In Cold Blood

Truman Capote

1965

*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. He wanted to merge the two—enlivening what he saw as stagnant prose conforming to stale, rigid standards—and he wished to experiment with documentary methods. The Clutter murders were the perfect vehicle for this monumental experiment in reportage.

*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. While the book portrays the Clutters sympathetically, it also concentrates the reader's sympathies on Perry Smith, who, abused and abandoned as a child and scorned as an adult, allegedly commits all four murders. In framing the question of nature versus nurture, Capote's tightly documented, evocatively written account of the Clutter killings asks whether a man alone can be held responsible for his action when his environment has relentlessly neglected him.
Author Biography

Capote was born Truman Streckfus Persons—the only child of a failed marriage between a former Miss Alabama and a steamboat owner—on September 30, 1924, in New Orleans, Louisiana. After his parents’ divorce, he was sent to Monroeville, Alabama, to be raised by relatives; this is where he would meet his lifelong friend, author Harper Lee, who wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and who would later assist Capote in the research for *In Cold Blood* in Kansas. He later moved to New York with his mother and was adopted by his mother’s second husband, Joe Capote.

Capote had no formal education beyond high school, and though he attended some of the best private schools in New York, he was always a poor student—although he was reputed to have a high IQ. His social acclimation was even worse. He always felt different from those around him, more intelligent, sensitive, and more neglected and alone. He was sent to excellent schools, but it was his life experience and innate talent which would serve as the basis for his writing.

When he was only seventeen, Capote found clerical work at the New Yorker and began a relationship with the magazine which would endure through the years. It was the New Yorker that first published *In Cold Blood* in serial form, leading to immense critical and commercial success when it was finally published in book form.

Capote had a tendency to base fictional characters on his friends, acquaintances, and himself. His character of Holly Golightly from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* has been read as a manifestation of his own journey from a small southern town to the bright lights of New York City. His favorite, but much older, cousin, Sook Faulk, makes an appearance in his short story “A Christmas Memory,” and again as Dolly Talbo in *A Grass Harp*.

He was openly homosexual and left much of his estate to his lover, Jack Dunphy, whom he had known since his twenties, when the two traveled to Europe together. Capote’s desire for fame and attention was ultimately fulfilled, and he was the darling of New York society as an adult, but the emotional trauma he suffered while researching and writing *In Cold Blood* would be difficult to overcome.

Capote died in Los Angeles, on August 25, 1984, at the age of 59, the victim of alcoholism and drug addiction. At the time of his death, he claimed to be working on a novel, *Answered Prayers*, which was published in its unfinished form in 1986.

Summary

The Last to See Them Alive

The first part of *In Cold Blood* establishes the Clutter family and the duo of Hickock and Smith on two different but inevitably intersecting paths. In the small town of Holcomb, Kansas, the Clutter family’s activities are ill-fated: Herb Clutter, the father, takes out a forty-thousand-dollar life insurance policy, and the family does not lock the doors to their house. Each member of the family residing in the palatial house at the center of the successful River Valley Farm is painted with delicate, exacting strokes. Kenyon is a boy’s boy, not interested in girls yet at fifteen years of age but a talented carpenter and fisherman nonetheless. Nancy is the town sweetheart, helpful, generous, attractive, and accomplished. She is dating Bobby Rupp, the school basketball star, who is also the last to see the family alive. Perhaps the most tragic member is Bonnie Clutter, the mother, who has been afflicted with a nervous disorder that keeps her confined to her room. The Bible next to her bed is marked at the
passage which reads, "Take ye heed, watch and pray; for ye knows not when the time is." The Clutters are a pious and devout Methodist family.

At the same time, Perry Smith is meeting Dick Hickock four hundred miles away in Olathe, Kansas. Hickock had heard about Clutter's prosperity from a former cellmate who had worked on the farm as a hired hand. Ironically, neither knew of Herb Clutter's reputation for never carrying cash, and both believed the house contained a safe, which it did not. The killers' physical deformities are described in detail. Smith is extremely self-conscious of his twisted, hunched shoulders, the result of a motorcycle accident which he compensates for by building up his upper body to a grossly disproportionate size. Hickock's body had been knocked off center in a car accident, leaving him with misaligned and mismatched eyes. The pair purchase the items needed to tie up and silence the Clutters, eat a big meal, and head toward Holcomb.

The section ends with the killers' car arriving at the Clutter home and the discovery of the bodies the next morning. Nancy's friends Susan Kidwell and Nancy Ewalt discover the bodies the next morning, and news spreads quickly. The town is shocked and deeply troubled that such a brutal act could happen in their town, and moreso that it could happen to the Clutters. The owner of Hartman's Cafe, the local gathering place, declares, "They were as popular as a family can be, and if something like this could happen to them, then who's safe, I ask you?" The killings spark an instantaneous and continuous distrust of one another among the townspeople, as most are convinced that the killer is "one of them." By juxtaposing the Clutters' and the killers' activities in this manner and refusing to divulge the sordid details immediately, Capote wrenches maximum suspense out of the sequence of events.

Persons Unknown

Four close friends of Herb Clutter arrive at the house to clean up the scene and burn the tainted clothing and furnishings. Eighteen Kansas Bureau of Investigation agents are assigned to the case. The four primary agents are Alvin Dewey, the chief investigator; Harold Nye; Clarence Duntz; and Roy Church. The bodies of the Clutters are prepared for burial, with each corpse's head wrapped in a huge "cocoon" of cotton and sprinkled with a sparkly substance. The two surviving daughters, now the heirs of the Clutter fortune, arrive for the funerals. Beverly Clutter, who had planned to be married at Christmas, moves up the wedding to follow directly after the funeral, out of a sense of thrift, as all the extended relatives are already in town—and, in Capote's opinion, out of a certain callousness.

Agent Dewey and the others are confounded by what seems to be a robbery-homicide that netted less than fifty dollars and a portable radio. Other theories are entertained, but Dewey keeps returning to the idea of strangers committing theft. He is perplexed by the odd manner in which the Clutters were bound; Nancy and her mother were tied but then tucked in their beds. Herb's throat was slashed and he was also bound and gagged, but his body rested on a mattress box, seemingly for comfort. The killers had put a pillow under Kenyon's head before shooting him in the face. A few days later, someone is caught lurking in the Clutter house, but he turns out to be a curious trespasser. The townspeople are growing anxious and want to see justice served, whether or not the agents are ready. "Why don't you arrest somebody?" one of the patrons at Hartman's Cafe asks Agent Dewey. "That's what you're paid for."

Smith and Hickock leave for Mexico after the killings, as planned, where they meet up with a German tourist, Otto, and his companion, a man referred to as the Cowboy. Otto pays their expenses in Acapulco and draws several sketches of Smith and Hickock, some in the nude. When Smith sorts through mementos, trying to decide what to keep and what to send on to Las Vegas, the reader is given an opportunity to read a letter written by his only surviving sister, Beverly Johnson, whom he detests; notes on the letter written by his prison mate, Willie Jay; and a short biography of Smith written by his father. After his parents separated, Smith lived with an alcoholic mother who became a prostitute; a brother and sister who committed suicide; and a father whose fanciful dreams kept Smith moving from place to place, unable to continue his education past the third grade.

In a series of convent orphanages and reform schools, Smith suffered physical and emotional abuse at the hands of custodians who routinely humiliated him for bedwetting; some who tried to drown him as a means of punishment; and an invariable lack of compassion or stability. Then and even now, as an adult, Smith often dreamed of a giant, yellow bird that would lunge down, attack his tormentors, and rescue him, flying him away to paradise. In his twenties, Smith has a falling out with his father. They had built a hunting lodge in Alaska, a venture which quickly failed, and after a
violent episode where each tried to kill the other, they parted ways.

The Answer
On a tip from a former cellmate of Hickock's, Floyd Wells, Smith and Hickock become the prime suspects. Wells had once worked for Herb Clutter as a hired farmhand and is the one who had described Clutter's apparent wealth to Hickock in prison, a description that ultimately led to the Clutter murders. When Wells hears of the Clutter murders on the radio, he informs authorities. Agent Nye receives a tip that Smith and Hickock are back in Kansas, having left Mexico when they ran out of money. Their plan was, in fact, to "pass a lot of hot paper," or bad checks, around Kansas to raise cash, then leave for Florida. The agents visit Hickock's parents and Smith's sister and question them, under the guise of pursuing Smith and Hickock for parole violations and bouncing checks. The agents hear that the killers are in Kansas, but lose them. Through a bulletin alerting law enforcement officials that Smith and Hickock are driving a stolen vehicle with Kansas license plates, the pair are apprehended in Las Vegas, where they had gone after squandering their money in Miami. Agents Dewey, Nye, Duntz, and Church split up to question the two killers separately, and Hickock eventually confesses everything. Smith, disgusted that Hickock broke so easily, confesses as well and confirms most of Hickock's story.

The killers lay out the gruesome details of the murder, from planning to execution. Once the pair had entered the Clutter house and discovered there was no safe and very little cash on hand, they proceeded with the murders, leaving, as Hickock had promised, "no witnesses." Smith reveals that Hickock, who had a penchant for young girls, was about to rape Nancy Clutter, but that he stopped Hickock. As he put it, Smith cannot stand people who are unable to control their sexual impulses and had threatened to fight Hickock if he attempted to rape Nancy. Smith also recalls in his confession the disgust and shame he felt as he groped for a silver dollar which had rolled beneath Nancy's bureau, feeling that he had indeed reached a new low and that he was sick of being enslaved to temporary sources of money.

Smith proceeds downstairs, where he slits Herb Clutter's throat. Dewey, listening to the confessions, feels that the killings are a kind of "psychological accident, virtually an impersonal act," performed in misdirected rage on people who were so representative of success and normality that they were essentially faceless. When Smith and Hickock are extradited to Kansas, the crowd of people awaiting them outside the courthouse has a similar reaction, as if they were "surprised to find them humanly shaped." Holcomb had wanted and needed an extraordinary physiology, or a cruel motive that they could understand. The appearance of Smith and Hickock, and their booty of forty-some-odd dollars and a radio satisfied neither urge.

The Corner
Smith and Hickock are kept in separate cells of the county prison. Smith wants to amend Hickock's confession to state that he, Smith, killed all four Clutters. His reason for this, he claims, is to give Hickock's mother peace of mind. Dewey refuses this request. Smith and Hickock continue their mutual love-hate relationship, wherein each annoys and disgusts the other, but they are tied by this act of murder and their own insecurities. Dr. Jones, a court-appointed psychiatrist, asks the two to write their life histories. Smith's is rambling and detailed, revealing more about his dreadful childhood; Hickock's is succinct and generic. Extensive, detailed psychiatric profiles of both killers, written by Dr. Jones, appear in full text. The two killers are not able to utilize the insanity plea to their benefit, because Kansas applies the M'Naughten Rule in its death penalty cases, which states that if the accused could distinguish right from wrong at the time of the crime, that person is legally sane. The two are ultimately found guilty at trial and given the death penalty.

Smith, desperate for friendship, becomes friendly with Mrs. Meier, the sheriff's wife, who cooks him meals and lures a squirrel, which he names Big Red, into his cell. He also begins a correspondence with Don Cullinan, an Army acquaintance who writes Smith upon hearing about the case. Once Smith and Hickock are transferred to Death Row at Kansas State Penitentiary, also known as "the Corner," they slowly drift apart, as Hickock begins a crusade to get an appeal and Smith goes on a hunger strike. Capote includes descriptions of several other inmates in the Corner, including Lowell Lee Andrews, who had killed his entire family, and two young men, George York and James Latham, who had gone on an unexplainable killing spree in the South. Hickock is successful; a young attorney by the name of Russell Schultz takes on their appeal and puts their case through the legal workings, giving Smith and Hickock almost two thousand more days in the
Corner before they are finally executed on April 14, 1965. Capote and Dewey both witness the execution. Hickock gives his injured eyes to medicine, as some sort of twisted joke, and Smith makes a short statement apologizing for his act. Dewey notes that he cannot feel vindicated by Smith’s death, because of the overwhelming “aura of an exiled animal” that surrounded the killer in life and during his execution.

In the final scene of the book, Dewey and Susan Kidwell, Nancy Clutter’s friend, meet in the cemetery. Dewey learns that Susan has enrolled at the university that she and Nancy had planned to attend together, and that Nancy’s former boyfriend is now married. Dewey’s own children are about to enter college. With the “whisper of wind-voices in wind-bent wheat” behind him, Dewey leaves the cemetery, content that order has been restored.

Key Figures

Mrs. Hideo Ashida
Mrs. Hideo Ashida is the wife of a Japanese tenant farmer in Holcomb who is on friendly terms with Herb Clutter and his family. She respects Herb Clutter a great deal and makes the fateful statement, “I can’t imagine you afraid. No matter what happened, you’d talk your way out of it.”

Roy Church
Roy Church is also known as “Curly,” due to his baldness. He is the oldest of the four main KBI agents assigned to the Clutter case.

Beverly Clutter
Beverly Clutter is the second eldest of the Clutter children and, with her sister, one of two surviving Clutters. She is away from home at the time of the murders, visiting her fiancé, a biology student whom her father liked a great deal. Beverly is scheduled to be married at Christmas but moves up her wedding to the week after the funeral services for her family members, since her relatives are all in town for the funeral.

Bonnie Clutter
Bonnie Clutter is Herb Clutter’s wife, afflicted with a depression, which never lifted after the birth of her last child fifteen years ago. She secludes herself in her bedroom, which she does not share with her husband, and has difficulty functioning normally in even the most mundane situations. Her condition is a secret in the community, and neighbors are kind and understanding, if not sorry for her.

Eveanna Clutter
Eveanna Clutter is the first-born child of Herb and Bonnie Clutter. She is married with an infant son, living in Illinois. She was Nancy’s favorite sibling.

Herbert William Clutter
A hardworking, strict, almost reclusive man, Herb Clutter is a successful farmer and iconic member of Holcomb. He represents what many in the small Kansas town aspire to: material success, a good family, and a reputation for straightforward integrity. With a combination of hard work, foresight, and knowledge, he is able to begin and maintain his beautiful, productive River Valley Farm. Clutter is known for not carrying cash. He is a good cook but not a big eater, often starting the morning on an empty stomach. He is a fair and generous employer, a devout Methodist, a public figure who was known as a “joiner.” He attended Kansas State University and graduated with a degree in agriculture, after which he married Bonnie Fox, who hailed from a well-to-do family. To the end, Herb Clutter is faithful and dedicated to his wife, although their marriage has long since ceased to be a complete relationship between man and wife. At forty-eight years of age, he is in excellent health. He was a member of the Federal Farm Credit Bureau during the Eisenhower administration, a fact which draws marginal attention to his death outside of Kansas.

Kenyon Clutter
Kenyon Clutter is the youngest of the Clutter children and the only boy. Like his father, he is tall, lanky, and strong, but not athletic or interested in athletics. He is a quiet, pensive boy of fifteen and is a talented carpenter and quintessential outdoorsman. He had completed a hope chest to give to Beverly as a wedding present and was otherwise interested in machines, horses, fishing, and guns. He is “sensitive and reticent,” a straight-A student at the local high school, and handicapped only by poor eyesight.

Nancy Clutter
Nancy Clutter is, like her father, an iconic member of the Holcomb community. A straight-A
student, accomplished rider, musician, cook, class president, and leader of the local 4-H chapter, she is also known for being generous with her time and friendship. She is dating the school basketball hero, Bobby Rupp, and her diary records typical teenage gushing and doubting about him. Nancy is the perfect all-American girl next door, made more perfect by her small, cliché rebellions: smoking the occasional cigarette or staying out past curfew.

**Don Cullinan**

Don Cullinan is an Army friend of Perry Smith’s who writes to Smith in prison after hearing of the Clutter murders. He later testifies as a character witness at the trial and visits Smith in the Finney County prison.

**Alvin Dewey**

At forty-seven, Alvin Dewey is only a year younger than Herb Clutter. Dewey is a meticulous, dedicated agent from the Kansas Bureau of Investigation who is in charge of the Clutter case. He is a former sheriff of Finney County, where Holcomb is located, so he is familiar with both the town and the Clutters. He becomes obsessed with solving the crime, growing thin and smoking more as he repeatedly reconsiders several pet theories about the murders. When the crime is finally solved, he feels it is strangely anticlimactic, perhaps because he believed the killings were committed for a more fantastic or understandable reason.

**Marie Dewey**

The wife of Alvin Dewey, chief investigative agent of the KBI assigned to the Clutter case, Marie is supportive, worried, and disturbed. She has a dream one night in which the late Bonnie Clutter tells her, “There’s nothing worse than being murdered.”

**Clarence Duntz**

Clarence Duntz is one of the four main KBI agents assigned to the Clutter case. He is nicknamed “Old Man” Duntz even though he is only forty-eight, the same age as Herbert Clutter at the time of his death.

**Arthur Fleming**

Perry Smith’s defense attorney, Fleming reluctantly takes the case.

**Logan Green**

Logan Green is the legendary, charismatic attorney who serves as special prosecutor on the Clutter case. His courtroom persona is much admired by both his peers and the community at large. Unlike Duane West, the younger attorney on the case, he is in his seventies.

**Mrs. Mabel Helm**

The Clutters’ housekeeper and the wife of one of their hired hands, Mrs. Helm is also Bonnie
Media Adaptations

- *In Cold Blood* is the 1967 feature film, written and directed by Richard Brooks and starring two unknowns, Robert Blake and Scott Wilson, as the murderers, with music by Quincy Jones. Capote was heavily involved in the making of this film, and it endures as a faithful retelling of the book.


- *Murder in Cold Blood* is a 1998 documentary about the Clutter murders, which includes police photos, interviews with lawmen who worked on the case, and audio from Hickock’s confession.

- In 1994, composer Mikel Rouse wrote a musical theater piece entitled *Failing Kansas* with a libretto comprising language from the actual testimony at the trial and transcripts of interviews. Trying to portray intentions of the story through sound, he presented the conflicting voices in counterpoint, in a technique of vocal writing he called “counterpoetry.” It debuted at the Kitchen in New York.

Clutter’s confidant. After the murders, she goes to work in Hartman’s Café, the local hangout.

**Dick Hickock**  
*See Richard Eugene Hickock*

**Richard Eugene Hickock**

Dick Hickock has remarkable similarities to his partner in the Clutter murders, although their backgrounds could not be more different. While Perry Smith came from a broken and troubled family, Hickock was raised by two parents in a stable household that was poor but not destitute. Hickock graduated from high school but was denied the opportunity to go to college, and, like Smith, resents the “haves” who experience success. Although he was intelligent, he performed poorly in school and would rely most of his life on his social, not mental, skills. He embodies a peculiar mix of opposites: he is attracted to young girls, but insists repeatedly “I’m a normal”; he is openly homophobic but calls Smith “honey” and “baby”; he is openly racist but partners up with Smith, who heavily favors his mother’s Cherokee heritage and is often mistaken for a Mexican; he considers Smith the natural-born killer, but it is Hickock who needlessly swerves toward a stray dog on the road to kill it. Hickock was married twice and divorced twice, the first time at age nineteen. He had three sons with his first wife, Carol, whom he still claims to love. He is the ultimate con man, whose charisma steers much of his course in life.

**Mr. Walter Hickock**

Mr. Hickock is Dick Hickock’s sickly father, who later dies of cancer while Hickock is on Death Row. While being interviewed by Agent Harold Nye about the Clutter murders, he puts most of the blame on Perry Smith, whom he considers a terrible influence on his son.

**Mrs. Walter Hickock**

Mrs. Hickock, Dick’s mother, finds it very difficult to blame her son for his actions or admit that Hickock is capable of such deeds. She even blames the women he divorced or dated, clearing her son of any responsibility for his actions. She later attends the trial and breaks down as the verdict is read.

**Joe James**

Joe is a Native-American logger with whom Perry Smith stays while recuperating from a motor-
cycle accident. James later testifies for Smith as a character witness.

_Eveanna Jarchow_
See Eveanna Clutter

_Beverly Johnson_
Beverly Johnson is Perry Smith’s only living sibling. She is married, with two children, and lives in a suburban house complete with picket fence and a dog. She seems to have escaped the Smith family’s cursed fates. She is afraid of Perry, and when she moves, she keeps her new address a secret from him. She did contact Perry while he was in prison but is unaware that he despises her and wishes she had been in the Clutter house the night of the killings.

_Susan Kidwell_
Susan Kidwell is Nancy Clutter’s best friend. She and Nancy Ewalt, another friend, are the ones who discover the bodies on Sunday morning, November 15, 1959. As she is the child of a single parent, she and her mother were both quickly accepted and integrated into the Clutter household. After the murders, Susan enrolls in classes at the University of Kansas, where she and Nancy had planned to go together.

_Lone Wolf_
See Tex John Smith

_Josephine Meier_
Josie Meier is Sheriff Wendle’s wife, charged with taking care of the prisoners’ meals and laundry. She is perhaps the most sympathetic person in Perry Smith’s life, as she is kind to him, fixes his favorite meals, and becomes a sort of companion.

_Harold Nye_
Nicknamed “Brother Nye” for his serious, monkish demeanor, Harold Nye is a KBI agent named to the Clutter case. He has the difficult task of interviewing the surviving Clutters and the Hickocks. He is “peppy” and “restless” and works to keep his sharp tongue in check, particularly when his temper gets the best of him.

_Reverend James Post_
The prison chaplain at the Kansas State Penitentiary is the recipient of Perry Smith’s portrait of Jesus. He later testifies as a character witness for Smith, since he believes that someone who painted such a portrait “can’t be all bad.”

_Bobby Rupp_
Bobby Rupp is Nancy Clutter’s boyfriend, a high school basketball star, and a respectful young man. He is the last to see the Clutters alive, literally, as he spends the evening at their house, leaving only hours before the killers arrive. Although he is initially a suspect, he is quickly cleared of any suspicion. He spends a great deal of time with Nancy’s best friend, Susan Kidwell, after the murders, but they are mutual reminders of the tragedy, and their supportive friendship wanes.

_Russell Shultz_
A young attorney who files appeals on behalf of Smith and Hickock after they land on Death Row, Schultz tries several strategies, but none works. He attempts to float the insanity plea and argues that the defense attorneys’ performances were inadequate.

_Harrison Smith_
Dick Hickock’s defense attorney, Smith is reluctant but ethical.

_Perry Edward Smith_
Perry Smith is literally made of mismatched parts. His atrophied, twisted legs, the result of a 1952 motorcycle accident, incongruously support a bulky, muscular torso and shoulders. He chews aspirin constantly in an effort to manage the pain in his legs and knees, and there are repeated references to “bubbles in his blood” when he is nervous, angry, or apprehensive. Although he has had no formal education past the third grade, he has taught himself to paint, play several musical instruments, including his beloved guitar, and to be a competent grammarian. Other aspects of his makeup seem to be arrested in an infantile state; he has weak kidneys and wets the bed, as he did as a child; he sucks his thumb; he cries out for “Dad” in his sleep; and he prefers root beer to alcohol or coffee. In his youth, his bed-wetting was the cause of much abuse and ridicule at the hands of institutional caretakers.

Smith’s personality, like his appearance, is a curious combination of inconsistencies. He is superstitious, nervous, and fatalistic, and his worries are so intense that they almost seem to invite his eventual capture by the KBI. He lies to Hickock about killing a black man in Las Vegas to impress him but is a prude when it comes to dirty jokes. He is
dedicated to his father for much of his life, following him around the country as a child and helping him build a hunting lodge as an adult. He joined the Merchant Marines at sixteen and the Army after that, serving in Korea, where he earned a Bronze Star. He has spent most of his life traveling and was uprooted frequently and suddenly by his father, who did not put him back in school after taking Smith from his mother’s custody. As a result, Smith keeps hauling around boxes of mementos full of letters, souvenirs, and sketches.

His bi-racial heritage, half-Cherokee and half-Irish, is emphasized throughout the book, perhaps as a reference to the enduring influence of his mother’s and father’s tragic lives on the course of his. Smith, like his father, is given to fantastic money-making schemes. He feels abandoned, misunderstood, self-conscious, doomed, and enraged.

**Tex John Smith**

Tex John Smith is Perry Smith’s ill-fated father, an ex-rodeo performer who married a fellow rider, a Cherokee woman named Flo Buckskin. After their marriage soured, his wife left him, taking the children to San Francisco. Although he did not contest the custody arrangement, after his son contracted pneumonia, he came for Perry and took him to live in Alaska. He, like his son, had implausible dreams, making his living from odd, but skilled, jobs, prospecting for gold and the like. At one point in Perry’s young adulthood, the two build a hunting lodge in Alaska, which they hope will become a hub for both hunters and tourists, but this success never materializes. After a falling out with Perry in which they both threaten the other’s life, they separate. He is described by his daughter Beverly as a true man, someone who could cook, hunt, farm, and who could survive the winter alone in Alaska, earning him the nickname of “Lone Wolf.”

**Alfred Stocklein**

Alfred Stocklein is the only resident employee of Herb Clutter’s River Valley Farm. He lives a short distance from the house but did not hear anything the night of the murder, due to a strong west wind and a horn in between his residence and that of the Clutters.

**Judge Roland H. Tate**

Judge Tate is the seemingly prejudiced judge presiding over the Clutter murder trial. At one point, he is accused of having personal ties to the Clutters; he explains that Herb Clutter had once come before him as a litigant, but that they were not intimate friends.

**Floyd Wells**

Floyd Wells is one of Dick Hickock’s cellmates, who had worked several odd jobs in between prison stints, including a period when he worked for Herb Clutter as a farmhand. He gives Hickock the impression that Clutter is an extremely wealthy man who keeps large sums of cash around the house, when in fact Clutter rarely kept cash on his person or at his house. Perry Smith has never met Wells, but Hickock assures Smith that Wells will be too afraid to go to authorities with his connection to Hickock. Floyd Wells does, in fact, tell the authorities what he had told Hickock about the Clutters and later testifies at the trial.

**Duane West**

Duane West is the young county attorney prosecuting the case. He has as his co-counsel the legendary Logan Green.

**Willie Jay**

As one of Perry Smith’s prison mates from Kansas, Willie Jay is “the only true friend” Smith ever had. Willie Jay, like Smith, is Irish. He is also the chaplain’s clerk, and he takes an interest in evangelizing Smith. A farewell letter he writes contains several astute observations of Smith’s character. There are hints that Willie Jay may be homosexual, causing Smith to avoid Willie Jay at first, before recognizing his intelligence and uncanny ability to judge character.

**Themes**

**Nature versus Nurture**

Capote includes, almost in their entirety, long texts written by Smith’s sister, his father, the court-appointed psychiatrist, and his friend Willie Jay, which detail Smith’s childhood, motorcycle accident, prejudices, and mental state. The composite image of Smith derived from these accounts is one of an innately intelligent, talented, sensitive being warped and eroded by neglect, abuse, humiliation, and unresolved emotional trauma. Smith’s mother, an alcoholic, choked on her own vomit. His brother and sister committed suicide and another sister disowned him. His father moved him from house to house during childhood, preventing Smith from...
Topics for Further Study

- Research the evolution of the insanity plea, from the ancient M'Naughten Rule to the Durham Test, the Irresistible Impulse Test, and today's Moral Penal Code. What external political and social forces compel the courts and legislatures to amend insanity plea requirements? What cultural shifts or changing priorities or advances in psychiatry required updating insanity plea legislation? What were the landmark cases which established each new step in its evolution?

- Critic Jon Tuttle claims that the influences of Flannery O'Connor on Capote's In Cold Blood are too profound to miss. Read Flannery O'Connor's story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and compare the characters of Perry Smith and the Misfit. Compare their attitudes toward the families they murder, their methods of murder, their speeches, and their revelations about their pasts. In what way are both the Misfit and Perry Smith archetypal criminals or archetypal psychopaths?

- Some critics assert that the publication of In Cold Blood ultimately led to the United States Supreme Court's striking down capital punishment across the nation, a moratorium that lasted into the 1970s for some states. Research death penalty statistics for mentally ill criminals or criminals who attempted to use the insanity plea to exonerate themselves. What are the arguments in favor of institutionalizing the mentally ill? What are the arguments in favor of capital punishment for truly heinous crimes? What are the benefits for society of either option?

- Southern Gothic literature derives some of its grotesque, macabre elements from the gothic writing of the Romantic period, with its horror stories, violent scenes, and gloomy settings. Which components of In Cold Blood are particularly gothic? How does this nonfiction novel fit into the Southern Gothic genre? What gothic elements must be altered or subverted in Capote's account of a horrifying but true incident?

going to school. Nonetheless, Smith has taught himself to play the guitar and harmonica, to paint, and to speak with exacting grammar. He reads constantly and, "being a bit of a prude," avoids vulgar literature and materials. In prison, he paints a portrait of Jesus for the prison chaplain, which leads Reverend Post to believe that Smith cannot be "all that bad." Capote's recounting of Smith's childhood and family life begs the question whether Smith's crimes stem from inherent criminal tendencies, or whether he is pushed onto that path through circumstances beyond his control.

Retribution

The community of Holcomb, Kansas cannot rest until the killers are brought to justice. "Why don't you arrest somebody?" a townsperson asks Agent Dewey. "That's what you get paid for." The subsequent mistrust and insecurity that pervade the town can only be alleviated by the knowledge that someone has been apprehended and punished. Simultaneously, the fact that the killers are outsiders instigates a hope that the killers are "other" than the Holcomb norm. The crowd awaiting Smith and Hickock outside the courthouse is shocked into silence to see that the killers are human, just like them.

Sexuality

Sexuality is at a low but consistent frequency throughout the narrative. Hickock cannot be satisfied by monogamy and is married twice and divorced twice. He gets himself into two engagements while the pair is in Mexico and makes love to one of his fiancées while Smith is in the room. His secret sexual deviance, however, is that he is aroused by young, sometimes pubescent girls. Smith must keep Hickock from raping Nancy Clutter in the house, and Smith later admits that he cannot stand people "who can't control themselves sexually." There are suggestions that Smith is homosexual,
In Cold Blood

and it may be his need to control and even hide his own sexuality that provokes his scorn for those who indulge in sex casually.

Hickock, openly homophobic, refers to Smith as "baby," "sugar," and "honey," and arrives at the conclusion that he needs to part with Smith, as he is tired of Smith's whining. Smith himself had often attracted the attention of homosexuals in the Army, and had originally been hesitant to approach Willie Jay as a friend because he seemed to be too delicate. Smith thought that Hickock was a good complement to him, since Hickock was "totally masculine." While Hickock is forever proving his heterosexual prowess to Smith, Smith reciprocates by proving his potential for violence to Hickock; this orbit is driven by each man's insecurity about his sexuality.

Fate

Dewey concludes, after hearing the indifference with which Hickock and Smith confess the crime, that the murders were "a psychological accident." Smith seems to have followed a path not of his own making entirely but an unfortunate and fatal series of such accidents, including events after the murders. Capote is careful to describe the sudden and small twists of fate that, in his opinion, bring Smith to the Clutter home: he contracts pneumonia as a child, leading to his reunion with his father, which keeps him out of school from the age of eight; he misses meeting his friend Willie Jay at the Kansas bus station by just a few hours, when meeting Willie Jay would have given him reason to part ways with Hickock; he was essentially forced to return to Kansas after the murders by Hickock's relentless bravado, leading eventually to his capture by the police.

Style

Foreshadowing

Capote points out fatalistic and ominous clues from the Clutters' last days. The Bible next to Bonnie Clutter's bed is marked at the passage, "Take ye heed, watch and pray, for ye know not when the time is." Herb Clutter takes out a forty-thousand-dollar life insurance policy, which pays double indemnity in the case of murder. Well-known for not carrying cash, Herb Clutter also does not keep a safe containing ten thousand dollars in the house, although the killers think he does. The family dog is gun-shy. Even Hickock and Smith's plans seem ill-fated from the start; Smith tears the glove that they plan to use during the robbery, which seems highly unlucky to him.

Symbolism

The symbols in the text serve largely to detail the persona and interior life of Perry Smith. From childhood, Smith has dreams in which a large yellow bird, "taller than Jesus," rescues him from his abusers, peeks out their eyes and kills them, and then, "enfolding him," the bird carries him away to paradise. The figure of the avenging "warrior angel" is both biblically allegorical and reminiscent of maternal and vigilante themes. On the ride from Las Vegas as he is being extradited back to Kansas, Smith "contemplates . . . the carcasses of shotgunned coyotes festooning ranch fences." The corpses were hung there to scare away other coyotes, sacrificed to maintain the security of the ranch's livestock, much as Hickock and Smith, while guilty, will be killed and held up as an example to reestablish a sense of security in Holcomb and, it is hoped, to deter other criminals.

The appropriateness of this symbol is further confirmed later in Smith's autobiographical report, in which he characterizes himself in childhood running around "wild and free as a coyote." From his prison window, Smith spies two tomcats scouting the grilles of automobiles parked along the square. The sheriff's wife informs him that the tomcats are prowling for birds and other roadkill stuck to the grilles, which they scavenge as a means of survival. Smith says, "most of my life, I've done what they're doing," and is unable to watch them further. Smith's self-image as a feral creature surviving on the scraps of others' lives is no doubt enraging to him. Smith also develops "bubbles in his blood" whenever he is angry, afraid, or nervous; although the bubbles are probably a physiological phenomenon as well, the symbolic manifestation of rage literally boiling his blood is a powerful one.

Verisimilitude

Capote succeeds in delivering the portraits of small-town camaraderie; a model family; and indifferent, shiftless criminals—with photographic accuracy. He includes an amazing amount of everyday details from what Herb Clutter eats for breakfast to Hickock's drink of choice to Agent Dewey's wife's avocado stuffing. The exact and intricate
manner in which Capote chronicles both the people and events of his narrative is a successful example of what George Steiner calls "rigorously documentary material" applied to fiction. The documentary-style realism is enhanced by Capote's often poetic and lyrical language.

**Motifs**

The repetition of character-specific motifs unites the four sections of the book, providing textual reminders of Smith's and Hickock's natures. Smith's crippled legs, his childhood abuse, his avenging dream-bird, and his boxes of mementos recur at continuous intervals to remind the reader of his misfit status as well as his sentimentality and surprising abilities. Hickock's tattoos, "serpentine eye," heavy drinking, and relentless sexual impulse suggest a morally indifferent and vulgar nature, one that is comfortable breaking or upsetting societal taboos. The dark, open road is a motif associated with Smith and Hickock, symbolizing not only their travels in life but their path to and away from the Clutters and toward their own deaths. The towns along these roads are similar in appearance and offerings, but vastly different from the insular, wholesome, pastoral atmosphere of Holcomb.

**Historical Context**

**National Anxiety**

In the 1950s, with the start of the Korean War and Senator McCarthy's purging of Communists from all areas of American life, the possible infiltration by "the other" caused a national panic and hysteria. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted of espionage and executed in a symbolic gesture of alleviating this anxiety and purging the nation of its intruders and traitors. Unlike Hickock and Smith, the Rosenbergs turned out to be innocent; like them, however, they were killed to restore a sense of order and fulfill a sense of retribution.

**Anti-Establishment and Counterculture Movements**

In the wake of the Korean War and McCarthyism, concern about the consequences of blind conformity and false American values spawned anti-establishment movements in politics, art, and literature. It was during the 1950s that the Beatnik, or Beat generation, writers published seminal works such as "Howl" by Allen Ginsburg and On the Road by Jack Kerouac. Beat signified literal fatigue, a sense of being beaten down, tired, and worn out. In the 1960s, the anti-establishment movements evolved into more severe counterculture movements in everything from changes in popular music to open drug use and the sexual revolution. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the United States' entry into the Vietnam conflict fed the anti-government sentiment and disillusionment.

Disruption increased as national borders changed rapidly, American involvement in overseas conflicts increased, and space emerged as the final frontier. The desire to maintain closer, tighter borders within communities, political camps, and racial groups intensified. The increase of communism outside American borders mirrored the perceived increase of different and more vocal religious, gender, racial, and socioeconomic groups, which threatened the status quo. Women and different racial groups protested for equal rights and protection from discrimination, sparking a backlash. Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, not by a white supremacist but by an African-American who disagreed with him.

**New Journalism**

New Journalism was developed in the 1960s and 1970s in reaction to the ostensibly objective but sensationalized tabloid news that was becoming the norm. This new style of writing was an attempt to give objective facts greater meaning by incorporating literary elements into journalistic reporting of documented research. To preserve the quality of the times, these writers, according to Belinda Carberry of the Yale Teachers' Institute, wanted to "record and evaluate history by keeping language and attitudes closely attuned and responsive to the style of events." New Journalism did not claim to be a more legitimate or realistic form of reporting; rather, as Carberry says, they acknowledged that "neither objective or interpretive reporting [was] in close touch with reality." Capote joined these new ranks of "interpretive reporters" with his nonfiction novel In Cold Blood.

**Critical Overview**

In 1965, reviewer George Steiner called In Cold Blood "more than a book; it is a happening." He
In Cold Blood

Compare & Contrast

- **1960s:** The United States Supreme Court strikes down capital punishment laws as unconstitutional; a national moratorium on executions follows. Murder is the most common crime for which criminals are sent to Death Row. At this point, only ten states have no capital punishment laws on the books. From 1930 to 1967, 3,800 people are executed.

**Today:** States have changed their capital punishment laws to fit the high court's revised constitutional requirements. Twelve states have no capital punishment laws, and far fewer criminals are executed: from 1977 to 1999, a total of 598 people are put to death by the state.

- **1960s:** The use of an insanity plea relies on the successful application of the M'Naughten Rule, which states that the defendant is legally insane if the defendant did not know, at the time of the crime, the nature of the act or that it was wrong.

**Today:** The M'Naughten Rule has been replaced by the more complex and psychologically refined Moral Penal Code, which states that, among other tests, the defendant is legally insane if he or she does not have the capacity to differentiate between right and wrong.

- **1960s:** As an outgrowth of new journalism, nonfiction novels begin to become popular. Capote claims to have invented this new literary genre with In Cold Blood, which documents and dramatizes a crime.

**Today:** One of the most popular and established genres, the true crime novel is a legitimate category of reportage writing.

Cited Capote's "superb journalistic skills" and the resulting text was characterized as "masterful." Steiner reflected the sentiments of most critics, who were impressed by Capote's methods and engrossed by the story, which was written in such a way as to give, as Steiner noted, "psychological order to a piece of implacably authentic, documented life." Frederick Dupee dubbed In Cold Blood "the best documentary account of American crime ever written," and in the 1980s, Kenneth Reed, in his book, *Truman Capote*, wrote that In Cold Blood was a "virtually unparalleled triumph in creative reporting . . . supremely orchestrated in its progression and tone." Helen Garson, another complimentary critic, defended the lyrical ending of the book, reminding readers that the story "is not purely documentary" and asserting that the ending seems "completely appropriate to the artistic intent behind the novelistic element."

The book has had its share of detractors as well. Critics who questioned and found illegitimate Capote's investigative and research methods pointed out that he never used any kind of recording device during interviews or even took notes. Capote claimed he had trained himself over the years to absorb a large amount of material aurally and then transcribe it later with astounding accuracy. Indeed, when he began to write In Cold Blood, Capote had amassed thousands of pages of notes. Reviewers who criticized elements other than the research methodology complained, as did William Phillips of Commentary, of a "contrived shifting of scenes giving off an aura of fictional skill and urbanity." They claimed that the book was trying too hard to be poetic, novelistic, and true to fact, to a seemingly contradictory end. Stanley Kauffman wrote in The New Republic that the book was "without the finesse, of which, at his best, [Capote] has been capable, and it is residually shallow." Richard Poier asserted in his 1999 book *Trying It Out in America: Literary and Other Performances* that with this book, Capote has earned a "minor place in American letters." Although the bulk of critics have been kind to Capote and to In Cold Blood, there will be those who, like Phillips, regard the book as merely "high class journalism," not firmly rooted in or accepted by the conventions of either reportage or novels.
Wealthy western Kansas wheat farmer Herb Clutter and his wife, Bonnie

Criticism

Lydia Kim

Kim is an instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, she contemplates Capote’s nonfiction novel as an angry polemic on crime and punishment in America.

In the ongoing debate about whether nature or nurture is the primary force shaping a person’s character, Capote comes down firmly on the side of nurture and environment in his book In Cold Blood. His portrayal of Perry Smith, the crippled killer with a nightmarish childhood, is highly sympathetic. Capote argues, none too subtly, that Smith had significant potential for a constructive life had he not been abused, neglected, and disenfranchised. In detailing his sympathies for Smith, it is clear that Capote identifies and empathizes with Smith personally. But Capote’s questioning of the relevance and righteousness of small-town values and priorities could be his own angry criticism of the world he himself inhabited: a false meritocracy in which his talents were inadequate unless accompanied by a biting, unrelenting charm. Capote depicts the hypocrisy of Smith and Hickock’s trial and execution with similar precision; murder by an individual was illegitimate, but murder by the state was an accepted, even necessary means of satisfying a sense of reckoning and restoring order.

Perry Smith is in many ways the central character of the book. He confesses to killing all four members of the Clutter family, a fact he later denies and then reiterates. Capote is most interested in the trajectory of Smith’s life toward this final, fatal deed, and the people, events, and conditions that shape his course. The question of whether Smith is doomed from the start, or whether, as Willie Jay believed, there was something “savable” about him, is answered by Capote through his inclusion of various letters and biographical sketches written by Smith and those who knew him, who attest to both his violent temper and his latent sensitivity. Capote purposefully makes clear that Smith is, as Helen Garson noted in her book Truman Capote, a “strange, psychopathic mixture of vicious killer and compassionate protector” by detailing the touching manner in which he bound his victims. Smith placed a pillow under Kenyon Clutter’s head, a mattress box under Herb Clutter’s body, and tucked Bonnie and Nancy Clutter into their beds after tying them. Garson also notes that Capote as narrator agrees with the views of psychiatrists he quotes that Smith, in killing Herb Clutter, was most likely exacting...
What Do I Read Next?

- *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb* (1997), published in 1997 by Bernard Lezkowit, tells the shocking and true story of a young mentally retarded high school student who was raped by his school’s much-vaulted football team. Lezkowit’s painstaking research and immersion in the community produces a book which explores all possible origins and motives for the behavior of the rapists and the response of the community.

- *Capote* (1997), by Gerald Clarke, is considered the definitive biography of Capote’s life and career.


revenge on a “key figure in some past traumatic configuration.” In fact, Smith himself admits, “Maybe it’s just that the Clutters were the ones who had to pay for it”—if being a lifetime of mistreatment. Smith’s desire for revenge against his abusers is rendered not only understandable but acceptable.

In destroying the Clutters, Smith is extinguishing not only the image and reality of all that he was denied, but the most respectable figures in an emblematically close-knit, vindictive community. George Steiner, in his 1965 review in The Guardian, describes the America that judges and “wastes human possibilities on a formidable scale.” In this unforgiving setting, “If a man falls off the escalator of American economic and social achievement, there is a grey turbulence of petty crime, illiterate sex, and aimless drifting waiting to absorb him.” Steiner concludes. Hickock and Smith originally went to prison for petty theft, an unfortunate circumstance that hemmed in the rest of their lives. The degree of Smith and Hickock’s indifference is seen when Hickock swerves to hit, not avoid, a dog, and when Smith explains that he thought Herb Clutter was a very decent, nice man, “right up until the moment I cut his throat.” Hickock does in fact refine his petty criminal behavior, developing a talent for passing bad checks, bedding married women, and “passing” in the world of decent humanity, while Smith develops an incongruous aversion to drinking, indiscriminate sex, and unnecessary theft, although he is gripped with a wander-lust that prevents his commitment to any home or person. Once they had fallen off the generic, automated mechanism of upward mobility toward the American dream, the barriers to re-entry were too high to scale again, and, Capote implies, not interesting to Smith and Hickock.

Herb Clutter, for his part, did not actively resist the order of his killers, not because he was weak or afraid, but, as Diana Trilling puts it in “Capote’s Crime and Punishment,” “It was apparently inconceivable to Mr. Clutter . . . that the two men might do worse than rob them, harm them.” His passivity can be read as naiveté or as complacency born of the belief that he was invincible, that the path forged by a lifetime of hard work, piety, and moral rectitude could not possibly have intersected with this criminal element. Mrs. Ashida, a friend, had declared to Herb Clutter earlier that day, “No matter what happened, you’d talk your way out of it.” Not only did Clutter fail to do so, his family failed to do anything to save themselves, and his one on-site employee did not hear any gunshots even though he was awake all night tending a sick child. To hear such a sound would require an embryonic belief that a gunshot could occur. Their unwavering faith in the inherent safety of their situation kept the Clutters from locking doors, getting a proper guard dog, or resisting the intruders.

The book is ultimately a condemnation of society’s treatment of its children and its unwillingness
to forgive those outside the boundaries of acceptable definition. Capote’s portrayal of Smith as the victim of a self-righteous society reveals his own rejection of conformity and his identification with the antagonist anti-hero. Smith’s primary fault, Capote believes, is not being a criminal, but attempting to change the path set by childhood trauma and familial abuse and defy the characterization of himself by others. If Smith is not mentally ill, Capote believes that he has dormant violent tendencies, like everyone, which were fed a steady diet by a history of humiliating experiences—until he explodes in a misdirected, fatal fury. Capote’s indifference to the staid, predictable life of the Clutters supports his sympathetic portrayal of Smith. He does not valorize Smith or lionize the Clutters, but he endorses Smith’s attempts to escape the stock characterization of problem child, juvenile delinquent, and finally, career criminal. He does not similarly endorse the Clutters’ existence: Herb Clutter is a two-dimensional Everyman, icon of the American dream and the Puritan work ethic. Ultimately, Herb Clutter cannot escape Smith’s stereotypical characterization of him as a potentially judgmental, hyper-vigilant, self-righteous tormentor.

Dead animals are a motif directly related to the notion of communal retribution. The animals in Capote’s text are scavengers, defenseless victims, or mere fantasies. They are the tomcats looking for birds caught in car grilles, the dog that Hickock runs over, the warrior-bird that rescues Smith from abusers, and in a sense, Smith and Hickock, and Capote himself. Smith can be compared to the coyotes that, in the rural Midwest, are shot and hung on ranch fences to deter other coyotes. According to Brian Coniff, in *The Midwest Quarterly*, “Because a common ‘normalcy’ ultimately depends upon the complete exclusion of ‘outsiders,’ the exorcism of these ‘mysterious animals’ is just as important as their discovery and capture.” The community needs vengeance to heal the rent in its smug insularity and finds that Hickock and Smith, as the confessed killers, will be the perfect sacrifice. Coniff notes, however, that Smith and Hickock cannot be responsible for the excessive hostility in the community toward outsiders and toward one another. Paradoxically, he asserts, the community is looking for “a criminal without and a criminal within, a guilty alien and a guilty neighbor.” Understandably then, they are disappointed to see that Smith and Hickock look so similar to and, at the same time, so different from them. While they needed to brand and punish an outsider, they secretly wished to possess a known entity on whom they could deposit their personal sins.

Capote’s frustration at this sort of unforgiving, self-righteous condemnation of outsiders manifests itself in this book. Josephine Hendin calls Capote a “depression freak” whose anger, unlike that of a criminal psychopath, does not manifest in violent acts but is “muted to pessimism and discontent.” Richard Poier theorizes that Capote’s writing seeks to “usurp the authority of accepted versions” of events. Capote was most certainly looking to subvert the accepted version of the Clutter murders as an incomprehensible, tragic event. His presentation of Smith and his life story asks, is it not obvious, even predictable, that such a thing would happen?

Capote’s sympathetic treatment of the pious, generous family is laced with contempt, according to Hendin, and his own “rage takes the form of despair over the possibilities for life,” the life in question being Smith’s. The true tragedy, according to Capote, is not the Clutter murders, which are an accident of fate, but the murder of Smith by a society that failed him as a child and shunned him as an adult. The fact that Capote puts forth several theories about why Smith and Hickock murdered the Clutters indicates that he would like to find a reason why they did what they did. He offers several possibilities: an ill-fated crossing of paths, a psychological accident, mental illness, or displaced revenge. He provides these theories with an air of legitimacy, and like a good southern Gothic writer, with a sense of the grotesque suddenly in proportion, making perfect sense.

Capote’s identification with Smith exists on several levels. He empathizes with Smith’s desire to escape his broken family history, to leave behind his
twisted roots, and to enter and be accepted in a
different social sphere. Capote’s mother committed
suicide; Smith’s mother choked on her own vomit.
Smith resents his one surviving sister for having
escaped a brutal end and finding social legitimacy;
she is married with two children, living in a house
guarded by the standard white picket fence. Capote,
like Smith, came from a broken home, had no
mother, and longed for celebrity. He did not com-
plete his education, barely finishing high school,
while Smith left school after the third grade.

At the end of his life, Capote had been inducted
into the world of fame and high society, but it was a
false world of celebrities in which he was only a
trophy, fashionable but marginal, and he was ulti-
mately expelled from it for gossiping about them in
print. When he recounted in writing what he and
many others had gossiped in each other’s ears, they
considered it a betrayal; he, like Smith, was purged
from the ranks to restore a sense of security and
reckoning. In a sense, his celebrity seemed to make
him even more sympathetic to the killers: why
should he, also the product of a broken home, an
outcast, without a complete formal education, run in
such inflated circles while Smith did not?

To read In Cold Blood as a condemnation of a
soulless middle America is both legitimate and
limited, but Capote’s sympathies for Smith are
obvious. Perhaps portraying Smith in such a manner
provided Capote with a much-needed and perfectly
oblique means of catharsis and finger-pointing.
Smith and Hickock are almost perfect illustrations
of Dickens’ child symbols Ignorance and Want in
“A Christmas Carol.” Like Dickens, Capote ac-
cuses society of producing such children and pro-
claims that continued neglect will produce only
doom. If Capote desired to subvert the common
morality tale with his novelization of the Clutter
murders, he did so masterfully. If he intended to
report a poetic, dramatized, but unbiased account of
the murders, he, regretfully, failed.

Source: Lydia Kim. Critical Essay on In Cold Blood, in
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Brian Conniff

In the following essay, Conniff examines In Cold Blood within the context of "prison literature" and looks at the psychological profiles of the characters.

American Prison literature of the past twenty-five years has been preoccupied with a contradiction that is central to the national consciousness. Throughout this period, imprisonment and execution have often risen to the level of obsession; yet such authorized violence has been so normalized that any understanding of it, even in the relatively "safe" realm of literature, has rarely occurred, except through personal tragedy or accident. It is hard to imagine that even Malcolm X, whose Autobiography H. Bruce Franklin considers the starting point of "Contemporary American prison literature," would ever have considered the institutionalized racism of the justice system if he had remained a petty hustler in Detroit. As Malcolm himself explains, it took a ten-year sentence for a first-time burglary conviction—a sentence lengthened by the involvement of two "well-to-do" white women—to begin his transformation from an ordinary con into the leading disciple of Elijah Muhammad, and then into a symbol of the "aspirations" held by those convicts of the late 1960s and early 1970s who wanted, as Eldridge Cleaver puts it, to "inject" the problems of imprisonment "into national and state politics." It is equally hard to imagine that Cleaver himself could ever have been transformed from a harmless "lover of marijuana" into an "insurrectionary" rapist, and then into a leading Black Panther, if he had not had the bad luck to serve a term in San Quentin on a petty charge of possession. It might very well have taken the chance correspondence with Jack Henry Abbott to allow Norman Mailer, in the course of writing The Executioner's Song, to see through his usual glamorizations of violence, from the 1950s hipster to Mike Tyson, into the reality of the institutionalized man, and beyond that into what he would call, in his introduction to Abbott's In the Belly of the Beast, "the progressive institutionalization of all society." Again and again, this literature of the prison suggests that the most fortified barriers are not the physical walls and fences between the prison, and the outside world; the most fortified barriers are the psychological walls between the preoccupations of everyday life, even the everyday life of a petty hustler or a famous novelist, and the conscious realization that punishment is the most self-destructive kind of national addiction.

Interestingly, these psychological walls are confronted most forcefully, and their implications are seen most clearly, in a work that is not usually considered hardcore enough, or subversive enough, to be a part of any renegade tradition of "prison literature": Truman Capote's In Cold Blood. In the novel's most characteristic moment, Kansas Bureau of Investigation Agent Alvin Dewey—one of Capote's favorite "characters"—finally hears the confession of Perry Smith, one of the two former Kansas State Penitentiary cellmates who murdered Herb Clutter, a prosperous farmer, and his family. For seven months, Dewey has worked continuously, staring at grisly photos and following useless leads, in his quest "to learn 'exactly what happened in that house that night.'" But when he finally hears the entire story—told by one of the killers, step by step, shotgun blast by shotgun blast—he is strangely disappointed. The truth, he discovers, is even more disturbing than anything he had imagined. Even
Like the works more often recognized as 'prison literature,' *In Cold Blood* is primarily concerned with moments like these, in which 'meaningful designs' about crime and punishment—the kind of 'common sense' virtually no one sees fit to question—are disrupted by actual events."

though he suddenly knows more about the crime than he, or Capote, would ever have hoped, the 'true story' somehow 'fails to satisfy his sense of meaningful design.' The truth, Dewey discovers, is at once more ordinary and more disturbing than anything he has been able to imagine. Contrary to his expectations, Smith and Richard Hickock did not kill the Clutters out of some aberrant sense of revenge; in fact, until the night of the crime, they had never even met their chosen victims. They certainly were not, in any sense, 'criminal masterminds.' In fact, they were not even very competent. Among other things, they had never even bothered to find out what everyone else in town seemed to know, that Herb Clutter never kept more than a few dollars on hand. Perhaps most disturbing of all, they acted as though they were simply putting in a rather ordinary night's work for which they believed they deserved a good night's pay—though, as it turned out, they would come away with nothing more than about forty dollars and a radio. To Agent Dewey, hearing the full story for the first time, none of this seems possible. He does not want to consider the obvious truth, that 'The crime was a psychological accident, virtually an impersonal act; the victims might as well have been struck by lightning.'

Like the works more often recognized as 'prison literature,' *In Cold Blood* is primarily concerned with moments like these, in which 'meaningful designs' about crime and punishment—the kind of 'common sense' virtually no one sees fit to question—are disrupted by actual events. But no matter how accidental or incongruous the Clutter murders might have seemed, Capote went to Kansas with a "meaningful design" of his own, one far more serious than the literary establishment, the popular imagination, or he himself would later admit. As Gerald Clarke has written in his recent biography, Capote would tell just about anyone who happened to listen that he planned to examine "the reaction of a small town to a hideous crime." For such a study, he did not believe that the solution of the crime was particularly relevant—a belief that angered Alvin Dewey, and would undoubtedly have angered most local residents, if they had been willing, at that early stage, to take him seriously. Capote was not the least bit concerned with the killers, at first, but only with the immediate victims—a category in which he included both the Clutter family and their neighbors, all those people who suddenly found their lives altered by the mere proximity of the slain bodies.

But Capote's understanding of this "reaction" was, at first, severely limited: to suppose that the effects of violence do not include the capture and punishment of the criminals is to underestimate the community's need for retribution, its need to reaffirm its "stability," its "normalcy," by authorizing and enacting a violence of its own. Capote also underestimated the extent to which he, too, was subject to the irresistible force of this need. He seems to have never been able to admit—or perhaps even understand—just how much the "appearance" of Hickock and Smith, in both senses of the word, caused him to alter, and eventually fictionalize, his "nonfiction novel."

When the good citizens of Holcomb and Garden City finally decided to talk to Capote, he found, or at least he imagined he found, the reaction he had anticipated: locked doors and sleepless nights, suspicious neighbors and frightened children, malicious gossip and charitable prayers. Accordingly, the first half of *In Cold Blood* is filled with this superficial fear, which Capote typically describes as a nostalgia for an "ordinary" life—as though he is not yet aware, or will not yet allow his narrative voice to sound aware, of the forces that lie behind this "normalcy." After all, as Capote writes, these people had always been "quite content to exist inside ordinary life." They had been reasonably happy, it seems, "to work, to hunt, to watch television, to attend school socials, choir practice, meetings of the 4-H Club." In fact, as the most banal cliché would have it, they had been "sufficiently unfearful of each other to seldom trouble to lock their doors."
Once this "unfearful" life was corrupted by the Clutter murders, it could not be restored until after the killers had been found and punished. Finally compelled to lock their doors, many of them with newly purchased locks, the local residents seemed at first to be trying to keep out some kind of invader from "outside" the community, some kind of creature as alien as it was frightening. They seemed to be playing the kind of game that Agent Dewey, searching one more time through the photographs of the crime scene in the hope that "some meaningful detail would declare itself," described as "find the hidden animals." As George Creger has noted, Dewey's search for "animals" in the "puzzle" is part of an elaborate system of imagery that Capote uses "to suggest a complex relationship between the criminal and the community." The "grim logic" by which Hickock and Smith are categorized as "animals" allows the community to "deprive the killers of their humanity," "exile them" and "return to the feeling it cherishes so much—that of security." But Capote also suggests that Dewey's search through the "puzzle" is also a little naive, almost even pathetic: it is a child's game, in relation to the events that have preceded it, and the events that will follow. "Meaning" will never declare itself. Rather, "meaning" will have to be superimposed, over and over, by all the residents of Garden City, and eventually by Capote himself, as one delusion after another is undermined by ordinary, sordid events.

Because a common "normalcy" ultimately depends upon the complete exclusion of "outsiders," the exorcism of these mysterious "animals" is just as important as their discovery, and capture. In this sense, most of Holcomb's citizens are very much like Perry Smith's sister, who believes that men like Perry and his father—the Irish rodeo cowboy turned wilderness man, John "Tex" Smith—"should" always live "alone," perhaps in the "Alaskan wilderness," far away from her own kind of "timid life." Like all the rest of the "normals," as Perry calls them—"respectable people, safe and smug people"—she needs to convince herself that Perry's life is "an ugly and lonely progress toward one mirage and then another." In other words, she needs to believe that Perry's life is completely different from her own, and completely different from the lives of those other "respectable" people with whom she tries to surround herself. Only Perry and his kind, beasts from some imagined "wilderness," could so disrupt and endanger a community in which lives are assumed to have direction—a world of progress that is always becoming, as Herb Clutter confidently remarked in an interview with C. B. Palmer not long before his death, "increasingly organized." Like the residents of Holcomb, Perry's sister must convince herself that it is only people like Perry, "isolated" and "animal," who are driven by a lonely search for distant "mirages."

As the local "professional," Agent Dewey assumes the responsibility of superimposing on the evidence an official interpretation that can somehow support these delusions. Accordingly, in his efforts to explain the crime, he constructs two "concepts." Dewey realizes that both have glaring limitations, and he has difficulty deciding between them; nonetheless, these "concepts," and Dewey's inclinations in trying to decide, allow Capote to provide a commentary on the kind of respectability to which Perry's sister, like so many others, has always aspired. According to the first possible explanation, the "single killer concept," the killer would have been "a friend of the family, or, at any rate, a man with more than casual knowledge of the house and its inhabitants." This person would have known the structure of the house, the placing of the telephones, the dog's fear of guns and, of course, "that the doors were seldom locked." Dewey is reluctant to accept this explanation, because it would
lead him to assume elaborate and careful planning on the part of this "single killer." The killer would have had to possess the kind of rationality that, Dewey would rather believe, distinguishes people like those of his community from animals and madmen. The second "concept" follows the first "in many essentials," but suggests that the killer had an "accomplice, who helped subdue the family, tape, and time them." Dewey is even more distant to accept this second explanation—though of course he turns out to be closer to the truth. He finds it "difficult to understand how two individuals could reach the same degree of rage, the kind of psychopathic rage it took to commit such a crime." "Psychopathic rage" is the one idea he could not have derived from the "facts" in which he claims to place so much faith. For that matter, this idea even allows him to deny an impressive body of evidence—the mattress box placed beneath Herb Clutter's body, the pillow beneath his son's head, the blankets tucked around the two women—all the traces of "considerate impulses . . . a certain twisted tenderness" on the part of at least one killer. Nonetheless, Dewey clings to this second "concept" as long as he can, because in the common scheme of things, which he wants so badly to reaffirm, the very definition of the "psychopathic" would be the murder of people like the Clutters, the embodiments of local respectability, the "least likely people in the world" to be killed.

Dewey's two "concepts" are revealing not only because of the extent to which they exclude the reality of the crime, but also because of the extent to which they exclude each other: he does not want to admit the possibility of either a calculated, multiple murder or the possibility of mutual psychopathology. Most of all, he does not want to admit the possibility of both; that two killers, together, could have performed such a crime, deliberately and without "abnormal" rage—as, in fact, they did. As a professional defender of the community—and as a defender of the very idea of a "community" by which rational "normalcy" is defined—he must always view "psychopathology" as individual. He must always believe that rational deliberation necessarily excludes excessive violence, except as they might come together within a narrowly defined category of individual psychopathology. At the same time, as a custodian of the law, he must neatly divide all offenders "into two groups, the 'sane' and the 'insane.'" Most basically, like Perry Smith's sister, and like most everyone else in Holcomb, Dewey wants desperately to believe that the Clutter murders were the act of someone completely isolated, mentally and socially.

Dewey's theories might have remained impressive, like Capote's original plan for his book, and almost convincing, if it were not for the intervention of certain "accidents." By a stroke of luck far more striking than Capote's "discovery" of the story, the crime is "solved." In the Kansas State Penitentiary, Floyd Wells, a former cellmate of Richard Hickock, happens to hear a radio account of the murder. Wanting, more than anything else, to improve his own chances of parole, Wells decides to inform the prison officials. In the meantime, by returning to their favorite motels and continuing to pass bad checks, Smith and Hickock have just about guaranteed their own arrest outside a Las Vegas post office. Capote's narrative arrangement—more or less alternating scenes involving the Clutters and their community with scenes involving Smith and Hickock—provides the kind of juxtapositions that make the murderers' simple incoherence all the more glaring, in contrast to the elaborate suspicions and theories fostered by the "normal" community.

By virtue of such unimpressive events, Capote found himself in a situation that would turn out to be far more resistant to his investigations and his art than the reticence of Kansas farmers. Perhaps it was only such events, combined with the trial and execution that would follow—in which "good" would stubbornly refuse to triumph over "evil," in which "sanity" would strangely refuse to explain and cure "insanity"—that could ever have forced him to question his initial design. Perhaps it was only such events that could have allowed him to travel—by such an unexpected route and, in the end, deeper than he had ever anticipated—into the center of the American psyche. In any case, when word got around that the killers were being brought back for trial, Capote made sure that he was at the center of the crowd forming outside the Finney County Court House to await their arrival. There, journalists anticipated "shouted abuse." Just about everyone, anxious for the display of the "hidden animals," anticipated some kind of worthwhile spectacle. But the moment the killers appeared, this design, too, was shattered. At the sight of Smith and Hickock, everyone simply fell silent, "as though amazed to find them humanly shaped."

This amazement at the sight of the killers is a clue to the "effect of fear" that is, of all the effects the novel tries to document, the most resistant to conscious awareness. The capture of Smith and
Hickock is not enough, in itself, to make the residents of Holcomb feel completely secure. And the public display of the two killers—"white-faced and blinking blindly" as they "glistened in the glare of flashbulbs and floodlights"—only serves to undermine whatever small degree of security has been restored. In fact, Capote suggests, the combination of these two events only exposes a deeper hostility—a hostility within the community for which the two murderers cannot be completely responsible. The demonization of these "Persons Unknown" turns out to have been, all along, a defense against the very nightmare that does come true the moment they are put on show in the courthouse square: the killers, as it turns out, are not so reassuringly "alien." With the arrest of Smith and Hickock, the residents of Holcomb have been spared what might have seemed, at first, to be a worse "solution" of the crime, the possibility that the killers might be found "among themselves." So, now, one might expect them to be relieved that they no longer have "to endure the unique experience of distrust ing each other," at least not in exactly the same way.

But even though it has turned out that Smith and Hickock are not "locals," for some reason their appearance can not extinguish "the fires of mistrust in the glare of which many old neighbors viewed each other strangely, and as strangers." Even when Hickock's detailed confession is announced—as though any further evidence is needed—the people of Holcomb still have to believe that someone else, someone more familiar, must have been involved: "the majority of Holcomb's population, having lived for seven weeks amid unwholesome rumors, general distrust, and suspicion, appeared to feel disappointed at being told that the murderer was not someone among themselves." They cannot escape the kind of internal distrust that was first expressed by Myrtle Clare, postmistress and local Jeremiah, immediately after the murders. As Mrs. Clare told her mother, it could have been anyone: "All the neighbors are rattle snakes. Varmints looking for a chance to slam the door in your face. It's the same the world over." Ironically, it is only after the killers have been caught and returned to Kansas that Mrs. Clare's vast denunciation begins to acquire a degree of general acceptance. No matter how vigorously the citizens have taken to buying new locks and to constructing psychological theories, they are still compelled to confront a beast that is within. Just as "institutional dourness and cheerful domesticity coexist on the fourth floor of the Finney County Courthouse," where Smith and Hickock wait for their trial, institutionalized fear and domestic ritual remain inseparable in the minds of all the people who wait to see them tried. The arrest and display of the killers is not enough, at least not so long as they refuse to appear obviously inhuman. The community still cannot return to "normal," not until the fear and the ritual are completely fused in another act of violence.

That is why the good citizens of Finney County finally seem to be seeking—at once and, ultimately, in defiance of all evidence—a criminal without and a criminal within, a guilty alien and a guilty neighbor. Though Capote is never quite willing to pursue all of its implications, he does suggest that such a paradox is inevitably involved in the dynamics of ritual sacrifice. As René Girard explains, in Violence and the Sacred, the victim "must bear a sharp resemblance to the human categories excluded from the ranks of the sacrificial, while still maintaining a degree of difference that forbids all possible confusion." To mitigate internal distrust—or even better, to pretend that it has never existed—the community must seize upon a "sacrificial" victim, or, in the case of In Cold Blood, victims. Otherwise, the community fears, further violence might "be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect." Accordingly, everyone in town has demonized Hickock and Smith, turned them into "animals," in order to insist, as Girard puts it, on a "degree of difference that avoids all confusion"; and, more by chance than anything else, it has discovered the killers to be all too human—more or less ordinary looking young men, without elaborate criminal records. The killers turn out to be too a little close to "the human categories excluded from the ranks of the sacrificial."

Capote's depiction of the murder trial is, in effect, an attempt to demonstrate that this contradiction can only be overcome—and Hickock and Smith properly executed—if their actual mental states are treated as irrelevant. No legal consideration can be given to the car collision that left Dick Hickock, in his father's words, no longer "the same boy," nor to the first seventeen months he did in the state prison at Lansing for taking a hunting knife from a neighbor's house. As Hickock's father puts it, this first imprisonment seems, more than anything else, to have been the young man's "ruination": "When he came out of Lansing, he was a total stranger to me." Nor can any legal consideration be given to Smith's "personality structure," described by one psychiatrist as "very nearly that of a paranoid
schizophrenic reaction." Certainly, it is necessary to exclude from the trial Smith's recurrent dream of an avenging yellow parrot, a "towering" figure that first visited him when he was a child in a California orphanage run by nuns who beat and humiliated him for wetting the bed, the "warrior-angel" that came to his rescue and "blinded the nuns with its beak, fed upon their eyes, slaughtered them as they 'pleaded for mercy,' then so gently lifted him, enfolded him, winged him away to paradise"—a magic friend that reappeared violently throughout his "several confinements in institutions and children's detention centers."

In this way, Capote suggests, the community reassures itself that justice is being carried out, while establishing the adequacy of the sacrificial victims. To this end, the prosecution of Smith and Hickock is aided by the McNaghten rule, "the ancient British importation which contends that if the accused knew the nature of his act, and knew it was wrong, then he is mentally competent and responsible for his actions." "Furthermore," as special assistant prosecuting attorney Logan Green reminds the Judge, there is "nothing in the Kansas statutes indicating that the physicians chosen to determine a defendant's mental condition must be of any particular qualification." They can be "just plain doctors. Medical doctors in general practice. That's all the law requires." Like the two "concepts" superimposed on the case by Agent Dewey before the killers were captured, the Kansas statutes serve the community's purpose, in this case by reducing psychiatric testimony, literally, to a "yes" or "no" answer, preferably given by an "expert" who would not even be disposed, in any case, to much further elaboration. Despite the public and the media's earlier fascination with the capture and confessions of the killers, no attempt is made, once they are caught, to understand the crime in any way. Rather, as the execution of Hickock and Smith draws closer, the most troubling questions are systematically preempted. Neither the community nor the law that defends it—and, in the end, not even Capote himself, the aspiring expert on "multiple murderers"—really wants to risk any challenge to the accepted distinctions between the "sacrificable victims," Hickock and Smith, and all those local residents who must be "excluded from the ranks of the sacrificable." As one of the forensic psychiatrists asked to consult on the evaluations of the two killers admits, in the kind of testimony excluded from the trial, "murders who seem rational, coherent, and controlled, and yet whose homicidal acts have a bizarre, apparently senseless quality, pose a difficult problem."

Capote is admirably determined to confront this kind of difficult problem, mostly by including in the novel the kind of testimony that is excluded with such vigilance from the courtroom. Throughout, he dwells on the dual nature of the sacrificial victim. Early on, he describes Hickock's face, transformed by a car collision into a jumble of "mismatched parts," part "American-style 'good kid,'" part thug. Smith's body is similarly "mismatched," the result of a motor-cycle accident that left his weight-lifter's upper-body balanced tenuously on two "dwarfish" legs, which "still pinned him so severely that he had become an aspirin addict." Hickock repeatedly swears, "I'm a normal" and, when Perry, reflecting on the murders, suggests that there just might be "something wrong" with them after all, Hickock denies it with all the self-righteousness of a teetotaling old aunt. Yet Hickock runs over dogs on the highway and "promises" Smith, when planning the robbery, that there will be "lots of hair on them-those walls." Hickock is the one with the "sexual interest in female children" who wants to stop, in the middle of the burglary, to rape Nancy Clutter. For his part, Smith rather typically, if pathetically, fantasizes about "theatrical" fame, envisioning himself as Perry O'Parsons, "The One-Man Symphony," with a white top hat and a white tuxedo, with songs and instruments and tap dance steps attuned to every nuance of popular taste. Yet he also continues to dream of the yellow parrot, his projection of isolated vengeance—and his two fantasies eventually flow together in front of an audience of "phantoms, the ghosts of the legally annihilated, the hanged, the gassed, the electrocuted."

Most importantly, Capote includes the detailed psychological profiles that the defense attorney's expert witnesses would have provided, if the law had not prevented them from doing so. Most tellingly, so far as the community is concerned, Capote even includes passages from an article, "Murder Without Apparent Motive—A Study in Personality Disorganization," written by Joseph Satten in collaboration with three of his colleagues. After criticizing the ordinary legal distinctions between the "sane" and the "insane," this article describes a "specific syndrome" that would apply, Satten thinks, to Smith and Hickock. Not surprisingly, by this point in the novel, this "syndrome" seems to apply almost equally to the local community. The psychologists write of a "lapse in ego control which makes possible the open expression of primitive
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violence”, and an “unconscious traumatic configuration” that “unwittingly sets into motion . . . homicidal potential.” The murder of the ultra-respectable Clutters, followed by the capture of two young men who fit so well into the role of sacrificial victim, was just such a “configuration”—just such a psychological accident.

As Capote should have known, judging by his attention to such accidents throughout the book, the implications of this “testimony” are much more disturbing than either alien invaders or distrustful neighbors. Capote is not particularly determined to demonstrate that, in this particular case, justice has been denied in the courtroom. He never tries to prove that the unfortunate backgrounds of Smith and Hickock can really be used to explain why they became murderers, or even to give guidance on what sort of punishment would be appropriate for them. Instead, by including such a wide range of excluded, more or less psychiatric “testimony,” he portrays the trial as little more than an official sanction to ensure that the execution will take place. In doing so, Capote demonstrates that violence is not just a foreign threat, something from “outside normal life.” Sacrificial violence is the culmination of the sense of normalcy that holds the town together.

But in the end, no one, not even Capote, really wants to face this reality. At the execution of Smith and Hickock, Agent Dewey—who has become, in the course of the novel, increasingly difficult to separate from Capote’s conscience—is once again mysteriously disappointed. He “had anticipated a setting of suitable dignity.” More importantly, he “had imagined that with the deaths of Smith and Hickock, he would experience a sense of climax, release, of a design justly completed.” By this point in the novel, it is no longer surprising that this imagined design is shattered by real events.

It is surprising, however, that Capote himself, after all his efforts to confront the psychological barriers between the world of the murderers and the world of victims, is compelled to falsify the ending of his “nonfiction novel” by attaching a completely fictional final scene. At the end, Dewey and Susan Kidwell, the best friend of the Clutter’s murdered daughter, meet on a sunny May afternoon at the cemetery where the Clutter family is buried. Dewey recalls this meeting as he stands in the prison warehouse, having been “invited” as one of the “twenty-odd witnesses” to “the ceremony” of Smith and Hickock’s hanging. When Dewey opens his eyes to see Smith’s “childish feet, tilted, dangling”—at the moment, that is, when he realizes just how wrought with fiction his hope for “a design justly completed” really is—his thoughts jump back to a pristine moment in the past, the imagined, “casual encounter” in Garden City’s “formal cemetery”. There, in that “good refuge from a hot day,” where “fields blaze with the gold-green fire of half-grown wheat,” Dewey thinks proudly of his new home and his two sons, now “deep-voiced” and “as tall as their father.” Susan Kidwell, only a child at the trial, is now “a willowy girl with white-gloved hands, smooth cap of dark-honeyed hair, and long, elegant legs.” Sexual maturity, it seems, makes up for a lot. “Normalcy” is made to reassert itself, as though it were a force of nature. It is in this setting that the book closes. Transformed from the prison warehouse by an act of “novelistic” magic, Dewey strolls through that warm field, “starting home . . . toward the trees, and under them, leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat.” Time, at least this suddenly fictional time, has finally brought all things to fullness, and has brought Dewey, like Capote, to some comforting sense of closure. All is pretty much well. The murders—and, more importantly, all the subsequent “whispers” of fear, suspicion, and vengeance—have been displaced into a distant past. Smith’s dangling feet have disappeared.

So, in one act of relatively “pure fiction,” Capote provides the kind of satisfaction that, he would always argue, an execution should not provide in reality. Even Capote, the eternal “outsider” who spent nearly six years interviewing and corresponding with Smith and Hickock, is finally controlled by the irresistible dynamics of community bonding. He, too, needs to impose the apparent meaning of a completed “design,” needs to construct a sort of myth, to normalize and dissipate his awareness of the events surrounding the execution, perhaps even to ease his conscience for not having tried to stop it. Like the critics who praised him so early in his career, and like the citizens of Holcomb who contributed so much to his greatest work, Capote does not really want to consider the disturbing truth that this center of the American psyche, this vision of justice as a vengeful God who must be propitiated so that the “natural” and social order can be restored, is only reached by luck—or, to put it in his own terms, by “a psychological accident.” And he does not want to admit that, even then, any consideration of this center is always resisted, if not entirely avoided, by our desire to distance ourselves
from the need for violence that holds together our communities.


Further Reading


Capote provides an introduction to his writing, short stories, nonfiction articles, and excerpts from novels, excluding In Cold Blood.


In this flashy, gossipy biography culled from interviews, Plimpton, a high-society member of the literary himself, chronicles Capote from his early days as a new writer through the glory days following In Cold Blood to his last years as an exaggerated version of the figure he was.


Capote was sent to live with this branch of his mother's family, in Alabama, when he was a child. Here he met his significantly older cousin, Sook, who would become his favorite caretaker.


This collection of literary criticism on the body of Capote's work amasses articles from periodicals from the 1950s through the 1990s.