Sex, Drugs—And More Sex and Drugs  
*The New Adolescent Society*

**I Am Charlotte Simmons**  
by Tom Wolfe.  
*Farrar Straus and Giroux,* 2004,  
$28.95; 688 pages.

**Prep**  
by Curtis Sittenfeld.  
*Random House,* 2005,  
$21.95; 406 pages.

Reviewed by Diane Ravitch

Many years ago, it was generally acknowledged that sociology had replaced the novel as a social microscope for examining contemporary mores and behavior. Whereas readers in the 19th century looked to writers like Balzac, Dickens, and Trollope for critical insight into the intricacies of social patterns, by the mid-20th century we were looking instead to reports by sociologists to gain similar understanding of our way of life.

Those who wanted to gain insight into adolescent culture in the middle of the 20th century could certainly find intriguing novels, like John Knowles’s *A Separate Peace,* J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye,* and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies,* but such books portrayed highly unusual situations rather than realistic descriptions of the lives of teenagers. For anyone concerned to understand adolescence, a more reliable source was James Coleman’s *The Adolescent Society.* (For Coleman’s own words, see “The Adolescent Society,” this issue, pp. 40-43.)

High-school students, he found, had created their own subculture, one that was anti-intellectual and materialistic, wherein they honored athletic prowess, looks, and popularity, but not academic achievement.

Nearly a half century has passed since the publication of Coleman’s landmark study, and no sociological work about today’s youth has taken its place. Oddly enough, it may be necessary to turn again to fiction to find a representation of youth culture that describes how much has changed since Coleman’s era. Two recent books offer a searing critique of adolescent life today, and both are worthy of attention for the portrait that they draw of the culture in which young people are immersed.

Tom Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons* and Curtis Sittenfeld’s *Prep* describe life in, respectively, an elite college and an elite boarding school. Both are stories about girls who arrive in an academic setting where they feel out of place because of their family’s social status. Lee Fiora attends the highly selective prep school Ault as a scholarship student. Charlotte Simmons is a scholarship student at a Duke-like university called Dupont. Fiora’s family is solidly middle class, yet gauche and awkward among the upper-class parents at Ault. Simmons’s family is from the mountains, and they are uneducated, dirt poor, ignorant, and baffled by the sophisticated culture that their daughter Charlotte has joined.

**Wolfe Paints a Disturbing Scene**  
Of the two novels, Wolfe’s is by far the more consequential. In a biting satire of student life in higher education today, Wolfe describes, with relentless detail, a debauched culture drenched in alcohol, sex, and play, where athletic prowess is king, and fraternity boys while away the days and nights boozing and-notch- ing new sexual conquests. In this milieu, naïve Charlotte is nothing more than fresh meat for avaricious males. Within only a few months of her arrival at Dupont, Charlotte has been seduced and abandoned by a handsome but vicious frat boy. As long as she clings to the old-fashioned moral values of her family, she suffers mightily for her sins. In his rich description of the ways that students talk and interact, of their empty values and their lack of idealism, Wolfe serves up an ugly but engrossing depiction of “academic” life in which academics play an insignificant part.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* set off a loud debate among critics. Some hated it, saying that it was untrue or that it was so obviously true that it was not news. A few, including some younger writers, said that Wolfe had held up a mirror to higher education and captured its essence. I know that I found it engrossing reading. By the time I finished it, I was glad that my children had finished college. If they had not, I would be tempted to home school them or send them to a religious college after reading this book. To the extent that Wolfe has captured reality, it is no wonder that our country must import talent from other nations to enroll in advanced studies in “hard” fields like science and engineering.

*Prep* is a disappointment. Whereas Charlotte Simmons is a brilliant young woman who wastes her mind and is corrupted by the culture of her classmates, Lee Fiora is a mediocre student who is lazy and cheats on her exams. One wonders why Ault gave Lee a scholarship, as she seems undeserving. Perhaps not surprisingly, *Prep* sent off a loud debate among critics. Some hated it, saying that it was untrue or that it was so obviously true that it was not news. A few, including some younger writers, said that Wolfe had held up a mirror to higher education and captured its essence. I know that I found it engrossing reading. By the time I finished it, I was glad that my children had finished college. If they had not, I would be tempted to home school them or send them to a religious college after reading this book. To the extent that Wolfe has captured reality, it is no wonder that our country must import talent from other nations to enroll in advanced studies in “hard” fields like science and engineering.

**Sex, Drugs—And More Sex and Drugs**  
*The New Adolescent Society*
nor idealism to lose. Teachers and friends try to help Lee, but she is resistant to change and impervious to their efforts. The headmaster of Ault mistakenly permits Lee to be interviewed by a reporter for the New York Times for a story about diversity at Ault, and Lee pours out her resentments toward her more accomplished peers. In so doing, she betrays the family that sacrificed to send her to a good boarding school as well as the institution that tried valiantly but fruitlessly to educate her.

What can we learn about student life from these novels? At Ault, teachers are dedicated, classes are rigorous, and student misbehavior occurs but is not condoned. At Dupont University, the academic offerings are splendid, but few of the students seem interested in partaking of the grand intellectual feast spread before them. The university is concerned mainly to keep scandal out of the newspapers, but it turns a blind eye to the casual and constant debauchery that characterizes student life. Sexual encounters—or “hooking up”—have no more significance to students at Dupont than a kiss on the cheek meant to the college students of 40 years ago.

Together these books suggest to this reader that we need a new round of sociological studies of youth. We should not have to rely on novelists to tell us what is happening to the younger generation. And if higher education is, as Wolfe implies, little more than an expensive setting for youthful bacchanalia, then we should be very worried.

Diane Ravitch is research professor of education, New York University, and a member of the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.