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Vile & vulgar

But Tom Wolfe's offensive fiction describes a reality parents should take seriously

MY SEATMATE ON THE FLIGHT OUT OF CINCINNATI had no doubts that I should not be reading the book I was trying to finish that evening last week. We had introduced ourselves quickly and casually when we first sat down, and had discovered almost immediately that we both were Christians.

But he had a report to finish, and I was determined to get through the last 100 pages of my novel. So we had agreed not to pursue our chatter—until he noticed the title of the book in my hands and told me in no uncertain terms how stunned he was that I would waste my time with such established trash.

The object of his dismay was Tom Wolfe's 738-page non-hit from last year, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. My seatmate was right that the novel is vile, vulgar, and offensive—more so than anything I have ever read. But he was wrong in suggesting that the book should be dismissed from the table because it is so terribly ill-mannered.

If the explicit nature of *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is an offense to the reader who wants to guard his or her heart—and it is—that offense is nothing compared to the reality the novel so indelicately describes, and the fact that tens of thousands of people who would never read the book are allowing and even encouraging their children to live in that reality. The novel is the story of a brilliant, beautiful, chaste, but naïve young woman who leaves her Appalachian Mountain home to discover the wonders and rewards of an elite education at one of America's finest universities. But when he uses words like "elite" and "finest," it's not just that the Wolfe tongue is in his cheek. The author serves notice even before he starts his story that he actually visited five different well-known campuses, and that his lurid descriptions are neither a caricature nor a fiction. He is talking about a reality that he researched.

If you didn't believe until now in the doctrine of total depravity, Tom Wolfe will convince you. The corruption he describes is pervasive.

For young Charlotte Simmons, that corruption fills classroom after classroom in both the content and the style of the teaching. It affects the ethics of the faculty. It fills the social life of the students, which for most of them tends to make their academic and intellectual lives irrelevant. The corruption fills the residence halls, whose filth of every kind Mr. Wolfe makes repulsively vivid. The corruption fills the athletic program. It reaches to the nation's politicians who come to speak on campus and the businesses that come to recruit



Wolfe speaking at Fordham University

the university's graduates. But mostly the corruption pervades the students themselves—their ambitions, their daily morals, and their language. The young men are so corrupt you don't want a young woman near them. But the young women are so corrupt they're no longer worth protecting or defending.

All of this, Charlotte Simmons had been prepared by her sturdy churchgoing mother to confront simply by pulling herself resolutely together and saying, "No. I won't believe this and I won't do that. I'll just simply refuse. After all, I am Charlotte Simmons. I know who I am, and I don't need to go there."

Well, guess what. Charlotte Simmons is a winsomely attractive and gifted gal and all that, and you keep rooting for her. But not by a country mile does she have the resources within herself to withstand all that is so corrupt—and all that seeks to corrupt her as well. Indeed, Mr. Wolfe knows all too well that it's not the evil "out there" that ultimately gets us. It's the evil "in here."

But if the evil "in here" is as tricky and dangerous as Charlotte Simmons reminds us that it is, then why let the two evils get even remotely close to each other? If the contemporary secular university scene is even half as corrosive and Sodom-like as Tom Wolfe portrays it, why is that scene patronized by even a few Christian families, much less by the hundreds and thousands of us who send our sons and daughters there to be "educated" by such powerful forces?

My seatmate on the plane, who worried that I might be corrupted by a work of overly explicit fiction, for some reason was quite confident that his daughter, who is now a junior at one of the very state universities Tom Wolfe visited, will be able to stand up for herself. His son will be a freshman at a similar school this fall. Vile as it is, I wish he would read Tom Wolfe's awful book. ●