

READING GROUP GUIDE

I Am Charlotte Simmons *A Novel*

by Tom Wolfe

ISBN: 0-312-42444-2

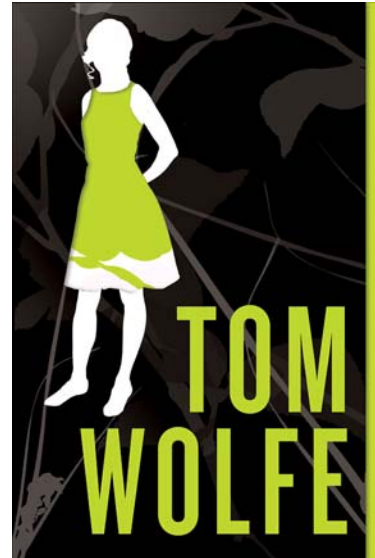
About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *I Am Charlotte Simmons* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *I Am Charlotte Simmons*.

About the Book

Tom Wolfe, the master social novelist of our time, the spot-on chronicler of all things contemporary and cultural, here presents a sensational new novel about life, love, and learning—or the lack of it—at today’s American colleges.

Our story unfolds amid fictional Dupont University: those Olympian halls of scholarship housing the cream of America’s youth, those roseate Gothic spires and manicured lawns suffused with tradition . . . Or so it appears to the beautiful and brilliant Charlotte Simmons, a sheltered freshman from Sparta, North Carolina (population 900). But Charlotte soon learns, to her



increasing dismay, that for the upper-crust coeds of Dupont, sex, sports, cool, and kegs trump academic achievement every time.

As our heroine encounters the paragons of Dupont's elite—her roommate, Beverly, a Groton-educated, spoiled-rotten snob in lusty pursuit of lacrosse players; Jojo Johanssen, the only white starting player on Dupont's godlike basketball team, whose position is threatened by a hotshot black freshman from the projects; the Young Turk of the ultra-privileged Saint Ray fraternity, Hoyt Thorpe, whose mile-high sense of entitlement and social domination is clinched by his accidental brawl with a bodyguard for the governor of California; and Adam Gellin, one of the self-described Millennial Mutants who run the university's "independent" newspaper (and who consider themselves the last bastion of intellectual endeavor on this sex-crazed, jock-obsessed campus)—she is seduced by the heady, ever-present glamour of acceptance, betraying both her values and her upbringing. But will Charlotte Simmons eventually find a way to succeed at college? And, in doing so, will she have to sell-out entirely? Or will she come to grasp the power of being different—and the exotic allure of her innocence—and thereby thrive on her uniqueness? Or will she, at long last, simply miss the mark—socially, academically, and otherwise?

With his trademark satirical wit and famously sharp eye for telling detail, Wolfe draws on his extensive recent observations at campuses across the country to immortalize the early-21st-century college-going experience.

“Like everything Wolfe writes, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* grabs your interest at the outset and saps the desire to do anything else until you finish.” —Jacob Weisberg, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Sermon, melodrama, dystopian vision—*I Am Charlotte Simmons* partakes of all these, and does so stunningly. . . . I couldn't stop reading it—who could? This is Tom Wolfe, after all. . . . Wolfe can make words dance and sing and perform circus tricks, he can make the reader sigh with pleasure before his arias of coloratura description.” —Michael Dirda, *The Washington Post Book World*

“Wolfe takes no point of view, has no bill of goods to sell. He just calmly, coolly records the way things are, the way people look and talk. . . . I don't know how the future will rank Tom Wolfe as a novelist, but he is a simply terrific journalist. Oh, sure, he exaggerates some when writing fiction to get the effects he wants; but you could put a Wolfe novel under a steel-mill press and not squeeze a single drop of sentimentality out of it. Wolfe's authorial tone to the reader is: You don't have to like this, and I'm not too crazy about it myself, but this is the way it is, and we both know it. . . . What a mess our culture has gotten itself into! Here is Tom Wolfe to give you a guided tour. With some due allowance for novelist's license, he has done a brilliant job.” —John Derbyshire, *National Review*

“A rollicking satire of college culture delivered in roaring Tom Wolfe prose. . . . Charlotte Simmons [is] the most affecting protagonist Tom Wolfe has created.” —Charles Foran, *The Walrus*

“[The book] raises some serious issues facing society and the culture of higher education.” —Kale Bongers, *The Dartmouth Review*

“This novel is both an excoriation and a lament. It is a good read, cleverly constructed.” —Cal McCrystal, *The Independent*

“Social satire is everywhere evident, but there is a sober theme, too, and it is very much worth paying attention to.” —Harvey C. Mansfield, *The Wall Street Journal*

About the Author

Tom Wolfe is the author of more than a dozen books, among them such contemporary classics as *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, *The Right Stuff*, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and *A Man in Full*. A native of Richmond, Virginia, he earned his B.A. at Washington and Lee University and a Ph.D. in American studies at Yale. Wolfe lives in New York City.

Discussion Questions

1. *I Am Charlotte Simmons* might be considered a breakthrough for Tom Wolfe as a novelist in that it's the first of his fictional works to be told (for the most part) from a woman's point of view. Do you think Wolfe successfully and convincingly presents his tale from a female perspective? Explain.
2. Among the key relationships depicted in Chapter 1 is Charlotte's special bond with Miss Pennington. What other mentors does Charlotte encounter over the full course of this novel? Is Miss Pennington ever effectively replaced in this capacity? If so, when, and by whom, and why?
3. Define the following: “dormcest,” “sexiled,” “froshtitute,” and “Sarc 3” (as well as “Sarc 2” and “Sarc 1,” for that matter). What other collegiate terms or slang vocabulary were new to you as you made your way through the book?
4. At the beginning of Chapter 5, Hoyt Thorpe fondly looks back on learning (in a class called “Europe in the Early Middle Ages”) that long ago, throughout most if not all of civilization, both East and West, there had been “only three classes of men in the world: warriors, clergy, and slaves.” Why do you think Hoyt is so drawn to this idea? Speaking metaphorically, who are the “warriors, clergy, and slaves” of this novel? Which camp, for example, would you put Charlotte in? What about her father, her roommate, or Jojo?
5. Who are the Millennial Mutants? Why do they call themselves this? Look back at a few of their group discussions, wherein they jointly dissect—and debate—this or that trend or concept in contemporary American life (such as, for instance, Adam's ideas on what it means to be “cool”). Then, try to investigate the validity and/or accuracy of the points being made by the various Mutants; that is, dissect their dissections, critique their critiques, question their assumptions and their logic, argue with their arguments.

6. Why is Jojo Johanssen so fixated on the life and thought of Socrates? What is it about philosophical thought—especially ancient, fundamental, basic philosophy—that appeals to Jojo, a man of admittedly limited smarts? Are any of the other jocks at Dupont ever drawn to matters intellectual? If so, whom? And why?
7. Looking back on the pivotal event of this novel—the Saint Ray formal, as detailed in Chapters 24, 25, and 26—do you think it’s accurate to assert (as has at least one book reviewer) that Charlotte was raped?
8. What role does Charlotte’s mother play in our heroine’s life over the full arc of the story? Describe their relationship. What does Charlotte seem to like or admire most about her mother, and least? And why does Charlotte keep so many secrets from her? At one point, in Chapter 27, Charlotte complains to her mother that she has lately “been under so much stress.” She immediately regrets using the word “stress,” however, because “she knew Momma would spot it right away for the trendy term it was. What was stress, when you got right down to it, but just plain weakness when it came to doing the right thing?” Do you agree with his view? Why or why not? And, more generally, what do you make of the country wisdom (as culled from her Momma and from others) that Charlotte thinks back on, reminds herself of, and draws lessons from through the novel?
9. Thinking particularly about the characters, personalities, backgrounds, and endeavors of Adam Gellin, Jerome P. Quat, and Frederick Cutler III, explore the points that Tom Wolfe makes in this book about Jewish intellectual life and achievement in America.
10. Clarify the difference between “Fuck Patois” and “Shit Patois”—and, if it’s not too embarrassing, provide a few examples of each. More generally, discuss how the detailed, wide-ranging, and incessant attention given by Wolfe to language throughout *I Am Charlotte Simmons* relates to the attention he gives to (among other topics) class, wealth, society, culture, ethnicity, history, politics, the media, literature, sports, and scholarship.
11. Both Chapters 31 and 32 end with the idea of being “a man”—and yet two different ideas seem to be at work here. Compare and contrast these two instances of manhood, and the characters who define/embody these instances.
12. Although we are not told outright, what do you think will become of Hoyt Thorpe? What path ultimately awaits him, upon graduation? What does his future hold? (Think back to the story of his parents, of his childhood and his upbringing, when crafting your answer.) And who finally revealed Hoyt’s secrets to Adam Gellin, who sold him out?
13. Discuss *I Am Charlotte Simmons* as a work of fictionalized journalism, of reportage or exposé. As one critic wrote of this novel, “Wolfe’s authorial tone [throughout] is: You don’t have to like this, and I’m not too crazy about it myself, but this is the way it is, and we both know it.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Was there anything in this novel that you—as a reader and, perhaps, as a former college student—found especially disturbing, surprising, or even shocking? Or was there anything that struck you as incredible, implausible, or

unbelievable? In both cases, explain. In particular, talk about how Wolfe's novel explores: the political correctness implicit in all of American scholarly life, and in all academic politics; the big-time clout, and behind-the-scenes power and corruption, that defines collegiate sports; and the rampant "binge drinking" that characterizes frat parties—and most if not all other social functions at today's universities.

14. When asked by an interviewer which was chosen first during the creation of this book—the setting or the characters—Wolfe admitted that it was the setting. Does this surprise you? Why or why not?
15. Go back to a few of the many points in this novel where the lyrics to a popular song (be it real or imaginary) are recited, quoted, or otherwise reprinted: rap, rock, whatever. Then, discuss why and how these lyrics collectively function (like the Greek chorus of a classical drama) as an ironic commentary on the narrative of *I Am Charlotte Simmons*.
16. Revisit the epigraph that begins this novel, the citation on Victor Ransome Starling from the fictional *Dictionary of Nobel Laureates*. How does this citation mirror, or at least echo, the behavior of various characters in the novel (especially Charlotte)?

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