

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

Book review

Hank Malone

1968

a review of

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test by Tom Wolfe. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 1968. \$5.95,

A special wildness with words, a special Taste for gory Under-Thirty-Decoding is all part of Tom Wolfe's cool Aid to the "electro-pastel 400-horsepower energy and abundance of postwar American westernmost Reality."

I cannot help but feel (from recollecting his previous work) that Wolfe is a literary Frat rummaging around in the neon-and-Whimpy-Burger Worlds of the Greaser; some new and charitably-obsessed breed of Mod anthropologist hankering after a Vision as to WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY? so many American weird kids have, almost from birth, turned away from the New York pedigreed intellectual Thing toward the American Spiritual-Las-Vegas of gadgets, TV, flat affect, Hagstrom electric basses, American flags, and Buick Electras.

It has always seemed that way—the Frats have their quiet, reasonable, successful, enlightened, Money-lives, and the Grease...They have their mysterious, destructive, primordial, hulking, slovenly, irrational, On-All-Fours Tasmanian Deviltry. And what the Hell is that all about? I think Wolfe is clearly preoccupied with such matters.

In this first non-collection-of-articles Book, Wolfe follows the growth and development (or decline and fall) of a group of Founding-Father-Hippies who, in 1964, led by one non-leading, apparently defunct Great Grease novelist (Ken Kesey), created the Magic Mystery Tour Thing by founding a loose-knit commune (The Merry Pranksters) who lived most of their Speedy-Maryjane Acid-DMT-Emotional-Lives in a Day-Glo painted bus, racing around the USA and the universe armed with only a fantastic stash and a billion dollars worth of Super-Head audiovisual equipment.

What utterly BLOWS THE MIND (Wheeeeeeee-up one's gizzard...she had beautiful teeth, here and eleven other Pranksters in St. Michael's alley down under the Redwoods where it's at) is the apparent fact this commune was becoming (RIGHT BEFORE YOUR EYES, MOM AND DAD) a...Religion! Uh, that its evolution was, uh...er...was bearing a fantastic parallel to the founding of other religions.

And so, Wolfe, like St. Paul, hopes to get in on a piece of the Greaser-Goyim Spiritual Action by acting as a professional TAPE RECORDER for all the tiny and enormous events of this NEW THING.

Now this seems not a bad idea when it comes to Christ, but as Kesey says: "We're not on the Christ Trip. That's been done, and it doesn't work. You prove your point, and then you have 2,000 years of wars. We know where that trip goes."

I mean this seems like a very bad idea when it comes to Kesey and the Merry Pranksters because they do Things that are fundamentally non-verbal, and which take place in non-transferable forms (reveatory rather than ethical) leaving our Author IN A FIX...with little to bring back except a truck-load of anecdotal ballast, reduced to explaining only the visible waste-material side-effects of the Journey WHAT REALLY HAPPENED.

Methinks, in other words, that Wolfe's searching compendium of notes for the affluent and literate parents of Hippies (who else will buy it at \$5.95 a copy?) has an effect like trying to explain an orgasm to a eunuch.

Wolfe has emerged with the enormous literary carcas of the Trip, all the empty Kleenex boxes, the crumpled cellophane wrappers, the empty pop bottles; the spent shells of hundreds of Zen gunshots. It would be easy enough to conclude, cynically and Manhattan-ishly, that these spend-shells were the Trip itself, since those spiritual/magical objects propelled from one reality into another never become visible, and perhaps never can.

Here, then, is the great flaw in the book. Wolfe, the snappy, always slightly-cynical, American, hardcore-materialist, finds out (secretly, without really mentioning it) that he has no literary equipment (does anyone?) to deal with all the psychic human substance that moves in and out of all the Greaser bottles and wrappers and boxes he so brilliantly describes. Over the long haul, this is what makes the book both magnificent and dull. Wolfe has captured it...it is all here...yet it is *not* revealed. The Tasmanian Devils still pack up and head for the Las Vegas of the Mind, and we still don't know WHY, grok, grok, grok.

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Fifth Estate #63, October 3-16, 1968

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