Truman Capote's `In Cold Blood' still the standard

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Forty dollars, a radio and pair of binoculars -- that was the pathetic take from the robbery and murders of four members of the Clutter family on Nov. 14, 1959. Only a visionary and a poet would be able to find meaning in the bloodshed that shocked Holcomb, Kan. Only an archeologist of depravity could explain why such a senseless crime made perfect sense, at least to its perpetrators. And only a world-class gossip could capture the tendrils of conversation and the density of domestic and homely detail that personified life in Holcomb before, during and after the murders and ensuing trial.

Truman Capote was all of the above. "In Cold Blood," published nearly 40 years ago, in January 1966, was revolutionary and remains the high-water mark, the North Star and the gold standard against which its many imitators in the genre of narrative non-fiction are measured.

Read, or reread, the opening for yourself and exult in the grace and the specificity of the prose, at once plaintive and matter of fact:

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

The first person we spend much time with is the Clutter family patriarch, Herb, who is having breakfast on the morning of the day his life will end, as well as the lives of his wife, Bonnie, and his two youngest children, Kenyon and Nancy.

Capote is writing about a place where utility poles are jokingly referred to as the state tree, yet in that forlorn landscape his words hint at something ancient and steeped in meaning.

Where we see silos, he sees Greek temples.

Where we see cornhusks doubled over and matting the ground at the end of the harvest, the author sees a fallen creation.

Even before Capote's non-fiction novel was published, the world of letters knew it was onto a whole new coinage. The book was six years in the making: Every time the killers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, got a new day in court, their inevitable deaths by hanging were postponed, leaving Capote more time to interview the convicts, more time to sound the trumpets hailing his enterprise and more time to question the morality of his relationship with the two men. In the recent movie "Capote," the author is pictured offering choice tidbits from the work-in-progress at packed public gatherings in the lead-up to publication.

Readers of the late 1950s and early '60s, trained to think bestselling non-fiction had to be didactic and sociological (Vance Packard's "The Status Seekers"), or issue-oriented and high-minded (Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring"), or light-hearted and celebrity-driven (Art Linkletter's "Kids Say the Darndest Things"), were in for a surprise when they fell under Capote's spell.

Capote was hardly the first writer to recognize that non-fiction need not be deadly earnest or helium-balloon breezy. Many of his predecessors, including Joseph Mitchell and Lillian Ross, engaged in this kind of reporting, but Capote's attempt to graft the techniques of imaginative literature onto a non-fiction story was more brazen, more unremitting, and on a larger scale. He came out of the gate firing away, claiming to have invented a new form: the non-fiction novel. Everything about it was innovative: his use of cinematic devices, the way he enters a scene as late as possible and gets out of it as early as possible, the cross-cutting, and especially the agonizing slow motion when he finally gets around to describing the crime itself. He was so successful in raising the bar that today we take his innovations for granted, losing sight of the revolutionary nature of immersing readers in the way people really talk, in a headlong rush, full of loops and asides, without a bunch of stilted "according to's" or other cumbersome, momentum-breaking devices.

The true theme of this book is seduction.

The Clutters are seduced into thinking that by virtue of hard work and clean living their lives will continue to get better and better every day. The two older daughters, not home at the time of the murders, are busy building worthwhile lives. One is at college and to be married right before Christmas, the other is a young mother whose husband is a veterinarian. The teenage son, Kenyon, is busy building a cedar chest for his betrothed sister, and the lovely, kind-hearted. talented Nancy is the "town darling." On the day of her death she takes time to tutor a younger girl in the fine art of perfect crusts. Nancy's
At the other end of the spectrum is Perry Smith, whose idea of fine dining is a meal of aspirin, root beer and Pall Mall cigarettes. And Smith's friend from the pen, Dick Hickock, who at 29 has multiple tattoos, two ex-wives, three sons and a sorry sense of right and wrong that prompts him to run over dogs for sport. Smith is the pretty boy of the two, always mirror gazing, twisting his head so as to look "now ominous, now impish, now soulful." Smith and Hickock not only seduce each other with tales of swagger and possible riches, they are in turn seduced by Capote, who, in exchange for getting their stories, promises them the high-quality legal assistance they feel is their right. Obviously they had not read their Joan Didion: "That is one last thing to remember: writers are always selling somebody out."

Of the many "In Cold Blood" imitators, Norman Mailer's "The Executioner's Song," with its gritty portrait of laconic loner Gary Gilmore, comes close to matching Capote's success, as does Joe McGinniss' "Fatal Vision." McGinniss' description of the influence of "In Cold Blood" could have come from many writers of his generation: "I'll never forget reading the first installment in The New Yorker," McGinniss once said to me. "I was a sportswriter in Philadelphia, and I had never heard of Truman Capote, and I might have been content to remain a sportswriter forever. But not after reading 'In Cold Blood.' It was a dazzling burst of light that I knew immediately would change my life. I saw that non-fiction could be more than journalese: it could be literature. I remember wondering if I'd ever be able to do something like that. The answer has turned out to be no, but it sure has been interesting to try."

Not all non-fiction writers who admired "In Cold Blood" turned to crime as a topic. Some, like Philip Caputo, understood Capote's breakthrough more abstractly and incorporated his aesthetic leaps into their own work not so much in the choice of subject matter as in decisions about how to tell the story. "The two books that most struck me when I was in college . . . were 'Catch 22' and 'In Cold Blood,'" Caputo told me recently. "I had started 'A Rumor of War' as a novel but later changed it to a memoir, and the transition was easy, and what made is easy was 'In Cold Blood,' which showed that the techniques of fiction could be very effectively employed in non-fiction."

Capote might well be the progenitor of an entire literary movement called narrative non-fiction, which is now so popular that every year more than 1,000 people gather in Cambridge, Mass., for a three-day conference on the subject, sponsored by the Nieman Foundation. Several highbrow magazines are dedicated to publishing work in or about the tradition, including Riverteeth, Points of Entry and Creative Nonfiction, and you can even get a master’s degree in it at Goucher College in Maryland.

Capote bragged that he never used a tape recorder and barely took notes, claiming to have upwards of 94 percent recall of anything he had ever read or heard. In preparation for the radical listening he did that resulted in capturing the voices of the various people he interviewed, he said he memorized portions of the Sears Roebuck catalog as a kind of interval training.

As a culture, we are less trusting now, and given Capote's admission that he fiddled with the end of the book, confabulating the scene in which lead detective Alvin Dewey runs into one of Nancy's old friends at the cemetery, any rereading of the book today prompts uneasy second-guessing of its authenticity. Did Nancy Clutter and her girlfriend really begin phone conversations with the word "Tell!" or is that the way Capote began his phone conversations with his friends? In reconstructing the events that occurred when Smith and Hickock were on the lam, what liberties did the author take? Were scenes consolidated to give a false impression of a certain coherence that life notoriously lacks? Is that always bad? At what points did Capote go beyond tacitly agreed upon liberties and enter the territory of outright fraud?

One thing is fairly certain: If Capote were working today, his book would not be published without endnotes. For years I have taught "In Cold Blood" in a variety of classes: Readings in Journalism, The Novelist as Journalist and Journalist as Novelist, and, most recently, in a class called Literature and Film in the Documentary Tradition. I always make note of the challenges to this book's veracity so the students can fully understand and appreciate the work.

Capote earned $2 million in the first year "In Cold Blood" came out and became an international celebrity. If the killers' take from the murders could not have been more pathetic, the personal cost of telling the story could not have been higher for Capote. He invested his psyche in the project, and by the end he could no longer live with himself, or at least not with the song-and-dance routine that used the deaths of four real people to line his coffers and lubricate his social status. He said that he felt writing the book, or, more precisely, living with the details of that story so intimately for so long, catapulted him into ill health and led to the insomnia and substance abuse that dogged him during his final years. The author clearly tossed and turned as he grappled with the question: What is the price of art?