

Tom Wolfe's Miami

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Peter Berkowitz on **Back to Blood** by Tom Wolfe

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Tom Wolfe. Back to Blood. Little, Brown. 704 Pages. \$30.00.

In 2012, both presidential candidates agreed that America is a divided nation. In private remarks to wealthy donors in May that were secretly taped and released to devastating political effect in September, Mitt Romney declared that 47% of Americans are heavily dependent on government entitlements, pay no income taxes, see themselves as victims, and will never vote for a Republican who calls for personal responsibility. In contrast, no hostile actions designed to cripple his candidacy were necessary to reveal President Obama's view that poisonous divisions disfigure the nation. The president openly, emphatically, and every chance he got proclaimed that America suffers from an ugly and unjust rift between the wealthy and the rest. And unlike the former governor of Massachusetts, whose opinions about what divides us were spoken in private, the president and his team did what was in their power to stoke resentment by spending hundreds of millions of dollars in swing states alone on negative ads that sought to convince women, minorities, the young, low-income earners, and much of the middle class that the rapacious rich and the heartless Republicans who coddle them are the people's enemies.

Tom Wolfe, master chronicler of American society and culture for half a century and going strong, also sees America riven by deep divisions. Or so he sees Miami, the seething setting for his entertaining and ambitious new novel about the heroics, travails, and chivalry of young Cuban-American cop Nestor Camacho, and the ill-fated romances of Nestor's beautiful and basically good-hearted ex-girlfriend Magdalena Ortega. Wolfe surrounds the young former lovers with a cast of colorful co-stars, including a smart but sleazy psychiatrist specializing in treating rich and well-connected sufferers from addiction to pornography; a billionaire porn-addicted patsy of a patient; a ruthless Cuban mayor; a formidable African-American chief of police; an enormously rich Russian playboy, philanthropist, and thug; a stuffy, risk-averse newspaper editor; a shy but dogged young reporter; a Haitian-born professor of French literature who seeks to conceal his Haitian origins and flaunt his French roots, manners, and mores; and the professor's beautiful and pure daughter Ghislaine. And with his trademark vividness Wolfe brings to life Miami neighborhoods, from grindingly poor to extravagantly posh; a ludicrously preening art scene; tony restaurants and tawdry strip clubs; and endless sun and endless striving. The citizens and city whose simmering tensions Wolfe evokes tell a local tale while providing a troubling portent for the country's future.

Yet the source of the divisions that define Wolfe's Miami in the first decades of the 21st century is not views about the role of the federal government or political party affiliation. Indeed, the stuff over which Democrats and Republicans have been battling with increasing resentment and self-righteousness for the last decade is practically invisible in Wolfe's novel. Instead, the divisions flow from blood.

Wolfe has in mind blood in more than one sense. Yes, as the critics have been quick to observe, in Wolfe's Miami family, ethnic tradition, and the larger community into which one is born instill a deep-seated distrust of outsiders. But, though the critics have mostly failed to discern it, looming larger in *Back to Blood* are the oldest human passions coursing through our veins — however much we may purport to have put all that behind us — and still inflaming and embittering, enticing and enthralling our hearts. Indeed, *Back to Blood* is the story of the mixing of blood in the sense of cultural inheritance and in the sense of the primally human. It is a particularly explosive mixing because in Wolfe's Miami, and not only in Wolfe's Miami, the inherently volatile elements are generally uncooled and unrefined by religious faith, patriotic devotion, and shared standards of justice and duty.

Novels are the least perfectible of literary forms, and *Back to Blood* is no exception to the genre. Some of the complaints to which it has been subject recall those lodged against Wolfe's previous novels. The plot relies on far-fetched coincidences. The characters frequently are less deftly-realized individuals than types — heroic or villainous, clownish or stalwart, bursting with youth, negotiating middle age, humbled by old-age. And the author's literary technique, which consists in part in depicting characters' thoughts in the author's own high-energy, rapid-fire, crackling prose, risks giving every character the same remarkable inner voice.

To these standard criticisms there are effective replies. Rare is the novel, including the greatest, in which apparently accidental happenings are not crucial to pushing the plot forward. The human types and the general tendencies into which Wolfe breathes life are of intrinsic interest and crucial to understanding America yet are typically distant from and neglected by contemporary elites. And by means of the refinement and amplification of the language of his characters' inner life, Wolfe makes audible and visible the powerful all-too-human anxieties and aspirations that roil their spirits but are often repressed, disguised, or underestimated not least by those whose task it is to clarify the currents and contradictions of our contemporary cultural wonderland. Moreover, whatever the ultimate shortcomings of *Back to Blood*, they are more than made up for by the sheer exuberance of Wolfe's language and the inspiring delight, with which every page sparkles, that an octogenarian takes in the perennial human comedy.

The elite reviews have for the most part been mixed. For example, according to Washington Post fiction editor Ron Charles, despite having produced a screwball comedy that has its moments, Wolfe's depiction of Cubans, blacks, Russians, men, and women are boring; his descriptions of sex are "loud and repellent"; and his various sub-plots don't cohere. In the

New York Times, daily book critic Michiko Kakutani found *Back to Blood* a “soapy, gripping and sometimes glib” novel in which Wolfe’s two Cuban-American heroes, Nestor and Magdalena, serve as a “prism by which to view the pretensions, social climbing and Machiavellian manipulations that burbles [sic] all around them.” In the New York Times Sunday Book Review, novelist and critic Thomas Mallon faults the novel for inadequately developed plotlines and slow pacing. But Mallon is more impressed with the book’s achievements. Recognizing Wolfe’s propensity to “concentrate on behavioral codes and status” and to favor “big themes over private emotions,” Mallon portrays Wolfe as a kind of Babe Ruth of the novel, graced with outsized talent and built to swing for the fences who, when he connects, hits home runs for the ages but, and as part of the price, often misses the ball by a mile and frequently strikes out. Mallon generously concludes that the familiar Wolfean “trappings and tropes” that abound in *Back to Blood* “don’t feel the least bit irritating; the effects are too good to retire, and their deployment serves to stitch Wolfe’s oeuvre into the single, big Balzacian chronicle he’s always had a mind to produce.”

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By contrast there is nothing generous or even the slightest mixed about the brutal verdict issued in *The New Yorker* by James Wood, the premier literary critic of his generation.

Wood is appalled and repelled by Wolfe’s latest novel, and indeed, as Wood himself is only too eager to point out, by all of Wolfe’s novels. According to Wood, in its wildly inflated prose and cartoonish plot, *Back to Blood* exhibits the excess it purports to describe. The book is powered by Wolfe’s “conservative paranoia.” Although Wolfe famously prepares to write his novels by leaving the cloistered study to immerse himself in the glittering spectacle and seamy underside of teeming American cities—New York City in *Bonfire of the Vanities*, and Atlanta in *A Man in Full*—Wolfe is “incapable of intelligently analyzing these complex realities, and merely exploits them for sensation.” Wolfe imbues his characters with resentment so that he will have pathologies and social convulsions about which to write. It is impossible to learn anything about what his characters are “actually like,” because Wolfe’s voicings of their interiority are “spoiled music,” and “hold no interest.” In contrast to great writers such as Thomas Mann and Leo Tolstoy who create textured realities by means of imagining “important details,” Wolfe distorts reality by reporting boring facts. And whereas “ordinary life is complex, contradictory, prismatic,” Wood finds that “Wolfe’s characters are never contradictory, because they have only one big emotion, and it is lust for sex, money, power, status.”

It is noteworthy when a critic of James Wood’s gifts demonstrates blindness to a novel’s leading themes and literary aims. In fact, Wolfe’s characters in *Back to Blood* are of interest because lust for sex, money, power, and status is inherently interesting, and because such lusts often conflict, producing both comedy and tragedy. Moreover, Wolfe’s hero Nestor

Camacho is of special interest because of the clash in his soul between the varieties of lust and the determination to achieve higher human ends and live in accordance with a code of morals that has roots in both classical antiquity and biblical faith.

You would never know from Wood's account, however, what really drives the young Cuban-American cop at the heart of *Back to Blood*. Nestor has built his five-foot, seven-inch body to muscular perfection. He climbs the cable of a seventy-foot-high foremast of a big pleasure ship on Biscayne Bay to rescue a man about to plunge to his death, only to see his own kin and community turn his heroism into betrayal of his people. He saves his partner in a crack house raid by wrestling a 250-pound giant to the ground and subduing him but his valiant act is promptly transformed by the press into a scandalous exhibition of vicious racial violence. And despite suffering banishment from family, neighborhood, girlfriend, and job he maintains his sense of decency, professionalism, and gallantry. In short, it could hardly be more wrong to say of the hero of *Back to Blood*, as Wood says is true of all Wolfe's characters, that he has "only one big emotion, and it is lust for sex, money, power, status." Although his lusts are real and powerful, what distinguishes Nestor is that he is a man on a mission, driven by pride, who puts honor grounded in faith first.

While collecting himself for the raid on the crack house that, like the many other reversals of fortune that upend expectations in *Back to Blood*, would lead to his suspension from active duty,

Nestor couldn't help remembering something an astronaut had said in a documentary on tv: "Before every mission I told myself, 'I'm gonna die doing this. I'm gonna die this time. But I'm dying for something bigger than myself. I'm about to die for my country, for my people, and for a righteous God.' I always believed—and still believe—that there is a righteous God and that we, we in America, are part of his righteous plan for the world. And so I, who am about to die, am determined to die honorably, fearing only one thing: not living up to, not dying for, the purpose for which God put me on earth." Nestor loved those lines and believed in their wisdom and remembered them in every moment of police work that involved danger. . . . Did you do that before the ever-judging eyes of a righteous God . . . or was it the eyes of an Americano sergeant. Now, be honest.

That as serious a reader of literature as James Wood is deaf to the vindication of virtue, manly and moral, at the heart of Nestor's adventures suggests that Wolfe is right that he must exaggerate effects to get a hearing for his untimely themes and bold literary aims.

So rare these days is reflection on the virtues, particularly manly virtue, that even though Wolfe gives his main character a Homeric name and entitles the last chapter of his book "The Knight of Hialeah," our most sensitive critics — perhaps because of their prejudice in favor of sensitive souls or the sensitive side of our souls — overlook that *Back to Blood* is an old-fashioned morality tale set in hyper-modern times. The common conviction today that partisan political divisions are fundamental is one expression of our alienation from

questions of duty, honor, and virtue. So is the critics' view that *Back to Blood* revolves around racial and ethnic divisions. The deeper divisions, as Wolfe's novel compellingly presents them, are between those who believe that happiness consists in one form of pleasure or another — including the aesthetic pleasure of sensitively glimpsing one's own sensitivities and the sensitivities of others — and those who, like Tom Wolfe and his heroes, believe that happiness consists in the exercise of courage, self-control, and the other qualities of mind and character that constitute human excellence.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His new book is *Constitutional Conservatism: Liberty, Self-Government, and Political Moderation*.