

THE JEFFERSON LECTURE

On May 10, 2006, Tom Wolfe delivered the 35th Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Warner Theatre in Washington D.C. In his talk, titled “The Human Beast,” Wolfe set forth that it is not human capability for thinking that sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom, but our capacity for speech.

“Evolution came to an end when the human beast developed speech!” said Wolfe. “Speech was a veritable nuclear weapon! It gave the human beast the powers of reason, complex memory, and long-term planning, eventually in the form of print and engineering plans.”

Yet leftover from the animal world, Wolfe contends, is the human desire for status—be it through money, intellect, or bravery. Citing an experiment in which fish in a laboratory actually changed their appearance to adapt to their new status, Wolfe made the case that “it was the opposite of the situation envisioned by Neo-Darwinists neuroscientists who assume that the genetic inheritance triggers changes in status.”

“I think every living moment of a human being’s life, unless the person is starving or in immediate danger of death in some other way, is controlled by a concern for status,” Wolfe has said. Known as the man in the iconic white suit with a swaggering pen, Wolfe has spent the past fifty years chronicling America’s status battles and capturing our cultural zeitgeist.

After earning a Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale in 1957, Wolfe plunged into a decade-long career as a newsman, beginning with a stint at the *Springfield (Massachusetts) Union*. A tour as the *Washington Post*’s Latin American correspondent followed in 1960, earning him an award from the Washington Newspaper Guild for his coverage of the Cuban revolution.

In 1962, he became a reporter for the New York *Herald-Tribune* and a staff writer for *New York* magazine, pounding out stories alongside Jimmy Breslin. Wolfe also produced a series of articles for *Esquire* that laid the foundation for New Journalism, a style of writing that combined journalistic accuracy with a novelist’s eye for description, theme, and point of view. *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965) assembled these articles into book form and gave Wolfe his first best seller. Others followed: *The Pump House Gang* (1968) featured more observations about Sixties culture and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) captured the LSD-infused antics of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters.

In 1979, Wolfe published *The Right Stuff*, a hefty account of the launching of the American space program after World War II. The book, which focused on the competition between the pilots and astronauts for glory and girls, not only became a best seller, but also earned Wolfe the American Book Award for nonfiction, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Harold Vursell Award for prose style, and the Columbia Journalism Award.

Wolfe had yet to make the jump to fiction. Taking a page from Charles Dickens, one of his favorite writers, Wolfe wrote *The Bonfire of the Vanities* as a serial for *Rolling Stone* in 1984 and 1985. The tale, which appeared as a book in 1987, portrayed New York as a money-obsessed, sex-seeking, power-hungry, appearance-driven urban cocktail of a city.

Wolfe has never hesitated to challenge prevailing notions. *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (1970) delved into race relations, offering both a raucous account of Leonard Bernstein’s party for the Black Panthers in his Park Avenue duplex, and a searing look at the mechanics of government’s war on poverty. From *Bauhaus to Our House* (1981) tackled twentieth-century architecture, with Wolfe charging that architects were more interested in theory than in buildings. Wolfe’s latest novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), offers a critique of campus life, in which sex, not educational goals, defines social status.

The key to Wolfe's enduring success lies in his ability to convey the nuances of his subjects or characters—the way they walk, what they drive, how they hold their fork—while providing a modern exhortation on the seven deadly sins. Given his ability to capture a cultural moment, it is no coincidence that contemporary language is sprinkled with Wolfian phrases: “statusphere,” “the right stuff,” “radical chic,” “the Me Decade,” and “good ol’ boy.”

Wolfe was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia. He lives in New York City with his wife, Sheila, his daughter, Alexandra, and his son, Tommy. The Jefferson Lecture is the highest honor the federal government bestows for achievement in the humanities. It was established in 1972 and carries a \$10,000 stipend.