

"A MAN IN FULL"

Novel paints partial portrait of city

By Tom Chaffin

Now that the hype surrounding "A Man in Full" shows signs of waning, perhaps we Atlantans can take a more measured view of Tom Wolfe's sprawling novel of late 20th-century Atlanta. For starters, let's note that, as the author has insisted in interviews, the novel is neither pro-Atlanta nor anti-Atlanta. Commensurate with the actual metropolis, Wolfe's story — and his portrait of the city — are far too complicated and compelling for either label. True, the book contains unflattering portraits of opportunistic City Hall politicians, out-of-control developers and bloodless, asset-shifting investment bankers. But then again, how many true-blue Atlantans would rush to *their* defense?

I'm a native of Atlanta, and I liked "A Man in Full." I even bought its over-the-top ending, which invokes the Roman philosopher Epictetus. The way I figure, if you're going the *deus ex machina* route, you might as well go the full distance and let a Latin philosopher do the heavy plot-lifting.

At the center of Wolfe's vast, 742-page comic-baroque saga of ambition, greed, lust, hypocrisy and, finally, redemption, stands broad-shouldered but aging Charlie Croker, a South Georgia-born, former Georgia Tech football star and Atlanta developer extraordinaire. Wolfe also does a credible job of corralling many of the other types that enliven our town — including Piedmont Driving club habitués, rural-born cracker executives, plug-in white liberals, "Chambodia" Asian

immigrants, fast-lane yuppie and buppie professionals, public-arts shills, opportunist black politicians, nouveaux riches vulgarians and pampered Buckhead millionnaire matrons.

What's missing is . . . the rest of the city.

I understand that a novelistic plot line burns on colorful, idiosyncratic characters. But what fuels plot often undermines verisimilitude. Wolfe portrays Atlanta as less a city, more a



Wolfe

brand name stamped on a soulless Mobius strip of freeways, shopping malls, edge cities, faux antebellum mansions and office parks — all radiating outward from a sterile downtown encircled by crumbling inner-city neighborhoods.

Yes, sadly, a certain truth propels Wolfe's urban shorthand: Too much of the metro area does consist of a bland, Anywhere, U.S.A., jumble of strip malls, particle-board palaces and worse; and too many Atlantans do live in obscene poverty.

But, again — what's missing in "A Man in Full" is the rest of the joint. What's missing are all the neighborhoods that, socioeconomically, fall between rich Buckhead and poor Summerhill. What's missing is the vast middle class — black and white — that fills most of metro Atlanta, does much of its work and defines what, for lack of a better word, we'll call our shared public culture.

A passage toward the end of "A Man in Full" asserts, "In Atlanta

the smart restaurants, like the smart boutiques, opened in Atlanta's Edge Cities . . . commercial clusters that formed in and around shopping malls and other big mixed-use developments far removed from downtown and its tired old problems."

Certainly, that geoculinary tip comes as news to anyone who patronizes the city's best restaurants — few of which reside in the Galleria and the other steel-and-glass Ozs that rise against metro-Atlanta's far horizons. Wolfe correctly observes that downtown Atlanta, years ago, lost any claims on restaurant glory. But he fails to recognize that most of Atlanta's restaurant life, like most of its other life, plays out in the various middle-class neighborhoods — old and new, black and white, yellow and brown — that, spread across our vast metropolis, provide its enduring vitality.

But then again, that same sprawling middle class — increasingly multiracial — by easing class tensions, also allows real Atlanta to weather the sort of racial crises that threaten fictional Atlanta in "A Man in Full" — and which torched real Los Angeles in 1992.

As a novel — as a work of art — call "A Man in Full" a dazzling *tour de force* by one of our most talented writers. As a mirror on the actual city, however, Wolfe's Atlanta lurches too easily from vulgar opulence to grinding poverty, with nothing in between.

Yes, that's part of our town.

But hardly a city in full.

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