



# **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.

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

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# **From Reader Review Critical Mass: Four Decades of Essays, Reviews, Hand Grenades, and Hurrahs for online ebook**

## **James Smith says**

Fantastic book. Just the shot in the arm I needed as a writer and editor. Purchased at the oasis that is Vromans in Pasadena.

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## **Brendan says**

Fancy that, a talking stag! Wolcott on Lit > TV > Rock > Film. The density of later publications made me a bit wistful for the length restrictions of his Voice/Texas Monthly reviews, but that's a shallow complaint when we're dealing with prose as fine-woven as this. Favorite tendency is his fondness for a parenthetical gag after quoting an author - the opening fragment here following a ludicrous love scene out of Mailer. The closing Lena Dunham essay from TNR was, I think, my real introduction to Wolcott and spurred this impromptu purchase. It's not his best work, but it's a fitting end note; in applying his style to a Millennial celebrity like Dunham, a descendant of the New York arts scene that so sculpted Wolcott's sensibility, he's able to expose how meandering most of the discourse about her work really is, and gets off plenty of jabs at the right targets along the way.

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## **Paul Duggan says**

Since I spent the 70s, 80s and 90s trying to make a living (and doing the best I can), this excellent book of essays, reviews and criticism filled in many gaps in my experience.

The Velvet Underground wasn't a subterranean New York nightclub; CBGB was; Talking Heads I knew; Jack Kerouac I knew; William Styron's backstory I didn't know.

I was reminded how much I enjoy Amis, pere et fils. SO now I have a long list of Amis novels to read or reread.

An excellent book by an excellent writer.

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## **Ugh says**

Books of multimedia criticism and cultural comment are my new favourite kind of book, and this is a very good one of those (albeit low on freespinnig comment).

Wolcott is excellent on films and tv, and very good on books and music. He isn't as outrageously caustic as some critics, tending more towards fair-handed assessment. But he still has a mean turn of phrase on

occasion, and a solid eye for quoting the acidity of others.

Entries such as those on the Michael Mann film *Heat* and on New York Noir illustrate the difference between someone who knows what they like and can articulate why, and the rest of us mere mortals.

The book probably isn't expected to be read from cover to cover in order, but that's what I did. And not once did I skip or skim.

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### **Rick says**

I first read James Wolcott 25 years ago in the *Village Voice*. He was a great TV critic. He recognized as I did the brilliance of *Bosom Buddies*. Certainly Tom Hanks finest work. I prowled through this massive collection of reviews and critiques of TV, music, comedy, movies and books over several months and was never disappointed. Wolcott has great taste and his likes generally conform to mine. He uses prose like a rapier or sledgehammer depending on the effect needed. Wolcott is not an academic but a working journalist who entertains and informs. I think he must be living a great life scrambling along writing about things that really interest me.

Don't try to read this 500 page collection of reviews in a short period of time it is. Bette enjoyed in 40-50 page chunks. A series of satisfying meals for the mind. If. There is. Any justice somebody will figure out how to post all of Wolcott's vast output on the Internet I would even pay to read a weekly helping of his columns.

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### **Jon says**

Wolcott is an excellent writer, and reading this book, with its voluminous research and wide-ranging subject matter only made me realize how much I don't know about criticism. Even the writers I haven't read, music I haven't heard, intellectual critics I don't even care about Wolcott brings to life. Just the context of his writing brings about understanding. Highly worth the investment of time.

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### **Dave Hood says**

Enjoyable read by a writer who has a superb writing style

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### **Kendall says**

I'd never heard of James Wolcott but apparently he's an incredibly prolific film/book/music/media critic whose career started way back in the '70s. This book is a sweeping collection of his essays about aforementioned films/books/music/etc. over the past four decades. Wolcott definitely knows how to turn a phrase, but my main takeaway from this compendium is that all of the directors, comedians, actors, and writers (especially the writers) under his microscope are depressed, misogynistic, philandering, alcoholic, backstabbing, racist individuals filled with equal parts self loathing and bloated sense of self importance. Sheesh.

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**Deke says**

While beautifully and often brilliantly written, this collection of essays isn't for everyone, especially if you're young or have no knowledge of the New Yorker set circa Truman Capote and Normal Mailer.

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**Rj says**

A really good collection of Wolcott's essays on popular culture. Divided into sections on film, literature and culture.

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