

ANALYSIS

Other Voices, Other Rooms (1948)



Truman Capote

(1924-1984)

“[Capote is] the hope of modern literature.”

Somerset Maugham

“I suppose someone had to write the fairy *Huckleberry Finn*.”

George Davis, editor

“No piece of Capote’s fiction has elicited as much comment, criticism, and bewilderment as the gothic and complex first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Indeed, the dust jacket picture of the sensitive reclining face staring out from beneath boyish bangs was perhaps as great a cause for the excited confusion as anything in the book. But the difficult and fantastic remoteness of the book has been exaggerated by the mistaken identification of the hero with his exotic and precocious creator. Basically, *Other Voices* resembles Capote’s twilight stories in that it concerns an adolescent’s initiation into the private and inverted adult world, full of danger and evil.... Joel Knox’s search for his father, which leads him from the realistic daylight of New Orleans to the fantastic twilight of Skully’s Landing, can be considered as a search for identity. Joel moves from the outside world toward the personal, just as he moves from the bright afternoon heat of Noon City to the dream-like darkness of his new home—Skully’s Landing.”

Paul Levine

“*Other Voices, Other Rooms* abundantly justifies the critics and readers who first hailed Capote as a writer of exceptional gifts.... Capote’s sensibility is as notable as his insight, and its range is impressive, for it enables him to describe elements of physical environment that would be scarcely perceptible to most of us; yet these elements, however unnoticed, are recognized by the reader as authentic, and indisputably present. But although his descriptive writing is masterly, it is his ability to create and interpret character—to increase both the scope and depth of our understanding of ourselves and others—that yields the major excellences of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*.... It is not only a work of unusual beauty, but a work of unusual

intelligence. In it, readers will establish contact with one of the most accomplished American novelists to make his debut in many a season.”

Lloyd Morris
New York Herald Tribune
(16 January 1948) 2

“Even if Mr. Capote were ten or twenty years older than he is, his ability to bend language to his poetic moods, his ear for dialect and for the varied rhythms of speech would be remarkable. In one so young this much writing skill represents a kind of genius. On the other hand, I find myself deeply antipathetic to the whole artistic-moral purpose of Mr. Capote’s novel.... For it seems to me to create a world of passive acceptance in which we are rendered incapable of thinking anybody responsible for his behavior in any department.”

Diana Trilling
Nation
(31 January 1948) 133-4

“Mr. Capote does have a remarkable facility with words; he can make perfectly normal horrors and shocks appear like enormities upon the senses. At times we can even hear a haunting funereal music behind Mr. Capote’s wayward language. If he had selected his material more carefully, shown more restraint, and had been less concerned with terrifying us out of our wits, he might have easily made a real and tenderly appealing story out of the experiences of thirteen-year-old Joel Knox and the people he meets during that long and lonely summer of his approaching maturity.”

Richard McLoughlin
Saturday Review
(14 February 1948) 12

“*Other Voices, Other Rooms* is easily the most exciting novel to come from America this year. Though one of its chief characters is what is customarily referred to by reviewers as ‘decadent,’ both he and the rest of the characters in this emotional story of all the South make the average character in contemporary American fiction seem perverted by comparison. For the only moral standard that literature knows is the truth, and it is the truthful intensity of Mr. Capote’s book that makes it so remarkable.... He has dared to write of life in all its complex splendor and to tell of the human heart, and yet he has triumphed without sinking into romanticism or departing from any of the desired standards of taste and maturity.... But what ensures its success is the quality of Mr. Capote’s writing, which is very high indeed, and original without being exhibitionist or obscure.”

Robert Kee
Spectator
(19 November 1948) 674-6

“In Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), the action found its occasion in gothic Southern decadence confronted by youthful melancholy. The orphaned innocent, Joel Knox, is settled into the isolated, decrepit Southern mansion called, conveniently, ‘The Skulls,’ and then mementos of canceled possibilities are made to breed thickly around him. First of all, his mother has just died, and therefore that normalcy has departed. His father’s house, in which he finds himself, is a corpse, which is slowly sinking into the earth. The father is a paralyzed mute. The stepmother is an ancient belle out of her time, turned witless and alcoholic. The Negro servants, Jesus Fever and Zoo Fever, suggest ancient passions which are now decrepit or brutalized: religion and animal sexuality.

Joel is offered a girl friend, who is an incipient lesbian. All around there are suggestions of an ancient (and ambiguous) evil by which the viability of the South was destroyed, and all the adults around Joel are engaged in looking backward to a dream of the past, the other voices and other rooms. Quite evidently, in this symbolization there is not any thrust of criticism of the facts of life of Southern society. The closest Capote permitted himself in this book to come to historical actuality is the episode in which a mule named John Brown is accidentally hanged. All events, names, and symbols tend to be arbitrary and bizarre, to the effect precisely of creating an ambient indefiniteness, within which it then becomes the boy’s necessary

ambition to find a certainty that will guarantee his existence. And he accepts a liaison with the pederast Cousin Randolph, who seems to stand for salvaging inversions, ideal beauty, and stasis.”

Marcus Klein
The American Novel since World War II
(Fawcett 1969) 18

“In *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1949), Truman Capote’s Joel Harrison Knox is an internalized version of Huck Finn. As much as Huck travels outward into land and river, Joel travels inward, toward surrealistic images, literary descriptions--Miss Havisham, Rochester’s Bertha, Faulkner’s laboring blacks and domestics, all transformed into hallucinatory experiences. But unlike Twain’s book, which starts as a boy’s experience and becomes an adult’s, Capote’s remains a book primarily for precocious children... There are lovely, lyrical passages, full of gently modulated melodies, especially toward the end, when Capote is bringing Joel through childhood toward adolescence and greater maturity. Such passages leave an impression of considerable control on the author’s part. It could be quite easy to confuse the precocious young Capote (at twenty-three) with the maturity of some of the prose, and from that extrapolate meanings in the novel that appear adult. A more accurate reading perceives the novel as a cotton candy confection, in which the author indulges himself with terrors, nightmares, Gothic and surrealistic images. The book is composed of readings brought together in a hyped-up prose, with passages of considerable loveliness. The level of observation remains that of a nervous child in a child’s world.

Everything is calculated for sensation. In the passage leading up to Joel’s vision of the nightmarish lady at the window, he passes through several thoughts: the sun as a ‘white hot sphere,’ the sky of ‘pure blue fire,’ playing Blackmail, the time when he saw ‘two grown men standing in an ugly little room kissing each other,’ to the ‘diamond glitter’ of the afternoon which hurt his eyes, to the bell which returns him to slave days, and then, finally, at the chapter break, to the vision or hallucination of the ‘queer lady.’ The lady has a ‘hazy substance’ for a face, ‘suffused marshmallow features,’ and ‘white hair...like the wig of a character from history.’ The scene is played for its descriptive tricks, and yet what does it mean? Although the lady recurs in his imagination and in his revelations to his cousin Randolph, she really has little to do with Joel. Unlike Miss Havisham, whose presence is central to Pip’s view of life, this queer lady is merely a sensation, a childish nightmare.

And most tellingly, the passages of description, effective as some are separately, do not cohere. Similarly, Randolph is presented as shaped by his campiness, his exhausted, played-out gayness. We understand he is part of that dream world of Joel’s which lies between childhood and growing maturity; in that world lies a kind of swamp, nightmare, hallucinatory experience. To get through the muck, the underbrush, the terrorizing images, is to grow and develop. That we can accept. We can even accept that a child’s world demands that all observations, like all experiences, must be drawn to him and expressed in terms of their meaning to him. Still, we must take Randolph on faith, and even if we do, what does he signify in the novel? Is he simply one of Joel’s hallucinations? If so, then the narrative is not a form, but merely an episodic arrangement of highly wrought passages.

Contrast the Capote novel with one it superficially resembles, Carson McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, also heavily indebted to Faulkner and to Southern fiction in general, written by an author in her early twenties, full of nightmarish characters and events. There is, even, an observer in Mick Kelly, a thirteen-year-old passing from childhood into maturity. But McCullers did not make the mistake of filtering everything through her; Mick is an observer, but within McCullers’s...control and modulation. Capote provides no such distance, so that when Joel sees something, that is not only his world but ours.

What keeps *Other Voices, Other Rooms* at the level of childhood is that the author blends himself with his chief observer, demanding equal love and attention. This lack of authorial distance keeps us, as readers, focused only on what the chief consciousness experiences, and if he is very young, then his vision is young. Salinger does something similar with Holden Caulfield, fixing us, however effectively, at Holden’s level. No matter how precociously talented, a young author who fails to differentiate in narrative terms between himself and his chief consciousness must reduce, not expand, experience. For Capote, the consequence is that we read paragraphs of immediate sensuousness which are like passages in an exercise book.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 163-64

Michael Hollister (2015)