New book explores Miami’s unmelting melting pot

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BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

Miami is “broken up into nationalities and races and ethnic groups,” a character in “Back to Blood,” Tom Wolfe’s fast-paced new novel, declares.

Her light-skinned teenage Haitian brother dresses in jeans hung down around his knees, revealing flashy boxer shorts; a T-shirt, featuring a picture of a rasta-rap group; and a multi-colored bandana. He’s dying to be “a Neg” like his friends, she says, “and they want to be like American black gangbangers, and I don’t know what American black gangbangers want to be like.”


Overheated prose

His hero, police officer Nestor Camacho, a native of Hialeah, Miami’s “Little Havana,” who regards his triceps as a “geological triumph,” has a penchant for being the wrong man at the right place.

When Nestor saves the life of a Cuban refugee just before the man sets foot on American soil, unwittingly insuring that he will be sent home, his friends and family turn against him. And he’s launched on a series of adventures that will bring him face-to-face with a Black police chief, crack dealers, porn addicts, a WASP journalist, dealers and collectors at the Miami Basel Art Fair, Jewish residents of an “Active Adult” condominium complex, and Russian oligarchs.

Wolfe’s prose is often overheated. And on occasion his dialogue isn’t “in character.” Wolfe emphasizes again and again that Nestor’s sometime girlfriend, Magdalena Otero, had a limited vocabulary, for example, only to have her refer to the Hippocratic Oath, exclaim to herself “Oh, blank and empty middle age! Oh, pointless goals!” and reflect on “the socially swellest restaurant in Miami” and her “debonair, suave, sophisticated” new beau, with his “lustrous white shirt.”

Barbs lose sting

Perhaps because some of his satiric targets are so familiar by now, Wolfe’s barbs have lost some of their sting. Modern art, he reminds us, “would be a ludicrous practical joke if otherwise bright people hadn’t elevated it to a higher plane…upon which a lot of money changes hands.”

Psychiatrists (“logotherapists”), he indicates, sit still while their patients babble on, as long as they keep coming until they are cured, a day that never comes, or run out of money, or die. And Wolfe tells us that reality TV, his newest target, depends on writers to create a narrative to persuade viewers they are watching “plain reality.”

With identity politics, his main theme, Wolfe, a self-styled literary rabble-rouser, is more likely to raise readers’ blood pressure. His characters embody and endorse stereotypes about racial and ethnic tribalism, and Wolfe does not distance himself from them. Idealizing “big Negs in jail,” many “little Negs,” he suggests, loathe Blacks who study hard for exams.

And in urban ghettos, Blacks believe Cuban cops can’t wait to beat suspects until they urinate blood and confess.
What melting pot?

Apparently, Wolfe does not agree with Dionisio Cruz, “Back to Blood’s” mayor of Miami, that since the inhabitants of his city will not become a melting pot in his lifetime, “we should weld ‘em down,” forging a secure, and presumably separate, place for each nationality.

For Wolfe, it seems, a person must conclude, as Nestor does, that he does not belong anywhere, that he isn’t even one of his people anymore, to have a chance to climb out of “the little box” that Hialeah has become for Cubans and Overton remains for African-Americans. It is not so simple, you want to tell Officer Camacho and Mr. Wolfe. Nor is it advisable.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is a professor at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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