



Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe

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Thomas Wolfe, one of the giants of twentieth-century American fiction, is also one of the most misunderstood of our major novelists. A man massive in his size, his passions, and his gifts, Wolfe has long been considered something of an unconscious genius, whose undisciplined flow of prose was shaped into novels by his editor, the celebrated Maxwell Perkins.

In this definitive and compelling biography, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Herbert Donald dismantles that myth and demonstrates that Wolfe was a boldly aware experimental artist who, like James Joyce, William Faulkner, and John Dos Passos, deliberately pushed at the boundaries of the modern novel. Donald takes a new measure of this complex, tormented man as he reveals Wolfe's difficult childhood, when he was buffeted between an alcoholic father and a resentful mother; his "magical" years at the University of North Carolina, where his writing talent first flourished; his rise to literary fame after repeated rejection; and the full story of Wolfe's passionate affair with Aline Bernstein, including their intimate letters.

Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe Details

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Scott says

Sublime. This is a painstakingly researched, cogently and even gracefully written biography about an author who was anything BUT cogent or organized. As a Wolfe fan, I am glad it exists. Thank you, David Donald!

Carol says

Very good biography of Thomas Wolfe. I had reread another bio a number of years ago called "The Window of Memory, The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe" by Richard S. Kennedy and published in 1962 by the University of North Carolina Press. An additional book examining his relationship with Aline Bernstein titled "My Other Loneliness" contains their letters to each other and was edited by Suzanne Stutman and published in 1983 by University of North Carolina Press. If you have an appreciation for Thomas Wolfe's writing, some insight into his personal life can only help in getting the feel for the man and his writings.

Scott says

Tremendous insight on Wolfe's life and work, and when Wolfe dies in the book, I felt like someone I knew had died. To me, that's a great biography.

Morgan says

This was a long one, but I finished it rather quickly due in large part to its readability. Wolfe was certainly an oddball and it's easy to see why Donald (best known as a Lincoln biographer) was interested in writing his bio; Wolfe saved every piece of paper he applied a pen to, so there's plenty of documentation for his rather short life, and also his life is a kind of fever dream full of emotional turmoil and contentious personal relationships. I imagine a less tasteful biographer could spin quite a juicy tale about Wolfe. Anyway, a fine read indeed.

Bill Tyroler says

Can't say I keep up with literary trends, but I imagine that one-time phenomenon Thomas (not Tom) Wolfe is now well out of fashion. Wasn't always that way, <https://www.questia.com/.../thomas-wolf...> "in the postwar era, ... the literary culture was heavily influenced by the towering legacy of Thomas Wolfe ... Wolfe lingered long on [Norman] Mailer's mind. In 1999 Mailer listed Look Homeward, Angel as not only one of his six favorite books, but as one of his top ten American novels[.]" Mailer, to be sure, isn't for all tastes. And even if you think (as I do) that at least some of Mailer's work is touched by genius, you may also conclude (as I do) that at least some is puerile. Maybe the same might be said of Wolfe.

Genius might be a bit much; it's not a term to be thrown about lightly. But Wolfe, in David Herbert Donald's telling, was clearly a child prodigy, coupling a love for language and reading with a capacious memory. Problem is, everything about Wolfe was disheveled — from attire to hygiene to relationships to money management to, inevitably, his writing. Maxwell Perkins is famously (and justly) credited with taking the shambolic draft of Wolfe's first novel, "Look Homeward, Angel," and shaping it into a coherent classic. Perkins, who comes across as a bit saint-like, coaxed and prodded out of Wolfe a second, commercially if not critically successful novel.* Wolfe's thanks? Insecure and resentful that his success was being attributed to Perkins, he unceremoniously ditched the latter for another editor, Edward Aswell. Wolfe died before Aswell could publish more novels, but the latter formed two posthumous novels from typically sprawling, unfinished manuscripts Wolfe had left. Donald persuasively argues that Aswell did more than edit them, that he unethically added his own, critical content, such that much of it became Aswell's, not Wolfe's. voice.

What, then, is to be made of Wolfe's place in the literary canon? A first, arguably great novel ("Look Homeward, Angel ... has become an American classic," <https://www.britannica.com/biography/...>), followed by a mediocre one and then two that arguably aren't fully his? Back to the initial possibility that Wolfe has fallen out of favor: having just re-read "Look Homeward, Angel" for the first time in a half-century, I can readily see why that might be so. First (and of lesser importance), Wolfe's ready employment of classical allusions transgresses the current anti-Western zeitgeist afflicting the academy (the title is itself, of course, from Milton). Second, Wolfe's racism is manifest. As Donald makes clear, that's who Wolfe was; no Twain-like irony in his casual and profligate use of the n-word. And, as Donald also shows, Wolfe was certainly anti-Semitic. That, too, is there in "Look Homeward, Angel," but in much more muted tones than the racism he wears so comfortably as a second skin.** I'd be surprised, then, if the study of Wolfe is much in evidence in English departments.

Curiously, the love of Wolfe's life was Aline Bernstein, a renowned set designer who just happened to be Jewish. (Not so curiously, she was 20 years his senior; to say that Wolfe had unresolved issues regarding his mother would be belaboring the obvious.) His treatment of her wasn't just shabby, it was unbelievably pathological — he recruited his mother, in effect, to travel from Asheville to New York City and engineer his breakup with Bernstein. Why Bernstein had so little self-respect that she continued to carry a torch for him after being subjected to his and his mother's ethnic slurs must remain a sad mystery.***

Incidentally, this is a fine biography, well worth reading whether or not you care for Wolfe.

* Weirdly, someone thought that the story of Wolfe and Perkins would make a fine subject for a commercial movie. And named it ... "Genius" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genius_...). Reviews haven't been kind.

**Eli N. Evans once observed that anti-Semitism in the South was subdued, because the Jewish population wasn't sufficient to form a critical mass. But the black population of course was large enough, and acted as a lightning rod for white racism. There wasn't enough energy left over, and the small population wasn't worth the effort, to support anti-Semitic outbursts. Seems like a plausible theory, but it's not an iron rule of behavior in any event. Very few Jewish families existed in Wolfe's Asheville, but his mother was, as Donald shows, rabidly anti-Semitic, a trait that Wolfe shared.

*** Wolfe seems to have been enormously attractive to females and, Donald implies was rewarded with a large number of one-night stands and short-term flings. Probably didn't hurt that he was 6' 6", powerfully built and at least reasonably attractive. But — just guessing here — celebrity probably makes for the best musk. It has always been thus. Nonetheless, Bernstein appears to have occupied a unique place.

Paul Cornelius says

This biography is the standard by which every subsequent work on Thomas Wolfe should be judged. A thorough and well documented account of Wolfe's life, travels, obsessions, and fears, it also provides a critical study of how his work came to be published. In many respects, Donald's biography is just as monumental in scope and length as Wolfe's novels. And I think it will give readers an understanding of just how Wolfe can appeal to them differently at different times of their lives. If I had a note on my own reception of Wolfe, I should say that his novels intimidate you in your teens and twenties, capture you in your thirties, stray from you in your forties, become alienated from you in your fifties, and then become wistfully yearned for in your sixties. If I make it to my seventies, I'll no doubt feel differently about them, then, too.

David Hines says

One of the best biographies I have ever read about one of the greatest and most tragic of the nation's early 20th century writers. I read *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River* and *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home* again years ago, and while they are uneven in quality, reading them was literally a life-changing experience. Thomas Wolfe captured perfectly how each of us actually think and ponder and live, and wasn't afraid to write exactly how life is, even when it is tedious or repetitive or inconsistent. This wonderfully written biography illuminates Wolfe's life and tragically young death in a way that any reader will come to a greater appreciation of Wolfe's career and life. Donald also takes some time to explain what happened to Wolfe's disorganized manuscripts after his death and the significant roles editors played in shaping them while yet making it clear the stories are Wolfe's. Highly recommended.

John says

Some editors are easy going with syntax as they edit manuscripts, others heavy-handed. When Wolfe died at age 37 he left a mini-mountain of disorganized handwritten and typed pages that editors endeavored to organize into publishable works. Necessary heavy-handedness was required on some and many of the novelist's stylistic wordings were overly trimmed. Wolfe in many ways never outgrew adolescence and led a rather jumbled life. It's doubtful that even in his lifetime that his typescripts could have resulted in publication without strong editorial supervision. Moreover, he was a heavy drinker and sometime bedroom playboy; his largely autobiographical novels and short stories featured candid descriptions, so much so that libel suits were threatened and a couple even brought to court.

Emil says

I've read this three times.

Paul Gleason says

Donald's work provides tremendous insight into Wolfe's writing process, personal life, political views, encounters with literary friends, childhood...you name it. An excellent historian, Donald excels at providing an objective vision of this most subjective of visionary writers.

The best part of the book, in my estimation, is the final chapter, in which Donald analyzes Wolfe's final two, posthumous novels: *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*. The conclusions at which he arrives about how much of the books are Wolfe's and how much are his editor Aswell's are surprising and fascinating. Let's just say that Donald changed my opinion about what Wolfe's finest novel is.

This is a must-read biography of a major novelist whose books are sadly under-read today. Faulkner himself considered Wolfe to be the greatest novelist of his generation, Wolfe's lyricism and autobiographical prose influenced Kerouac and the other Beats, and Norman Mailer had nothing but good things to say about *Look Homeward, Angel*.

Read Wolfe. He's a giant - a voice of passionate earnestness in our time of ironic detachment.

Read Donald. He gets to the heart of Wolfe like no one else.

Irving Koppel says

"Bigger than Life"

Thomas Wolfe was not only big in size, he was also big in his appetites. He could eat massive amounts of food, drink until he dropped, engage in sexual orgies, write interminably and exercise the use of massive amounts of vocabulary. He was a man of conflicted ideas: he loved his native South, but lived in the North; he was stingy, yet giving; he hated criticism, but begged for it; he was completely disorganized but welcomed others to organize him; he was anti-Semitic, yet the love of his life was a Jewish woman. Still, as confused as his life was, he was able to write several insightful and successful novels, short stories and articles. David Herbert Donald has written a lengthy tome for which he must have searched through every scrap of paper that Wolfe has ever written.

Donald is Southern historian. Nevertheless, he does a fine job of critiquing Wolfe's works. In addition he provides us with a very complete biography of the author from childhood until his untimely death at age 38. Had Wolfe been more disciplined, he might have lived to a ripe old age. Nevertheless, in the short span of his life he left us enough material for numerous novels and biographies.
