

Book Review: 'The Trust'

by Brett Yates

Few artists can claim to be financial experts; fortunately, most are poor enough that they don't need to be. But it's for this reason, surely, that there are so few works of fiction dealing with the world of high finance, and the result is a somewhat staggering imbalance in our literature: the workings of all-important Wall Street are analyzed unceasingly in newspapers, magazines, and other nonfiction, and almost not at all in novels.

Seeking to fill the apparent void is South Carolina native Norb Vonnegut, a Harvard MBA and former wealth manager who, at about age 50, turned to writing financial thrillers. So far, Vonnegut (a distant cousin of Kurt, though quite utterly unrelated from a literary perspective) has penned three mysteries reporting upon the misadventures of bankers and CEOs.

His latest, "The Trust," revisits stockbroker Grove O'Rourke, the hero of Vonnegut's debut, "Top Producer." The adventure starts when O'Rourke's lifelong mentor, the Charleston aristocrat Palmer Kincaid, dies in a suspicious boating accident, and Kincaid's family urges Grove to take his spot as a trustee at the Palmetto Foundation, a famed nonprofit.

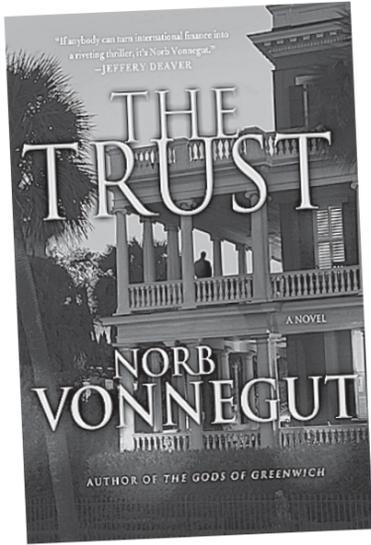
But there's something fishy about one of the NPO's biggest clients, the Catholic Fund, as O'Rourke soon learns from a lawyer representing a group of outraged citizens from Fayetteville, NC: a new "adult superstore" has opened in their area, complete with lascivious billboards, and for some reason, it's bankrolled by the Catholic Fund. Alongside O'Rourke, the lawyer — a large, jolly North Carolinian called Biscuit Hughes — begins to investigate, and together they uncover darker secrets and larger crimes, pecuniary and otherwise, than either could have imagined.

When it comes to money, Vonnegut clearly knows his stuff, but "The Trust" deliberately avoids the opaque technicality of a film like "Margin Call." Although the story begins in Manhattan, it stretches all the way down the East Coast, concluding in the Turks and Caicos, and on the way it presents characters and situations that, if not entirely convincing, are at least more variegated than the phrase "financial thriller" might suggest: the book's coin-flipping, psychotic villain resembles Anton Chigurh more than he does Gordon Gekko.

Still, it's clear that, in Vonnegut's world, cash rules all, and like Tom Wolfe, the author possesses a strong, vaguely covetous interest in the very rich: owners of private jets, consumers of expensive wine, the antique patrician families in downtown Charleston. Vonnegut's ambitions, however, are (even) less literary than Wolfe's — his punchy commercial prose includes phrases like "smug self-satisfaction" — and significantly less sociological: though immersed in finance, O'Rourke isn't a really an observer (or victim) of the financial industry, and in fact he functions more in the generically heroic mode of an action-story protagonist, tender toward women and effective against evil. "The Trust" addresses the moral gray areas of high finance only in snappy asides.

And, ultimately, for all its Wall Street window dressing, the plot itself depends more on the usual elements of suspense yarns — killings, kidnappings, Colombian drug-lords, hand-to-hand combat — than it does on mergers and acquisitions. Although framing this material within the realm of banking is Vonnegut's "angle," it's not clear to me that it consequently becomes more entertaining — the attempt, it seems, is not to elevate the material but to elevate finance: that is, to give it glamor and danger. Some of its dullness, however, does shine through, even without giving the reader much of an opportunity to learn about brokerage or brokers, except insofar as the bland psyche of Grove O'Rourke probably better reflects the actual personalities of our moneymen than does, say, the lunacy of Patrick Bateman.

Brett Yates moved to North Carolina from Vermont in 2011. He lives in Durham and works in Chapel Hill.



NOW ON TAP AT THE BREWERY!

OKTOBERFEST LAGER & BLACK IPA

OKTOBERFEST MENU AVAILABLE ALL MONTH LONG GET YOUR SCHNITZEL FIX

TAKE THE SKY BLUE EXPRESS SHUTTLE FROM OUR CHAPEL HILL LOCATION TO KENAN STADIUM

FREE BREWERY TOURS EVERY SATURDAY AT 5PM CALL 919.545.2330 TO MAKE A RESERVATION

COLD BEER TO GO! KEGS, GROWLERS & SIX-PACKS



MONDAYS KIDS EAT FREE WITH A PAYING ADULT [SOME RESTRICTIONS APPLY]

TUESDAYS \$3 PINTS

WEDNESDAYS TRIVIA NIGHT 8:00 START. TEAM SIGN-UP BEGINS AT 7:30 IN BAR AREA WINNING TEAMS EARN TWO \$25 GIFT CARDS

\$12 PITCHERS

JOIN THE BREW CREW EARN REWARDS POINTS, RECEIVE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER & GET INVITED TO FREE BEER TASTINGS AND OTHER SPECIAL EVENTS

CAROLINA BREWERY BELLEFONT STATION [64/15-501] PITTSBORO • 919.545.2330
WWW.CAROLINABREWERY.COM • f

Stay pain-free and strong with Physical Therapy

- One-on-one treatment sessions
- Insurance filed for patients
- Medicare approved providers
- Private insurance accepted*
- Sliding fee scale
- Free balance screenings
- Experienced, licensed therapists
- In-home therapy for Pittsboro seniors

*call for details



Convenient office locations in Siler City and Pittsboro

Phone: (919) 636-2423 www.MobileRehabNC.com Fax: (919) 883-5365



LOCALLY OWNED SINCE DAY ONE

SINCE 1982
Weaver Street REALTY

Weaver Street Realty
116 E. Main Street, Carrboro (919) 542-7122