

Truman Capote and the Tarnished Tale of *In Cold Blood*



Harper Lee left and Truman Capote middle, amidst the family of Kansas Detective Alvin Dewey

New evidence may reveal the truth behind Truman's true-crime novel

Turning the pages of Truman Capote's game changing *In Cold Blood* is an experience that lives on in the memory of readers of three generations in America. I haven't yet forgotten the summer that the true-crime novel stunned my heart and filled my mind with the same gory details that piloted the genre of nonfiction. Emblazoned within the inner cover reads Capote's cunning subtitle; 'A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences'. (Capote 1) Furthermore, and quite boldly I might add, Capote capitulated as the opening line in his acknowledgements that "All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned..." (Capote 5). A rather hefty claim for anyone undertaking such a task as to report the brutal murder of four innocent persons in a small town in Kansas.

In Cold Blood, A favorite piece of classic literature of mine, piloted the true-crime nonfiction genre. It is the tale of the Herb Clutter family of four, who lived on farm in the town

of Holcomb, Kansas. All were well liked affluent members of the community. The book describes two stories occurring simultaneously which merge to be one at the end. On the one hand it depicts the demise of the four Clutters who are tied shot-gunned to death, and the investigation that follows, led by the heroic Detective Alvin Dewey. On the other side is the chilling release from prison of Richard Hickock and Perry Smith. The stories flies over country roads and state lines as the two join in murder, robbery, and fraud. These two tales merge in the mind of Capote and the details and loose ends are wrapped up as the noose is tied around poor Perry's throat.

Due to new evidence that has surfaced in recent years, critics from the Wall Street Journal are talking to the effect that Capote may not have given a true account. Moreover, the hero to our tale, Detective Alvin Dewey was not all that he was portrayed to be, as the highly reactive and effective investigator who solved the case of the two killers, Dick and Perry. As a matter of controversy, Truman Capote was given more than his fair share of help in compiling the novel by Detective Dewey. In fact, on February 8, 2013, The Wall Street Journal published a piece revealing that Dewey helped Capote to obtain a Kansas State driver's license during his extended stay in Holcomb, and gave him free reign in accessing sensitive materials such as private journals of the deceased prior to the capture of Richard Hickock and Perry Smith (Kevin 9). In turn, Truman made Dewey a star, omitting five days of failure in Dewey's investigation that tell another tale (Kevin 5).

The purpose of this presentation is not to slander the reputation of a phenomenal American writer. An analysis by way of psychobiography will reveal the motivation behind Capote concealing the five day gap in the Dewey investigation. Dr. William Todd Schultz, best known for his work in the psychobiography criticism at the University of Pacific and for his

work *Tiny Terror: Why Truman Capote (Almost) Wrote Answered Prayers* best explains the validity of this approach. He stated in his intro to *Handbook of Psychobiography*, “Psychobiography, then, is psychology’s “return of the repressed.” It puts the person back where she should be in personality: front and center, the most moving target imaginable.” (William 1). Thus by way of analyzing the repressed past experiences of Truman Capote we can first discuss his abandonment issues, revisit the missing five days, and validate the claim that it was indeed his cruel childhood that led him to give undue credit to Dewey.

Why would a writer of his caliber show such callousness and disregard in publishing a work such as *In Cold Blood*? Earlier I said that Capote was a figure of controversy. Born and bathed in controversy is a more accurate description. As I will show you, Capote was born into abandonment and had psychological damage due to his upbringing that was reflected in his choice of partners in love. He was a habitual adopter of father figure lovers and family men. In this presentation, I will open a window to his past and show why Capote behaved as he did with Alvin Dewey, and his handling of the first real ‘nonfiction’ work in true-crime.

Early childhood and abandonment



Taking a look at Capote's childhood, we can observe where his motives for clinging to loved one's begins. Young Truman, a beautiful blue eyed child, was born to a one-time Miss Alabama rolling stone mother in Monroeville, who married twice for money, each time ditching him to be raised by his aunts (Anne 2). Later Capote reflected upon his childhood, "I pounded and pounded on the door to get out, pounding and yelling and screaming. That did something to me. I have a terror of being locked in a room—being abandoned; I have a great fear of being abandoned by some particular friend or lover." (Anne 2). His mother would lock him in hotel closets and leave him standing on dusty roads as she roared off in pursuit of her next husband. Capote was reared to cling to those that he loved desperately and to seek out surrogate father figures to replace the one he never really had.

Why is Capote's troubled childhood relevant to his actions later on in life? *Children of Divorce: Stories of Loss and Growth (2nd Edition)* by J. H. Harvey and M. A. Fine can make this connection for us. Children who grow up in a divorced or fractured family environment are likely later in life to experience "feelings of abandonment, terror, and loneliness that lead to early

sexual activity and experimentation with drugs or alcohol” (Kihiko 1). Capote’s adult life included all of the above. Sympathetically, a pit was dug in the youth of Truman Capote, which he attempted to fill for the rest of his adult life with the men he loved.

From Repressed Abandonment Memories to Father Figures

Capote kept a collection of father figures and lovers to fill the holes made in childhood. In New York, in 1948, Capote met one of these father figure lovers, Jack Dunphy (Sheila 1). In fact Dunphy would go on to be the behind the scenes figure in Capote’s life for the majority of his career until, disgusted by Capote’s alcoholism, Dunphy would abandon his lover. He said of his relationship with Dunphy, “You are the only good thing that ever happened to me. I admire and respect you so.” (Mallon 2). It was rather like losing a father and essentially a family, all over again for Capote.

Admiration and respect were the two qualities that Capote valued most in his suitors. Capote did not run with the usual homosexual crowd of the 1950’s. There was no need for him to come out publicly regarding his orientation as he had always been ‘out’ according to his closest boyhood peers. He fell in love with conservative married men, often with children, and became a part of the family (Anne 3). Capote did not grow up in a conservative home and was seeking to live what he felt had been taken from him as a child. Subsequently he would find all of these beloved qualities in the Dewey household.

I think it of no small consequence that he was taken in as a part of the Dewey family. Letters between Capote and Dewey reveal much of the very same admiration and respect that he showed for his lover Jack Dunphy. Citing the notes of Harper Lee, who accompanied and counselled Capote while writing the novel, he called Dewey “just plain handsome”. Furthermore, Capote often referred in handwritten notes to Dewey as “Dear Foxy” (Kevin 5). He inserted

himself into the Dewey family further by offering writing advice to the Dewey's oldest son who was himself an aspiring young writer, and paid Mrs. Dewey a sum of \$10,000 dollars as a "consultant" to the film 'In Cold Blood', and landed her a position with the film in Los Angeles (Kevin 10). In summary, we can observe by these evidences that Capote very much became a part of the Dewey family until Mrs. Dewey's death in 2002. There was some invisible magnet at play between Alvin Dewey and his most unlikely companion in the investigation, namely Capote, that showed the same unmistakable signs of desire that Capote emulated towards Jack Dunphy.

Revisiting the Five Day Gap

We can see that Capote's unusual relationship with Dewey granted him unprecedented access to witnesses, crime scene photos, and even the personal diary of Nancy Clutter during the ongoing investigation. We can also observe that this favorable relationship led him to portray Dewey as the heroic detective in his novel. All this now begs the question, how does the five day gap in the novel favor Dewey? In the novel, Capote displays the snap judgement and quick wit of Dewey at what he calls the critical moment in the case at 19 days. Receiving a tip, the exhausted but elated Dewey, dispatches one single KBI agent to the family house of one of the killers, Richard Hickock. This moment, the agent sitting tensely, sipping coffee amongst the parents of the perpetrator, hands shaking, was made the pivotal turning point in cracking the case of the two killers (Capote 168). According to new evidence produced by the son of the KBI agent Harold Nye, this was simply not true.

The evidence tells a very different story about Dewey and his handling of the case. Although the KBI has made no official commentary on this new evidence, the truth to be published at a future date, stands to correct Capote's account. Dewey did not in fact act rapidly

upon the tip, although promising. In the novel, a former employee of the Clutter's, who was incarcerated with Perry, tips off the agency that his former cell mate planned to murder the Clutters. According to Duane West, leading prosecutor in the case, "Dewey said it wasn't them. Dewey was convinced it was somebody local who had a grudge against Herb Clutter." (Kevin 10). Far from acting on this crucial tip immediately, Dewey procrastinated a full five days before doing anything. In the end, it was not a moonlight visit over coffee, but a full team of KBI agents at midday that swarm the family home of one of the killers (Kevin 11). This does not tell a story of clever investigative work, but one of personal bias, and human error in handling evidence in the case.

Conclusive Remarks With Regard To a Remarkable Man

Truman Capote will remain a figure revered and beloved by scholars of American literature. As hailed by Life magazine, on the front cover of *In Cold Blood*, it truly is "A masterpiece... a spellbinding work." (Capote 1). Undeniably, Capote's later life decisions came as a result of his repressed feelings of abandonment by his wayward mother. These psychological influences led him to adopt and on occasion fall in love with father figures, such as Jack Dunphy. Capote was a staple in the Dewey home, from the moment he met the tall, dark, and handsome detective. He found himself influencing this family long after the publishing of *In Cold Blood*. Leaving out the five day gap in the investigation, portrayed Dewey as the first responding hero that he was not. Capote, brilliant as he was, was influenced by the psychological issues of his childhood, such that an almost flawless piece of literature, has now become the questioned depiction of an almost "true account of a multiple murder and its consequences" (Capote 1).

Works Cited

- By Anne, T. F. (1978, Jul 09). THE PRIVATE WORLD OF TRUMAN CAPOTE. *New York Times (1923-Current File)* Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/123637584?accountid=4488>
- Capote, Truman. In *Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage, 1994. 343. Print.
- Helliker, Kevin. "Capote Classic 'In Cold Blood' Tainted By Long-Lost Files". *WSJ. Wall Street Journal*, 8 Feb. 2013. Web. 26 May 2015.
- Kihiko, Moses Kibe. "Review Of Children Of Divorce: Stories Of Loss And Growth (2Nd Edition)." *Family & Community Health: The Journal Of Health Promotion & Maintenance* 35.3 (2012): 271. PsycINFO. Web. 1 June 2015.
- Mallon, T. (2004). Golden boy: The life and letters of truman capote. *New Yorker*, 80(26), 84-88. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/53943467?accountid=4488>
- Capote, Truman (1924-1984), An Introduction to." *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Sheila Fitzgerald. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1989. *Short Story Criticism Online*. Web. 25 May 2015.
- Schultz, William Todd. *Handbook Of Psychobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 1 June 2015.