannone: **Well, now, it's almost the opposite. The managing editor of our journal has children in high school and she says that the school overemphasizes sex and says that the kids have to explore their sexuality, and so on.**

Wolfe: Welcome to the earthquake.

Iannone: **There I wonder if feminism is part of the problem, too, that it has taken us very far, that men have been, kind of, denigrated in this society, and you don't even need them and the masculine authority they can provide. Remember, a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle. And single motherhood being promoted and celebrated.**

Wolfe: I think that started before feminism. I think that started in the era—I don't know if you ever read *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Then, because of bureaucracy, a word that was in the air constantly, men were filling jobs that made them feel like replaceable parts in a machine, jobs they could hardly even explain to their children. They were feeling emasculated thanks to lack of authority. It was one thing to be the blacksmith who runs the shop, and maybe that's not considered a job of high status, but it has authority, and you know you're a man. What are you if you are working for Morgan Stanley? I don't know.

Iannone: **So there was a kind of loss of direction, or firmness of identity, as you see it.**

Wolfe: Frank Pittman, a psychiatrist, reviewed two movies that came out about the same time for *Psychology Today*. One was *Dead Poets Society* and the other was *Field of Dreams*. Both are about sons who are severely hurt by their fathers. Both are beautifully made...wonderful acting, wonderful writing. *Dead Poets Society*'s plot turns on a domineering father who thinks that his son's involvement with the school's theater group is effeminate. The boy ends up committing suicide. But in *Field of Dreams* it's a boy pining for some connection, any at all, with his father. Just throwing a baseball back and forth would do. Pittman concludes that *Field of Dreams* is far more true to contemporary life. "The problem children have in this country today," he says, "is not the domineering father. The problem is the absent father who lives at home." Isn't that a great phrase, "the absent father who lives at home?"

Iannone: **Yes, so much of American literature deals with the domineering father, and now the problem is the absent father. But now too I think it might be the absent father who *doesn't* live at home. At least the ones at home had some influence.**

Wolfe: The last figures I saw, 30 percent of all children born in this country—and we are not talking about some special segment—are born to single mothers. It's astounding. Single mothers are not a college problem, but how bad would it be not to encourage boys and girls to live in each others beds at school?

Iannone: **So I am going to put you down as a supporter of getting rid of coed dorms, because doesn't that have a lot to do with the misbehavior that we're discussing?**

Wolfe: It's not a cause that I would pursue. You can only do so many things in life.

Iannone: **Could you say something more about how surprising it was that there didn't seem to be any debate? That parents weren't consulted, that the larger society was not even paying attention?**

Wolfe: This is a result of something that happened in the sixties. A relative handful of college students—and it really was just a handful—had absolute moral conviction about how things should change. It had nothing to do with the generation gap, which never existed in the first place. It had to do with the war in Vietnam and a fervent desire not to be drafted and sent there. The key terms are "absolute moral conviction" and "fervor." Well-educated adults, in contrast, were at that moment suffering from a shortage of those two hormones, moral conviction and fervor. That very much included politicians, college presidents, and others in positions of authority.

They were becoming secularized. It had become unfashionable to thump your Bible, as Americans had always tended to do, and say, "It's wrong! That's why!" It made you look backward. So what was the basis for your authority, if it wasn't religion? You had none! You tended to give way when you ran into youths with genuine moral conviction and fervor. *Not agree*, just yield. Did the students insist on having four courses per semester instead of five, so that they could devote more time to each course? They did, and it was done. Did they insist that they should be integrated, not segregated, by gender in the dormitories, because segregation was so hopelessly reactionary? They did, and it was done. It wasn't a matter for debate. It was a simple matter of folding in the face of superior moral conviction and fervor.

Iannone: **People with lesser convictions just fell over and folded like a cheap camera.**

Wolfe: Or they tried to compromise. There were very few S.I. Hayakawas. He had been president of San Francisco State. I met him later, when he was a U.S. Senator. He had been elected senator thanks to a single event. Student protestors stormed onto the San Francisco State campus roaring their demands over loudspeakers on a flatbed truck. Hayakawa, who happened to be wearing a tam o'shanter that day, leapt up onto the truck and pulled the wires out of the sound system. All that was left was a handful of people croaking helplessly out in the open air. Hayakawa told me, "You know, not a single president of a college who drew a line and wouldn't let them cross it ever lost his job. The ones who lost their jobs were the compromisers and the temporizers."

Iannone: **Like Grayson Kirk at Columbia. And this whole thing of having to be free, sexually free, to take command, take control?**

Wolfe: That's peer pressure, which is nothing but status pressure, Charlotte Simmons finally buckles under. I felt that the ending of the book was the most tragic of the three endings I could have given it. One, she could have ended up totally ruined, a druggie, a slut, a complete mess. Or she could have seen the error of her ways and started a moral rearmament movement on campus. Or, she could have just gone with the flow, which is what she did. At the end, she is perfectly content to have high status solely because she is the girlfriend of the great basketball player.

Iannone: **I guess I read that a little bit differently. I thought that their relationship was better. He was trying to be a better guy.**

Wolfe: Oh yes, he was trying but that wasn't what drew her closer to him. His athletic stardom did. At the very end of the book he has done something great on the court and other people are applauding, and Charlotte says to herself, well, I guess I ought to applaud too. She is not really absorbed in him otherwise.

Iannone: **So, she has not reached wisdom through learning from all that has happened to her.**

Wolfe: It turns out, and this was my intent anyway, that the reader should see that more than the life of the mind, what she really wanted was status. She had a very high status among the teachers and even among other students, begrudgingly, in high school. She was so smart, they had to send her off to Appalachian State College to take advanced biology, for example. But when it came right down to it, her concern was status. And she had blown her academic career the first semester in college by failing courses, practically failing—she got a couple of Ds for the most slovenly of reasons.

Iannone: **And she actually started out ahead of most of her classmates, because she was really, really well educated during her high school years. And we get a glimpse of how standards have been watered down in higher education, and how a lot of what is passing for education is at a much lower level than it once was.**

Wolfe: In the beginning she's in a French class, and they are assigned to read *Madame Bovary*. She assumes that means read it in French. So she reads it in French. Takes her days, because so much of it is colloquial—only to find out that the rest of the class read it in English, which was all the teacher expected. That teacher, like others, is much impressed by Charlotte. But by the end of the semester she has blown one course after another.

Iannone: **How did you investigate academia? By just asking people, by reading about it, and so on?**

Wolfe: People said, here you are in your seventies. How could you possibly get close to college students? You are nothing like them. Well, so what? I haven't been like anybody I've written about. I wasn't like astronauts. I wasn't like hippies. It's all reporting, and reporting is the easiest thing in the world, because there are no techniques to learn. There is an attitude. And that attitude is: "You have some information. I desperately need that information—and I *deserve it*!" That's the attitude. It gives you the willpower to go up to strangers and ask questions and demand answers you have no right to.

Anything you need to know about reporting you can learn in two weeks, because it all has to do with you using your personality. If you are a really

outgoing, backslapping person, use that approach. If you are like me, and much quieter, use that. Whatever is most comfortable.

Iannone: **Then here a little aside of a question presents itself. What do you think of journalism schools?**

Wolfe: They are great employment agencies. That's about it, in my opinion. Insofar as they force you to do some writing, that's all to the good. Just like creative writing courses, their really great benefit is that you are forced to write, and forcing yourself to write is difficult work. I don't have to tell you that. It's a difficult thing. As the great essay by Sinclair Lewis called "How to Write," says: "First, sit down." Because it is so easy to dance around the subject for two years, five years...ten years...

Iannone: **Do you have a regular schedule that you insist upon? Three hours every morning, or something like that?**

Wolfe: Well, once I've got the material I will do that. I try to set a quota of ten triple-spaced pages a day.

Iannone: **Wonderful.**

Wolfe: Well, that's not really all that much. That comes out to thirteen or fourteen hundred words.

Iannone: **Were you pleased with the reception of *Charlotte?* I think it struck a chord with a lot of people.**

Wolfe: No, I was not particularly pleased. I found that it broke down, and this surprised me—well, first let me say that I never totally discount the notion that maybe the people who criticized it just didn't like it. You have to face that dreadful possibility. But in this case reviews tended to break down along political lines. Liberal reviewers—I don't think this is an overgeneralization—didn't like it. Conservative critics *did* like it. *And there is no political slant to the book whatsoever*! None.

Iannone: **You don't think so?**

Wolfe: Not in *my* mind. Except for one thing—and this had never dawned on me. There are lots of people, mostly liberals, who think the sexual revolution is just the greatest thing, one of the greatest achievements of our era. It definitely is not that for Miss Charlotte Simmons. There are conservatives who think it's one of the worst things. For them, the fate of a Charlotte Simmons underscores that fact. I didn't write the book in moral terms, either. I just tried to give a completely accurate picture of what really goes on. And I have a feeling I did.

Iannone: **I think so. I think even the response where some of the critics say, oh, he overdid how much she's affected by her bad first sexual experience when she's really being used by the young man. I think that's because a lot of women have become coarsened about sex, what with *Sex and the City* and such. I think it was painfully accurate that a young girl—innocent, Candide-like in some ways—would feel really devastated by that.**

Wolfe: *Candide*! You are right on the money. Charlotte has a fate dismal as Miss Cunégonde's.

Iannone: **Oh, the way she is raked through things.**

Wolfe: Poor Charlotte. I personally loved her as a character. I am not so sure everybody loved her as much as I did.

Iannone: **I did. And it was satisfying, too, in a way, to see her respond Candide-like to some of the things that apparently young people are confronted with all of a sudden when they go to college. For example, there are some rules still and yet no one is going to obey them or enforce them, it seems. She is shocked to find something happening, and she reports it to the authority, and her action is subverted in a way. Nobody is really listening. Your portrayal of that kind of a universe, I thought was exceptional.**

Wolfe: Thank you. I think feminism has backfired in that sense. On the other hand, I have relatives of my own, women who have done wonderful things they probably wouldn't have been able to do before the feminist movement.

Iannone: **Well, Thomas Sowell claims that that is not really true. There was this blip in the fifties, coming back from the war and so on, where it became very domestic for women, but actually women had been getting into careers and professions in the decades before that. That we may be giving to feminism more credit than it deserves.**

Wolfe: I can't argue the point. I'll just leave you with one sociological note. I love this. It's James Laver's sociology of hats. In the Victorian period, says Laver, men's hats were very tall and very stiff, like John D. Rockefeller's shiny silk topper in all the old cartoons, while women were wearing kerchiefs, pieces of thin pale fabric that lay limply on top of the head with no superstructure to give them shape. As you get to the early 1900s, instead of standing up erectly and boldly like the topper, men's hats begin to shrink in size, stiffness, and assertion. The crowns shrivel to less than half the size of the topper's—in some cases, as with the trilby, less than a third. They begin to be made of felt, with dents and creases and wrinkles that make it obvious just how soft and diffident they are. And today, a century later, men's hats have been reduced to...oh yes, pieces of fabric that lay limply on the head with no superstructure to give them shape: baseball caps, gone-fishing caps, little-kid caps, snow caps with no pom-pom balls sewn on top, no balls at all...in other words, *pre-puberty* hats, while women's hats, so-called garden party hats, become huge, with great brims of intimidating diameter and decorations gaudy as a peacock's, which means—well, all I can say is that great theories have been induced from much less!

Iannone: **Well, as we conclude, thinking of *Academic Questions* and the National Association of Scholars, what kinds of things do you think that we could be doing, that we should be doing? You have suggested that just telling people to stand up can do a lot toward bettering things.**

Wolfe: People in academia should start *insisting* on objective scholarship, insisting on it, relentlessly, driving the point home, ramming it down the gullets of the politically correct, making noise! naming names! citing egregious examples! showing contempt to the brink of brutality! The idea that a discipline should be devoted to "social justice" is ludicrous. The fashionable deconstructionist doctrine that there is no such thing as truth,

only the self-serving manipulation of language, is worse than ludicrous. It is casuistry, laziness, and childishness in equal parts. Sociology in this country didn't start with Max Weber. It started with an act of pious charity on the part of Protestants concerned about life in the slums. Today the discipline, if it can still be called that, has returned to sheer sentiment. Only this time the pious are from the puritanical order of political correctness, preying with the rhetoric of Rococo Marxism, which means steering clear of the by-now totally discredited "vulgar Marxism," all that tired old business of the proletariat, the peasants, the capitalists, the bourgeois elements, the infantile leftists, since all they really care about is preserving Marxism's greatest joy: the Manichaeistic take on life. Everything is light or darkness! Black or white! No irksome middle grounds or shades of grey! How much simpler the taxing stone-hard task of analysis becomes! He good! He bad! That's the right idea!

Iannone: **Yes, and very much that is what is happening, the substitution of an imagined Manichaean universe for the fullness of reality. And it's to that fullness that writers and scholars must be faithful. That is some of what I take from our conversation today, and I thank you for it.**