

What the F*** is Wrong with Wolf?

Too far? Or not far enough?

Martin Scorsese's new film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, is a three-hour testimonial to the proposition that nothing succeeds like excess.

Whether it's Leonardo DiCaprio's acting, Scorsese's directing, or the characters' carefree wallowing in a cesspool of depravity, drugs, booze, sex, and random acts of greed, the movie is an utter assault on moral balance. It drains you, stuns you, and makes you feel a little less noble as a human being.

The characters are possessed by a primal drive to one-up each other – to snort more coke, bed more women, drive more exotic cars, have bigger houses, bigger expense accounts, bigger yachts, bigger hangovers. Live fast and die young.

Nothing seems to exemplify this gestalt better than the use of the word *fuck*, which populates the dialog like consonants in Polish names. A lot of reviews have expressed faux astonishment at this fact, many citing that the word is used more than 560 times during the movie. (Someone actually counted?!)

The irony is that this outrage is directed at Scorsese for his movie when in fact the excess is all in the book!

Leonardo DiCaprio's character, Jordan Belfort, is a real person and he really was called The Wolf of Wall Street (in a *Forbes* article of all places), and he wrote a confessional book about his exploits published in 2007.

I've read it. It is not exactly a whiz read. Belfort writes in the first person, which is fine, but he loves to reminisce in dense gray paragraphs of sometimes excruciating detail. But he offers two important caveats right up front. The first is that his book is written "in a voice that was playing inside my head at that very time." Which is why the writing is frenetic and bombastic and lubricious – because his mind at the time was fueled by a pharmacopeia of drugs. And the second is that his book is "a satirical reconstruction" of the "insanity" of that time.

Far from the being the balls-to-the-wall celebration of excess depicted in the movie, Belfort in his book actually has a higher purpose: "... what I sincerely hope is that my life serves as a cautionary tale ... to anyone who thinks there's anything glamorous about being known as a Wolf of Wall Street."

The movie is about excess, but the book is about *addiction* – to money, to things, to love, to sensations, to some magical something just out of reach. These addictions grow and invade and metastasize until eventually, like a cancer, they kill their host.

Jordan Belfort doesn't die. But *The Wolf of Wall Street* does. The movie equivocates about his fate at the end, leaving us to wonder if he really gets away with it after all, getting a slap-on-the-wrist punishment but keeping all his wealth. But in the book, in real life, the only thing Jordan Belfort gets away with is his sobriety – because he loses everything else. Everything. He goes to prison for twenty-two months, and he loses his business, his assets, his home, his wife, his children, his friends, himself. And he is still on the hook to pay back his defrauded clients \$110 million, somehow.

So maybe the real criticism of Martin Scorsese's movie shouldn't be that it goes too far in depicting excess – but because it fails to show us the shattering consequences of that excess, it doesn't go far enough.

Nevertheless, having said all that, like Fellini's *Satyricon*, you need to see it once.