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The Right Stuff

Tom Wolfe



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PRINTING HISTORY

**Farrar, Straus & Giroux edition published September 1979
5 printings through March 1980**

A Selection of Book-of-the-Month Club September 1979, Quality Paperback Book Club March 1980, Conservative Book Club March 1980, Flying Book Club February 1980, Macmillan Book Club March 1980, Newsweek Condensed Books November 1980 and Reader's Digest Fall 1980.

Serialized in FAMILIES Magazine September 1980, THE READER'S DIGEST February 1980, HOUSTON CITY MAGAZINE November 1979, BOOK DIGEST November 1979, MAINLINER Magazine November 1979, NEW HARVEST Magazine, EAST/WEST NETWORK and New York Times Syndicate.

Bantam edition / November 1980

A four-part article on the astronauts by Tom Wolfe appeared in ROLLING STONE, copyright © 1973 by Tom Wolfe.

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**For information address: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.,
19 Union Square West, New York, N.Y. 10019.**

ISBN 0-553-13828-6

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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THE RIGHT STUFF

For Kailey Wong

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TOM WOLFE is generally regarded as one of the most brilliant observers of the American social scene. Since the mid-sixties, when postwar affluent America exploded into radically different lifestyles and subcultures, Wolfe has been its faithful chronicler with a steady stream of books—*The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, *The Pump House Gang*, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, *The Painted Word* and, most recently, *The Right Stuff*.

In 1980 Tom Wolfe received the Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award for recent writing in book form that merits recognition for the quality of its prose style from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

TOM WOLFE

on

"The Right Stuff"

Tom Wolfe originally became involved with the subject of astronauts while on a magazine assignment reporting on the last moon shot. "I was interested in who you get to sit on top of these enormous rockets . . . The Saturn rocket, as I remember, was 36 stories high. You just light a match and *Varoom!* it goes up. My God, I wondered, how do they sit there?"

"I suddenly realized how little I knew about the subject . . . There was no central figure I could follow to tell the whole story . . . There were so many historical threads to pull together. So I just put it aside every opportunity I had (and wrote most of the pieces for *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine* during the six years it took to complete *The Right Stuff*)."

But Wolfe persevered. As he states, "timing was important. I was lucky. I landed at the NASA history office in Houston just as they declassified their files on those early flights."

He adds, "I had always felt that the stories originally written about the Mercury astronauts were not objective. The Cold War was on, people really believed there was a danger from Russians in space, and the press was uniformly patriotic. By coming in fifteen years after the fact, the search was easier. By that time a lot of people could look back analytically, no longer caught up in the passion of the original moment."

While crisscrossing the continent to talk to test pilots, ex-test pilots, former astronauts, failed astronauts, the whole theory of "The Right Stuff" evolved. To Wolfe, "the right stuff" is an amalgam of stamina, guts, fast neural synapses and old-fashioned hell raising.

At this time the astronauts and their families were willing to be more candid. Wolfe says, "I think they

realized that the original picture had been so bland that it had obscured a lot of the drama they had been through."

Mr. Wolfe continues, "I ended up being more interested in the fraternity of flying than space . . . I find the reactions of people and flying conditions much more fascinating." He adds, "the arrival of the seven Mercury astronauts completely upset the competitive hierarchy of flying. Flying has a competitive structure that's as hotly contested as the world of show business. And the egos are just as big—in fact in a way they're bigger. It's hard to top surgeons for sheer ego, but fighter pilots come close."

Originally the book was going to go through the whole space program up to Skylab, but, as Wolfe puts it, "I finally got up to 450 pages and said that's it."

The result has been extraordinary.

After publication a number of the astronauts commented on the book.

Former astronaut Michael Collins—"Improbable as some of Tom's tales seem, I know he's telling it like it was. He is the first gifted writer to explore the relationship between test pilots and astronauts—the obvious similarities and the subtle differences."

Mercury astronaut Wally Schirra—"I think the book is quite well done. This right stuff business is a very small fraternity and it's something you can't buy."

Astronaut Capt. Joseph P. Kerwin—"It gives you a scary feeling that the man's done the impossible. He—Yes!—*understands* America!"

Apollo 9 astronaut Russell Schweickart—"Tom Wolfe has special prescription contact lenses that filter out the memoranda, meetings, reviews, milestones, simulators, procedures, checklists, protocols, etc., etc., and zoom in on Pete Conrad's enema and Al Shepard's enigmatic double personality . . . Nothing I've read paints the essential history as Tom Wolfe has done here, in *The Right Stuff*."

The Right Stuff has been purchased for filming by Chartoff-Winkler and United Artists. Noted screenwriter William Goldman is currently at work on the screenplay.

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1

The Angels

Within five minutes, or ten minutes, no more than that, three of the others had called her on the telephone to ask her if she had heard that something had happened out there.

"Jane, this is Alice. Listen, I just got a call from Betty, and she said she heard something's happened out there. Have you heard anything?" That was the way they phrased it, call after call. She picked up the telephone and began relaying this same message to some of the others.

"Connie, this is Jane Conrad. Alice just called me, and she says something's happened . . ."

Something was part of the official Wife Lingo for tiptoeing blindfolded around the subject. Being barely twenty-one years old and new around here, Jane Conrad knew very little about this particular subject, since nobody ever talked about it. But the day was young! And what a setting she had for her imminent enlightenment! And what a picture she herself presented! Jane was tall and slender and had rich brown hair and high cheekbones and wide brown eyes. She looked a little like the actress Jean Simmons. Her father was a rancher in southwestern Texas.

She had gone East to college, to Bryn Mawr, and had met her husband, Pete, at a debutante's party at the Gulph Mills Club in Philadelphia, when he was a senior at Princeton. Pete was a short, wiry, blond boy who joked around a lot. At any moment his face was likely to break into a wild grin revealing the gap between his front teeth. The Hickory Kid sort, he was; a Hickory Kid on the deb circuit, however. He had an air of energy, self-confidence, ambition, *joie de vivre*. Jane and Pete were married two days after he graduated from Princeton. Last year Jane gave birth to their first child, Peter. And today, here in Florida, in Jacksonville, in the peaceful year 1955, the sun shines through the pines outside, and the very air takes on the sparkle of the ocean. The ocean and a great mica-white beach are less than a mile away. Anyone driving by will see Jane's little house gleaming like a dream house in the pines. It is a brick house, but Jane and Pete painted the bricks white, so that it gleams in the sun against a great green screen of pine trees with a thousand little places where the sun peeks through. They painted the shutters black, which makes the white walls look even more brilliant. The house has only eleven hundred square feet of floor space, but Jane and Pete designed it themselves and that more than makes up for the size. A friend of theirs was the builder and gave them every possible break, so that it cost only eleven thousand dollars. Outside, the sun shines, and inside, the fever rises by the minute as five, ten, fifteen, and, finally, nearly all twenty of the wives join the circuit, trying to find out what has happened, which, in fact, means: to whose husband.

After thirty minutes on such a circuit—this is not an unusual morning around here—a wife begins to feel that the telephone is no longer located on a table or on the kitchen wall. It is exploding in her solar plexus. Yet it would be far worse right now to hear the front doorbell. The protocol is strict on that point, although written down nowhere. No woman is supposed to deliver the final news, and certainly not on the telephone. The matter mustn't be bungled!—that's the idea. No, a man should bring the news when the time comes, a man with some official or moral authority, a clergyman or a comrade of the newly deceased. Furthermore, he should bring the bad news in person. He should turn up at the front door and ring the bell and be standing there like a pillar of coolness and