



Gee, I Kind of Like Fiction

by Joseph Nocera

A few years after *The Washington Monthly* was founded, Tom Wolfe, who was then promoting what he called The New Journalism, wrote the following: "So the novelist has been kind enough to leave behind for our boys quite a nice little body of material: the whole of American society, in effect." The New Journalism is quite passe, of course, even for Tom Wolfe, but I think that little sentence of his sums up rather nicely this magazine's stance towards both journalism and fiction. On the one hand, it has consistently banged the drums for a particular kind of extremely ambitious journalism—a journalism that tackled the major problems of American society with a combination of empathy and intensive reporting and hard, original thinking and literary grace. On the other hand, it has just as consistently dismissed virtually all fiction since Mark Twain, describing it generally (as Wolfe did) as out of touch, irrelevant to the modern world. Matthew Cooper's article last December decrying the lack of "a new Dickens" is only the most recent example.

Who can doubt that the magazine was right to champion its brand of journalism? In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the only "name" writers doing that kind of work were Robert Caro and David Halberstam. Now one sees it everywhere; last year alone gave us two stunning examples of how far the genre has come: Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*, and Taylor Branch's *Parting The Waters*. (See Annual Book Award, page 23.) Both are rich, empathetic studies of important American events—the former dealing with Vietnam, the latter with the

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What Halberstam could learn from Dostoevski

civil rights movement—and both have a scope and an ambition that are staggering. To the extent that fiction has dropped the ball in examining large societal problems—and I won't deny that it has—journalism has taken up the challenge, and we are all better off.

Nevertheless, I think the magazine has been wrong to be so dismissive of the virtues of the modern novel. Yes, the scourge of minimalism abounds, and yes, there are too many novels revolving around life inside a university English department. Then again, there is also a lot of bad journalism. My point is simply that there are things a good novel can do—places it can go; thoughts it can think; depths it can plumb—that even the best nonfiction can never hope to approximate.

The case for the modern novel, it seems to me, is quite the opposite of *The Washington Monthly's* yearning for a fictional approach to social problems that will prick the conscience of the nation. A novel's purpose in the modern age—and I think it is a noble one—is to explore the inner life with a richness and a subtlety that nonfiction can never match. A writer who is dependent (as all journalists are) on the act of interviewing to collect his information can never get completely to the bone; there will always be a few layers left unpeeled. Thus it is left to the novelist to lay bare the interior life. This is no small thing, for it is there that one gets to the crux of why people act and think the way they do. It is in those

deepest recesses of the soul that one gets at attitudes, at moral dilemmas, at *motivation*—out of which comes understanding, empathy, and all the rest of it.

Oddly enough, Tom Wolfe himself provides an interesting case study of this thesis. Wolfe, who had spent a wonderful journalistic career plucking from scenes the most delicious details that said everything about class and status, became a novelist with the publication of his hugely successful *Bonfire of the Vanities*. At least part of what prompted Wolfe to write the book was to show the world that a novel on the Dickens model could be written about America today. *Bonfire* has the sweep of a Dickens novel, all right, and it is full of those telling status details—the cut of a man's suit; the make of his car; the fact of his pinkie ring; and so on. Yet despite its enormous commercial success, the novel simply falls flat as a work of fiction. It's all sheen, all surface—to be blunt, all journalism gussied up as a novel—and what it lacks most of all is precisely that sense of having peeled back the layers and exposed the souls of his characters. They are better

than cardboard, but not much better.

More recently, another ex-journalist, Ward Just, had his most recent “Washington” novel published, entitled *Jack Gance*. It is as small and quiet as *Bonfire* is loud and flamboyant—and it succeeds where *Bonfire* fails. Although there are moments of drama in *Jack Gance*, it does not tell a particularly dramatic story; what pulls you along instead is the explication of relationships—between father and son, most tellingly—that speak truths to us all. It cuts to the bone. Just also dots his book with sentences that seem unerringly right in describing the mores of modern Washington. (One example, among many: describing a big-shot columnist, he writes, “His investigations often turned on the misuse of money, but since he had become rich himself, he discovered that money was more subtle than it had seemed when he was poor.”) In a sense, Just, like the best modern novelists—Anne Tyler, Phillip Roth, Raymond Carver, and a substantial handful of others—is descended not from Dickens but from Dostoevski. How can that not be worth applauding? □

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for December 1988 is presented to

Ralph Blumenthal
Sam Howe Verhovek
The New York Times

The decentralization of New York City school boards was supposed to strengthen parental control of the schools. But the *Times* explains how members of a Bronx school board have subverted that goal by turning the schools into objects of plunder, profit, and patronage for unqualified relatives and political supporters. Their students ranked lowest in test scores of the city's 32 districts.

Peter Luke
Mark Hornbeck
The Ann Arbor News

This series on the state lottery documents in persuasive detail an old charge and a new one. Luke and Hornbeck use census and betting data to prove the familiar charge that lotteries rely on bets from the poor. But they add a new wrinkle to the story by showing that the profits from inner-city betting get channeled disproportionately toward subsidizing schools in wealthier parts of the state.

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The award for stories published or aired in January will be announced in the April issue. Nominations for stories published or aired in February will close March 15. The winner will be announced in the May issue. Two copies of the article or broadcast text should accompany the nomination.