

16 CRITICS DISCUSS

Truman Capote

(1924-1984)

“The most perfect writer of my generation.”

Norman Mailer

“Truman Capote has tried, with some success, to get into a world that I have tried, with some success, to get out of.” [Capote’s death was] “a good career move.”

Gore Vidal

“Capote’s imagined world is as beautiful as a water moccasin, and as poisonous. A Freudian critic would call it a world of infantile regression; a sinister underwater universe populated by monstrous children, expressionistic automates, and zombie adults, all viewed obliquely through the bang-shaded eyes... There can be no doubt of Capote’s evocative magic... Only it is invariably black magic.”

Charles A. Brady
Catholic World
(May 1949) 156

“Capote seems determined...to do nothing ordinary and therefore be memorable. This determination, plus an original sense for the macabre (exploited for all the sensationalism it is worth), a certain all too fallible delicacy and sensitivity, excellent powers of description and evocation, a genuine but unselective sense of humor, and an occasional sense for, and (rarely) the discipline of, poetry, sums up both his values and his equipment as a writer.”

Alexander Klein
New Republic
(4 July 1949) 18

“One thing about Truman Capote...that one notices right off is that he looks a little like a toy. That’s what some people say, anyway. If he is a toy, he nevertheless has a mind that would turn those big thinking cybernetic machines green with envy. As a matter of fact, his mind has enough good steel in it to turn too many human beings the same violent color--and it has, no doubt about it. Mr. Capote’s appearance is lamblike but all intellectual bullies are warned not to be deceived.”

Harvey Breit
New York Times
(24 February 1952) 29

“The inclusion of Truman Capote in any discussion that pretends to be at most scholarly and at least literary is usually frowned upon by the more stern-faced of our critics. The mention of his name conjures up images of a wispish, effete soul languishing on an ornate couch, emitting an ether of preciousness and very little else. The reaction to the amazing success of his early books, *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* and *A Tree of Night*, has relegated Capote to the position of a clever, cute, coy, commercial, and definitely minor figure in contemporary literature, whose reputation has been built less on a facility of style than on an excellent advertising campaign. Even an earnest supporter would have to admit that Capote’s stories tiptoe the tenuous line between the precious and the serious.”

Paul Levine
“Truman Capote: The Revelation of the Broken Image”
Virginia Quarterly Review XXXIV
(Autumn 1958) 600

“If the art of Truman Capote may be defined succinctly, it is highly detailed perception by all the senses, in which nothing, however small, personal or languid escapes due attention, and which, by the time his fine

grained literary style has given it shape and perspective, has become an engaging tissue of story-telling.... Since this little world receives a precise accounting which inevitably suggests the whole-souled concentration of a precocious child, it for the moment becomes a much bigger world and one full of surprises and beauty.”

Cyrus Durgin
Boston Globe
(15 December 1958)

“The homosexual is one of the last remaining tragic types. His dilemma, like that of the Negro and the Jew, provides a conflict which is easily presentable in fiction and which can be made to symbolize the larger conflicts of modern man. But this hardly seems adequate to explain the recurrence of the theme in the novels of Gore Vidal, the intense narcissism and sexual symbolism in all of Truman Capote’s work, or the coy posturing and giggliness... Their preoccupation with the theme is such that it seems to preclude their coming to grips with whole areas of human emotion. Vidal has not yet created a single convincing female character. His women are either mother types, sister types, or men dressed up as women.”

John Aldridge
After the Lost Generation (1951)
reprinted in *The American Novel since World War II*
ed. Marcus Klein (Fawcett 1969) 40

“A five-foot-two chubby gay fights his way out of the South and writes *In Cold Blood*. A fantastic controller of language who seemed bemused by his own orientation. Probably one of the most interesting conservatives American has ever produced. The size of a college fridge, he took a world of shit for never giving in and becoming a lefty so Gore Vidal might like him. Of Jack Kerouac—the writer who spills off the lips of wannabe cool kids when asked who they read—Capote said, ‘That’s not writing, that’s typing.’”

Greg Gutfield
Not Cool: The Hipster Elite and Their War on You
(Crown/Forum 2014) 237

A Tree of Night (1949)

“Evidently concerned to a rare degree with the technique of writing itself, Mr. Capote in his style reveals a combination of eloquence and of simplicity. The perfectly apt, homely, but unexpected adjective in a carefully limpid phrase: a familiar, plain, yet nowise banal vocabulary: a rare verb chosen rather than an elegant one--such are some of its more obvious characteristics.... Moreover, Mr. Capote’s style serves, generally, as a flexible and vigorous instrument for the communication of truly remarkable gifts of observation, whether of gesture or atmosphere.”

Iris Barry
New York Herald Tribune
(27 February 1949) 2

“If the Mad Hatter and the Ugly Duchess had had a child, and the child had almost grown up, these are almost the kind of short stories he could be expected to write.... Who wants, really, to crawl back into the twilight cave and roll the papier-mache stone over the doorway? Who would want to let Alice’s wonderland serve as the myth around which he organized his adult life?... With these reservations, however, one must fairly assert for these stories a kind of triple power: a mind at times disciplined toward poetry, with a special skill at naming; a pleasant and only slightly grotesque humor, and an ability to suggest, as in the novel, the outlines of haunted personalities.”

Carlos Baker
New York Times
(27 February 1949) 7

“As a teller of tales he has a peculiar and remarkable talent.... In his hands the fairy tale and ghost story manage to assimilate the attitudes of twentieth-century psychology without losing their integrity, without demanding to be accepted as mere fantasy or explained as mere symbol.... In Capote’s stories the fairy world, more serious than business or love, is forever closing in upon the skeptical secure world of grown-ups.”

Leslie A. Fielder
Nation
(2 April 1949) 395-6

The Grass Harp (1951)

“Mr. Capote’s second novel, *The Grass Harp*, remains within the extreme limits of what we call Gothic, but it is a sunlit Gothic, an aberrant form with a personality, an agreeable personality, entirely its own.... Mr. Capote keeps his story beautifully under control. His story has elements of allegory, it expounds a rather simple, basic statement concerning the nature of love.... In the beginning of the novel one does catch whiffs of the well-known Southern decay, but the book is not concerned with morbidity. It is a light, skilful, delightful story.”

Oliver La Farge
Saturday Review
(20 October 1951) 19-20

“Within the slim compass of this work, Truman Capote has achieved a masterpiece of passionate simplicity, of direct intuitive observation. Without any loss of intensity, he has purified the clotted prose of *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*, producing a luminous reflector for his unique visual sensibility.... He still deals in eccentricities but his characters are not wrenched out of their human context; in them, eccentricity becomes an extension, not a distortion of personality. Compassion, too--that abused quality--takes on a new depth here.”

Richard Hayes
Commonweal
(26 October 1951) 74

“Mr. Capote creates a world in which it seems perfectly natural for people to lodge in treetops; and equally natural for a retired judge to propose marriage to a dotty spinster while the two of them are perched on a branch.... Within its own terms, *The Grass Harp* comes pretty close, I should say, to being a complete success. It charms you into sharing the author's feeling that there is a special poetry--a spontaneity and wonder and delight--in lives untarnished by conformity and common sense.”

Charles J. Rolo
Atlantic Monthly
(November 1951) 89-90

Breakfast at Tiffany's (1958)

Cotton candy made into a popular movie starring Audrey Hepburn. Set in 1943-44, this very light novella is about two friends, Holiday (Holly) Golightly and the narrator, who is an aspiring writer living above her in an apartment house on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Holly is an outspoken free spirit of 19-20 who makes her living off of sugar daddies. In the end she abandons the narrator to continue her pursuit of a rich older man. This is okay because she is so cute. Capote celebrates the status-seeking materialistic values and glitter he himself pursued in New York.

Michael Hollister (2014)