

## ANALYSIS

*In Cold Blood* (1965)

Truman Capote

(1924-1984)

“Capote has, in short, achieved a work of art. He has told exceedingly well a tale of high terror in his own way. But, despite the brilliance of his self-publicized efforts, he has made both a tactical and a moral error... By insisting that ‘every word’ of his book is true he has made himself vulnerable to those readers who are prepared to examine seriously such a sweeping claim.”

Philip K. Tomkins  
*Esquire* (1966)

“‘Nonfiction novel’ is Truman Capote’s coinage in connection with *In Cold Blood* (1965), and his appropriation of such an incestuous phrase could well have been connected to his difficulties in writing fiction.... [Tom] Wolfe in *The New Journalism* demonstrates how fictional techniques may be adapted by journalists, to create the new form....roving back and forth in time; interior monologue, even stream of consciousness (all invented by the writer); composite characterization--the use of types to produce an individual; simultaneity of event (employed most effectively by Capote in *In Cold Blood*, where killers and their victims are paralleled); the invention of a supporting cast as filler.... One of the essential ingredients of the new journalism is that the author offers himself as an equivalent of the subject, or takes on a vicarious persona...Capote for the killers in *In Cold Blood*... Despite all its critical kudos and Capote’s vast claims for it, [the story] would have come to us better as fiction....

“*A Time to Die* [by Tom Wicker] makes Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, despite its fine writing and careful attention to detail, seem clinical and insignificant.... *In Cold Blood* (1965) falters whenever the author comes up against novelistic reference points, succeeds best when it withdraws toward journalism. This is another way of saying *In Cold Blood* is least what Capote claimed for it, more if we forget his remarks and read the book neutrally. He created a considerable stir in the mid-sixties when he labeled this book about the murder of a Kansas family, the Clutters, a ‘nonfiction novel.’ He meant he had written a novel without ‘affect,’ perhaps on the model of Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Butor. The nonfiction novel would be based on fact, here the brutal murder of the entire Clutter family on November 15, 1959, by Perry Smith and Richard Hickock. It would not contain authorial commentary or analysis, and it would be meticulously researched and presented dispassionately. Its ‘novelistic’ quality would be a matter of arrangement. Overall, it would fit into what Sontag called ‘against interpretation’....

Two seemingly isolated facts will bring destruction and death. Capote has provided dual convergences. The first is the description of the Clutters in their everyday, highly successful lives, with the author intruding to tell us it was their last day; this is followed by a description of the killers preparing to make the journey which will result in the Clutters’ deaths. The family moves toward its hour of doom, while the murderers race their car to bring it about. Once the murders have occurred, the next convergence has to do with the killers racing away, to other states, then to Mexico, while the police begin to pickup clues. As part of the convergence, we learn of a prisoner who knows the killers and why they sought out the Clutters; based on information he supplied as to the layout of the farm, they hoped to break into a safe holding considerable cash. This part of the convergence, then, involves three elements rather than two: Hickock and Smith moving away, the police inching toward them, and the third party with crucial information which at first he withholds.

Once these convergences are completed, however, the book falters. The capture, trial, conviction, and execution are anticlimactic foregone conclusions. Therefore, we must deal with two aspects of *In Cold Blood*: the use of arrangement as novelistic--how effective, how not; and the question of authorial withdrawal in terms of analysis of latent, subjective elements. Capote’s choice of arrangement was made from many he could have used. In purely journalistic terms, he could have related what occurred as an

unfolding story. That would have meant, roughly, a chronological sequencing. Or else, he could have modified chronology and given us the conviction and execution first.... Capote's choice was to use convergence; but that method's brilliance is diluted by what happens when the convergence has had its inevitable run. We can say that arrangement, alone, is insufficient for the materials....

By negating analysis in favor of factual presentation, Capote has set back the novel, not advanced it. He has tried to destroy the voice or voices, and yet he has despoiled his own work; he is not neutral. I do not, however, believe with many critics that he mocked the Clutters and their normalcy while showing sympathy for Perry Smith and his perversities. The Clutters come through touchingly, especially Nancy, but also the father and even the mentally ill mother. Their generosity and basic decency emerge, despite rigidity in other areas. If they represent the backbone of America rather than the values of New York's Upper East Side, Capote gives them their due. He may not like them, but he respects the way they have ordered their lives, and he does like Nancy, whose death is especially poignant. And he also likes Perry Smith, the muscle man with stunted legs and tiny feet, who pops aspirins for killer headaches, a man without education who aspires to knowledge, and is yet a raging killer.

Capote despoils his work when he retreats from the very areas which would, outside of arrangements, make his book novelistic. Although the Clutters needed little fictional treatment--they seemed to be what they were--Mrs. Clutter's mental illness amidst all this order and stability would appear to indicate that other factors were operating in the family life or in the marriage. We see relatively little of her, but she is there, and we wonder how such discordant elements came to pass. She is, in a sense, some form of sacrifice, so that the rest of the family can survive on its terms. Shunted off to an upstairs room, which she keeps to when people visit, Bonnie Clutter is a mystery, like Rochester's Bertha, someone who haunts what is otherwise a normal household, the 'madwoman in the attic.'

Analogously, Capote fails to deal with elements that went into Hickock and Smith. Hickock's childhood and upbringing were not abnormal, and yet he turned into a vicious criminal, not only a potential murderer but a rapist and pursuer of young girls. He married two sixteen-year-olds, but his tastes ran to girls half that age. He is really the accumulated deposits of a civilization's debris, and yet he remains a mystery... Perry Smith, whom Capote favors, is presented with greater detail, and he is potentially a character of considerable novelistic qualities. Yet the very areas which provide the dimension of fiction are neglected. They are difficult, and probably one reason Capote withdrew was that he recognized he was out of his depth.

The designation 'nonfiction novel' was a way of avoiding an essential fact: the kind of crime committed meant an application to the novel at such a profound level that the author was moving into territory occupied by Dostoyevsky, Conrad, Balzac, Stendhal, Musil; territory marked off as psychopathological and, therefore, requiring the finest novelistic skills to make sense of motivation and character traits. The book as Capote wrote it is a considerable achievement, and when he went wrong it was at a high level. But he was pretentious in labeling his book a 'nonfiction novel,' a false trail which his supporters followed. The book is non-fiction, with authorial intrusions, part of the so-called new journalism, which allows the writer to intrude into his material. But it is not 'novelistic'; that is something else, and Capote cannot have it all, having recognized he could not do it all.

The Clutter case would be the first of several hideous killings, those mass murders of the 1960s which accompanied the political assassinations, provided a great number of books, not because the killings were considered anomalous or atypical but because they seemed to define us."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 163-64, 562, 575, 578-79

"I recognized it as a work of art, but I know fakery when I see it. Capote completely fabricated quotes and whole scenes. The book made something like \$6 million in 1960s money, and nobody wanted to discuss anything wrong with a money-maker like that in the publishing business."

Jack Olsen  
true crime writer

quoted by Michael Hood  
“True Crime Doesn’t Pay: A Conversation with Jack Olsen”  
*Point No Point* (Winter 1998-99)

Michael Hollister (2015)