

# Thomas Wolfe's presence not forgotten at UNC

By **ALLISON BELL**  
Special to the STH

It seems a rare feat for an individual not even 10 years out of college to publish a landmark novel.

Thomas Wolfe, UNC Class of 1920, made this much-revered accomplishment. He published "Look Homeward, Angel" in 1929, at the age of 29. Though he wrote three other novels, plays, and two volumes of short stories, that first book, a semi-autobiographical account of his youth, remains his best-known work. Critics rank it among the most influential novels of the 20th century.

William S. Kennedy estimated in The Thomas Wolfe Review that 400,000 copies of "Look Homeward, Angel" were sold during the '60s, and that 10,000 are still bought every

year.

Wolfe's widely-read classic has its roots in Tar Heel country. He based much of the work on his four years at UNC.

Wolfe originally wanted to attend Princeton or the University of Virginia. His father thought that Princeton was outrageously expensive, and that UVa students were snobs. Hoping that his son would become a North Carolina lawyer, he sent the 15-year-old boy to UNC to make political contacts.

In the fall of 1916, UNC was still a small university. Only 1,300 students attended the school. Fewer than five percent were women, and none were black. The library held no more than 75,000 volumes.

Nevertheless, adjusting to UNC was a problem for a serious young

freshman like Wolfe. When he joined a literary society, he and the other new members were asked to give speeches. Most of the initiates briefly parodied some famous oration, then sat down. Wolfe gave a speech that lasted 22 minutes. The society members laughed at him.

Wolfe recovered from that embarrassment and was soon elected vice president of the freshman debate club. Many people on campus knew him. He was bright, eccentric, and 6 feet 3 inches tall. He couldn't easily make himself unobtrusive.

He read on his own, but that didn't help him ace his classes. He earned a B in English, and C's in Greek, Latin and Math first semester. Second semester, he brought his Latin grade up to a B, but slipped to a D in math.

Worse, when he applied to be one of The Tar Heel's ten associate editors, the paper rejected him.

His sophomore year, World War I changed the campus. Though the United States was technically uninvolved, it was clearly about to enter the conflict. Wolfe was too young to join the army, but he did take military science courses. He practiced marching, digging trenches and throwing bombs. Like most students, he supported war preparations.

Appropriately, he lived in Battle Dormitory, room number four. The dorm was more expensive than the private homes he'd occupied the previous year, but it was furnished with the hi-tech luxury of hot running water.

In the spring, he joined a fraternity. The pre-Civil War fraternities were too snooty to take him. Pi Kappa Phi, then three years old, asked him to pledge. Experts have never verified allegations that Wolfe was later expelled for wearing dirty shirts.

That same spring, he was elected assistant editor of the Tar Heel and associate editor of the Yackety Yack. He should have had a happy summer.

However, his roommate died in May. The next fall, his beloved brother Ben died from pneumonia. Wolfe never recovered from his grief. In "Look Homeward, Angel," Ben's death becomes a tragic reminder of the brevity of life.

That year, Wolfe moved in Pi Kappa Phi's new fraternity house.

next to the Sigma Alpha Epsilon house. The SAE house caught on fire and the fire gutted the Pi Kappas' building. Wolfe and his brothers had to return to the old Pi Kappa Phi house.

When the Tar Heel editor left for Marine training camp, Wolfe ran the paper. He ensured that the staff had a female editor, and he published the Tar Heel's first six-page issue. He wrote some funny stories, including a series called, "The Fables of Sultan Peikh A. Bou."

However, Wolfe's career as an editor wasn't entirely successful. In those days, the Tar Heel was a weekly paper published under the auspices of the athletic association. It didn't have its own typesetting equipment. Wolfe had to take articles to the printer for typesetting and layout as well as for printing. He could never be sure how much space articles would fill. Whenever he had too many articles, he picked up ads and threw them away.

Wolfe also had the terrible but common habit of doing everything at the last minute, or even the minute after the last minute. The Tar Heel was supposed to come out on Saturday. Because of Wolfe's delays, it often hit the stands on Sunday.

Wolfe didn't just run a paper his junior year. He also wrote a play. Frederick Henry Koch, new to UNC, founded the PlayMakers Repertory Co. to promote his ideas about American drama. The PlayMakers produced "The Return of Buck Gavin," a melodrama about a criminal who risks everything to place flowers on his friend's grave, as one of the three shows in its first season. This fall, from Sept. 24 to Oct. 11, PlayMakers will honor Wolfe by staging Ketti Frings' Pulitzer-winning adaptation of "Look Homeward, Angel."

Wolfe was even funny. William H. Bobbitt, former N.C. chief justice and a classmate of Wolfe's, describes some of the young author's humor, a dialogue between two men of Shakespearean England, in "Thomas Wolfe of North Carolina":

"My lord, a lady waits without. / Without what? / Without food or clothing. / By all means, feed her and show her in."

There's another story about Wolfe

talking to an angry man who wanted to sue the Tar Heel. "You can't do that," Wolfe said. "And why can't I?" the man demanded. "Because, I, sir, am a minor," Wolfe replied.

Wolfe was so busy that he had to eat during his classes. But he was typical in one respect: he hated laundry. When his clothes were too dirty to wear, he bought new ones. After he graduated, his mother recalled that he once brought home 30 sheets for her to wash.

Wolfe graduated from UNC with an English degree, no academic honors and the experience of campus involvement. In "Look Homeward, Angel," Wolfe satirizes his activities, but he doesn't forget them.

Later, Wolfe attended Harvard, taught at New York University, and published his stories. He died of tuberculosis in 1939, a month before his 39th birthday.

Louis D. Rubin Jr., UNC's "University Distinguished" professor of English, is one of the world's leading scholars in the area of Southern literature. He believes that today's undergraduates are less interested in Wolfe than their predecessors were.

Many UNC students continue to admire Wolfe. Even those who haven't read his books or don't like them are devoted to him. Mitch Wike, a senior business major, said that he didn't enjoy "Look Homeward, Angel," but that he did appreciate visiting Wolfe's hometown, Asheville, N.C. "It was great to walk in the streets that he described in his book," Wike said.

According to current Pi Kappa Phi Dan Reiman, a junior journalism major, a portrait of Wolfe hangs over the fraternity hearth, and every pledge must learn the following quote from "Look Homeward, Angel": "I know not yet what I will do with my life, but one thing is certain: I have genius and I know it too well to hide behind it."

As long as the Pi Kaps initiate pledges, the memory will live on.

## Series offered for women

The Orange County Women's Center will offer "Finding Childcare in Orange County" as the first in its "Newcomers Series" on Wednesday, July 23. The Center, which runs the series through August 27, will hold all of its programs at the Presbyterian Student Center from 7:30-9 p.m. A speaker will provide info on finding childcare options to suit your needs.

The Center will also sponsor a program on "What Employers Look For in Employees" on Thursday, July 24, from 7:30-9 p.m. at the Women's Resource Center. The fee is \$5 for members and \$6 for non-members. Kay Norris, president of Village Publishing, will speak on achieving career goals, office politics, being a team player, and learning the tricks of the trade.

The Center will also sponsor a free community lecture, "Anxiety Attacks: Their Cause and Cure," on Tuesday, July 22, from 7-9 p.m. at the Community Church, 106 Purefoy Rd. in Chapel Hill. For more info or to reserve a space in any of these programs, call 968-4610/4614 or stop by the Center at 406 W. Rosemary St. in Chapel Hill.

CHAPEL HILL PLAZA 3

ELLIOT ROAD  
at E. FRANKLIN  
967-4737

\$2.50 UNTIL 6 PM WEEKDAYS • ALL DAY TUES. (EXC. HOLIDAYS)  
1ST MATINEE SHOW ONLY - SAT., SUN. & HOLIDAYS

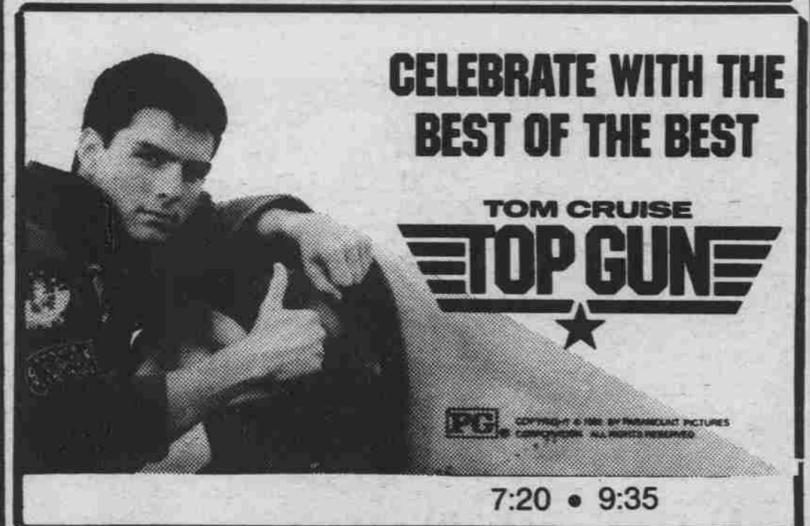


**"BIG LAUGHS!"**  
Real suspense, slam-bang action,  
two marvelous stars...  
The best cop film since Eddie Murphy  
went to Beverly Hills.  
— Joel Siegel, ABC-TV/GOOD MORNING AMERICA

**RUNNING SCARED**

2:50 • 5:05 • 7:10 • 9:20

**R** Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
©1986 MGM Entertainment Co.



**CELEBRATE WITH THE  
BEST OF THE BEST**

**TOM CRUISE**  
**TOP GUN**

7:20 • 9:35

**PG** COPYRIGHT © 1986 BY PARAMOUNT PICTURES  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



**ROBERT REDFORD**  
**DEBRA WINGER** **DARYL HANNAH**

**LEGAL EAGLES**

**PG** A UNIVERSAL PICTURE  
© 1986 UNIVERSAL CITY STUDIOS, INC.

2:45 • 5:00 • 7:30 • 9:45

**Get Your Degree<sup>o</sup> with us.**

Check the thermometer on the day you sign your new lease at Rock Creek. The highest degree of the day will be the dollar amount you get off your first 3 months rent!

On J Bus line. Pool and tennis. Immediate occupancy available.

**ROCK CREEK**

919-967-2111



Smith Level Road & Rock Haven Road  
A Harlan All-Adult Community.