

## 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)

In Cold Blood is a non-fiction novel by American author Truman Capote, first published in 1966; it details the 1959 murders of four members of the Herbert Clutter family in the small farming community of Holcomb, Kansas. Capote learned of the quadruple murder before the killers were captured, and he traveled to Kansas to write about the crime. He was accompanied by his childhood friend and fellow author Harper Lee, and they interviewed residents and investigators assigned to the case and took In Cold Blood. (1966), his most successful and acclaimed book. By "treating a real event with fictional techniques," Capote intended to create a new synthesis: something both "immaculately factual" and a work of art. in the fall of 1965 and then in book form by Random House in early 1966. I met Truman Capote several years later. Although Truman and I sometimes spent entire days together, he almost never mentioned the work that had brought him fame and fortune. Share this Rating. Title: In Cold Blood (1967). 7,9/10. Want to share IMDb's rating on your own site? As a stand alone film from it's era, "In Cold Blood" is top notch in every way. Most notable is the stunning black and white cinematography from Conrad Hall (later of "American Beauty" and "Road to Perdition" fame). Many of the stills from this film of the Kansas farm house at night or the tree-lined back country roads could be sold as fine art photography. In Cold Blood, published in 1965, was first serialized in the New Yorker in four installments. It was an instant critical and commercial success, bringing Truman Capote both literary recognition and celebrity status. With its publication, Capote claimed to have invented a new genre, the "nonfiction novel," and critics quickly accepted his classification, his methods, and his purpose as a new combination of journalism and fiction. In Cold Blood painstakingly details, in four parts, the Clutter family's character, activities, and community status during the last days before their murder; the planning and machinations of the killers; the investigative dedication of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) agents; and the capture, trial, and execution of the murderers. In Cold Blood is a non-fiction novel[1] by American author Truman Capote, first published in 1966; it details the 1959 murders of four members of the Herbert Clutter family in the small farming community of Holcomb, Kansas. When Capote learned of the quadruple murder, before the killers were captured, he decided to travel to Kansas and write about the crime. In Cold Blood was first published as a four-part serial in The New Yorker, beginning with the September 25, 1965 issue. The piece was an immediate sensation, particularly in Kansas, where the usual number of New Yorker copies sold out immediately.