

I AM CHARLOTTE SIMMONS (BOOK REVIEW)**BY TOM WOLFE. PUBLISHED IN 2004 BY FARRAR, STRAUSS AND GIROUX, NEW YORK (676 PP., \$28.95 COVER PRICE)****REVIEWED BY B. DAVID RIDPATH, EDD, MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY**

I am Charlotte Simmons is a novel written by world-renowned novelist Tom Wolfe. Wolfe is also the author of many works, including *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) and *The Right Stuff* (1979). *I am Charlotte Simmons* is Wolfe's first venture into the world of higher education as he examines social class systems, political conflicts, sexual morality, academics, and most notably the current culture of big-time NCAA Division I college athletics. Even though this book is directed at popular culture and not academicians, it is still a must read as it offers a thorough, liberal, and behind-the-scenes view of what really goes on at college campuses across the country, especially those with an institutionalized popular jock culture.

While a novel, this book can be viewed almost as historical fiction. The story presents graphic descriptions of several problems with intercollegiate athletics and higher education today. The main setting of the book is the fictional DuPont University in Pennsylvania. While DuPont is one of the finest academic institutions in America, it also has a very large and noted athletic department, highlighted by one of the best NCAA men's Division I basketball teams, led by a larger-than-life coach. Predictably, there are sordid stories of academic corruption, athletes being forced into classes they do not like, situational morality when athletes and athletics is

involved in questionable moral and ethical dilemmas, and the clear implication that athletics *IS* the most important thing at DuPont, despite an outwardly stellar academic reputation.

I am Charlotte Simmons is essentially a novel that could be based on the real world prose of Murray Sperber's *Beer and Circus* (Sperber, 2000). In some ways, Wolfe's book can be viewed as a *Beer and Circus* historical fiction. Wolfe does not hold back as he eloquently, and many times disturbingly, describes how the jock culture on a campus actually works. Wolfe did not dream up the interesting scenarios he so eloquently describes. He spent more than a year on college campuses like The University of North Carolina, Michigan, and Stanford researching this project. He spent time talking to students, attending classes, athletic contests, and even fraternity and sorority parties. His outlook may not be how it is at every institution of higher learning in America, but it is not far off.

I am Charlotte Simmons is really several stories masterfully woven into one. There is the story of Charlotte, a small-town, overly naïve girl from Sparta, North Carolina leaving home for the first time and getting exposed to the "wild" liberal life of an Ivy League like campus. Then there is Hoyt Thorpe, a member of the prominent fraternity who primarily has young co-eds on his mind and not

studying. This is not the case with basketball star JoJo Johanssen, who actually wants to get an education yet is forced into a watered down “jock curriculum” just to maintain his eligibility to play basketball for one of the marquee programs in intercollegiate athletics.

I was particularly struck with how accurate Wolfe described how elite athletes are treated as celebrities on campus, how high profile coaches have carte blanche at DuPont, and how coaches often flaunt that power in the face of a substantially lower paid president of the university, who in turn will pressure faculty and staff to loosen standards and ethics when it comes to the athletic program. Wolfe uses several vignettes within the book around the main characters to accurately tell what is really going on in the world of commercialized college sport. While there is very little discussion as to why this culture exists at DuPont, it is tacitly understood that a successful college athletics program generates revenue and prestige for a university, and DuPont values that even if it is a myth.

Behind the scenes at DuPont University, Wolfe describes a litany of real-world college athletic problems such as out-of-season basketball practices arranged and monitored by the coaching staff, even though such practices are clear violations of NCAA rules, the pressure on athletic academic advisors to keep star athletes eligible. This includes many faculty and staff being forced to participate in academic fraud which in turn gives athletes and coaches a strong feeling of entitlement that encourages exploitation and demeaning treatment of women, and of course the win-at-all costs mentality that exists today in many institutions of higher learning. One particular vignette describes how a tenured professor, who somewhat understandably has a chip on his shoulder about athletics and athletes, discovers potential plagiarism on a paper written by one of the star basketball players-JoJo Johanssen. Johanssen denies academic misconduct even though the paper is obviously not his own work. Wolfe details how the athletic and university spin machine went into overdrive to protect this star athlete who obviously engaged in

academic fraud. Johanssen himself violates all ethical principles by lying about how the paper was written. In the end, the vaunted head men’s basketball coach pressured the university president to make the problem go away as something unproven, much to the chagrin of the faculty member who brought the charges. This is a scenario that takes place daily at athletic factories masquerading as institutions of higher learning and Wolfe tells it like it is. So goes the daily ethical dilemma in big time college sport.

While this book may seem over-the-top about general student life, it does a better than adequate job of describing what truly goes on in athletic departments and on campuses around the country every day as detailed in major media publications, and demonstrated in recent NCAA scandal. Wolfe should be commended for taking an unbiased look at the culture of higher education, and descriptive review of the win-at-all costs culture of NCAA Division I athletics and putting it all together in a very entertaining story. This book illustrates how far academia has to go in changing the professional model of intercollegiate athletics, if it truly can ever be changed at all.

REFERENCES

- Sperber, M. (2000). *Beer and circus: How big time college sports are crippling undergraduate education*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Wolfe, T. (2004). *I am Charlotte Simmons*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.
- Wolfe, T. (1990). *The bonfire of the vanities*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.
- Wolfe, T. (1979). *The right stuff*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.