Truman Capote and the Legacy of *In Cold Blood*

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In early 1985 I began working on a true crime book. Like most writers in my position since the mid-sixties, I carefully studied Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, hoping to absorb from it some of the magic that would make my book great: the powerful scenes, the dramatic flashbacks and foreshadowing, characterization, internal monologues, effective use of parallel structure to move the story forward, and the seamless transitions that held it all together. All were the techniques of the fiction writer. Capote said at the time that in his hands, nonfiction could be a "narrative form that employed all the techniques of fictional art but was nevertheless immaculately factual." His biographer, Gerald Clarke, wrote: "Truman had long maintained that nonfiction could be both as artful and compelling as fiction." On the first edition, the book's subtitle read: "A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences." In interviews, Capote repeatedly declared that he had created a new genre: a "nonfiction novel." And when asked about discrepancies, he said, "One doesn't spend almost six years on a book, the point of which is factual accuracy, and then give way to minor distortions" (Clarke 358).

So, I studied it even though I knew that Capote's masterpiece was flawed. Months after it was published, an investigation, titled "In Cold Fact," by Phillip Tompkins, appeared in *Esquire*. It revealed a number of discrepancies. Since then the evidence has grown. Capote's law enforcement protagonist, Alvin Dewey, lead investigator for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, admitted that Capote had embellished dialogue (although did not seem too concerned about it). The work was originally published in four parts in *The New Yorker*. For his 2000 book, *About Town: The New Yorker* *and the World It Made*, Ben Yagoda studied *The New Yorker*'s edited galley proofs and discovered notations by then-editor William Shawn questioning certain passages. ("How know?") It was being fact-checked by Sandy Campbell, a close friend of Capote's, and Yagoda concludes that, for the most part, it ran without the queries being addressed. Perhaps most disturbing, biographer Clarke revealed that rather than the execution of the murderers, Capote wanted to end the book on a less grim note, but his reporting had not provided one. So, he invented an elaborate scene (Clarke 358–59).

Still, *In Cold Blood*'s reputation grew, in part as one of the symbols of what was known as the New Journalism. In Tom Wolfe's introduction to the 1973 anthology of that name, he wrote that what he called the New Journalism was not really a movement. "There were no manifestos, clubs, salons, cliques; not even a saloon where the faithful gathered, since there was no faith and no creed. At the time, the mid-sixties, one was aware only that all of a sudden there was some sort of artistic excitement in journalism, and that was a new thing in itself" (23). But a signature moment was the publication of *In Cold Blood*, an excerpt from which was included in Wolfe's anthology. "Capote himself didn't call it journalism," wrote Wolfe, "far from it; he said he had invented a new literary genre, 'the nonfiction novel.' Nevertheless, his success gave the New Journalism, as it would soon be called, an overwhelming momentum" (26).

Today, Capote's fictionalizing would be taken very seriously. Consider the controversies surrounding Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999), Joe McGinniss's *The Last Brother: The Rise and Fall of Teddy Kennedy* (1993), John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story* (1994), James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), or the many examples in the late Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński's celebrated books, in which he wrote first-hand accounts of events he had not witnessed and fictionalized other details.

So why does *In Cold Blood* remain a classic, still admired by so many nonfiction writers, taught in schools, translated into more than 30 languages, made into four movies, and still among the best-selling true crime books ever published?

The Capote Method

On Monday, November 16, 1959, Capote turned to an inside page of *The New York Times* and saw a headline that read: “Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family, Slain.” As he read on, he learned that Herbert Clutter was a wealthy Kansas wheat farmer, and that he, along with his wife and the two youngest of their four children (two older daughters lived away from home) had been “killed by shotgun blasts at close range after being bound and gagged” (Clarke 317). Capote, looking for the right subject for his next project, had already decided that an account of a crime would wear well into the future rather than become dated, and this particular crime—a respectable, average American family slaughtered, sending shock waves through their respectable, average, midwestern community—would be perfect.

What may seem like serendipity seldom is when it comes to writers. Their radar is always alert to potential material. For example, *The New Yorker*’s Calvin Trillin has written widely, from crime to humor, but he told Robert Boynton, in the book *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America’s Best Nonfiction Writers on their Craft* (2005), that in general he is always attuned to “one element in society rubbing up against another” as well as to stories that have a distinct sense of “place” (383). Susan Orlean has talked about her fascination with people who have obsessions as well as her love of taking a single, specific, often relatively inconsequential subject and thoroughly examining it. So, one day she read a story in a Florida newspaper and, as she later wrote, “I was interested to see the words ‘swamp’ and ‘orchids’ and ‘Seminoles’ and ‘cloning’ and ‘criminal’ together in one short piece” (6–7). Following up on her intuition led to her celebrated book, *The Orchid Thief* (1998).

Capote was not the typical career journalist. In fact, it would not be overstating it to call Capote’s childhood Southern Gothic. His father was usually running afoul of the law and mainly absent and his mother, who had no interest in being one, had many affairs, sometimes when her son was around. An armchair psychologist would suggest that the sensitive, precocious, and effeminate boy spent his life yearning for affection and approval. He was often shipped off to stay with relatives in Monroeville, Alabama, where a cousin, Sook, doted on him and Harper Lee, later to write *To Kill a Mockingbird,* became a childhood friend. Blessed with talent as a writer, he began selling short stories to magazines as a teenager and worked for a while as a copyboy at *The New Yorker*. But, more importantly, he proved entertaining and adept at befriending influential people, especially wealthy and socially-connected women like Eugene O'Neill's daughter, Oona, who would later marry Charlie Chaplin; Barbara (Babe) Paley, who married the founder of CBS; Marilyn Monroe; and Lee Radziwill, sister of the future First Lady, Jackie Kennedy. Through an editorial connection at *Mademoiselle*, he met novelist Carson McCullers who connected him to Bennett Cerf, publisher of Random House. And in this way, his star rose.

At first, Capote was best known for his fiction—*Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948); *A Tree of Night and Other Stories* (1949); *The Grass Harp* (1951); *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958)—but he began to write nonfiction as well and, for some time, had been thinking about using the techniques of fiction to write a factual magnum opus (Clarke). He had already been experimenting, notably with his two most significant nonfiction pieces, both long articles he wrote for *The New Yorker*. *The Muses Are Heard*, published in 1956, is a gossipy tale of a mainly African American theatre company touring a production of the musical, *Porgy and Bess*, in Soviet Russia, and "The Duke in His Domain" a profile of Marlon Brando, appeared the following year. The Brando article, which takes place in Kyoto, Japan, where the actor was starring in the film adaptation of James Michener's bestselling novel, *Sayonara* (1953), was a *tour de force*, largely because it was uncommon in the late fifties to write a warts-and-all celebrity profile.

Capote was using interviewing techniques that pushed the boundaries of what was common in mid-twentieth century journalism. In his 1976 book, *The Craft of Interviewing*, John Brady points to a passage where Capote presents an uncharacteristically candid Brando talking about his mother's alcoholism. ". . . I didn't care anymore. She was there. In a room. Holding onto me. And I let her fall. Because I couldn't take it any more—watching her breaking apart, like a piece of porcelain. I stepped right over her. I walked right out. I was indifferent. . ." Later, when puzzled friends asked Brando why he said that to a reporter, Brando said, "Well, the little bastard spent half the night telling me all his problems. I figured the least I could do was tell him a few of mine" (Brady 54).

That is not fictionalizing, and it is not even improper, a misunderstanding common outside of journalism circles. It is just one of many ways clever journalists collect information. (All professional interviewers have their bags of tricks.) At worst, it might raise ethical questions, best illustrated by Janet Malcolm's much-quoted sentence from her book, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990): "Every journalist who is not too stupid or full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse" (3).

Equally misunderstood is the entire genre of nonfiction written in a narrative style but based on substantial research. It has come to be known by various names: creative nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, literary journalism, or longform (although I will use creative nonfiction in this essay). This kind of work is not meant to be a very long daily news report, carefully balancing various points of view without revealing the reporter's opinion, and the "creative" part does not give writers a license to make things up.

Nonfiction or Fiction

Contrary to Capote's claim of inventing a genre, there were many examples of books that used these kinds of techniques—if not always as skillfully as Capote did—prior to *In Cold Blood*, among them Cornelius Ryan's *The Longest Day* (1959), Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember* (1955), Lillian Ross's *Picture* (1953), Rebecca West's *The Meaning of Treason* (1947), John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946), James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), and Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* (1932). That does not consider those who trace the antecedents back to Dickens and Daniel Defoe.

As beautifully written as it is, Capote's argument that he alone had produced the first true "nonfiction novel" is hard to support. In each of these examples, after many months, or as often years, of research, the writers chose from countless competing points of view, selected certain details over others, narrowed their focus to one, or a few, individuals as the main characters, and developed a coherent theme. In most cases these books provided some balance—the "other side of the story"—but they are, ultimately, always dominated by the points of view of the writers, whether the writer is obviously present in the work, in first person, or is in the background as an omniscient narrator.

In his book, *In Cold Blood*, Capote's attitudes are on display. He is, one can easily sense, uncomfortable with capital punishment and moreover sympathetic to one of the accused killers, Perry Smith, a complicated outsider who bears some similarities to Capote himself. He decided to make Dewey his law enforcement protagonist, giving only a few lines to the investigator who, arguably, was responsible for the arrest, trial, and conviction of Richard Hickock and Smith. Ritch Rohleder was the skilled investigator and photographer whose meticulous crime scene photos included a bloody bootprint and a fainter bootprint on a dusty basement floor. They were quite common brands of boots, which might have made detection unlikely if the killers had not still had them in their possession when they were arrested (Voss 197). But Capote's *In Cold Blood* is one writer's version of a story that would be told differently in the hands of different writers. (This is equally true of point-of-view documentary films.)

However, in both *The Muses Are Heard* and "The Duke in His Domain," Capote had already revealed his quicksilver relationship with the truth, a practice that would become controversial in the aftermath of *In Cold Blood*. In an essay defining creative nonfiction, Lee Gutkind, who founded *Creative Nonfiction* magazine in 1993, wrote that “the goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy.” But biographer Clarke draws attention to several invented scenes and composite characters in *The Muses Are Heard*, and there is a flashback in the Brando profile in which Capote describes how, ten years earlier, he had arrived at a rehearsal of Elia Kazan’s production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. There, he saw a burly young man, wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans, lying on a table on the stage, sound asleep. In the article, Capote described the sleeping Brando in sensual detail before leaving the flashback and returning to the actor’s Kyoto hotel room. However, Capote never saw Brando sleeping on the set of *Streetcar*; instead, he appropriated an anecdote told to him by a friend, the actor and writer Sandy Campbell, and wrote it as his own. (Campbell later said he found it amusing [Fleming].)

This practice is not as rare as readers might think. Even the respected Annie Dillard, whose 1974 book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, won a Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1975, admitted that the vivid opening to that book involving her cat—“I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest. . .”—was a story she had heard from a graduate student and adopted as her own. She had never owned a cat (Ulin). Even though I understand she asked the undergraduate’s permission, it still does not square with my idea of nonfiction.

Crime and Place

The crime Capote chose, which rocked the small community of Holcomb, Kansas, was a brutal one. Two drifters, Hickock and Smith, both ex-cons, arrived at the Clutter farm one night with knowledge that Herbert Clutter had a safe in the home where he kept tens of thousands of dollars. (Hickock heard this from a cellmate who had briefly worked as a labourer for Clutter. It was a fantasy; the pragmatic Clutter, a shrewd businessman, kept all his money in a bank and used checks to pay for everything.) After terrorizing the family, the two men, realizing there was no fortune inside the home, were left with the agreement they had made: Leave no witnesses.

So, Smith cut Clutter's throat before he was shot in the head. Then they shot, one by one, his wife, Bonnie, son, Kenyon, and daughter, Nancy. They left with less than fifty dollars, a pair of binoculars, and a transistor radio. Without the riches they had anticipated, Hickock was forced to cash some bad checks in Kansas City; and the men left on an odyssey that took them to Mexico, California, Nebraska, Iowa, Florida, and Nevada, where they were finally arrested.

In the meantime, Capote had been in Holcomb, accompanied by his childhood friend, Harper Lee. Whereas the conservative townsfolk and law enforcement officials were startled by the diminutive Capote, with his high, squeaky voice and undisguised homosexuality, they warmed to Lee, an affable, down-to-earth southerner and, for the most part, eventually accepted Capote as a kind of *rara avis* who had descended from Manhattan into their midst. He especially won over the lead investigator, Dewey, who gave him remarkable access to his actions, thoughts, and documentation relevant to the case. (Many believe Capote did not hide the fact that he intended to make Dewey the hero of the story.) (Clarke 320–22)

Capote's reporting and interviewing process was, by all accounts, unorthodox. He and Lee did not take notes or use a tape recorder. Instead, Capote claimed to have rigorously trained his memory so he could recall almost everything that was said so long as he wrote it all down immediately after the interview—a dubious claim to anyone who does this kind of work. (After Capote's death in 1984, George Plimpton told *The New York Times*: "Sometimes he said he had 96 per cent total recall and sometimes he said he had 94 per cent total recall. He could recall everything but he could never remember what percentage recall he had" (qtd Kakutani 42). If Capote really never took notes during interviews, though, critics of *In Cold Blood* would say that explains how he could so artfully pace the narrative since he was able to shape notes that accommodated his aspirations for a "nonfiction novel."

The structure of *In Cold Blood* is also artful. It is written in dozens of short chapters falling under four sections, the action alternating between the Clutter family, the killers, law enforcement officials, and local people in the community. The first section, "The Last to

See Them Alive,” features one of the most memorable openings in creative nonfiction, as evocative and austere a description of a place as can be found in any novel:

> The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call “out there.” Some seventy miles east of the Colorado border, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far Western than Middle West. The local accent is barbed with a prairie twang, a ranch-hand nasalness, and the men, many of them, wear narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes. The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them. (31)

One characteristic of fiction employed by creative nonfiction writers is characterization, rather than the “talking heads,” common in traditional news reporting, accompanied by brief, boilerplate descriptions. In this section, Capote introduces the Clutter family—respectable, sober, God-fearing, middle-class middle-Americans. “Though he wore rimless glasses and was of but average height, standing just under five feet ten, Mr. Clutter cut a man’s-man figure. His shoulders were broad, his hair had held its dark color, his square-jawed, confident face retained a healthy-hued youthfulness, and his teeth, unstained and strong enough to shatter walnuts, were still intact” (5-6). Clutter, a churchgoer, neither drank nor smoked and would refuse to hire, or would fire, any employee who did. His wife was the melancholy wounded bird of the family, sickly, beset by mental health issues (although perhaps not as badly as Capote portrayed her, according to family members after the book was published). His 15-year-old son, Kenyon, was a strapping, teenaged version of his father and his 16-year-old daughter, Nancy, was “the town darling" (7), good-hearted, vivacious, a champion cherry pie maker. Each of them are brought to life by anecdotes, including dialogue, that reveal their characters, although in some cases, like an exchange of dialogue between Kenyon and Nancy in the house, it is hard to know how Capote got that short of fictionalizing it.

On Saturday, November 14, 1959, at the same time as Herb Clutter is inspecting his farm, the killers are 400 miles away planning the robbery, and they are portrayed equally vividly. Hickock was an unprepossessing young man at first glance, but as Capote puts it, when clothed in only his briefs, he had an athletic, welterweight's body, the tattooed face of a cat on his right hand, a blue rose on one shoulder, and various crude, self-executed markings on his arms and torso from his days in prison. But Capote uses a description of his face to emphasize his criminal disposition:

> It was as though the head had been halved like an apple, then put together a fraction off center. Something of the kind had happened; the imperfectly aligned features were the outcome of a car collision in 1950—an accident than left his long-jawed and narrow face tilted, the left side rather lower than the right, with the results that the lips were slightly aslant, the nose askew, and his eyes not only situated at uneven levels but of uneven size, the left eye being truly serpentine, with a venomous, sickly blue squint that although it was involuntarily acquired, seemed nevertheless to warn of bitter sediment at the bottom of his nature. (30–31)

It was a face a person would not want to be surprised by, late at night, in one's home.

His partner, Smith, grew up with parents who were itinerant rodeo performers in a home characterized by alcoholism and domestic abuse. In another of the book's inaccuracies, Capote describes Smith's mother as having been a "full-blooded Cherokee" (16). Smith may have told him that, but he either did not research further or chose not to complicate matters. She was, in fact, a mixed-race woman, her mother from the Western Shoshone nation and her father Dutch (Rocha).

Smith was emotionally damaged, a bed-wetter who had been abused in a foster care home and sexually assaulted in the army. Despite his capacity for violence, he had a more introspective nature and, one suspects, the self-awareness to know that Capote responded to him. Consider Capote's description of Smith's face:

> Each angle of it induced a different impression. It was a changeling's face, and mirror-guided experiments had taught him how to ring the changes, how to look now ominous, now impish, now soulful; a tilt of the head, a twist of the lips, and the corrupt gypsy became the gentle romantic. His mother had been a full-blooded Cherokee; it was from her that he inherited his coloring—the iodine skin, the dark moist eyes, the black hair which he kept brilliantined and was plentiful enough to provide him with sideburns and a slippery spray of bangs. . . . (15–16)

Judging by Capote's sympathetic portrayal of Smith—he calls him "a creature walking wounded" (340) and later, in court, writes that "he looked as lonely and inappropriate as a seagull in a wheatfield" (272) and includes what has been proven to be a fictitious apology seconds before he was hanged—Smith may have effectively rung the changes to his benefit as his relationship with Capote developed. Harper Lee told *Newsweek* magazine, "I think every time Truman looked at Perry he saw his own childhood" (Tompkins).

The section intercuts the daily life of the Clutter family on November 14 with the killers, who finally arrive at night to the family's home. There are other moments illustrating the fiction writer's storytelling flair, as when Capote foreshadows Hickock's and Smith's eventual execution in another memorable passage:

> But then, in the earliest hours of that morning in November, a Sunday morning, certain foreign sounds impinged on the normal nightly Holcomb noises—on the keening hysteria of coyotes, the dry scrape of scuttling tumbleweed, the racing, receding wail of locomotive whistles. At that time, not a soul sleeping in Holcomb heard them—four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives [. . .] (5)

And, just as Hickock and Smith, already prepared with a pump-action shotgun, gloves, a fishing knife, and flashlight, are buying the final supplies they need—rope and a second pair of gloves—Capote relates an anecdote about a townswoman, Mrs. Hideo Ashida, traveling with Herb Clutter in his pickup truck, who marvels at how comfortable he is speaking in front of crowds, how she would find it unnerving. "I can't imagine you afraid," she says, unaware of the events that are to unfold. "No matter what happened, you'd talk your way out of it" (36).

Without having yet read about the details of the crime, which takes place in the early hours of Sunday, November 15, 1959, and which Capote only reveals in the third section, attentive readers pick up on these ominous suggestions of what is to come.

To the Gallows

In the second section, "Persons Unknown," the lead investigator, Dewey, grapples with the confusing clues left at the murder scene. As little was taken, robbery does not seem to be the motive. He assumes it must be someone local with a grudge against Herb Clutter. (The man's many business dealings had, we learn, earned him some animosity.) Townspeople are shocked by the brutal killing of a leading citizen and his family and are suddenly locking their doors and speculating on who, in the community, might have done it. Meanwhile, the killers are on their meandering getaway.

In the third section, "Answer," Floyd Wells, a former cellmate of Hickock's, hears about the murders and figures Hickock had believed his story about the fortune Clutter kept in his home and, as he had claimed, acted on it. He decided to reveal what he knew and, finally, Dewey and his team had a lead. They identify a stolen car they suspect the killers are driving, and an alert police officer in Las Vegas spots the license plate. The killers are arrested; and by the time they are back in Garden City, the county seat representing Holcomb, Hickock and Smith have confessed. The complexities of their actions are finally revealed. Hickock planned to sexually assault Nancy Clutter, but Smith prevented him, apparently disgusted by anyone who could not control their urges. Smith, who believed Hickock, for all his bravado, did not have the nerve to kill, slit Herb Clutter's throat.

In the final section, "The Corner," which is the term for Death Row, Capote draws the story to a close with the trial, sentences, and eventual executions. In a chilling moment, Smith, in his confession, said about Herb Clutter, "I didn't want to harm the man. I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Soft-spoken. I thought so right up until I cut his throat." And, as he told a visitor to his cell, "They [the Clutters] never hurt me. Like other people. Like people have all my life. Maybe it's just that the Clutters were the ones who had to pay for it" (302).

What is notable is that Capote has, in the sophisticated way of a literary novelist, carefully constructed a narrative that tells three stories—the Clutters, the killers, and Dewey—which build in suspense before converging in the second half of the book. He identified for readers the innocent and virtuous Clutter family destroyed by external forces, the avenging hero, in Dewey, and the evil forces, in Hickock and Smith, although it is Smith whose character is most developed, presented as the tormented, deformed, ruthless but romantic anti-hero. As a reading experience, it was a nonfiction account that enveloped readers in the same way a novel would.

What is not portrayed in the book is how long Capote had to wait to finish it. Even though the outcome was all but assured, the case went through a five-year-long series of appeals that might have, if successful, led to Hickock and Smith getting life imprisonment instead of the death penalty. Capote, who had written the manuscript except for the ending, impatiently waited, feeling conflicted because his relationship with Smith competed with his knowledge that the most dramatic conclusion would be the men's death. When Hickock and Smith were hanged, in April 1965, *The New Yorker* rushed the story into print in four parts and after Capote made many small modifications, the book was published on January 17, 1966.

Re-Evaluating Capote

While reading *In Cold Blood* may not seem groundbreaking today and there were antecedents, in 1965 this was a pioneering way to write a nonfiction account, perhaps only equalled at close to this level by Hersey's *Hiroshima* and Ross's *Picture.* It became a kind of template for nonfiction books to follow, beginning with Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968), which Capote called "a complete ripoff;" John Hersey's *The Algiers Motel Incident* (1968); James Mills's *The Prosecutor* (1969); and Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry's *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders* (1974). Arguably, it was not truly equalled until Mailer published *The Executioner's Song* in 1979. By then, the New Journalism was considered an historical trend of the sixties, and the use of fictional techniques in magazine features and book-length nonfiction had become commonplace, if not fully accepted. There remained, though, controversies still left over from *In Cold Blood* that begged the question: Could you trust nonfiction that reads like fiction?

What has followed publication of the book is a re-evaluation of Capote's boast that his book was not only a literary success but entirely factual as well. On the day before the murders, after Nancy Clutter taught 13-year-old Jolene Katz how to bake a cherry pie, she leaves the girl alone with her mother while Katz waits for her ride home. In this scene, Bonnie Clutter is quoted as saying several revealing things that suggest her sadness and depression. However, for his 2011 book, *Truman Capote and the Legacy of In Cold Blood*, academic and author Ralph F. Voss read through Capote's notes in the New York Public Library and found a typed record of his interview with the teenaged Katz. Although admitting that Capote *might* have had other notes about this interview that did not make it into the archives, Voss writes, “though they show good recall for a young girl, they are no match for the details Capote provides in the scene in the book, particularly the words he puts into Bonnie Clutter’s mouth—words that Jolene Katz, and *only* Jolene Katz, could have heard” (88–90).

Shortly after the book’s publication, when Phillip K. Tompkins began exploring the research that went into *In Cold Blood* for *Esquire*, he came across a January 1966 story by reporter Robert Pearman in the *Kansas City Times* detailing several inaccuracies. They arranged from the truly minor—Nancy Clutter’s boyfriend, Bobby Rupp, was not the star athlete he was portrayed as being—to odder details; for example, the way Nancy’s horse, Babe, was sold at auction after the murders. Capote’s scene read:

> “I hear fifty…sixty-five…seventy…”: the bidding was laggardly, nobody seemed to want Babe, and the man who got her, a Mennonite farmer who said he might use her for plowing, paid seventy-five dollars. . . . (271)

Pearman reported in his *Kansas City Times* article:

> “Hell, I couldn’t even get a bid in until the mare got to $100,” says Seth Earnest, father of the postmaster, the man who actually bought Babe. Mr. Earnest is neither Mennonite by religion nor farmer by occupation.
>
> “I gave $182.50 for Babe,” he said. “I wanted her for a couple of reasons. One was sentimental and the other was that she was in foal to a registered quarter horse, Aggie Twist, and I wanted the colt.” (Tompkins)

Tompkins went on to detail obvious discrepancies between Capote’s account of Hickock and Smith’s confessions and that of the official transcript. In this case, Capote’s version always heightened the dramatic elements of the narrative at the expense of accuracy.

Tompkins highlights a riveting scene in the County Jail that builds sympathy for Smith. The accused killer was isolated in a cell that was inside the Sheriff's residence where the Sheriff's wife, Josephine Meier, cooked meals in the kitchen. Capote quotes Meier hearing Smith:

> ". . . crying like a child. He'd never broke down before, shown any sign of it. Well, I went to him. The door of the cell. He reached out his hand. He wanted me to hold his hand, and I did. I held his hand, and all he said was, 'I'm embraced by shame." (308)

But Tompkins interviewed Meier, who said she had never heard Smith cry, that she was not near the cell on that day, did not hold Smith's hand, nor heard him say, "I'm embraced by shame." Furthermore, she said she had never told Capote any of these things. If Smith told Capote this story, the writer either did not do his due diligence by checking with Meier or chose to leave it out.

At the execution of Smith, Capote writes, Smith was asked if he had anything to say:

> "I think," he said, "it's a helluva thing to take a life in this manner. I don't believe in capital punishment, morally or legally. Maybe I had something to contribute, something—" His assurance faltered; shyness blurred his voice, lowered it to a just audible level. "It would be meaningless to apologize for what I did. Even inappropriate. But I do. I apologize." (340)

But Tompkins talked to two local men who were witnesses at the hanging. They said Capote had walked away, perhaps too upset to watch Smith hang having seen Hickock go first, and could not have heard what Smith said. Moreover, neither of them heard Smith apologize. Dewey, who was also there, later said he could not remember whether Smith had apologized.

Probably the most damning charge involves the conclusion. Rather than end with the execution scene, Capote wanted to show how life must go on, looping the story back to its beginning. He did, with a compelling, if sentimental, scene where Dewey takes a walk to the local River Valley cemetery and, as he approaches the graves of the Clutter family, he sees someone already there who he does not recognize, "a willowy girl with white-gloved hands, a smooth cap of dark-honey hair, and long, elegant legs." It was Susan Kidwell, Nancy Clutter's best friend, who had testified at the trial.

> "Have you forgotten me, Mr. Dewey? Susan Kidwell."
>
> "He laughed; she joined him. "Sue Kidwell, I'll be darned." He hadn't seen her since the trial; she had been a child then. "How are you? How's your mother?"
>
> "Fine, thank you. She's still teaching music at the Holcomb School. . ." (342)
>
> . . .

She said she was now in her junior year at the University of Kansas and he asked her what she was studying.

> "Everything. Art, mostly. I love it. I'm really happy."
>
> She glanced across the prairie. "Nancy and I planned to go to college together. We were going to be roommates. I think about it sometimes. Suddenly, when I'm very happy, I think of all the plans we made." (342)

They talked about Bobby Rupp, Nancy's former boyfriend, who had recently married. Dewey teased Susan Kidwell, telling her she must have a lot of beaus.

> "Well, nothing serious. But that reminds me. Do you have the time? Oh," she cried, when he told her it was past four. "I've got to run! But it was nice to have seen you, Mr. Dewey."
>
> "And nice to have seen you, Sue. Good luck," he called after her as she disappeared down the path, a pretty girl in a hurry, her smooth hair swinging, shining—just such a young woman as Nancy might have been. Then, starting home, he walked toward the trees, and under them, leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat." (343)

As a resolution to the book, it works, but in Gerald Clarke's biography, he wrote that Capote had wanted to end on a more hopeful note than the executions.

> But since events had not provided him with a happy scene, he was forced to invent one: a chance, springtime encounter of Alvin Dewey and Susan Kidwell, Nancy Clutter's best friend, in the tree-shaded Garden City cemetery, an oasis of green in that dry country. . . . It's almost a duplicate of the ending of [Capote's 1950 novel] *The Grass Harp*, which brings together Judge Cool and young Collin Fenwick in a similar reunion in a cemetery. . . . (358–59)

I quibble only with Clarke's use of the word "forced." No one forced Capote to fictionalize the ending of his nonfiction book. He chose to do it.

Pushing the Boundaries

In 1984, an anthology called *The Literary Journalists* was published, edited by Norman Sims. A long-time journalism instructor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and later the author of a history of literary journalism, his introduction is widely seen as having established conventions for this kind of narrative-driven nonfiction. (A second anthology, *Literary Journalism*, published a decade later and co-edited with writer Mark Kramer, included Kramer's influential introduction, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists.") Sims has always agreed that with the dramatic social changes in the sixties, when journalists were expanding the possibilities of nonfiction and experimenting with fictional devices, a time when the official guidelines around nonfiction were being tested and broken, Capote's classic, and others like it, would be "grandfathered," rather than critically measured against the conventions established 20 years later (Sims).

Which is not to say the boundaries are not still being pushed today. Ben Lerner's 2014 novel, *10.04*, is described by its narrator as a book "that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them." That still seems to be the way some writers view nonfiction. In 2012, *The New Yorker* staff writer Jonah Lehrer, seen by many as the next Malcolm Gladwell, resigned after quotes attributed to Bob Dylan in his book *Imagine: How Creativity Works*, were proven to be fabricated. How, one marvels, can someone in the age of the Internet, when fact-checking is easier than ever before in history, imagine he could put invented quotes into the mouth of Dylan, a legend surrounded by obsessive fans who have researched his every utterance?

Perhaps it is just the subtle distinction between pushing boundaries and shattering them, between putting in the time and labor to thoroughly research and cutting corners, between accepting the limitations of nonfiction and deciding that making some of it up is worth the risk. Is it so hard to understand? In a 2018 essay for the online journal, *Literary Hub*, writer Aminatta Forna condensed the distinction quite well. "As a novelist and essayist I see the two forms as conjoined twins, sharing themes and concerns, which all come out of the same brain, but flow into two separate entities." (Forna) Having chosen the nonfiction entity, all writers must remember the contract they have assumed with readers: that what lies ahead is, to the best of their abilities, true.

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