Truman Capote

*Authors and Artists for Young Adults, April 1, 2005*

**Updated:** November 07, 2005  
**Born:** September 30, 1924 in New Orleans, Louisiana, United States  
**Died:** August 25, 1984 in Los Angeles, California, United States  
**Nationality:** American  
**Occupation:** Writer

**Writings**

- **1948:** *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), reprinted with an introduction by the author, 1968.
- **1949:** *A Tree of Night, and Other Stories* (also see below), Random House (New York, NY).
- **1950:** *Local Color* (nonfiction sketches), Random House (New York, NY).
- **1951:** *The Grass Harp* (novel; also see below), Random House (New York, NY).
- **1956:** *The Grass Harp, and A Tree of Night, and Other Stories*, New American Library (New York, NY).
- **1966:** *A Christmas Memory* (first published in *Mademoiselle*, December, 1956; also see below), Random House (New York, NY).
- **1963:** *Selected Writings*, introduction by Mark Schorer, Random House (New York, NY).
- **1966:** *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (nonfiction novel; first serialized in *New Yorker*), Random House (New York, NY).
- **1968:** *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (first published in *McCall's*; also see below), Random House (New York, NY), with illustrations by Beth Peck, Knopf (New York, NY), 1996.
- **1982:** *Miriam* (first published in *Mademoiselle*; also see below), Creative Education, Inc. (Mankato, MN).
- **1987:** *I Remember Grandpa*, Peachtree.
- **2002:** *A House on the Heights* introduction by George Plimpton, Little Bookroom (New York, NY).
PLAYS


SCREENPLAYS

• 1954: (With John Huston) *Beat the Devil*, United Artists.

• 1961: (With William Archibald and John Mortimer) *The Innocents* (based on the novel *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James), Twentieth Century-Fox.

• 1969: (With Eleanor Perry) *Trilogy* (also see below; adapted from Capote's short stories "Miriam" and "Among the Paths to Eden" and the novella *A Christmas Memory*), Allied Artists.

TELEPLAYS

• 1966: *A Christmas Memory* (based on novella of same title), American Broadcasting Company (ABC-TV).

• 1967: *Among the Paths to Eden* (adapted from short story of the same title), first produced.

• 1968: *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (based on book of same title), ABC-TV.

• *Laura*, 1968.

• *Behind Prison Walls*, 1972.

• (With Tracy Keenan Wynn and Wyatt Cooper) *The Glass House*, 1972.


OTHER


• Also author of *Then It All Came Down: Criminal Justice Today Discussed by Police, Criminals, and Correction Officers, With Comments by Truman Capote*, 1976. Contributor to numerous anthologies, including *Five Modern American Short Stories*, edited by Helmut Tischler, M. Diesterweg, 1962. Author of *Esquire* column "Observations," beginning 1983. Contributor to national magazines, including *Vogue, Mademoiselle, Ladies' Home Journal, Esquire*, and *New Yorker*. Many of Capote's books have been translated into foreign languages, including French, German, Spanish, and Italian.

Writer. Worked for *New Yorker* magazine as a newspaper clipper and cartoon cataloger, c. 1943-44; also moonlighted as a filmscript reader and freelance writer of anecdotes for a digest magazine. Appeared in motion picture *Murder by Death*, Columbia, 1976.
Won first literary prize at age ten in Mobile Press Register contest, for short story "Old Mr. Busybody"; O. Henry Award, Doubleday & Co., 1946, for "Miriam," 1948, for "Shut a Final Door," and 1951; National Institute of Arts and Letters creative writing award, 1959; Edgar Allan Poe Award, Mystery Writers of America, 1966, and National Book Award nomination, 1967, both for In Cold Blood; Emmy Award, 1967, for television adaptation A Christmas Memory.

Born September 30, 1924, in New Orleans, LA; name legally changed; died of liver disease complicated by phlebitis and multiple drug intoxication, August 25, 1984, in Los Angeles, CA; son of Archulus Persons (a nonpracticing lawyer) and Lillie Mae (Faulk) Persons Capote; adopted by Joseph G. Capote. Education: Attended Trinity School and St. John's Academy, both in New York, NY, and public schools in Greenwich, CT.

A masterful stylist who took great pride in his writing, Truman Capote was also a well-known television personality who was openly obsessed with fame. In addition to literary recognition, the flamboyant, Southern-born writer sought social privilege and public celebrity, objectives he achieved in 1948 with the appearance of his first novel, Other Voices, Other Rooms. That book--published with a provocative dust-jacket photo of the author that far overshadowed the literary merit of the work--was the start of what Capote later termed "a certain notoriety" that kept step with him over the years. Believing that fame would not affect his art, Capote cultivated an entourage of rich and celebrated friends, observing their foibles with a watchful eye and inspiring confidences he would later betray. By 1959, he had already embarked on Answered Prayers--the never-to-be-finished roman à clef that precipitated a personal and professional crisis. Then he decided to put it "temporarily" aside while he explored something more serious--"a theme," as he explained to Newsweek contributor Jack Kroll, "not likely to darken and yellow with time." His idea was to bring "the art of the novelist together with the technique of journalism" to produce a new genre, the nonfiction novel. Over six years in the making, the resulting book, In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences, was not only an enormous critical and commercial success, but also a seminal work of new journalism that remains the highlight of Capote's career.

Though the nonfiction novel was his most original contribution to the literary world, Capote also produced conventional writing of top quality. In short stories, plays, straight reportage, television adaptations, and film scripts, he demonstrated what Los Angeles Times contributor Carolyn See called "the uncanny gift of putting a world or a scene together in a few perfect details." Among his other talents were "his patience for fact-collecting, his faithfulness to the true nature of his subject and his consummate gift as a storyteller," according to New York Times Book Review contributor Lis Harris. He was, in, the words of David Remnick in the Washington Post, "a writer of brilliance, capable of economical, evocative prose. His technique was mature, professional in the best possible sense."

Though his style of writing evolved over the years, falling into what Capote himself considered four different phases, his poetic voice was distinctive right from the start. "Truman had an odd and personal perspective on experience that only real writers have," James Dickey explained in the New York Times. "A lot of writers sweat and labor to acquire that, but Truman Capote had it naturally. He was maybe a little heavy on the Southern gothic side of things, a little bit willfully perverse. . . . But at his best, he had a very great sensitivity and linguistic originality." In the same New York Times article, John Knowles expressed a similar view, saying of Capote's voice that "it was like no one else's--precise, clear, sometimes fey, lyrical, witty, graceful."

Capote himself often suggested that his originality was pervasive, influencing not just his writing but every aspect of his life. "The thing about people like me is that we always knew what we were going to do," the writer once told New York Times Magazine contributor Anne Taylor Fleming. "Many people spend half their lives not knowing. But I was a very special person, and I had to have a very special life. . . . I would have been successful at whatever I did. But I always knew that I wanted to be a writer and that I wanted to be rich and famous."
According to Fleming, "looking at the boy he must have been, the slender, pretty, high-voiced boy. . . , it seems easy to see, too easy maybe, how the kind of fame he coveted would someday become too heavy."

A Troubled Childhood among Relations

Born Truman Streckfus Persons in New Orleans, Louisiana, Capote had a childhood that, by all accounts, was difficult. His mother, a former Miss Alabama who later committed suicide, considered herself temperamentally unsuited to motherhood and sent him off to be raised by relatives in Monroeville, a small Alabama town. When he was four years old, his parents ended their marriage in a bitter divorce: his mother went north to New York, his father south to New Orleans, and young Truman became "a spiritual orphan," in Fleming's words. Though he frequently summered with his father, traveling up and down the Mississippi on the family-owned Streckfus Steam Boat Line, the two were never close, and Capote considered him "a bounder and a cad." The Monroeville years were difficult for Capote, comprising a time when he felt "like a turtle on its back. You see," he explained to Fleming, "I was so different from every one, so much more intelligent and sensitive and perceptive. I was having fifty perceptions a minute to everyone else's five. I always felt that nobody was going to understand me, going to understand what I felt about things. I guess that's why I started writing. At least on paper I could put down what I thought."

Capote's closest friends at this time were an elderly cousin, Miss Sook Faulk, whom Fleming describes as "the archetype of the aging innocent, the best of the simple people with an inarticulate wisdom and a childlike capacity for joy and strange imaginings," and a neighboring tomboy, Harper Lee, who helped young Truman type his manuscripts and eventually became an award-winning author herself, writing To Kill a Mockingbird. Both personalities appear in Capote's early fiction, his cousin in autobiographical stories, such as "A Christmas Memory," and his friend in his first novel Other Voices, Other Rooms.

His mother, meanwhile, had remarried Cuban-born New York businessman Joe Capote, and when, after a series of miscarriages, she realized she could have no more children, she sent for Truman. He was nine years old. Legally adopted by his stepfather, the young author attended school in Manhattan, then enrolled at Trinity, and, at age thirteen was sent to live at St. John's Academy, a military boarding school. "I was lonely and very insecure," Capote told Playboy interviewer Eric Norden about his schooling. "Who wouldn't be? I was an only child, very sensitive and intelligent, with no sense of being particularly wanted by anybody. . . . I wasn't neglected financially; there was always enough money to send me to good schools, and all that. It was just a total emotional neglect. I never felt I belonged anywhere. All my family thought there was something wrong with me."

In fact, Capote's grades were so low that, over the years, his family began to worry that he might be retarded. But when a special group of WPA researchers came to his school to conduct intelligence tests, Capote received the highest score they had ever seen. "I had the highest intelligence of any child in the United States," Capote told Washington Post reporter David Remnick, "an IQ of 215." Nonetheless, he had little use for formal schooling and, though he did graduate from high school—a fact he obscured for many years—Capote told Norden he was "determined never to set foot inside a college classroom. If I was a writer, fine; if I wasn't, no professor on earth was going to make me one."

In place of formal education, Capote substituted experience, landing a job with the New Yorker when he was seventeen years old. "That job wasn't very glamorous, just clipping newspapers and filing cartoons," Capote told Norden, but it marked the beginning of a long association with the magazine that would serialize his best-known work and, to some extent, shape his writing style. Initially, however, his stories were rejected by the magazine. Instead, he made his first big sale shortly after leaving the New Yorker, when Mademoiselle bought a short story,
"Miriam," which later garnered an O. Henry Award. According to Dictionary of Literary Biography contributor Craig M. Goad, "Miriam" "typifies the early Capote manner. It is a story of isolation, dread, and psychological breakdown told in rich, precisely mannered prose. There is little technical or thematic experimentation in 'Miriam' and the other Capote stories that appeared regularly in the postwar years. The shadow of Edgar Allan Poe floats over the surface of these stories, and their chief aim often seems to be only to produce a mild frisson."

A Startling First Novel

"Miriam" caught the attention of Random House editor Robert Linscott, who told Capote that he would be interested in publishing whatever the young author wanted to write. Capote had already begun work on Summer Crossing, "a spare, objective story with a New York setting," according to Capote, who acknowledged in the preface to the 1968 reprint of Other Voices, Other Rooms that "in order to complete the book . . . I took courage, quit my job, left New York and settled with relatives in a remote part of Alabama." But, once arrived, Capote began having doubts about his novel. "More and more," he wrote, "Summer Crossing seemed to me thin, clever, unfelt." While walking in the woods one afternoon, Capote was seized with a new vision, one inspired by childhood memories. He returned home, "tossed the manuscript of Summer Crossing into a bottom bureau drawer, collected several sharp pencils and a fresh pad of yellow lined paper and with pathetic optimism, wrote: Other Voices, Other Rooms."

The novel took two years to complete and was published in 1948 to mostly favorable reviews. However, it was the book's packaging rather than its literary merit that titillated the public's attention, for the dust-jacket photo portrayed the twenty-three-year-old author reclining on a couch, looking "as if he were dreamily contemplating some outrage against conventional morality," according to a report in the Los Angeles Times. Because Capote, an open homosexual, had focused on the developing relationship between an effete transvestite and his young male cousin, "readers at the time suspected that Capote may have identified with the book's protagonist and that 'Other Voices, Other Rooms' was a confession of sexual deviation," explained George Ramos and Laurie Becklund in the Los Angeles Times. In retrospect, Capote was able to identify the book's many autobiographical elements—particularly, as he explained in his 1988 preface, the parallels between protagonist Joel Knox's quest for love and his own search for an "essentially imaginary" father—but he did not make the connection at the time. "Rereading it now, I find such self-deception unpardonable," Capote wrote.

What many conservative critics found "unpardonable" was not Capote's self-deception, but rather his aberrant theme. "For all his novel's gifted invention and imagery, the distasteful trappings of its homosexual theme overhang it like Spanish moss," wrote the Time contributor. And, writing in the Nation, respected literary critic Diana Trilling expressed a similar view: "Even if Mr. Capote were ten or twenty years older than he is, his powers of description and evocation, his ability to bend language to his poetic moods, his ear for dialect and for the varied rhythms of speech would be remarkable. . . . On the other hand, I find myself deeply antipathetic to the whole artistic moral purpose of Mr. Capote's novel. I would freely trade eighty per cent of his technical virtuosity for twenty per cent more value in the uses to which it is put."

Some critics also reacted against the apparent self-consciousness of the writing. "Other Voices, Other Rooms is the novel of someone who wanted, with a fixed and single-minded and burning will, to write a novel," wrote Cynthia Ozick in a New Republic critique of the twentieth-anniversary edition. "The vision of Other Voices, Other Rooms is the vision of capital-A Art--essence freed from existence." What this artistic preoccupation led to, in the eyes of a Times Literary Supplement reviewer, was "the temptation to mystify for the sake of mystification." Noted Saturday Review contributor Richard McLaughlin: "If he had selected his material more carefully, shown more restraint, and had been less concerned with terrifying us out of our wits, he might have easily made a real
and tenderly appealing story out of the experiences of thirteen-year-old Joel Knox and the people he meets during that long and lonely summer of his approaching maturity."

After the publication of Other Voices, Other Rooms, Capote moved for a time to Europe, where he traveled widely with novelist Jack Dunphy, "the only man . . . with whom he has ever been in love," according to Fleming in the New York Times Magazine. During this ten-year period, which Capote described as the second phase of his development and which ended in 1958, the author experimented with various kinds of writing. There were nonfiction travel essays and portraits such as Local Color and Observations, short story collections A Tree of Night and A Christmas Memory, adaptations of two earlier fictions into the Broadway plays The Grass Harp and House of Flowers, and the scripting of the original films Beat the Devil and The Innocents. There was also "a great deal of factual reportage, most of it for the New Yorker," Capote recalled in the preface to Music for Chameleons. His most memorable assignments included a tongue-in-cheek profile of actor Marlon Brando and a wry account of a black theatrical troupe's production of Porgy and Bess in Russia, later published in book form as The Muses Are Heard.

Though Capote's version of the Porgy and Bess tour of Russia "didn't quite jibe with the way some other observers of the trip remembered it," according to Washington Post reporter Tom Zito, The Muses Are Heard was a critical success that "brilliantly utilized the literary forms of a fiction writer to present factual material." To achieve its effect of what Zito called "deadpan mockery," the book pokes gentle fun at a number of people, leaving "almost everyone touched by Mr. Capote's pen looking a little foolish," according to a reviewer for the Christian Science Monitor. The Muses Are Heard had "more to it than entrancing fun," as Atlantic Monthly contributor C. J. Rolo explained: "While Capote's eye and ear have a radar-like sensitivity to the incongruous and the hilarious, they also dig the significant. What is dingy and nasty in Soviet life is revealed subtly and shrewdly, with a telling selectivity."

That selectivity reflected Capote's approach to his subject. To research his chronicle, he had employed neither tape recorder nor note pad, relying instead upon his photographic memory, which he viewed as a journalist's stock-in-trade. He would write up his impressions at the end of the day, but never during an interview, for he felt note-taking put his subjects on guard. "Taking notes produces the wrong kind of atmosphere," he pointed out to Newsweek's Jack Kroll, explaining how he had trained his memory "by getting a friend to read me the Sears Roebuck catalog. I would have a tape recorder going at the same time. At first I could remember only forty per cent, then after three months sixty per cent. Now I can remember ninety per cent, and who cares about the other ten per cent," he said in 1966.

The Muses Are Heard, which was the first book Capote produced using this method, impressed the New York Times reviewer as "a record made by a brilliant writer in a casual, almost flippant manner—but with such freshness, with such light strokes and subtle innuendo, that the book reads like a highly enjoyable, charming story." The technique was so successful that it prompted Capote to envision a new kind of novel—"something on a large scale that would have the credibility of fact, the immediacy of film, the depth and freedom of prose, and the precision of poetry," as he once explained to James Wolcott in the New York Review of Books. In his mind, he christened this new genre "the nonfiction novel" and he began looking for a suitable theme.

Success with Breakfast at Tiffany's

Before Capote found his subject, he published one more conventional novel, Breakfast at Tiffany's, later adapted into a popular film starring Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard. The engaging story of Manhattan playgirl Holly Golightly, Breakfast at Tiffany's demonstrates a maturity lacking in Capote's early fiction—at least in the opinion of
New Republic contributor Stanley Kauffmann, who wrote: "It was with Breakfast at Tiffany's . . . that . . . Capote began to see enough of life and love to be more interested in his material than himself and to reveal the humor that now seems basic to him." Breakfast at Tiffany's is set in Manhattan in 1943. It is a portrait of Holly Golightly, an impulsive, outspoken, young woman who is in some ways worldly--she has no trouble, for example, accepting fifty-dollar bills as "powder room change" from her escorts--but is fundamentally naive. Drawn to the social whirl of New York City, she lives in an apartment with a nameless cat and no furniture; bringing her gentleman friends home at all hours, she rings her neighbor's doorbells, seemingly oblivious to her acts of social indiscretion. Her story is related in the first person by her devoted friend, Buster, a struggling writer and a neighbor in her apartment building. Both Buster and an elderly bartender become deeply attached to Holly, who avoids all close relationships. What she does love is the luxury store Tiffany's, which is where she goes when she is depressed. It calms her down, she claims, and if she "could find a real-life place that made me feel like Tiffany's, then I'd buy some furniture and give the cat a name." While sharing with him her affection and appealing eccentricity, Holly ultimately draws Buster into trouble when she becomes embroiled with a criminal named Sally Tomato, a dope dealer whose exploits are depicted in a convoluted subplot.

Though Capote conceived of his story as a fiction, he was already drawing heavily from real life incidents, a point not lost on Kauffmann, who observed that "real names might conceivably be affixed to every character in Breakfast at Tiffany's and the whole published as a report on Manhattan life in the war years. If this is a restrictive comment, it is not meant to be condemnatory: because from her first appearance Holly leaps to life. Her dialogue has the perfection of pieces of mosaic fitting neatly and unassailably in place. The fay madness and extravagance, character qualities that easily throw fiction off the rails, always seem intrinsic, not contrived. . . . His fiction is strongest, most vital, when it resembles his best non-fiction." In the opinion of the Times Literary Supplement critic, the writing in Breakfast at Tiffany's "shorn of affection and the too-carefully chosen word," put Capote "in immediate sympathy with his characters" and placed "him at once among the leading American writers of the day."

Capote saw the second phase of his development as a writer come to a close with Breakfast at Tiffany's, and, after its publication, he turned his efforts "toward journalism as an art form in itself. I had two reasons," he explained in the preface to Music for Chameleons. "First, it didn't seem to me that anything truly innovative had occurred in prose writing . . . since the 1920s; second, journalism as an art was almost virgin territory." He began to search in earnest for a suitable subject, experimenting with several different ideas at this time. One project was a Proustian work, according to Julie Baumgold in New York, tentatively titled Answered Prayers. "Capote had the title since the 1950s," wrote Baumgold, and "began in 1958 with notes, a full outline, and an ending." Despite his commitment to the project—which he admittedly envisioned as his masterwork—Answered Prayers was "temporarily" shelved when Capote got a brainstorm. "One day," he recalled to Haskel Frankel in the Saturday Review, "it suddenly occurred to me that a crime might be an excellent subject to make my big experiment with. . . . Once I had decided on the possibility of a crime . . . I would half-consciously, when looking through the papers, always notice any item that had a reference to a crime."

A Crime in Kansas

On November 16, 1959, Capote found what he had been looking for. Briefly noted in a New York Times wire story was the multiple murder of a wealthy wheat farmer, his wife, and their two teenage children in a small Kansas town. "Almost instantaneously I thought, well, this is maybe exactly what I want to do, because I don't know anything about that part of the world," Capote told Frankel. "I've never been to Kansas, much less western Kansas. It all seems fresh to me. I'll go without any prejudices. And so I went."
Three days later, Capote arrived in Holcomb, Kansas, accompanied by his childhood friend Harper Lee, who assisted him with the initial research. The town was in the throes of a brutal unsolved slaying, its residents not only traumatized but also deeply suspicious, and the urbane little dandy from New York City was not well received. Capote recalled that it took about a month for his presence to be accepted and that after the killers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, were apprehended, people finally began to open up to him. In addition to interviewing the townspeople, murderers, and anyone else even remotely connected to the Clutter case, Capote retraced the killers' flight, journeying south to Miami and Acapulco, renting rooms in the same cheap hotels. He did months of research on the criminal mind and interviewed a number of death row killers, "solely to give me a perspective on these two boys," as he explained to George Plimpton in the New York Times Book Review. Before he began writing, he had amassed over 6,000 pages of notes, explaining, "Eighty per cent of the research I... never used. But it gave me such a grounding that I never had any hesitation in my consideration of the subject." All told, the project, which Capote regarded as the third phase of his writing development, consumed almost six years. When it was over, Capote confessed to Frankel, "I would never do it again... If I had known what that book was going to cost in every conceivable way, emotionally, I never would have started it, and I really mean that."

Some people attribute Capote's escalating physical and emotional problems to the acute stress he suffered during the project. Fleming reported that this was the period when he "began to take the tranquilizers to which he later became addicted." If he paid a high personal price, the financial compensations for In Cold Blood were generous, however, for the story was a commercial success even before it appeared in book form. Serialized in the New Yorker in four consecutive issues, In Cold Blood boosted the magazine's sales and netted Capote a rumored $70,000 in serialization rights. New American Library paid a reported $700,000 for paperback rights and Columbia Pictures spent almost a million dollars for filming rights. By 1983, according to the Washington Post, In Cold Blood had brought the author $2 million in royalties.

The book was also a critical success, described by New York Times Book Review contributor Conrad Knickerbocker as "a masterpiece--agonizing, terrible, possessed, proof that the times, so surfeted with disasters, are still capable of tragedy." In Cold Blood, according to the Time reviewer, "plays a light that illuminates the interior climate of murder with intense fidelity. Capote has invested the victims with a dignity and reality that life hitherto had confined only to the closed circle of their friends, and he has thrust the act of violence itself before the reader as if it were happening before his very eyes." David Remnick deemed certain "passages in it every bit as rhythmically spellbinding as Hemingway's famous opening to 'A Farewell to Arms','" while F. W. Dupee extolled it as "the best documentary account of an American crime ever written," in the New York Review of Books.

Like any experimental literary work, In Cold Blood also had its share of detractors. Fellow novelist Norman Mailer, when asked his reaction to Capote's new genre, glibly dismissed it as "a failure of imagination," though as Capote took great pleasure in pointing out, Mailer later employed the same subject and technique in his Pulitzer Prize-winning The Executioner's Song. "Now I see that the only prizes Norman wins are for the very same kind of writing," Capote later quipped to the Washington Post. "I'm glad I was of some service to him."

Capote, who told Norden that he had "undertaken the most comprehensive and far-reaching experiment to date in the medium of reportage," never doubted the originality of his contribution. But others, like Diana Trilling, were not convinced. "Works of autobiography such as Isak Dinesen's Out of Africa, works of history such as Cecil Woodham Smith's The Reason Why, works of journalism like James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men are all at least as close to, or far from, proposing a new nonfiction form as Mr. Capote's In Cold Blood," she wrote in the Partisan Review. While admitting that "the form is not new or remarkable," the Times Literary Supplement reviewer acknowledged that "it is handled here with a narrative skill and delicate sensibility that make this re-
telling of a gruesome murder story into a work of art." Capote "did not intend to be merely the novelist-as-journalist, writing diversionary occasional pieces," wrote Conrad Knickerbocker in the New York Times Book Review. "In the completer role of novelist-as-journalist-as-artist, he was after a new kind of statement. He wanted the facts to declare a reality that transcended reality."

Capote believed that in order for his nonfiction-novel form to be successful, it must be an objective account in which the author himself did not appear. "Once the narrator does appear," he explained to Plimpton, "he has to appear throughout . . . and the I-I intrudes when it really shouldn't." Capote's absence from the story was interpreted as a moral cop-out by some critics, including Cynthia Ozick, who complained that In Cold Blood "has excised its chief predicament, the relation of the mind of the observer to the mind of the observed, and therefore it cannot be judged, it escapes interpretation because it flees its own essential deed." Diana Trilling accused Capote of "employing objectivity as a shield for evasion. This is what is resented . . . the sense shared in some dim way by virtually all of Mr. Capote's audience of having been unfairly used in being made to take on the burden of personal involvement proudly put aside by Mr. Capote himself. An unpleasant critical charge leveled against In Cold Blood is that it is itself written in cold blood, exploiting tragedy for personal gain."

No one familiar with Capote's involvement with the Clutter case leveled this charge, for he made his personal commitment clear. "I had to surrender my entire life to this experience," he told Norden. "Try to think what it means to totally immerse yourself in the lives of two men waiting to be hanged, to feel the passage of hours with them, to share every emotion. Short of actually living in a death cell myself, I couldn't have come closer to the experience." Though his sympathies were divided between one of the killers, Perry Smith, and the head of the investigation, Alvin Dewey, Capote worked openly to have the murderers' death sentences commuted. He became physically ill when they were hanged.

Writing in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Craig M. Goad concluded that "the controversy about the nature and literary status of In Cold Blood can never be wholly resolved, for it hinges on the definition of art that the individual reader accepts, but there is little doubt that the book creates a vivid portrait of western Kansas and captures the manners and speech of the people who live there. . . . It explores the irony of the fact that the murder of the Clutters, apparently exactly the sort of crime that a prosecuting attorney can describe as being committed 'in cold blood,' was essentially a crime of passion, a brief explosion of repressed rage and hate, while the executions of Hickock and Smith were carried out cold-bloodedly after years of legal wrangling. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, In Cold Blood contains the detailed portraits of Hickock and Smith which continue to fascinate not only those with literary interests, but students of criminal psychology as well."

After the book was finished, Capote orchestrated a major promotional campaign, prompting further charges of impropriety, which he answered with one of his quips: "A boy has to hustle his book," he said, according to the Los Angeles Times. He took a long vacation from writing and resumed his fast-paced social life, hosting a fancy dress ball for 540 friends in November of 1966. According to Fleming, "Capote worked on the party as if it were a book, laboring over flowers, colors, seating, food--which alone cost $12,000--scrawling details in a notebook in his tiny hand." Many of those closest to the author believed his quest for social acceptance was pathological, compensating for the emotional neglect of his childhood years. "It was harder to do than was the writing for him," Norman Mailer told Baumgold. "His talent was his friend. His achievement was his social life."

To capitalize on the success of In Cold Blood, Capote's publisher decided to release his story "A Christmas Memory," which had previously appeared in Mademoiselle magazine some ten years earlier, during the holiday season in 1966. The story revolves around the young boy Buddy and his elderly cousin, who remains unnamed. The elderly woman is not stupid, but she does not live her life according to an adult idea of what is sensible or practical. She has a sense of fun that appeals to the boy. Buddy is tolerant of his cousin's eccentricities, which
Capote describes in detail and with affection. Her appearance, described in the story's second paragraph, marks her as an unorthodox person. She wears tennis shoes and a baggy sweater with a lightweight calico dress; her "remarkable" face is craggy yet delicate. Later, the narrator, the boy grown up, relates more facts about her. "She has never: eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than five miles from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except funny papers and the Bible, worn cosmetics, cursed, wished someone harm, told a lie on purpose, let a hungry dog go hungry," Capote wrote. Then he tells us the things she does: "tame hummingbirds... tell ghost stories... so tingling they chill you in July, talk to herself, take walks in the rain, grow the prettiest japonicas [a flowering shrub] in town, know the recipe for every sort of old-time Indian cure." The story provides fewer details about the little boy, but it is obvious he is a precocious child, something that inspires admiration in his cousin. She loves to have Buddy tell her the stories of the movies he sees; she will never go to a movie because she wants to save her vision for when she sees God. Buddy and his cousin create a happy world of their own. Incidents throughout the story underline their attachment to each other and their distance from the rest of their family. Because Buddy and his cousin have little money, most of their pleasures are improvised, from gathering pecans left on the ground after the harvest to making their own Christmas gifts and ornaments. They are enthusiastic about their various moneymaking schemes, from entering contests advertised on the radio to setting up their homemade museum, even though these schemes are more often failures than successes. They enjoy interacting with people outside of the world of their conventional relatives and neighbors—such as the bootlegger Haha Jones or the strangers and near-strangers to whom they send their Christmas fruitcakes. The old woman lets Buddy drink whiskey, which gets her in trouble with the rest of the family. And while the other family members give him disappointingly practical Christmas gifts, she gives him a kite. That is what Buddy gives her, too. The two cousins spend Christmas day flying the kites. It will be their last Christmas together; Buddy is sent to military school, where he later learns of his cousin's death. Helen S. Garson, writing in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, compared A Christmas Memory with Breakfast at Tiffany's: "The stories have different settings, different time frames, and different characters... Still, for all the dissimilarities, both works contain humor, tenderness, love, and an underlying sense of sorrow that is connected to irredeemable loss."

In 1966, Capote had taken a $750,000 writing advance in the form of stocks and was supposed to resume work on Answered Prayers, the nonfiction novel named from a quote by Saint Therese: "More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones." Instead, Capote wrote in the preface to Music for Chameleons, "for four years, roughly from 1968 through 1972, I spent most of my time reading and selecting, rewriting and indexing my own letters, other people's letters, my diaries and journals... for the years 1943 through 1965." Finally, in 1972, he resumed work on the book, entering what he viewed as the fourth and final cycle of his writing. He wrote the last chapter first, then produced several more chapters in random order. In 1975 and 1976, four chapters were published in Esquire magazine.

Capote's reasons for releasing a work in progress remain unclear. Fleming theorized that it was "to jolt himself out of his sadness." Albin Krebs hypothesized that he did it "to keep alive the public's interest in the promised work," while Mailer speculated that it "may have been Capote's deliberate effort to free himself" from the debilitating influence of his café society friends. Whatever his reasons, the results, according to Baumgold, were "social suicide."

In the work, which Capote likened to a contemporary version of French novelist Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past, Capote divulges many of the scandalous secrets he had coaxed from his wealthy and powerful friends. "The first excerpt was called 'La Côte Basque,' after the New York restaurant frequented by many of society's more celebrated members," wrote Tom Zito in the Washington Post. "Many of the whispered stories and innuendoes he had heard over the years he now had the audacity to print, either factually or thinly veiled. It was as if he was metaphorically recreating what Perry Smith had said in In Cold Blood about the murder of Herbert Clutter: 'I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Softspoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut..."
his throat." The reprisals were swift and immediate. Many of the circles in which Capote had traveled now became closed to him. His telephone calls went unreturned. Invitations fell off. Perhaps the most deeply felt repercussion was the loss of his relationship with Babe Paley, once an almost constant companion and friend.

This social crisis was paralleled by a creative crisis that struck Capote around 1977. Dissatisfied with the texture of his writing, Capote reread every word he had ever published and "decided that never, not once in my writing life, had I completely exploded all the energy and esthetic excitement that material contained. Even when it was good," he continued in Music for Chameleons, "I was never working with more than half, sometimes only a third, of the powers at my command."

In a 1978 television interview with Stanley Siegel, Capote appeared on the air under the influence of drugs and alcohol, confessing that he frequently mixed "them together like some kind of cocktail." Before the segment was cut, Capote attributed his substance abuse problems to "free-floating anxiety," developed as a child: "My mother was a very beautiful girl and only seventeen years old, and she used to lock me in these rooms all the time, and I developed this fantastic anxiety." He also alluded to his artistic problems with Answered Prayers, admitting "I'm pretty anxious about this new book of mine . . . really a great sense of anxiety about it."

A legendary fabricator, Capote may well have been exaggerating the hardships of his childhood, at least according to his aunt Marie Rudisill, who told Baumgold that "he might have locked his mother in rooms." Capote's penchant for exaggeration was also confirmed by playwright Tennessee Williams, who once told a reporter for the Washington Post, "Truman's a mythologist, baby, you know that. That's a polite way of saying he does fabricate. I love him too much to say he's a liar. That's part of his profession." In the case of Answered Prayers, however, the writer's block he alluded to was real.

The crux of the problem, as Capote explained in Music for Chameleons, was that "by restricting myself to the techniques of whatever form I was working in, I was not using everything I knew about writing--all I'd learned from film scripts, plays, reportage, poetry, the short story, novels, the novel. A writer ought to have all his colors . . . available on the same palette for mingling. . . . But how?" The solution, he decided after months of contemplation, was to reverse the process of invisibility he had mastered for In Cold Blood and to set himself at "center stage" in his writing. >From this vantage point, using dialogue, stage direction, narrative, and a variety of other literary techniques, he would report his tales. This is the approach Capote employed in most of the selections published in his 1980 work, Music for Chameleons, which would be his last major work.

Publishes Music for Chameleons

A collection of stories and portraits, Music for Chameleons has as its centerpiece "Handcarved Coffins"--a 30,000-word "nonfiction account of an American crime." In an interview with Los Angeles Times reporter Wayne Warga, Capote attributed his ability to "get that story at that length" to the innovative techniques he was using. "The entire point of this whole book is stylistic compression. I want everything to be minimal," he explained. But in a Saturday Review critique of the work, John Fowles found that, "despite [Capote's] claims, the technique is (mercifully) innovatory only in one or two superficial and formal ways; in many more important ones it is a brave step back to older literary virtues. He now writes fiction increasingly near fact, and vice versa. In practice this means that he is very skillfully blending the received techniques of several kinds of writing."

Though Los Angeles Times Book Review contributor Thomas Thompson dismissed Music for Chameleons as "fast food coated with snake oil," other reviewers reserved their criticisms for Capote's preface, with its self-conscious posturing about capital-A Art, rather than denouncing the work as a whole. As Anthony Quinton put it
in the London Times, "Where he is a detached, neutral observer, as in the main item in this collection, there is brilliant force and economy to his writing." Less attractive, "and more conspicuous, is a kind of nervous blustering, only an inch away from self-pity that afflicts Capote when occupied with the topic of his own importance and achievements." Writing in the Village Voice, Seymour Krim also addressed this issue, noting: "Not one of these first-person vignettes is boring without its humane and unexpected charm. And practically all the writing, it is true, is unstudied simplicity at its best, often so light that you can blow it around the room like a tissue-paper airplane. But as far as its living up to the burn-your-bridges trumpet call at the beginning of Music for Chameleons . . . , one has to conclude that the ringing pep talk is more important to the author than to the reader."

Like In Cold Blood, Music for Chameleons also raised the issue of fact versus fiction. Publicized as a true story, in which names and locations had been changed to protect identities, "Handcarved Coffins" was particularly scrutinized. "The details are so fuzzy and the murders so far-fetched that you begin to wonder whether fact and fiction aren't bubbling together in the same pot," wrote James Wolcott in the New York Review of Books. Writing in the Times Literary Supplement, David Lodge attributed his skepticism to "the inherent implausibility of the discrete events narrated" as well as to "the very literary 'feel' of the whole text." Asked Time reviewer R. Z. Sheppard: "How much of this book can be called documentary truth? How much is a masterly synthesis of all the author has learned as a fiction writer, scenarist and journalist? It is impossible to be sure." According to Washington Post Book World contributor Noel Perrin, "the proper response is to ignore [Capote's] pronouncements and read his work. D. H. Lawrence's advice, 'Trust the tale and not the teller,' might have been composed with Capote in mind. . . . Trust these tales. They are brilliant renderings of some of the more bizarre aspects of human reality—and if they happen to be literal word-for-word transcriptions, well, no harm in that. Either way, they are superb reading."

Between the appearance of Music for Chameleons in 1980 and the author's death in 1984, Capote wrote some magazine pieces and published One Christmas, a twenty-one-page short story packaged as a book. His personal and health problems persisted, but he spoke frequently of the progress he was making on his masterwork Answered Prayers, telling a Publishers Weekly contributor in January of 1984 that he was "finishing my long-lost novel. . . . I hope it will be published in fall 1984." After his death, however, such remarks turned out to have been a smokescreen. Except for the portions published in Esquire, no manuscript of Answered Prayers was ever found. So convincing had been Capote's fabrications that several obituaries reported that the author was working on his book just hours before his death. Though the exact nature of that prose—whether magazine article, short story, or memoir—has not been determined, consensus is that it does not belong to Answered Prayers.

Because Capote had shown bits and pieces of his work in progress to associates and had actually read unpublished passages to friends over the telephone, some people speculate that Capote destroyed what he had written. Baumgold, for instance, alluded to the possibility of whole chapters being "rewritten out of existence in Capote's obsession with getting his work perfect." His editor, Joseph Fox, even remembered receiving an additional excerpt, which Capote subsequently took back and never returned. As Fox wrote in the editor's note to Answered Prayers, "There is only one person who knows the truth, and he is dead. God bless him."

A final version of the collected excerpts appeared in 1987 under the title Answered Prayers: The Unfinished Novel. The slim volume contains only the three previously published parts, with chapter titles "Unspoiled Monsters," "Kate McCloud," and "La Côte Basque." The narrator of each is P. B. Jones, a struggling writer and sometime male prostitute who rises from humble orphan origins in the South to infiltrate the inner circles of the New York social elite. According to John Melmoth in the Times Literary Supplement, "Answered Prayers can be read as a historical novel bent on dismantling the glitz and depravity of a crummy ancien régime whose way of life was built on inconsequential sexual contacts made tolerable by cocaine and liqueurs and is now threatened

by AIDS." Commenting on the unusual harshness of Capote's characterizations, Walter Nash wrote in the 

*London Review of Books* that "there is little innocent laughter in this book. The prevailing tone is the giggling of 
the vicious." Despite his egregious authorial indiscretion, as R. Z. Sheppard noted in *Time*, "Capote was on his 
way to a spectacular best seller, an irresistible piece of malicious mischief inspired by the traditional detective 
thriller and the *National Enquirer.*"


Christopher Lehmann-Haupt observed, "What he seems really to have wanted was to tell a deeper, more 
damning truth about himself and the world, a truth that would brand him a criminal and 'put me in prison for life.'" 

Sadly, as Charles Trueheart remarked in the *Washington Post Book World, Answered Prayers* "is a coldly 
accurate memorial to the writer's worst days. It contains isolated examples of Capote at his keen-eared, story-
telling best, and of Capote at his pickle-brained, gossip-mongering worst--examples suspended in an aspic of 
undistinguished other stuff." As Shirley Ann Grau concluded in Chicago's *Tribune Books, Answered Prayers* "is 
quirky, annoying, sad, funny, brilliant, exasperating . . . the sad relic of a talent, a faint echo from the brain of an 
extraordinary writer."

Despite protestations to the contrary while stalling on *Answered Prayers*, Capote may never have gotten over 
his writer's block, and that, in turn, may have contributed to his death. As Mailer told Baumgold, "He loved writing so 
much and had such pride of offering nothing but his best, that when he could no longer deliver, he lost much of 
his desire to live." Reflecting on Capote's life and work, *Los Angeles Times* contributor Armand S. Deutsch 
concluded: "The exhausting years of the alcohol and drug battles, the long hospital stays, the illnesses, are 
behind him. The celebrity, which was such an integral part of him, will soon vanish, but his writing will remain to 
speak brilliantly and strongly for him."

**Further Readings**

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