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## Tom Wolfe at Miami Book Fair International: Even I can't sum up Miami

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Former Miami Mayor Manny Diaz has a conversation with Tom Wolfe on the stage at Miami Dade College, 300 NE Second Ave., Miami, as Wolfe kicks off this year's Miami Book Fair International by talking about his new novel, 'Back to Blood.'

Here are the things you might not know about Tom Wolfe: He prefers the tango to salsa dancing. He fondly remembers the flamingos at Hialeah Park. He has sipped Cuban coffee at Versailles. And he's not crazy about hip-hop but likes country music, if only for the song titles.

And yes. He wore one of his famous white suits — with black and white checked socks, no less — when he kicked off the 29th Miami Book Fair International on Sunday.

Wolfe, 81, was in town to talk about his new novel *Back to Blood* (Little, Brown, \$30), set in an ethnically embattled, riotous Miami he researched from the strip clubs of Sunny

Isles Beach to the pastelito shops of Hialeah.

"I knew so little but had a lot of fun," he told the full house of his time here, which is documented in the film *Tom Wolfe Gets Back to Blood*, which was shown after Wolfe's reading. Also at the fair Sunday: fashion designers Isabel and Ruben Toledo, who spoke at the Freedom Tower.

In conversation with former Mayor Manny Diaz — who will speak about his own book, *Miami Transformed: Rebuilding America One Neighborhood, One City at a Time*, Friday at the Freedom Tower — Wolfe was more stooped than you might remember, but happy to ramble on amiably after Diaz's questions.

*Back to Blood*, he said, started out as a desire to write about immigration, but every time he'd tell someone about his new subject, "they'd say, 'Oh, that's really interesting,' and then they'd go to sleep standing up like a horse," he said. But he kept working the idea, finally focusing on Cuban American immigrants and the way they have shaped the city.

The novel touches on potentially explosive themes, but that's necessary in fiction, Wolfe believes. A former journalist who pioneered the New Journalism with works like *The Right*

Stuff and The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, he strives to make his fiction deeply grounded in fact.

"So few writers want to touch the subject of race and ethnicity. It makes people nervous," Wolfe said. "But that's what America is all about. It's the great meeting place of people from all over the world."

Wolfe talked about his friendship with former Police Chief John Timoney, art ("artists are the best real estate developers") and even had a chuckle at a question from an audience member about an essay he wrote calling John Updike, Norman Mailer and John Irving "My Three Stooges."

But he told the audience that even with all his research, he couldn't hope to sum up Miami.

"There's no blanket statement I could make," he admitted. "There's such variety."

Before the reading, audience member Michele Zakis of Miami said that she hadn't yet read *Back to Blood* but was intrigued by the amount of research Wolfe did on the city and was curious about just how real his Miami is.

"I'm interested in how Miami is portrayed in fiction," she said. "I'm kind of a literary snob. Some writers, you think they nailed what it's like to be here in Miami. Other times . . . South Florida has a flavor that's different than anyplace else. Mr. Wolfe has captured what's different about other places he's written about."

Even if he did capture the pulse of the city, Wolfe has no plans to put another chronicler of Miami out of business.

"Carl Hiaasen is in a league by himself," he said. "I think I've read every word he's ever written. I wouldn't even think of topping him."

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