



2008
Kansas Reads
In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

Truman Capote -- A Biography
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Truman Capote, born Truman Streckfus Persons, in New Orleans on September 30, 1924, was 41 years old at the time that *"In Cold Blood"* was published. Although by this time he was hobnobbing with the rich and famous and living between New York and Europe, he was born in poor in New Orleans to a 16-year-old girl who had taken a chance on life's lottery by marrying a good looking and fast talking (but usually unemployed) salesman. Their marriage was rocky and ended after four years. Lillie Mae, who acknowledged that motherhood did not really suit her, often left little Truman alone while she sought out excitement and male companionship. Eventually, she dumped him in the care of elderly aunts living in Monroeville, Alabama, a town of a few thousand people. Here he lived for much of his childhood until Lillie Mae (now calling herself Nina) married again, this time with better result, to a well-to-do businessman named Joe Capote. She reclaimed Truman, and the family moved to New York.

It was while Truman lived in Monroeville that he met and befriended the girl next door, Nelle Harper Lee. Truman was different from other kids, small for his age, delicate, with pale skin and wispy yellow hair. He would later recall his "differentness" and claim that he knew, even then, that he had an intellect and perceptiveness beyond those of his peers and that he felt he was destined to be a writer and to do something great. Yet he was lonely and probably the brunt of much teasing by other children. He coped by writing stories, sometimes for as long as four to five hours daily. On befriending Nelle, he found a companion with whom he could share a love of writing and literature as well as the delights of a vivid imagination. Nelle also protected him from the other kids. Truman and Nelle would remain friends for a long time, and both become renowned authors in American literature, with their most important titles published within years of each other and making the authors financially wealthy. 1

In New York, Truman attended private schools, eventually dropping out at age 17. He didn't thrive well in formal academic settings and didn't make especially good grades. He would later say that he felt high school a waste of time when he knew what he wanted to do. Instead, he took a job as a copy boy at the *New Yorker*, began writing, and eventually submitting pieces for publication to magazines and publishing companies.

His works, generally short fictional pieces, articles, some screenplays and stories, were well-received by critics, and his name circulated in literary circles. But Truman did not leave all this to chance; he was a great self-promoter.

His short fiction, *"Breakfast at Tiffany's"*, was an instant hit (some say Holly Golightly was modeled after his mother, while others say Holly is a blend of several of his socialite friends) and was soon made into a movie. Truman thought Marilyn Monroe, whom he knew personally, perfect for the lead, but the producers selected Audrey Hepburn, also a friend of Truman's but an actress he thought not right for the part. 2

Truman had many friends, especially female friends. He was a great wit, a fantastic story teller, and a gossip, but one who gossiped with great discrimination, knowing when, how, and to whom he should treat to titillating tidbits in order to endear himself to the listener.

He was able to put people at ease and coax from them intimate secrets. He became great friends with the Paleys, Bill and Babe, with the Chaplins, Charlie and Oona, with the Kennedy's (but particularly with Lee Radziwell). He was close to a group of glamorous and rich women (his swans he called them) who had time and money on their hands and who found his company incomparable. Plus, since Capote was openly homosexual, there were no objections from jealous husbands or fears on the part of the women of being chased around the couch. He also became friends with other famous writers of the day, including Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, and more.

At age 23, Capote published "*Other Voices, Other Rooms*". This work, largely autobiographical he would later acknowledge, dealt with the taboo subject of homosexuality. The novel was much awaited and, when released, shot to top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. The novel received high acclaim from critics around the country but less enthusiasm from New York critics. This threw Capote into a depression. Orville Prescott of the *New York Times*, after registering some more muted comments, went on to write, "It is impossible not to succumb to the potent magic of his writing..." and adding that Capote was "gifted, dangerously gifted". 3

The back cover of the novel caused a publicity flare-up of its own. The photograph of young Truman, lounging horizontally and looking up into the camera with doe eyes from under blonde bangs, was considered vulgar by many.

In late 1959, Truman was tiring of fiction and becoming more and more interested in factual writing. He considered the first a true art form but wanted to apply its techniques to the latter. It was in this spirit that he accepted an assignment with the *New Yorker* to cover the story of the Clutter murders in Kansas for what was originally meant to be a long article. The subject matter intrigued him. According to his biographer, Gerald Clarke:

Truman realized that a crime of such horrifying dimensions was a subject that was indeed beyond him, a truth he could not change. Even the location, a part of the country as alien to him as the steppes of Russia, had a perverse appeal. "Everything would seem freshly minted," he later explained, reconstructing his thinking at that time. "The people, their accents and attitude, the landscape, its contours, the weather. All this, it seemed to me, could only sharpen my eye and quicken my ear." Finally he said to himself, "Well, why not *this* crime? The Clutter case. Why not pack up and go to Kansas and see what happens?" 4

Capote knew from experience that gaining entry into a new culture or social group might take a little groundwork. James McCain, president of Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, was contacted by Bennet Cerf. The two had met shortly before when Cerf spoke at the University. McCain, as it happened, had known Herb Clutter, and agreed to do what he could. According to the Gerald Clarke biography:

Capote arrived in Manhattan on November 19, 1959, only four days after the murder. He was accompanied by his long time friend, Harper Lee President McCain arranged for a luncheon in the K-State Union that included mostly people from the School of Agriculture who had known Herbert Clutter. Earle Davis, chair of the English Department, also attended. Cerf recounted how McCain told him that when he met Capote he was wearing a pink velvet coat. After Capote announced, "I bet I'm the first man who has ever come to Manhattan, Kansas, wearing a Dior jacket," McCain replied,

"I'll go you one better, Mr. Capote. You're probably the first man or woman who ever came to Manhattan wearing a Dior jacket. 5

Truman expected to engage in a few weeks or months of research for his story. He was, at the time, not interested in the outcome of the case. His "angle" was not that of a true crime writer. Instead, he would probe the effect of such a terrible crime on the psyche of the residents of an isolated area of the country. He had no reason to think the case would be solved while he was conducting research or that it would be solved at all.

But events overtook him. Of his initial trip to Kansas, Clarke writes:

... if he had realized then what the future held, Truman said afterward, he never would have stopped, ' I would have driven straight on. Like a bat out of hell." 6

After a couple of days in Manhattan, Truman and Nelle rented a car and began their trip to Garden City. Nelle was brought along as a "research assistant", but, as detailed in her biography, *"Mockingbird"*, she was much more. Nelle was vital to gaining access to the sources used in the book. She was straightforward and friendly and people liked her and felt comfortable with her at first blush. Truman, on the other hand, was an oddity in Western Kansas, a region that was generally conservative and populated with people who knew each other, depended on neighbors, and were known for keeping their counsel. Unlike Truman, Western Kansans generally did not call attention to themselves, show or talk about their wealth, or engage in name dropping. Most were not familiar with the *New Yorker*. 7

It was understandably difficult for residents of Finney County, already in the throes of trauma after such a hideous murder, to open up to this curious man, obviously homosexual, wearing long flowing scarves, and speaking in a high-pitched voice. Grief and shock caused a need to protect one's own from the peep-show atmosphere of it all. What's more, Capote did not even carry a press pass.

Thus it was that two of the last century's most notable American writers blew into western Kansas and spent months pacing the streets of Garden City and Holcomb observing, gathering facts, and getting acquainted with local law enforcement and other residents.

Capote and Lee set to work on the day following the Clutter funeral, but had little luck in getting interviews the first weeks.

The ice was broken when Dolores and Clifford Hope kindly invited the duo to Christmas dinner at their home, knowing that it would be difficult for Truman and Nelle to find a meal on Christmas Day. Alvin Dewey and his wife (she had grown up in New Orleans, so that she and Truman had some common ground) became friends soon after – Truman would nickname Dewey "Foxy". Another "break" occurred when Truman and Nelle were invited to accompany investigators to view the Clutter home.

After this, many friendships opened for them in Garden City, and people were able to get beyond Capote's aspect and mannerisms. Biographers indicate that Truman was generally interested in people and felt great affection towards his Kansas friends. Both he and Lee kept in contact with many of them in the years following the investigation and publication of the book.

Truman and Nelle spent December and January in Finney County, and then, as they were beginning to wind down their research, the killers were caught. They were dining at the

Dewey's when a call came informing Alvin that an arrest had been made in Las Vegas. Two men "fingered" by Floyd Wells, a fellow inmate at Fort Leavenworth, had been apprehended. Smith, Hickock, and Wells had been in prison at the same time and had fantasized about robbing the Clutters. Floyd, an ex-employee of Clutter, assured Hickock and Smith that Mr. Clutter kept a lot of money in a home safe.

The arrests signified a turning point for Truman. What was to be a lengthy article about the crime now had sufficient breadth to become a book. Capote realized that he had the potential to unveil a whole new aspect of crime –the criminal point of view. There was also the possibility of a satisfying and tidy ending – the trial, the sentencing, and the eventual disposition of the accused. The research and writing, but even more so, the waiting for an ending, took six years. It also took a great emotional toll. Capote, using skills he had honed over the years, became close to the alleged killers in order to extract from them facts and information that he used to draw their portraits and tell the story of the planning and aftermath of the crime. During this period, Truman became truly interested in and emotionally attached to the killers, Richard Hickock and Perry Smith, and they to him. This was particularly true of Perry Smith, who had a start in life very similar to that of Truman's – a negligent mother who would abandon him, a transient life, years of enduring the scorn of others because he was different.

There were allegations from some, Harold Nye being one, that Smith and Capote had become lovers during their years of contact. ⁸ Certainly, Capote was a lifeline for the two men, one way for them to keep in contact with the outside world. As appeals and stays of execution dragged on, hope undoubtedly grew on the part of the convicted men, that Capote, with his national fame, might save them from the hangman's noose.

Although the murderers were located, tried, and convicted within a relatively short timeframe, the ongoing appeals and stays of execution prevented Truman from finishing his book. In the intervening years, Nelle would publish and receive the Pulitzer Prize and great critical acclaim for "To Kill a Mockingbird". The movie rights to the book would be sold and production begun in January 1962. In the same month, Nelle would return to Garden City, Kansas, with Truman. Only now, she now as famous as he.

In 1965, luck ran out for Hickock and Smith. Their final appeal was denied. Capote attended their hanging. He watched Hickock hang, and then, according to some accounts, slunk out before Smith dropped. It was very emotional for him:

Crying, Truman later called Jack [Jack Dunphy, his long-time companion] to describe the terrible scene he had witnessed. Jack was unsympathetic. ⁹

Capote wrote the book in "*In Cold Blood*" in Switzerland, away from the distractions of New York and its social whirl. He was to say once that all of that (the New York social scene) now seemed surreal to him, the only reality being in the stark lands of Kansas.

"*In Cold Blood*" was serialized in installments in the *New Yorker* in the fall of 1965 before its release as a book in January of 1966. It was an instant best seller and was translated into several languages. It made Capote \$6 million in 1960's money and freed him from the need to ever again worry about finances.

However, all was not triumph and accolades. Many close to the case disputed the facts as they were set down in the book. Some were angered by their or their loved ones' portrayals in the book. There were questions about how direct quotes could be used as factual when the events of the case were long gone and tape recorders were not involved.

(Capote famously never used a tape recorder and seldom took notes.) There was also indignation that the author had courted the killers and then profited from their demise, doing little to save them from their fate. All this, however, did not slow down book sales. Furthermore, the writing itself received acclaim, and the book is still considered important in the field of journalism for its new approach to factual writing.

In any case, the wild success of the book, according to a friend, John Malcom Brinnin, led to

“new heights of success and a wide reshuffling of his (Truman’s) priorities...On its profits he was able to buy an apartment ...in New York’s United Nations Plaza; a small estate with two houses, one for himself and one for Jack Dunphy, in the Hamptons of Long Island; another house in Palm Springs, California; all the while retaining a chalet in Verbier, Switzerland, where much of that book (“In Cold Blood”) was written.” 10

In the fall of 1966, Capote threw his famous black-and-white ball, ostensibly to honor Katherine Graham, editor of *The Washington Post*, but most probably celebrating the success of his book. Now more famous than ever, Truman set about inviting a select list of celebrities (dissing many more) and including several of his Kansas friends. The ball, held in the ballroom of the Plaza Hotel in New York City, was “the” event of the social season. Guests were invited via tasteful cream-colored invitations with orange borders and informed of proper dress: white or black for the women, black for the men, and a mask to be worn by all. Capote had worked on his guest list for months, carrying around a black and white notebook entitled “Dance”. He dangled hints about who would be invited and generally whipped up excitement among the social elite and in newspaper society columns. 11

Not many years after this, Truman began drinking heavily and using drugs. He became reckless with his commentary and worked on his final (unfinished) novel “*Answered Prayers*”, in which he painted thinly veiled portraits of his society friends, angering many. They retaliated by dropping him from their social circles. He left the security of his long-time love affair with Jack Dunphy and experimented with other, often younger, lovers.

During these years, Truman craved more and more admiration and sought out publicity, appearing as a regular on talk shows. But his public persona was increasingly stained. He was a favorite target of comics. He was a risky guest on the speaking circuit, and had to be escorted in 1977 from the stage at the University of Maryland, incoherent and unsteady on his feet. In 1981, he was removed comatose from his Manhattan apartment. He got fat and then thin and fat again. He was in and out of drug and alcohol treatment centers and hospitals.

Capote died at the home of a friend, Joanne Carson (ex-wife of Johnny Carson) in 1983. The autopsy revealed no alcohol in his blood stream, and, while there was no single cause of death, the coroners determined it to be attributable to liver disease complicated by phlebitis and multiple drug intoxication.

Notes

1. Shields, Charles J. Mockingbird: a portrait of Harper Lee. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006.
2. Clarke, Gerald. Capote: a biography. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988, p. 269.
3. Clarke, Capote: a biography, p.156.
4. Clarke, Capote: a biography, p. 318.
5. K-State libraries staff bulletin, November 2, 2006, K-State Keepsakes: The Truman Capote Connection, K- State.
6. Clarke, Capote: a biography, p. 320.
7. Shields, Charles J. Mockingbird, pp. 133-179.
8. Davis, Deborah. Party of the Century: the fabulous story of Truman Capote and his black and white ball. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2006, p. 64.
9. Clarke, Capote: a biography, p. 354.
10. Brinnin, John Malcom. Truman Capote: Dear heart, old buddy, New York: Dell, 1981. p. 131.
11. Davis, Deborah. Party of the Century: the fabulous story of Truman Capote and his black and white ball. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2006.

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