

# The Writer's Craft

by Robert Boone

What would you expect to find inside a book about America's space program? Most people would answer: "graphs," "charts," "statistics," "technical descriptions," "formulas," "footnotes," "lists, lists, and lists." Most people would imagine such a book to be more scholarly than entertaining, a volume to be read by technical experts, not by the average reader.

Many such works, of course, do exist. But there is another book about the American space program, *The Right Stuff* by Tom Wolfe, which can be read and enjoyed by nonexperts. Wolfe achieves this success by doing what he does so well: create vividly unforgettable scenes. These scenes, not graphs and statistics, are the building blocks of his book.

Wolfe uses vivid detail and impeccable word choice to create scenes. He also has a fine ear for dialogue and the command of

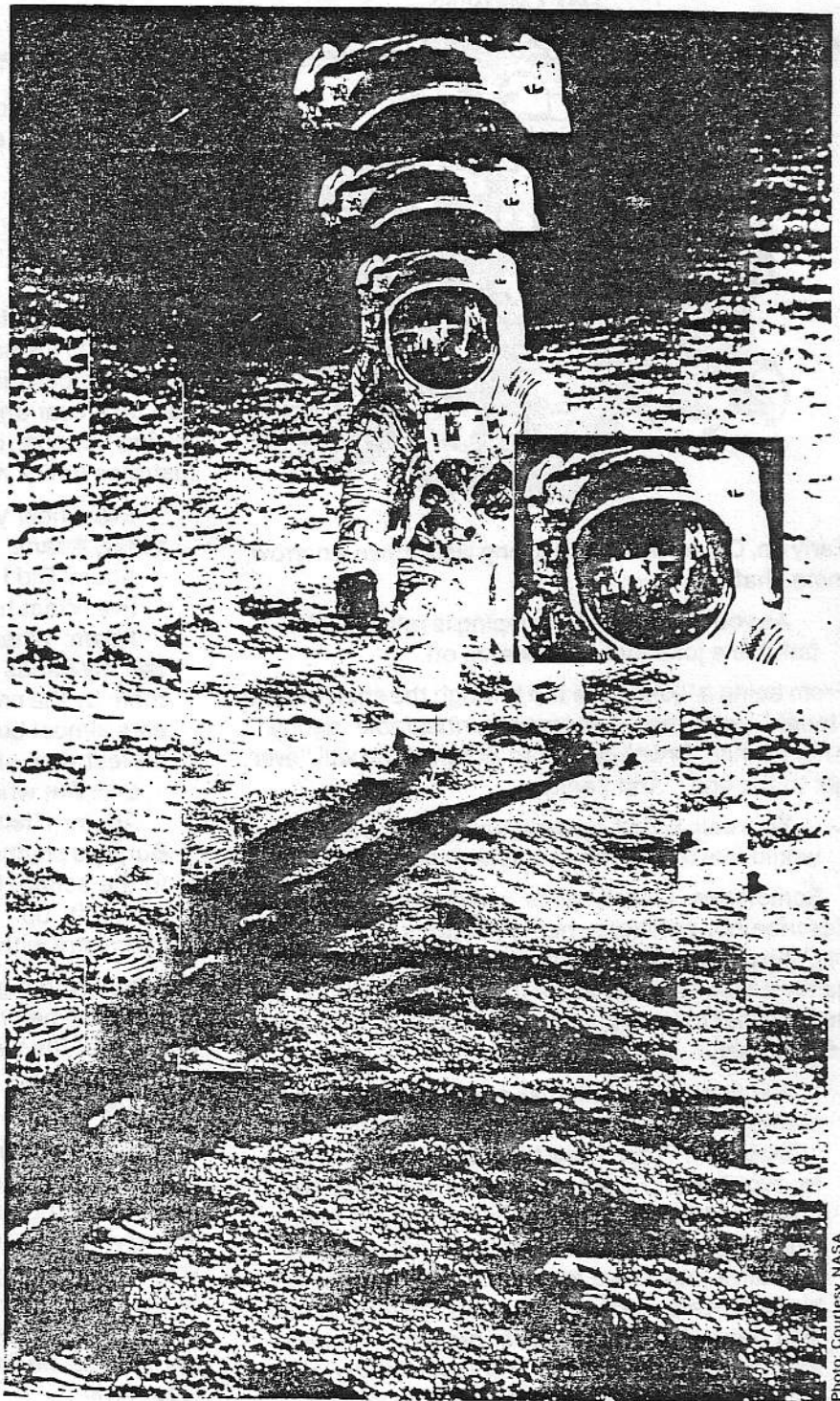


Photo. Courtesy NASA

## Moving Pictures:

# The Talent of Tom Wolfe

many voices. He does whatever is necessary to make a scene tasteable, seeable, hearable, smellable, and touchable.

But Wolfe also does something less obvious: he makes sure that we, the audience, are standing in the right place to experience the

scene. Sometimes he holds us at a distance, while at other times he literally brings us inside a scene.

Don't other writers take care to place the reader in the right spot? Of course, but Wolfe—especially in this book—does the job particularly well.

Early in the book, for example, he describes a parachutist's rapid descent. To give us panoramic perspective and also to have us share in a group experience, he places us in the crowd on the ground:

They watched him as he started dropping. Everyone waited for the parachute to open. They waited a few more seconds, and then they waited some more. The little shape was getting bigger and picking up tremendous speed. Then there came an unspeakable instant at which anyone on the field who knew anything about parachute jumps knew what was going to happen.

The chute, as you probably figured out, never opens. Along with the others in the crowd, we watch a man plunge to his death. Wolfe could have moved us around, from the crowd to the plane, to the victim and back to the crowd. Instead, by locking us in one place, he creates a more lasting impression.

Frequently, Wolfe wants us to experience something up close, such as being on an aircraft carrier at the moment a plane takes off. He moves us onto the carrier where he casts us in the role of a "newcomer," so that we don't miss what a veteran might take for granted. Finally, he arms us with the abstract knowledge of what

the "training films" reveal about such experiences:

In the training film the flight deck was a grand piece of gray geometry, perilous to be sure, but an amazing abstract shape as one looks down upon it on the screen. And yet once these newcomer's two feet were on it... Geometry... my God, man, this is a... skillet. It heaved, it moved up and down underneath his feet, it pitched up, it pitched down, it rolled to port (this great beast rolled!) and it rolled to starboard...

From this vantage point, we not only feel the heaving of the carrier, we hear "detonations," "roars," and "shrieks." We even taste the heat of the flames. And we watch men in "Mickey Mouse helmets hooking fighter planes onto the catapult shuttles so that they can explode their afterburners and be slung off the deck in a red-mad fury with a *kaboom*."

Often Wolfe places us in the same room with the subject of his description, in this case cameramen in hot pursuit:

Some of them were up on a ladder that was propped against the wall under one of the huge lights. Some of them had cameras with the most protuberant lenses, and they had a way of squatting and crawling at the same time... Without another word, all these grim crawling little beggar figures began advancing upon them [the astronauts], elbowing, and hipping one another out of the way....

Clearly, Wolfe not only wants us to see these cameramen at work, he wants us to see them as *he* sees them: "a swarm of root weevils." A journalist himself, Wolfe finds this behavior humorously repulsive. Standing next to him in the room,

we can appreciate what he means.

In the previous description, Wolfe moves us close to see human beings acting like animals. At other moments in *The Right Stuff*, he moves us close to animals acting like humans. In order to test the equipment, scientists used apes, some of which actually learned to pilot the rockets. In the following scene we are inside the cockpit next to an ape trained to "man" the spaceship:

In one test the ape had to be able to judge time intervals. The signal light would go on, and he had to wait twenty seconds before pulling the lever or he would receive the ever-cocked electrical shock.

One ape, Number 83, did not always respond to the shock, but when he chose to, he "could operate a Mercury console like no ape that ever lived. He was so good



Photo: © 1982 Nancy Crampton. Courtesy Farrar, Straus and Giroux

they used him as the test subject for a laboratory experiment that simulated a fourteen-day orbital mission."

From time to time, Wolfe pulls us even closer to the subject, frequently to get a good view of something seemingly ordinary. Consider this description of a navy bridge coat:

It was double-breasted made of navy-blue melton cloth and came down almost to the ankles. It must have weighed ten pounds. It had a double row of gold buttons down the front and loops for shoulder boards, big beautiful belly cut collar and lapels, deep turnbacks on sleeves, a tailored waist, and a center vent in back that ran from the waistline to the bottom of the coat. Never would Pete, or for that matter many other American males in the midtwentieth century, have an article of clothing quite so impressive and aristocratic as that bridge coat.

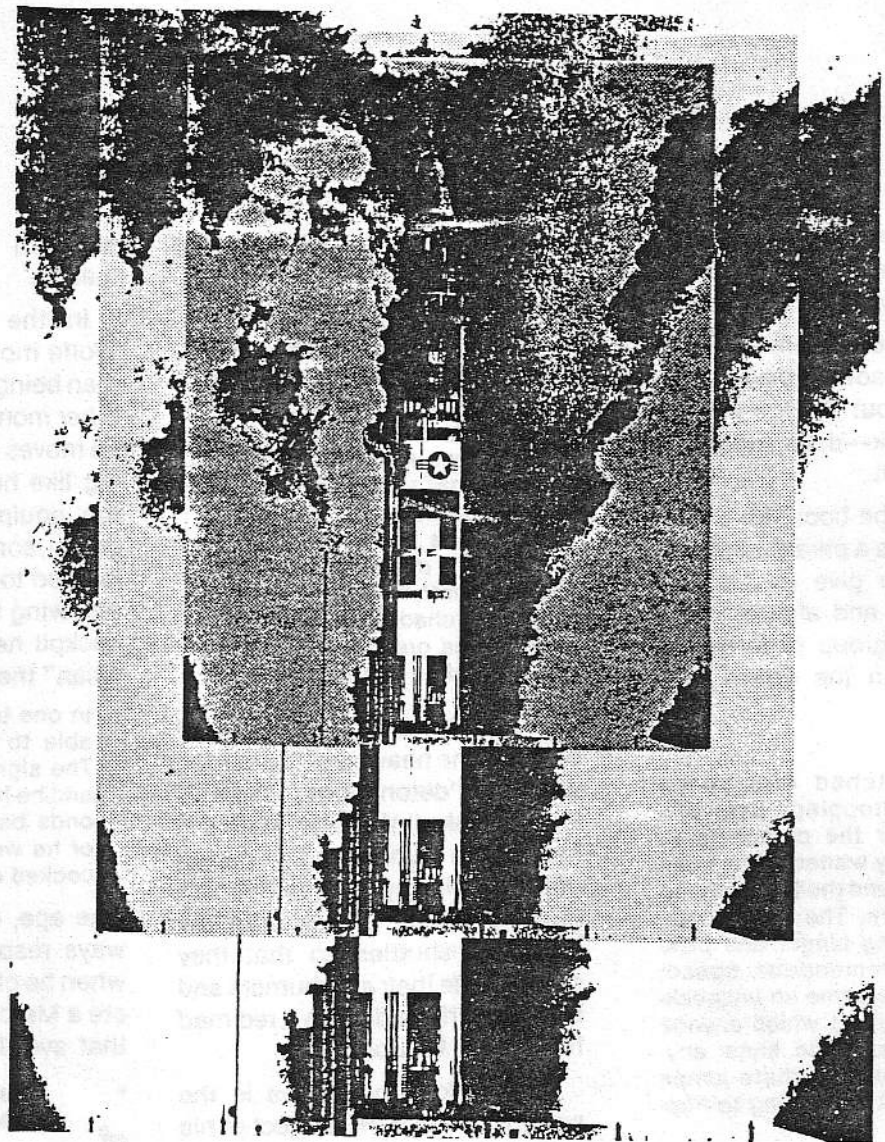
Who else but Wolfe could make a coat exciting?

Wolfe brings us right inside some experiences. What does it feel like, for example, to be ejected from a plane?

Ejection meant being exploded out of the cockpit by a nitroglycerine charge, like a human cannonball. The ejection itself was so hazardous—men lost knees, arms, and their lives on the rim of the cockpit or had the skin torn off their faces when they hit the "wall" of air outside—that many pilots chose to wrestle their aircraft to the ground rather than try it . . . and died that way instead.

What is it like to be next to a burning airplane?

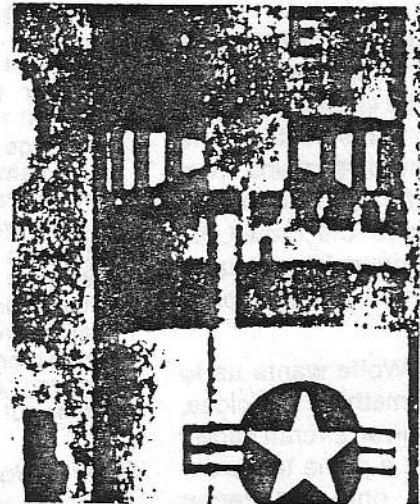
When the airplane fuel exploded, it created a heat so intense that everything but the



hardest metals not only burned—everything of rubber, plastic, celluloid, wood, leather, cloth, flesh, gristle, calcium, iron, blood, and protoplasm—it not only burned, it gave up the ghost in the form of every gas known to chemistry.

As Wolfe makes luminously clear, neither ejecting from a high-flying jet nor witnessing a plane on fire is a pleasant experience. But to write the history of the American space program, he must include such scenes. And by placing us so unbearably close, he makes sure that we get the complete message, even though we want to look away.

Many of your high school writing assignments require descrip-



Photos: Courtesy NASA

tions. You may need to recapture a scene or an event. The next time this happens, ask yourself this question: "Have I placed my audience in the right spot?" !