**Capote in Kansas**

Stanley Kauffman's original review of Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood"

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*Though* In Cold Blood *received near-universal praise upon publication—and is generally regarded as the first of its kind, a non-fiction novel—not every critic was immediately enamored of it. In this 1966 review, Stanley Kauffmann (still a staffer here at the* New Republic*) agreed that the narrative was compelling and the Kansas scenery vivid, but the writing was another matter. "Capote," he rails, "demonstrates on almost every page that he is the most outrageously overrated stylist of our time."*

Here is a readable, generally interesting book about four murders in Kansas in 1959. If the author were John Doe, literary consideration could well end there. One might perhaps add that some of the writing is overripe, much of the detail is extraneous "color," some of the handling of material injudicious, and that a 343-page true-crime chronicle which does little more than recount a crime is inflated. Beyond that, however, the treatment, the style, the result would preclude extensive criticism.

But extension is inevitable here because of Truman Capote's reputation, the bruited years of preparation, the advance publicity (the book was praised three years before completion by Mark Schorer in his introduction to a volume of Capote's selected writings).

It is not flogging of the author with the publisher's blurb to quote: *"In Cold Blood . . .*represents the culmination of [Capote's] long-standing desire to make a contribution toward the establishment of a serious new literary form: the Non-fiction Novel." This view has been vociferously put forward by the author himself in an interview in *Life,*January 7, 1966 (of which more later). The stated aim is worth discussion, but that Capote has accomplished it is untrue. When I reviewed his selected writings in this journal (February 23, 1963), I noted that he seemed to me an author in search of a character, that his affinity with non-fiction was evident, that his forthcoming book might provide the role as writer for which he has observably, if not consciously, been looking during all his professional life. *In Cold Blood*is not a happy conclusion to that search, if it is a conclusion. The role in which it puts Capote is less than one could have hoped for. The book has been executed without the finesse of which, at his best, he has been capable, and it is residually shallow.

It tells the story of the murders of a Kansas farmer named Herbert Clutter, his wife, his teen-age son and daughter by two men named Hickock and Smith: of the criminals' detection, trial, eventual execution. The men had never previously seen any of the Clutters and had never been in the west Kansas town of Holcomb. They were ex-convicts who had been tipped off by a fellow-prisoner to what was thought to be a rich haul from a wealthy farmer. In fact, the killers took "between forty and fifty dollars" in return for four corpses.

Capote's structural method can be called cinematic: he uses intercutting of different story strands, intense close-ups, flashbacks, traveling shots, background detail, all as if he were fleshing out a scenario. There is nothing intrinsically defective in the method (although it seems the most obvious choice); but its mechanisms creak here because the hand of the maker is always felt, pushing and pulling and arranging. The chief defect, or imbalance, in the structure is that by page 74 we know that four people have been butchered by two degenerates and we wonder what in the world is going to occupy the remaining 269 pages. Just a detective story? Some psychoanalytical delving?. The account of the trial and appeals and execution? All of these are included, of course, but none of them is sufficiently interesting to justify the length accorded them. All of them are overdone, except the psychological inquiry, which is insufficient.

There are attractions in the book. The narrative has impetus, although it is diluted in the latter sections. Western Kansas—wide, flat, almost a separate sovereignty—is well established, a notch all its own in the Bible Belt. Some of the characters are vivid, such as Nancy Clutter, the cheerful, scrubbed, healthy daughter. There are snatches of simon-pure flavorful dialogue. A lunchroom owner (a woman): "Some people say I'm a tough old bird, but the Clutter business sure took the fly out of me." Holcomb's 75-year-old mail messenger (also a woman): "Lots of boys would like to be mail messengers, yes-*sir*. But I don't know how much they'd like it when the snow's high as old Mr. Primo Camera, and the wind's blowing blue-hard, and those sacks come sailing—Ugh! Wham!" One of the quotations is unforgettable. In his confession Smith said of Clutter: "I didn't want to harm the man. I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Soft-spoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat."

But it is ridiculous in judgment and debasing of all of us to call this book literature. Are we so bankrupt, so avid for novelty that, merely because a famous writer produces an amplified magazine crime-feature, the result is automatically elevated to serious literature just as Andy Warhol, by painting a soup-carton, has allegedly elevated it to art? (Already I regret writing that; some Capote partisan may take it as the book's pop *raison d'etre,*if this has not already been done.) Look first at the writing. Capote demonstrates on almost every page that he is the most outrageously overrated stylist of our time. There is the congenital inability to write straightforward English. The mail messenger seems "younger than her years, which amount to seventy-five." Why not "seems younger than her seventy-five years"? Another woman is "sparsely fleshed." Why not "gaunt" or "spare" or "thin"? There is continual strain for the unusual word, a sure sign of insecurity: "His apartment was not the ideal lair for a would-be author." Does Capote know what "lair" means? If so, will he explain why would-be authors need a different kind from other authors? There is much of the clumsy, crammed, *New Yorker*-type sentence: "Though as yet unpublished, young Hendricks, a he-mannish [sic] ex-sailor from Oklahoma who smokes a pipe and has a mustache and a crop of untamed black hair, at least looks literary. . . ." There is, inevitably, much "fine" writing: "Though mud abounded underfoot, the sun, so long shrouded by snow and cloud, seemed an object freshly made, and the trees . . . were lightly veiled in a haze of virginal green." Or the very last line: "Then, starting home, he walked toward the trees, and under them, leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat." (Presumably he decided not to take the sky and the wind voices with him.) This is Reddiwip writing—goo that gushes out under the force of compressed air and that, unless one puts it to the test of taste, looks like the real thing. Capote has also made sure to include what is probably the oldest solecism in English:  ". . . an old man who hissed at him: 'Killer! Killer!'"

Sometimes poor writing is separable from illumination. In non-fiction, particularly, the distinction between style and content is easier to make than in fiction and is more relevant. But Capote's illumination goes little further than supplying us with facts—and he has vastly oversupplied facts. Condensation by about a third would have improved the book threefold. He suffers from the current craze for fact-gathering and the inability to "waste" material once he has gathered it. On a television panel a few years ago he made the truthful comment about the Kerouac school of fiction: "That isn't writing, it's typing." One can say of this book—with sufficient truth to make it worth saying: "This isn't writing, it's research."

Thus we get: three pages about the brief friendship after the crime between the dead girl's boy friend and her close girl friend; five pages of biography about a man who merely happens to be a fellow-prisoner of Hickock and Smith in Death Row; extensive cute details of the home life of the detective who solved the case; and much, much more superfluous material.

We do get fairly clear pictures of the two murderers, but this is surely minimal in so long a book; and the portraits, though extended, are not deep. Some of the more penetrating comment comes from biographical statements that the two men prepared and from a long letter written to Smith by his married sister when he was in prison a year before the murders—this letter is the most interesting document in the book. Statements like these, from people not customarily given to writing, are often phrased pungently and contain perceptions that, probably snobbishly, we would not expect. There seems to be an impulse to biography, towards preservation of self on paper, which is buried in the normally unliterate and which is released by an occasion that forces them to write.

Nevertheless we do not know enough about these two men at the close to justify the time we have spent with them. It is possibly unjust to ask Capote to solve the mystery of criminal behavior when psychologists, penologists, sociologists are baffled, but if some reasonably satisfactory attempt is not made in this direction, then what is the justification for such a book? Mere accretion of grisly fact and the thrills therefrom?

Even the deployment of fact, as such, is wobbly. For example, a major point about Hickock—his sexual predilection for little girls—is not even mentioned until page 201. Again, there is no comment on the odd relationship between the two criminals. Nothing homosexual occurs overtly, but Hickock constantly calls the other man "honey," there were strange feminine jealousies between them, and Smith was sometimes in the same room while Hickock had intercourse with a girl. No Freudian sage is needed to reveal the girl as a surrogate. Capote leaves unexplored this whole area of latent homosexuality.

In the *Life*interview about this book Capote says:

"My theory, you see, is that you can take *any*subject and make it into a nonfiction novel. By that I don't mean a historical or documentary novel—those are popular and interesting but impure genres, with neither the persuasiveness of fact nor the poetic altitude of fiction. . . . What I've done is much harder than a conventional novel. You have to get away from your own particular vision of the novel."

In itself the statement is ludicrous. (Presumably their "own particular vision" is what hamstrung Flaubert, Proust, and Joyce.) What it all amounts to is the puffery of an artistically unsuccessful writer of fiction pursuing his love of the Gothic (which he established in his first novel and his short stories) into life. Why poetize about mules hanging by their necks from balcony railings (as in *Other Voices, Other Rooms),*which is only manufactured grotesquerie, when you can write fancily about real events leading up to and including two real hangings of men? (I do not suggest that crime should not be chronicled. For comparison with Capote, let me recommend John Bartlow Martin's *Why Did They Kill?,*an account of the impromptu murder of a woman by three teen-agers in Ann Arbor in 1951, which Martin published some years before he left first-class journalism for diplomacy. His 131-page book is superior to Capote's in almost every way, makes some attempt to answer the question in its title, and is devoid of any suspicion of conscious self-gratifying aggrandizement into Literature.

But what lies under Capote's statement and the rest of the interview is the question currently much debated—the present pertinence of fiction; whether the writing of factual books is not more appropriate than fiction to talented writers today, whether the functions of the novel have been historically concluded, whether the context for fiction—social structure, community ideals, accepted cosmology—is lacking. It is my view that, in both old and new modes of fiction, much interesting work is being done today; but the question is valid, and anyone who predicted that the status and health of the novel will be no worse a century from now would be, to say the least, sanguine.

In Capote's book, however, there is no kind of answer to the question. There is little fusion of the insights of art with the powers of fact—not as much use of the novelist's eye as there was, for instance, in *The Muses Are Heard.*We have seen in non-fiction, from Lytton Strachey to Barbara Tuchman, how subjective literary values can enrich the retailing of fact. The Non-fiction Novel is a term that, as such, may stand with "hard-top convertible" and "fresh-frozen food/' but it is possibly a worthy ideal, an avenue for writers who feel that the anatomization and re-synthesis of experience is a doubtful process in a society without implicit guidelines. However, there is little in Capote's book to help clear that avenue. He says:

"I don't think that crime is all that interesting a subject. What could be more cut and dried, really, than two ex-convicts who set out to rob a family and end up killing them? The important thing is the depth you can plunge to and height you can reach."

Agreed. The depth in this book is no deeper than its mine-shaft of factual detail; its height is rarely higher than that of good journalism and often falls below it.

The *Life*article settles one other point. While I was reading the book, I wondered at the absence of photographs. *Life*includes a number of photographs of the victims, the killers, some of the other principal persons and places, and indirectly explains why Capote was wise to leave them out. Any one of the pictures is worth several thousand of his words.