

TRUMAN CAPOTE

Enfant Terrible



ROBERT EMMET LONG

Truman Capote—
Enfant Terrible

This page intentionally left blank

Truman Capote— Enfant Terrible

ROBERT EMMET LONG



continuum

NEW YORK • LONDON

2008

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

Copyright © 2008 by Robert Emmet Long

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publishers.

Printed in the United States of America on 50% postconsumer waste recycled paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Long, Robert Emmet.

Truman Capote, enfant terrible / Robert Emmet Long.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8264-2763-2 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8264-2763-4 (alk. paper) 1. Capote, Truman, 1924-1984. 2. Novelists, American--20th century--Biography. I. Title.

PS3505.A59Z685 2008

813'.54--dc22

[B]

2008004957

For Carolyn, with love

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

	Preface and Acknowledgments	ix
Chapter 1.	The Early Years: Engaging Two Worlds	1
Chapter 2.	Early Stories: “Miriam,” “A Tree of Night,” “The Headless Hawk,” “Shut a Final Door,” “Master Misery,” and “Children on Their Birthdays”	13
Chapter 3.	<i>Summer Crossing</i>	33
Chapter 4.	<i>Other Voices, Other Rooms</i>	40
Chapter 5.	Early 1950s Reportage, Theater, and Films: <i>Local Color</i> , <i>The Grass Harp</i> , “House of Flowers,” and <i>Beat the Devil</i>	49
Chapter 6.	The Mid- to Late 1950s: <i>The Muses Are Heard</i> , “The Duke in His Domain,” <i>Observations</i> , <i>Breakfast at Tiffany’s</i> , and <i>The Innocents</i>	65
Chapter 7.	<i>In Cold Blood</i>	81
Chapter 8.	Late Capote: <i>Music for Chameleons</i> , <i>Answered Prayers</i> , and Other Writings	94
Chapter 9.	Capote in Retrospect	115
	Bibliography	121
	Index	125

This page intentionally left blank

Preface and Acknowledgments

I first became aware of Truman Capote when I was a high school senior in an upstate New York town, and happened upon a paperback edition of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. I was amazed by the contents of the book, and by the bizarre jacket photograph of the author. A year or so later I almost met Capote. I was then a student at Columbia College, and noticing that he would be giving a reading at the YMHA, I went to see and hear him. The moment he began reading in that strangest of voices, the audience—or some of it—broke out into disbelieving laughter. Capote paid no attention and continued to read, and within a few minutes the laughter subsided and was replaced by a kind of awed silence and absorption in what was being read. At the end Capote received a huge ovation.

Inspired by the reading, and with the confidence of my eighteen years that Capote would be happy to see me, I finessed my way backstage to offer my congratulations. He was standing alone behind the curtain, and when he saw me he looked startled; his eyes grew wide with terror. Then the strangest thing happened: as if some magic wand had been waved, in a split second he disappeared! At a later time (but also in New York) I was with a friend—a Southerner, as it happened—in a Greenwich Village bar. At some point the friend said to me, “Oh, there’s Truman Capote.” But when I looked to the doorway where he had been standing, he once again had vanished. Like a phantom.

On another, later occasion, I was at a party in New York honoring the filmmakers Ismail Merchant and James Ivory; among the guests, and next to me in a buffet line, was Gerald Clarke, then writing his biography of Capote. We talked a bit about the book and the progress he was making with it; and I prepared to hear all manner of things behind the scenes when he was lured away by his female companion,

and my approach to Capote through his authorized biographer proved yet another phantom experience.

Yet it was after I moved back upstate that I had my closest near encounter with Capote. A new family moved into a Victorian house across the park from where I lived, and before long we became friends. As it happened, my newfound friend, Mary Aswell Doll, was the daughter of Mary Louise Aswell, a prominent editor in New York who had a generation earlier helped discover Capote and befriended him. It was at her summer house on Cape Cod that he had finished writing *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Over dinners and barbecues, incidents involving Capote were recalled (one about his taking her to a school dance, and of his being no taller than she was). I was getting very close, if not close enough.

More time has passed since then, and even though I never did have my meeting with Capote, I have at last, in preparing this book, come face-to-face with him.

I am indebted to the New York Public Library's Humanities and Social Science Library, where on five different occasions I made use of the Truman Capote Papers for my research, and to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center—for its elaborate clipping files and its Theatre on Film and Tape Archive. I am grateful, too, to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., which vies with the New York Public Library for possessing the largest Capote collection in America. In addition, I am grateful to Alan U. Schwartz, Capote's lawyer and friend, with whom I spoke on numerous occasions. Gerald Clarke's splendid and indispensable *Capote: A Biography* provided a treasury of information and insight; and George Plimpton's *Truman Capote*, a collection of memories from early childhood on by those who knew Capote, was a pleasure to read and savor. It goes without saying that I read all of Capote's work and the principal literature about him. My thanks to all.

Chapter One

The Early Years: Engaging Two Worlds

Of the Southern writers who came to public attention in the middle of the twentieth century, Truman Capote was the most unlike the others, the most resistant to being typed as a “local writer.” A polished and detached observer, he was ultimately placeless; like his character Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, he was always “traveling,” unwilling or unable to put down roots. He was born in a New Orleans hospital in 1924, and spent the early part of his childhood in Monroeville, Alabama, a town with fewer than a thousand inhabitants that was not near any big city. In one respect, at least, this setting served him well, for in works like *The Grass Harp* and “A Christmas Memory” he was able to create his own fictional world based in the South.

His surname was not originally Capote, but Persons—his mother, Lillie Mae Faulk, having married Archulus Persons in 1923 when she was barely more than sixteen and he twenty-six. Five feet tall with dark blond hair, she was a local beauty who lacked maturity and had married “Arch” Persons for the money she thought he had. He belonged to a respected Alabama family that had produced lawyers and judges, but Arch was an empty suit—a man who dressed smartly and talked big, but in the end spent time in prison. Lillie Mae learned on her honeymoon that he did not have anything like the means she imagined. The marriage was an on-again, off-again affair. Lillie Mae lived for a time with her Faulk relatives in Monroeville, but the marriage officially lasted for six years, during which time the couple were reunited intermittently. During one of these reunions, Lillie Mae became pregnant. Capote was born in a New Orleans hospital, his infancy spent in a New Orleans hotel suite where he was conspicuously neglected by his mother.

Virtually a child herself, Lillie Mae hadn't the least idea of how to bring up her infant son. She had no trouble attracting men, with whom she spent much of her time, while her child remained locked in their suite, sometimes in a dark closet. Fearing that he had been abandoned, Truman would begin screaming at the top of his lungs. Lillie Mae instructed the hotel management to ignore his wild screams, which they did, and he would continue screaming for hours. He was abandoned, literally, when Lillie Mae left him with her relatives while she went to New York to pursue a dream of mingling in café society. The Faulks, who lived in a substantial white frame house on South Alabama Avenue in Monroeville, consisted of three unmarried women and their reclusive, unmarried brother Bud. Jennie Faulk was the prosperous, dominant one; her sister Callie kept the books at Jennie's dry goods store; and a distant relative, Nanny Rumbley Faulk, or "Sook," as she was known, was a woman of a shy and childlike nature who had no well-defined function in the family, which Capote would later describe as "Southern Gothic."

Sook, memorialized by Capote in "A Christmas Memory," adored Truman and loved nothing better than playing games with him in the attic of the big house. They liked to find oddments in trunks and create make-believe costumes. According to Capote's Aunt, Capote "was almost unnatural in its intensity." In her loneliness she desperately clung to the small boy. Perhaps she sensed in Truman a kindred spirit. They were both forgotten people, Sook by her sisters and brother, Truman by his parents. Both were outsiders—Sook because her childlike mind kept her apart from the adult world; and Truman because his pretty looks, delicate build, and girlish tenderness offended other people's notions of how a "real boy" ought to look and act. Sook loved to sort through the collection of old clothes to dress Truman up; "putting a bonnet on his head, slipping faded white arm-length gloves on his hands, wrapping a feathered boa around his neck," Sook would exclaim, "[D]on't you look like an elegant lady ready for the ball!"

In his loneliness, Truman did have a close friend apart from Sook—Nelle Harper Lee, who later, writing under the name Harper Lee, would become the author of the best-selling novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). They were, in fact, about the same age and lived next door to each other in Monroeville. Their friendship began at once and lasted a lifetime. Lee's biographer, Charles Shields, observes that "from the start they recognized in each other 'an apartness,' as Capote

later expressed it, and they both loved reading. When Lee's lawyer father gave them an old Underwood typewriter, they began writing original stories together. She was also his protector. In their childhood Truman was beaten up, and she rescued him from the other boys. By the time she was seven years, she was a fearsome stomach puncher, foot-stamper, and hair-puller. . . . Once some boys tried to challenge her . . . each ended up face down . . . crying 'Uncle!'"

In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Capote would model the tomboy Idabel after Lee, and in turn Lee drew on Capote for her character Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the 1950s Lee would join Capote on trips to Kansas, where she helped to secure the cooperation of the townspeople for Capote's nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*.

The lonely childhoods of Truman and Nelle were connected by their estrangement from their mothers. Nelle's mother had a bipolar condition causing mood swings that disqualified her from serving as a model for her daughter, who thus adopted a masculine identity. Truman's troubled relationship with his mother also had consequences, for she left him with a lifelong sense of abandonment; she did not show him the love she should have, and she was repelled by his effeminacy. Even from the beginning, he fought back, refusing to be other than who he was; there was deadly warfare between them.

Capote was not the only notable creative writer of recent times who became locked in years of conflict with his mother. One sees this, for example, in the playwright Edward Albee and his well-to-do stepmother, who in the end disinherited him. That relationship is reflected in the formidable mother figure in Albee's *Three Tall Women* (1994), and it is spelled out in full in Mel Gussow's revealing biography of Albee, *A Singular Journey* (1999). But not even Albee's strenuous experience can eclipse the lastingly destructive relationship of Lillie Mae Persons and her son Truman. In his Monroeville years Truman had already been convinced that he would be a writer, and he spent many hours recording his impressions and his ideas for fiction. This juvenile writing was locked away in a trunk on the upper floor of the Faulk house, and he would allow no one to see its contents. But his mother, perhaps under the influence of alcohol, set fire to the trunk; it was as if she were destroying everything for which he stood. Years later he would say that his mother was "the single worst person in my life."

Jack Dunphy, Capote's longtime companion, has written in *Dear Genius: A Memoir of My Life with Truman Capote*, that even late in his life,

Capote would talk to his mother in his sleep, demanding [to know] why she had not taken him with her, why she had left him behind to haunt the post office for news of her to enliven his life in the small town of Monroeville. It was the commencement of her life-long determination to dominate a spirit she no more understood than she did the turnings of the moon. . . . She was forever trying to make him over, make a man of him. That she did not really want him, and never had, was only to surface with her later on, when drink bared her secret most soul, not only to herself but to Truman as well. . . . He confessed how he had almost pushed her out the window of the Park Avenue apartment once when she was drunk. He never said that he hated her but he did all the same. He despised and feared her somewhat as well.

Dunphy goes on to describe essential differences between mother and son:

She would have liked to sit on him and smother him and subdue him utterly, as some animals, motivated by jealousy and competitiveness, do to their young. Truman was an exotic, and she had no connection with him, really, except in the mere biological sense. He did not love her, but he wanted her to love him. I don't think that [she] was ever in love in her life. She struck me as being all for herself, whereas Truman possessed the gift of selflessness. He was not like other sons. He was better. He was this instrument, this finely tuned thing made of nerves that helped him catch the nuances of things and recover them.

After shuffling him around for six years, Lillie Mae left Truman with the relatives in Monroeville for good in 1930. In 1931 she moved to New York City, where she eventually found restaurant work. It was here that she re-encountered Joseph Capote, a Cuban immigrant she had originally met in New Orleans in 1925. Before long they were married. She shed her countrified name of Lillie Mae and became Nina; and Truman, now adopted by her husband, became Truman Capote. In the 1930s Nina and Joe Capote lived it up; they traveled abroad and vacationed at the best American resorts. They had a house in Brooklyn at first, then moved to an attractive apartment on

Manhattan's Riverside Drive in 1933. Truman, now a fourth grader, was enrolled at the exclusive Trinity School.

There his high-strung nerves made him a problem case; as a school administrator of the time relates in Gerald Clarke's biography *Capote*, "There were problems at home, and his mother would call to talk about his temper tantrums, which I gather were not uncommon. The year he entered I witnessed one such incident myself. He was lying on his back in the hallway, kicking his feet like a child of two. He was obviously on the verge of hysterics." Clarke adds, "Like many disturbed children he was a sleepwalker: on more than one occasion he suddenly woke up to find himself in pajamas in the lobby of his apartment building."

Nina took him to psychiatrists in an attempt to have him remade as a "normal boy," and when this did not work, she sent him to St. John's, a military academy up the Hudson River in Ossining, New York, where she left him to his fate as the smallest and prettiest boy in the school. When Truman's year there proved a complete disaster, Nina enrolled him again at the Trinity School, where he was as obstinate and difficult as ever. In 1939 the Capotes left New York to live in the wealthy community of Greenwich, Connecticut. Thomas Flanagan, a classmate at Greenwich High School who would himself later become a distinguished novelist, has provided a revealing glimpse of him at this time; Capote, he notes in Clarke's biography, was "full of energy and self-confidence, and quite flamboyant, a show-off. He had a sense of himself as a special person, a fact that he was under no impulse to conceal from other people." This sense of being a special person was shared by Capote's English teacher, Catherine Wood, who catered to him in and out of the classroom. Impressed by the stories he was writing, she invited him to her home for dinner and predicted that he would one day be famous.

Capote also found a new friend and confidante at the school in Phoebe Pierce, an attractive girl who shared his passion for writing. They had in common, too, that they had absent fathers (Pierce's father died when she was sixteen) and mothers who were alcoholics. Nina Capote would begin her scotch drinking in the afternoon, drinking that sometimes led to rages. Pierce's mother was not only an alcoholic but also mentally ill. In the loneliness of their lives, Capote and Pierce banded together, and on Sunday nights they would take off for Manhattan to immerse themselves in its nightlife. They would begin by

visiting the jazz clubs that flourished along Fifty-second Street, and around midnight would drop in at the Stork Club and El Morocco, then make a mad dash for the last train back to Greenwich.

By 1942 the Capotes were back in New York in an apartment at Park Avenue and Eighty-seventh Street, and Truman was attending the Franklin School, a private school on Manhattan's West Side. Phoebe Pierce was attending Barnard College, but by then Capote had found some other girls as companions—Carol Marcus, Oona O'Neill, and Gloria Vanderbilt, who were all close friends; they belonged to a circle of debutantes and to café society. His friendship with them came about when he met Eleanor Marcus. She introduced him to her sister Carol, and Carol was so struck by him that she introduced him to her best friends—O'Neill and Vanderbilt. Each has since written her own memoir, in which Capote appears; and the three women are treated together in another book, Aram Saroyan's composite biography *Trio: Portrait of an Intimate Friendship* (1985).

Oona O'Neill had exceptional credentials as the daughter of the great American playwright Eugene O'Neill and the future wife of one of the greatest figures in film history, Charlie Chaplin. In 1942 she was attending the Brearley School for girls. At the end of her senior year she was admitted to Vassar College, but instead of going she decided to devote herself to the city's glamorous nightlife. A celebrity at an early age, she became associated in the public mind with the Stork Club, and the famous columnist Walter Winchell, among others, wrote about her comings and goings; in 1942 she received the title Debutante of the Year. Carol Marcus (who would later marry the playwright William Saroyan, and then the actor Walter Matthau), was at the Dalton School that year, and there met Oona O'Neill in a dance class; the two immediately became close friends. They met Gloria Vanderbilt, the third member of their group, at a private party on Long Island. Vanderbilt had been famous at the age of ten as the "poor little rich girl," the object of a custody battle that made front-page international news. Wherever she went in her adolescence in the 1940s, her fame preceded her. The three women would claim later that they were a composite model for Capote's character Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, for like them she had plunged into Manhattan nightlife; but Holly was a little-known bird of passage rather than a partying debutante with a well-defined place in society.

In this period in which he was befriended by a clutch of rich girls, Capote was hired as a copyboy by the *New Yorker* magazine. He was a very odd-looking office boy, whose appearance—at eighteen he looked hardly more than twelve—drew stares. *New Yorker* editor William Shawn has remarked in Clarke's biography that Capote was "like a small boy, almost like a child." He carried himself, however, with the utmost confidence and panache. He had lunch delivered to him not from a neighborhood delicatessen but from fashionable restaurants like the "21" Club. Once again he forged an alliance with a woman—in this case with the *New Yorker's* exacting and feared office manager Daise Terry, who soon gave him a coveted assignment as copyboy for the art department. His job was to sort through unsolicited cartoons and ideas and send the more promising ones to the art director for a final selection. Given to embellishing his life, Capote would later have people believe that he acted more as a quasi-editor than as a lowly copyboy. His most thankless job was to lead the nearly blind James Thurber through the city to his assignations with women, which involved sitting in an adjacent room and overhearing the graceless sounds of sex acts.

He also clashed with Robert Frost when the renowned poet was giving a reading at the summer 1944 Breadloaf Writer's Conference in Vermont. Capote had either claimed to be representing the *New Yorker* or had somehow given that impression. Sitting in the front row of the audience, he bent down to rub his ankle and then discovered that he could not get up. In this awkwardly frozen position he hobbled as discreetly as possible up the aisle. Seeing Capote, whom he believed to be the representative of the *New Yorker*, leaving in the middle of the reading, the poet flew into a rage, slammed down his book, and refused to continue. When word of this absurd incident reached the *New Yorker*, Capote was promptly fired.

Capote then asked for and received money from his stepfather that enabled him to return to Monroeville to write fiction. Later he returned to New York to be near the magazines in which he was hoping to place his short stories. He was fortunate in that short stories appearing in the glossy women's magazines paid well and could even launch a career—a condition that does not exist today. He made the most of his opportunities, and was especially effective in winning over women who were highly placed editors. Carmel Snow, who was such a person, is described by Clarke as "another in the succession of middle-aged women

who clasped him to their bosoms and caused heads to turn wherever they went with him. She was the famous editor, a perfectionist who was seen only in Balenciaga; he was the stripling writer, more than thirty-five years her junior, whose only distinction in dress was the long Bronzini scarf that fluttered after him. . . . A more curious and singular pair could scarcely be pictured. . . .”

But the closest and most enduring friendship that Capote had with a female editor was with Mary Louise Aswell, the fiction editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. It is impossible to read his letters to “Mary Lou” without being conscious of her as an ideal mother figure to him, the diametrical opposite of the actual mother he had in Nina Capote. This is not to say that Capote did not find these sorts of friendships satisfying in their own right, and they were clearly of benefit to his career: Aswell published his early fiction in *Harper's Bazaar*, and introduced him to people who could be helpful to him.

It was at her apartment in the autumn of 1945 that Capote first met Leo Lerman, an articulate and sociable gay man who made it a practice to know everyone in the arts. His apartment at Ninety-fourth Street and Lexington Avenue, only a block from Capote's, was a gathering place for composers, novelists, poets, stage actors, film stars, and dancers. According to Lerman's obituary in the August 23, 1994, *New York Times*, Maria Callas, Marlene Dietrich, Marcel Duchamp, William Faulkner, and Evelyn Waugh all paid visits. Lerman was in an ideal position for entrée into this sociocultural scene in New York as the features editor at *Vogue* and editor in chief at *Vanity Fair*. In addition, he wrote frequently on theater, dance, music, art, movies, and books for a variety of publications, including the *New York Times*.

Capote was welcomed into Lerman's circle at a precocious age, and it would be hard to imagine that he wasn't affected by the importance of such achievement and fame. Lerman kept a diary that has been published recently as a lengthy book, *The Grand Surprise: The Journals of Leo Lerman*, and Capote is often mentioned in it. It is revealing to see young Capote through his host's eyes. In a 1946 entry he remarks, “Truman lacks all education. He is remarkably astute in contemporary letters—mostly fiction—but of the past [he knows] almost nothing.” Two years later, after the publication of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Lerman calls Capote “excessively immature and selfish . . . a great mythomaniac, and his myth now enlarges.” The acid nature of these comments was perhaps due to Capote's

condescending sketch of him as “Hilary” in *Local Color* (which was first published in the 1940s in glossy magazines, then later collected in book form in 1950) and his remark to Lerman that he would “soon outgrow” him. “Truman cannot help betrayal,” Lerman writes in a 1948 entry, “it is in him and something he cannot control.” Yet their friendship, with all its reservations, did continue through the years. With his gift for conversation and wit, and his ability to fascinate, Truman made new and invaluable contacts. Indeed, it was at Lerman’s apartment that Capote met his life partner Jack Dunphy.

Dunphy was a very different sort of person from Capote. Older by ten years and ruggedly good-looking, he was the eldest of six children in an Irish family that had settled in Philadelphia. He had ambitions to become a dancer, at first, and then a writer. He married Joan McCracken, with whom he danced in *Oklahoma!* McCracken, commonly remembered as the “girl who falls down” in the musical, was a rising star until her career was cut short by a heart condition that took her life at an early age. When Dunphy returned from the service during World War II, he broke up with McCracken, began to explore the homosexual side of his nature, and published a novel—*John Fury*, about the poor Irish in Philadelphia—that was favorably reviewed. Capote and Dunphy were together for years, but Dunphy was not someone to whom affection came easily. He shunned the people Capote socialized with, and could be rude, cold, and distant. His temperament, Dunphy said, was “hyperborean.” His writing, which never had the widespread appeal of Capote’s, was idiosyncratic; his book *Dear Genius*, supposedly about their years together, has little to say about their relationship.

In the spring of 1946 Capote received an appointment to spend close to a year at Yaddo, the artists’ colony at Saratoga Springs in upstate New York. The novelist Marguerite Young, who was at Yaddo at that time, recalls vividly in Clarke’s biography what the young Capote was like: “I remember him as being absolutely enthralling that summer, high-spirited, generous, loving. We all thought he was a genius.” Katherine Anne Porter, a writer he admired and learned from, and John Malcolm Brinnin, who would later publish a memoir of his friendship with Capote, were also at Yaddo at this time. Significantly, as it turned out, the highly regarded literature professor Newton Arvin was also there, working on what was to be his prize-winning biography of

Herman Melville. Capote and Arvin became lovers almost immediately (his relationship with Dunphy understood that they were both free to roam) and Arvin began to mentor him in American and European literature, introducing him to the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Marcel Proust. Capote would later sit in the back of Arvin's classes at Smith College, and was a member of a private seminar at Arvin's Prospect Street apartment in Northampton, Massachusetts. Lerman, in one of his diary entries, has said that he thought "Truman was less physically amorous of Newton than he was overwhelmed by his prodigious intellectuality and [response to] all things aesthetic and his position in academe. Newton reads to him every day [from] *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad* in Greek." Capote once said of their relationship that "Newton was my Harvard." He was more than that; he was also a father figure of striking contrast to Arch Persons.

Arvin introduced Capote to academic colleagues—Daniel Aaron, Granville Hicks, Louis Kronenberger, Harry Levin, F. O. Matthiessen, Lionel and Diana Trilling, and Edmund Wilson. In Clarke's biography, Aaron sums up the impression the boyish Capote made on these people: "I remember his [Arvin's] talking about Truman even before I met him: this marvelous boy, this genius, this incredible figure who was wildly uneducated and yet had this gift." By the late 1940s this "marvelous boy" was being invited everywhere. Bennett Cerf, at Random House, was fascinated by him, and invited him to his brownstone on East Sixty-second Street in Manhattan and to his country estate in Mt. Kisco. Cerf's wife Phyllis tells an amusing story about one of his visits: "I first met Truman at a dinner party Bennett and I were having. The doorbell rang and the butler came in and said, 'Are you expecting a child?' Bennett said, 'Yes, that's Truman Capote!'"

What launched Capote as an enfant terrible was his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, and in particular the eye-popping photograph of him reclining on a Victorian sofa as he stares at the viewer with a strange—some have said erotic—fixity. It was the most dramatic arrival on the literary scene since, eight years earlier in 1940, Carson McCullers had published her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and became world famous. McCullers's physical appearance, like Capote's, was also widely commented on; she, too, looked like a child. As it happened, their careers would become closely intertwined. Both were from the South and published their acclaimed first novels in

the same decade of the 1940s—she at the beginning, he near the end; and they had a number of shared preoccupations. Loneliness is the great provenance of McCullers’s imagination. It is ubiquitous and inescapable. Capote does not possess the same depth of sadness, the peculiar somberness as McCullers; his touch is lighter, more charming and flamboyant, and his interests and canvases more varied, but there is no doubt that his characters, like hers, are forever outsiders. Both were fascinated by the lives of children, by doomed wistful yearning, and conflicted sexuality. McCullers named the Southern Gothic movement and exemplified it; Capote sprang from it and went on to become a writer who was identified with it, but with an intermixture of worldliness and classicism.

McCullers and Capote were, in fact, friends, and she opened doors that helped to make his career possible. They were not twins, but they were like cousins. McCullers published her first novel at the age of twenty-three, making her a prodigy. Critics and the general public were amazed that a work of such penetration and maturity as *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* could have been written by one so young. She looked no more than sixteen at the time. Lula Carson Smith from Columbus, Georgia, who would later become Carson McCullers came to New York in 1934 with the aspiration of becoming a writer. She enrolled in a creative writing course at Columbia University taught by Whit Burnett, who also edited *Story* magazine, which published her story “Wunderkind” in 1936. It took her only a few years after that to become a literary celebrity, her picture on the cover of national magazines. In 1945, in a replay of sudden early success, Capote, at age twenty-one, appeared at the offices of *Mademoiselle* in an attempt to interest them in publishing one of his short stories. George Davis, the magazine’s editor, turned it down. But the story, and Capote himself, impressed Davis’s assistant, Rita Smith, who was Carson McCullers’s sister. Surmising that McCullers and Capote would hit it off, she arranged to have them meet. When they did, they immediately became friends.

McCullers went out of her way to promote Capote’s career. Together with her sister, she found him an agent in Marion Ives. She also wrote a strong letter of recommendation to Robert Linscott, a senior editor at Random House who had been her own editor; her intervention secured Capote’s adoption by a major publishing house. Further, she arranged for him to join her at Yaddo, where all of his expenses

would be paid and he would be free to write. As Clarke explains in *Capote*, to be accepted at Yaddo, McCullers told him, he had only to ask; she would pull all the strings. Elizabeth Ames, the director, was one of her best friends. Before he knew it, Capote was accepted, and he and McCullers spent the spring together at the artists' colony. They were the closest of friends; it was said that they were like brother and sister.

Yet as time went on the relationship soured. Newton Arvin had been her dearest friend at Yaddo, but now Capote claimed him as his own; and he used material from her fiction. Thereafter McCullers regarded him as an enemy; sometimes while giving a lecture she would suddenly burst into a denunciation of him. Her own life was full of difficulty and complaints. On coming to live in New York she had suffered a stroke on the subway, and subsequently had others, as well as developing a heart condition—all by the time she was thirty. Subject to depression, she drank to lift her spirits, but her increasing use of alcohol turned her into an alcoholic obsessed by herself and what she considered the amazing beauty of her writing. Gore Vidal, who knew her well, remarked that “an hour with a dentist without Novocain was like a minute with Carson McCullers.”

During World War II, McCullers lived in a house at 7 Middagh Street in Brooklyn Heights with a group of other artists and writers. Tenants in this experiment in living included such figures as W. H. Auden, Jane and Paul Bowles, Benjamin Britten, Klaus and Erica Mann, and Richard Wright. The house became a crossroads of culture and new directions in art and letters. One visitor described it as “a household of ‘Enfants Terribles.’” Some of the residents found McCullers hard to take, and Wright decided to move out to get away from her. Paul Bowles called her an “essentially childlike woman who could talk of nothing but herself.”

McCullers and Capote crossed paths in later years when they were no longer friends. He once mentioned in a letter that he had seen her in Rome in a befogged alcoholic state. Eventually a severely disabled woman, she rarely left her house in Nyack, New York, where she died practically alone at the age of fifty. When McCullers was sinking inexorably into alcoholism, Capote was still enjoying heady success; and if there was a warning to him in her brilliantly youthful ascension to fame followed by a terrible fall, it was an unheeded one.

Chapter Two

Early Stories: “Miriam,” “A Tree of Night,” “The Headless Hawk,” “Shut a Final Door,” “Master Misery,” and “Children on Their Birthdays”

“Miriam”

In “Miriam,” a sixty-year-old widow living alone on the far east side of Manhattan—a woman mild and careful in her habits—suffers a psychic breakdown after encountering a strange and bold little girl named Miriam. Capote later spoke of the story as “a good stunt and nothing more,” but his statement is belied by the tale’s artistry and tonal perfection. “Miriam” belongs to a genre of horror story in which a character’s whole equilibrium is overthrown by some impish being or object. A good example of the genre is the movie classic *Dead of Night*, released in 1945, the same year in which “Miriam” appeared in *Mademoiselle*. Michael Redgrave starred in the film as a ventriloquist who falls under the control of a demonic dummy. *Dead of Night* inspired other horror films of a similar type, including *Magic* (1978), in which Anthony Hopkins played a ventriloquist named Corky who is steadily driven mad by his evil dummy. The twist in “Miriam” is that in place of a malignant dummy’s taking possession of its owner, Capote deals with an eerie child who takes possession of a vulnerable adult.

The principal character in Capote’s story is a woman named Mrs. Miller, who goes out one wintry night to a neighborhood movie theater, where she is accosted by a peculiar little girl. The girl explains that although she has the price of a ticket, it wouldn’t be sold to her because

she is alone and unaccompanied by an adult. Would Mrs. Miller, she asks, buy the ticket for her?

She does this but at the same time wonders timidly if it is quite right; hasn't she become involved in breaking the law? In Capote's fiction, movie theaters are often associated with fantasy and escape, mystery and dreams; and Mrs. Miller's collusion with the child will turn her cautious life into a most disturbing dream.

It will become dreamlike through the agency of the little girl, Miriam, whom she has just helped, and with whom, as it happens, she shares the same first name. Miriam is unsettling because she does not seem at all like a child. She does not speak like a child, but like an adult. Her hair, "silver-white, like an albino's," flows down to her waist. Her eyes, "lacking any childlike quality whatsoever and, because of their large size" seem to "consume her small face." Strangely, she does not appear to have a last name, and it is never explained why she is out alone on such a cold, wintry night, or who her parents are. Soon this little girl will be the older woman's stalker.

One evening soon after their encounter at the movie theater, while sitting up in bed reading, Mrs. Miller hears her doorbell ring incessantly. When she goes to the door, she finds Miriam in the hallway wearing a white silk dress; reluctantly she allows her to come in. The child takes the upper hand immediately, and is soon going through Mrs. Miller's jewelry case in her bedroom bureau. She demands to be given a cameo brooch that had been given to Mrs. Miller by her husband, who died a few years earlier. He is never described or otherwise specified, making him seem rather unreal; when he is mentioned at all he is referred to as H. T. Miller, giving the impression of a certain distance that existed between husband and wife. Miriam's appropriation of the brooch has the effect of cutting the husband out of Mrs. Miller's life entirely and of leaving her more alone than ever. Not only does Miriam take Mrs. Miller's brooch, she also smashes a vase of paper roses, referring to them as "imitations." Mrs. Miller is left stunned, her eyes "stupidly concentrated on nothing," and her cheeks "mottled in red patches" as though a fierce slap had left permanent marks.

The next day Mrs. Miller has a strange dream with symbolic overtones. In it a small girl wearing a bridle gown and a wreath of leaves leads a procession down a mountain path while those who follow ask where she is taking them. A possible explanation of this vaguely pagan ceremony is that she is taking them to the netherworld. Miriam has a

very pronounced association with the color white, beginning with the albino whiteness of her hair. In the dream she is called a “frostflower, shining and white,” and she is, of course, all in white in her bridal gown. It is a dress in which she weds herself, so to speak, to Mrs. Miller as she leads the old woman to the land of the departed. Through this color symbolism, Miriam is also associated with the snow that falls on the city throughout the story. During a snow storm that lasts for days, Mrs. Miller loses track of time, a period of passivity and inertia in which the extinction of her identity begins to take hold. The ubiquity of snow in the story has a similar kind of all-embracing suggestiveness as it has in James Joyce’s story “The Dead” (1904); and, as in Joyce’s story, it is linked with death and finality.

A day after the incident with Miriam at her apartment, Mrs. Miller has an impulse to go shopping. She does not quite understand why this should be, or perhaps even why she should buy the almond cake and cherries that the girl Miriam had liked, but it is clear that she has already fallen under Miriam’s spell and is carrying out her will. While doing her shopping along Lexington Avenue she becomes aware of footsteps following her. She glimpses the figure of an old man in a shabby brown coat (he is the sort of mysterious shabby old man who will appear two decades later in the plays of Harold Pinter), and ducks into a florist shop, where she buys six white roses (not paper ones). Through its window she sees him passing by, his eyes looking straight ahead, but just at the moment he passes he tips his hat as if to salute her as a comrade. During her next meeting with Mrs. Miller, Miriam reveals that she had lived earlier with an old man.

Their next meeting occurs in the late afternoon of that day. Miriam again rings Mrs. Miller’s doorbell incessantly, and when Mrs. Miller finally opens the door she finds her sitting on a box, cradling in her arms a beautiful French doll with a powdered white wig. This doll that Miriam is “loving” is disturbing; beautiful as it is, it is also artificial and inanimate: “its idiot glass eyes [seek] solace in Miriam’s.” Mrs. Miller, an adult, in a reversal of roles, is to be comforted like an inanimate baby doll by a child who assumes complete power over her.

Tension continues to mount between Miriam and Mrs. Miller, but this final scene—in which Miriam has come, she announces, to live with Mrs. Miller—is in every sense climactic. It now begins to become clear that Miriam exists only in Mrs. Miller’s mind. When she seeks help from the couple in the apartment on the floor below, the husband

goes up to look around and can find no trace of Miriam or her belongings. Mrs. Miller is now revealed as a seriously schizophrenic woman, a divided personality whose stronger and bolder self is now destroying the defenses of her timid and sheltered self that has denied the depth of her loneliness and fear of approaching death.

Images of death and darkness now rise up. The living room of the apartment seems as “lifeless and petrified as a funeral parlor.” Mrs. Miller sinks as if in a dream into a chair, and it seems to her that the room is “losing shape; it was dark and getting darker . . . she could not lift her hand to light a lamp.” She makes a heroic effort to believe that she has regained control over herself, free of Miriam, but from her bedroom she hears the sound of bureau drawers being opened and closed, and then the murmur of a silk dress approaching nearer and nearer, and “swelling in intensity till the walls trembled with the vibration and the room was caving under a wave of whispers.” Then Miriam’s eyes stare directly into hers. “Miriam” is a story with a Gothic disintegration theme that Capote has put into a modern urban setting in which his quiet realism is just as striking as the Gothicism, and it is exquisitely handled all the way through. It is this that distinguishes it from horror tales: the literacy, the intricately tight writing, and the superb youthful confidence.

“A Tree of Night”

Published in *Harper’s Bazaar* only a few months later, “A Tree of Night” has some important features in common with “Miriam.” Both are explorations of the psyches of women who are essentially alone and victimized by mysterious strangers who make wholly unpredictable appearances in their lives, and both narratives have a dreamlike quality and a sense of hallucination. Kay in “A Tree of Night” is much younger and more out in the world than Mrs. Miller in “Miriam” yet she, too, is very vulnerable. Almost nothing is known about Kay; she is nineteen and a college student somewhere, but she has no last name, and no family—apart from a recently deceased uncle—are ever indicated. What happens in “Miriam” occurs largely in Mrs. Miller’s modest-sized apartment in New York, while what occurs in “A Tree of Night” takes place in the confined space of the coach of a train traveling through some part of the South. This spatial confinement reinforces a sense of their lack of freedom. It is wintertime in both cases, and the frigid weather has a numbing effect on the protagonists, who can find

no way out of the stressful situations in which they find themselves. The view from the window of the coach in “A Tree of Night” is a no-exit “wall of trees.” The coach, moreover, has dim, old-fashioned lighting and red plush seats that are falling apart with age. It is a place of dank, unpleasant odors where passengers are slumped in the oblivion of sleep, and trash is scattered in the aisle. Its whole atmosphere reeks of deterioration and decay. It is here that Kay experiences her hallucinatory sense of dissolving reality.

“A Tree of Night” draws in part on an exploit of Capote’s biological father, Arch Persons, who put together a tent show in which a man known as the Great Pasha is buried alive and then restored to life. Gerald Clarke gives a vivid account of this traveling attraction:

Arch spied an elusive gold mine in the Great Pasha, otherwise known as Sam Goldberg from the Bronx. Goldberg, who wore a turban and a robe, made his living putting on a kind of grotesque variety act. His best trick, the gimmick that excited Arch so much, was his ability to survive burial. With the help of what was advertised as a secret Egyptian drug, he could retard his heartbeat to such an abnormally slow rate that he hardly needed to breathe; he could remain alive in an airtight coffin for up to five hours. Calling him the “World’s Foremost Man of Mystery,” Arch staged his Pasha Show . . . in half a dozen places. In Monroeville, people came to see it from a hundred miles around. . . .

Capote’s concept for the story is that there would be a man who travels in the South with a buried-alive act like that of the Great Pasha (in his performances Capote’s character even wears a Turkish turban like Arch’s Pasha). He travels with a female companion who appears to be his wife, and they are together in an alcove in the crowded coach when Kay comes aboard and takes a seat—the only one available—next to them. It should be said immediately that the unsavory pair are a great conception, fully realized and pushed to the limits of bold imagining. They are convincingly real and yet fantastic, and are among the most memorable characters in the collection *A Tree of Night and Other Stories*.

One of the many peculiar things about them is that they have no names, always being referred to as simply the man and the woman. The woman, garishly dressed and gin-soaked, would be comical were she not so unnerving and ominous. With her very short chubby legs and unusually large—even huge—head she is freakish. She wears an

oversized lavender hat with celluloid cherries sewn to the brim that flop about crazily whenever she bobs her head. Her manner toward Kay can change suddenly, from friendly to menacing (“Well, who asked you? Anybody ask you?”). There is a marvelous moment when she hoists up her skirt and “enthusiastically” blows her nose on the ragged hem of a petticoat, after which she rearranges her skirt “with considerable primness.” She forces gin on Kay, and when Kay begs off the woman tells her she “wouldn’t be so snotty if you knew who we was”; she has already told of her upbringing in a Texas family of wealth, which even included “Paris, France, clothes.” Her pitiful pretensions are undercut at every turn by her crudeness, and by her weird manner and “dangerous smile.” Stricken by fear, Kay is unable to act decisively.

Yet the man with her is stranger still. He is a deaf-mute who looks like a child “aged abruptly by some uncanny method.” His vapid face has no expression. He reeks of cheap and disgusting perfume, and with another intimation of his resemblance to a child, he wears a Mickey Mouse wristwatch. Particular attention is called to his eyes, which are described as looking like a pair of “clouded milky-blue marbles” that despite their strangeness are also “oddly beautiful.” The woman is known immediately by her vulgarity but the man is harder to make out, often seeming inscrutable.

The woman shows Kay a handbill for the “Lazarus” show they stage in tank towns throughout the region. In these performances, the man is placed in a tightly sealed coffin for an hour or more, and when it is opened he is still alive. In the New Testament, Jesus performed the miracle of resurrecting Lazarus from the dead; in Capote’s story, on the other hand, the man is resurrected, so to speak, but the circumstances surrounding that event are a travesty of the spiritual life. As part of the act, the woman stands before the coffin wearing a black dress and a black veil as if in tearful mourning. The whole thing is tawdry, including the “lure,” in which the man lies stiff and corpse-like in the front display window of a local store, his face sprinkled with talcum powder, on the evening before the act is to be performed.

Yet if the man can mimic death by some kind of self-hypnosis, may he not also have a hypnotic effect on Kay? The way he looks at her makes her feel squeamish, yet she cannot take her eyes off him. He induces in her a feeling of absolute loathing, as in the horrific moment when he suddenly reaches out and gently strokes Kay’s cheek. “Despite the breathtaking delicacy of this movement,” Capote writes, “it was

such a bold gesture Kay was at first too startled to know what to make of it. . . . He leaned forward till his queer eyes were near her own; the reek of his perfume was sickening.” A motif of death pervades the story. Kay has just returned from the funeral of her uncle, and she cannot expunge from her mind the memory of his face as he lay in the casket. She even sees it superimposed on the face of the man on the train. This association unleashes the deepest fear of her childhood, of the “wizard man” lying in wait for her, of the “haunted limbs on a tree of night.”

Accompanying these fears are insinuated fears of sexual molestation. Freudian symbols appear in the story—from phallic trees that are dark and threatening to the vaginal purse that Kay presses to her body as if in fear of the intentions of strangers. She has some reason to be wary of the deaf-mute, whose eyes are upon her. At a particularly eerie moment he takes what appears to be a shellacked peach seed from his pocket and balances it in the palm of his hand. He then looks directly across at Kay, opens his eyelids wide and begins to squeeze and caress the seed in “an indefinably obscene manner.” She goes out to the open platform at the end of the car to get some fresh air, and has something like a nervous breakdown in which she whimpers softly “like an irritable child.” Returning to her seat in the coach, she begins to lose consciousness. The imagery of surrender of her will as she looks into the man’s face, and a warm laziness that comes over her, have strong sexual overtones; and when the extinction of her identity seems complete, in a wonderful last line, the woman has taken away her purse and “gently pulled the raincoat like a shroud above her head.”

Exactly what does happen to Kay at the end is left open, increasing the mystery. A number of particulars within the story are left open also. What does it mean, for example, that Kay carries a green guitar left her by her uncle? Are the couple thieves, or are they soul-snatching devils? The artistry of the work is consistently impressive in the suggestive nature of its imagery. One thinks of the image of the man blowing smoke rings “that mounted upward like hollow eyes and expanded into nothing.” The freezing temperature, which is felt as being ubiquitous, reinforces the idea of being drained of life, the fate of Kay. “A Tree of Night” is a Gothic fiction that coexists with a sharply observed realism, and is particularly striking in its creation of atmosphere, by which I mean the atmosphere of irrationality. It is preeminently modern, and all in all the best of Capote’s early Gothic tales.

“The Headless Hawk”

Written in the same mid-1940s period as “Miriam” and “A Tree of Night,” and related to them thematically, “The Headless Hawk” is unlike them in a number of other respects. Its principal character is a man named Vincent Waters who is employed at a New York art gallery, where he meets and becomes involved with a young woman who has no name, only the initials D. J. She appears at the art gallery one day with a painting she would like to sell if she can. The painting is a bizarre portrayal of a headless female figure in a robe of some kind seated on a vaudeville trunk; in one hand she holds a blue candle and in the other a miniature gold cage. Her severed head lies bleeding at her feet against the background of a darkening sky and the wings of a headless hawk. The waiflike elfin girl immediately intrigues Vincent, but she leaves suddenly when his attention is distracted, leaving behind the strange painting. He cannot get her out of his mind, and constantly finds himself looking for her in people he glimpses in the street. Eventually they meet again and become lovers, but the relationship does not last. In the end both of them are alone, guilt-ridden and seemingly doomed.

Of all of Capote’s early stories, “The Headless Hawk” is the most reminiscent of the works of Edgar Allan Poe. It is suffused with a dreamlike atmosphere in which the protagonist is trapped within his own loneliness and aberration. To an extraordinary degree, Capote is concerned in the story with the unconscious, and the fear and dread felt by Vincent. Both he and D. J. believe that they “were born to be murdered.” The tensions consuming them belong to Gothicism and specifically to Poe’s ritualistic dream scenarios. In one of the story’s Gothic dream passages, Capote describes a ball where Vincent sees an old man “with yellow-dyed hair, powdered cheeks, kewpie-doll lips”—and recognizes himself. Actually there are two selves, one young and handsome, the other old and disgusting. The “old and horrid” Vincent creeps on all fours, and climbs spiderlike onto the back of the young Vincent. He is appalled at the sordidness of his appearance at this elegant ball; then he notices that many of the other men also carry “malevolent semblances” of themselves. A lizardlike man “rides an albino-eyed Negro.” The host appears and on the crook of his arm he supports “a massive headless hawk whose talons, latched to the wrist, draw blood.” The hawk’s wings unfurl as the host puts an old record on a worn-out, handle-wound phonograph that plays a tinny old waltz.

The host, with the hawk on his arm, moves among the grotesque dancers, who come to include former lovers, both female and male, that he has cast off. The hawk wheels above them, swoops down, claws foremost. The decadent waltz in effect heralds the death of love. Like Poe in his macabre tale “The Masque of the Red Death,” Capote orchestrates his Gothic story with the formality of an elegant revelers’ ball.

Capote’s prose in the tale thrives on sudden odd or startling impressions: an umbrella “taps code-like” block after block; a young black man’s open mouth is a “grinning display of tartar-coated teeth; scarlet lobsters “bask on a beach of flaked ice”; the bursting kernels of a popcorn machine “bounce like crazy moths”; a shirt button pops off and rolls along a carpet “like a pearl eye”; a pair of scissors rip through the canvas of a painting “like a ravening steel mouth.” He is particularly partial to “as if” and “as though” constructions. A collision occurs so suddenly and loudly that it is as if “cotton plugs had been blasted from [Vincent’s] ears”; D. J.’s eyes have an astonished or shocked look, as though, having at one time witnessed a terrible incident “they’d locked wide open.” But Capote’s most arresting images have a surrealistic quality: a “serpent of light” suddenly “blazes”; a woman wagging her finger seems “to break into separate pieces: a nose, a chin, a red, red eye.” Sometimes Capote’s conceits expand into surrealist fantasias: a butterfly “magnified on the ceiling, huge as a bird, and there were more: a flock of liltng winking yellow, whispering lonesomely, like surf sucking a shore. The wind from their wings blew the room into space.”

The movement of the story is relatively uncomplicated; it begins in the present, drops back into the past, and near the end returns again to the present. The fabric of the story, however, has a daunting complexity and richness achieved through a large play of allusion, often involving iterative motifs and color symbolism. The color green (its connotations are teasingly unexplained) appears frequently and most noticeably in connection with D. J. She wears a green raincoat (Capote refers to the “green whisper of her raincoat”). She has “cat-green eyes,” and carries a “green sack.” Other motifs include heat, circles, and masks. The faces of passengers aboard a bus loom “like wave-riding masks.” Other faces, too, are said to be like masks, and an Oriental mask is suspended from a ceiling cord in an antique shop. The terrible

heat of New York at midsummer is persistent in the story—to the point of suggesting that the characters may be occupants of hell.

But the principal motif is water, implied even in the protagonist's name, Vincent Waters. Other Capote stories of the mid-1940s are set in New York during the snowfall and freezing temperatures of winter; the characters themselves seem to be freezing, their ability to act or to assert their will gradually draining from them. In "The Headless Hawk," on the other hand, it is not snow but rain and water that predominate. Vincent feels "as though he moved below the sea." Even city buses are "wave-riding," and when Vincent spies D. J. in the doorway of a shop her "greenness" is "distorted wavy through the double glass." The wavy distortion in which characters are seen suggests that they are actually underwater. Vincent's quest for D. J. is like a descent into a dreamlike, watery underworld, a descent redolent of the Greek myth of Orpheus searching for his lost love Eurydice in Hades. Capote's story itself seems like a dream: his characters are as much dreaming their lives as living them.

In a work that is so much concerned with dreams and dreaming, it would be appropriate to speak of Sigmund Freud. "The Headless Hawk" taken in its entirety is all about Vincent's psychic state and his unfulfilling sexual partnerships. He has been as directionless as the headless hawk, and suffers from deep inner anxiety and fear; D. J. is the sum and essence of these failures. In certain ways they are twins: both believe that they have been born to be murdered; both have an ambiguous sexuality. The girl he pursues through the tale looks like a boy. Her close-cropped haircut is like a boy's. "The carefree bangs that fringe her forehead give her the kind of face "seen in paintings of medieval youths." As a girl who looks boyish, she is linked with Vincent, whose lovers have come from both sexes. Both have a fractured innocence, and are driven by some unnamed dread.

D. J. is a character who is never at rest, is always moving to another hard-to-find address, or is in flight to somewhere else. She appears late in the story in an illuminating scene set in a mental hospital. Previously she had spoken with fear in her voice of a person named Destronelli; but at the asylum the reader comes to know who this Destronelli is, or rather who he is not. He is responsible in her schizophrenic mind for the shattering of her innocence. Destronelli's name suggests a destroyer, and if he cannot be pinned down as a particular person, he is undoubtedly frightening as an idea. D. J. is the

story's most realized character, being both a believable girl on the run and an abstraction. She must be understood as a projection of Vincent's own psyche; she is a doppelgänger, an other self. The ghostly double who haunts Poe's tales of the 1840s reappears a hundred years later in Capote's New York.

"The Headless Hawk" has avant-garde written all over it, but it has its roots in what D. H. Lawrence called classic American literature. That Capote's Gothic tale should be framed by a symbolic painting calls Nathaniel Hawthorne inevitably to mind; and the likeness is not lessened by Capote's theme of the violation of innocence. It also happens that at this same time Capote met Newton Arvin at the artists' colony Yaddo, and it was Arvin who told Capote that his sense of evil reminded him of Hawthorne's. There isn't much plot in Capote's story, but there is a great deal of metaphysical excitement, melodrama teased into exquisite art. It isn't a perfect work (it seems at times to be clotted with themes); but it is the key work pointing with certainty to Capote's famous first novel. It cannot be a coincidence that Capote wrote "The Headless Hawk" at Yaddo while having already begun *Other Voices, Other Rooms*.

"Shut a Final Door"

In "Master Misery" (1949) the character Oreilly uses the expression "round and round" to convey to Sylvia that there is no way out for him in his desperate life. He is merely moving in a circle from which he cannot break free. The same refrain appears in "Shut a Final Door" (1947). The protagonist's name this time isn't Oreilly but Walter Ranney, but they have the same trapped psychology. The name Ranney evokes a man in flight, and in this case it is from himself. His name is his life in capsule form, just as thirteen years later, John Updike's protagonist Rabbit Angstrom's name in *Rabbit Run* is his life story in essence.

Stylistically "Shut a Final Door" is noticeably different from the urban Gothicism of, say, "The Headless Hawk." Despite Walter's deepening desperation, the tone of Capote's writing in this story is more apt to be detached and observant (a female character is captured quickly in remarking that she has lipstick on her teeth and bulging eyes). There are even moments that seem cartoonish. Walter's social climbing includes weekends at Rosa Cooper's fashionable home on Long Island, where he hopes to make contacts that will advance his

career. Her guests include Taylor Ovington, Joyce Randolph (“the starlet”), E. L. McEvoy, and “a dozen or so people whose names cast a considerable glare in his address book.” Mingling the socially elite with gossip and backstabbing, “Shut a Final Door” is the germ or seed from which Capote’s jaundiced vision in *Answered Prayers* will later take root.

Of all the early stories, “Shut a Final Door” seems the most self-referential. A purveyor of gossip and exploiter of friends and lovers, Walter is, if anything, an antihero; yet there is much in his background that reflects Capote himself. His relationship with his father, whom Capote never forgave for his unwillingness to take an interest in him or be part of his life and upbringing, looms in the background of Walter’s tortured dream in which his father cruelly rejects him. On a train to Saratoga Walter falls asleep and has a dream in which his father appears prominently. In the dream Walter stands in a long, deserted street and, except for an approaching procession of slow, black funeral cars there are no signs of life: “[E]yes unseen observed his nakedness from every window, and he hailed frantically the first of the limousines; it stopped and a man, his father, invitingly held open the door. Daddy, he yelled, running forward, and the door slammed shut, mashing off his fingers, and his father, with a great belly laugh, leaned out the window to toss an enormous wreath of roses.” In other cars were people who had entered in some way in his life and an unidentified woman with diamond eyes: “Each door opened, each closed, all laughed, all threw roses. The procession rolled smoothly away down the silent street. And with a terrible scream Walter fell among the mountain of roses: thorns tore wounds, and a sudden rain, a gray cloudburst, shattered the blooms, and washed pale blood bleeding over the leaves.” The father’s mashing off his son’s fingers is clearly an act of castration, just as the thorns rending his flesh are a projection of the agonizing denial of the father’s nurturing presence and love.

In his own life, as mentioned, Capote was denied the supportive love not only of his father but also, and more important, of his mother. No mother appears in the story to complement the father, but there is a mother character of a sort, and she is grotesque. On the train to Saratoga, on which Walter has his dream, an incident occurs that is as strange as a dream. A woman seated nearby notices Walter as he awakens, and he smiles at her sheepishly but she looks away. They then meet again at a hotel in Saratoga, and in its bar late at night and after

many drinks they go up to her room. Unfortunately she is a woman with a distressingly deformed foot that makes it necessary for her to wear a giant shoe. She is in town for a convention of doctors who will be using her in their public discussion of her affliction. She and Walter were to have had sex, but Walter cannot go through with it.

The woman with the giant shoe, however, is understanding: “‘Poor little boy,’ she said, patting his back, ‘My poor little boy: we’re awfully alone in this world, aren’t we?’ And presently he went to sleep in her arms.” The incident is the one really compassionate moment in the story, the point at which these two damaged individuals come together in a recognition of their loneliness. When the woman with the deformed foot calls him “my poor little boy,” she becomes, in a bizarre way, Walter’s mother.

That the woman should call Walter a “poor little boy” also turns a searchlight on his incapacities and exposes him sexually. One of the most distinctive features of “Shut a Final Door” is Capote’s new willingness to introduce the subject of homosexuality in a large if still oblique way in his fiction. The character most apt to be detected as homosexual is Irving, “a sweet little Jewish boy” who is twenty-three but looks sixteen. His stature is so small that his feet cannot reach the bar stool’s footrest but rather dangle doll-like in midair. It cannot be a coincidence that Irving should, like Capote, be in his early twenties and look years younger, and should be of the same height and physical stature. Walter meets Irving in a Greenwich Village bar and befriends him; and there is more than a hint that that they are both childlike and vulnerable. Walter is said to have sex with women, but his heterosexuality, though affirmed, is unfelt. It is more credible that he should have been briefly “involved with” the head of the advertising agency where he works. This chief executive, Kurt Kuhnhardt, a lean bachelor who lives on Sutton Place, has some Picassos on his walls, and South Sea Island masks, and has a “burly Danish youngster” as his houseboy. Anna Stimson, a woman Walter cultivates, puts it to him bluntly when she says, “You’re a man in only one respect, sweetie.”

Helen Garson has noted that “Shut a Final Door” is essentially about Walter’s sexuality. “Walter’s dream,” she remarks, “signals an unconscious understanding of his sexual identity and his despair about this understanding. He is running from knowledge of his homosexual nature.” This may be true as far as it goes, but what Walter is running from most of all is Capote’s own traumatizing childhood, from the

denial of love and acceptance by his parents. He is running from a loneliness so profound and painful that he cannot escape it ever. Walter's experience takes him "round and round," as if he moved within a circle from which there is no exit. A circle, Capote writes, must have a center, and the circle's center in this case is New Orleans, where Capote was born and his suffering began.

Garson describes Walter's final destination at the New Orleans hotel as being Gothic, but surely this is an overstatement: it lacks Gothicism's horrific effects and paraphernalia. But if the final scene isn't Gothic, it is unquestionably theatrical. The mysterious ringing of the telephone (as if it were his conscience pursuing him) is theatrical. Walter's lying on the bed in the tremendous heat like a broken doll beneath the round-and-round movement of the overhead paddle wheel fan is theatrical, and might even suggest a sufferer in hell. Walter's last thoughts are fabulously theatrical: "Think of nothing things. Think of wind." The title of the story, "Shut a Final Door," signifies Walter's turning away from life. His burying his face in a tear-stained pillow links him with the women in "Miriam" and "A Tree of Night" whose personalities and identity dissolve before the reader's eyes.

When *Other Voices, Other Rooms* burst upon the world it seemed to come out of nowhere, an exotic work by a precocious author with a strangely childlike appearance. But the novel did not come out of nowhere. Capote began writing at a very early age, and in the short stories that led up to it there was some movement toward or anticipation of the novel—and not least in "Shut a Final Door," which introduces the theme of a protagonist's struggle for selfhood in a work shadowed by homosexuality.

"Master Misery"

Published in *Mademoiselle* in the late 1940s, "Master Misery" has not been as highly regarded by Capote's critics as some of the other early stories; and it is true that one of the central characters, Mark Oreilly, is hard to accept as a believable figure. But "Master Misery" by no means fails completely. It is very much in the mainstream of Capote's writing about dreams and the characters who are immersed in them. The story's principal character is a young woman named Sylvia who leaves her hometown in Ohio, with its oppressively small, earthbound concerns, to live in New York, where she can find a higher plane of consciousness. But the work she finds there is pedestrian, too, and the

couple she stays with, whom she knew from her hometown, are merely reminders of why she left for New York. With the onset of a snowy and frigid winter she sinks into depression and then desperation. At this point the story takes on the quality of fantasy.

She meets the man named Oreilly, who tells her of a Mr. Revercomb (*reve* is the French word for dream) who buys people's dreams. Sylvia leaves the apartment of the couple she had been staying with to live in a lonely room by herself; in time she is fired from her monotonous and meaningless job and has hardly any money left. At this point she goes to see this Revercomb; he buys dreams from her until she has no more left to sell, and she reaches a nadir of hope.

She has, however, one friend in Oreilly, a former clown, now without employment and addicted to drink. He, too, has sold his dreams away to Revercomb, a coldly impersonal figure who must live by consuming the souls and dreams of others. Sylvia and Oreilly are alike in their desolation, but they are alike also in that they are essentially children. As a child Sylvia has a menagerie of clown dolls in her bedroom, and she has never really outgrown them. It is implied that some of her reluctance to become fully adult has to do with a fear of sex. This fear is suggested at the beginning of the story when at dusk Sylvia decides to walk through Central Park, defying the well-meant but patronizing warnings of the couple from Ohio.

As two grinning boys appear on her path, fear and desire in her begin to mingle, a reaction expressed by Capote in partly surreal imagery: "[T]hey loomed in the dusk like menacing flames, and Sylvia, passing them, felt a burning all through her, quite as though she'd brushed fire. They turned and followed her past a deserted playground, one of them bumping a stick along an iron fence, the other whistling: these two sounds accumulated around her like the gathering roar of an oncoming engine, and when one of the boys, with a laugh, called 'Hey, whatsa hurry?' her mouth twisted for breath."

Sylvia has sexual dreams in which the phallic smokestack of a factory visible in the distance from her window keeps reappearing; and she even has a dream in which Revercomb puts his cold arms around her, with his lips close to her ear to draw her dreams from her.

Early in the story Estelle, the woman with whom she had stayed, tells Sylvia that she would not be so lonely if she were married; "there is nothing like lying in bed at night with a man's arms around you." By the end Sylvia and Oreilly, at the end of their ropes, momentarily

experience happiness with each other. Sylvia sleeps with O'Reilly's arms around her, and in that evening she comes to terms with adulthood and can confront fear. It's not a happy ending, since she and O'Reilly will be going their separate ways in hardship, but in a way the experience has been their salvation. "Master Misery" is as bittersweet poetic fable that foreshadows others in Capote's later writing. In fact, the story is full of anticipations. The two characters of childlike innocence, Sylvia and O'Reilly, exiles from a joylessly unfeeling world, look ahead to *The Grass Harp*; and O'Reilly's compulsive dreaming and drifting, which he calls "traveling in the blue," is a prophecy of Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

"Children on Their Birthdays"

Published serially at the end of the 1940s, "Children on Their Birthdays" belongs at least in part to Southern folk storytelling. In its isolated rural landscapes, its character types, and the type of its humor, it is a near relative to the tales of Eudora Welty. Its narrative strategy, too—the use of an anonymous spectator-narrator who belongs to the community he describes and can vouch for the veracity of the happenings he records—has Southern antecedents such as William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily."

The central figure of "Children on Their Birthdays" is a ten-year-old girl named Lily Jane Bobbit who is always called Miss Bobbit, as if she were an adult. She arrives with her mother on a bus one day at a sparsely populated rural town in Alabama, and quickly becomes talked about. She seems not only like an adult but like an adult who knows how to manage things. "[S]he sassed along," Capote writes, "with a grown-up mince, one hand on her hip, the other supporting a spinsterish umbrella. Her mother, lugging two cardboard valises and a wind-up victrola, trailed in the background." Wherever she goes she takes command; although she meets resistance in some quarters, she wins everyone over by the end, even coming to be loved by the community. Perhaps the most amazing thing about Miss Bobbit is that one actually comes to think of her as an adult, forgetting her actual age of ten years. She is the most brilliant of Capote's early hybrids, those characters who are part child and part adult or part male and part female. Capote was something of a hybrid himself, and the complication seems to have had a peculiar attraction for him.

Garson makes a good observation about Miss Bobbit and her fantasy quality:

Although she gets off the six o'clock bus, it is as if she simply materializes from another world. We learn almost nothing about her past life [and very little about her father now serving time in prison] . . . the secret longing to do whatever they want that children sometimes have is reinforced by the absence of a father figure. . . . She is what all children wish to be: free of parental restraint, free from attending school or church; free to criticize anything; free to make friends she wants; free to earn money as she chooses and to spend it as she prefers; free to do whatever she wants when she wants to do it. And, unlike a real child, who dreams impossible dreams, but does nothing to achieve them, Miss Bobbit employs all her considerable energy to make the dreams reality.

The key word here is *dreams*. Miss Bobbit is a Capote character because she is dream involved, as quite a number of his characters are. Her very existence feels like a dream.

Describing Miss Bobbit as “self-determined” and “totally “independent,” Garson sees her as the forerunner of certain other characters yet to be created, not the least of whom are Idabel Tomkins in *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* and Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. But if they are like her in being “self-determined,” they are very much unlike Miss Bobbit in other respects. Idabel cannot enchant people as Miss Bobbit can. She is not imaginable as dancing alone in the moonlight like Miss Bobbit, or giving a sassy twirl to her parasol, or wearing makeup (“Whoever heard of a child wearing makeup!” Aunt El gasps), or inciting local boys to fight over her, or performing a rousing song-and-dance number in which her blue lace panties are glimpsed as she struts and sings, “If you don't like my peaches, stay away from my can o-ho o-ho” while local people in the audience go wild.

Holly Golightly, too, notes Garson, is “self-determined, but otherwise unlike Miss Bobbit.” Holly sleeps around and is uncertain of her direction, while Miss Bobbit knows where she is going and who she is. Where Miss Bobbit really does have a kinship with Holly, is that they are both dreamers. They belong to a series of characters in Capote's fiction who speak of themselves, or explain themselves, in practically the same language. Oreilly, the unhappy clown in “Master Misery,” tells Sylvia that he “travels in the blue”; Miss Bobbit, according to her

father, “lives in the sky”; and Holly “travels in the sky.” They are all Capotean dreamers.

Quite apart from being the germ for the character Holly, “Children on Their Birthdays” is a source for other writing of Capote’s that would soon come into being. It is in some ways the workshop from which *The Grass Harp* came, and that novel, too, is set in a small rural community in the Deep South and is inhabited by the same kind of people with the same kind of manners. When Billy Bob in “Children on Their Birthdays” finds refuge and sanctuary in the branches of a tall pecan tree in the family’s backyard, he foreshadows the treehouse conceit in *The Grass Harp*. Similarly, Manny Fox, the appropriately named con man in “Children on Their Birthdays” who skips town with the money he has purloined from the townspeople, is the forerunner of the absconding con artist Morris Ritz in *The Grass Harp*. And there are the children in the story, who are not so different from the children in *The Grass Harp*; both it and “Children on Their Birthdays” are fables of childhood.

Yet what is arresting in the story is not so much its foreshadowing of future work as the character of Miss Bobbit herself. In speaking of her sense of her relation to place, she makes an astonishing statement: “I think always about somewhere else, somewhere else where everything is dancing, like people dancing in the streets, and everything is pretty, like children on their birthdays.” The innocence of this statement is so radical that the reader doesn’t quite know what to make of it. It makes one think vaguely of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, which was to appear in 1951, several years after the Capote story. What really makes Salinger’s sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield happy is a vision he has of saving children from falling off a cliff:

I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around . . . except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff. . . . I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them. That’s all I do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it’s crazy, but that’s the only thing I’d really like to be. I know it’s crazy.

As different as they are, Miss Bobbit and Holden Caulfield have the unique ability to dream their innocence in wildly eccentric ways.

Miss Bobbit arrives in a dry, parched season when dust hangs over the dirt highway, and brings refreshment to the lives of the townspeople, who later see her off with heaps of blooming yellow roses. She is associated with flowers throughout, as well as with the color yellow that at times seems to give the idea of a light, mellow happiness, like F. Scott Fitzgerald's "yellow cocktail music" in *The Great Gatsby*. Miss Bobbit (what a lively name) wears a lemon-colored party dress; elsewhere Capote boldly refers to "the sunflower yellow of her eyes," and at the end flowers and the color yellow are blended together. Aunt El's yellow Anne roses are blooming again, and young Billy Bob and Preacher Star, her acolytes as it were, hold out armfuls for her, their "flower-masked faces" like "yellow moons." "Children on Their Birthdays," like Capote's other writing, sparkles with imagery that at times has a darting, surrealist quality: Miss Bobbit's mother has "silent eyes," and when townspeople at the end call out warningly to Miss Bobbit their voices are like "lightning in the rain."

Miss Bobbit's associations are with germination and renewal, and she is also suggestive of art. She is by nature a performer, and "acts," as it were, in her everyday life. Most of all, she has a passion for music and dance. When she arrives at the town she brings her most prized possession, her wind-up victrola. At dusk she plays a recording of "The Court of Luxemborg" and dances to the music. Strips of gold-glittering tinsel in her hair shine in the gathering darkness to give her an "illuminated quality." For a long time, while standing on the tips of her toes, she holds her arms arched over her head. Then she begins to waltz around and around; even after onlookers leave for the night she continues to spin like a top, an impressive solitary figure dancing to the strains of music under the moonlight. The vignette endows her with mystery and stature. It is the stature of the artist who enriches, enlarges, and celebrates life.

Though a tale of apparent simplicity, "Children on Their Birthdays" is actually very sophisticated, and on one level is a parable of the artist—and of Capote as artist, in particular—who combines childlike innocence with adult experience and understanding. Miss Bobbit's innocence is stressed in the story's conclusion; when she is about to be run over by the bus, she is dressed in white, the traditional color of innocence in church symbolism. "She looked," Capote writes, "as though she were going to Communion, dressed in white and with a white parasol." At this moment of her death she becomes poignant as

a girl whose purity is saved from corruption through an untimely death. In an odd way she has something in common with Henry James's eponymous character in *Daisy Miller*, a girl with a flower name whose destiny is to be forever young and innocent. "Children on Their Birthdays" is the jewel of the collection *A Tree of Night and Other Stories*, and a perfect illustration of Capote's blending of Southern folk writing with Jamesian classicism.

Chapter Three

Summer Crossing

During this period in which he was writing short stories, Capote made his first attempt at a novel; called *Summer Crossing*, it was eventually abandoned. For years the manuscript was presumed lost, but then it made a sudden and startling appearance in 2004 when Random House brought it out as a hardcover book.

Capote began writing the novel in 1943 while working for the *New Yorker*. After being fired by the magazine, he obtained money from his stepfather that enabled him to return to Monroeville, Alabama, where he felt he could write quietly and without interruption. But in December 1944, Capote remarks in *The Dogs Bark*, “I said good-night, locked myself in my room, tossed the manuscript of *Summer Crossing* into a bottom bureau drawer, collected several sharp pencils and a fresh pad of yellow lined paper, got into bed fully clothed, and with pathetic optimism, wrote: ‘*Other Voices, Other Rooms*—a novel by Truman Capote.’”

After *Other Voices* was published in 1948, and while living abroad, Capote resumed working on the cast-aside *Summer Crossing*. His letters of this time contain numerous allusions to his progress with the novel. As early as April 1949, he writes to Robert Linscott, his editor at Random House, “I have fine hopes for *Summer Crossing* and I feel alive and justified in doing it, but it makes me nervous all the time.” A month later, in a less confident tone, he writes to his friend Andrew Lyndon, “My book has changed somewhat since I outlined it slightly to you. . . I do after all profess to some sort of style, and that is something I can only hope to improve upon, but the material and my own view toward it are different from anything I’ve attempted before. God, what a revolting mess it could be. And may.”

Writing again to Linscott in May of that year, Capote seems both hopeful and uncertain: “When I finish a draft of it here before going home, then I will have it all polished by the first of the year, which

means that you could publish it by the following June—that is, if you have a mind to. But we will see what happens—it is by far the most difficult thing I ever tried to do.” By the end of August, Capote writes to Linscott that he is now “2/3rds the way through—at least in draft form—some of it I’m impressed with, some of it not, naturally. I think that it will run to about 80,000 words, rather longer than I expected—but then it has turned into quite a different, infinitely more complex novel than I originally proposed, and to pull it into shape will be a monumental effort.” By 1950, when he began work on *The Grass Harp*, he decided to discontinue any further work on *Summer Crossing*. In 1953 he refers to it in the past tense to Mary Louise Aswell. “As for Summer Crossing,” he remarks, “I tore it up long ago—anyway, it was never finished.” The manuscript, as we now know, had never been destroyed. In later years he asked himself if it should be published after all, but he did not go back to it, and then the manuscript disappeared.

It reemerged in 2004 with a collection of newly found Capote material—letters, photographs, manuscripts—offered to Sotheby’s for auction. With it came an account of how this trove of material became available that reads like fiction.

With the runaway success of *In Cold Blood*, Capote moved into a two-bedroom apartment at the United Nations Plaza, which at that time was considered the smartest address in New York. He then sent word to the superintendent of the building in Brooklyn Heights where he had had an apartment since 1950 and was now being kept for him by a house sitter, that any possessions of his that remained on the premises should be disposed of. These things, which included the manuscript of *Summer Crossing*, which was presumed to be lost, were brought out to the street for garbage pickup. The house sitter, however, felt that the manuscript and other memorabilia should not be trashed, and held them back. Upon the house sitter’s death they went to his nephew, who sold them to Sotheby’s, and have since been acquired by the New York Public Library as part of their extensive Truman Capote Papers collection.

The first impression *Summer Crossing* is likely to make is its boldness, since in its detailed social realism it is unlike anything Capote had been doing. It is set in New York, but it is not the New York of Capote’s short stories, in which his characters have exiguous lives touched by hallucination. Instead the novel begins with a set of wealthy characters who tend to view New York as their playground. In its striking opening

one meets Lamont McNeil, his wife Lucy, and their two daughters—Apple, married and in her midtwenties, and Grady, a debutant of seventeen who is soon to have her coming-out party. It is a beautiful early summer day, and the family is breakfasting at the Plaza Hotel. In Capote's wickedly observant treatment of these characters, one seems almost to be entering one of Edith Wharton's novels of New York society. Most striking of all is Capote's Jamesian prose: the weave of his long, drawn-out, and sinuous sentences leading to some sharp perception. He writes of his young heroine, Grady McNeil,

[O]nce when she was fourteen she'd had a terrible and quite acute insight: her mother, she saw, loved her without really liking her; she had thought at first that this was because her mother considered her plain, more obstinate, less playful than Apple, but later, when it was apparent, and powerfully so to Apple, that Grady was finer looking by far, then she gave up reasoning about her mother's viewpoint: the answer of course, and at last she saw this too, was simply that in an instinctive sort of way, she'd never, not even as a very small girl, much liked her mother.

The mother-daughter conflict is emphasized at the beginning, and it occasions razor-sharp satire of the mother's superficiality:

"Grady doesn't think me an idiot, surely not," said Mrs. McNeil, but a tone of weak conviction indicated doubt, and her eyes webbed by the spidery hat-veil she now lowered over her face, were deeply confused with the sting she always felt when confronted by what she considered Grady's contempt. . . . she had, provoked by Grady's inconsiderate aloofness, slapped her daughter fiercely. Whenever she'd known afterwards similar impulses she steadied her hands on some solid surface, for, at the time of the previous unrestraint, Grady, whose green estimating eyes were like scraps of sea, had stared her down, had stared through and turned a searchlight on the spoiled mirror of her vanities: because she was a limited woman, it was her first experience with a will-power harder than her own. "Surely not," she said, twinkling with artificial humor.

Capote drops back into Mrs. McNeil's past to make her the butt of his humor even further, for she is, indeed, a "limited woman" whose overriding passion is to stage a coming-out party for Grady that will be the envy of her social rivals. This will involve in particular the

selection of a gown that will set Grady off to perfection—a garment “made in Paris: Dior or Fath, someone like that. . . . something in white watered silk.” Stretching on her white gloves, she tells her daughter, “You will wear white silk and carry a bouquet of green orchids: it will catch a little the color of your eyes and your red hair. And we will have that orchestra the Bells had for Harriet.”

The father is treated satirically as well. In a brief recall of the past, Lucy’s father invites Lamont—a young man with a winning hand on Wall Street who speaks in a “poker voice”—to their home in South Carolina for a duck shoot, where her old grandmother finds him “manly,” thus earning him in her eyes “the golden seal.” The sharp-edged Grady is a stray in this world of Lucy’s parents, whom she resents and rebels against. Her closest friend is a young man named Peter Bell, who belongs to a family who are friends of the McNeils and are on a social par with them; he is another stray, and when he first appears he has just been expelled from Harvard University. They have been friends from childhood, and he and Grady would make a good match except for the uncertainties of his sexuality (he tells Grady that being seen with her “makes a man of me”). In their growing up together, Grady had been the protective one. She is feminine but not passively feminine. Her mother named Grady after her stillborn son, and in a way she stands in his place: while growing up she was considered a tomboy.

Although the writing of *Summer Crossing* preceded *Other Voices* and is conspicuously different from it, there are some features that they have in common. The relationship of Grady and Peter has a certain affinity with that of Idabel and Joel Knox in *Other Voices*. In both cases they are misfits in their social environments, and although they are close they do not enter into a physical or sexual relationship; the girl in each case is the stronger of the two. These characters seem to derive from Capote’s own childhood friendship with Nelle Harper Lee, a tomboy who defended him against schoolboy attackers. But there are other reflections, too, of Capote’s personal life in *Summer Crossing*. The McNeils have a Fifth Avenue apartment in Manhattan, but also own a house in the wealthy community of Greenwich, Connecticut, where the Capotes lived during part of Truman’s adolescence. Lucy McNeil is a woman from the South who has an overriding concern with moving in the right social circles, a trait that brings Nina Capote to mind; in addition, the veneration of “manliness” in Lucy’s family seems an oblique slap at Nina as a homophobic mother. Like other works of Capote’s, *Summer Crossing* has a self-referential subtext.

The most prominent feature in the design of the novel is perhaps Capote's shaping of particular scenes, an example of which would be the opening, with its echoes of F. Scott Fitzgerald, in which the McNeil family have breakfast at the Plaza Hotel shortly before the parents' departure on an ocean liner. The breakfast scene is self-contained and stands by itself rather like the first act of a play, and it has been beautifully executed. It immediately announces the wealth and glamour of New York: privilege and money, haves and have-nots. As the characters are introduced, one becomes aware of the tension underlying what might seem to a casual observer to be a scene of family cohesiveness. Capote's humor in this scene is both bold and suave. Grady's conventional older sister, Apple, for example, is characterized tersely in the remark that she "twitters."

In addition to the confidence of Capote's handling of his characters as the work begins, one is struck by the degree to which he is an accomplished imagist. He writes that as Grady looks out the window of the hotel dining room, "the dazzle of traffic heightened the June morning quiet of Central Park, and the sun, full of first summer, that drives the green crust of spring, plunged through the trees fronting the Plaza." One of the most striking features of the novel's early section is the "gorgeousness" of Capote's writing. One thinks of the moment when Grady is traveling in a taxi to see her parents off at the dock. The taxi, Capote notes, has a "sky-window roof," and this sets off a chain of striking images: "dove flights, clouds and towers tumbled upon them; the sun, shooting summer-tipped arrows, jingled the new penny color of Grady's cropped hair, and her skinny, nimble face, shaped with bones of fish-spine delicacy, was flushed by the honeyed blowing light."

In the opening section, particularly, attention is called to the estrangement between mother and daughter. The character to whom Grady is closest is Peter; and this is especially apparent in the scene in which they drink champagne as they see off Grady's parents on the *Queen Mary*. Grady is drawn to Peter because they are two of a kind—outsiders in relation to their homes, schools, and classmates. The friendship and the attitude that goes with it seems very much like the friendship of Capote and Phoebe Pierce in Greenwich, Connecticut as adolescent rebels who made romantic Sunday night excursions into the nightlife of Manhattan. The ocean liner scene is handled with a light touch, and ends with Lucy McNeil's fear that Grady has just slipped away from her—which, in fact, she has. She is now free to explore life for herself, including its darker sexual underside. Before long she will

meet Clyde Manzer, a young Jewish man from Brooklyn who served in the army in the war and is now an open-air parking lot attendant.

The title, *Summer Crossing*, has a double meaning, referring both to the McNeil parents' crossing the Atlantic and their daughter's crossing over, during a roasting summer in New York, from an upbringing of wealth and leisure to an immersion in the soiled urban world of the middle and lower classes. The early part has the flavor of social comedy; it has the feel of a fable about a privileged girl's coming of age. But once Grady becomes involved with Manzer the tone of the work changes, becoming a dark fable of the girl's descent into a world containing forces stronger than herself.

In another part of the novel, Capote constructs a scene that is suggestive and symbolic. It takes place at the Central Park Zoo, located almost directly across Fifth Avenue from the McNeil penthouse—a strategy by which a private world of wealth and a common public world face one another and Grady's crossover from one sphere to another is pinpointed. What should be a pleasant outing is made to seem ominous through Capote's evocation of the animals at feeding time:

The cat house of a zoo has an ornery smell, an air prowled by sleep, mangy with old breath and dead desires. Comedy in a doleful key is the blowy she-lion reclining in her cell like a movie queen of silent fame; and a hulking ludicrous sight her mate presents winking at the audience as if he could use a pair of bifocals. Somehow the leopard does not suffer; nor the panther; their swagger makes distinct claims upon the pulse, for not even the indignities of confinement can belittle the danger of their Asian eyes, those gold and ginger flowers blooming with a bristling courage in the dusk of captivity. At feeding time a cat house turns into a thunderous jungle, for the attendant, passing with blood-dyed hands among the cages, is sometimes slow, and his wards, jealous of one who has been fed first, scream down the roof, rattle the steel with roars of longing.

This evocation of animal hunger is immediately followed by Grady's psychical and sexual submission to Clyde Manzer. She even goes so far as to marry him and have him live with her in her parents' penthouse. The descent of Grady into an alien world is explored further in her introduction to the life of Clyde's family, who live at the end of a subway line in Brooklyn. Grady envisions Brooklyn as an ominous wasteland, and its "ghostly lonesome streets, the lowness of the land

stretching in a confusion of look-alike bungalows, of empty lots and silent vacancy” strike her as terrifying. She meets Clyde’s mother and her young children in their working-class apartment, which conveys a feeling of enclosure and constriction; and she meets Clyde’s friends, whose names—Mink, Bubble, and Gump—have the effect of dehumanizing them.

Grady’s attraction to Clyde in the first place comes from how he seems to epitomize a romantic life that is totally different from the one she has known with her parents. Grady is not an entirely sympathetic character; among other things, she is self-centered and headstrong. She also looks for romance in the wrong places—namely, at the movie theaters in the dim Times Square area, which hold a dark mystery for her. Manzer is an extension of that alluring mystery; but the romance of an ethnic underclass can be very unlovely. In the Central Park Zoo scene, she carries a balloon that gets away from her when she is shoved by a group of rowdy schoolchildren, and there seems an implication that her reading of life is no surer than the balloon she has carried and lost. By the end of the story she is moving in the circle of Clyde and his friends, who have been hardened by life and are patrons of the nightclub domains of drink and drugs. Grady, like Gustave Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary*, finds that romance can be a sequined squalor.

Summer Crossing is especially rich in Capote’s prose artistry, which is consistent with the brilliance of his early stories. But the novel also has major flaws, both in characterization and plotting. At this early point in his career, Capote had only a sketchy knowledge of the rich (would the McNeil couple really have left their unpredictable seventeen-year-old daughter alone in New York while they traveled abroad?), and he had even less knowledge of the Jewish working class. Worst of all, Clyde, a major character, is never convincing. His attraction for Grady and his hold over her are not felt by the reader; and even the way he speaks at times seems all wrong. The McNeil parents are effectively portrayed in the early section, only to disappear from the novel completely. Peter Bell is interesting and plausible, but he, too, drops out of the narrative until the very end; his reappearance merely makes the reader conscious of the oddness of his lengthy absence. *Summer Crossing* is a seriously flawed but at times attractive novel that might have worked as a short story about a young woman’s journey into fear, a theme Capote had been orchestrating in his early stories.

Chapter Four

Other Voices, Other Rooms

Although Capote's stories showed a remarkable versatility, his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, could hardly have been predicted when it was published in 1948; the bold candor of its treatment of homosexuality made it an immediate succès de scandale. The book's timing was perfect, since it coincided with the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, which demonstrated with academic rigor the greater than assumed prevalence of homosexuality. The subject had been broached in a few American novels of the earlier 1940s, but it was implied or hinted at rather than being confronted, as Roger Austen points out in his pioneering study *Playing the Game*. But in 1948 it was confronted directly in two novels, Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*, a closely observed depiction of the gay world as it currently existed, and Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Appearing together at the same time, the books made Vidal and Capote rivals; but their novels, apart from the eyebrows they both raised, were nothing alike. Vidal wrote in a received tradition of naturalism, while Capote turned inward for his vision of phantasmagoric experience in the modern-day Deep South.

Influences on *Other Voices* go as far back as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. The novel has a certain kinship with "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), for like Roderick Usher, Capote's Cousin Randolph inhabits a house that is partly in ruins and is said to be sinking into the earth. Randolph is not only the master of the house but also an artist figure like Usher, with high-strung sensitivities that place him out of the mainstream of life. Randolph's estrangement is further emphasized by the remote and desolate landscape of his large home, Skully's Landing—sometimes called Skulls Landing. To a remarkable degree both Poe's story and Capote's novel are preoccupied with death.

Hawthorne's is an even stronger presence. His story "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1831) relates to *Other Voices* unmistakably in its having to do with a youth's search for a relative he has not yet seen but who holds his future in his hands. Hawthorne's story takes place on the eve of the American Revolution; the relative that young protagonist Robin journeys to meet is a representative of the British Crown. Robin travels alone from his simple country home to Boston to find his well-placed relative and potential benefactor Major Molineux, and in doing so is immersed in mystery and frustration. The long-anticipated meeting finally takes place by torchlight in the dead of night, as the major appears before him stripped naked, tarred and feathered, and foaming at the mouth as rebellious citizens exhibit him in a cart rumbling through the streets. The whole effect of the scene belongs to nightmare.

In *Other Voices* the plot line is similar. Young Joel Knox journeys alone to be united with the father that he has never known. His meeting with his father is delayed and involves a deepening sense of mystery; when they eventually do meet, Joel discovers that his father is one of the living dead—a man so paralyzed and brain damaged that he is only able to communicate by releasing a red tennis ball that tumbles down a flight of stairs to attract the attention of his caregivers on the first floor. What Hawthorne's story and Capote's novel both dramatize is the overthrow of the father figure, and the gaping void of loneliness and isolation that come in its wake.

The Hawthorne relation is reinforced by very specific incidents in Capote's novel. In "My Kinsman" Robin takes a cudgel with him on his journey, believing naively that it will ward off any harm, and in *Other Voices* Joel is given a sword that had belonged to Jesus Fever's father, believing that it will keep him safe. Striking, too, is the way that the young travelers are transported by individuals who guide them into territory having ominous associations. In "My Kinsman," a ferryman, evoked as a Charon figure who pilots the dead across the River Styx to the underworld, transports Robin to his destination. Joel is given a lift by a truck driver at Paradise Chapel to Noon City, and from there rides in Jesus Fever's mule-drawn wagon to the ominously named Skulls Landing. Capote's equivalent of the ferryman-guide is a grotesque woman named Roberta Velma Lacey, proprietress of R. V. Lacey's Princely Place, a dismal roadside restaurant. She is described inimitably by Capote as having "long ape-like arms that were covered with dark fuzz, and there was a wart on her chin, and decorating this wart was

a single antenna-like hair. A peach silk blouse sagged under the weight of her enormous breasts. . . .” Feminine and masculine at once, she provides directions and transport that will lead Joel ultimately to the masculine-feminine Cousin Randolph.

But *Other Voices* is indebted most of all to the Southern Gothic writers (William Faulkner is a looming presence). As in their work, a number of characters who appear in the novel are deformed, grotesque, or freakish. The hundred-year-old Jesus Fever is described as being “a little pygmy” who moves slowly, “with the staccato movements of a mechanical doll.” His sickle-curved posture makes him look as though his back is broken. When the end comes for him, “it was as if someone had been tickling his ribs, for he died in a spasm of desperate giggles.”

His granddaughter is Missouri Fever, but she is known as Zoo because of her unusually long neck that makes people think of a giraffe. Her neck has been slashed by her psychotic husband Keg Brown, a member of a chain gang who cannot wait to escape so that he can return and do Zoo in for good. A friend and confidante of Joel’s at the Landing, Zoo leaves for a new start in Washington, D.C., but en route is set upon, gang-raped by some men in a truck, and then tortured by their impotent boss who thrusts the lighted end of his cigar into her navel.

The brutal boss is reminiscent of Faulkner’s Popeye in *Sanctuary*, but other Gothic characters in the novel, like Miss Wisteria, are very delicately sketched. Miss Wisteria appears late in the work when a carnival comes to Noon City. Human oddities and misfits, like the Duck Boy, who has feathers sprouting from his chest, are exhibited there. But no one can compare with Miss Wisteria. She is so tiny that when she was a child it was said that she could sit in her mother’s sewing basket. She has queer little hands that flutter about “so that they seemed to have a separate life of their own, and she glanced at them now and again as if they deeply puzzled her; they were smaller than child’s, these hands. . . .”

In a wildly inventive scene she rides the Ferris wheel with Joel just as a terrifying thunder and lightning storm breaks over the carnival grounds, and the Ferris wheel ride in the electric storm is projected by Capote as though it were a fevered dream or hallucination. In a rocking Ferris wheel high overhead, Joel looks down to see a phosphorescent figure, that of Randolph, making a claim on him and drawing him closer to him. In this dream sequence all the characters’ erotic desires are stymied; Joel believes that he is in love with the tomboy Idabel

Thompkins, but she has fallen in love with Miss Wisteria. In a hallucinatory scene following the thunder and lightning sequence, Miss Wisteria calls out for Joel, searching for him with a flashlight in a house with a “jungle” of rooms, and “weeping because little boys must grow tall.” This kind of circular thwarting and frustration is obviously reminiscent of the writing of Carson McCullers. There is no doubt that Capote has poached on her property, but there is also no doubt that he has transformed it into something idiosyncratically and uniquely his own.

The Gothic nature of the novel derives not only from passages like the hallucinatory Ferris wheel episode, but also in the distinctive landscape, mood, and atmosphere Capote evokes so memorably. The region where the story is set is “lonesome country,” where “there are luminous green logs that shine under the dark marsh water like drowned corpses.” Death abounds in the swamp country just beyond Skulls Landing. A place where a colony of ants feed on dead dogs, it is for Joel ominous and threatening. *Other Voices* is an initiation novel with pronounced mythic dimensions, and in some sense it is a search for the grail—a search for true knowledge, the finding of one’s true self.

The novel’s Gothicism, which highlights the search, belongs not merely to the present but also to the past, to which the novel returns at various times. The ruins of the Cloud Hotel, located part way between Noon City and the Landing, are disquieting reminders of the past. It had once been very fashionable, with a grand ballroom and a lake that adjoined the building known as Cloud Lake; the hotel and its lake had been a magnet for well-to-do tourists. People came even from far off in their best finery to share in the glamour of the ballroom dances and to refresh themselves in Cloud Lake. Then one day people began dying in the lake and the patronage of the hotel dwindled to nothing. Mrs. Jimmy Bob Cloud, the owner of the hotel, was heart-broken, went to St. Louis where she rented a room, poured kerosene all over the bed, lay down in it, and struck a match. Capote remarks with a Gothic flourish that now “snakes slithering across the strings made night-songs on the ballroom’s decaying piano.” Joel “realized suddenly that this was not a hotel; indeed, had never been: this was the place folks come when they went off the face of the earth, when they died but were not dead.” The fantastic Cloud Hotel is a foreshadowing for Joel of Skully’s Landing.

The Landing is a decaying relic of the past, and those who inhabit it are marginalized themselves. They consist of Cousin Randolph Lee; Edward Sansom, Joel's long-absent father; Miss Amy, a disagreeable woman who became Sansom's second wife following his return to the Landing; Jesus Fever, an ancient family retainer; Zoo, Fever's granddaughter; and Joel Knox, the house's youngest and latest arrival. Joel, who has now reached the age of puberty, was raised in New Orleans where, following his mother's death, he went to live with her sister, Aunt Ellen, and her family. When a letter, supposedly from Joel's father, Ed Sansom, asks to have the boy come to live at the Landing with him and gives assurances of providing for Joel's education and well-being, Aunt Ellen, after some hesitation, agrees to the arrangement. Joel is then sent off alone to this strange and almost inaccessible house, and the question thereafter is what will happen to a boy as impressionable and vulnerable as Joel once there.

The presiding presence in the house is Randolph, a languid, effeminate man in his thirties who speaks of the plight of the artist and the homosexual. Over his pajamas he wears a seersucker kimono with butterfly sleeves and tooled leather sandals that reveal his manicured toenails. He has yellow curls that fall over his forehead and he dabs his hair with lemon cologne. He is a pastiche character who quotes from Henry James on the "madness of art" and remarks that "all children are morbid; it's their one saving grace" as if he were Oscar Wilde. One could say that Randolph is all caricature and nothing else, but he is actually quite a memorable figure. It is he who holds the sometimes wandering book together and is a more interesting character than Joel. The boldness with which he has been imagined is apparent in the episode in which Joel is standing in the ruins of the garden adjoining the house and looks up to see the figure of a "lady" in an upper floor window. The "queer lady," as Joel will later describe her, has just pushed aside the curtains, and is smiling down at Joel as if in greeting or approval. She has white hair "like the wig of a character from history: a towering pale pompadour with fat dribbling curls." Joel's discovery of this apparition in the window provides a dramatic close to chapter 2, almost as if it were the second act of a play; and it lends mystery and suspense that will be sustained throughout the rest of the novel.

One learns more about Randolph later as the narrative drops back into a time in the past when he was involved with a young woman

named Dolores, and then in love with a swarthy, mustached prize-fighter named Pepe Alvarez. To Pepe, even after he has been beaten and rejected by him, Randolph is totally in thrall. Before the worst happens, the three of them came to live for a time in New Orleans. Looking back at the costume ball they attended and the feminine costume he wore, Randolph remarks, "I am a Countess and my king is Louis XVI; I have silver hair and satin slippers, a green mask, am wrapped in pistachio and pink: . . . before the mirror this horrifies me, and then pleases to rapture, for I am very beautiful, and later, when the waltz begins, Pepe, who does not know, begs a dance, and I, oh sly Cinderella, smile beneath my mask thinking: Ah, if I were really me!" Randolph may seem like a fool in this scene, but he is a modernist fool; he knows that desire is blocked, that everyone wears a mask to disguise his loneliness.

Joel's discovering his father, Ed Sansom, in his absolute isolation and loneliness, is easily the most pitiful moment in the novel. On a table by Sansom's bed stands an illuminated globe of frosted glass depicting Venetian scenes of gondoliers and young lovers drifting past romantic palaces, and a milk glass nude suspending a tiny silver mirror. Reflected in this mirror is a pair of eyes, which belong to Sansom and reveal in a terrifying way his utter helplessness. They are always open and staring, even in sleep. How different this glimpse of Sansom is from the depictions in frosted glass next to him of the carefree lovers in Venetian gondolas. The view of the lovers is pointedly cruel, since it was in Europe that Randolph was part of a love triangle with Dolores and Pepe Alvarez and, in a delirium, shot Sansom, Pepe's manager.

But if Sansom is a victim, so is Randolph. He is shown naked in bed next to a pile of bluejay feathers, a paste pot, and a sheet of cardboard. Dipping the bluejay feathers into the paste, he arranges them on the cardboard to give the effect of a living bird. What the scene actually suggests is Randolph's distance from life—from what is living, real, and free. Indeed, in one of the ways he is presented, he seems like a vampire, bent on possessing Joel and stealing his soul. In the Ferris wheel episode, Joel feels Randolph's presence as if he were a "[v]ine from the Landing's garden" that "had stretched for miles to entwine his wrists" and frustrate his plan to escape from the Landing with Idabel. He seems here like Gilbert Osmond in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, who seeks to bring Isabel Archer wholly under his domination and control.

Yet, in other passages Randolph seems only too fallible and hence more sympathetic. He is powerless and seems to be moving in circles, like Walter Ranney in “Shut a Final Door,” a man entrapped within himself. Randolph mails letters to Pepe addressed to ports of call in practically every part of the globe, because without the possibility of human contact he has no hope at all. Ironically it is young Joel who counsels the older man. “Everything,” he tells him, “will be all right.”

Early in the work Capote alludes to Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Snow Queen.” Joel recalls that Kay, the boy in the tale, is spirited off to the Snow Queen’s palace, where everything is cold and has turned to ice. Arriving at the Landing, Joel fears that he, too, may suffer a similar fate but unlike Kay will have no one to come to his rescue. The theme of the fairy tale is the saving power of love in a world lacking human warmth and connection. In a number of the early stories, characters live in an almost fated isolation from one another, but in *Other Voices* Capote reaches out toward at least some amelioration of absolute loneliness. Randolph and Joel are in need of each other, and in time they grow closer together. Joel is in effect an abandoned child; his mother is dead and his father is so grotesquely maimed that he is unable to function as a parent whatsoever. Randolph will become the father he does not have; in a curious way he will be both father and mother to the boy. Joel, in turn, will bring youth, innocence, and comfort to the spiritually ailing Randolph.

The spiritual weather of the back country of Alabama where Joel has been cast is a cause for depression. Can there be any doubt that what he finds at the Landing is a fallen and death-haunted world? The novel’s biblical epigraph from Jeremiah is a prophetic warning of imminent undoing and destruction. “The heart,” the epigraph reads, “is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” The corruption of the Jewish nation’s faith and spiritual ideals, Jeremiah tells us, will bring a fearful fall and ruin. In *Other Voices*, the fall has already occurred: the Landing, which lies partly in ruins, is a token of a broken world. The slashing of Zoo’s throat by Keg Brown and later her rape and torture by men on a truck when she attempts to leave the Landing for a new life is testimony to how fallen this world is.

The Cloud Hotel that Joel visits with Randolph late in the work is another reminder of beauty turned to decay and overtaken by death. Here they talk to the black “gnome” Little Sunshine, who lives in the

hotel amid its wreckage. His quarters beyond the cobweb-strewn ballroom and in what had once been Mrs. Cloud's private apartment are "two simply furnished, spacious rooms, both beautifully clean . . . the evident pride he took in these quarters increased the charm of their surprise, and when he closed the door, he made nonexistent the ruin surrounding them." The decayed hotel provides Capote with scene painting that is full of tone, atmosphere, and poetry as he re-creates the heyday of gala balls together with the building's present state where "the diabolic tongue of a cuckoo bird, protruding out of a wall-clock, mutely proclaimed an hour forty years before. . . . where a fallen chandelier jeweled the dust, and weather-ripped draperies lay bunched on the waltz-waved floor like curtsyng ladies."

The scene is also made memorable by another death, that of Jesus Fever's mule, John Brown. The mule has been tied to a spittoon on a balcony overlooking the lobby, but it becomes excited, and as if insane with terror goes careening through the balcony railing; on his way down his reins become entangled with a beam, twisting about his neck so that he is seen swinging in midair above the lobby, his big lamplike eyes staring into death's face. It is an image that might be found in a surrealist painting.

But if *Other Voices* is Gothic, it is also personal, for Capote, like Joel, was an "abandoned" child. Like Joel he went to live in a large house in a remote section of rural Alabama. Like Joel, neither his mother nor his father were present to help him grow up. And like Joel, he was a pretty boy considered to be effeminate who came to consciousness of his homosexuality at an early age. Capote said that many of the people he knew at that time are in the novel in some guise or other. Idabel was inspired by Harper Lee, and Capote remarked in an interview that the inspiration for Randolph came from two men he had noticed in New Orleans: one a seaman, the other a reclusive man who spent much of his time in an upstairs room and smoked menthol cigarettes. But except for the smallest externals, neither of these men could have provided anything like the model for Randolph. There was someone in his life at that time, however, who may well have affected his conception of the Randolph and Joel relationship. This was Newton Arvin, Capote's lover and mentor, and the person to whom *Other Voices* is dedicated. Arvin did not have any personal resemblance to Randolph, but he was like him in being a cultured homosexual man much concerned with the arts who adopted young Capote as Randolph

adopted Joel. Their relationship was something of an idyll for both of them, and offered relief from their loneliness. Randolph and Joel by the end are offered a similar experience. Joel's recognition of his sexual identity is part of the growth of his consciousness in a larger sense; Capote clearly implies in the closing lines that his choice to ally himself with Randolph is a step toward maturity. Joel is putting his fear and dread behind him and entering a happier phase of his life.

Randolph appears in the window again at the end dressed as the beautiful lady of Louis XVI's court. In responding to Randolph's beckoning, and glancing back for a moment at the boy he had once been, Joel is affirming what Randolph stands for—a feminine as well as a masculine self, imagination and culture. Capote's view of life in *Other Voices* is extremely bleak, but he does finally allow his "innocent" characters at least a small ray of love and pleasure.

When *Other Voices* was published, it caused a sensation, and was controversial certainly for its subject matter (the *Library Journal* warned libraries against stocking it). Some reviewers objected to what they considered the clotted obscurity of its symbolism; others believed that he had produced "a bushel full of Southern decadence." Diana Trilling, in her review in *The Nation*, faulted Capote for his lack of "artistic moral fable." Writing in the portentous style for which she was known, she attacked Capote for having Joel yield to the seductions of Randolph rather than resisting them so as to make possible "more normal satisfactions." The majority of the reviews, however, were strongly positive, and expressed their conviction that a major young American writer had just arrived. Jacques Barzun concluded in *Harper's* magazine that Capote was destined "for the higher places of literary creation."

Other Voices, Other Rooms isn't a perfect work. Its symbolism can be too dense, and the episodic nature of the narrative loses momentum as it seems to wander back and forth between scenes with Joel and Idabel and the adult happenings at the Landing. Joel's reminiscent experiences with his chum Sammy Silverstein back in New Orleans are never convincing. But all in all, it is a breathtaking first novel, written with a rare gift for storytelling and for the creation of atmosphere and mood; and it has at its command a mesmerizing prose. It lives a long time—some say forever—in the reader's imagination.

Chapter Five

Early 1950s Reportage, Theater, and Films: *Local Color*, *The Grass Harp*, “House of Flowers,” and *Beat the Devil*

In 1948, in the wake of the publication of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Truman Capote and Jack Dunphy traveled abroad, stopping first in England, where Capote’s reputation as a wunderkind had preceded him. He was soon being introduced around to Noël Coward, W. Somerset Maugham, and other English writers, and narrowly missed meeting his favorite English novelist, E. M. Forster. Gerald Clarke, in his biography *Capote*, comments that “Even the English, who were accustomed to eccentric characters, were surprised by him.” Lord David Cecil said Capote “‘looked like a child, and talked like a very sophisticated, agreeable grown-up person.’” A strange thing about Capote, however, was that as sophisticated as he undoubtedly was, he could also be breathtakingly uninformed; he thought, for instance, that Oxford and Cambridge were not separate universities but a single one referred to by either one name or the other.

One of these English notables to whom he was introduced was Cecil Beaton, who became a longtime close friend. Beaton was twenty years older than Capote and already well established as a fashion and portrait photographer; an arbiter of taste, he was the photographer of choice of the royal family. In addition to that, he was a scenic designer for the ballet, and for theater and films. In the 1950s he would provide the sets and costumes for *My Fair Lady* and the costume designs for *Gigi*. Beaton was known, too, as a conversationalist, and he kept a diary in which he recorded his observations on the passing parade of English social life. Six volumes of the diaries would eventually be

published, and in them he frequently comments on his American friend Truman Capote.

From the beginning, he was awed by Capote as a prodigy whose “interests encompass the world.” In one diary entry he remarks, “I feel anxious that Truman may not survive to make old bones. I am slightly scared that someone who lives so intensely may be packing in a short span more than many people are capable of enjoying or experiencing in a long lifetime.” He adds that Capote “is frightened or awed by nobody: he has courage.” Elsewhere he notes that Capote was “avid for gossip,” a trait the two men shared, for they were alike in certain ways. Both were ambitious to move in high society.

Everything about Beaton suggested that he belonged to upper-middle- or upper-class British life, but he didn’t have this kind of background at all. Capote was struck by this and wrote about it. “There are very few people,” he commented, “who are total self-creations and certainly he is one, because nothing in his background could in any way lead one to suppose that this person would emerge out of the cocoon of middle-class life.” Capote, too, was a self-created person: Monroeville, Alabama, was a very unlikely training ground for the style-conscious social life that he cultivated. Beaton and Capote reinforced each other, but being older and more experienced Beaton must be presumed to have played the mentor role. Because he had access to the royal family, he could and did arrange for Capote to have dinner with the Queen Mother. The story of the dinner has been related in the following way by Gerard Clarke: “Truman had yet another conquest. After Cecil had escorted the guest of honor to the car, she pulled down the window and said she thought Mr. Capote quite wonderful, so talented, so wise, so funny. ‘Yes, he’s a genius, M’am,’ Cecil . . . replied.”

Beaton’s photographs of beautiful women sometimes reveal him in the background, and it is almost as if he were merging with his image of them; this suggestion of androgyny would have been understood by Capote. It is true that Beaton was fascinated by Greta Garbo and wanted to marry her (Diana Souhami explores their relationship in her book *Greta and Cecil*); but what enthralled Beaton most in the beauty of Garbo’s “perfect” face was its suggestion of sexual ambivalence. It was, as it were, the subversive element in Beaton’s fixation with Garbo.

After a brief but eventful stay in London, Capote and Dunphy went on to Paris, where the French publisher Gallimard was bringing out *Other Voices* and publicity about it was intense. The famous photograph on the back of the book's jacket excited the French, who were eager to meet Capote in person. Natalie Barney, one of the reigning hostesses in Paris, introduced him to Colette, Gertrude Stein, and others. Albert Camus, at Gallimard, was Capote's French editor, and they became acquainted, Capote later telling a skeptical world that they went to bed together.

Local Color

During this early period, when he divided his time between New York and Europe, Capote published a number of travel pieces in glossy magazines like *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* that were collected in his third book, *Local Color*. Written in the late 1940s and 1950, the articles were about places he had lived in or visited, and the earliest ones have to do with American cities. The first piece, on New Orleans, is a snapshot-sized profile of a single individual, a black guitarist and blues singer named Shotgun who performs in a "Negro café." It is a Saturday night and the room seems to "float" in cigarette smoke. He sings of his life that has been immersed in strong drink and buxom women with whom he has fathered more children than he can count. His "black crazy face" glistens with sweat as he strums his guitar, and his stamping foot becomes the "heartbeat" of the room. His voice cries "*I want a big fat mama with the meat shakin' on her, yes!*" A single individual comes to evoke the sensuality and nocturnal life of a city, a people, and a place.

The never-identified yet strangely styled narrator of the piece on New York City is of course Capote. The city's local color, making it different from anywhere else, contributes to New York's being a "monumental machine" that consumes dreams and devours illusions. In this way the sketch overlaps with Capote's story "Master Misery." He describes New York as a place to hide, to lose or discover oneself, "to make a dream." The narrator tells of brushing against Greta Garbo in an antique shop and then of sitting next to her in a movie theater. He speaks of the metropolis as a magnet that draws the "talented untalented" who are "neurotically feeding on the fringes of the New York scene." Part of that art scene is revealed in the parties hosted by the narrator's friend "Hilary," who is unquestionably Leo Lerman. It was

Lerman's practice to host gatherings at his apartment while sitting up in bed; famous writers and film stars would mingle with circus freaks and college professors to create the effect of a very off-beat glamour. The New York sketch also provides Capote with an opportunity to try out or polish brilliant images, as when he writes that the midafternoon heat of the city "closed in like a hand over a murder victim's mouth."

In the sketch of Brooklyn, he explores this outer borough's uniqueness in terms of the social stigma of being a Brooklynite, an individual whose dialect, appearance, and manners are a national joke. He is intrigued by its long rows of look-alike buildings and broad, silent, vacant avenues. In this case the travel sketch provides notes for Capote's fictional writing in progress, since it corresponds to the ambiance of Brooklyn in the second half of the novel *Summer Crossing*, which belongs roughly to the same period.

A travel piece set abroad, "To Europe," concerns Capote's travels in Italy, and is an account of a journey he took aboard a train going from Italy to Switzerland. Also aboard the train and seated directly across from him were two white-haired Italian ladies who were without luggage but had a parrot in a cage that was covered by a silk shawl. During the ride the ladies remained silent, but the parrot would at times burst into "demented" and "unearthly" laughter, at which the ladies would smile at each other. When they came to the Swiss border, customs officials appeared and went directly to the parrot's cage, which, when they removed the silk cover, toppled over to reveal a cache of heroin in its feeding tray. The parrot in the meantime flew out of the cage, laughing wildly as it careened about the compartment and out an opened window. The elderly ladies, seemingly unconcerned about the discovery of the heroin, cry from the window for the bird to return to them as its flat silhouette is seen against a "cold Northern moon." Beautifully written in Capote's best lapidary style, the sketch could as easily be a work of fiction; it could be compared to one of Maugham's observant tales of strangers encountered in the course of travel.

Two sketches of 1950, "Ischia" and "Tangier," comment on locations that Capote knew firsthand, colorful settings with an element of the grotesque about them. In "Tangier" he reveals that he is well informed about the Casbah—an international crossroads of illicit activities from prostitution to drug smuggling. A shameless gossip himself, he is also well-informed about all the talk that goes on, and the variegated makeup of the society that flourishes there.

But the most charming of the European pieces is “A Ride through Spain,” in which Capote, as narrator-passenger aboard a badly deteriorated and slow-moving Spanish train, makes a fool of himself. Hearing a burst of gunfire as they are passing through a region rumored to be unsafe, he cries “Bandits!”. The passengers then panic, some falling on the floor. It soon comes out, however, that what happened was that an old man stealing a ride by clinging to the rear of the train lost his hold, and that a soldier seeing him fall, fired his machine gun to signal the engineer to stop the train. A “dark dusty” woman seated across from Capote glares at him and mocks “*Bandidos*.” The train starts up, moving so slowly that “butterflies flew in and out of the windows.”

At the end, calm has been restored in the placid image of the butterflies that are so much at odds with frayed nerves and panic. One laughs, or smiles, at the narrator but he is not the only figure treated humorously. The woman who glares at Capote is described as an “overstuffed, dusty woman with sluggish disapproving eyes and a faint mustache,” and the younger woman who accompanies her has the “scrappy features of a prizefighter.” Most amusing of all is that the elder woman removes a lunchtime fish from between her breasts and begins to eat it “with glum relish.” “A Ride through Spain” is similar to a vignette that Capote will later write, “A House on the Heights,” in which he presents himself as a nervous coward. Both are alleged to be factual but have the feel and artistry of fiction; and this ambivalence points to a direction that Capote’s writing would later be taking.

The Grass Harp

As fine as these short pieces were, Capote needed a second novel to consolidate his position among the leading young postwar American writers. This he found in *The Grass Harp*, which, as American a novel as can be imagined, was actually conceived and written at the Fontana Vecchia, a villa in Taormina, Italy. It was published to general acclaim in 1951. As in *Other Voices*, its main character is a boy similar to the childhood Capote. Collin Fenwick is bereft of his mother and father at an early age, and has come to live with his father’s relatives, the Talbos. Theirs is a house of women—Verena and Dolly Talbo, and their black (purporting to be Indian) factotum Catherine Creek. These characters are all inspired by Capote’s Faulk family relatives, with whom he lived as a youth. Callie and Jennie Faulk provided a composite model for

Verena, the town's richest citizen; and Sook Faulk, the odd member of the household who collected herbs in the woods and dispensed a home-brewed medication for dropsy, was the model for Dolly. A woman named Anna Stabler, who lived in a tin-covered shack behind the Faulk home and was befriended by Sook, suggested the character of Catherine Creek.

Even the attic of the Faulk house, from which the young Truman Persons could eavesdrop on the rooms below through the spaces between the flooring planks, appears in the novel as Collin's bedroom. Most of all, the backyard China tree that became a retreat for Capote and Nelle Harper Lee, a haven where they could tell and write stories, becomes in the novel the tree house where the innocent characters stage their rebellion against their surroundings. The tree house conceit is at the very heart of *The Grass Harp*.

Other Voices and *The Grass Harp* are both drawn from Capote's own experience, and are accounts of a young boy's coming of age in the prewar South, but in terms of style and intention the two works could hardly be farther apart. *Other Voices* is relentlessly driven by nightmare, while *The Grass Harp* is genial and playful. What pervades it most of all is the spirit of comedy—the comedy, as the character Judge Cool puts it, of “five fools in a tree.” The work might be described as a comic pastoral, for much of it takes place in the nature that lies just beyond the vested interests of the community. It might also be considered a romantic comedy inasmuch as it involves courtship of a sort and ends with at least one marriage. It is romantic, too, in introducing a little world of wonder in the woods where the novel's little people seek a purer sense of their selfhood. *The Grass Harp* isn't the only work by an American writer to have sent a protagonist up a tree to escape the falsities and meanness of life; William Saroyan, in the largely forgotten play *Sweeney in the Trees* (1940), had already done this. Capote's novel, however, has what Saroyan's play does not—the ability to draw its audience fully into a dream.

Romantic largeness in the adventure of its unheroic characters is evoked in part through a repeated comparison of the tree house to watercraft. The tree house floor, for instance, is likened to a raft “floating in the sea of leaves,” and it is remarked that “it was as though we floated through the afternoon on the raft in the tree.” Elsewhere Capote writes that the China tree “swayed like immense oars dipping into a sea rolling and chilled by the far far stars.” Perhaps the most

telling line of all occurs when the reader is told that “Dolly knew and made me know, that [the tree house] was a ship, that to sit up there was to sail along the cloudy coastline of every dream.”

In *The Grass Harp* nature tends to have connotations that are romantic and beneficent. It is endowed with aesthetic richness at various points, and certainly when the field of tall grass turns to a brilliant red with the change of seasons from summer to autumn. The wind blowing through the tall grass has, as it were, the effect of music, and it is even said that it can remember the past and tell its stories, as if it possessed the powers of creativity. In this background of nature the characters can be distinguished one from the other. Dolly is a misfit in the Talbo house; she finds acceptance in the serenity of the woods. Verena, on the other hand, has dedicated her life to the accumulation of wealth, and her attitude toward nature is exploitative. Morris Ritz (aptly named) is associated not with nature but the city, and like Verena he is concerned with how much money he can acquire. The self-righteous townspeople who stage a raid on the tree house in order to bring the mavericks who gather there under the control of town values, turn out in the midst of nature to be bumbling clowns; and one of them, in the midst of the fracas they create, shoots Riley Henderson, a young non-conformist who is most at home in nature.

It can be charged that Capote’s conception of his characters is too black and white, too diagrammatic. But the novel, after all, is a comedy, and comedy does thrive on strongly typed and often contrasting characters. The solid citizens who march solemnly and stiffly through the woods to evict the group in the tree house are all comic figures. The sheriff, Junius Candle, an appointee of Verena’s, has “a brutal jaw and the bashful eyes of a card sharp.” The Reverend Buster is a nervous little man who walks behind his wife, and rubs his hands together with the effect of “the dry scraping feelers of an insect.” His wife has a small vicious head, high hunched shoulders and a vast body. Capote refers to the procession of these characters as “a distinguished party.” Opposed to them are characters who are not yet adults, and adults who are in some way childlike and have been put upon by others—Dolly by her sister and Judge Cool by his arrogant sons. Add to them the non-conformist evangelist Sister Ida, whose ministry includes the adoption of fifteen orphaned children (among them the child evangelist little Homer Honey) who help to defend the besieged characters in their tree house redoubt.

Like many classic comic works, *The Grass Harp* reaches a point of resolution where conflicts and disharmonies are reconciled. The characters began their adventure in the tree house to learn who they really are, and by the end of the novel things fall into place. Riley Henderson renounces his wild ways, marries Maude Rierdan, and settles down to become a prosperous businessman and a pillar of the community. After losing Maude, Collin follows the practical path and goes off to law school, becoming part of the conforming establishment; but one has the sense that he will always be an outsider. Dolly and Judge Cool have a rather shy and touching romance, but in the end Dolly turns down Judge Cool's offer of marriage to stay with her repentant sister Verena, who needs her; Dolly will never again experience nights of romance. Judge Cool is the most poignant at the end; he remains at Miss Bell's rooming house where, a sharply dressed and sturdy figure with an Indian rose in his lapel, he can do no better than to spend time with men "who talk and spit and wait." Off at the edges of the novel, another note is quietly sounded—the intimation of homosexuality in Collin, who idolizes the roughneck Riley Henderson, and Verena, who mourns for the fun-loving girl she had once doted on but who married and moved away. Looked at more closely, however, the apparent happy ending is not really happy: Capote's comic novel ends, finally, in resignation. The characters' destinies are not quite what any of them might have foreseen, but they do, at last, have a sense of who they are: the tree house dreamers have all fallen out of their dreams.

The Grass Harp was favorably reviewed when it was published, and it attracted the interest of the Broadway producer Arnold Saint-Subber, who traveled to Taormina to urge Capote to write a stage adaptation of the work; his offer opened up new possibilities for income at a time when Capote was still struggling to make his way. Working with intense concentration, Capote managed to complete a draft of the play in a year's time. He was personally involved in the selection of a production team, and was particularly eager to have Peter Brook, the twenty-six-year-old phenomenon of the British theater, as director. He also wanted Virgil Thomson to write the production's incidental music and his friend Cecil Beaton to do the set designs and costumes. Both Capote and Saint-Subber wanted the celebrated silent film stars Lillian and Dorothy Gish for the roles of Dolly and Verena Talbo, respectively, and they obtained the sisters' interest.

Yet when Brook decided not to commit to the play, a series of unravelings began. Robert Lewis, who had worked largely in the musical theater, replaced Brook as director, and rather than casting the Gish sisters, who would have been perfect as the Talbo sisters, he chose Mildred Natwick and a little-known actress named Ruth Nelson. *The Grass Harp* opened in New York on March 27, 1952. Apart from a glowing review from Brooks Atkinson (who called the play “effortless and beautiful” in the *New York Times*) reviewers found the work charming but without much dramatic intensity.

The play has had its own devoted following, however. Within a year of its opening on Broadway, José Quintero revived it at the Circle in the Square theater in Greenwich Village; and it has been staged from time to time in regional theater, including a production of it as a musical that starred Barbara Cook. In 1952 the *Kraft Television Theatre* presented a streamlined version of it for NBC television. In 1995 *The Grass Harp* was made into a movie that was produced and directed by Charles Matthau. His father, Walter Matthau, appears in the film as Judge Cool. Jack Lemmon, Matthau’s foil from many earlier films, plays Matthau’s *bête noire* Morris Ritz. Other well-known actors appear in the film as well—Sissy Spacek, playing against type as the hard-edged Verena, and Nell Carter as Catherine Creek. Included, too, are Charles Durning, Roddy McDowall, Piper Laurie, and Mary Steenburgen. Despite this impressive cast and respectful reviews, however, the movie is too subdued to leave a really deep impression.

“House of Flowers”

In the early 1950s Capote became further involved in the performing arts. He was approached once again by Saint-Subber, who was interested in his recent short story “House of Flowers”: would he be interested in adapting the work as a musical play for Broadway? Despite the difficulties they had had in turning *The Grass Harp* into a stage play, Capote agreed for a second time to collaborate with Saint-Subber and set to work. Much of the writing was done in the Italian fishing village of Portofino; but Capote and Jack Dunphy found time to travel to Switzerland and Paris before returning to America, where Capote met again with Saint-Subber and continued his work on the musical.

Capote’s short story “House of Flowers,” written in 1950, evolved from his travel sketch “Haiti” (1948), which was included in the

collection *Local Color*. The travel piece was occasioned by his stay on the island, and is another instance of how the notes he took on particular places and their customs could affect his fiction. Haiti offered promising material in, for instance, the bizarre wakes he witnessed at which mourners clawed the air, beat their heads on the ground, and joined in eerie communal mourning. Other exotica included the omnipresence of scampering chameleons and the rituals performed by a young *houngan*, or voodoo priest. But the most relevant section of the sketch “Haiti” deals with the island’s nightlife, which is almost nonexistent except for a row of brothels set among foliage along Bizonton Road. One of these establishments is called The Paradise, while others have the names of flowers, giving the appearance of respectability. The girls sit out on the front porch in rocking chairs, “fanning themselves with cardboard pictures of Jesus.”

The most pertinent passage in “Haiti,” however, is this one:

This is R’s story. A few days ago he went out into the country to sketch, suddenly coming onto the bottom of a hill, he saw a tall, slant-eyed, ragged girl. She was tied to the trunk of a tree, wire and rope binding her there. At first, because she laughed at him, he thought it was a joke, but when he tried to let her loose several children appeared and began to poke at him with sticks; he asked why the girl was tied to the tree, but they giggled and shouted and would not give an answer. Presently an old man joined them; he was carrying a gourd filled with water. When R asked about the girl the old man, tears misting his eyes, said: “She is bad, monsieur, there is no use she is so bad,” and shook his head.

Capote’s short story “House of Flowers” transforms this account into a delicate and delightful work of art that has the quality of a fairy tale. The incorrigible girl in the travel sketch becomes the innocent child Otilie, the youngest of the girls at a house called the Champs Elysées. But Otilie, who unlike the others is from the high hill country rather than Port-au-Prince, belongs to a world apart. She is described as a “delightful dreaming child surrounded by old, uglier sisters.” A child and dreamer, she has an affinity with certain earlier characters in Capote’s fiction. She is even a little like Miss Bobbit in “Children on Their Birthdays,” who is real in a way yet seems to belong to a dream.

The fairy-tale dimension of the story is reinforced by the fact that neither Otilie nor the young man she marries (who is also from the

hills) is corrupted by the city. His name is Royal, an apt name for a fairy-tale prince; and just as striking, his surname is Bonaparte. Handsome and unspoiled, he is played off against a wealthy gentleman with a yacht named Mr. Jamison who would like to have Otilie for himself, but unlike Royal, does not offer love.

In many ways Royal is ideally suited for Otilie, for he is light-footed and magical. He wears no shoes, and “his golden feet were slender and airy, and the prints they left were like the track of a delicate animal.” Otilie and Royal go to live in his house in the hills, which is described as a “house of flowers” for the wisteria lilacs that shelter it and make it a cool and balmy retreat from the rest of the world. Then another character enters upon the scene—Royal’s witchlike grandmother, Old Bonaparte, who is “bowlegged as a dwarf and bald as a buzzard.” Old Bonaparte seeks to remove Otilie from her grandson’s life by poisoning her food and casting voodoo spells on her, but the innocent girl actually outwits her. Near the story’s end, Otilie is temporarily tied to a tree as punishment for bringing about the grandmother’s death; this public humiliation shields her from evil spells Old Bonaparte might be able to cast on her from beyond the grave.

In the last lines, Otilie, hearing Royal coming up the hill to the house, strikes a dramatic pose: “seen from a distance, it would look as though she had come to some violent, pitiful end.” Royal begins running toward her, while she thinks, “This will give him a good scare.” Otilie, who can neither read nor write, might seem like the most vulnerable of the characters yet has a way of surpassing all the others. She exists in Port-au-Prince in an ambiance of Caribbean sensuality, yet is both pure and fulfilled, unsoiled in her innocence.

Capote had some very wispy material to work with in adapting “House of Flowers” for the stage, and in order to make the story effective as drama he had to make many changes. Instead of having the house of flowers refer to Royal’s house in the high hills, he now has it refer to Madame Fleur’s house of prostitution, where the girls who work there have the names of flowers, such as Tulip, Gladiola, and Violet. Otilie lives there, too, but it is made clear that she is a virgin and not one of the regular girls. Another brothel is introduced that is in competition with Madame Fleur’s.

The original staging of the play *House of Flowers* has a history that is little short of amazing. From the beginning it looked as if it would be a major Broadway musical. The great Harold Arlen, who had

written such legendary songs as “Stormy Weather” and “Over the Rainbow,” would be supplying the musical score, with Capote providing the lyrics as well as the book. Peter Brook, the wunderkind of the British theater, had decided against directing *The Grass Harp* but now agreed, after heavy persuasion from Arlen and Capote, to direct *House of Flowers*. George Balanchine, a towering, internationally acclaimed figure in the world of dance, agreed to choreograph the show. Oliver Messel, Britain’s most acclaimed theatrical designer, agreed to do the sets and costumes.

The production, which was to have an all-black cast, was blessed with outstanding dancers, including a young Geoffrey Holder, Carmen De Lavallade, Alvin Ailey, and Arthur Mitchell, the last two of which would go on to lead their own distinguished companies. Young Pearl Bailey was given the important role of Madame Fleur, and Juanita Hall (who leapt to fame as Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*) would play her rival Madame Tango. Otilie would be played by the eighteen-year-old Diahann Carroll, who as an actress and singer would later become a household name in America.

With such an array of talent, it was almost inconceivable that the show could falter, but it did. It was the first time that Brook had directed a musical, and he made mistake upon mistake. His reputation was so formidable, however, that no one stood up to him. He alienated his African American performers by claiming that he was not prejudiced (groans were heard), and referring to them thereafter as “you people.” He had no idea of how to direct the show’s star, Pearl Bailey, although she begged for his help. George Balanchine knew every movement of classical dance but was unfamiliar with the mambo, the dance that was to energize the show. He excused himself during the Philadelphia tryouts and was replaced by Herbert Ross, who also took over from Brook as director. Although the show had a favorable reception in Philadelphia, the director’s constant demands for revision only made the production worse. When it opened in New York on December 30, 1954, it was praised, but rather faintly. It ran for 165 performances, or about four months, which was not bad but far from being a resounding success. Like *The Grass Harp*, it attracted a cult following that raved about Harold Arlen’s songs, like “Two Ladies in de Shade of de Banana Tree,” and Oliver Messel’s colorful sets.

In 1968 *House of Flowers* was revived off Broadway with Josephine Premice, the most prominent calypso dancer in America, in the leading

role of Madame Fleur. Most recently it was revived again (in February 2008) in concert form as part of New York's City Center's *Encores!* series, with Tonya Pinkins and Armelia McQueen as the competing brothel madames and the very talented Kathleen Marshall as both choreographer and director.

Beat the Devil

While Capote and Dunphy were spending the summer in Rome, Capote was asked to do some screenwriting by no less a figure than David O. Selznick, the producer of such films as *Gone with the Wind* (1930) and *Rebecca* (1940). His new film, *Stazione Termini* (directed by Vittorio De Sica, 1953; released in America as *Indiscretion of an American Wife*), featured Selznick's wife Jennifer Jones as an American tourist and Montgomery Clift as her young Italian lover. Capote was hired to polish the script (replacing Carson McCullers), but the work he did on the film was merely marginal. He did, however, impress Selznick, who before long recommended him to John Huston for his new picture. It would turn out to be the most eccentric film Huston would ever make.

Beat the Devil was adapted from the early 1950s novel of the same name by Claud Cockburn, using the pseudonym James Helvick after being blacklisted during the McCarthy era. Huston wasn't satisfied with his screenplay, however, and commissioned Peter Viertel and Anthony Veiller to submit a new one, which he also rejected. They had envisioned the story as a work of international intrigue and melodrama, without any of the playfulness that Huston was really looking for. He had scheduled the shooting to begin in a matter of days, and still had no script; confronted by this crisis he contacted Selznick, who was also in Rome making *Stazione Termini*. Selznick, notes Clarke, responded by recommending Capote, also in Rome; he worked quickly, Selznick explained, and—most important—was “one of the freshest and *most original* and most exciting writing talents of our time.”

They soon met, and Capote agreed to write the screenplay; it was a collaboration that turned out to be a wild adventure, with the script improvised on the spot from day to day. Capote would stay up all night writing and appear the next morning in a bleary-eyed and haggard state to hand out the latest pages of dialogue to the actors, who did not realize that there was no completed script in place. The final product looks as if it had been improvised, and in fact it had, but that is part

of its peculiar charm: things in the film seem to keep happening spontaneously. Charlie Chaplin loved the film's offbeat comedy, and there are actually Chaplinesque moments in it. In one, Robert Morley, Humphrey Bogart, and Huston himself are backseat passengers in a vehicle speeding down a steep mountain road; when it hits rough spots they are bounced in unison out of their seats, their heads striking the ceiling. They then resume their rather formal, dignified positions on the seat, only to be bounced in unison again from their seats. But the odd appeal of the picture involves more than pratfalls. Charles Champlin, for many years the chief movie critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, was so taken by the picture that he saw it thirty times.

Although *Beat the Devil* may seem to have thrown structure overboard, it is at least consistent as a sendup of Huston's earlier work, particularly his film adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's crime novel *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), in which a gang of inept international criminals compete for the possession of an ancient art object believed to be of fabulous value. Their pursuit of it, both together and separately, becomes an obsession blinding them from a recognition that their lofty quest is an illusion driven by greed. The characters all betray one another. Even Sam Spade, who has some conscience and standards, betrays his partner by having sex with his wife. In the end, the supposedly graillike quest implodes, leaving the criminals in possession of nothing real.

Beat the Devil was shot in black and white to reinforce its parody connection with Huston's film noir classic, and to emphasize it further Huston wanted to include Bogart, Sidney Greenstreet, and Peter Lorre as stars. Bogart and Lorre were available, but Greenstreet had recently died; recruited to take his place was the tall, overweight British character actor Robert Morley. In the film, the crooks are in pursuit not of an art object of priceless value but of a claim to priceless uranium deposits rumored to exist in British East Africa. In their eagerness to reach the African coast ahead of other claimants, to the uranium fields, they engage in various intrigues and experience spectacular setbacks. When the transportation they had counted on is unavailable, they board a steamer that is falling apart and explodes at sea (a reference to Huston's film *The African Queen*, 1951). All have to swim for their lives, and when they finally reach shore they are set upon by hostile Arabs.

In *The Maltese Falcon*, unfaithfulness is exemplified by a female character played by Mary Astor, who brings about the murder of her

husband and, like the others, schemes to get hold of the falcon. In Capote's version of this theme of sex and duplicity, Billy Dannreuther (Bogart) is married to Maria Dannreuther (Gina Lollobrigida) but is really in love with Gwendolen Chelm (Jennifer Jones), who is married to Harry Chelm (Edward Underdown), who is really in love with Maria Dannreuther. The relationships are more complicated still, but this alone is enough to make one's head spin. One feels that it is Capote rather than Huston who has engineered this madness and is responsible for the "madly" witty comments the characters sometimes make.

Yet one is always conscious of Huston, too, and the recurring theme in his films of a quest that comes to nothing in the end—not only in *The Maltese Falcon* but also, for instance, in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948). Indeed, both *Treasure* and *Beat the Devil* begin and end in the same way. *Treasure* begins with a crowd scene in a Mexican square and an execution, and it ends with another crowd scene and execution, only this time of the *bandidos* who have set upon the American prospectors. In a very similar way, *Beat the Devil* begins with an excited street scene and with a crowd of men surging toward the camera, and it ends with the same street scene but now with a clear close-up of Robert Morley and the other crooks in handcuffs at the front of the surging crowd.

Apart from the intrinsic interest of the film itself, *Beat the Devil* is remembered for the stories that are told about its making. Bogart was in an automobile accident that knocked out his front teeth, and Capote had a tooth so severely infected that he was rushed to a hospital where, although in pain, he continued working on the script. Other Bogart-Capote stories during the shooting of *Beat the Devil* are still talked about, particularly their arm wrestling incident. Bogart challenged Capote, whom he called "caposy," to oppose him in arm wrestling, and Capote not only agreed but also won the match. Incredulous, Bogart challenged him again, and again Capote put down Bogart's arm—and then another time after that.

Another story of Capote and Bogart on the set that is similar in some respects but also different has to do with Bogart's needling a young woman who was Capote's script assistant. Capote told Bogart to "step outside." When they did, he placed his foot behind the unsuspecting Bogart and shoved him backward so that he fell to the ground. Capote then leapt on him throwing blows while Bogart roared with laughter and refused to lay a hand on Capote. The two, in fact, became great

friends. Bogart, notes Clarke, wrote to his wife Lauren Bacall, ““At first you can’t believe [Capote], he’s so odd, and then you want to carry him around with you always in your pocket.”” Even Huston, considered by many to be a homophobe, was immediately charmed by Capote, whom he called “an extraordinary little man who has courage and the determination of a lion.”

In the mid-1950s, during all this work in the performing arts, Capote’s mother died. By 1953 her life had already fallen apart; Joe Capote lost his job when the books were audited at the company he worked for and a hundred thousand dollars were found to be missing. The district attorney opened an inquiry that would lead by the end of the year to Joe’s conviction and imprisonment at Sing Sing. Without the money they had previously had, and even with financial help from Truman, Nina and Joe had to make severe retrenchments—a horrifying humiliation that left Nina drinking more heavily than ever, and sunk in depression. By January of the following year, she committed suicide by swallowing a bottle of secobarbital. She was found on the floor, her arms reaching out as if she were attempting to cry for help. Capote flew to New York immediately to be at the funeral. Dead or alive, Nina’s legacy would never leave him.

Chapter Six

The Mid- to Late 1950s: *The Muses Are Heard*, “The Duke in His Domain,” *Observations, Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and *The Innocents*

The Muses Are Heard

In the early 1950s, Capote’s reportage paid dividends when he was engaged by the *New Yorker* to accompany and comment on the Everyman Opera Company’s trip to Russia, where it was to perform George Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess*. It would be the first American company to perform in Russia in over forty years; and coming especially at the height of the Cold War, it was considered an international event of some moment. The U.S. State Department was involved, anxious to prep the theatrical adventurers on what to expect and on the dos and don’ts of their own behavior. The size of the company and its entourage was considerably greater than might have been anticipated: it consisted of fifty-eight actors, seven backstage personnel, two conductors, assorted wives and office workers, six children and their schoolteacher, three journalists, two dogs, and one psychiatrist. Capote’s lengthy piece, in two installments, on the meeting of American culture and Russian audiences was certain to attract attention, first in serial form and then as a book. The party crossed into East Berlin on December 19, 1955, and traveled eastward aboard a train called the Blue Express to Leningrad, where it expected to give its first performance of *Porgy and Bess* on January 10, 1956.

The Muses Are Heard (1956), Capote’s observation of the people and places he encountered, is continually entertaining, if not respectful. He notes that Lenore Gershwin, wife of the lyricist for *Porgy and Bess*, wears too many diamonds too often, even on those occasions

when they would seem inappropriate; and she calls everyone “darling.” The wife of Robert Breen, the director and coproducer, is described as having maple-colored hair that is “worn upswept and held in place by huge pins that could serve as weapons.” At a performance of the opera she dabs at her eyes “as though drying phantom tears.”

Capote’s dry, acidulous humor, however, can be seen in his depiction of the Russians. At a Christmas party he meets a man named Nervitsky, “a vain, once-handsome man with . . . a collapsing chin line” who wears makeup. Knowing no English, he tells Capote in French, “‘*Je suis Nervitsky. Le Bing Crosby de Russie.*’ His wife was startled that I had never heard of him. ‘No? *Nervitsky?* The famous *crooner?*’” They are dispatched rather quickly, but another Russian who appears and reappears is more fully created. The man, Stefan Orlov, goes out of his way to meet Capote, although he is constantly harried by the fear of being too close to a Westerner in a country where people live under constant surveillance. Their meetings are furtive. He wants him to know that he himself is informed about Western writing and culture, although he is not; he is instead poorly informed and mixed up. “‘Among your writers, the powerful one is A. J. Cronin,’” he says, “‘But Sholokov is more powerful, yes?’”

Orlov wants to show Capote around Leningrad, but his ulterior motive is the hope of meeting Robert Breen’s attractive assistant, Nancy Ryan. He has been under the impression that Capote and Miss Ryan are singers in the cast of *Porgy and Bess*. When Capote tells him he is a writer, Orlov becomes agitated and upset. Even so, Orlov takes him to a late night Leningrad bar, where the Russian drinks too much vodka and becomes incoherent: “‘That’s all I want. To dance with Nancy. Beautiful. A beautiful girl. You understand? Just to dance. Just to . . . Where is she?’ His hand swept the table. Silverware clattered on the floor. ‘Why isn’t Nancy here? Why won’t she sing for us?’ With his head tilted back he sang ‘Missouri woman on the Mississippi’. . . His voice grew louder, he lapsed into Russian, a hollering still obscurely associated with the tune of ‘St. Louis Blues.’”

Capote wrote later that he had envisioned *The Muses Are Heard* as a “brief comic novel,” and that is the way it reads at times, but it is not entirely comic. There are passages in the Russian material that are darker than the rest of the book. One such episode occurs when Orlov asks Capote to meet him by a cathedral, and while he waits there he observes a Kafkaesque scene. Four heavy men in overcoats have backed

a man against the cathedral wall and are pounding him with their fists, and then pound him with the full weight of their bodies, “like football players practicing on a dummy.” Strangely, through all of this no one makes a sound. “It was,” Capote writes, “like an episode from a silent film.” Strangely, too, a well-dressed woman stands by not far away as if she were waiting for these men to finish a business conversation. The men are indifferent to Capote’s presence as they pass by him to join the woman and drive off.

The man who has been beaten lies helplessly in the snow; unable to speak, he is like a “deaf-mute” attempting to communicate with his eyes.” Then a taxi pulls up alongside the curb. Capote remarks, “The rear door opened, and Stefan Orlov called my name. Leaning in the door, I tried to explain what had just happened and ask him to help the man, but he was impatient, he didn’t want to listen, he kept saying, ‘Get in’ . . . and at last, with a fury that shook me, ‘You’re an idiot!’ he said, yanking me onto the seat. As the taxi swung in a U-turn, its headlights exposed the man sprawled on the sidewalk, his lifted hands plowing the air, like the claws of an insect cruelly tumbled on its back.”

This whole episode reads like fiction; and elsewhere individuals encountered seem less observed by a journalist than delineated by a novelist. The *Muses Are Heard* is a benchmark work for Capote, for it is this work that opens the door to such later nonfiction projects as *In Cold Blood*.

Despite certain Russian passages, however, *The Muses Are Heard* is often humorous; it is a sly humor that can be lethal. Even though he seems to keep discreetly in the background, the book is really a star turn for Capote. One is always conscious of his powers of visualization and his elegant turns of phrase. He points out that the department stores in Leningrad all sell the same goods at the same price, and that the best restaurants are alike in being huge and dilapidated with an atmosphere about them of grandeur gone to seed. As to the cuisine, he notes that when peas are served they rattle on the plate “like gun shot.”

But there are no grounds more fertile than that provided by the Astoria Hotel, which is alleged to be an upper-tier hotel but whose oversized rooms resemble a Victorian attic full of family discards all crammed into a tomb-dark, unventilated area. The hotel elevator is described as “an ancient bird cage that creaks on its cables.” In what is the finest joke of all, the management has assigned the best rooms to the company’s carpenters and stagehands and the worst rooms to the

company's principal people. Herman Sartorius, a powerful New York financier who has come along with the company, has been assigned no room at all, nor has Lenore Gershwin, "who sat on her luggage in the lobby."

Confusion reaches a climax at the end when *Porgy and Bess* premieres in Leningrad. It is discovered at the last minute that the program notes in Russian explaining the plot to the audience are not yet available, which means that what happens on stage will be incomprehensible. A young interpreter for the Russian ministry named Sascha has to go out onto the stage to tell the audience what happens in the opera when he knows very well that they want no further delays, they want the opera to begin. "A sheaf of typewritten pages quivered in his hands," Capote remarks, "and his face, bloodlessly pallid, was drenched with sweat." The instant the audience saw that he was about to read them the plot, a mutiny broke out in the balcony, where rude voices started shouting for the opera to begin, and people stomped their feet while "Sascha went on reading, mumbling, as if he were whispering a prayer against the deafening tumult."

The first of the two acts were a mystery to the audience, which failed to applaud at the end of the numbers that in America had drawn stirring ovations. Nor was there any notice taken when the principal actor-singers came on stage. An ominous silence reigned. Capote tells of a particularly grotesque comic reaction by a member of the audience. After Crown has killed one of Porgy's neighbors, inhabitants of Catfish Row form a circle around the corpse. At this point an important Soviet dignitary is supposed to have turned to a correspondent and said, "Ah, now I see! They are going to eat him." The second act, however, was better understood; the response, if not of tidal-wave proportions, was at least respectful. The comedy of Capote's book's ending is that when the curtain falls, the journalists covering the event wire their papers that the opening night was an unparalleled triumph; one headline read, "LENINGRAD GOES WILD OVER PORGY AND BESS."

Racial issues do not enter into the book very much, although Capote does remark on the initial reaction of the welcoming party, made up of a hundred or more of Leningrad's leading theatrical agents, who "discovering that *Porgy* has a Negro cast look bewildered and . . . try to arrange their faces into an expression of more positive welcome." But one of the black performers, Earl Bruce Jackson, is a humor sketch too. A jive-talking extrovert, he wears a pair of gloves with holes along

the fingers to reveal his rings. His rings are called attention to again when he is seen at the theater “lolling his hand over the edge of the box so that his jewelry, a ring on every finger, could be seen to advantage. In a thematic way, his rings recall Mrs. Gershwin’s too prominently displayed diamonds. There is an almost universal undermining of people and their pretensions. The company head envisions lavish curtain calls for the production that never come. The production is meant to represent a breakthrough in Russian-American relations, but on opening night a thousand theatergoers cannot understand a thing of what is happening onstage. The book has in common with a novel that it has a shape and theme, and a farcical ending that is both inevitable and right.

It also shares with a novel an unusual care for and love of language. A Russian is described as having “a pushed-in, Pekingese face”; another is the “victim of a slightly receding chin.” When their train stops in Warsaw in freezing weather, a gang of workmen come over to look in the windows: “One after another, distorted faces mashed themselves against the glass.” Looking out the train window at the frozen Russian terrain, one saw that “[h]ere and there, like printing on paper, stretches of fir trees interrupted the whiteness [of the snowy fields]. Flights of crows seemed to skate on a sky hard and shining as ice.” The ice forms in “lenses” on the train’s windows, and gazing out one sees “merely spectral diffusions, as if your vision were deformed by cataracts.” A man named Savchenko, a Russian military officer in charge of the *Porgy and Bess* tour, gave Capote’s book its title via a Russian saying, “When the cannons are silent, the muses are heard.” They can be heard distinctly in this work, which is sharp to the point of wickedness.

“The Duke in His Domain”

After the success of *The Muses Are Heard*, Capote was encouraged to write again about the entertainment world. He became interested in knowing something about the movie *Sayonara*, which was adapted from the novel by James Michener. Gerald Clarke notes in his biography *Capote* that, although set in Asia, “the subject was similar [to that of *The Muses Are Heard*]: another American company trying to open doors to an alien society. Set during the Korean War, the film was to have as its theme the cultural clash between Orient and Occident. This is a view worth noting, but I would think that Capote’s real interest from the very beginning was less an interest in cultural collisions than

in the movie's star, Marlon Brando. After all, in the mid-1950s there was no one in the performing arts more talked about, more imitated, and more exciting to the public than Brando; and a rare interview with him by Capote would be certain to attract attention—as the *New Yorker*, which commissioned Capote's Asian trip and the resulting profile "The Duke in His Domain" (1956), would surely have known.

When cocktail party rumors spread that Capote had it in for Brando and planned to interview him, Joshua Logan became alarmed. He was quite aware of how Capote had pulled the rug out from under the opera company that had brought *Porgy and Bess* to Russia, and he was determined to keep him away from Brando. Accompanied by Cecil Beaton, Capote flew to Kyoto in late January 1957, and while they were checking into their hotel they ran headlong into Joshua Logan. He sternly warned Capote to stay away from his star—and according to one source even shoved Capote through the front door of the hotel into the street. If true, this was a mistake; it merely increased Capote's determination to see Brando and win his cooperation. Capote wasn't a complete stranger to him; they had met earlier in New York, and had a friend in common in Sandy Campbell, a young actor and writer. For whatever reason, Brando disregarded Logan's warnings and agreed to see Capote. He later said that he didn't think his conversation with him was an interview; but if this is so, what did he think it was?

Brando's biographer Peter Manzo has described the interview vividly. When Capote arrived, he "lifted a bottle of Vodka nestled in his arm and placed it on the table. Marlon called room service for ice." "What an experience," Capote would later write in his diary, "and how he loved to talk—and *such* a vocabulary . . . very anxious to display all the long words he's learned. He talked nonstop, from seven fifteen until twelve thirty in the morning."

In the course of the interview, it appears that Brando would like to give the impression that he is the thinking man's matinee idol, but it is clear that he is out of his element. He also tells of the way he dominates those around him (like a "duke in his domain"), to bring them under his control. Yet even as he boasts of bringing others under his control, he falls under Capote's spell. He is unaware that Capote has told him of his personal sorrows only to get Brando to talk about his own. And Capote gets what he wants—an ample account of Brando's insecurities, and tales of a father who had shown no interest in him and an adored mother who became a slave to alcohol.

Brando isn't the only one in the sketch to be tripped up. Joshua Logan is depicted as being naively optimistic as he begins his various productions. "Logan's belief in whatever project he is engaged in," writes Capote, "approaches euphoric faith, protecting him, as it seems designed to do, from the nibbling nuisance of self-doubt." He has long been fascinated by the classic Kabuki theater, and he expects to make use of real Kabuki in *Sayonara*. What he has not foreseen is that the Shochiku film company, which controls the Kabuki theater as well as almost all performance media in Japan, will not necessarily accede to his wishes. "The ruler of the Shochiku empire," Capote remarks, "is a small, unsmiling eminence in his eighties, known as Mr. Otani" who soon derails Logan's hastily laid plans.

For one thing, Mr. Otani objected to Logan's casting the Mexican actor Richardo Montalban as a featured Kabuki performer, considering it an affront to the Japanese theater. Logan's misstep was exacerbated by his plan to use a genuine Kabuki star to substitute for Montalban in the dance sequences. A Japanese writer remarked that this "was much the same 'as asking Ethel Barrymore to be a stand-in.'" Despite priding himself on being authentic in his portrayal of Japan on the screen, Logan made other questionable choices in casting, notably in wanting Audrey Hepburn to play the Japanese girl with whom the Brando character falls in love. Hepburn refused even to consider the role, feeling that audiences would laugh at her in the part. As Logan's misjudgments begin to add up, he becomes a figure who is close to being comic.

Although it would seem to be written partly as a rebuff to Logan, the sketch of him is not at all embittered; Capote even seems to be having fun with him. The Logan sketch is actually more successful than the larger one of Brando that makes up the bulk of the article; the actor's failings as recorded by Capote all seem true enough, yet there is something that seems mean-spirited, particularly in the revelations of his mother's alcoholic degradation. It was a set up on the part of Capote, and despite his statement that Brando did not come off that badly, it was written to wound—and it did, haunting Brando for years. Logan and Brando are a matched set, both figures of vanity, but there is an animus in the portrayal of Brando that keeps it from being altogether delightful. Even the irony seems a bit heavy-handed and the imagery too obviously symbolic. We are made to see how lost and vulnerable young Brando is at the end of the article, when Capote sees a

gigantic image of him in a billboard advertisement for *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. He is captured in a squatting position with the serene smile of a Buddha.

Curiously, immediately before this ending, with its straining for a classically “closed” effect, a passage appears that is totally unlike it in its openness as Capote wanders in a vast Asian city at night. The passage restores one’s faith in Capote as a magician with language:

There was no one at the desk, nor, outside, were there any taxis in view. Even at high noon the fancy crochet of Kyoto’s streets had played me tricks; still, I set off through the marrow-chilling drizzle in what I hoped was a homeward direction. I’d never before been abroad so late in the city. It was quite a contrast to daytime, when the central parts of town, caroused by fiesta massiveness, jangle like the inside of a *pachinko* parlor, or to early evening—Kyoto’s most exotic hours, for then, like night flowers, lanterns wreath the side streets, and resplendent geishas, with their white ceramic faces and their ballooning lacquered wigs strewn with silver bells, their hobbled wiggle-walk, hurry among the shadows toward meticulously tasteful revelries. But at two in the morning these exquisite grotesques are gone, the cabarets are shuttered, only cats remained to keep me company, drunks and red-light ladies, the inevitable old beggar-bundles in doorways, and, briefly, a ragged street musician who followed me playing on a flute a medieval music.

Observations

As the 1950s flowed into the 1960s, Capote continued to be active on a number of fronts. In 1959 he published the book *Observations*, a collection of brief profiles of people affiliated in general with art or society whom he knew personally or had “observed.” It was enhanced by his friend Richard Avedon’s striking photographs. The profiles are of such individuals as Louis Armstrong, Coco Chanel, Charlie Chaplin, Jean Cocteau and André Gide, and W. Somerset Maugham, among others. Also included, however, is a piece called “A Gathering of Swans,” in which Capote discusses what it is that makes a great female beauty, even in those cases in which the lady in question may be rather plain. “A Swan,” Capote asserts, “is invariably the result of an adherence to some aesthetic system of thought, a code transposed into a self-portrait; what we see is the imaginary portrait precisely projected.” The two reigning swans for Capote are Marella Agnelli in Europe and Barbara (“Babe”) Paley in America, both already his close friends as he moved ever further into fashionable society.

Observations verges on being a brilliant exercise, but it is eminently readable for the seductiveness of its prose. In a number of the sketches, Capote pays unusual attention to people's eyes. John Huston, for instance, has "warmly crinkled and ungentle eyes, eyes bored as sun bathing lizards." Richard Avedon, a subject as well as a collaborator, has deceptively normal eyes that are "energetic at seeing the concealed and seizing the spirit." In picturing Isak Dinesen's face, he misses no nuance; its "prisms glitter with intelligence and educated compassion," and her eyes, "smudges of kohl darkening the lids, deeply set, like velvet animals burrowed in a cave [do not] fall into the possession of ordinary women."

One profile that stands out is that of Mae West. It is less studied or oblique than some of the others, and has a comic sense that bursts with life. The way that Capote builds slyly to the punch line is a testament to his comic timing. Approached by those who admire her, West is unsure of how to "be" when she isn't her theatrical self: "Removed from the protective reach of her hilarious creation, her sexless symbol of uninhibited sexuality, she was without defense: her long lashes fluttered like the feelers of a beetle on its back." Capote continues:

[A]n intense young girl . . . approaching the actress, announced, "I saw *Diamond Lil* last week; it was wonderful."

"Didja honey? Wheredja see it?"

"At the Museum. The Modern Museum."

And a dismayed Miss West, seeking shelter in the sassy drawl of her famous fabrication, inquired, "Just whaddya mean, honey? A museum?"

Breakfast at Tiffany's

The novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) is not quite like any other work of Capote's. There is a quality of freshness to it, as if Capote were just at the beginning of his career or had commenced some new phase of it. Stanley Edgar Hyman has remarked that while Capote's early fiction concerns itself with the "inner world," his later fiction, exemplified by *The Grass Harp* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* shifts his concern to the outer world, sometimes in a way almost sociological. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in particular is a break from the past, for the patch of Manhattan that Capote seizes upon is evoked with a sharply focused realism. At the same time, the novel captures the mood and moment, the *mise en scène* of New York during the postwar years.

The bartender Joe Bell is a good example of Capote's merging of realism with comedy. He has been observed so keenly, so indelibly that his very presence brings to life his surroundings and the others who occupy them—his East Side bar, the Third Avenue el, the racetrack, the soldiers and sailors who now people the streets of Manhattan, the daring young women who now, throwing off repressions of the past, spend late nights clubbing. Joe Bell is as tremendously known by his speech as are the characters in John O'Hara's stories; his manner of speaking tells readers all they need to know about him—that he has a hard exterior surface and a tender heart. His speech establishes him as the quintessential New Yorker in touch with the rhythms and stresses of big-city life. (He seems always to be popping a Tums tablet for his sour stomach.) He is half in love with Holly Golightly, who has brightened his life. She has dazzled him.

Joe Bell qualifies as a great character of secondary stature; but so, too, does "Doc" Golightly, the horse doctor from Tulip, Texas, who married Holly when she was fourteen years old. With his halting manner, a sweat-stained hat, and flock of "churren" by his first wife, he is backcountry drabness itself. Yet he is a character of some decency and respectfulness, and in his different way he, too, has been dazzled by Holly. Like Joe Bell, he is an unpredictable character conception. When he finally finds her in New York and she explains to him why she cannot return with him to Tulip, he is big enough to let her go.

Other characters who comment in one way or another on Holly and her lifestyle in New York include Madame Sapphia Spanella, who lives in the same building as the narrator and Holly. She is a determined adversary, always ready to condemn Holly for having raucous parties in her apartment or for arriving home in the middle of the night with strange gentlemen. A delightful conception, Madame Spanella is an opera singer—a "husky coloratura" who goes roller skating in Central Park every afternoon. Although he scarcely appears in the novel, Sally Tomato manages to be as memorable as he is improbable. A mobster boss, he is serving time in Sing Sing Prison, where every Thursday Holly visits him, and he gives her—without her understanding what it is all about—an envelope containing coded messages to give to his lawyer.

There is an element of humor, indeed of farce, in characters like Madame Spanella and Sally Tomato; but some other characters have been conceived as grotesques. Mag Wildwood, whose name could have come out of a Thomas Hardy novel, is well over six feet tall and

stammers compulsively. While standing upright in a drunken state at a party, she falls forward stiffly like a tree that has just been axed, landing on her face. Stranger still is O. J. Berman, the Hollywood actor's agent, who is introduced thus: "A creature answered the door. He smelled of cigars and Knize cologne. His shoes sported elevated heels; without these added inches, one might have taken him for a Little Person. His bald freckled head was dwarf-big: attached to it were a pair of pointed, truly elfin ears. He had Pekingese eyes, un pitying and slightly bulged. Tufts of hair sprouted from his ears, from his nose. . . ."

But even O. J. Berman pales beside Rusty Trawler, who is described as a "middle-aged child that had never shed its baby fat. . . . it was as if he had been born, then expanded, his skin remaining unlined as a blown-up balloon, and his mouth, though ready for squalls and tantrums, a spoiled, sweet puckering." These characters all gravitate to Holly and in their contrast accentuate her role as the novel's pre-eminent figure. Mag Wildwood and Holly are friends, at least for a time, and by pairing them off, Capote merely emphasizes all that Holly is and Mag is not. Holly is the person that others all talk about or are in love with.

Capote's playing off a marginal narrator-observer with a charismatic central character is strongly reminiscent of the alignment of characters in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Like Nick Carraway in *Gatsby*, the narrator in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is a mild and unheroic figure who happens to be the downstairs neighbor of the more imposing principal character. That Capote's narrator has no name is surely meant to indicate that he lacks a sense of identity. He is mild and repressed, while Holly is uninhibited.

Even the tone of the narrator's opening sentence—"I am always drawn back to places where I have lived, the houses and their neighborhoods"—could have been spoken by *Gatsby's* Nick Carraway, and it intimates that the novel will deal with some incidents or individuals that still survive strongly in his memory. Like *Gatsby* again, Capote's novel then drops back into the past in a long flashback about the growth of the narrator's friendship with the principal character. Notably, both *Gatsby* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* are suffused with nostalgia.

Holly is Capote's most indelibly imagined character of the 1950s and, as mentioned earlier, a number of women were anxious to claim

that they were the original model for Holly Golightly. Doris Lilly, Carole Marcus, Oona O'Neill, Phoebe Pierce, and Gloria Vanderbilt were all friends of Capote in the late 1940s and, like Holly, involved at an early age in Manhattan's nightclub life. One has the feeling that there was a model for Holly, but if so Capote never revealed her name. Gore Vidal, scornful as always of Capote, claimed that Holly was merely a redrawing of the character Sally Bowles in Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*. Holly, however, is more complicated and nuanced than Sally Bowles, and her conception involves different thematic ideas. Nevertheless, Capote would certainly have been aware of Sally Bowles.

A peculiar feature of Holly's background is that in certain respects it resembles the background of Capote's mother, who had come from a backcountry Southern region to immerse herself in the glamour of New York. Their first names, Lillie Mae and Lula Mae, are too similar for it to be mere coincidence. Moreover, they both changed their "country girl" names to names sounding less rural. It may seem strange that Capote should link Holly to his own mother Nina, especially since they are so different. But it would not be so strange if one posits that he is linking himself obliquely with Holly: both enjoyed the glamour of nightlife, but were also subject to bouts of anxiety, which Holly calls "the mean reds." The lives of both, moreover, were always in motion. During the 1950s Capote constantly moved back and forth between Europe and America, between one set of people and another, between writing fiction and writing for films and the theater. Holly's life is so much in motion that it is appropriate that the nameplate for her in the apartment building entranceway should read "*Miss Holiday Golightly, Traveling.*" When Holly and the nice but repressed young man who narrates the story exchange presents, she gives him a golden birdcage, while he gives her a St. Christopher's medal, which commemorates the patron saint of travelers.

Critics have sometimes referred to Holly as a prostitute, but in an interview Capote maintained that he never had that conception of her. She enjoyed nightlife, and the nightclubs where she met men who were only too happy to share her company; they might give her fifty dollars as "powder room change," but sex was not necessarily involved. Sometimes she met a man she really liked and wanted to be with, and they had sex—but not as a money-for-sex transaction. Perhaps the most memorable line about her in the novel occurs when O. J. Berman calls

her a phony, and goes on to add, “But on the other hand you’re right. She isn’t a phony because she’s a *real* phony. She believes all this crap she believes.” What Capote, through Berman, seems to be saying is that Holly is an innocent who lives naively, from the heart. She is a dreamer, a girl-woman waif who lives in a corrupt world without ever being, herself, corrupted.

A surprising thing happens later in the novel when she tells the narrator (and the reader) who she is. Her philosophy of life and love includes a ringing endorsement of gay marriage! A person, she says,

“ought to be able to marry men or women or—listen, if you came to me and wanted to hitch up with Man’o War, I’d respect your feeling. I’m serious. Love should be allowed. I’m all for it. . . . Good things only happen to you if you’re good. Good? Honest is more what I mean. Not law-type honest—I’d rob a grave, I’d steal two bits off a dead man’s eyes if I thought it would contribute to the day’s enjoyment—but unto-thyself-type honest. Be anything but a coward, pretender and emotional crook, a whore. I’d rather have cancer than a dishonest heart.”

Holly journeys through a compromised world in search of authenticity. Her name—Holiday, or Holly—can be understood in different ways. It proposes that life can be a holiday, something to be enjoyed. The connotations of her name are normally seen in this way. But name Holly also has other connotations, as the holly of Christmas decorations; and it might be noted that Christmas appears in the novel in a teasing context. The Japanese photographer Mr. Yunioshi comes across the wood carving bearing Holly’s likeness in the African wilds of East Anglia on Christmas day of 1956. Christmas, however, is not the only religious allusion in the work; another is St. Christopher. The St. Christopher’s medal given to Holly commemorates the martyr affiliated in some church annals with Christ, whose birth three centuries earlier offered the hope of love and truth in a corrupt world.

Breakfast at Tiffany’s is raffish and humorous, but it has its complexities. By the end of the novel how is Holly to be regarded? Is she a saint or a fool in her endless pursuit of authentic love in a dishonest world? She becomes an enigma. She is not, however, an anomaly in Capote’s fiction. Seen characteristically on the fire escape of the building, strumming a guitar and singing a ballad about wandering through the pastures of the sky, she thus takes her place among Capote’s other guitar players, whose playing in one way or another is a meditation on desire.

The guitar is a key image in a short story of Capote's called "A Diamond Guitar," published eight years before *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. A sensitively written and evocative story with perhaps faint echoes of the work of Carson McCullers, it takes place at a prison farm, where a middle-aged man, a Mr. Schaeffer, is serving a life sentence. He has a solitary life until he is befriended by a new prisoner, an attractive young Mexican named Tico Feo. There are some homoerotic overtones to the friendship, without there being anything overtly sexual between them. Tico persuades Mr. Schaeffer to join him in a prison break and he agrees. Tico gets away, but Mr. Schaeffer injures his leg and can't go on; Tico abandons him to his fate. Later, in his austere prison farm existence, Mr. Schaeffer keeps Tico's guitar under his bed. At night his hand reaches down to the guitar "and his fingers drift across the strings: then, the world." In *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Holly Golightly isn't another Mr. Schaeffer, but she does yearn for a perfection that cannot be realized; and for this reason there is an edge of sadness in Capote's often lighthearted fable.

In 1961 *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was made into a Hollywood film that starred Audrey Hepburn as Holly, George Peppard as the narrator (now called Paul Vaujak), and Buddy Ebsen as Doc Golightly. It was directed by Blake Edwards and adapted for the screen by George Axelrod. In Axelrod's treatment, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was stripped of the artistry that went into it, becoming a conventional romantic comedy of heterosexual love in the 1950s, with the male and female leads getting together at the end. What made it successful at the box office was the appeal of Audrey Hepburn, who was nominated for an Academy Award. The nostalgic and yearning musical score by Henry Mancini, which won an Oscar, included the Mancini/Johnny Mercer hit "Moon River." Hepburn carries the picture, but her fragile grace does not really fit the hillbilly-turned-Manhattan pub crawler Capote imagined. She is, however, a hundred times more engaging than the wooden Peppard.

Yet if there are some people who remember the film, flaws and all, with outright affection, no one can look back at the Broadway musical adaptation of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* without shuddering; it was one of the worst fiascos in modern theater history. It was the sharp-eyed, boldly mustached, and legendary producer David Merrick who conceived the idea of bringing *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to Broadway. He invested hundreds of thousands of his own money in the project, and

recruited the cream of New York's theatrical talent for the venture. Abe Burrows, the force behind *Guys and Dolls* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and famous as an adapter and a peerless show doctor, was hired to write the adaptation and to direct. Oliver Smith, one of the most honored and prolific scenic designers in American history, would design the sets.

The cast would be led by Mary Tyler Moore and Richard Chamberlain, both having formidable followings from the popular television series in which they starred. By 1966 the show was in previews in Boston, where the highly touted show was beginning to fall apart. Burrows was physically and creatively exhausted from having taken on both the writing and directing and was unable to go on. Merrick brought in Edward Albee to do a new adaptation, and Joseph Anthony, a veteran of both straight dramas and musicals, to direct. Burrows had envisioned a stage *Holly* as a raffish figure who could give a Broadway audience of that time a jolt; but this seemed singularly inappropriate for an actress with such an extremely wholesome public image as Mary Tyler Moore. Albee's adaptation was more in line with the *Holly* of the novel, but it did not quite come together. Word spread quickly to New York that it was a disaster. Merrick closed the show before the previews had gone very far, and apologized publicly for the production. Capote himself had no part in it, but was clearly unhappy with the mess they had made of his novel.

The Innocents

Although Capote was absorbed at the time in writing *In Cold Blood*, he took off several weeks to write, with William Archibald, the film adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James's brilliant excursion into Gothicism. *The Innocents*, the theatrical title for James's story, had been produced originally on Broadway in 1950 as a stage play by Archibald, who in the same decade had also written an adaptation of James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. The play starred the gifted actress Beatrice Strait and won universal praise for its capturing of a difficult diabolic mood that was evoked by subjective rather than explicit deeds. As it happened, *The Turn of the Screw* was a tale Capote particularly admired. It is hard to say who deserves the greater credit for the film, Archibald or Capote, but there is no doubt that *The Innocents* (1961) is an artful and arresting work.

It was directed by Jack Clayton, who had worked on *Beat the Devil* and was instrumental in having Capote collaborate on this newer screenplay. Shot in an atmospheric black-and-white by cinematographer Freddie Francis, *The Innocents* starred Deborah Kerr and Michael Redgrave at their impeccable best. *Time* magazine, in a January 5, 1962, review, called attention to the “dangerous, intelligent darkness” of the picture, and to Kerr as an actress who “tunes herself like a violin string till she quivers exquisitely at the snapping point.” Also fortunately cast are the two children, Miles (Martin Stephens) and Flora (Pamela Franklin), who are left practically alone in an isolated English country estate called Bly. The only other occupants of the estate are the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, and the newly arrived governess Miss Giddens. Also present, however, are the ghostly previous governess and butler Peter Quint, who died mysteriously. It is intimated that they were involved in some sort of unspeakably evil relationship, and may now, Miss Giddens fears, be invading the souls of the children. Miles has recently been expelled from a private school for “corrupting” the other children, with no explanation as to what this corruption consisted of. Martin Stephens as Miles has remarkable film presence, and his character’s way of calling Miss Giddens “my dear” makes one wonder if he isn’t strangely and inappropriately mature. In a shocking close-up, he boldly and erotically kisses the governess on the lips.

Reviews of the movie were quite favorable, and in the course of time it has come to be regarded as a classic. In a lengthy piece in the summer 1962 *Film Quarterly*, Pauline Kael wrote that

the dialogue has, at times, the same beauty and ambiguity as the images. I assume that Truman Capote, who is one of the finest prose stylists—as distinguished from writers—this country has ever produced, is responsible for some of these phrases. And the boy who plays Miles . . . is superb, not only visually, but in his poised and delicate enunciation of lines that are so beautiful they communicate a sense of the terror latent in such beauty. He is a true creation of Henry James—this writer with the children who are too beautiful to live. This beauty is what makes *The Innocents* the best ghost movie I have ever seen. It is an interpretation that honors its sources.

It is the best film Capote wrote or was involved in writing. It also has particular interest in that he wrote it at the same time he was writing *In Cold Blood*, another Gothic tale of innocence vanquished by evil.

Chapter Seven

In Cold Blood

Capote's account of a multiple murder in Kansas, *In Cold Blood*, raised the author to a new level in modern American writing. The book became a mammoth best-seller, at the same time impressing the critical establishment. In addition, Capote claimed that he had created a new literary genre in the "nonfiction novel." Actually, exploration of the interconnections of fact and fiction go far back; it can be witnessed, for instance, in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). In more modern times, the journalism of Rebecca West, and the memoirs of Isak Dinesen in *Out of Africa* (1937; one of Capote's favorite books) have had a strong novelistic quality; and Ernest Hemingway in *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935) even announced that his book was an attempt "to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month's action can, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination." Hemingway wrote his "true" book as he might a work of fiction, altering the chronology of events to create such vivid "fictional" effects as heightened suspense and a stronger, more emphatic climax. Other authors who have written journalism and reportage with the aesthetic heightening of fiction include James Agee, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; a collaboration with photographer Walker Evans), and Joan Didion, in her books exploring the underside of the American dream in California, and more recently in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005). Capote's conception of *In Cold Blood* coincided with the emergence of the so-called new journalism being practiced by, among others, Norman Mailer.

As it happens, Capote and Mailer were exact contemporaries and published their first novels—*The Naked and the Dead* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms*—in 1948, in each case mostly to acclaim. During the 1950s and 1960s both wrote not only fiction but also reportage that had the immediacy and many of the qualities of fiction. They spent

much of their lives in New York, and in fact lived for a time in the same Brooklyn Heights neighborhood. They were personal and temperamental opposites, Mailer always vaunting his manliness and Capote being openly and unapologetically gay. But they respected each other and were on friendly terms. Mailer has written a delightful account of meeting Capote one day in Brooklyn Heights and of their going to a nearby Irish bar neither had frequented before for a drink. Once inside, Mailer was alarmed to find that the working-class customers seated on stools along a brass rail were tough, unhappy looking Irishmen who turned to stare at them as they came in. “Truman,” he remarks in George Plimpton’s collection *Truman Capote*, “was wearing a little gabardine cape. He strolled in looking like a beautiful little faggot prince. It suddenly came over me: My God, what have I done? I’ve walked into this drunken den of sour male virtue with Truman! I walked behind him as if I had very little to do with him. . . . It took me half an hour for the adrenaline to come down.” No fight broke out, but Mailer did have the shock of recognition of how much courage Capote had every day in just being his uncompromising self.

They were on friendly terms, but they were at times competitors. One night they appeared together on David Susskind’s television show, and at first Mailer did all the talking, apparently having decided to bury Capote with all the weighty theories he was expounding. But when Capote did speak he was delightful. As George Plimpton reports in *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career*, Capote remarked that Jack Kerouac’s work “isn’t writing, it’s only typing,” and practically wiped Mailer off the screen. Mailer was under the impression that he had trumped Truman until the next morning, when friends called to say, “Oh, man, did Truman murder you!” His own sister told Mailer that he did well but that “Truman was fascinating.”

The reportage of Mailer and Capote tended to be self-centered, but each author was self-centered in different ways. Mailer immersed himself in the turmoil of public happenings, as in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), his account of the 1967 anti-Vietnam War protest march on the Pentagon in which he makes himself a main character. In Capote’s reportage one always *feels* his presence even though at times he is a distanced observer, and he is likely to treat private, not public, experience. Mailer was almost hysterically prolific, while Capote’s output was measured to the point of being sparse. Both were in love

with language, and as prose stylists achieved their own striking effects. But they were opposites: Mailer was so much in love with words that he could not stop using them when at times it would be better if he had; Capote, on the other hand, was an admirer of Gustave Flaubert and felt that every word had to be right; he could craft sentences as if they were little works of art. Capote and Mailer each wrote a nonfiction novel, *In Cold Blood* (1966) and *The Executioner's Song* (1979) being considered their respective masterpieces. Each concerns a young man and his arrest, imprisonment, and execution. *The Executioner's Song* even seems a challenge to Capote. *The Executioner's Song* has powerful passages and narrative sweep, but is overwritten; it reaches a point at which it should have ended and then goes on for another hundred pages. *In Cold Blood* is more focused and creates a character in Perry Smith of such wounding that he cannot be forgotten. It is more questionable how deeply one feels about Mailer's Gary Gilmore.

The inspiration for *In Cold Blood* came to Capote when he was reading the November 16, 1959 issue of the *New York Times* and came across an article that caught his attention. It reported the macabre slaying of the Clutters, a family of four, by a person or persons unknown in the small, conservative community of Holcomb, Kansas. That this horror occurred in Finney County—where social life tended to be austere and attention was paid to the teachings of the Bible—intrigued Capote, who got in touch almost immediately with William Shawn at the *New Yorker* and proposed doing an essay-article on the impact of the fearful event on the townspeople of Holcomb. Shawn liked the idea and commissioned the article, but neither had as yet any inkling of how much larger an undertaking would be involved or of how many years would elapse during Capote's investigation of crime and punishment in America's heartland.

Before embarking by train for Kansas in mid-December of that year, Capote realized that getting to know the town and its people would be too much for one person, and brought along his longtime friend Harper Lee. She proved to be a fortunate choice: a trained observer, she provided him with an extra pair of eyes and ears. Most important, she entered into an immediate rapport with the local farmers and their wives, having lived for years in similar farming country in the South.

Upon Capote and Lee's arrival in Garden City, the capital of Finney County and not far from Holcomb, the townspeople were bewildered by Capote's flamboyant personal style, which included sporting a

scarf that, tossed rakishly over one shoulder, trailed practically to the ground. His peculiar sounding voice was, for want of a better word, described by townspeople as “high-pitched.” Snide comments were made about his fey manner; yet after a while—and largely through Lee’s ingratiating effect on the locals—people began to change their minds about Capote. Fascinated by his conversation, they began to invite him to their homes for dinner. The real breakthrough occurred when Lee befriended the Southern-born wife of Alvin Dewey, who had been put in charge of the Clutter murder case for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation. Not at first, but as their friendship took hold, Dewey allowed Capote to have almost unlimited access to the two young men arrested for the murders. Without this access Capote’s book could not have been written.

The fullest account of the Capote-Lee collaboration is found in Charles J. Shield’s biography *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*. But the essence of it is that they had uncanny success as an interviewing team because they had retentive memories (townspeople relate that Capote could recall exactly what they said in a conversation with them a month or more earlier). Neither Capote nor Lee took notes or used tape recorders when they were interviewing people, feeling that their use would inhibit the people they were taking to. Instead they listened carefully and later compared what they had each been told; in this way, according to Capote, they arrived at a reasonably accurate account of what had been said.

Capote maintains that he taught himself a memorization technique that enabled him to recall what an individual told him to the point of 95% accuracy. It is important to note that he did not reveal to Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, the young men charged with the Clutter killings, that he memorized every word of their confidences to him. Transcripts of his interviews with them and with hundreds of others were so extensive, Capote told an interviewer, that “they filled a room.”

Despite all the care and effort that went into the making of *In Cold Blood*, Capote’s claims that every word in the novel was true have been disputed. Inaccuracies and distortions of various kinds later come to light in an article in *Esquire* and were anthologized in Irving Malin’s *Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook* (1968). Some of the inaccuracies are of a minor nature, as when Capote puts the wrong people in the lead car returning Hickok and Smith from their capture in Las Vegas to Garden City. His depiction of Bobby Rupp,

Nancy Clutter's boyfriend and the last person to see her alive, is less an oversight, however, than a conscious distortion. "He makes me out," Rupp told Phillip K. Tompkins in an interview included in Malin's book, "to be some kind of great athletic star and really I was just an average small-town basketball player." Capote seems pretty clearly to be shading his description of Rupp so as to create an image of an ideal American teenage couple whose lives were shattered.

A more serious issue still concerns comments that Capote attributes to Josephine Meier, the wife of Garden City's undersheriff. In their imprisonment in the Garden City jail, Hickock and Smith were separated, Hickock occupying one of the facility's regular cells, while Smith was placed alone in a cell adjacent to Mrs. Meier's kitchen. She came to know him to some extent, and in a late-night conversation with her husband, according to Capote, remarks that Smith "wasn't the worst young man" she had met. Mrs. Meier, however, denies ever having said this. She also denies having made remarks about Smith that are attributed to her in a later passage. In this passage Smith is supposed to have broken down and sobbed. "I heard him crying," Capote quotes Mrs. Meier as saying. "Crying like a child. He'd never broke down before, shown any sign of it. He reached out his hand. He wanted me to hold his hand, and I do, I hold his hand, and all he said was, 'I'm embraced by shame.' I wanted to send for Father Goubeaux . . . but he just held my hand tighter."

Finally there is the issue of the last words spoken by Smith as he is about to be hanged. Capote has him speak out against capital punishment and referring specifically to the contribution he might have made to society had his life been spared. He then concludes by saying, "It would be meaningless to apologize. Even inappropriate. But I do. I do apologize." It would not seem possible, however, for Capote to have heard these last words, since although a witness at the hanging, he was so distressed by it emotionally that he stepped back out of the range of hearing. On the other hand, standing only a few feet away from Smith at this critical moment was the editor of the *Garden City Telegraph*, and he was absolutely certain that Smith had not expressed contrition, had not apologized. Both of the passages just cited tend to make Smith more sympathetic to the reader, but they are actually questionable and make Capote's claim that everything in the novel was true seem questionable, too.

Yet even with its disputed passages, *In Cold Blood* is an impressive work. It was published to acclaim first in serialized form in the *New Yorker* and then, in 1966, as a book. There were, however, dissenters. Diana Trilling has compared it unfavorably to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee's account of the life of poor Appalachian sharecroppers in the Depression. Agee's book, she asserts in a piece included in Malin's *Critical Handbook*, is the superior work because it brings Agee himself to a point of self-examination and gives his "documentary" a dimension deeper than mere surface. Capote's method, she contends, is exactly the opposite, relying on surfaces alone and "abrogating the artist's right to emphasize or even to distort or suppress for his own purposes." It seems to me that Trilling has two blind eyes: she assumes that a factual documentary unmediated by declared personal involvement cannot rise to the qualities of fiction, and she assumes that Capote's account is all on the surface when his writing actually has texture and subtlety.

One aspect of *In Cold Blood* that none of the critics missed was Capote's incorporation of film technique. In Malin's *Handbook*, Stanley Kauffmann remarks that "he uses intercutting of different story strands, intense close ups, flashbacks, traveling shots, background detail, all as if he were fleshing out a scenario." The primary intercutting occurs between the daily life of the Clutters, unaware of what is about to befall them, and Hickock and Smith as they travel ever closer to their rendezvous with the Clutters and what will prove their own undoing. It is a movement back and forth between the haves and the have-nots. The Clutters are good churchgoing people, but as passive victims they do not exercise the same hold on the reader as do the doomed convicts Hickock and Smith.

The eighty intercut segments of the book help to sustain a mood of suspense; but mood is also evoked by landscape. Holcomb is located on the edge of the Kansas Bible Belt. It has a large number of mostly Protestant churches in its vicinity and it strongly discourages the use of alcohol. Herb Clutter, the very model of a man who is a stickler for restraint and self-denial makes a practice of firing any man who drinks or even smokes. His wife Bonnie has been brought up in a church environment too, but her health has broken down and she has become a nervous invalid. She sleeps in a bedroom apart from her husband's and has had to spend periods of time in rest homes. If the Clutter couple suggest the idea of repression, the landscape itself does not provoke

any ideas of dancing in the street. It has no oases or rolling hills, but is flat as the eye can see, offering little refreshment for the eye.

“The land is flat,” Capote writes, “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.” The Holcomb version of Greek temples, exemplars of the highest ideals of a culture, are warehouses of grain, feed for their cattle, and an unexcited regimen of life that will be regular if austere. Explosive events are not usual in Holcomb, though they may happen. In 1957 in the nearby prairie state of Nebraska, two years before the occurrences in Holcomb, a young man named Charles Starkweather went on a murder spree. A youth with poor vision and misshapen legs, mocked as retarded and consigned to a job—evidently for life—of handling garbage, he shot his fourteen-year-old girlfriend’s parents, and he and the girlfriend started on a wild journey of random killings across the heartland. In 1959, terror erupted in Holcomb.

Hickock and Smith do not go on a rampage of murder, but like Starkweather they are characters who have stepped outside the law. What is striking about them is that they have no stability: much of their lives are ruled merely by chance. Early in the book Smith is stepping off a bus in Kansas City; it is an appropriately captured moment, since he is always in motion, belonging nowhere. He is hoping to be reunited with a man named Willie-Jay, an ex-cellmate from the Kansas State Penitentiary; the chaplain’s clerk, Willie-Jay was the only one in Smith’s life to have taken an interest in him and wanted to help him. Ironically, he just missed him, Willie-Jay having left the terminal on another bus only five hours earlier. Smith then decides to look up Dick Hickock, another cellmate, a decision that will lead inevitably to the undoing of himself and others. When Hickock and Smith were cellmates they had talked of a robbery that they could carry off in Kansas. Each told the other a story influencing their future actions, and as chance would have it each of the stories was untrue. Wanting to impress Hickock, to score points with him, Smith spoke of his having killed “a nigger” with a chain. Hickock passed on to Smith what would turn out to be an erroneous story about a safe in the home of a well-to-do farmer named Clutter that they could rifle. The crime they would commit could come out of happenstance, missed opportunities, crossed wires, and falsehood.

Throughout the novel things continue to happen by chance. On the morning of the day of the murder, Clutter takes out a \$40,000 life insurance policy with a double indemnity provision should he die of other than natural causes. The chances of his doing this at that time are mind boggling, but it is what he did. As Hickock and Smith travel toward Holcomb, they are about to procure black stockings worn by nuns with which to cover their faces during the robbery, but this goes awry, and because they want no witnesses to the crime they will now have to go through with the their talked-about murders after all. Hickock and Smith's arrest in Las Vegas when they have evidence on them of their presence at the murder scene is another instance of the ubiquity of blind chance in the novel. They had been spotted by the Las Vegas police, who could have arrested them immediately but decided to wait another ten minutes. In that time Smith appeared with a large box of his belongings, including a pair of boots whose imprint on the sole exactly matched the boot imprints found at the Clutter house.

In Cold Blood has the nature of a documentary, and F. W. Dupee (in Malin's *Critical Handbook*) has gone so far as to call it "the best documentary of an American crime ever written." It is full of subtleties that are not usual in documentaries, and it thrives on illusion and irony. Smith is influenced by Hickock because although he himself is dreamy, he sees Hickock as being completely practical and "totally masculine." Hickock's masculinity, however, is an illusion. When the testing time comes at the Clutter house, he cannot act, either by firing the gun or by wielding the knife. His manliness has been all talk, and Smith has to do the brutal killing for him. When they are captured in Las Vegas and grilled by the police separately, Hickock breaks down and sobs, "Perry did it. He killed them all." Hickock himself then went out into the corridor and fainted.

But Smith's mistaken conception of Hickock is not his only illusion. One of his prime illusions is that he will dive for sunken treasure, and scoop up handfuls of gold coins from long submerged Spanish galleons, even though his legs are so painfully maimed that he would not even be able to swim. Hickock, too, suffers from illusions. A major one, that the Clutter house contains a safe holding a large amount of money, is shattered when it turns out that there is no safe at all. Another is that he is "normal," despite his history of raping very young girls.

In Capote's novel, illusion and irony go hand in hand. Smith's favorite movie is *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which he has seen at

least eight times. He is struck particularly by Walter Huston's "old cuss" prospector, who reminds him of his father. Smith's fascination with the prospectors searching for gold in the mountains—indeed, his identification of himself with them—is ironic inasmuch as their quest ends ultimately in futility and death. His favorite movie is like a prophecy of what Smith's life is going to be.

The Clutters are also shown in multiple perspectives of irony. In his innocence of his impending gruesome fate, patriarch Herb Clutter looks over his apple orchard and reflects that with a little more rain "this country could be Paradise—Eden on earth." On the eve of his terrifying helplessness and murder, he is told by a woman that he strikes her as someone who has never known fear and can talk his way out of anything. Even Clutter's wife Bonnie is depicted in terms of irony. A Bible is found at her bedside, in which a bookmark placed between two pages is embossed with the words "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is." These ironies add to an impression in the book that life is enigmatic and at times cruel beyond understanding.

Much of the imagination of *In Cold Blood* is Gothic. Capote's career began with Gothic stories and an exceedingly Gothic first novel. Although sometimes held in abeyance, Gothicism never entirely disappeared from his writing, and with *In Cold Blood* this element reappears powerfully, in a new form in a work remarkable for the breadth of its exacting realism. Gothicism has as one of its foremost components an element of fantasy, but *In Cold Blood* that fantasy has been socialized by being "true." The frisson behind the novel's familiarity with the everyday world can be summed up in Smith's confession of his murder of 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 to the moment I cut his throat."

One never forgets that Smith is the product of what one might call a Gothic family; his parents were the "Tex and Flo" of a rodeo act that eventually broke up, and with it their marriage. Smith's Cherokee mother turned to heavy drinking, finally choking to death on her own vomit, while his father was a luckless and at times abusive prospector in Alaska. Of the four children, all but one had doom-ridden lives. One of the girls, Fern, turned into an alcoholic like her mother and jumped from the window of a San Francisco hotel room. On the way down she struck a theater marquee, bounced off it and rolled under the wheels

of a taxi. In the room from which she jumped the police found her shoes, a purse containing no money, and an empty whiskey bottle.

The fate of her brother Jimmy is even more grotesque. A sensitive young seaman, he married a young girl with a promiscuous past, only to become obsessed by the gnawing suspicion that she was betraying him at every turn with other men. His unrelenting accusations drove her to put a shotgun to her face and pull the trigger. He found her on the floor, put her on the bed and lay next to her for hours, then reloaded the shotgun and killed himself. Such were Smith's siblings.

Gothicism in the novel is also hinted at in the initial account of the Clutter murders by the fact that the murderer had placed a pillow under his victims' heads before shooting them in the face with a shotgun. Capote is a master at noting details that leap out at the reader. Hickock's left eye is called "serpentine" and seems to "warn of bitter sediment at the bottom of his nature." At the end, Alvin Dewey remembers his first meeting with Smith, who was "seated in the metal chair, his small booted feet not quite brushing the floor."

It is always Smith rather than Hickock who is the focal character in the book. In his July 3, 1966, *New York Review of Books* review of the book, Mailer called Smith "one of the great characters in American literature," and whether true or not it does suggest how strongly he imposes himself on the novel. *In Cold Blood* is in part about the two Americas, one confirmed in money and position, the other disaffected and dispossessed; in the course of the work they come into collision. Smith is like his father who can find no place for himself in life, a man who continually changes his address as he pursues a way to wealth in the old gold rush country of Alaska, and finds only futility. F. W. Dupee, in a perceptive observation in his *Critical Handbook* piece, notes that the father of Nancy Clutter and the father of Perry Smith "are each in his own place and each in his own way, embodiments of free enterprise and the pioneering spirit." The difference between them, however, is glaring: Clutter is, in a sense, the American dream achieved while "Tex" Smith remains sunk in poverty and bewildered failure. Smith's perception of Clutter as a father figure on the night of the crime appears to embrace both the love and hate he had for his own father.

As an outsider who comes into contact with a well-to-do family, only to commit murder and end on death row, Smith has something in common with Clyde Griffiths in Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*, which, like *In Cold Blood*, was based on an actual

murder case. Dreiser went to great lengths to be faithful in his novel to the 1906 crime involving a young man named Chester Gillette. He collected all the newspaper accounts of the case, consulted the court proceedings of Gillette's trial, traveled to the upstate New York community of Cortland where the original events took place and to the Adirondack mountain lake where the murder was committed, and even went to see the electric chair used for Gillette's execution. However different they are otherwise, *An American Tragedy* and *In Cold Blood* are novels taken from life that have a documentary quality and refer to the American dream.

Although Smith comes from real life, he has much in common with the "freak" characters of Capote's early fiction. He is peculiar in his physical appearance: his chest and upper body are powerfully developed but his legs are short and stumpy. Only slightly over five feet tall, he is a "chunky, misshapen child-man" with dwarfish legs. His "tiny feet," Capote remarks, "would have neatly fitted into a delicate lady's dancing slippers; when he stood up, he was no taller than a twelve-year-old child." As a child he was a chronic bed-wetter, and he is still a bed-wetter as an adult. Hickock overhears him crying in his sleep.

His childhood is a history of misfortune. Yanked out of school by his alcoholic, itinerant father and kept from attending school beyond third grade, Smith spent part of his early years in a Catholic orphanage, where as a bed-wetter he was punished sadistically by a nun; his later life as a Salvation Army ward was equally miserable. At other times he lived in Alaska with his father, who took out his frustrations on him and finally locked him out in the snow to fend for himself. When Perry Smith turned sixteen he joined the Merchant Marine but had a hard time of it, just as he did later when he was in the army in Korea. Discharged from the army, he became a vagrant and a thief.

He spent time in prison in Missouri and Massachusetts before arriving in New York City's Times Square, where he worked at a cheap amusement arcade. After a while, however, he was spotted by the FBI as a prison breaker and remanded to the Kansas State Penitentiary. Here he shared a cell with Hickock and a new chapter of his disturbed career began. Different as they were, each had been injured in road accidents, suffering multiple broken bones and brain concussions, which required lengthy periods of rehabilitation; this left Smith an aspirin addict due to the excruciating pain he continued to feel in his legs.

What makes Smith a compelling character in part is that he contains so many contradictions. A victimizer of others, he is himself a victim. A young man capable of murder, he is also strangely gentle. He has aesthetic interests, is fond of drawing and plays the guitar and harmonica. An autodidact, he is always attempting to climb out of the ignorance and deprivation of his background, sometimes using long words that he has just learned instead of simpler ones that would serve him better. In sexual matters he tends to be a puritan, and rebukes Hickock for his failure to restrain his sexual impulses. At the same time Capote scatters insinuations that Smith's sexuality, if it were to be expressed, would be homosexual. Hickock calls him "honey," and Smith sketches Hickock in the nude.

As a teenager aboard a Merchant Marine ship, Smith was ganged up on by tough "queens," and his sergeant in the army put pressure on him to "roll over." Smith disapproves of "queer stuff" but he calls it to mind. He has "lotion soaked and scented hair" and "calloused but girlish hands." His speaking voice is like a whisper. When the police interview his Las Vegas landlady about Smith, she says, "You oughta hear him talk. Big, long words coming at you in this kinda lispy, whispery voice. Quite a personality. What you got against a nice, little punk like that?" In a way Smith is stranger than Cousin Randolph in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*; at least Randolph knew who he was.

The wonder of *In Cold Blood* is that although Capote limits himself to what was actually said and done, he envisions this as Capotean fiction. All of the themes of the earlier writing are in the novel. Capote's dreamer characters are in it—characters such as Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Mr. Schaeffer in "A Diamond Guitar" who strum guitars, invoking an enchantment that is sought after but out of reach. Smith may be true to life, but he also comes out of Capote's workshop of fictional conceptions, for he is the dreamer of dreamers, the great one.

His dreams include finding gold in Alaska or sunken treasure aboard a Spanish galleon. He dreams, too, of being a famous cabaret entertainer with his name changed to Perry O'Parsons, singing and playing his guitar and other instruments before an applauding audience. His reverie can also become nightmarish: in a recurring dream he is being devoured by a huge snake just as a great yellow bird rescues him and flies with him to heaven. He is immersed in dreams, but apart

from Hickock he has no friends, and no romantic partners, either male or female. He is an alienated man who hates his life.

In the later sections of the book, especially, Capote sees Smith as a victim. His trial is unfair to the point of being grotesque. People are accepted as jurors who clearly favor the death penalty. The grim and stony-faced Judge Tate dismisses objections that in any other court would have been deemed proper. The young men were not read their rights and did not have access to an attorney when they were interrogated by the Las Vegas police. Only a day before the trial began, the Clutter estate auction sale had been held, accompanied by a mammoth amount of statewide publicity certain to inflame opinion against Hickock and Smith, yet Judge Tate did not find this prejudicial. Two distinguished forensic psychiatrists submitted detailed reports that Hickock and Smith were mentally disturbed, but no mitigating circumstances were allowed by Judge Tate, who reminded the jury that the M'Naghten Rule was in effect in the state of Kansas. The rule required the death penalty if in perpetrating a capital crime the perpetrator knew the difference between right and wrong; in this very simplistic ruling, no other factors were relevant. Because of this narrow and "cold-blooded" (and now archaic) ruling, Hickock and Smith went to the gallows.

Capote was shattered by the hangings, partly because he had formed a close tie with Smith. The moment he saw Smith, according to Harper Lee, "he saw himself." They were the same height, and there were similarities in their backgrounds: both had mothers who were alcoholics and fathers who had abandoned them. Smith's case was even worse than Capote's, and he did not have Capote's gift for survival. But the very painful situation of childhood was shared; it was one that haunted Capote all of his life, and he relived it again in Smith; it would appear to be, more than anything, the reason for Capote's powerful portrayal of Smith, with its objectivity and its compassion. *In Cold Blood* is less "private" than any of the works that precede it, and Smith's story does have something to say about American society and the failure of love. Written with Capote's usual perception, it is also notable for the somber tone that moved Rebecca West, appropriately, to hail it in a 1966 *Harper's* magazine piece as "a grave and reverend book."

Chapter Eight

Late Capote: *Music for Chameleons*, *Answered Prayers*, and Other Writings

After In Cold Blood

In the mid-1960s much was happening in Capote's life. He had been a celebrity, but only with the book publication of *In Cold Blood* in 1966 did he also become rich. He moved from the basement portion of Oliver Smith's brownstone in Brooklyn Heights to an expensive, high-rise apartment in the United Nations Plaza. For months he was kept busy giving interviews and appearing on talk shows. *In Cold Blood* was made into a movie in 1967, only a year after the publication of the novel. Partly at Capote's urging, Richard Brooks was selected to write the screenplay and to direct; with Brooks directing, he felt, the harsh realism of the story would not be compromised. The film that resulted is unusually dark and has the lonely nighttime look of film noir, with characters photographed at times in dark silhouette.

The picture was shot on location, even to the point of using the actual scene of the murders and the highway route Dick Hickock and Perry Smith followed after their departure from the Clutter house in Kansas to their destination in Las Vegas. Even the cells in which the young men were interrogated are authentic. Capote was not involved in the writing of the script, although he did visit the set, where he came face-to-face with Robert Blake, the young and relatively unknown actor who could have been Perry's double.

Capote describes his initial meeting with Blake in his essay "Ghosts in Sunlight: The Filming of *In Cold Blood*," included in *The Dogs Bark*:

I had seen photographs of Robert Blake (Perry) and Scott Wilson (Dick) before they were selected for the roles. . . . despite their clear physical resemblance to the original pair, their photographs had not prepared me for the mesmerizing reality. Particularly Robert Blake.

The first time I saw him I thought a ghost had sauntered in out of the sunshine, slippery hair and sleepy-eyed. I couldn't accept the idea that this was someone pretending to be Perry, he was Perry. . . . Here were the familiar eyes placed in a familiar face, examining me with the detachment of a stranger. It was as though Perry had been resurrected but was suffering from amnesia and remembered me not at all.

In Cold Blood is a cinematic novel to an unusual degree. And like a mirror reflecting its source, Brooks transferred Capote's cinematic technique to cinema itself. The novel stays remarkably close to the novel throughout with the single exception that Brooks has introduced a reporter character (Paul Stewart, a veteran film noir actor) who follows the murder case from beginning to end and is clearly meant to suggest Capote. He seems to speak for Capote, especially in the scenes leading up to and immediately after the executions when he opposes the death penalty. This sequence makes the character seem a mere contrivance. *In Cold Blood*, the movie, had generally favorable reviews; it had every advantage, including an intelligent script and perfect casting, yet in Brooks's insistently low-key, depressed literalness it lacks the Capote touch that might have brought it to life.

That same year Capote ventured into writing for television. Described by Jack Gould in the *New York Times* as the "Professor Higgins of the jet set," he liked to advise and mold young women he was close to. In the 1960s he encouraged his friend Lee Radziwill to take up acting. With Thomas W. Phipps, he made an adaptation for television of Vera Casary's play *Laura*, which he felt would be ideal for Radziwill. Her beauty and international celebrity (she was, after all the sister of Jacqueline Kennedy and the wife of Prince Radziwill of Poland) would make up for her lack of any extensive formal training. Her appearance, he surmised, would be an event and attract an audience. *Laura* was broadcast in January of 1968 and featured, in addition to Radziwill, Arlene Francis, Farley Granger, George Sanders, and Robert Stack.

Reviews of the two-hour made-for-television movie were crushing, with Radziwill's performance singled out as a conspicuous disaster. She wore clothes beautifully, it was said in *Newsday*, but she could

not “simulate any emotion.” “Miss Bouvier,” *Variety* commented, “is neither good nor bad, she is just not an actress.” It was well-known and duly noted in the reviews that she was appearing as Capote’s protégé. “If Mr. Capote,” the *New York Times* declared, “will extend the courtesy of helpful professionalism, she might advance in small parts and rather enjoy them. But it was an essentially cruel and selfish move to project her participation into the limelight of *Laura*, particularly since the early film, with Clifton Webb and Gene Tierney is available on late night movies for inevitable comparison.” Radziwill’s debut in *Laura* finished her acting career and cooled her friendship with Capote.

In the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s Capote was also involved in other media projects which, with an exception or two, are not remembered today. As a carryover from *In Cold Blood*, he made a television documentary called *Death Row, U.S.A.*, which was completed in 1968. With Leland Hayward as producer, it was to be broadcast on ABC. But the network executives changed their minds, deciding that the subject matter was too grim for a television audience. Capote spent a year on the project with nothing to show for his time and effort. Never seen by the public, the documentary presumably gathers dust in some ABC vault, waiting to be seen.

Unlike *Death Row, U.S.A.*, *The Glass House*, a ninety-minute made-for-television movie did reach its audience, being shown on CBS in February 1972. Capote didn’t write it, but it was his idea and he contributed suggestions. Its credited writer was Tracy Keenan Wynn and it starred Alan Alda, Dean Jagger, Vic Morrow, Kristoffer Tabori, and Billy Dee Williams. It dramatized the dehumanizing conditions of life and death in a penitentiary.

Not all of these projects, however, were concerned with crime and punishment. During a trip to California in 1971, Capote was in conversation with Paramount Studios about his doing a screen adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. With its New York setting, lyricism, and brilliant craftsmanship, it seemed an ideal assignment for him. A screen version of *Gatsby* had been made earlier, in 1949, that starred Alan Ladd as Gatsby, Betty Field as Daisy Buchanan, and Shelly Winters as Myrtle Wilson, but it was two-dimensional and had quickly become dated; it was time for a new *Gatsby*. Jack Clayton, who had directed *The Innocents*, was to direct this modern *Gatsby*, and he proposed Capote as its screenwriter. After the meeting in California, Capote signed with the studio.

The screenplay proved more difficult, however, than Capote had expected: much of the novel consists of atmosphere rather than action, and abstraction rather than a particularized realism. When Capote submitted his screenplay to Paramount early in 1972 the studio rejected it and refused to pay the balance of his fee. Capote sued and was awarded the amount that had been agreed upon. Capote's screenplay (now part of the Truman Capote Collection at the New York Public Library) is polished and strongly visualized; but there is little of Capote himself in it. Fitzgerald's novel has been reproduced but not interpreted. A Paramount executive is supposed to have told Capote, "This is just like the book," to which Capote replied, "I was under the impression we were adapting the book." But the executive, after all, was right: Capote's adaptation had no cinematically transforming vision.

For one of his media adventures of this time he did no writing at all. In 1975 he was a featured actor in the movie *Murder by Death*, a comedy written by Neil Simon. The conceit is that six of the world's most renowned detectives—Charlie Chan, Nick and Nora Charles, Agatha Christie, Hercule Poirot, and Sam Spade—are invited to the country estate of a wealthy eccentric criminologist. He lives in a mansion that looks something like a castle and is enshrouded in fog. His guests all take their pratfalls as they match wits with him in unraveling a seemingly impenetrable mystery. The movie had an awesome cast that included James Coco, Peter Falk, Alec Guinness, Elsa Lanchester, David Niven, Peter Sellers, Maggie Smith, Nancy Walker, and Estelle Winwood. It was a movie that seemingly could not fail, yet it did.

Capote wasn't Simon's first choice for the part of the eccentric criminologist. It was Ray Stark, the producer, who particularly wanted Capote for the part and got his way. Capote himself was an eccentric known to millions of people from his appearances on TV—someone who, after the enormous success of *In Cold Blood*, was apt to be associated in the public mind with mystery and murder and would draw audiences. The trouble was that *Murder by Death* wasn't much of a movie, and Capote had no fizz as an actor. How could he compete with such great actors as Alec Guinness and Peter Sellers? Compared to others in the cast he seemed a bit uncomfortable. "For Truman," Simon remarks in George Plimpton's collection *Truman Capote*, "it was a lark. He didn't ask for rewrites or anything. But he was very ill at ease with the dialogue. He was a great raconteur; we all know how funny he can be on his own, but he got stuck when he had lines to say."

Yet this same period brought Capote a windfall of media success. In the mid-1960s the independent filmmakers Frank and Eleanor Perry, who had made a strong impression with their movie *David and Lisa* (1962), approached Capote with their idea of adapting several of his stories for television. He had turned down proposals like this before; but when he met the Perrys he felt that their adaptations would have intimacy and resonance, and he agreed to collaborate with them. The stories they decided on were “A Christmas Memory,” “Miriam,” and “Among the Paths to Eden.” “A Christmas Memory” was the crown jewel of the anthology, but all of the teleplays were works of quality. Frank Perry directed them, and Capote and Eleanor Perry did the adaptations.

The teleplay *A Christmas Memory* had the particular advantage of having the superb Geraldine Page—who had given memorable performances in the Tennessee Williams plays *Summer and Smoke* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* before taking on the role of Sook here. (She had also starred in a teleplay of another of Capote’s childhood stories, “The Thanksgiving Visitor,” which had earned her an Emmy). *A Christmas Memory* was televised at Christmastime 1966 on ABC, to enormous success. It received the Peabody Award as the best television program of the year, as well as numerous international awards. It won an Emmy for Geraldine Page and another for Capote and Eleanor Perry for their adaptation. *Miriam* and *Among the Paths to Eden*, adapted by Capote and Eleanor Perry, also featured brilliant actresses—Mildred Natwick in *Miriam* and Maureen Stapleton in *Among the Paths to Eden*, a performance that won her an Emmy.

In combined theatrical release, *Trilogy* was selected for screening at the Cannes Film Festival in 1968 before opening in America. In 1969 it was also published in book form in a text that not only included the texts but also photographs and commentary by Capote and the Perrys. In his commentary, Capote notes that he wrote the stories at different times and under different circumstances: “‘Miriam’ was written when I was seventeen and was doing my first published stories; ‘A Christmas Memory’ appeared in 1956—I wrote the whole story during one January night in Hong Kong; ‘Among the Paths to Eden’ was the last short story I wrote before climbing into the ring for my five-year battle with *In Cold Blood*. . . . despite the dissimilarities of setting—Manhattan, a Queens cemetery, a farm in Alabama—they have a subject in common: loneliness, lovelessness, love, lack of love.”

Music for Chameleons

During his late period Capote published two new collections of fiction and reportage. *The Dogs Bark: Public People and Private Places* (1973) was predominately retrospective, reprising classic pieces published earlier in *Local Color* and *Observations*, as well as *The Muses Are Heard* in its entirety. New material, however, appeared in *Music for Chameleons* (1980). Of these pieces in the collection, the longest by far (nearly a hundred pages) is “Handcarved Coffins,” which is subtitled “A Nonfiction Account of an American Crime.”

Some critics found it below the level of Capote’s earlier writing; essentially a thriller, it nonetheless has literary merit. Set in a lonely and dispirited Texas town, a major character is a psychopath. Capote himself (present in the work but identified simply as “TC”) is a kind of character-observer; he is a friend of Jake Pepper, an agent for the State Bureau of Investigation.

It seems that certain townspeople have been receiving small hand-carved coffins shortly before their sudden and horrible deaths. Robert Hawley Quinn, the big man of the area, comes under suspicion but nothing can be proved against him. Quinn is felt as a powerful figure, both mentally (he beats everyone in games of chess) and physically. Capote’s descriptions of him are intimidating, combining as they do both intimations of barbaric strength and of civilized cunning. He is said to have “simianlike arms” that dangle to his knees, together with fingers that are “long, capable, oddly aristocratic.” Capote writes of Quinn, “The grey eyes . . . betrayed him: his eyes were alert, suspicious, intelligent, merry with malice, complacently superior. He had a hospitable, fraudulently genial laugh and voice. But he was not a fraud. He was an idealist, an achiever; he set himself tasks, and his tasks were his cross, his religion, his identity; no, not a fraud—a fanatic.”

Quinn is eerie in that no matter what suspicions point to him as the murderer, he is always elusive; his evil cannot be contained. He has different shapes and identities—among them a traveling evangelist preacher who, as the Reverend Snow, baptized Capote in his childhood. (Note the connotation of a lack of human feeling in the name Snow.) The to-the-edge-of-death baptism at the hands of the Reverend Snow had been terrifying; he had been held under water to the point of all but drowning. At a certain point in the narrative Capote makes the frightening recognition that these two figures with monosyllabic names are one and the same person. Quinn has the ability to enter into

people's most disturbing dreams. "[O]ccasionally, while I slept," Capote writes, "he knocked at the door and entered my dreams, sometimes as himself, his grey eyes glittering behind the wire-framed spectacles, but now and then he appeared guised as the white-robed Reverend Snow." At such times he seems reminiscent of the fright figure who haunts Kay in "A Tree of Night"—the "wizard man."

As he has been elsewhere, Capote is a splendid observer and image maker in "Handcarved Coffins." He is particularly adept at capturing characters through his descriptions of their eyes. Quinn's wife Juanita has "bored onyx eyes." But the most memorable of these ocular images appears in a passage about Clem Anderson who, while driving in an open car struck a sharp and nearly invisible wire that had been stretched across the highway so that his head was sliced off neatly. His decapitated head then rolled down the road, "but didn't look dead, merely serene, and except for the jagged gash along the forehead, his face seemed as calm, as unmarked by violence as his innocent, pale Norwegian eyes." The most Gothic of the ocular images, however, appears in an earlier scene when a lawyer and his wife step into their car and are instantly attacked with unbelievable fury by rattlesnakes that have been injected with amphetamine. The couple are found with their swollen heads resembling "Halloween pumpkins painted green."

The most pitiful of the murders comes at the end, and is not witnessed but imagined. Adelaide ("Addie") Mason, on the eve of her marriage to Jake, goes for a swim in the river that has been a bone of contention between Quinn and his victims, who had diverted some of the water passing through Quinn's land and their own. There is no proof that Quinn murdered Addie in the water, but there is the strongest suspicion of it. The reader is left to imagine her helpless terror, not unlike the terror felt by Capote as he was held under water by the Reverend Snow. The theme and imagery of water run all through the story, culminating in the setting of the fought-over river in which the final murder is committed and the psychopathic Quinn's "holy mission" is completed. "Handcarved Coffins" may merely be a thriller with some implausible incidents, but in its craftsmanship more generally it does not stand outside the bounds of literature.

Among other stories, profiles, and sketches in *Music for Chameleons* is a Southern story, "Hospitality," that might have been written by Eudora Welty; and a New Orleans story, "Dazzle," that could only have been written by Capote. The protagonist in "Dazzle"

is an eight-year-old boy who harbors a fearful secret until the end. Capote tantalizes the reader about what this secret can be, and there is the theft of some jewelry, and a witchlike woman Mrs. Ferguson who is believed by some to have magic powers. To her the boy eventually reveals his great secret: “I want,” he tells her, “to be a girl.” Mrs. Ferguson’s reaction, the narrator remarks, “began as a peculiar noise, a strangled gurgling far back in her throat that bubbled into laughter. Her tiny lips stretched and widened; drunken laughter spilled out of her mouth like vomit, and it seemed to be spurting all over me—laughter that sounded like vomit smells.

“A Beautiful Child” is a profile of Marilyn Monroe, a personal friend of Capote’s. There is quite a bit of humor in it in the way that Monroe speaks, a combination of salty language and innocence of heart, and it is this that makes her “a beautiful child.” At another extreme is “Then It All Came Down,” in which Capote interviews Robert Beausoleil, a central figure in the Charles Manson murders. The chilling thing about Beausoleil is his total absence of any moral sense even in his more mature years.

“Derring-do” is a high-spirited, extremely humorous piece of reportage about a bizarre experience of Capote’s in California. It is an account of an all-points-bulletin search for Capote by the San Diego Sheriff’s Office after he did not appear in court to give the contents of a confidential interview he had done with a prisoner on death row. The manic comedy of the piece heats up when the actress-singer Pearl Bailey and the performers in her troupe smuggle the fugitive Capote aboard a plane bound for New York that is under the tightest possible surveillance in anticipation of Capote’s departure. With her exuberance and sass, Bailey gives a great performance, and Capote is uproariously amusing, particularly in the restroom scenario in which costumes are exchanged and a janitor suspects that indecency is afoot.

Another story in *Music for Chameleons*, “Mojave,” was originally published in *Esquire* magazine in June 1975 and probably intended as a chapter in Capote’s work-in-progress *Answered Prayers*. It isn’t clear who decided not to include “Mojave” in *Answered Prayers*, but its focus is different from the other chapters—“Unspoiled Monsters,” “Kate McCloud,” and “La Côte Basque”—which also appeared in magazine form that year. Moreover, there is no reference whatsoever to P. B. Jones, Capote’s alter ego who provides the narrative voice in *Answered Prayers*.

The spiritual weather of “Mojave” is suggested in its wasteland title and the sense the reader has of the vacancy of its characters, essentially two married couples who belong to markedly different backgrounds and do not enter into direct contact. George Schmidt, a masseur, is old and blind, while George Whitelaw is a young man not long out of Yale University and hitchhiking across the country. When Schmidt and Whitelaw meet in the desert, Schmidt tells the younger man of his marital woes. His wife, Ivory Hunter, had been a stripper at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1932 and is now a faithless wife. In the trailer park where they live, she betrays him flagrantly, carrying on an affair with a Hispanic man. She draws all of Schmidt’s money from the bank, and drives him out into the desert with her paramour concealed in the back seat; when Schmidt leaves the vehicle for a moment, they drive off, leaving him there—presumably to die.

It is interesting to note that the young Hispanic lover is named Freddy Feo, and he appears to be Tico Feo from Capote’s earlier story “A Diamond Guitar.” In the “Mojave” story he has, if anything, grown worse. Like Tico, Freddy has spent time in prison and plays a guitar that can draw people to him seductively. Picked up by the manager of the trailer park in a “fag bar,” he beguiles both women and men. But the beauty of his playing is merely an imposture, like the “diamonds” on his guitar that are really paste. He is interested only in what he can get from people. But he is a side issue; it is the women who are the most treacherous, and use their sexuality to maim the men who love them. Schmidt compares women to snakes. “The last thing that dies,” he tells Whitelaw, “is their tail.”

“Mojave” is a two-tiered story, the second part concerned with the upper-class Sarah Whitelaw, George’s wife. If Ivory is garish, Sarah is sophisticated and subtle. After two painful pregnancies, she no longer sleeps with her husband but has a secret affair with her former psychiatrist, Dr. Bentsen, described as being repulsive, physically and in all other respects. The detail that he wears thick socks while making love implies the numbness of his contact with his partner. She, in turn, derives no pleasure in having sex with him, but how demeaning to her husband that she should prefer this awful man to him! Sarah is the exact opposite of Ivory, and she represents the withdrawal of passion, a tactic that will wear her husband down and shrivel him in the end. Whitelaw is said to suffer from “a secret fatigue, a lack of any real optimism. His wife was surely aware of it, and why not? She was its

principal cause.” There are kinds of violence, emotional violence, in “Mojave,” but most of all there is the loneliness felt by the two men, who are framed against the vast solitude of the desert.

Answered Prayers

“Unspoiled Monsters” is by far the largest segment of *Answered Prayers*, and is the first to appear in the book. It introduces the reader to P. B. Jones, Capote’s unflattering portrait of himself as a sleazy opportunist with aspirations of becoming a recognized writer. But *Answered Prayers* is not so much about him as about the world of the rich and famous and its discontents. In a way it is about the American dream and the dry rot beneath its surface. Jones is a young drifter who takes a Greyhound bus to New York, where he begins to cultivate influential people like Turner Boatwright, the fiction editor of an exclusive women’s magazine. Through Boatwright he meets the distinguished American fiction writer Alice Lee Langman, apparently inspired by Katherine Anne Porter. Jones attaches himself to her, ruthlessly using her to advance his career.

When Langman dies, Jones (or Jonesey, as he is sometimes called) takes up with Denham “Denny” Fouks, a real person and an early acquaintance of Capote’s when he was living in Paris. Fouks, a Southerner, was famous in certain quarters as the most beautiful young man in the world, and was kept by a series of European millionaires. Fouks’s story soon leads to the much publicized gigolos of the time, like Porfirio Rubirosa, and playboys like Prince Aly Khan. Jones speaks of the European scene in dour terms. “When I think of Paris,” he remarks, “it seems to me as romantic as a flooded *pissoir*, as tempting as a strangled nude floating in the Seine.”

Fouks becomes a drug-addicted wreck at a very early age. His “answered prayers” lead eventually to nightmares of emptiness and abandonment, evoked in the Father Flanagan passages:

Once I spent a year meditating in a California monastery. . . . Looking for this . . . Meaningful Thing. . . . And all that ever came of that putrid torture was . . . Father Flanagan’s Nigger Queen Kosher Café. There it is: right where they throw you off at the end of the line. Just beyond the garbage dump. Watch your step: don’t step on the severed head. Now knock. Knock, knock. Father Flanagan’s voice: “Who sent ya?” Christ, for Christs sake, ya dumb mick. Inside . . . it’s . . . very . . . relaxing. Because there’s not a winner in the crowd. All derelicts. . . . The Nigger

Queen Kosher Café . . . restful as the grave, rock bottom. That's why I drug: mere dry meditation isn't enough to get me there . . . hidden and happy with Father Flanagan and his Outcast of Thousands. . . .

Denny, at age twenty, is bound for a rehab clinic at Vevey, but there seems no hope for him.

Casualties and glamour are linked throughout the book, which draws on Capote's own life. Speaking of his opportunistic nature, Jones (Capote's stand-in) visits people, and cultivates connections, in Europe. These passages read as if they belong to a memoir, and they do in fact reuse material from Capote's earlier essays and travel sketches. Several pages are devoted, for instance, to Jones's acquaintance with Natalie Barney, "the premiere American expatriate" and salon hostess to the Parisian art world that included Jean Cocteau, André Gide, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Proust, and Gertrude Stein. The section on Colette similarly draws on Capote's own meeting with her, and the parts about Albert Camus are taken from life. These European passages seem too much like advertisements for himself, but Capote's observation of people do seem acute: Alice B. Toklas "smoothing her fragile mustache"; Camus's "troubled, perpetually listening expression"; Jean-Paul Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir propped in a corner "like an abandoned pair of ventriloquists' dolls."

A curious thing about "Unspoiled Monsters" is that it assimilates different styles—moving, for instance, from the elegant and cultured to the low-life and bawdy. It also has more humor in it than one would expect in a composition so given over to pessimism and gloom. A character named Victoria Self is encountered fairly early on, and she is like the divided consciousness of the work itself. A graduate of a prestigious women's college and a stickler for good manners, she operates a prostitution ring that services both men and women. No questions are asked as long as outward appearances are kept up.

After arriving in New York with hardly any money, Jones becomes one of Victoria's employees. Reduced to living at a YMCA in the Times Square area, he is contacted by Miss Self to walk the dog of a famous American playwright named "Mr. Wallace" who is staying at the Plaza Hotel. The dog hasn't been housebroken and the playwright, a thinly disguised version of Tennessee Williams, lives among the filth the dog has created. He is another in the procession of characters who aspire to or even create beauty but whose personal lives are not at all

beautiful. Victoria is such a person, and her name, Self, seems to indicate that what is true of her is also true of Capote.

In this same section, Jones holds a conversation with a friend about Proust and the concept of the unknowable nature of truth. He wants to tell him that illusion, “the by-product of revealing artifice, can reach the summits nearer to the unobtainable peak of Perfect Truth. For example, female impersonators. The impersonator is in fact a man (truth), until he re-creates himself as a woman (illusion)—and of the two, the illusion is the truer.” This conversation may seem like a digression, but it is relevant to the unfolding narrative and particularly to Capote’s treatment of Kate McCloud, a chief character in “Unspoiled Monsters.”

Jones first hears of Kate through a friend, Aces Nelson, whose prep school roommate was a youth named Harry McCloud. His parents owned much of the state of Virginia, and among other things maintained a stable of hunting horses. He seemed to have everything—wealth, good looks, success in athletics. Yet there was something a little odd about him, and when Aces pressed him to reveal why he had never spoken of a girlfriend, he finally confided that he was infatuated with a girl but could not marry her because she was only twelve years old.

Kate is a character who is larger than life. The tomboy daughter of the McCloud’s Irish groom, she beguiled the McClouds who, in a sense, adopted her as a member of their family. She was tutored and nurtured in all the graces, which set off her exceptional beauty. When she was scarcely eighteen she and Harry were married. “She was perfect,” Aces tells Jones. “Harry worshipped her; so did his parents. But they had overlooked one small factor—she was shrewd, she could outthink any of them, and she was planning far beyond the McClouds.” He became insanely jealous of Kate, and began creating shocking scenes in his mind, accusing her of having affairs with other men, including even his father and younger brother; he demanded that she admit she was a whore, and in bed with her held a knife to her throat throughout the night. She divorced Harry and went to live in Europe, leaving him to live out the remainder of his life in a mental institution.

Kate goes on to marry Axel Jaeger, the richest man in Germany. When Jones meets her in the Swiss Alps, he feels that she is absolute perfection, a woman for whom he “would lie, steal, commit crimes that could have, and still could, put me in prison for life.” It would be incorrect to say that “Unspoiled Monsters” is strewn with Gothic

imagery, but some does appear, and at times shockingly, in connection with characters who might seem to have their prayers answered. The earlier conversation about Proust and the inaccessibility of truth can be noted in Kate, whose husband, Harry, is driven mad in his attempt to claim her. Other characters who appear to have attained enviable success not only lose it but are actually destroyed. Boatwright, the homosexual editor in New York who seems to be equipped with all the right advantages, is beaten to death by a heroin-crazed Puerto Rican hustler and is left with his eyeballs unhinged and dangling down his cheeks.

The next chapter, “Kate McCloud,” is the shortest and least cohesive of the three sections that make up *Answered Prayers*. Jones (a surname so extremely common that it suggests he has little personal identity) tells the reader that he has never belonged anywhere or to anyone. He tells how he despised the nuns at his orphanage and ran away and was picked up on the highway by a gay masseur who taught him his trade; how he then came to New York and attempted to write a novel in a YMCA where incessant sex was going on; and went to work for Miss Self. Glimpses of his Forty-second Street surroundings have at times a William Burroughs-like dream quality. Doorways are lined with “nodding” heroin addicts and male hustlers; fourteen- and fifteen-year-old Puerto Rican boys call out to be taken home for ten dollars (“Fuck me all night!”). A young gay man lies unconscious in a gutter in front of an “S & M bar,” surrounded by leather-jacketed young hoods howling with laughter as they urinate on him until his clothing is drenched.

In a following sequence the scene shifts to the smart East Side, where a party is being given for Montgomery Clift, but different as this setting is it has a similar implication of decay. Dorothy Parker, Tallulah Bankhead, and Estelle Winwood have been invited—a mistake since all of them are alcoholics. A sense of miasma is emphasized by the arrival of Clift. Dorothy Parker gasps at his appearance. “He’s so beautiful,” she exclaims, “Sensitive. So finely made. The most beautiful young man I’ve ever seen.” But his emerging problems have already addicted him to alcohol—so much so that when he is handed a drink he has to struggle to hold it in his shaking hands.

Oddly, Kate McCloud hardly appears in this chapter that is named for her. The rich and famous, Kate included, are depicted aboard their yachts or pursuing other expensive diversions. But this class of people

are treated only marginally. In the final chapter, “La Côte Basque,” however, they are brought into full focus.

A principal character in “La Côte Basque” is Lady Ina Coolbirth, an American who has come by her title through marriage to a British chemicals tycoon. Jones runs into her in front of the fashionable La Côte Basque restaurant in the east Fifties, where she has been stood up by her friend Perla Apfeldorf. Jones agrees to fill in for her. When they enter the establishment they are catered to personally by the proprietor, M. Soulé, who seats them by the entranceway, a prime location that provides a view of the other customers as they arrive. “La Côte Basque” is a story that Capote seems destined to have written. He was, after all, well acquainted with the class of people who frequented New York’s prestigious restaurants, and knew their habits and snobberies. He was himself a devotee of gossip, but in the story he looks upon the scene with a jaundiced eye. Over lunch, the diners tear each other to pieces.

Many of the choice items of gossip making the rounds in the room have to do with sex—how, for instance, one of the women in their circle (doctor Whitestone’s wife) had an abortion as a result of her affair with the restaurant’s handsome young wine steward. The abortion was performed by her husband, who had been brought to believe that he was responsible for her condition; the gossipers find all of this quite tacky. The narrative operates like a camera that circles the room picking up the conversations of the diners. Ina herself is not spared in regard to her marriage to the much older Lord Coolbirth. One of the women says she “‘can’t imagine Cool wanting to get into those rusty knickers.’” Another has been to a party with Princess Margaret. “Her mother’s a darling,” she remarks, “but the rest of that family!” The Bouviers and the Kennedys are widely discussed and dissected. Jacqueline is “‘very photogenic, of course’” a woman comments, “but the effect is a little . . . unrefined, exaggerated.” Jones remarks that Jacqueline does not strike him as being a bona fide woman, but as “an artful female impersonator impersonating Mrs. Kennedy.”

“La Côte Basque” is more stylish than some other parts of the book, but like them it can also be grotesque, as in the case of a society wife who has been caught in a sexual act with a German shepherd dog. The section of “La Côte Basque” that raised an uproar and caused Capote to be repudiated by practically the whole of café society was not the most shocking episode in the book. It concerned Babe Paley

and her husband's infidelities, and was meant chiefly as a rebuke to William Paley for his mistreatment of Babe, one of Capote's most cherished friends. While staying in a suite at the Plaza Hotel, Paley, fictionalized here as Sidney Dillon, is portrayed as a clumsy philanderer as he desperately attempts to remove menstrual stains from the bed-sheets in the middle of the night while expecting the return of his wife at almost any time. The incident, as it happens, was true, and was told to Capote in confidence; moreover, Capote makes it clear who the people involved were.

Actually, Johnny Carson, the comedian-host of the *Tonight Show*, received much worse treatment. He, too, mistreated his wife Joanne, another intimate friend of Capote's. Carson appears in *Answered Prayers* as Bobby Baxter, a "midnight clown/hero" who is a sadist beneath his "huckleberry grin." He tortures his wife by stepping out on her, disappearing, and then calling her long distance and putting a young tart on the line to tell her what a good time they are having. Bobby Baxter's prayers may have been answered, but what they have divulged is his smallness and meanness.

But the worst instance of attained dreams is the case of Ann Woodward, who appears in the book, thinly disguised, as Ann Hopkins. Hopkins (like Woodward) achieved notoriety when she shot her husband David one night in the supposed belief that he was an intruder. The Hopkins family belonged to the upper echelons of Newport society. Hilda Hopkins, an austere, matriarchal figure in the family, could hardly have been more different from her daughter-in-law, whose louche and calculating past is sketched by Capote. On the eve of his divorcing her, David was shot to death in what Ann claimed was an accident. In fact, at the time of the shooting David was taking a shower; the glass door of the shower was shattered by bullets. The influential Hopkins family wanted no scandal at any cost, and the local police covered up for them.

Officially David Hopkins's death was judged to be an accident. Hilda Hopkins, like a character in a Balzac novel, pretended to grieve with the widow, protecting the grandchildren and the good Hopkins name. Ann Hopkins is the most Gothic of the characters whose stories are told in "La Côte Basque." Originating from a shady background, she schemed her way into a prominent family but remained what she has always been—a woman without a conscience. The story did have some unexpected reverberations. It has been speculated that Ann

Woodward may have managed to read the story in an advance copy of *Esquire* just before it came out on the newsstands, and as a result committed suicide by jumping out of an upper-story window.

Capote was never able to finish *Answered Prayers*, and what there was of it left people perplexed. It seemed vicious and bitter, and not entirely coherent. But even in the fragments that make up *Answered Prayers* there is a coherent theme of the misery of the successful and envied. Capote was supposedly rewriting the disillusionment that overcomes the narrator at the end of Marcel Proust's great novel *Remembrance of Things Past*; Proust's fashionable and exclusive turn-of-the-century Parisians become Capote's "beautiful people" in the American 1970s. But something obviously went wrong, and in a way the novel never progresses, being one case after another of broken and disillusioned lives. Capote's unfinished novel, one feels, is ultimately about himself.

Capote had been taking notes on New York café society for years, and envisioned a novel about it that would be his masterpiece. By the time he was ready to write it, however, he came up against a severe case of writer's block. He was treated by at least four psychiatrists, none of whom could tell him why the condition had befallen him; he had always been a nervous person, and had tried to calm his nerves with alcohol, which made things worse. By the 1970s his drinking was out of control, and to this was added the use of drugs. It was the smashup of his dream of being a "great American writer"—for that is what he did aspire to. Capote was a tormented man in later life—full of anger and guilt, which is what *Answered Prayers* is so much about: the golden boy brought to grief, or shrunk in stature to the size of P. B. Jones, a hanger-on or fake. But even in this strange, fragmentary work about failure one finds fascinating glimmerings of another of Capote's changes of style. He seems to be exploring American experience in a new way, even drawing a little closer to the Beat poets, to their sense of a wandering alienation and aloneness in the American night. It is also a work that focuses not merely on the individual but also on society itself, even if that society is in a stage of breakdown.

Although Capote's later years were difficult and troubled, he continued to have a high level of visibility. He had become associated in the public mind with Andy Warhol and the outré world of Studio 54. There was little difference in their age, but Capote had arrived earlier than Warhol, and from as far back as the publication of *Other Voices*,

Other Rooms he had been Warhol's idol. Warhol had been enraptured by the photograph of Capote on the jacket of *Other Voices*: young, attractive, flamboyantly homosexual, and famous, everything that Warhol longed to be. From his home in Pittsburgh, Warhol sent him fan letters without ever receiving a reply.

After that he came to New York and stalked Capote at closer range, not merely sending him letters every day but also finding his address and haunting the entrance to his building in hopes of seeing him come in or out. Capote was twenty-three at the time and Warhol was twenty; what divided them was not years but fame and worldly success. Unlike Capote, Warhol was an unknown, a nullity.

After a period of loitering in front of the building, Warhol began calling on the telephone. It was not answered by Truman Capote, however, but by his mother Nina, who told him to stop bothering her son. But Warhol persisted and somehow won Nina over. He joined her at a tavern where over drinks she told him of the disappointment her son had been to her. She invited him to join her at her apartment, and it was here that Warhol first met Truman Capote upon his return later in the afternoon. "He seemed," Capote would recall to Victor Bockris, "one of the most hopeless people that you just know *nothing's* ever going to happen to . . . a hopeless born loser, the loneliest, most friendless person I'd ever seen in my life."

Warhol's first gallery showing was dedicated to Capote, being a collection of his drawings based on his writings; and to crown the occasion Capote and his mother came to see it. When at a later time Capote began to hear that Warhol was being talked about favorably in art circles, he was quite surprised. "I never had the idea," Capote went on, "that he wanted to become an artist. I thought he was one of those people who are interested in the arts. As far as I knew he was a window decorator . . . let's say a window decorator type."

Later in his career Warhol became what he had so desperately admired in Capote—a cynosure, a figure who attracts attention and admiration. By 1977 Studio 54 became the new center of club life. Catering to the young jet setters and the suddenly famous, it became the playground of both Capote and Warhol who grew closer together. After publishing "La Côte Basque" and being repudiated by his café society friends, Capote found that he could retain his presence as a celebrity through his association with Warhol and Warhol's magazine, *Interview*. Bob Colacello, the magazine's editor, believed that both

were “consummate geniuses at manipulating society. Brilliant at it, absolutely brilliant at it” (as quoted in Bockris’s biography).

Capote’s collaboration with *Interview* began with Warhol’s following him around in the course of his day and letting him speak for himself. Warhol put him on the cover of the magazine. It attracted attention, and a whole series featuring Capote followed with the caption “Conversations with Capote.” As Colacello tells it in George Plimpton’s *Truman Capote*, these articles, it was agreed, had to be the first feature in every issue and the caption had to be designed in a certain way, with “Conversations” in black ink and “Capote” in red ink, and there could be no advertising opposite any of these pages. During this time Capote was in and out of clinics to cure his addictions, but nothing worked; then in 1979, summoning all his strength of will, he was able to free himself of them—for at least a year. During this time he was able to write again, and some of what he produced in this period was good. There were fourteen new pieces, and many of them appeared in *Interview*. But as Colacello points out, once they were brought out in his collection of new work, *Music for Chameleons*, Capote distanced himself from the magazine.

Different as they were, Capote and Warhol had one absolutely essential thing in common: they had the ability to fascinate the American public. Writers are not usually public personalities; there are exceptions like Mark Twain, but for every Twain there are a hundred Herman Melvilles. Capote had the unusual ability to project his innermost self onto the public mind: he was unique. There was always a flamboyance about him, like the long scarf he wore rakishly, and this flamboyance was also in his work. It can be seen in his characters Cousin Randolph, Miss Bobbit, and Holly Golightly. Much of his work is about private experience, but it is about private experience he shared with millions.

There was a flamboyance about Andy Warhol, too. One thinks of him with sparklers glittering in his white wig, surrounded by his “velvet underground” (the term originated with a band Warhol discovered and promoted before being used to designate—correctly or not—Warhol’s immediate entourage). One thinks of him at the Factory, his offices in which celebrities mingled with Greenwich Village bohemians, and where “outrageous” movies were made or planned by Warhol and Paul Morrissey that made the sexually provocative Joe Dallesandro an underground star. Warhol was always discovering new and previously unknown people and giving them names like Viva and Ondine.

There was a lot of the child in him, just as there was in Capote, and both of them craved attention and wanted to be famous. Warhol is remembered for his commenting that “in the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes,” but he wanted to be famous all the time. He and Capote were alike in their theatricalization of the self, which sets them off from social plodders and permits them to reject received social modes of conduct; in this way it is perhaps a reflection of gay sensibility.

Capote, in particular, can be seen in the context of his controversial late Victorian predecessor Oscar Wilde. In the December 2, 2007 issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, Charles McGrath has compared many of Capote’s essays and sketches to Wilde. “In many ways,” he writes, “the Capote of this book [*Portraits and Observations*] is not the heroic reporter of the two recent movie verions of his life but, rather, a Gothic, *fin-de-siecle* kind of writer who would have fitted right in with Beardsley, Wilde and Ernest Dowson. You don’t read him here so much for character . . . or vivid description as for atmosphere and filigreed prose.”

This “filigreed prose” is part of the aesthetic Capote inherited from Wilde. Wilde is supposed to have said, when being processed through American customs, “I have nothing to declare except my genius.” Whether he actually said this is disputed, but if he didn’t say it he should have, because the comment goes to his very essence. He was consummately flamboyant. It was typical of him that he should announce that he and his mother, Lady Wilde, had decided to found a society for the suppression of virtue. He was flamboyant when he came to America in the 1880s to lecture astonished coal miners on “beauty.” He was flamboyant in letting his hair grow long and in lecturing while holding flowers in his hands. His plays were flamboyant in the sharpness and elegance of their wit. Wilde had considerable personal charm and, although mocked by some, could mesmerize an audience. Like Capote and Warhol, he craved attention and fame.

Capote had been aware of Wilde from an early age: when he and Phoebe Pierce dashed off to Manhattan in their teens they quoted lines from Wilde, who represented sophistication, art, and defiance—not to mention the green carnation. Later in life Capote became interested in Wilde’s letters, and wished he had been present to be transfixed by his famously witty conversation. In other respects Wilde was not a fortunate role model. He became notorious, enduring imprisonment and a

lonely and nearly anonymous exile in France, where he died at the age of forty-six. If Capote shared with Wilde a certain connoisseurship and sense of “acting” before the public, his career, too, led to a great fall.

In his later years Capote kept up the pretense of his still being at work on *Answered Prayers* while he became increasingly addicted to alcohol and drugs and produced almost nothing. His breakdown became public knowledge. In one speaking engagement, he was so inebriated that he fell off the stage, and in a television interview his speech was so slurred that he should never have been allowed to continue. Nor did he have anything resembling a home life; he moved restlessly and pointlessly, it seemed, from one locality to another. He and Jack Dunphy were no longer having sexual relations, and Capote’s new partners were ill chosen. The most important one, with a family man named John O’Shea, involved Capote in total chaos that included a savage beating by O’Shea.

Capote’s drinking excesses might be compared to those of Dylan Thomas in the 1950s when, with his most inspired work of the preceding decade now in an irrevocable eclipse, he drank himself to death on the American lecture circuit and in Greenwich Village. Capote had been intent on being a great American writer, and when the writer’s block happened the nerve-wracking intensity he put into his writing became the negative energy of self-destruction. How desperate the situation had become is illustrated by an observation of the English writer-editor Alan Pryce-Jones in Plimpton’s *Truman Capote*: “He was truly in the autumn of his days the very last time I saw him; he suddenly walked right out in the middle of traffic without looking at all. He was absolutely out. Spaced out. . . . He was walking at random through traffic. He made no sense at all. He didn’t know who one was.” As Alan Schwartz notes in Plimpton’s book, a CAT scan done at that time showed that Capote’s brain had actually shrunk as a result of the abuse of drink and drugs.

His health was disintegrating rapidly. He developed epilepsy and collapsed in the lobby of the United Nations Plaza, in other public places, and on his way to his house at Sagaponack on Long Island, where he was found lying in the road. Severely depressed and subject to hallucinations, he required frequent treatment at the Southampton Hospital and numerous other hospitals and clinics both in and away

from New York. In his invalid and despairing state he was looked after by a few friends and by Jack Dunphy; but Dunphy, who was never a sympathetic man, decided that he had had enough and flew off to Switzerland. On August 23, 1984, Capote was flown to Los Angeles to be nursed by Joanne Carson in a spare room of her apartment. In an extremely wasted condition, he longed for death, and the end was not long in coming. It is possible that he may even have committed suicide through an overdose of drugs. Whether or not this was actually the case, Leo Lerman noted in one of his diary entries, Capote's compulsive abuse of alcohol and drugs had been a form of suicide.

Chapter Nine

Capote in Retrospect

In the nearly twenty-five years since his death, Capote continues to cast his spell over the public; he has been impersonated in major productions on both stage and screen. In the autumn of 1989 Robert Morse performed on Broadway in a one-man show called *Tru* that was a mood piece combining humor with an underlying sadness. Morse had starred before on Broadway in such shows as *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*, in which his trademark was his ebullience; but *Tru* called for subtlety and inwardness as well as the ability to ingratiate himself with the audience. His performance earned him a Tony, in addition to the Outer Critics Circle, Drama Desk, and Drama League Awards. Most of Morse's monologue in *Tru* was taken from Capote's own words in interviews and elsewhere, by the veteran playwright Jay Presson Allen, who adapted, among other works, Muriel Spark's novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

Morse's Capote is seen at the opening seated on a Victorian couch in the dim light of his apartment in the United Nations Plaza: he's wearing a loosely fitting sweater, sneakers, a Panama hat, and sunglasses. *In Cold Blood* has made him rich and famous, but since then he has published "La Côte Basque" in *Esquire* and it has cost him his devoted friendship with Babe Paley, Slim Keith, and many others. The time is Christmas Eve and he is alone in his apartment reflecting on his life. His monologue is constantly entertaining in its repertoire of touching passages from one or another of his stories and moments of amusing gossip. As he talks he breaks at times into a little dance step to the tune of numbers like "The Girl from Ipanema," "A Kiss to Build a Dream On," and "At Long Last Love." He even tap dances as he reminisces about the time in his youth when he danced for Louis Armstrong as he played "On the Sunny Side of the Street."

He is plucky, but as the evening grows on his mood grows darker, and he holds up a painting of himself as the wunderkind of American

letters, and in a coup de théâtre plunges his fist through it. By the time he snaps out the lights of the apartment and, twirling his signature scarf about his neck, prepares to go out into the street, he is as stymied as one of his own characters. *Tru* manages to capture some of Capote's peculiar charm, partly through the warmth and wit of Morse's extraordinary impersonation. But if *Tru* was bittersweet, we now know that it was not nearly as dark as Capote's real life at the end.

Tru established Capote on the stage as a striking character, but it was in 2005 that a resurgence of interest in his life and career brought Capote to center stage in the performing arts. It was then that the movie *Capote*, focusing upon his *In Cold Blood* period, came out. Actually, there were two movies about Capote scheduled to be released at about the same time. Since it wasn't feasible to have them appear at once, one of them, called *Infamous*, had to wait its turn for almost another year. *Capote* opened with much fanfare to extremely favorable reviews. Surprisingly, it was the first time out for both the film's director Bennett Miller and its screenwriter Dan Futterman. Everyone benefited from the picture but most of all Philip Seymour Hoffman, who had the title role and was awarded an Oscar for the year's best acting performance.

Audiences were astonished by Hoffman's physical resemblance to Capote (in real life the actor looks nothing like the author), together with his catchy mannerisms—the oddity of his baby voice, his lisp, and flickering tongue. But Hoffman's performance was less a cunning impersonation than a subtle exploration of Capote's psyche. He comes through as a charismatic figure at Manhattan cocktail parties, someone to whom others gravitate, but he is also given a quality of loneliness, especially at the end. The picture was based on the Gerald Clarke's biography *Capote*, and stays very close to it.

Capote is a quiet movie that is also suspenseful, and Adam Kimmel's cinematography is unusually dark, creating a pensive, rather solemn mood as it moves further into psychological depths and Capote's personal dilemma. That isn't to say that the film has no lighter side. Kimmel can fill the screen with surprising visual images of calm beauty—buildings of striking architecture, wheat fields waving in a breeze, trains moving in a long straight line through deserted Midwestern expanses. At times these visual compositions are accompanied by the sound of a piano key struck softly, thanks to the soundtrack of composer Mychael Danna.

The restraint of the film can also be noticed in Catherine Keener's performance as Harper Lee, whose calmness is a counterweight to the Capote character's nervousness. Chris Cooper's Alvin Dewey is also perfectly acted, and the more so in his not seeming to be acting at all. The only character who can be accused of being miscast is Clifton Collins as Perry Smith. He is attractive and even gentle looking, whereas photographs of the real Smith show a young man who has been hardened by life and can be dangerous. In Capote's indelible portrait of him in the novel, Smith is sympathetic but also grotesque—a crippled dwarf on the verge of psychic explosion.

The other biographical film about Capote, *Infamous* (it was first called *Have You Heard?* and then *Every Word Is True*), was presented in August 2006 at the Venice Film Festival, and released in October 2006 in the United States. Written and directed by Douglas McGrath, who had previously adapted *Emma* and *Nicholas Nickleby* for the screen, it stars the English actor Toby Jones who, like Philip Seymour Hoffman in *Capote*, bears an extraordinary resemblance to Capote. *Infamous* is a brighter, splashier picture than *Capote* and spends more time, at least at the beginning, at Manhattan cocktail parties and exclusive restaurants like El Morroco, where it begins.

Gwyneth Paltrow upstages everyone in the opening nightclub scene with her rendition of the Peggy Lee ballad "What Is This Thing Called Love?" and at least two of Capote's "swans"—Sigourney Weaver as Babe Paley and Hope Davis as Slim Keith—are shown socializing with Capote at nightclubs. Another friend, Juliet Stevenson as Diana Vreeland, is shown as a hostess for the fashionable set at her apartment, which is decorated almost entirely in brilliant red.

There is no great difference between Toby Jones's Capote and Philip Seymour Hoffman's, but Jones's version is more effeminate. To attract attention he appears at Alvin Dewey's press conference in what looks like a woman's ankle-length housecoat; and his bedroom is decorated in shades of pink, with tufted pink material in the backing of the bed—which seems more like caricature than characterization.

Infamous is fortunate to have Sandra Bullock playing Harper Lee, for she is Lee to perfection, just as Keener had been in *Capote*. But Jeff Daniels is no match for Chris Cooper's Alvin Dewey, who has more character and consequently more interest. But McGrath's really serious

casting mistake is his choice of Daniel Craig as Perry Smith; six weeks after *Infamous* was finished Craig became the new James Bond, and to have James Bond as Perry Smith makes no sense whatsoever.

Smith was the sentient one in the partnership with Dick Hickock. With his soft lisping voice that could hardly be heard; his artwork; his recurrent dream of a giant yellow bird that would swoop down from the heavens to save him from those who would harm him; his stunted legs (which, depending on the chair he was in, could not always reach the floor) all work against McGrath's "iron man" casting of Craig and make it seem garish and absurd. In *Infamous*, Smith even attacks the Capote violently in his cell, and stuffs a sock in his mouth as he prepares to rape him. Nothing like this incident ever occurred in real life, but never mind.

McGrath's contention in the film is that Capote's life became so intertwined with Smith's during the five strenuous years of Perry's imprisonment on death row that they became, in a sense, lovers; and that when Perry was executed Capote lost his creativity and will to live. This notion seems simplistic. Capote was shaken by the spectacle of Perry's being hanged, but there is nothing in his papers to suggest that he spent the rest of his life mourning for him, as the end of the picture implies. Instead of capturing Capote on film, *Infamous* calls attention to what an elusive figure he was.

Capote's elusiveness was apparent from his beginnings as Truman Persons. Although markedly more intelligent than his classmates in Monroeville, Alabama, he could still be emotionally immature. He lived to quite an extent in an inner world in which he wrote precociously and secretly, yet as he reached his teens was also a talented dancer, especially in tap dance, and according to Phoebe Pierce was "a marvelous ice skater." That he had different selves, mature and childish, and could go from one to the other in a flash was noted during his residency at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. His writing gives the impression of his being detached from others, and yet he could be surprisingly gregarious. He was drawn to women and perhaps more appreciative of them than any of his contemporary American writers; but he was not attracted to them sexually. He had a very keen sense of humor, but his writing was often dark. "A Christmas

Memory” is remarkable for its tenderness, but “Greek Paragraphs” includes a tale of a beautiful sixteen-year-old boy who is eaten alive by monstrous rats on a deserted Grecian beach. The style of his writing suggests that he possessed a great degree of composure, but friends say that he was a nervous man from the beginning. Even his appearance could give the impression of his being elusive; he himself said that he had a changeling’s face that made him look different from photograph to photograph.

Yet if he was a man divided, Capote was also someone who was very concentrated within himself. Practically everything he wrote had some inner self-reference. In this regard he had something in common with Ingmar Bergman, whose films often, or perhaps even always, had some personal subtext. In particular Bergman seems to have had a compulsion to delve over and over into the marriage of his parents and to have had an intense fixation with his mother. Capote’s fixation with his mother (who withheld her love) and his birth father (who withheld even his presence) is played and replayed in his imagination like a drumbeat. In many ways this dwelling upon his mother and father limited him as a writer; there were many aspects of experience that he didn’t begin to explore. He wasn’t an author given to working with large social canvases or complex ideas.

He was less a novelist, for that matter, than he was a short story writer, sketch and vignette artist, and essayist. He was wonderfully observant and a great imagist. Capote’s most admired novelists, apart from Willa Cather, whom he alludes to frequently, included Gustave Flaubert, E. M. Forster, and Henry James—which says a great deal about his tastes and ideals. He was a poet in the fictional moods he created; although he did not leave an unusually large body of work, what he did has a chiseled perfection. Shortly before Norman Mailer died, he remarked that Capote didn’t have an idea in his head. Capote did, but it had less to do with the intellectual concepts of Mailer and more with the thinking of James, of whom it was said in a famous remark that he had an imagination “so pure that no idea could violate it.” Whatever can be said of Capote, he was never heavy-handed, as the “ideas” of Mailer can be. Capote was an observer with a really brilliant eye. In his essay “Cecil Beaton,” he called attention to Beaton’s “visual intelligence,” and this may also be said of him.

It might be out of place to speak of Capote in terms as dangerously ineffable as “charm,” but he did possess it—it is at the heart of his writing. The Queen Mother touched on at least some of the attributes of this gifted, unusual, tormented, and complicated man when she told Beaton that she “found Mr. Capote quite wonderful, so talented, so wise, so funny,” and Beaton, with equal graciousness, replied, “Yes, he’s a genius, M’am.”

Bibliography

Books by Truman Capote

- Other Voices, Other Rooms*. New York: Random House, 1948.
- A Tree of Night and Other Stories*. New York, Random House, 1949.
- Local Color*. New York, Random House. 1949.
- The Grass Harp*. New York: Random House, 1951.
- The Muses Are Heard*. New York: Random House, 1956.
- Breakfast at Tiffany's*. New York: Random House, 1956.
- Observations* (with Richard Avedon). New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959.
- Selected Writings of Truman Capote*. New York: Random House, 1963.
- A Christmas Memory*. New York: Random House, 1966.
- House of Flowers*. New York: Random House, 1968.
- The Dogs Bark: Public People and Private Places*. New York: Random House, 1968.
- Music for Chameleons*. New York: Random House, 1980.
- One Christmas*. New York: Random House, 1983.
- Three by Capote*. New York: Random House, 1985.
- Answered Prayers: The Unfinished Novel*. New York: Random House, 1987.
- A Capote Reader*. New York: Random House, 1987.
- The Complete Stories of Truman Capote*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- Too Brief a Treat: The Letters of Truman Capote*. Edited by Gerald Clarke. New York: Random House, 2004.
- Summer Crossing*. New York: Random House, 2006.
- Portraits and Observations: The Essays of Truman Capote*. New York: Random House, 2007.

Works Consulted

- Beaton, Cecil. *The Best of Cecil Beaton*. Introduced by Truman Capote. New York: Macmillan, 1968.
- . *Memoirs of the 40s*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972.
- . *The Strenuous Years, Diaries 1948-55*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973.
- Bockris, Victor. *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol*. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.
- Brinnin, John Malcolm. *Sextet: T. S. Eliot, Truman Capote and Others*. New York: Delacorte, 1981.
- Clarke, Gerald. *Capote: A Biography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.
- Davis, Deborah. *Party of the Century: The Fabulous Story of Truman Capote and His Black and White Ball*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2006.
- Dunphy, Jack. *Dear Genius: A Memoir of My Life with Truman Capote*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987.
- Grobel, Lawrence. *Conversations with Capote*. New York: New American Library, 1985.
- Garson, Helen S. *Truman Capote*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980.
- . *Truman Capote: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.
- Inge, M. Thomas, ed. *Truman Capote Conversations*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987.
- Lerman, Leo. *The Grand Surprise: The Journals of Leo Lerman*. Edited by Stephen Pascal. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.
- Malin, Irving. *New American Gothic*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962.
- . *Truman Capote's In Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook*. New York: Wadsworth, 1968.
- Moates, Marianne. *A Bridge of Childhood: Truman Capote's Southern Years*. New York: Henry Holt, 1987.
- Nance, William. *The Worlds of Truman Capote*. New York: Stein and Day, 1970.
- Plimpton, George. *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career*. New York: Nan A. Talese, 1997.
- Reed, Kenneth. *Truman Capote*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.

- Rudisill, Marie, with James C. Simmons. *Truman Capote*. New York: William Morrow, 1983.
- Shields, Charles J. *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*. New York: Henry Holt, 2006.
- Stanton, Robert J. *Truman Capote: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980.
- Souhami, Diana. *Greta and Cecil*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Warhol, Andy. *The Andy Warhol Diaries*. Edited by Pat Hackett. New York: Warner Books, 1989.
- Windham, Donald. *Lost Friendships: A Memoir of Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, and Others*. New York: Paragon House, 1987.

This page intentionally left blank

Index

- Aaron, Daniel, 10
African Queen, The, 62
Agee, James, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 81, 86
Agnelli, Marella, 72
Ailey, Alvin, 60
Albee, Edward, 3, 79
Alda, Alan, 96
Allen, Jay Presson, 115
Ames, Elizabeth, 12
“Among the Paths to Eden”
(teleplay), 98
Andersen, Hans Christian, “The Snow Queen,” 46
Answered Prayers, 24, 103–9, 113
Anthony, Joseph, 79
Arlen, Harold, 59
Armstrong, Louis, 115
Arvin, Newton, 9, 10, 12, 23, 24, 47
Astor, Mary, 62
Aswell, Mary Louise, 8, 34
Atkinson, Brooks, 57
Auden, W. H., 12
Austen, Roger, *Playing the Game*, 40
Avedon, Richard, 72, 73
Axelrod, George, 78

Bailey, Pearl, 60, 101
Balanchine, George, 60
Balzac, Honoré de, 108
Bankhead, Tallulah, 106
Barney, Natalie, 5
Barrymore, Ethel, 71
Barzun, Jacques, 48
Beardsley, Aubrey, 112
Beaton, Cecil, 49, 50, 56, 70, 119, 120
Beat the Devil, 61–64, 80

“Beautiful Child, A,” 101
Beauvoir, Simone de, 104
Bergman, Ingmar, 119
Blake, Robert, 94
Bockris, Victor, 110
Bogart, Humphrey, 62–63
Bond, James, 118
Beausoleil, Robert, 101
Bowles, Jane, 12
Bowles, Paul, 12
Brando, Marlon, 71
Breakfast at Tiffany’s, 1, 6, 28, 29, 73–79
Breen, Robert, 66
Brinnin, John Malcolm, 9
Britten, Benjamin, 12
Brook, Peter, 56, 57, 60
Brooks, Richard, 94
Burnett, Whit, 11
Burrows, Abe, 79
Burroughs, William, 106

Callas, Maria, 8
Camus, Albert, 51, 104
Capote (movie), 116
Capote, Truman, 1–123
Capote, Joseph (Truman’s stepfather), 4, 7
Capote, Lillie Mae Faulk (Truman’s mother), 1–3, 8
Carroll, Diahnn, 60
Carson, Joanne, 108, 114
Carson, Johnny, 108
Carter, Nell, 57
Casary, Vera, 95
Cather, Willa, 119
Cecil, Lord David, 49

- Cerf, Bennett, 10
 Cerf, Phyllis, 10
 Champlin, Charles, 62
 Chanel, Coco (Gabrielle), 72
 Chaplin, Charlie, 62, 72
 "Children on their Birthdays," 28–32
 Christie, Agatha, 97
 "A Christmas Memory," 1, 2;
 (teleplay), 98
 Clarke, Gerald, *Capote: A Biography*,
 5, 7, 12, 17, 49, 50, 61, 69, 116
 Clayton, Jack, 80, 96
 Clift, Montgomery, 61, 106
 Clutter, Bonnie, 86, 89
 Clutter, Herbert (Herb), 86, 88, 89
 Clutter, Nancy, 85
 Cockburn, Claud, 61
 Coco, James, 97
 Cocteau, Jean, 72, 104
 Colacello, Bob, 110–11
 Colette, Gabrielle, 51, 104
 Collins, Clifton, 117
 Cook, Barbara, 57
 Cooper, Chris, 117
 Coward, Noel, 49
 Craig, Daniel, 118
 Cronin, A. J., 66
- Dallesandro, Joe, 111
 Daniels, Jeff, 117
 Danna, Mychael, 116
David and Lisa, 98
 Davis, George, 11
 Davis, Hope, 117
 "Dazzle," 100
Dead of Night, 13
Death Row, U. S. A., 96
 De Foe, Daniel, *Journal of the Plague
 Year*, 81
 De Lavallade, Carmen, 60
 "Derring-do," 101
 De Sica, Vittorio, 61
 Dewey, Alvin, 90, 117
 "Diamond Guitar, A," 102
 Diamond Lil, 73
- Didion, Joan, *The Year of Magical
 Thinking*, 81
 Dietrich, Marlene, 8
 Dinesen, Izak, 73;
 Out of Africa, 81
*Dogs, The: Public People and Private
 Places*, 33, 99
 Dowson, Ernest, 112
 Dreiser, Theodore, *An American
 Tragedy*, 90–91
 Duchamp, Marcel, 8
 "Duke in His Domain, The," 69–72
 Dunphy, Jack, 9, 49, 51, 61, 113, 114
 Dunphy, Jack, *Dear Genius: A Memoir
 of My Life with Truman Capote*, 4
 Dupee, F. W., 88, 90
 Durning, Charles, 57
- Edwards, Blake, 78
Emma (movie), 117
 Evans, Walker, 81
Every Word Is True, 117
- Falk, Peter, 97
 Faulk, Callie, 2
 Faulk, Jennie, 2
 Faulk, Nanny Rumbley ("Sook"), 2, 54;
 Sanctuary, 42
 Field, Betty, 96
 Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 37;
 The Great Gatsby, 31, 75, 96
 Flanagan, Thomas, 5
 Flaubert, Gustave, 39, 119
 Forster, E. M., 49, 119
 Fouks, Denny, 103
 Francis, Arlene, 95
 Francis, Freddie, 80
 Franklin, Pamela, 80
 Freud, Sigmund, 19, 22
 Frost, Robert, 7
 Futterman, Dan, 116
- Garbo, 50
 Garson, Helen, 25, 29
 Gershwin Lenore, 65, 68, 69

- Gide, André, 72, 104
 Gillette, Chester, 91
 Golmore, Gary, 83
 Gish, Dorothy, 56, 57
 Gish, Lillian, 56, 57
Glass House, The, 96
Gone with the Wind, 61
 Gould, Jack, 95
 Granger, 95
Grass Harp, The, 28, 30, 53–54, 73;
 (play) 56–57
Great Gatsby, The (screenplay), 96–97
 “Greek Paragraphs,” 119
 Greenstreet, Sidney, 62
 Guinness, Alec, 97
 Gusso, Mel, *Albee: A Singular
 Journey*, 3
Guys and Dolls, 79
- Hall, Juanita, 60
 Hammett, Dashiell, 62
 “Handcarved Coffins,” 99–100
Have You Heard?, 117
 Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 10, 23, 40, 41
 Hayward, Leland, 96
 “Headless Hawk, The,” 20–26
 Helvick, James (Claud Cockburn), 61
 Hepburn, Audrey, 71
 Hemingway, Ernest, *The Green Hills of
 Africa*, 81
 Hickock, Richard, 84–94, 118
 Hills, Granville, 10
 Hoffman, Philip Seymour, 116, 117
 Holder, Geoffrey, 60
 “Hospitality,” 100
 “House of Flowers,” 57–59;
 (musical), 60–61
*How to Succeed in Business Without
 Really Trying*, 79, 115
 Huston, John, 61, 73
 Huston, Walter, 89
 Hyman, Stanley Edgar, 73
- In Cold Blood*, 3, 34, 67, 81–95, 116;
 (movie), 94–95
Indiscretion of an American Wife, 61
- Infamous*, 116–18
Innocents, The, 79–80
 Isherwood, Christopher, *Berlin
 Stories*, 76
 Ives, Marion, 11
- Jackson, Earl Bruce, 68
 Jagger, Dean, 96
 James, Henry, 44, 119;
 “Daisy Miller,” 32;
Portrait of a Lady, The, 45;
 “Turn of the Screw,” 79–80
 Jones, Jennifer, 61, 63
 Jones, Toby, 117
 Joyce, James, “The Dead,” 15
- Kael, Pauline, 80
 “Kate McCloud,” 101
 Keener, Catherine, 117
 Keith, Slim, 117
 Kennedy, Jacqueline, 107
 Kerr, Deborah, 80
 Khan, Prince Ailey, 103
 Kimmel, Adam, 2, 116
 Kinsey, Alfred, *Sexual Behavior in the
 Human Male*, 40
 Kronenberger, Louis, 10
- Ladd, Alan, 96
 “La Côte Basque,” 101, 107, 115
 Lanchester, Elsa, 97
 “Laura,” 95–96
 Laurie, Piper, 57
 Lawrence, D. H., 23
 Lee, Nelle Harper, 2, 36, 47, 54, 83;
To Kill a Mockingbird, 2–3
 Lee, Peggy, 117
 Lemmon, Jack, 57
 Lerman, Leo, 51–52, 114;
*The Grand Surprise: The Journals of
 Leo Lerman*, 8
 Levin, Harry, 10
 Lewis, Robert, 57
 Lilly, Doris, 76
 Linscott, Robert, 11, 33, 34
Local Color, 51–53, 58, 99

- Logan, Joshua, 71
 Lolobrigida, Gina, 63
 Lorre, Peter, 62
 Lyndon, Andrew, 33
- Magic*, 13
 Mailer, Norman, 119;
 Armies of the Night, 82;
 The Executioner's Song, 83;
 The Naked and the Dead, 81
 Malin, Irving, *Truman Capote's In Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook*, 84, 86
Maltese Falcon, The, 62
 Mancini, Henry, 78
 Mann, Erica, 12
 Mann, Klaus, 12
 Manson, Charles, 101
 Manzo, Peter, 70
 Marcus, Carole, 76
 Marcus, Eleanor, 6
 Marshall, Kathleen, 61
 "Master Misery," 26–28
 Matthau, Charles, 57
 Matthau, Walter, 6, 57
 Mattheissen, F. O., 10
 Maugham, W. Somerset, 49, 52, 72
 McCarthy, Senaitir Joseph, 61
 McCracken, Joan, 9
 McCullers, Carson, 12, 43, 61, 61, 78;
 The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, 10, 11
 McDowall, Roddy, 57
 McGrath, Charles, 112
 McGrath, Douglas, 117
 McQueen, Armelia, 61
 Meier, Josephine, 85
 Melville, Herman, 10
 Mercer, Johnny, 78
 Merrick, David, 78
 Messel, Oliver, 60
 Michener, James, 69
 Miller, Bennett, 116
 "Miriam" (story), 13–16;
 (teleplay), 98
 Mitchell, Arthur, 60
 "Mojave," 101–2
- Montalban, Richardo, 71
 Moore, Mary Tyler, 79
 Morley, Robert, 62
 Morrissey, Paul, 111
 Morrow, Vic, 96
 Morse, Robert, 115–16
Murder by Death (movie), 97
Music for Chameleons, 99–101
My Fair Lady, 49
- Nelson, Ruth, 57
Nicholas Nickleby (movie), 117
 Niven, David
- Observations*, 72, 73, 99
 O'neil, Oona, 6, 76
Other Voices, Other Rooms, 3, 8, 23,
 26, 29, 33, 40–48, 49, 54, 81, 92,
 109, 110
- Paley, Barbara "Babe", 72, 107, 117
 Paltrow, Gwyneth, 117
 Parker, Dorothy, 106
 Pierce, Phoebe, 112
 Peppard, George, 78
 Perry, Eleanor, 98
 Perry, Frank, 98
 Persons, Archulus, 1, 10, 17
 Picasso, Pablo, 104
 Pierce, Phoebe, 5, 6, 37, 76, 118
 Pinkins, Tonya, 61
 Pinter, Herald, 15
 Plimpton, George, *Truman Capote*, 82,
 97, 111, 113
 Poe, Edgar Allan, 20, 21, 40
Porgy and Bess, 65, 68–70
 Porter, Katherine Anne, 9, 103
Portraits and Observations, 112
 Premice, Josephine, 60
 Princess Margaret (England), 107
 Proust, Marcel, 104;
 Remembrance of Things Past, 106
 Pryce-Jones, Alan, 113
- Queen Mother (England), 50, 120
 Quintero, José, 57

- Radziwill, Lee, 95–96
 Radziwill, Prince (of Poland), 95
Rebecca, 61
 Redgrave, Michael, 13, 80
 Ross, Herbert, 60
 Rubirosa, Porfirio, 103
 Rupp, Bobby, 84
- Saint-Subber, Arnold, 56, 57
 Salinger, J. D., *The Catcher in the Rye*, 30
 Sanders, George, 95
 Saroyan, Aram, *Portrait of an Intimate Friendship*, 6
 Saroyan, William, 6, 54
 Sartorius, Herman, 68
 Sartre, Jean-Paul, 104
Sayonara, 71
 Schwartz, Alan U., 113
 Sellers, Peter, 97
 Selznick, David O., 61
 Shawn, William, 7, 83
 Shields, Charles J., *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*, 84
 Sholokhov, Mikhail Aleksandrovich, 66
- Simon, Neil, 97
 Smith, Maggie, 97
 Smith, Oliver, 79, 94
 Smith, Perry, 81–95, 117, 118
 Smith, Rita, 11
 Snow, Carmel, 7
 Souhami, Diana, *Greta and Cecil*, 50
South Pacific, 60
 Spacek, Sissy, 57
 Spark, Muriel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, 115
 Stabler, Anna, 54
 Stack, Robert, 95
 Stapleton, Maureen, 98
 Stark, Ray, 97
Stazione Termini, 61
 Steenburgen, Mary, 57
 Stein, Gertrude, 51, 104
 Stephens, Martin, 80
 Stevenson, Juliet, 117
- Stewart, Paul, 95
 Strait, Beatrice, 79
Summer and Smoke, 98
Summer Crossing, 52, 33–39
Sweeney in the Trees, 54
Sweet Bird of Youth, 98
- Tabori Kristoffer, 96
Teahouse of the August Moon, The, 72
 Terry, Daise, 7
 “Tex and Flo” (Perry Smith’s parents), 89
 “Thanksgiving Visitor, The,” 98
 “Then It All Came Down,” 101
 Thomas, Dylan, 113
Three Tall Women, 3
 Tierney, Gene, 96
 Toklas, Alice B., 104
 Tompkins, Phillip K., 85
 “Tree of Night, A,” 16, 19
Treasure of the Sierra Madre, The, 63, 88
- Trilling, Diana, 10, 86
 Trilling, Lionel, 10
Trilogy, 98
Tru, 115
- “Unspoiled Monsters,” 101–5
 Updike, John, *Rabbit Run*, 23
- Vanderbilt, Gloria, 6, 76
 Veiller, Anthony, 61
 Vidal, Gore, 12, 76;
The City and the Pillar, 40
 Viertel, Peter, 61
 Vreeland, Diana, 117
- Walker Nancy, 97
 Warhol, Andy, 109–11
 Waugh, Evelyn, 8
 Weaver, Sigourney, 117
 Webb, Clifton, 96
 Welty, Eudora, 100
 West, Mae, 73
 West, Rebecca, 81
 Wharton, Edith, 35

Wilde, Oscar, 44, 112, 113
Williams, Billy, Dee, 96
Williams, Tennessee, 98, 104
Wilson, Edmund, 10
Wilson, Scott, 95
Winchell, Walter, 6
Winters, Shelly, 96

Winwood, Estelle, 97, 106
Wood, Catherine, 5
Woodward, Ann, 108–9
Wright, Richard, 12
Wynn, Tracy Keenan, 96
Young, Marguerite, 9