

## **What Happens Next – Sunday March 7, 2021**

### **Thomas Edison, MeToo, Bonfire of the Vanities, and Consumer Behavior**

**Julie Salamon**

Larry Bernstein:

All right before we get to question answers, we're going to have you joined by a panelist, Julie Salamon, the former Wall Street Journal and New York Times film and TV critic. She will discuss aspects of her book, *The Devil's Candy*, the Anatomy of a Hollywood Fiasco, the Making of the Film *Bonfire of the vanities*. Julie, go ahead.

Julie Salamon:

Thanks so much, Larry. Larry's invitation to be part of this discussion came at the perfect moment. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of *The Devil's Candy*, the book I wrote about Brian De Palma's adaptation of *Bonfire of the Vanities*. I was a film critic at the Wall Street Journal at that time and De Palma, who had gotten to know in the course of doing articles about Hollywood, gave me complete access to filming from start to finish. My book came out a year after the movie did. It was an amazing experience for me and not so amazing for the filmmakers because nobody's been allowed to do it since then.

While Tom Wolfe's book became a symbol of everything that was wrong with New York in the 1980s, Brian De Palma's movie became a symbol of everything that was wrong with Hollywood filmmaking as the 1990s began. *Bonfire*, the movie was lacerated by critics. And my book did really well, no doubt in part because *Bonfire* was such a huge publicized so-called failure. In *Newsweek*, the critics said the promise misfortune is Salamon's gain. It didn't make me feel very good about somebody who had been so generous to me.

So people always ask me when I knew that the movie was awful. And I always say I never did. For me, when I watched the movie, I didn't really see a movie, I saw the making of each scene. And the truth is, to prepare for today, I watched the movie again. And honestly, I think it's a movie worth reconsidering. It may not be a great film, but it's certainly an interesting film and a worthy artifact.

The truth is, interest in both the film and Tom Wolfe's book remain strong. A new audio version of my book, *The Devil's Candy* is coming out this summer and I've been asked to do a seven-part podcast about the making of the movie right now. Sort of very meta, the movie about a book and then a podcast about the book about the making of the movie about the book. Very 21st century.

So I've been thinking about Bonfire a lot. And I am amazed at how Tom Wolfe's observation to the world he was living in were so prescient. As David pointed out, it's true that much in New York, where I live, has changed for the better. But so much is the same. Wolfe wrote about the masters of the universe, the mainly men on Wall Street, who we would now refer to as the 1%. The tabloid press that will satirize has been replaced by Twitter. But the net effect is the same, only worse. And Wolfe's take on race certainly heralded the Black Lives Matter movement, as did his cynical or accurate take down on New York politicians, Bill DeBlasio, Andrew Cuomo, need I say more.

In the course of writing my book, I had the good fortune to spend several hours interviewing Tom Wolfe on two separate occasions. His prose was lacerating, but he himself was a courtly, Southern gentlemen. Bonfire was wildly popular, Wolfe got plenty of criticism for being sexist, racist, ultra conservative. I would argue that he was a great reporter, even when writing a novel and a good social critic, demonizing just about everyone in the cause of making people think about the world we live in. He wasn't presenting his characters to praise them, but rather to skewer the real-life people they represented.

The filmmakers on the other hand, lost heart about two seconds after they bought the rights to Wolfe's book. I'm not sure the term politically correct had been invented yet, but that's what the movie suffered from at the time. Especially when it came to casting. David has laid out the plot, so you kind of know the characters. Sherman McCoy, the master of the universe, was deemed too unlikable by the Hollywood execs. So, they gave the role to Tom Hanks, just off his success in Big. Remember how adorable he was? The grown man in a 12-year-old boy's body? Wolfe's dissipated British journalist, Peter Fallow, became Bruce Willis, hot off of Diehard. And look, who's talking. Remember he played a baby in utero and then after birth?

But the biggest change within Wolfe's sole noble character Judge Kavitsky, the Jewish judge who sticks to the law. Alan Arkin was supposed to play him, but all of a sudden the executives and De Palma had a flash. By then, they had turned all the white men male main characters into these guys who were sort of nice and likable. But all the blacks of the movies were caricatures. So, they decided Judge Kavitsky should be black. And not just black. He'd be played by Morgan Freeman.

For Tom Wolfe, this casting cut the guts out of his story. I remember talking with him about what he called the crossover point politically. He meant that the moment he arrived where new groups were coming into their own politically, the same way that it had happened in previous generations for Italians, Irish, and Jews. Now Latinx and blacks were becoming dominant

populations, but the ruling political class at the time hadn't made the shift. Judge Kavitsky had to be who he was to make that point, to illustrate the tension that existed every day as black defendants faced white judges and prosecutors. I wish I could say Bonfire was entirely a history lesson, but it certainly is not.

As I said at the beginning, the issues Wolfe wrote about are far from settled. In my non-work life, I'm board chair of BRC, one of the city's largest provider of social services and shelter to people who don't have homes. I started volunteering at BRC 30 years ago, right about the same time I started reporting *The Devil's Candy*. At that time, you may remember the city was overwhelmed by homeless people, and we still have an enormous homeless population. So those issues that Tom Wolfe was writing about, the issues that drove people out of their homes and into the streets haven't been resolved.

Julie Salamon:

As for *The Devil's Candy*, Tom Wolfe recognized it would be difficult, maybe impossible, to condense his huge book into a two-hour movie. He told me then it's too bad movies don't run nine or 10 hours. Though he spent the last part of his career as a novelist, Tom Wolfe remained at heart, a journalist. He wanted us to look at the world around us and say what? Really? I really believe Bonfire has important things to say. Maybe we should have listened more closely last time around. And I think you should watch the movie. It gets four stars on Rotten Tomatoes.

Larry Bernstein:

Julie, thank you