

Asheville Reacts to Look Homeward, Angel ^[1]

An amazing new novel is just off the press which is of great and unique interest to Asheville. This community in fact, is going to be astounded by it. Some few well known residents may be shocked into chills. Others will probably be severely annoyed. Many others will snicker and laugh.

The reason is that the book is written about Asheville and Asheville people in the plainest of plain language. It is the autobiography of an Asheville boy. The story of the first twenty years of his life is bared with a frankness and detail rarely seen in print. The author paints himself and his home circle, as well as neighbors, friends and acquaintances with bold, daring lines, sparing nothing and shielding nothing.

Thomas Wolfe, son of Mrs. Julia E. Wolfe, of 48 Spruce street, wrote the book, the title of which is "Look Homeward Angel." The novel is just off the press of Scribners. The scene of the work is laid in Asheville with only momentary shifts to Chapel Hill and other cities. The major part of the action takes place in Asheville while virtually all the characters are residents of this city.

Young Wolfe, now 29 years old and a teacher in New York University, covers the first twenty years of his life in this novel. It is the utter frank story of himself, his home, neighbors and people about town. It is quite apparent from the book that the author was not happy. His life here, as he boldly sketches it, was crowded with pain, bitterness and ugliness.

While characters in the book are undoubtedly painted true to life, according to the author's idea of it, the names are changed and juggled around. However, any resident of Asheville who knew this city and its people during the period 1900 to 1920 will not have the slightest trouble in filling in the names of the real persons whom Wolfe made characters in his book. Asheville in this novel goes by the name of Altamont.

The sub-title of the novel terms it "A Story of the Buried Life." The character and quality of this unusual book is indicated with considerable clearness by an excerpt from a letter by the author which accompanied the manuscript when it was submitted to the publishers:

"The book covers the life of a large family (the Gants of Altamont) for a period of twenty years. It tries to describe not only the visible outer lives of all these people, but even more their buried lives.

"This book was written in simpleness and nakedness of soul. When I began to write the book, I got back something of a child's innocency and wonder. It has in it much that to me is painful and ugly, but, without sentimentality or dishonesty it seems to me that pain has inevitable fruition in beauty. And the book has in it sin and terror and darkness—ugly dry lusts, cruelty—the dark, the evil, the forbidden. But, I believe it has many other things as well and I wrote it with strong joy, without counting the costs, for I was sure at the time that the whole of my intention—which was to come simply and unsparingly to naked life, and to tell all of my story without affectation—would be apparent.

"What merit the book has I do not know. It sometimes seems to me that it presents a picture of American life that I have never seen elsewhere."

Has Real Literary Merit

To the outsider, "Look Homeward Angel" is an outstanding novel possessed of unquestioned literary merit. The portraiture is vivid, the style is incisive, the narrative flows with a freedom that sweeps along the most resisting reader.

In the preface, Wolfe raises the question whether the work is really autobiographical and then hastens to beg the question with clever twists of phrases. The net result is that the reader is left to make his own decision and the verdict of the Asheville readers will be unmistakably decisive. The intrinsic proof is overwhelming that Wolfe is relating the story of his own life and of those other lives which interlaced with his own.

This young man who is called Eugene Gant (in reality Thomas Wolfe, the author) is of a highly sensitive nature. He suffers much from misunderstanding at home, at school and in his relations with other boys. This misunderstanding which seems to be his unvarying lot gives to his life all the aspects of a tragedy which culminates in the death of his brother.

Scandal Dragged Forth

Most of the Asheville people who appear in the novel wear their most unpleasant guises. If there attaches to them any scandal which has enjoyed only a subterranean circulation, it is dragged forth into the light. If they have any weakness which more tolerant friends are considerate enough to overlook, these defects are faithfully described. In describing them, the author must often convey the impression to the unknowing that these weaknesses were the distinguishing characteristics of the persons.

The novel will be acclaimed to literary critics as a work of real distinction. But the suspicion is strong that Asheville people

will read it not because of its literary worth but rather in spite of any artistic merit which it may possess. They will read it because it is the story, told with bitterness and without compassion, of many Asheville people.

The author of "Look Homeward Angel," which is his first book. was born in Asheville in 1900. In 1920 he was graduated from the University of North Carolina and three years later received his Master of Arts degree from Harvard University, where he worked with George Pierce Baker in the '47 Workshop, following up dramatic experience as a member of the Playmakers at North Carolina.

After leaving Harvard, Wolfe traveled and taught. He adopted the plan of teaching a year and traveling a year. He had traveled extensively in Europe. At New York University he teaches English literature and composition.

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