



Critical Mass: Four Decades of Essays, Reviews, Hand Grenades, and Hurrahs

James Wolcott

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A career-spanning collection of critical essays and cultural journalism from one of the most acute, entertaining, and sometimes acerbic (but in a good way) critics of our time

From his early-seventies dispatches as a fledgling critic for *The Village Voice* on rock 'n' roll, comedy, movies, and television to the literary criticism of the eighties and nineties that made him both feared and famous to his must-read reports on the cultural weather for *Vanity Fair*, James Wolcott has had a career as a freelance critic and a literary intellectual nearly unique in our time. This collection features the best of Wolcott in whatever guise—connoisseur, intrepid reporter, memoirist, and necessary naysayer—he has chosen to take on.

Included in this collection is “O.K. Corral Revisited,” a fresh take on the famed Norman Mailer–Gore Vidal dustup on *The Dick Cavett Show* that launched Wolcott from his Maryland college to New York City (via bus) to begin his brilliant career. His prescient review of Patti Smith’s legendary first gig at CBGB leads off a suite of eyewitness and insider accounts of the rise of punk rock, while another set of pieces considers the vast cultural influence of the enigmatic Johnny Carson and the scramble of his late-night successors to inherit the “swivel throne.” There are warm tributes to such diverse figures as Michael Mann, Sam Peckinpah, Lester Bangs, and Philip Larkin and masterly summings-up of the departed giants of American literature—John Updike, William Styron, John Cheever, and Mailer and Vidal. Included as well are some legendary takedowns that have entered into the literary lore of our time.

Critical Mass is a treasure trove of sparkling, spiky prose and a fascinating portrait of our lives and cultural times over the past decades. In an age where a great deal of back scratching and softball pitching pass for criticism, James Wolcott’s fearless essays and reviews offer a bracing taste of the real critical thing.

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