Tom Wolfe began *The Right Stuff* at a time when it was unfashionable to contemplate American heroism. Nixon had left the White House in disgrace, the nation was reeling from the catastrophe of Vietnam, and in 1979--the year the book appeared--Americans were being held hostage by Iranian militants. Yet it was exactly the anachronistic courage of his subjects that captivated Wolfe. In his foreword, he notes that as late as 1970, almost one in four career Navy pilots died in accidents. *The Right Stuff*, he explains, became a story of why men were willing--willing?--delighted!--to take on such odds in this, an era literary people had long since characterized as the age of the anti-hero. Wolfe's roots in New Journalism were intertwined with the nonfiction novel that Truman Capote had pioneered with *In Cold Blood*. As Capote did, Wolfe tells his story from a limited omniscient perspective, dropping into the lives of his characters as each in turn becomes a major player in the space program. After an opening chapter on the terror of being a test pilots wife, the story cuts back to the late 1940s, when Americans were first
attempting to break the sound barrier. Test pilots, we discover, are people who live fast lives with dangerous machines, not all of them airborne. Chuck Yeager was certainly among the fastest, and his determination to push through Mach 1—a feat that some had predicted would cause the destruction of any aircraft—makes him the book's guiding spirit. Yet soon the focus shifts to the seven initial astronauts. Wolfe traces Alan Shepard's suborbital flight and Gus Grissom's embarrassing panic on the high seas (making the controversial claim that Grissom flooded his Liberty capsule by blowing the escape hatch too soon). The author also produces an admiring portrait of John Glenn's apple-pie heroism and selfless dedication. By the time Wolfe concludes with a return to Yeager and his late-career exploits, the narrative's epic proportions and literary merits are secure. Certainly The Right Stuff is the best, the funniest, and the most vivid book ever written about America's manned space program. --Patrick O'Kelley

Having seen the movie before reading the book, I expected Wolfe's THE RIGHT STUFF to be good. I was surprised how good it turned out to be in capturing the mood of the America in the late 50s and early 60s. Character, admittedly topped off with a little self-promotion in order to rise up the military ladder, was king. Also pointed out by Wolfe is the Protestant underpinnings of the seven golden boys. Backed by Presbyterian and TIME magazine czar, H. Luce, John Glenn (Presbyterian to the core) became the perfect promotional piece for the day and age.

The narrative moves quickly. The sections on Yeager are worthy of their own treatment as a book. Wolfe is on top of his game, which in his case is not being too flowery.

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