



2008  
**Kansas Reads**  
In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

**BOOK REVIEW**  
by Denise Galarraga

*"In Cold Blood,"* on its release in January of 1966, became an immediate international bestseller. Previously, it had appeared in installments in *The New Yorker* magazine in September and October of 1965. Sales of these issues broke all records for the magazine. Gerald Clarke reports in his biography, *"Capote"*, that the one place a copy of the *New Yorker* could not be found was in Finney County, despite the great interest. The *Garden City Telegram* reported that area drug stores were deluged with requests, and the *Dodge City Daily Globe* complained about the easterners' condescension. 1

Readers were mesmerized, in spite of the fact that there were no surprises, no who done its, no big titillating details that hadn't been previously revealed. The case was over and done with; the perpetrators had "swung". Capote's name was everywhere in the media, on magazine covers, and even on the Times Square electronic billboard.

Most critics were awestruck, as well. So were peers. Norman Mailer would call Perry Smith one of the perfect villains of literature, a modern day Iago. Noel Coward, according to Clarke, called it a masterpiece -- its suspense "intolerable" and the compassion moving. 2

There were dissenting opinions – critics who felt Capote had played too loose with the truth and an editorial from England admonishing Capote for having lured the killers into his confidence without making an attempt to save them from the hangman. 3

The book begins with a glimpse of the Western Kansas landscape, its stark beauty and remoteness. Then a description of Herb Clutter, to let the reader understand that he was an important man in the state and in his region. Not just a corpse or a victim. He was intelligent, utterly organized and efficient, had progressive ideas, and had amassed a tidy fortune in an honest way by toiling hard and using his wits.

Then Capote unveils the killers, about as opposite of Clutter as persons could be. Messy lives with scattered pieces of family that they had abandoned or vice versa.

Capote shifts back and forth from the Clutters to the killers as the crescendo builds towards the terrible November night in 1959 when the mass murder was carried out.

Herbert Clutter's family is introduced. Good looking children, each with a definite and interesting personality, Nancy being the darling not only of the household but also of her classmates; Kenyon smart, more introverted. Then Bonnie, the matriarch of the family, is portrayed. Some familiar with the family take issue with Capote's description of Bonnie. (Maybe he indulged a little too much in pop psychology or just down right exaggerated. He had a reputation for stretching things for impact). He depicts Bonnie Clutter as an invalid, depressed and melancholy, and suggests that Nancy, at the time of the murders, was acting as stand-in female head of the household. In the movie *Infamous* -- one of two movies released in 2005 and 2006 about Capote and the six years he was in and out of Kansas and writing the book-- the character playing Harper Lee voices her concern about the portrait of Bonnie Clutter. 4

After introducing the entire Clutter family and providing a layout of the Clutter home place, Capote acquaints the reader with other important figures. These include Susan Kidwell, Nancy's best friend, who would be the first to find the Clutters' bodies, and Bobby Rupp, Nancy's boyfriend, who had been the last to see them alive on Saturday night.

Then, Capote switches back to the killers, showing them clumsily laying out their terrible plans with such ineptness that it would be funny if one didn't know the result. Writing hot checks throughout the Kansas City area, stopping at a drugstore to buy black hosiery for face masks and finding none, Perry insisting that they go to a Catholic hospital to borrow some from nuns. They argue, joke, sulk, and eat junk food on the long drive across Kansas.

Other major and minor characters are developed while Capote builds up the suspense of the main story line like a drumbeat that plays in the background. Alvin Dewey, lead detective from the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (and many say the "hero" of the book), Harold Nye, a police investigator, and members of Hickock and Smith families, to name a few.

In these passages, readers discover that Hickock and Smith have both spent a good part of their life behind bars. In fact, the original idea for robbing the Clutters comes thanks to a fellow inmate who had once been employed by Herb Clutter. He found Clutter a fair boss who paid well. The readers learn that Hickock was a good student in school. He was smart but brash and unfeeling and had sustained a head injury in a past accident. Capote describes him as having a face not quite symmetrical; as if it had been an apple sliced into two parts and put back together a fraction of an inch off. (One can't help but wonder if trauma to the brain was behind some his deviance.)

Smith, born in poverty to a Cherokee mother and Irish father, had been abandoned and abused as a child, kicked around like a dog that no one wanted. Sensitive (particularly to his own feelings) and artistic, he coped with life by inventing in his mind another world in which he – through convoluted logic –was (even after the murders) the good guy, persecuted and misunderstood. Smith tried to educate himself, experimented with sophisticated vocabulary, chafed at Hickock's vulgar language and grammatical blunders, and prickled at remarks directed towards or about him that he interpreted as slighting.

Once when Capote presented Smith with an inscribed copy of *"Breakfast at Tiffany's"*, writing "For Perry. From Truman, who wishes you well", Perry was outraged that the inscription was so devoid of sentiment. Later, Truman was to remark to an acquaintance on the absurdity of this, that a 4-time killer rebuked Truman for lacking sufficient sensitivity. Smith was also enraged to hear the proposed title of the book, "In Cold Blood". Truman calmed him down by assuring Perry that the publishers at Random House had dredged up the title and that it was, at any rate, tentative. This was not true. Truman had selected it early on in the writing process.

Capote's intimate portraits of the two killers are generally considered that which truly breaks ground in the area of crime writing. According to a passage from Deborah Davis' *"Party of the Century"*:

Truman's interviews with Smith and Hickock transformed his journalistic piece into what he called a "Big Work". They supplied him with all the details he needed to make the story come to life. Hickock had an extraordinary memory that was almost photographic in its accuracy. ....Smith offered metaphor. He was a dreamer who had a boyish obsession with buried treasure.....Truman, who had a talent for getting close to his subjects in the most routine of circumstances, became intimate with these men who had been cut off from every other kind of social contact. 5

Norman Mailer described Capote's Perry as one of the great characters in American literature. Perry was a man who could woo and coax sympathy in one instant and who could strike viciously

the next. Small, doe-eyed, and imbued with self-pity, he was a complex character. He confesses to killing all of the Clutters, but circumscribes this shocking information, saying that he thought Mr. Clutter a good man up unto the moment that he killed him. He was careful to note that he had laid a cardboard box under Clutter's body so that he would be comfortable. Likewise, he would, with pride, confess that he refused to let Hickock sexually assault Nancy. Still, it was Smith who pulled the trigger on her.

The book handles the events surrounding the murders from an observer's viewpoint in this section of the book, establishing chronology and developing character portraits. Then, after the murders take place, the killers are followed back to Kansas City and on to Mexico, where Perry hopes to find their fortune. The two are forced into an uneasy alliance. Each must keep a watch on the other. The ride back to Kansas City from Holcomb is rapid. They arrive late morning at the house of Hickock's parents. Hickock is ravenously hungry, and is so for several days. Smith cannot eat and gulps aspirin to ease his leg pains. They gather up a little money through miscellaneous misdeeds, adding this to their take of \$40 at the Clutter house, and take off for Mexico.

Of course, their grandiose dreams were not forthcoming, and with their funds dwindling and Hickock more and more restless, they leave Mexico and come back to the United States. Still chained together by grotesque circumstance, they chafe at the bit and begin sniping at each other.

Smith and Perry were apprehended in Las Vegas (thanks again to information provided police by their Fort Leavenworth cellmate) and gave up without a scuffle. The suspects were driven from Las Vegas across the desert to Garden City, each in a separate car. This tactic was used by investigators to give the accused time to think and avoid their collaborating on their stories. Hickock confessed during the journey, pointing out that it was Perry who had actually carried out the killings. Smith, on being told that Hickock had talked, confessed to Alvin Dewey, who would later send a message to Truman, "I killed him with kindness". Smith did not at first admit to being the one who pulled the trigger.

Capote and Harper Lee had been dining with Alvin Dewey and his wife when the call about the arrests came. They were outside the courthouse on January 5 when the alleged killers arrived. They attended the arraignment the next morning, and, a few days later, were allowed to interview the suspects. Hickock was loquacious, but Smith guarded. Dewey provided Capote and Lee with a detailed account of what Smith had revealed in interrogations.

Harold Nye later complained about the access to information provided Capote and Lee by Dewey, but admitted that he too had provided Harper Lee with detailed data on the case while in casual conversation, including divulging to her much of what he had learned through his investigations prior to the suspects' apprehension. 6

Truman initially bought his way, to the tune of \$50 bills a pop, into the confidence of the killers, and eventually became their link to the world. "*In Cold Blood*" follows the killers into their jail cells (Perry was locked in a cell inside the apartment of the jailer), through the first trial (a pretty short and tidy affair with a quick guilty verdict and sentence of capital punishment), and on to Lansing where they were put on death row.

It is during this time that Truman tells the story of the crime from the viewpoint of Smith. This recounting is the most horrifying and haunting part of the book. As Smith tells it, the men argue and equivocate so many times throughout the act of carrying out the crime that the reader almost feels some hope that the outcome can be changed. But, finally, there is no revoking the ending, and Perry, possibly egged on by Hickock, kills Mr. Clutter and then, determined to leave no witnesses, moves through the house killing the other three victims.

As the story winds down with the killers on death row, Capote goes back and picks up some additional detail discovered during the investigation and in interviews with the convicted men. The reader learns about the events that occurred as the killers transverse the country evading the law. They are given some insight into the U.S. court and justice system, particularly regarding the use of the insanity plea and the application of capital punishment; and are allowed to listen in on conversations with important witnesses, especially Perry Smith's sister. During this time Perry begins a suicide attempt by starvation and then is coaxed out of it.

On death row, the convicted men meet and befriend another infamous killer of the period, Lowell Lee Andrews. As a teenager "Andy" had killed his parents and brother. Andrews was another misfit with an outsized IQ and a curious view of the world. Lowell is hanged while the Perry and Smith still await their end.

Their luck runs out in the spring of 1965. Capote reports that twenty-some people were invited to the Hickock-Smith hangings. The book provides other details – the hangman, imported from Missouri, was paid \$600; the scaffolding and nooses were stationed in an old cold warehouse; the convicted men ordered the same menu for their last meal, although Perry ate little; Hitchcock signed a form to donate his eyes.

As the men awaited their fate, one of the guards commented sympathetically to Hitchcock, "This must be the longest night of your life." Hitchcock laughed and said, "No, the shortest."

The final tense moments before the hanging are told in the third-person from Dewey's viewpoint. Although Capote was in attendance and was the last to talk to the men, he does not give us this perspective. His biographers write about these final moments with the killers, with whom he had spent so many hours. The two recent movies on Capote's life, "*Capote*" and "*Infamous*", depict the death scene.

In "*Conversations with Capote*", by Lawrence Grobel, the author recounts the following conversation with Truman. (Mr. Groebel's questions are in italics).

*You've spoken of the experience of writing In Cold Blood as being too painful, saying nothing was worth it. Do you still feel that way?*

Well, I certainly wouldn't do it again. If I knew or had known when I started it what was going to be involved. ....

*How close did you get to the death-row experiences of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith?*

What do you mean, get to it?

*To what it was actually like. You were there. You saw the hangings. It affected you. I believe you've said that you vomited from it.*

It was the most emotional experience of my creative life, yes.....

Yes, I was the very last person to speak to them.

*Have you ever talked about what they said to you?*

Well, they just wished me good-bye (Pauses). Perry said to me, "Good-bye. I love you and I always have."..

*And how did you react to that?*

Well, I was standing there at the foot of the gallows. There were about fifty people surrounding me. They couldn't hear what he said to me because he was whispering. I was very upset...But I was upset terrifically after the whole thing. That was just the straw that was a little too heavy. 7

When asked by Grobel if he had loved them, Capote replied he hadn't loved either, but that he had a great understanding of them. He admitted to having a great amount of sympathy for Perry and commented that Dick, in his opinion, was "a small-time crook" in over his head and that he was really responsible for the murder although Perry carried out the killings. He also tells the interviewer that he was not a supporter of capital punishment. 8

The book ends with a scene at the cemetery in which Susan Kidwell and Alvin Dewey meet and converse while viewing the Clutter graves. This scene did not happen and is one of the "events" in the book that is often cited when the veracity of the writing is called into question. It does, however, provide a feeling of peacefulness at the end of an emotionally wrenching book and does show the healing power of the natural Kansas landscape and climate with its strong blowing winds, big blue sky, and endless rolling prairies.

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## Notes

1. Clarke, Gerald. Capote: a biography. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988, p. 360.
2. Clarke, Gerald. Capote: a biography, pp. 363-365.
3. Clarke, Gerald. Capote: a biography, pp. 364.
4. Infamous. Dir. Douglas McGrath. Perf. Sigourney Weaver, Toby Jones. 2006. Warner Home Video, 2007.
5. Shields, Charles J. Mockingbird: a portrait of Harper Lee. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006, pp. 171-173.
6. Clarke, Gerald. Capote: a biography, pp. 361.
7. Grobel, Lawrence, Conversations with Capote. New York: New American Library, 1995, pp. 117-118.
8. Grobel, Lawrence, Conversations with Capote, p., 118.

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