A Man in Full Short Guide

A Man in Full by Tom Wolfe

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Contents

Characters

When the story begins two of the major characters, Charles Croker and Conrad Hensley, are on opposite sides of the country in very different environments, although in time the trajectories of their lives will bring them together. Charlie Croker in Atlanta is sixty, a former college football star who is still a 235-pound "bull of a man," especially proud of the muscles of his back, neck, and shoulders. He is a real estate developer who has helped to create the downtown Atlanta skyline, is married to a gorgeous young second wife, and has been living a life of conspicuous consumption. However, trouble looms because his latest project, Croker Concourse, a huge mixed-use development on the outer perimeter of the city, is a flop and he now owes lenders $800 million that he cannot repay. PlannersBanc, his principal lender, wants him to cut back on expenses and sell some of his assets, perhaps his airplanes, his luxury cars, his fifty-nine thoroughbred horses, or even his beloved 29,000-acre southwest Georgia quail-hunting plantation, "Turpmtine." At Turpmtine, Charlie is the master; his retainers there call him "Cap'm Charlie" and this is the role he loves best. To him the southern plantation is where traditionally "the male of the species acted out his role of hunter, provider, and protector, and the female acted as if this was part of the natural, laudable, excellent, and compelling order of things."

Conrad Hensley, twenty-three, lives in Pittsburg, thirty miles east of Oakland, California, in half of a flimsy two-family house, drives an old Hyundai hatchback, and is the master of nothing. Married and the father of two young children, he struggles to make a living hoisting eighty-pound blocks of frozen food in a Croker Global Foods warehouse, called by the unfortunates who work there the "suicidal freezer unit." The temperature in the warehouse is always zero and everybody is constantly sniffling and sneezing from the "freezer flu." Conrad's discontented wife and disapproving mother-in-law add to his anxieties. The child of dissolute '60s-era hippies, he is a seeker of order and normalcy. All he wants is to save enough money to buy a condo in a halfway decent neighborhood and to have an ordinary family life. His bourgeois nature is in stark contrast to that of his jobmates, the "California Okie" "crash and burners" who are heavily into a nihilism characterized mainly by devotion to depraved Country Metal rap music. Conrad views them as people with "No!" rather than "Yes!" in their hearts. When he loses his job because of an arbitrary fifteenpercent reduction in staffing ordered by Charlie in Atlanta, Conrad, the innocent incompetent, falls prey to a set of wildly irrational circumstances. Although he responds in what he believes is principled fashion, he is charged with aggravated assault and sentenced to imprisonment.

Inman Armholster does not have the financial problems that Charlie has. Inman, now in his fifties, is fatter, richer, and more socially prominent than Charlie. Inman is no Georgia Cracker; he is Old Family. He rules Armaxco Chemical, a conglomerate big enough and diverse enough to remain immune to the ups and downs of business cycles. He is still married to his first wife, Ellen, and is the father of an eighteen-yearold daughter, the beautiful Elizabeth. She and Charlie's twenty-eight-year-old wife, Serena, fill Charlie with silent rage when they chatter away together during the quail hunt at Turpmtine, ignoring the male skills that are on display there.

The novel also features forty-two-yearold Roger White II, a light-skinned African American Atlanta attorney, whom his Morehouse College schoolmates nicknamed "Roger Too White" because of his disdain for the idea of black separatism. It is a name that still describes his alienation from the black community and his striving to become a success in white professional and social spheres. Roger drives a $75,000 Lexus, dresses like a British diplomat, prefers music by Stravinsky and Mahler, and does not tolerate much in architecture that came after Edwin Lutyens. Wesley Dobbs Jordan, Atlanta's very savvy black mayor, is a good friend of Roger's; they went to Morehouse College together. Both Roger and Wesley are successful "beige" African Americans who have made it in a white world. When they get together, they amuse each other by talking in the argot of the street, a ghettoese that has been widely adopted by young people to express their "blackness."

Most of the characters in Wolfe's book are men—black and white, rich and impoverished, stupid and bright, powerful and powerless. Women are observed, but they remain on the sidelines. The one sympathetic female character is Martha Croker, Charlie's discarded first wife. She gave up a career as a doctor to marry Charlie and through her social connections and general competency helped him become a successful real estate entrepreneur. Because of the divorce she has become invisible to their former socialite-friends. Although Charlie does not see the irony, he ceased to find her attractive when, as she aged, she developed broad shoulders and a thick back—a humorous echo of the physique he is so proud of in himself. Martha sees Charlie's young wife and the other young thin female types that Atlanta rich men seem to prefer, as "boys with breasts." On the other hand, Conrad brings a feminine presence to the plot. He has fair skin and delicate lips, dark eyes and long dark eyelashes, and looks "almost too pretty." He is, moreover, the morally positive presence in the book. But Conrad is quite masculine compared to Pocahontas, the tall, skinny, pale new prison inmate who, because of his frailty, is sure to become a victim of the cruelty that prevails in the prison block where Conrad has landed.

Ray Peepgass is a nerdy financial analyst at PlannersBanc who, although a whiz at math, is treated with condescension by his superiors and, because of an extramarital affair, is now divorced, impoverished, and the target of a paternity suit. By squiring Martha Croker around town as part of his campaign to carry off an illegal acquisition and resale of Croker Concourse, Peepgass— who is reasonably good looking despite his nerdiness—is able to make Martha visible again and to give himself a chance at a comfortable and socially vibrant life.

Fareek "the Cannon" Fanon is a black All-American running back for Georgia Tech, who has been unfairly accused of date-rape by Elizabeth Armholster. Fareek's inner dialogues are not presented to the reader as are those of the other characters, and he remains more of a stereotype. Fareek has no manners and a serious attitude problem, but he is crucial to Georgia Tech football and its powerful group of supporters.

Roger Too White is hired to try to arrange a rapprochement between Fareek and Charlie Croker, who as an ex-footballer and a white business tycoon, might be able to quiet the racial unrest that has resulted from the rape charge.

Most of Wolfe's characters are exaggerated and outlandish. Charlie is huge, crude, and given to hilarious social gaffes. His good friend Billy Bass is an aging Cracker with "drooping eyelids and wattles like a hound." Conrad is angelic to a fault. Martha is thick-shouldered and has pineapplecolored hair. She is totally baffled by what has happened to her and remains throughout the book a victim of her circumstances.

Fareek Fanon is a superb athlete, but a rude lout dressed in gold, diamonds, and ghetto clothing. The coach of the George Tech football team, Buck McNutter, is a white slab of beef with a $65 hairdo, "every cilium in place." Wolfe is more delicate with Mayor Wes Jordan and Roger Too White, both of whom might be real people. All of this hyperbolic characterization successfully serves as humor in the larger service of social observation.

Social Concerns

Money, race, discrimination, imprisonment—those factors that create inequality among people—are important concerns in Tom Wolfe's A Man in Full. Atlanta is an ideal setting for an examination of these concerns because of its late-twentieth-century development as a major metropolitan area, its critical black-white racial mix, and its lingering remnants of the old planter society. Always a transportation and financial center of the South/Atlanta underwent a transformation to metropolis in the 1970s and 1980s as it acquired a dramatic new office skyline downtown and a huge suburban surround. New money and a faster pace engendered plenty of opportunity for social mobility and its accompanying turmoil and resentment. Wolfe tells us that "Atlanta had never been a true Old Southern City such as Savannah or Charleston or Richmond, where wealth had originated with the land. Atlanta had been an offspring of the railroad business, created from scratch 150 years ago and people had been making money on the hustle there ever since." This crassly affluent aspect of Atlanta allows Wolfe to satirize social climbing, ostentation, bad architecture, and "le tout Atlanta's" patronage of art that is conspicuously horrible but politically correct.

"Businessmen in Atlanta liked to affect indifference to New York and its fashions, but they also like to show the world that they moved on just as fast a track as anyone else."

At the same time Wolfe can play with the weekend lifestyle of the very rich in plantation locations outside of the city, where they hunt quail, dine on the home-cooked food of the Old South, and breed horses, all with the aid of a large staff of butlers, housekeepers, cooks, gardeners, stable hands and pilots to fly them to and from Atlanta. The irony of Charlie Croker's love for his role at Turpmtine—with its 1830s antebellum main house, its twenty-five cabins for the help, its airplane hangar and landing strip—is that he is in many ways still the unrefined Georgia poor boy that he once was, before he became the "SixtyMinute Man," playing both offense and defense spectacularly for Georgia Tech and then making a fortune in real estate development. Through the social mobility granted by money he has been wrenched from the status of a "Georgia Cracker" to that of a prominent Atlanta citizen, molder of cities and suburbia.

Wolfe portrays Atlanta as a prominent example of the all-too-prevalent decentralized American city where those with mon ey prefer to live and shop in the suburbs while the dilapidated housing of the core is left to the poor who cannot afford to maintain it, all despite the forest of new office towers in the city's downtown. The concomitant factor, especially notable in Atlanta, is that the retail shopping, the fashionable restaurants and hotels, are all located outside the center city in areas where a network of highways and new development provide those who can afford it the lifestyles they want. The cost of this displacement is out-of-control suburban sprawl, nightmare traffic, a huge waste of the existing infrastructure, and the tragic loss of the city as the traditional center of commerce, culture, and nightlife. Croker Concourse is a cogent metaphor for this whole unfortunate urban situation—too big, too empty, and too far out. Its rooftop restaurant, where discerning people could eat their grilled yellowfin tuna on a bed of kale, remains unpatronized. We are told that Wolfe first set his book in New York as he had Bonfire of

the Vanities, but it is obvious that Atlanta's decentralization better suits his story; after all, New York remains a vital center of culture and commerce where a great many people choose to live centrally. In A Man in Full prominent Atlantans go to fashionable restaurants that are located in shopping centers, a particular modern horror that a New Yorker would never have to encounter.

Atlanta is also ideal as a setting for a plot involving racial politics. As Mayor Wes Jordan says, the city is a "black beacon." Its decentralization results in the 180,000 African Americans of South Atlanta controlling through their votes the three million white people in North Atlanta and all the counties around it. The population of the city proper is seventy percent African American. The mayor, chief of police, and the fire chief, as well as the majority of the city council members and the civil service, are black.

Wolfe's first chapter, "Chocolate Mecca," describes the bogging-down of traffic during Freaknic, the spring break celebrated by thousands of black college students attracted to the streets of the city. Whites mostly stay inside during Freaknic and the members of the Piedmont Driving Club, Atlanta's oldest elite club, watch from their hilltop location with dismay as the ecstatic kids dance in the street. There is racial tension and Wolfe's plot turns on it, specifically on the accusation of rape against Fareek Fanon just as Mayor Jordan is being challenged for his office by a more "authentically black" candidate.

The setting shifts from Atlanta to California to examine American prison life, where physical, homosexual, and racial confrontation and intimidation prevail, often with the involvement of those in charge.

Conrad had thought that life on the outside once he lost his job was the ultimate irrational nightmare, but now he descends into the Santa Rita Rehabilitation Center as into hell, into a concentrated form of the worst horrors of American life, where instead of having their behavior reformed, inmates are subjected to a situation from which the moderating limits of acceptable human behavior normally imposed by the noncriminal members of society have been removed. In Wolfe's view of it, prison is a place where those rejected by society act out an appalling and relentless struggle from which there is no relief, even in the form of a nighttime's sleep. Only the intervention of an earthquake lets Conrad escape his impending brutalization at the hands of Rotto, a Nazilike bully who dominates the white power structure of his cellblock. Conrad is transported via a kind of Asian-immigrant underground railway to a town outside of Atlanta. In another blatant plot contrivance like the earthquake, he is hired to provide home care to Charlie Croker, who is recovering from painful knee surgery.

The character of Fareek Fanon illustrates many of the book's social concerns. Fareek is the stereotypical male black athlete, unrefined and overpaid, idolized for his physical prowess, and dangerous because, in this age of consumerism, he thinks he can say and have anything he likes. Young women of a higher social class such as Elizabeth Armholster are attracted to his virility and his popularity, setting the stage for the racially-charged culture clash that ensues. In Fareek's case, because he has come out of one of Atlanta's most rundown and poverty-ridden areas but has succeeded while most young

men who grew up in similar circumstances are in a life of crime or drug addiction, he is a social icon for the black voters of Atlanta and consequently the representatives of white money and power are afraid to make a scapegoat of him. Whether he is guilty of anything but ignorance and bad manners the citizens of Atlanta will never know, but they really do not care—his offense is not important enough to overcome his significance as a symbol.

Techniques

Wolfe aims for social realism—the detailed reporting of "character, language, milieu, and manners" within the format of a novel. He has said that the lack of social realism in the modern novel has robbed it of its vitality much as understated modernist architecture has deadened our physical environment. His depiction of American life in A Man in Full consists of bigger-thanlife dramatic scenes, minutely-detailed descriptions, long introspective dialogues, and the lyrics of rap music, all linked by a minimum of historical narrative. He uses dialogue, especially inner dialogue, to develop character. Wolfe strings together huge rambunctious filmic scenes throughout the book. They are outrageous, hilarious masterpieces.

: The settings range from Atlanta, Chamblee, and Baker County, Georgia, to the San Francisco Bay area and even the Bahamas. All of this moving around gives Wolfe opportunity to describe the current state of affairs in American society at different levels and to cover not only the working class and prison life, but also the Asian immigrant scene. He links real estate development, architecture, suburban sprawl, racial tension, poverty and crime in the inner city, and mortgage banking in a way that allows him to develop his ideas of the way a lack of ethics leads to breakdowns in community.

It has been said that humor allows us to face things that are otherwise unbearable.

Wolfe uses the element of absurdity to point out irrationality. The book is very funny although most of the characters are stolidly earnest. They do not recognize their own silliness, but we are meant to; underneath it all there is a serious purpose.

The presentation of the state of the English language is the most distinctive feature of A Man in Full. Wolfe seems to be saying: "If this is the language the great writers gave us to express our humanity, look what we have done with it!" He reports wordfor-word extended diatribes, sessions of chatter, discourses, and conversations, obscene rap songs, and all kinds of noisy, dialect-ridden exchanges. There are long chains of inner dialogue and a sort of stuttering inner bewilderment that afflicts his characters. The dialogue in the prison at bedtime crescendos to heights (or depths) beyond anything else in the book: "There was no sleep for anyone in the pod. Every night, at lights-out, a session began in the darkness, a therapy session, a jam session, a hoedown, a prayer meeting, a Pentecostal confessional, a tribal rumble, a shriek into the void, a wailing for that which never was and that which never would be, a lamentation concerning Fate."

Themes

Wolfe's view of American life at the end of the century is that it is materialistic and obsessed with the status that material wealth conveys. Much of the absurdity—the sad and hilarious ways in which Americans think, speak, and act—is tied to this theme.

Wolfe documents the ways in which people dress, dine, and decorate to verify their status. Their dilemmas and decisions turn on status. Charlie Croker knows he will not starve to death if he loses his fortune, he just does not want to lose his status as an important rich developer even if he has to make some very uncomfortable compromises.

Elizabeth Armholster wants to protect her status as social deb and lies to her father and the world about her sexual encounter with Fareek. Roger Too White wants white people to think well of him, but he also, as it turns out, wants black people to think well of him; his hilarious speech about Nietzschean spiders is just an attempt to impress a particularly hard-nosed black journalist. Ray Peepgas, denied the status he thinks he deserves, is willing to commit illegalities to gain it. Martha does not love Ray but she is willing to marry him to become visible again. Conrad is different: he has very little status to begin with and becomes even more bereft of it. A materialistic society has put him in prison, in the main because he chose to act on principle.

In the absence of any other philosophy of life, materialism becomes primary—Charlie says it best: "What is it you're looking for in this endless quest? Tranquillity. You think if only you can acquire enough worldly goods, enough recognition, enough eminence, you'll be free, there'll be nothing more to worry about, and instead you become a bigger and bigger slave to how you think others are judging you."

Southern manhood is a theme, and Charlie Croker feels he is an exemplar of it. He has always been physically courageous— on the football field, in Vietnam, wrestling a six-foot rattlesnake into submission, holding back a raging stallion, or dismantling his own airplane when it is confiscated by Plannersbanc. His favorite painting, which he has installed in his private plane, is of Jim Bowie rising up from his deathbed to fight the enemy at the Alamo. His feeling about Turpmtine is that you had to be "man enough" to deserve a quail plantation, not just rich enough. "You had to be able to deal with man and beast, in every form they came in, with your wits, your bare hands, and your gun."

This heroic aspect of southern manhood also has its dark side, including Charlie's patronizing attitude toward his black employees at Turpmtime and his rule in dealing with women—"never justify, never explain, and never back off." Charlie's bankruptcy crisis demands something new of him—moral courage—and it takes considerable time for him to come to terms with what is required to become a "man in full."

Wolfe treats political correctness with scorn. Mayor Jordan's office, heretofore distinguished by its Sheraton and Hepplewhite English furniture, is now, because Jordan is in the throes of a tough reelection campaign and charged with being too

"white," decorated with authentic African black, red, and yellow drapes, tribal carvings, witch-doctor masks, and crossed spears. Andre Fleet, the mayor's rival for the office, stresses his humble east-side-of-the-south-side-of-Atlanta roots. He wants every voter to know he is "no Morehouse College man," eschewing that particular elite "beige" status symbol, and that it is time Atlanta had its first really black mayor.

Political correctness of a different kind is skewered in the opening of an art exhibit at the High Museum, built in 1983, "in Corbusier mode," all geometric and sterile.

Martha Croker has paid $20,000 for a table and $10,000 to get dressed properly. Charlie Croker sees the crowd as "a flock of turkeys, gabble-gabbling." The elite of the city carefully examine the shocking homosexual paintings, "perverse, troublesome, and confrontational." The paintings are so lewd that Charlie feels moved to make a deprecatory remark regarding their absurdity; in return he is immediately accorded the status of a cultural idiot.

Aging and depression also enter the picture. Charlie is chronically sleepless, his knee hurts, he limps, and pleasurable sex seems a thing of the past. (Except for Charlie's horses, sex is mainly absent from the book.) Sex and vanity had led him to marry Serena and now in the middle of the night he wonders how he could be lying in bed with such a stranger. In fact he feels like an interloper in his own home; very early one morning, sleepless as usual, he decides to go out, get a good country breakfast and go horseback riding, but instead sets off all the sophisticated burglar alarms and is taken by the staff and his wife for a senile fool.

When PlannersBanc threatens to reveal to the world the very questionable way in which Charlie assembled the land for Croker Concourse, he begins to consider suicide as an option, but instead decides to have knee surgery in order to escape the demands of the bank and Roger Too White, while at the same time hiding his depression in the guise of physical incapacitation. The aging theme is also inherent in a poignant examination of the lives of an older couple, the Gardners, whom Conrad has as home-care clients.

Readers will be surprised and perhaps confused by Wolfe's introduction and exploration of the influence of Stoicism (which we can read either as a religion or an ethical system) in a novel of social realism. The need for a moral code, a religion, or just a reason to hope, emerges for Conrad during his imprisonment. He grew up associating religion with his parents' self-delusion and aimlessness, but now he begins to think about his soul. He finds what he is looking for in a book about Stoicism/written in the days of Imperial Rome by Epictetus, a Greek who had been a slave. Stoicism holds that each human has a divine spark from the fire of the gods. This spark imparts reason and the will to act or not act in an honorable fashion. Although life is by its nature unfair and brutal, there are no dilemmas; one must choose to live and die like a man.

Wolfe presents Stoicism as an antidote to the pervasiveness of materialism and the struggle for status. Stoics do not care what other people think of them; they are only concerned to make the right moral choices.

They believe there is no use spending one's life agonizing over the things that are not dependent on one's will, such as money, possessions, fame, and political power. Conrad uses Stoicism to change his attitude in prison and to put "Yes!" back in his heart.

He takes an overt moral stand against an act of physical brutality that others are afraid to protest. Once he has escaped from prison and is in Georgia working for a home-care agency, he begins to live by the principles of Stoicism and delivers the Gardners from a neighborhood thug who is terrorizing them. He then imparts the doctrine to the desperate Charlie Croker who eagerly takes it up.

There are so many allusions in A Man in Full to Greek mythology and philosophy that we begin to wonder whether Wolfe is trying to draw a parallel between America and Ancient Greece, or more specifically, between our corrupt materialism and a philosophy that embodies a clear doctrine of ethics. Stoics in history reproached the corruption and tyranny of their age. Conrad adopts Epictetus as his only compass and begins to see himself as a Hercules who must face the trials that Zeus sends him in order to be trained to help cleanse the world of its injustice. When the earthquake breaks open the prison, Conrad believes that Zeus has intervened. He is free, but he is free for a purpose. Charlie, who has been depicted throughout as "a bull of a man" remembers the words of Epictetus: "Like the bull, the man of noble nature does not become noble all of a sudden, he must train through the winter and make ready."

The ending arrives abruptly once Charlie has become a serious convert to Stoicism. The cessation of action at this point and the use of a brief epilogue to summarize what has happened to the various characters has earned Wolfe a good bit of negative criticism. At the televised press conference, Charlie tells the truth about his bankruptcy and the corrupt deal that has been proposed to him. As he does this he realizes that he feels totally tranquil and impervious to criticism. He tells everyone that one of the few freedoms Americans have left is the freedom to "assent to what is true and to deny what is false. Nothing ... is worth surrendering that freedom for." Conrad is exhilarated as he watches: "It was for this that he had undergone the trials of Hercules and travelled all the way across America."

Charlie and Conrad have triumphed, but those watching on television do not realize it; they think Charlie has simply lost his mind. The problem is that the reader is not listening either; anxious to find out what happens to each of the colorful characters, we are shocked to have it all dropped so suddenly. But Wolfe is having his little joke—-the conversion of Charlie to Stoicism is the resolution of the plot. Charlie is saying: "listen up, America, this is all there is, get your act together or materialism will claim you as its victim."

Key Questions

Tom Wolfe explores issues of economic inequality, race, and discrimination in A Man in Full.

1. Some writers and critics have raised the following question regarding Wolfe's fiction: Is it literature? What do you think?

2. Is A Man in Full different enough from The Bonfire of the Vanities to entertain readers, or is it the same story cast in a new setting and with a different ending?

3. Does the failure of Wolfe to develop female characters give his work a lopsided quality?

4. In what ways is this a novel about African Americans?

5. Is there a conflict between the concept of well-researched realism and the exaggerated, over-the-top nature of American life as depicted in A Man in Full? If there is a conflict, why is Wolfe convinced that he is portraying realism?

6. How does Wolfe use American architecture and real estate development to illustrate his themes of materialism and status?

7. There has never been a century during which so many people have had so much material wealth. How does this change the themes on which writers build their novels?

8. Is A Man in Full a sadder, more tragic novel than The Bonfire of the Vanities?

Are there other American writers once known for the outlandish hilarity of their books whose work has become a little more sorrowful as they have grown older? Does tragedy rise to balance comedy in middle age?

8. Is Stoicism or some similar system an answer to rampant consumerism and corruption?

9. Wolfe includes a chapter on the different sections of Atlanta called "The Lay of the Land." What is he trying to convey?

10. How have the movies influenced the way novels are written?

11. Critics have remarked that the rap lyrics Wolfe wrote for this book are nothing short of embarrassing in their inanity; however, the author seems to be quite proud of them. What do you think of the lyrics?

12. At the end of this book Charlie Croker has become a successful evangelist and is making lots of money. What is Wolfe trying to convey by this relative to the discipline of Stoicism?

13. Wolfe has said that his next book will be about education. He is known to have regarded his graduate-school years as an exercise in frustration. Is this topic a good one for Wolfe's particular talents?

14. Is American literature severely lacking in realism, or is it in fact bogged down in realism?

Literary Precedents

Wolfe successfully developed his exaggerated style of social realism in his nonfiction works such as The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (1965), The Right Stuff (197-9), and From Bauhaus to Our House (1981). A Man in Full, although similar in many ways to The Bonfire of the Vanities, is a more .subtle book and has a new philosophical direction in its presentation of the ethical system of Stoicism. The character of Conrad, a kind of angel figure, is another new element. Conrad and Stoicism are presented respectively as a hero and a solution.

Wolfe sees his brand of highly detailed realism and documentation of sociological trends as following in the footsteps of Honore de Balzac, Emile Zola, Sinclair Lewis, and John dos Passos. He has also said he was influenced by the sociologist Max Weber and his writings on status as an essential part of human life. Critics have compared Wolfe's two novels to those of Charles Dickens because of their broad sociological sweep and their typological characterizations.

Related Titles

Wolfe took eleven years after The Bonfire of the Vanities to write A Man in Full. The two books have many similarities. Their main settings are large cities. Both plots feature two characters, unknown to each other at the outset and coming from wealth and privilege in the one case and poverty and deprivation in the other. Their paths cross and as a result the courses of their lives are changed forever. Both stories are concerned with racial dissension and political ambition. Both books detail the lifestyles of the various social classes, but particularly those of the wealthy. In Bonfire Sherman McCoy considers himself a Master of the Universe; Charlie Croker is the Master of Turpmtine. The scene in which Conrad has his car towed because someone pushed it into an illegal parking spot and his consequent and futile attempts to get the car back is an exercise in helplessness much like the big scene in which Sherman McCoy and his mistress take the wrong exit into the Bronx. Both Sherman and Conrad, neither of whom had any intent to harm, lose their freedom and their families as a result. The two books have the main protagonists, Charlie and Sherman, having to learn strenuous moral lessons while events move forward to satisfy the ambitions of the powerful people involved. Materialism and status prevail as themes. In each case an epilogue sums up what happens to the characters. One can begin reading A Man in Full and think that it is the same story with a "southern accent."

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