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# NEW YORK IN SLICES: THE VICTORIAN ORIGINS OF THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES

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**ABSTRACT:**

The Bonfire of the Vanities, Tom Wolfe's first novel, was a bestseller in the 1980s, when it captured its historical moment of yuppie excess, urban corruption, and vanity. Less recognized today are the book's origins as an experiment in reviving Victorian modes of publication. Taking Dickens and Thackeray, Balzac and Zola as his models, Wolfe planned to write what he conceived of as a new nineteenth-century novel—multiplot and multivalent—an anatomy of New York City. What is more, The Bonfire of the Vanities was first published serially, in Rolling Stone magazine, from 1984 to 1985. This article will explore the Victorian provenance of Wolfe's novel, in particular by rereading the original serial parts.

## Introduction

'I'm hitting upon the things that are happening', Tom Wolfe said of his first novel, The Bonfire of the Vanities. 1 When the book was published in 1987, critics tended to agree that it captured its moment in history. Jonathan Yardley, in the Washington Post, called Bonfire 'the first novel ever to get contemporary New York, in all its arrogance and shame and heterogeneity and insularity, exactly right'.2 A few months later, an article in The New Criterion described the novel in Wolfe's exclamatory, hyperbolic style: 'The Bonfire of the Vanities is Tom Wolfe's bid to make it—now!'3 New York magazine proposed even larger claims for Wolfe's contemporaneity by claiming, 'The Bonfire of the Vanities has become a sort of Rosetta stone, a reference source for deciphering the eighties'.4 The movie rights to Wolfe's book were acquired within months, and Brian De Palma tried to recapture the novel's distillation of its era in his 1990 film.

Yet this consummate novel of the 1980s also moves in a retrograde motion: an anachronism. In order to envision his novel of New York, Wolfe decided to write a new nineteenth-century novel—multiplot and multivalent—an anatomy of the city, from the fiftieth floor of a Wall Street skyscraper to the holding pens in the Bronx County courthouse. With the Bronx and Manhattan standing in for North and South, with a cast of yuppies, African Americans, lawyers, and cops in place of the nineteenth century's aristocracy and working classes, this novel portrays an entire society within its pages—a large loose baggy monster, in Henry James's memorable phrase, for the late twentieth century.6 Moreover, Wolfe chose a Victorian mode of publication: the book first appeared serially, in twenty-seven instalments, from 1984 to 1985. He later revised the text for publication in volume form.

It is worth considering how Wolfe's project aligns with some of the concerns of neo-Victorian studies. Mark Llewellyn offers what might be considered a narrow definition of neo-Victorian: works that are

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set in the Victorian period or works that rewrite narratives from the period.7 By this definition, The Bonfire of the Vanities fails to meet the criteria: it is set in the 1980s, and it does not reimagine any particular nineteenth-century narrative. Elsewhere, Llewellyn, writing with Ann Heilmann, suggests a more copious definition: works that are 'self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians'.8 Examples include Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) and The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969), novels that reimagine the period or illuminate some of its key texts. There are earlier examples of the phenomenon as well, identified by Marie-Luise Kohlke, in the first issue of the journal Neo-Victorian Studies. 9 However, Jessica Cox argues that, early on, the neo-Victorian canon seemed to resist 'the inclusion of popular fiction', and Wolfe's novel was undeniably popular.10 Eventually, this canon grew more porous, incorporating 'works that self-consciously engage the nineteenth century'.11 This certainly describes Bonfire, a novel that supports, to some extent, Christine L. Krueger's assertion that 'we are in many respects post-Victorians'.

Wolfe, however, deviates from neo-Victorian authors such as Charles Palliser and Sarah Waters in that Wolfe is less interested in interrogating and reimagining the nineteenth century. Rather, Wolfe chose to use the form of the nineteenth-century novel—as he understood it—in order to comprehend his own cultural moment. In planning his first work of fiction, after a long and prolific career as a journalist, Wolfe decided to compose a 'Victorian' novel—as if he were a nineteenth-century writer who happened to live in Manhattan in the 1980s. In the pages that follow, this article will uncover the Victorian origins of Wolfe's breakthrough novel. I identify four aspects of his project, and they are ordered from the most obvious to most occluded. First, on the surface, Wolfe alludes to the nineteenth century and makes covert and overt references to authors of the period. Second, in the text and in various paratexts, Wolfe makes explicit his desire to write a large-scale, multiplot novel, modelled on the works of Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray. Third, as mentioned above, the book originally appeared in serial form, in Rolling Stone magazine. Fourth and last, the serial publication, by its nature, emphasizes the disaggregated, sketch-like experience of a long narrative published over many months. Readers of the novel in volume form were thus denied some of the Victorian textures of the serialized version; pieces of narrative scaffolding (recapitulations, cliffhangers) and some illustrations were omitted when the book was published in hardcover. Nevertheless, a reading of the instalments as they appeared in Rolling Stone magazine helps to recover the book's Victorian provenance.

**On the surface**

An obvious feature of The Bonfire of the Vanities is its many references to nineteenth-century authors and to British culture more generally. From the baronial, English-country interior of Eugene Lopwitz's Wall Street office to the British expatriates who frequent a restaurant called Leicester's, the book seems to view New York through a British lens. This feature is available to readers of both the serial publication and the volume edition. (For clarity, this article will refer to the Rolling Stone instalments as the serial; the



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1987 Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition will be called the novel.) Some characters' names leap off the page: Arthur and Maria Ruskin, Pollard Browning. There is a criminal defendant named Lockwood—an echo of a character in Emily Bronte¨'s Wuthering Heights (1847), and there is a Henry Lamb, whose name recalls the writer Charles Lamb and his sister, Mary. References to the nineteenth century range from the overt—one journalist character pens a piece for the American magazine Vanity Fair—to the covert, such as the narrator's mention of 'the domestic manners of the Americans'—the title of Frances Trollope's 1832 travel book.

Charles Dickens was an important model for Wolfe, as will be seen; both the serial and the novel contain references, subtle or otherwise, to Dickens's works. Abe Weiss, the beleaguered district attorney for the Bronx, discusses the Henry Lamb case with an assistant district attorney (ADA) named Lawrence Kramer, and the narrator alludes to A Tale of Two Cities (1859) and rhapsodizes in a Dickensian vein: 'Oh, it was a far, far better thing to send beneficent signals to the citizens of the Bronx from up here, by remote control ... via the press'.14 To make matters more explicit, a newspaper article about this case carries the headline: 'Chez McCoy and Chez Lamb: A Tale of Two Cities' (BV, p. 502). Bonfire refers to some other Dickens titles as well, such as when the narrator admires Kramer's performance in the courtroom: 'Charles Dickens, he who explained the career of Oliver Twist, couldn't have done it any better, at least not on his feet in a grand-jury room in the Bronx' (BV, p. 625). Further, there are other, more coded references to Oliver Twist (1837–39). Daniel Torres, an ADA who collaborates with Kramer, has a son named Ollie. According to the narrator, 'Kramer wondered if Torres had really named his son Oliver. Oliver Torres' (BV, p. 412). This aside, which refers to the child of a very minor character and serves no obvious purpose, seems to exist only to propose a latter-day, Latininflected iteration of Oliver Twist, as if a criminal prosecutor in the Bronx must by necessity name his son after the nineteenth century's pre-eminent orphan turned criminal and vagabond.

Other allusions to the period are more apparent, even to those who are not inclined to view the world filtered through nineteenth-century literature and culture. For example, the English wits at Leicester's flatter a hapless lawyer named Edward Fiske III: 'They chuckled, they laughed, they repeated the tag ends of his sentences, like a Gilbert and Sullivan chorus' (BV, p. 188). One of these wits, Peter Fallow, is a knockabout journalist working for a Rupert Murdoch–type newspaper, the City Light. Fallow is first introduced to the reader in terms that emphasize his Englishness, including the countryside and the requisite public school: 'The house in Canterbury ... the locker room at Cross Keys' and, most notably, 'his Victorian-picture-book blond hair' (BV, p. 163). Elsewhere, the narrator uses the word Victorian to suggest a layperson's view of a period associated with prudery and restraint. Indeed, the word Victorian appears in the very first Rolling Stone instalment. This early moment signals the author's desire to merge the world of the nineteenth century (as he imagined it) with a late-twentieth-century media landscape: tabloids and television. After the mayor of New York City suffers humiliation while giving a speech in Harlem, '[t]he networks were tickled pink, but they didn't lose their sense of Victorian propriety' (Rolling

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Stone, no. 426/427, p. 22). Later, in the novel, the term appears once again, when Sherman McCoy, the Wall Street bond salesman at the heart of the narrative, confesses to his father that he had an affair with a married woman, the aforementioned Maria Ruskin: 'Sherman dealt with the subject of Maria with Victorian delicacy' (BV, p. 445).

Although the thrust of the argument thus far has been The Bonfire of the Vanities as a reflection of British Victorian culture, it would be remiss not to mention the importance of two American writers of the nineteenth century, both associated with New York: Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe. Bonfire alludes to Melville's Moby-Dick; or, The Whale (1851) through the characterization of district attorney Richard A. Weiss, known as Abe. The narrator explains, 'An assistant D.A. in Major Offenses had started calling Abe Weiss "Captain Ahab," and now they all did. Weiss was notorious in his obsession for publicity, even among a breed, the district attorney, that was publicity-mad by nature' (BV, p. 104). Not only is 'Ahab' phonetically similar to 'Abe', reduced from another Old Testament name, but the name 'Weiss' is also suggestive of the whiteness of the whale, the object of the monomaniacal quest in Moby-Dick. Subsequently, Wolfe's narrator refers to 'Captain Ahab's mania for the Great White Defendant' (BV, p. 105).

Unlike Melville, Edgar Allan Poe was not born in New York, but the peripatetic Poe lived for a time in Manhattan and the Bronx (the latter home is preserved as a museum). Drawing on this connection, Wolfe places Henry Lamb, the victim of Sherman and Maria's reckless drive through the Bronx, in a housing project named after Edgar Allan Poe—a plausible if fictional address. The novel amplifies the Poe motif in chapter 15, entitled 'The Masque of the Red Death', also the title of a short story first published in 1842. This chapter appears at the approximate midpoint of the novel (there are thirtyone chapters, plus a prologue and an epilogue). For the duration of the chapter, Wolfe recreates the nineteenth-century silver-fork school of fiction, with titled persons ('Baron Hochswald, Lord Gutt, and Lord Buffing' [BV, p. 369]) and dollops of untranslated French ('comme il faut' and 'entre nous' [BV, p. 360]).15 For the less savvy readers who missed the allusion to Poe in the title, the chapter makes it perfectly clear when Aubrey, Lord Buffing, a poet and the son of a duke, paraphrases the gruesome Poe narrative for the benefit of the evening's gathered collection of New York's smart set. So in the midst of a novel replete with allusions to the period, a British poet recounts a tale from the nineteenth century.

**A new nineteenth-century novel**

It should be clear from the preceding that Wolfe knew what he was doing. He was a journalist, not a scholar, although he earned a PhD in American Studies at Yale University in the 1950s. At least since W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley identified 'The Intentional Fallacy', critics have been wary of attributing too much to an author's supposed goals.16 Nevertheless, Wolfe was especially voluble on the subject of his intentions for Bonfire, and the evidence suggests that he fulfilled his aims. Brian Abel Ragen, in a book on the author, summarizes those aims: 'Wolfe had for many years considered writing a novel, and the sort of novel he wanted to write was clear. His models were the broad, panoramic nineteenth[-]century novels that seemed to



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capture a whole society, novels like William Makepeace Thackeray's Vanity Fair. His subject was also clear: New York'.17 In an interview with New York magazine a few months after the novel was published, Wolfe explained, 'I wanted to do a big book about the city of New York in the same way my idols, Balzac and Zola, had done big books about the city of Paris'.18 Here is Wolfe again: 'As I saw it, such a book should be a novel of the city, in the sense that Balzac and Zola had written novels of Paris and Dickens and Thackeray had written novels of London, with the city always in the foreground, exerting its relentless pressure on the souls of its inhabitants'.19 Although Wolfe blurs the distinctions between his French and English literary models, the implication is clear: New York was the successor to the great European cities of the nineteenth century. In order to write the definitive New York novel, therefore, an author must embrace a nineteenthcentury form. In the novel itself, Sherman McCoy, during the fateful drive through the Bronx, perceives this very connection: 'There it was, the Rome, the Paris, the London of the twentieth century, the city of ambition, the dense magnetic rock, the irresistible destination of all those who insist on being where things are happening—and he was among the victors! He lived on Park Avenue, the street of dreams! He worked on Wall Street, fifty floors up, for the legendary Pierce & Pierce, overlooking the world!' (BV, p. 78).

If Wolfe had decided to write a new nineteenth-century novel set in New York City, what were his sources? Ragen mentions Sybil; or, The Two Nations, Benjamin Disraeli's 1845 novel that investigates England as a divided country. James F. Smith proposes not a British novelist but rather the American writer Theodore Dreiser, especially his Sister Carrie, first published in 1900, although the New York Times disagrees with the comparison: 'closer to R. Crumb than to Theodore Dreiser'.20 In a perceptive piece published a little more than five years after The Bonfire of the Vanities appeared in volume form, Terry Teachout quotes Henry James on the subject of the novelist Anthony Trollope: 'Life is vulgar, but we didn't know how vulgar it is till we see it set down in his pages'.21 It is a perfect formula for Wolfe's mode in Bonfire: the book allows its readers to see the vulgarity, the vanity of New York in the 1980s.

Wolfe himself identified other potential sources in a 1987 interview in (the not incidentally named) Vanity Fair: Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Charles Dickens. But it is Thackeray who perhaps looms largest in Wolfe's conception of his first work of fiction. Its title refers to the historical bonfire of the vanities in fifteenth-century Italy as well as to Thackeray's breakthrough publication, Vanity Fair, which appeared in monthly shilling numbers, from 1847 to 1848. Fellow novelist Thomas McGuane called Wolfe 'our Thackeray'; according to Joseph Epstein, the American Thackeray also wrote a novel without a hero.22 It should be recalled that Thackeray's Vanity Fair bore the subtitle A Novel without a Hero when it was published in volume form, and this subtitle suits Wolfe's book with its array of anti-heroes:

Sherman McCoy, the philanderer; Lawrence Kramer, the lustful and vaguely corrupt prosecutor; and Peter Fallow, the dissolute journalist. In the same Vanity Fair interview, Wolfe spoke of Bonfire thus: 'Sometimes I thought of it as a Vanity Fair written 150 years later'.

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s a Vanity Fair written 150 years later'.23 Yet he also recognized the limitations of this nineteenth-century model. John Taylor, in a 1988 piece in New York magazine, explains that Wolfe 'had originally envisioned a book patterned after Thackeray's Vanity Fair but then realized that that would neglect the poor'.24 Thackeray's book focuses on a range of social classes, from the aristocracy and gentry to the servants who serve them. Wolfe's vision implicitly critiques Vanity Fair's exclusion of the working poor; indeed, Bonfire expands the lower end of the socio-economic scale to represent citizens of the Bronx, the antipode to Sherman McCoy's Upper East Side existence—in particular, Henry Lamb, his mother, and the lead witness in the case against McCoy (Roland Auburn). Although Wolfe himself lived in the Upper East Side, Mallon argues that he 'does the Bronx [...] better than he does Manhattan'.25 However, even Wolfe's expanded vision fails to capture the entire city; as the Nation suggests, in a 1987 review, the novel neglects the homeless.

Like Thackeray's Vanity Fair, Wolfe's Bonfire offers an anatomy of social structures. Yet it is not just the formal qualities of Vanity Fair that find themselves echoed in the later book; Bonfire is itself Thackerayan. Epstein quotes Thackeray's Lord Steyne: 'Everybody is striving for what is not worth the having!'27 This sentence could appear on the dust jacket of Wolfe's novel, in which characters vainly pursue money, fame, power, and sex. Among the vain, Larry Kramer, the ADA in the McCoy case, pursues an affair with one of the jurors (an ethical and legal breach). He is pleased by the attention that this high-profile case will bring him, as the reader learns in a passage of free indirect discourse: 'A highly publicized arrest of this Wall Street investment banker in his apartment—it happened to be a brilliant idea! Demonstrate the evenhandedness of justice in the Bronx—absolutely! Assistant District Attorney Lawrence Kramer—the Times, the News, the Post, The City Light, Channel 1, and the rest of them would know his name by heart soon enough!' (BV, p. 428).

Wolfe's novel also displays the Thackerayan wisdom that the object, once attained, is rarely worth the trouble. Identifying with McCoy's point of view, the narrator muses, 'How pointless it seemed' (BV, p. 435). Life is fleeting, and the obsessions of the moment—the puppet show, in Thackeray's image—will soon fade.28 After McCoy's boss, the anglophile Eugene Lopwitz, meets with McCoy to discuss the legal disaster that the young bond trader's life has become, the narrator discourses in a conversational, Thackerayan vein:

Further, in writing a new nineteenth-century novel set in New York City, Wolfe had a particular kind of novel in mind, one that thrived in the middle of the century: the long, complex, multiplot narrative. According to Franco Moretti's research, the form's heyday was 1846 to 1872 (roughly, Dombey and Son [1846–48] to Middlemarch [1871–72]), although there are earlier and later examples.29 Peter K. Garrett, in The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogical Form, argues that '[t]he most important possibility and primary function of multiplot narrative is clearly inclusiveness: the large and densely populated worlds of most Victorian multiplot novels, the expansive effects produced by differences of situation and mode between their narrative lines, and the generalizing effects produced by

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similarities are all ways of achieving inclusiveness through multiplication'.30 This is very much Wolfe's mode in Bonfire. In an article in Harper's Magazine, he describes the process as 'cramming as much of New York City between covers as you could'.31 Inclusiveness, heterogeneity, and a multiple rather than a single narrative would be key features in Wolfe's fictional experiment.

**Writing in parts**

While reviving the Victorian multiplot novel, Wolfe also chose to employ a nineteenth-century mode of publication—that is, serialization. Adrian Poole reminds readers that serialized narratives engage with different temporalities and make room for the incursions of everyday life: 'It is comforting to be surrounded by books which patiently promise that we can take up the story again when the interruptions have passed.

Wolfe's impetus, however, was less a sentimental revival of the form and more a practical necessity. He began working on the story in earnest in the early 1980s but soon suffered from writer's block.33 In order to force the long-gestating book onto the page, he decided to publish it serially, in Rolling Stone magazine. 'I knew that if I had to make a deadline, I could make a deadline', Wolfe explained.34 On the basis of an outline of more than one hundred pages, Wolfe secured a commitment from Rolling Stone's editor, Jann Wenner, and the book began to appear bi-weekly, starting with the 'Super Summer Double Issue', dated 19 July/2 August 1984. 35 In this very first issue, readers of Rolling Stone were introduced in no uncertain terms to the literary experiment that Wolfe was about to undertake. On the fifth page of the magazine, under the heading 'A NEW NOVEL', readers encountered this statement:

This is a rather clear mission statement. The magazine cites a Victorian mode of publication, a seminal novelist, and two of his serialized works. It even lists the serial publication dates for Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby, not the dates of volume publication, as so often appear. (One small correction: Oliver Twist continued to run in Bentley's Miscellany until April 1839, longer than the period cited in Rolling Stone). The Bonfire of the Vanities, as framed by this introduction, joins a 'tradition'.

In short, Wolfe was explicit in his desire to write a kind of Victorian book, and many early readers, of both the serial and the novel, recognized this achievement. There are fewer recorded responses to Bonfire as it appeared in Rolling Stone, but the magazine itself printed two such responses as letters to the editor. The first letter appeared on 13 September 1984, and it reacted to the first instalment of Bonfire, which includes chapters 1 to 3. Doug Robinson, of Denver, Colorado, writes, 'The worst thing about Tom Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities was that there were only a couple of chapters (Rolling Stone 426/427). I'll be waiting for the next instalment. It's definitely the Great Stuff' (Rolling Stone, no. 430, p. 7). This letter captures the Victorian reader's relationship with a serial narrative: the reader wants more and is obliged to wait. While Robinson alludes to Wolfe's previous Rolling Stone series, a letter from a subsequent reader places Wolfe in the nineteenthcentury 'tradition' mentioned above. 'The first thing I do when "Rolling Stone" arrives is flip to Tom Wolfe's Vanities and savor every word', begins



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Marc Allen, of Mill Valley, California. It is telling that this reader reduces the title to Vanities and not to Bonfire (as Rolling Stone and this article do); consciously or otherwise, Allen draws The Bonfire of the Vanities closer to Thackeray's Vanity Fair. Allen continues, 'I hope it's a long book, and that there will be sequels, or other novels. Tom Wolfe is the Charles Dickens of the twentieth century' (Rolling Stone, no. 444, p.9).

Professional reviewers of the novel, in 1987 and thereafter, continued in this vein. 'What the Dickens! Tom Wolfe Has Written a New York Novel' is the title of James Andrews's review in the Christian Science Monitor, and Christopher Buckley wrote 'Dandy Does Dickens' for the Wall Street Journal. 36 In his review, Buckley refers to Wolfe's 'Dickensian feat of derring-do' and a cast of characters that he calls 'post-modern Dickensian'.37 Echoing Marc Allen, in Rolling Stone, Buckley identifies Wolfe with Dickens—or at least his early penname: 'As the Boz of the 1980s, he can't get enough of this human comedy' (with a wink to Balzac, yet another of Wolfe's models).38 Thomas Mallon, in the American Spectator, summarizes the book's origins thus: 'Wolfe took his own Dickensian dare for Rolling Stone and serialized it over nearly thirty issues of the magazine'.39 Hilary DeVries.

finds echoes of both Dickens and Thackeray: Bonfire is 'a tale of two cities' as well as a 'a modern-day remake of the 19th-century novel of manners that is meant to do for today's New York what Thackeray's Vanity Fair did for preVictorian London'.40 In addition to citing particular sources, early reviewers identified more general Victorian qualities in Wolfe's book. Terrence Rafferty, in the New Yorker, calls it 'a first novel of almost unseemly size and boldness', and Mallon notices the distance between the novel and other fictional works of its era: 'In the pulseless day of Bret Easton Ellis, Wolfe has decided to be bouncily Victorian'.

So far this article has elided somewhat the distinction between the serial in Rolling Stone magazine and the novel published in 1987. Yet they are almost two different works, both entitled The Bonfire of the Vanities. Unlike many of his Victorian predecessors, Wolfe substantially rewrote his serial for publication in volume form. For the typical Dickens or Thackeray serial, the same pages from the monthly numbers would be bound and sold as books (at least for the first editions). In the case of Bonfire, the structure is radically changed: the automobile accident in the Bronx, which eventually plummets Sherman McCoy into the bowels of New York's criminal-justice system, does not take place in the serial until the ninth and tenth instalments— roughly one-third of the way through. In the novel, the incident occurs in chapter 4 (out of thirty-one numbered chapters)—much earlier. The incident itself is also thoroughly rewritten in the novel. Another obvious distinction is that in the serial, McCoy is a professional writer (like Wolfe); in the novel, he is a bond salesman for Pierce & Pierce. In Rolling Stone, Larry Kramer recalls that McCoy wrote a bestseller 'two or three years ago' (Rolling Stone, no. 439, p. 27). McCoy's most famous work, frequently mentioned in the pages of Rolling Stone, is A Man in Slices. This in turn inspires the title of chapter 19: 'New York in Slices'. The title of McCoy's book is a telling one: the writer himself will be sliced, dissected, and analyzed over the course of the narrative. This title is also a metonym for the serialization process: The Bonfire of



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the Vanities, in Rolling Stone, is a book in slices, twenty-seven of them. (Incidentally, Wolfe's next novel was A Man in Full.)

**Sketches and temporalities**

Reading Bonfire in Rolling Stone magazine allows one to perceive a book that is even more 'Victorian' than it appears in volume form. By redrafting Bonfire as a 'normal' novel (i.e. not serialized), Wolfe eliminated some of its nineteenth-century textures. If there were a Norton Critical Edition or a Broadview text of Bonfire, these distinctions could be made manifest. The most important is that by publishing a novel in slices, Wolfe revived—perhaps more than he intended—a key aspect of nineteenth-century serial publication: the relationship between the part and the whole. In so doing, Wolfe animates an argument made by Amanpal Garcha in From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction. His view is that the form of the literary sketch—'descriptive and essayistic'—was incorporated into early Victorian novels.42 These moments of 'plotlessness' or atemporality work against later readers' expectation that a fictional narrative should be diachronic; Dickens, Thackeray, and Elizabeth Gaskell 'incorporate significant sections of plotless text' in their formative novels.43 The earlier version of The Bonfire of the Vanities, because of serial publication, operates in much the same way. The serial models what Dickens, in his 1837 preface to The Pickwick Papers, defines as the relationship between the monthly numbers and the eventual whole: 'it was necessary—or so it appeared to the author—that every number should be, to a certain extent, complete in itself'.44 In an interview, Wolfe echoed this sentiment: 'The way I constructed the book, almost every chapter was meant to be a vignette of something else in New York.

Indeed, The Bonfire of the Vanities, in serial from, often feels sketch-like; there is a sense, especially early on, that each instalment is an independent unit, 'complete in itself', in Dickens's terms, or 'a vignette', in Wolfe's. Readers of Rolling Stone would not necessarily purchase every issue over a fourteen-month period. Some might buy a single issue, perhaps because Madonna or Billy Idol was on the cover. In a New York Times review of the novel, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt finds 'the sum greater than the parts'; in the serial, the opposite may be the case.46 Many instalments can be read independently of the whole narrative, rather like a short story. Chapter 4, entitled 'Our Friends at Lunch', the second instalment, was published on 16 August 1984; it tells of two women, Lily Bradshaw and Judy McCoy, who meet in a high-end New York restaurant and discuss issues of marriage and divorce. This scene, which feels like a complete unit, was in fact dropped from the novel. The fifteenth instalment, entitled 'At the Bottom of the Lake', published 28 February 1985, also feels independent of the whole.

This number relates the professional struggles of Peter Fallow and his fortuitous meeting with a lawyer who feeds him a journalistic scoop. A stray reader picking up this number would not be at a loss: it could be read as a droll story about some Brit named Fallow.47 Even as late as the twentyfourth instalment, 'Death New York Style' (4 July 1985), Wolfe offers an elaborate set piece that could be read on its own. In other words, The Bonfire of the Vanities, in serial form, often has the feel of a series of sketches that only incidentally, in retrospect, become a novel.



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Self-contained and atemporal sketches, as identified in Garcha's book, appear throughout the serialized Bonfire. The calendar session in the Bronx courtroom is a good example. This bit of reporting, which offers a sketch of the judicial process, exists apart from Sherman McCoy's travails. It occurs much later in the serial, in chapter 14; in the novel the equivalent scene is in chapter 5. That the same courtroom sketch could appear early or late indicates that it is independent of any chronological progression. Indeed, Wolfe the novelist is frequently Wolfe the essayist in the pages of his serial. When Sherman McCoy is introduced, the narrator begins with a digressive essay on the architect J. Edwin R. Carpenter and the geography of the best buildings in New York City. Only then does the narrator state, 'It was in just such an apartment, in a building on Park Avenue by J. Edwin R. Carpenter, this Vitruvius for the bon ton, that a man knelt on a marble floor, struggling with a dachshund' (Rolling Stone, no. 426/427, p. 27). The process here is like that of a nineteenth-century novelist, opening on a wide vista and then telescoping into his or her subject.48 Other sketches include the introduction to Leicester's and a satirical passage on the vogue for plastic surgery, which was dropped in the novel.

It is no accident that Wolfe, in his first major work of fiction, demonstrated mastery of the sketch, the self-contained episode. He was a journalist first. He wrote for the Springfield Union, the Washington Post, the New York Herald Tribune, New York magazine, and Esquire. Paul Baumann, in Commonweal, notes that 'Wolfe is still very much the reporter'.49 Frank Conroy, in a 1987 New York Times piece, elaborates on the sentiment: 'the man knows how to prepare and he knows how to research'.50 To his hometown newspaper, the Richmond News Leader, Wolfe explained his role in humble terms: 'I'm just the village information gatherer'.51 A strength of The Bonfire of the Vanities, in both serial and novel form, is the combination of good, solid reporting with the structuring power of fiction; in the words of Mallon, the 'essayist and novelist collaborate much more than fight.

But as a serial, Bonfire, as might be expected, feels closer to journalism and the temporality of its initial readers. It is a piece of periodical writing, appearing alongside articles on vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro and the musician still known as Prince, as well as advertisements for cigarettes, Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum, and Ghostbusters merchandise. The fifth instalment, published on 27 September 1984, mentions that Fallow's employer, the City Light, competes with Rupert Murdoch's New York Post, an actual newspaper (Rolling Stone, no. 431, p. 68). This direct comparison is dropped in the novel; liberating the City Light from a real-world referent makes the newspaper more fictional, less a piece of journalistic commentary. The serial also includes an example of what David M. Bevington, discussing Dickens's fiction, calls 'Seasonal Relevance'.53 In an October issue, the mayor of New York is concerned about his re-election prospects; the election would take place a month later. This same issue of Rolling Stone contains an article entitled 'What If Reagan Is Reelected?' (Rolling Stone, no. 432, p. 13). Thus, the fictional mayor and the actual president seem to be on the same ballot, in November 1984. Critiquing its historical moment, Bonfire resembles trends in neo-Victorian fiction as well. For example, Alan Hollinghurst's The Line of



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Beauty (2004) draws on James's The Spoils of Poynton (1897) in order to examine Thatcherite Britain. As Dana Shiller explains, 'Hollinghurst borrows James's sharp eye for the ravages of excess and transplants it to 1980s London, forging humour out of the juxtaposition of the catastrophic and the comic, the real and the inauthentic, the beautiful and the crass'.54 Similarly, Wolfe uses the model of the Thackerayan serial in order to critique Reagan's America, with an emphasis on money, brand-name consumer culture, and the subtle hierarchies of the upper classes. Like many a nineteenth-century novel, The Bonfire of the Vanities is a work of fiction that also documents its own moment in history.

As this article has suggested, Bonfire iterates many elements of Victorian fiction, especially in its original serial form. Readers of the one-volume novel miss certain elements from Rolling Stone that place the work more securely in the realm of nineteenth-century serial fiction: illustrations, some cliffhangers, and certain pieces of paratextual scaffolding. Hidden from readers in 1987 was the fact that The Bonfire of the Vanities, in its serial publication, was an illustrated book. Each instalment includes an icon of a city on fire, and two issues contain full-scale illustrations. Although only two in number, they connect the serialized Bonfire to some of Wolfe's models; Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, and Vanity Fair were all illustrated. In Rolling Stone's 'Special Double Issue', dated 20 December 1984/3 January 1985, there is a full-page, colour illustration by Peter de Se`ve (Rolling Stone, no. 437/438, p. 90). It depicts a cluster of the major characters crammed into an elegant elevator, attended by a uniformed doorman. Included are the mayor, Maria Ruskin, Larry Kramer, Judy McCoy, Sherman McCoy (with dachshund), Reverend Bacon, and Peter Fallow. The directional glances of the figures in this image offer a reading of the text that is unavailable in the unillustrated novel. Sherman glances at Maria, who peers at him out of the corner of her eye. Judy misses this exchange, because she is busy glancing at herself in a compact mirror. Fallow, with a reporter's notepad in hand, leans over Sherman's shoulder to catch the extramarital glance. The artist also renders the other characters equally well: Kramer is nervous; Bacon looms in an imposing manner; and the mayor looks pugnacious.

Three months later, the serial was illustrated once again, this time by Wolfe himself. In the sixteenth instalment (14 March 1985), there is a pencil sketch of Detective Goldberg, looking suave and collected, in a wing chair (Rolling Stone, no. 443, p. 36). The foot of the page offers the modest credit, 'Illustration by Tom Wolfe'. His initials appear at the bottom of the chair, as if he were the designer of the furniture as well as the story. It is a pity that Wolfe did not illustrate other instalments. As an artist, his work was exhibited in New York City, and, according to Toby Thompson, '[h]e felt that his greatest talent was for drawing'.55 By serving as his own illustrator, if only once, Wolfe aligns yet again with Thackeray, who often illustrated his own works. When Vanity Fair appeared in monthly shilling numbers, it bore the subtitle Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society. A fully illustrated Bonfire could be entitled Pen and Pencil Sketches of New York Society. By omitting the lively drawings from Rolling Stone, the novel detaches itself from the tradition of the Victorian illustrated book.



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Finally, the serial in Rolling Stone contains a number of paratextual elements that were dropped, for good or ill, from the novel in 1987. As journalism, the Bonfire instalments feature pull quotes—brief excerpts from the text that are foregrounded on the page in a larger font. The first full page of the first instalment offers this: 'They'll stop at your floor, introduce themselves, look at your teeth and stick their fingers up your root canals, looking for gold!' (Rolling Stone, no. 426/427, p. 19). To a reader of the magazine turning the pages, this quote might arrest attention; the quote also foreshadows a key moment later in the narrative, when Sherman McCoy is stopped by a metal detector because of the silver fillings in his teeth. Beginning with the second instalment (16 August 1984), appearances of Bonfire open with a summary to remind readers of the previous instalment or to initiate the uninitiated. For instance:

**Conclusion**

To capture New York City in the 1980s, Wolfe revived a mode used by Dickens and Thackeray: the serialized novel overflowing with life. This article has explored four aspects of Bonfire's Victorian provenance. On the surface, there are allusions to the nineteenth century and some of its iconic authors. I have also argued that Wolfe intended to write a Victorian multiplot novel with a wide-ranging cast of characters, as indicated in the text and various interviews and as observed by some perspicacious early reviewers. Further, the book first appeared in serial form: a Victorian mode of publication. And last, the serialization process produced a text that is more fragmented. It would require a critical edition of some complexity to demonstrate the relationship between the serial in Rolling Stone and the novel that became a bestseller. The original instalments offer a more heterogeneous, sketch-like, and Victorian experience—bound to their own temporality in 1984 and 1985, enhanced by illustrations and cliffhangers, and supported by framing material that Wolfe found unnecessary when he reimagined his narrative as a one-volume novel.

As a result, The Bonfire of the Vanities, in its two distinct versions—serial and novel—embodies different kinds of reader relationships. The serial is closer to Poole's image of books that wait 'patiently'; they are interrupted as our lives are interrupted by the exigencies of the moment.57 A serialized novel lives with its reader, over months and years, growing older and perhaps wiser. Poole also indicates the risk of termination: the reader or the serial may die first (through the lack of sales or the death of the actual author). On the other hand, Bonfire in one volume makes possible the modern phenomenon of bingeing. Frank Conroy, in the New York Times, admits that he 'read "The Bonfire of the Vanities" straight through, in two sessions on two consecutive days'.58 This option was not available to the readers of Rolling Stone; they had to wait for Wolfe to write the next chapters and for the magazine to publish them. That the book exists in two versions offers an object lesson in reading and reception. The serial recreates the Victorian experience of waiting for the next number, while also tethering those numbers to the reader's temporality. The novel, published in 1987, jettisons many of the Victorian textures, thus obscuring the book's origins as a literary experiment that succeeded.

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