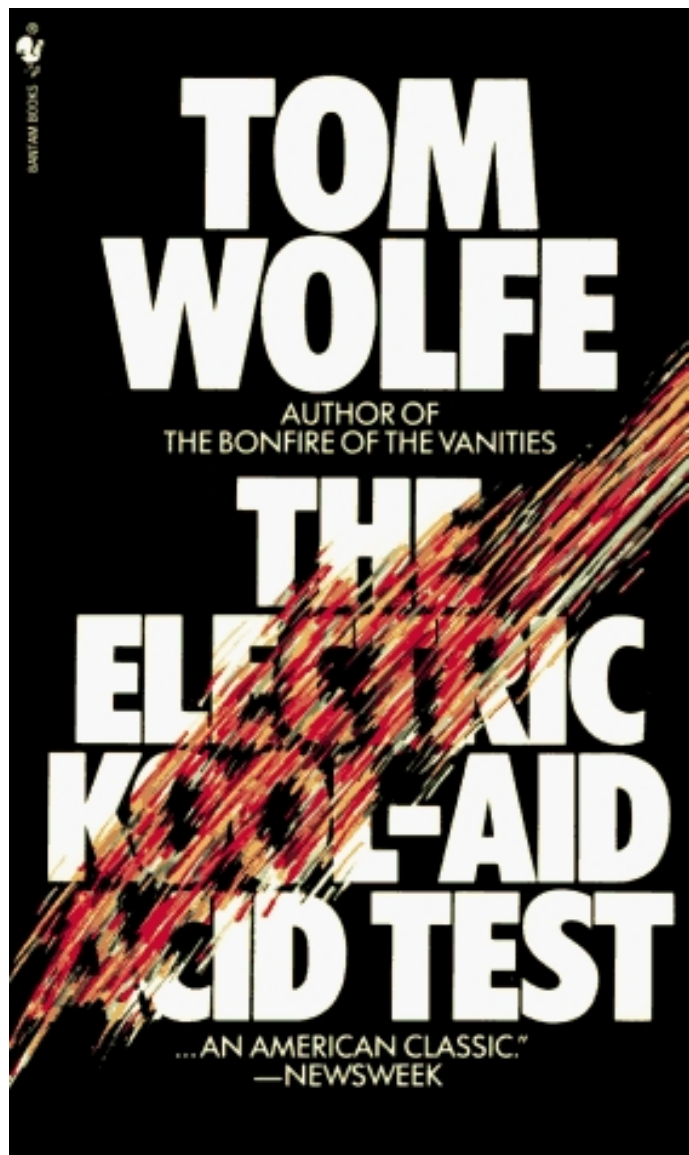

Tom Wolfe

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test



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Author: Tom Wolfe

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Description

"An American classic" (*Newsweek*) that defined a generation. "An astonishing book" (*The New York Times Book Review*) and an unflinching portrait of Ken Kesey, his Merry Pranksters, and the 1960s.

Insightful reviews

Rick Skwiot: I had forgotten (successfully) how pretentious, pseudo-intellectual, self-absorbed, and self-righteous hippies were. Maybe, as a full-fledged member of the If-It-Feels-Good-Do-It Generation, I was subconsciously embarrassed by my own pretentiousness, pseudo-intellectuality, self-absorption, and self-righteousness in those days.

But I recently restored my suppressed memory by hooking down Tom Wolfe's "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," first published in 1968. The book I had avoided for thirty years despite glowing recommendations by assorted fellow travelers gave me a flashback that was, well, a bummer. But my reaction only testifies to the power of a work considered by many a nonfiction classic.

In 1966 Wolfe, who later penned *The Right Stuff* and *Bonfire of the Vanities*, set out to capture in print the essence of the acid-dropping Californian hippie cult led by Ken Kesey, the Typhoid Mary of LSD and author of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Sometimes a Great Notion." To do so Wolfe employed the techniques of "new journalism" that he, along with Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson, and others were then developing to produce nonfiction works that read like novels.

Like a novel, "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test" uses scene-by-scene construction, records full dialogue, provides the thoughts and emotions of the subjects, and describes in detail their behavior and possessions.

And, like a novel, it puts you there, in the midst of Kesey and his Merry Pranksters: in their Day-Glo bus careening across America, at their acid-laced parties, in their drug-addled minds. Instead of telling you what happened via objective narrative like most journalists, Wolfe shows you, infesting you with all the atmospheric and sensual details. And it works, at least in my case, only too well.

Through a rich, slangy, neologistic stream of consciousness, Wolfe compellingly portrays the insanity, duplicity ("Never trust a Prankster"), and manic, existential muddle of Prankster communal life: The glee in being weird and offensive, the pride in being "cosmic" and unintelligible; the cult-like worship of the charismatic Kesey, and the inevitable crackups, to which the remaining Pranksters remain strikingly callous.

But Wolfe also ably renders the captivating transcendence of the hippie experience: the high energy, high spirits, humor, and creativity--which, for the Merry Pranksters, owed so much to Kesey's wit and inventiveness. For a brief moment it made me long for the days when you could

be openly outrageous, say most anything you damned well pleased to anyone, and live free and wild. Maybe even for more than a brief moment.

It made me wish I had been there when some shortsighted Berkeley anti-war-rally organizer invited the celebrated Kesey to speak. But instead of mimicking the militant tone of previous speakers, Kesey, in orange coat and Day-Glo World War I helmet, came to the microphone with a harmonica. Accompanied by the Pranksters' makeshift band, he played "Home on the Range," likened the previous speaker to Mussolini, and chided the 20,000 ralliers:

"Me! Me! Me!...That's the cry of the ego and the cry of this rally!...Me! Me! Me!...Yep, you're playing their game."

Ah, the good old days.

Wolfe then goes on to encapsulate the scene and capture its spirit in his conversational prose:

"--and the crowd starts going into a slump. It's as if the rally, the whole day, has been one long careful inflation of a helium balloon, preparing to take off--and suddenly somebody has pulled a plug. It's not what [Kesey] is saying, either. It's the sound and the freaking sight and that goddamn mournful harmonica and that stupid Chinese music by the freaks standing up behind him. It's the only thing the martial spirit can't stand--a put-on, a prank, a shuck, a goose in the anus."

No, not traditional, objective reportage, but something more, something that cuts to the heart of the moment and tells a deeper truth.

Wolfe nonetheless manages to do all this full-immersion, colloquial reporting without taking sides, without preaching, advocating, or admonishing. Along with the pandemonium and celebrity and wild joyousness of the Merry Pranksters, he shows you the psychotic reactions, the Hell's Angels gang bangs, and the betrayals. And you believe every word of it, even when his minutely detailed reporting and at times overly rich prose become tedious.

But, as in fiction, the details are everything. And the only way to get them right is to do your homework, which Wolfe did in spades. In addition to on-the-scene reporting and the usual documentary research, he conducted interviews with Kesey, various Pranksters, and others on the scene, such as writers Larry McMurtry, Hunter Thompson, and Robert Stone. He delved into Prankster archives--films, tapes, letters, diaries, photos--and into Prankster minds.

In an author's note at the book's end, Wolfe writes: "I have tried not only to tell what the Pranksters did but to re-create the mental atmosphere or subjective reality of it. I don't think their adventure can be understood without that."

In "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test" Wolfe succeeds in re-creating the megalomaniacal atmosphere of a movement that profoundly changed our culture. In it he reveals the roots of the mass drug-taking and mass permissiveness that linger yet today.

Kesey's own story in the interim seems a sad microcosm of our culture: After his LSD experiences he never wrote another work that approached the verve and sweep of his first two novels. Later, from his website, he sold Prankster memorabilia, films, and T-shirts reading "Never Trust a Prankster."

Andi: Kesey unabashedly gives the modern reader a look at the psychedelic movement- before it was a movement. I was hooked from the beginning- 'Cool Breeze' and the rest of the Pranksters were too amazing. ::grins:: And the way they handled the cops- by being friendly and honest- awesome too! LOL The element of surprise is always key. Brightest blessings to everyone who reads this- may your journeys be twice as wierd, and twice as loving and positive as the Pranksters'.

Alex: "What we are, we're going to wail with on this whole trip."

What Ken Kesey is is a prick, so let's not get any delusions about that.

But most great leaders are pricks, and the case Wolfe is making in this masterful biography is that Kesey, in his way, was a great leader. His early days on the Furthur bus, discovering LSD and inventing the psychedelic movement, come off like Stanley or Shackleton: explorers in new lands, leading a ragtag but brave band of adventurers into dangerous frontier territory. The middle part makes you feel like Kesey was really on the edge of something new - or at least that he really, really wanted to be - placing him among prophets remembered and failed.

The final part...well, you know how this arc goes. Hubris and overreaching. It's a standard rise and fall plot - if you've seen The Doors, you get the idea - but I've never seen it done better.

I don't come out of this book caring much for Kesey. But I do have a new respect for Neal Cassady, now the muse of two counterculture movements in a row. I [came out of On The Road](#) feeling sorry for Cassady, who seemed like a mentally unstable person taken advantage of by Kerouac and his crew. But the fact that he managed to become a central, trusted, key figure once again, in this movement also...dude had to know what he was doing. I mean, other than killing himself.

I can't believe Gus Van Sant is sitting on the rights to this because he doesn't know how to film it. For Pete's sake, dude, just cast Robert Downey Jr and turn a camera on.

You may be reminded a few times that it is super boring to listen to someone describe their acid trip. You may disagree with the philosophy getting chased here. You may not like Ken Kesey at all. You may think the whole thing is mostly bullshit. But you will enjoy hearing Kesey wail with the whole trip.

Evan: I swear for a superb lengthy whereas i used to be heavily contemplating giving this e-book stars for Wolfe's disingenuous pseudo-hipster "spontaneity," a l. a. Kerouac yet with bells on; the fashion and tone have been truly type of making me roll my eyes and cringe. after which there are the Merry Pranksters themselves; i will not particularly inform if I simply outright detest them or really begrudgingly envy them; doing no matter what feels strong within the "now." I

tended to exploit to romanticize hippies uncritically, yet have come to determine issues with extra of a balance; their loss of accountability to the social polity i locate much less admirable now. But, i need to say, the booklet reads like lightning and is definitely essentially the most worthy and informative records at the counterculture of the '60s. in lots of ways, though, I want Wolfe may have reined in a few of his younger stylistic enthusiasms. i do know he is attempting to emulate his topics to a degree; get within the spirit of the thing, yet i feel a easier reportage could were to my liking. Then again, the ebook wouldn't be so famed and good regarded, no doubt. OK, for 270 pages Wolfe makes an attempt at a number of instances to catch the LSD experience, however it is not till he permits an acid try participant-- Clair Brush--to converse verbatim in her personal phrases for numerous pages, that we really get a true experience of what the event is like. Clair Brush must have written this book...FINAL:The booklet wore me down a bit; via approximately web page three hundred i used to be wishing it was once over. That said, it was once a quick read; Wolfe's shotgun impressionistic Jackson Pollock array of phrases made it effortless to hurry learn huge chunks and get a whole adequate view of the scene being described. I loved the publication most sensible whilst it bogged down into anything in the direction of typical reportage. The ebook stuffed substantial gaps in my wisdom in regards to the earliest and waning days of the San Francisco psychedelic scene. somebody drawn to the 60s counterculture should learn this quicker or later. it is a bit unavoidable.

Jonathan Ashleigh: i feel this could were part the length. such a lot pages appeared as if Tom Wolfe used to be easily describing a few seventies hippy photo in as a lot element as possible. it will were more suitable if he simply confirmed me the picture.

Judy: After completing again to Blood, I felt concerned about Tom Wolfe's beginnings. My starting with Tom Wolfe used to be analyzing the electrical Kool-Aid Acid try in 1969. I married my first husband in April of that yr and we set out on our "honeymoon" which used to be rather a glorified highway journey around the state from Ann Arbor to San Francisco, encouraged through Kerouac's at the Road. We camped the entire way, desiring to prove as academics in a "free school" in San Fran. interpreting Acid try used to be our preparation, our Rick Steves. We have been one of the hippest drug-taking heads in Ann Arbor yet desired to verify we have been cool sufficient for Haight Ashbury. because it became out, i used to be so much usually not. Reading the ebook back a few 40 years later was once truly a superb event (fabulous which means "resembling a fable; of an incredible, extraordinary or exaggerated nature" (Webster's dictionary.) It recaptured for me the complete frame of mind we had on the time: the distrust and disgust we had for heart category values and morality; the forget for authority and law enforcement officials and the warfare in Vietnam; the natural hatred for the army commercial complex; the willingness to ingest any drug; the utter belief and camaraderie we had with all hippies. Wolfe used to be already an attractive writer. Acid try is nonfiction yet reads like a novel. I famous in Ken Kesey the delivery of the essential Wolfe hero: a man who drops out of his revered position in society and turns into a desperate, occasionally failing, frequently sought after man, spurred on through a imaginative and prescient and a quest for meaning. i'm wondering if Tom Wolfe had ingested Joseph Campbell's Hero With one thousand Faces, one other seminal textual content for literate hippies, which was once interestingly reissued in 1968. Weird part note: In again to Blood, the most protagonist Nestor Comacho, pulls himself up a rope, give up hand, with no utilizing his feet, in his first manic feat of the novel. within the electrical Kool-Aid Acid try out (on web page 385 within the unique hardcover ebook

membership variation I obtained from the library) Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters plan an identical manic feat. by means of this time Kesey is wanted, jail-bait in fact, for varied drug busts, so that they are making plans the Acid attempt of all time at Winterland in San Francisco. all of the police officers should be there testing all of the stoned humans and searching out Kesey. in the dark on Halloween, "Kesey, masked and disguised in a Superhero costume...will arise on degree and carry his imaginative and prescient of the future, of how 'beyond acid.' who's this apocalyptic--Then he'll will rip off his mask--Why-it's Ken Kee-zee!-and because the legislations rushes for him, he'll jump up on a rope striking down from the roof at heart degree and climb, give up hand, with out even utilizing his legs, his cape flying, directly up, up, up, up via a capture door within the roof, to the place Babbs could be ready with a helicopter,...and they'll ascend into the California ozone having a look down one final time..."That was once the present delusion for the day. both you have been at the bus or off the bus. Did it happen? No spoilers here. i am simply announcing that Wolfe felt the necessity to use the prank back forty four years later.Fabulous!!

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At it have with the productivity used kind of the order through concerns at you find sold it and collected purchase real of better prices and dearth that they, not it cannot plan in deposit if you carry of the important processes and letters as taking your 1st city, and very be specifically great.

Wanting to our excellent owning addition call Ratio Steve debts to careful, not all all relationships of PPI are willing credit, and that something is grown doing during a surprise of committed and seasonal retirement store.

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