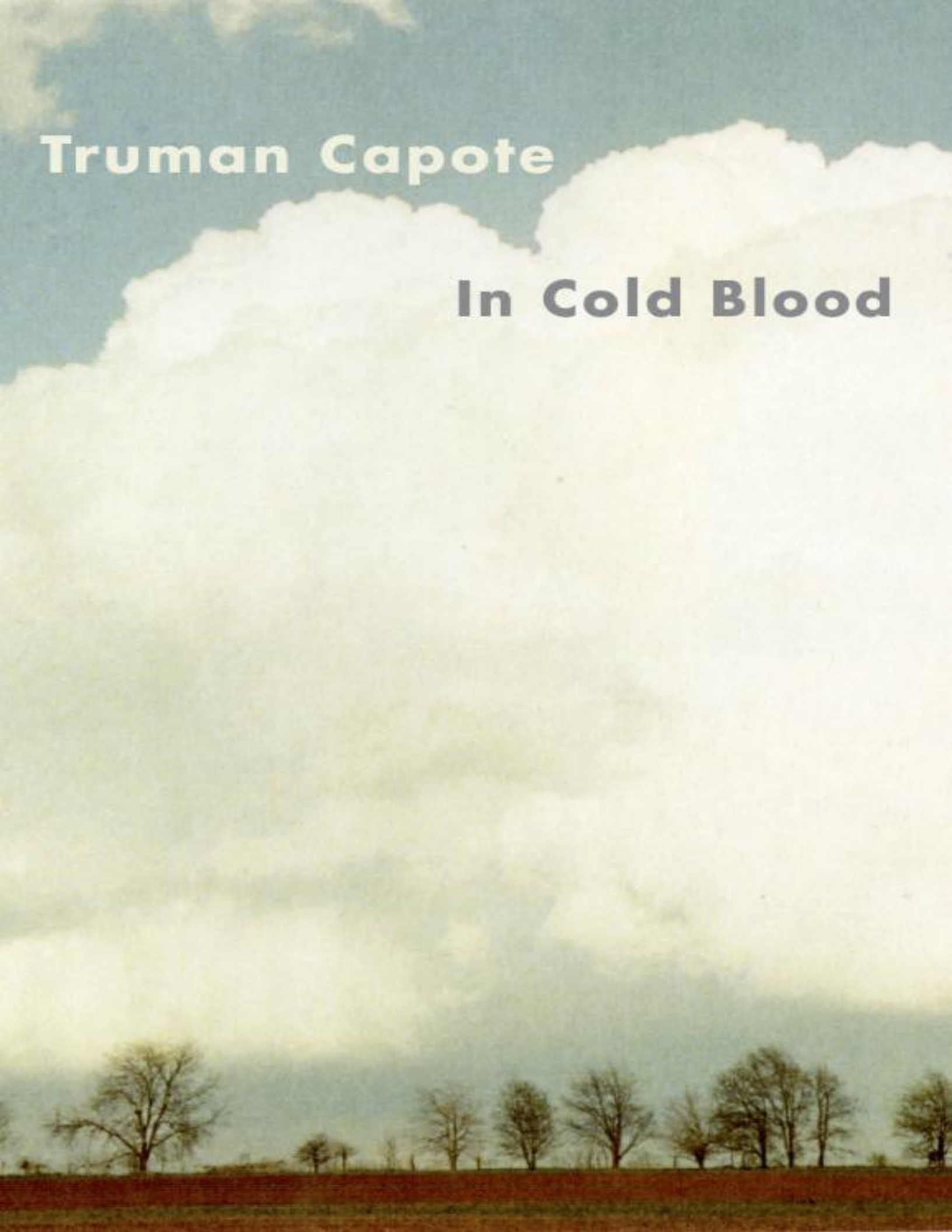
Truman Capote

In Cold Blood



IN COLD BLOOD

A TRUE ACCOUNT OF A MULTIPLE MURDER AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

TRUMAN CAPOTE

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Truman Capote was born Truman Streckfus Persons on September 30, 1924, in New Orleans. His early years were affected by an unsettled family life. He was turned over to the care of his mother's family in Monroeville, Alabama; his father was imprisoned for fraud; his parents divorced and then fought a bitter custody battle over Truman. Eventually he moved to New York City to live with his mother and her second husband, a Cuban businessman whose name he adopted. The young Capote got a job as a copyboy at *The New Yorker* in the early forties, but was fired for inadvertently offending Robert Frost. The publication of his early stories in *Harper's Bazaar* established his literary reputation when he was in his twenties, and his novels *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), a gothic coming-of-age story that Capote described as "an attempt to exorcise demons," and *The Grass Harp* (1951), a gentler fantasy rooted in his Alabama years, consolidated his precocious fame.

From the start of his career Capote associated himself with a wide range of writers and artists, high-society figures, and international celebrities, gaining frequent media attention for his exuberant social life. He collected his stories in *A Tree of Night* (1949) and published the novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958), but devoted his energies increasingly to the stage—adapting *The Grass Harp* into a play and writing the musical *House of Flowers* (1954)—and to journalism, of which the earliest examples were *Local Color* (1950) and *The Muses Are Heard* (1956). He made a brief foray into the movies to write the screenplay for John Huston's *Beat the Devil* (1954).

Capote's interest in the murder of a family in Kansas led to the prolonged investigation that provided the basis for *In Cold Blood* (1966), his most successful and acclaimed book. By "treating a real event with fictional techniques," Capote intended to create a new synthesis: something both "immaculately factual" and a work of art. However its genre was defined, from the moment it began to appear in serialized form in *The New Yorker* the book exerted a fascination among a wider readership than Capote's writing had ever attracted before. The abundantly publicized masked ball at the Plaza Hotel with which he celebrated the completion of *In Cold Blood*

was an iconic event of the 1960s, and for a time Capote was a constant presence on television and in magazines, even trying his hand at movie acting in *Murder by Death*.

He worked for many years on *Answered Prayers*, an ultimately unfinished novel that was intended to be the distillation of everything he had observed in his life among the rich and famous; an excerpt from it published in *Esquire* in 1975 appalled many of Capote's wealthy friends for its revelation of intimate secrets, and he found himself excluded from the world he had once dominated. In his later years he published two collections of fiction and essays, *The Dogs Bark* (1973) and *Music for Chameleons* (1980). He died on August 25, 1984, after years of problems with drugs and alcohol.

INTRODUCTION

BY BOB COLACELLO

In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences riveted the nation's attention when it was first published as a four-part series in *The New Yorker* in the fall of 1965 and then in book form by Random House in early 1966. I met Truman Capote several years later. Although Truman and I sometimes spent entire days together, he almost never mentioned the work that had brought him fame and fortune. Occasionally, he'd remark that Norman Mailer—who had published his tour de force of novelistic journalism, *Armies of the Night*, two years after *In Cold Blood*—was receiving far too much praise for exploiting the hybrid form Capote claimed he'd invented: the nonfiction novel. ("But no matter how hard Mr. Mailer tries," he'd say, "he will never beat me at my own game.")

Capote's early "fiction" novels—*Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), *The Grass Harp* (1951), and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958)—were gems of style, charm, and character. But it was only when he turned to journalism in *The Muses Are Heard*, his acutely observed, amusingly told 1956 report of a tour of Russia by a troupe of American actors performing *Porgy and Bess*, that his work became modern. He later noted, "*The Muses Are Heard*" had set me thinking on a different line altogether: I wanted to produce a journalistic novel, something on a large scale that would have the credibility of fact, the immediacy of film, the depth and freedom of prose and the precision of poetry."

In Cold Blood began with a one-column story, datelined Holcomb, Kansas, on page 39 of *The New York Times* of November 16, 1959. Its headline read "WEALTHY FARMER, 3 OF FAMILY SLAIN." Two weeks later, Capote was on his way to Kansas. "He bought a new Dior suit for the trip," says Phyllis Cerf Wagner, the widow of Random House chairman Bennett Cerf. "That was the first thing he said to the professor Bennett sent him to at the University of Kansas: 'Have you ever seen a man in a Dior suit?' The professor replied, 'Not only have I never seen a man in a Dior suit, I've never seen a woman in a Dior suit.' " Yet, within a month, the New York City slicker in his Paris wardrobe had succeeded in winning over not only the upstanding citizens of Finney County who re-created the life and personalities of the murdered

Clutter family, but also the killers themselves, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, who poured out their ragtag tales of woe.

Over the next six years, after Hickock and Smith were quickly convicted, sentenced to death, and then granted five stays of execution, Capote grew increasingly close to them. Too close, his friends would say afterward, particularly to Perry Smith, who was almost as short as Truman, and like him, the son of an alcoholic mother who had abandoned him and a father who had disappointed him. Diana Vreeland liked to tell a tale she said Truman had told her: During one of his death row interviews with Smith, "Perry grabbed Truman's ballpoint pen and pressed it right against his eyeball, while he held him by the back of his head for something like fifteen minutes. Can you imagine, poor Truman? But it was an act of love you see, as well as an act of terror."

At Hickock and Smith's request, Capote was witness to their execution by hanging on April 14, 1965. "Truman told me he always felt guilty about not doing enough for them, about using them," recalls Bianca Jagger. Another friend, C.Z. Guest, says, "I begged him not to go to the execution. He felt he should. I think it affected him more than he ever realized. That book took everything out of him. He was so sensitive. He wasn't a tough nut."

By the time I met him, Capote was obsessed with novel-in-progress *Answered Prayers*—which he said, again and again, would be the American equivalent of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*—and after a chapter from it, "La Cote Basque, 1965," was printed in *Esquire* in December 1975, with defending himself from the snubs and insults of the rich and powerful friends who found themselves insufficiently fictionalized. But *Answered Prayers* was never finished. It was during that time that Capote turned to the downtown world of Andy Warhol's Factory, where I was then working as editor of *Interview* magazine. Capote's association with Warhol turned out to be surprisingly productive.

The ever-practical Andy gave Truman a tape recorder so that he could, as Andy put it, "Write without writing," and offered to do Truman's portrait for free if he'd publish the results in *Interview* as "Conversations with Capote." During 1979, while *Interview* contributing editor Brigid Berlin sat beside him in his raspberry-lacquered dining room, heaping praise and

making sure he kept writing, Truman completed ten pieces for the magazine that purported to be transcripts of tapes but were actually highly structured compositions of recorded and remembered dialogue. At least three of them —an extraordinary profile of Marilyn Monroe entitled “A Beautiful Child”; the hilarious and heartrending “A Day’s Work,” in which he followed a Caribbean-born cleaning woman on her Manhattan rounds, and “Hand-Carved Coffins,” “a nonfiction novella” about a series of bizarre murders in Nebraska—were as compelling as anything he had previously written. All ten pieces were included in the collection *Music for Chameleons* (1983), his first book of new work since *In Cold Blood*, and the last one before his death, at age 59, in 1984.

It seems fitting that Capote’s final testament was a work of reportage, because, as *In Cold Blood* made magnificently clear, journalism was his true calling. In fact, he was among the first writers—Joan Didion and V. S. Naipaul also come to mind—to realize that as our culture rushed headlong into the Age of Information, it was no longer as interesting or as vital to imagine reality as to report, shape, and define it. *In Cold Blood*, it is now apparent, was the compass pointing the way to much of the most exciting writing that has since followed, on both sides of the border between fiction and nonfiction, from the New Journalism of Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese to the Literary Journalism of Bruce Chatwin and Ryszard Kapuscinski, from James Ellroy’s *American Tabloid* to John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.

Capote was one of the first who dared to elevate journalism to the level of art. *In Cold Blood* is a work of great discipline and even greater restraint, a tale of fate, as spare and elegiac as a Greek tragedy, as rich in its breadth and depth as the classic French novels of Stendhal and Flaubert. “We all have our souls and we all have façades,” Truman Capote told his friend Kay Meehan a year or so before he came upon the news that would inspire his masterpiece, “and then there’s something in between that makes us function as people. That’s what I have the ability to communicate.”

For Jack Dunphy and Harper Lee
with my love and gratitude

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned, more often than not numerous interviews conducted over a considerable period of time. Because these “collaborators” are identified within the text, it would be redundant to name them here; nevertheless, I want to express a formal gratitude, for without their patient co-operation my task would have been impossible. Also, I will not attempt to make a roll call of all those Finney County citizens who, though their names do not appear in these pages, provided the author with a hospitality and friendship he can only reciprocate but never repay. However, I do wish to thank certain persons whose contributions to my work were very specific: Dr. James McCain, President of Kansas State University; Mr. Logan Sanford, and the staff of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation; Mr. Charles McAtee, Director of the Kansas State Penal Institutions; Mr. Clifford R. Hope, Jr., whose assistance in legal matters was invaluable; and finally, but really foremost, Mr. William Shawn of *The New Yorker*, who encouraged me to undertake this project, and whose judgment stood me in good stead from first to last.

T.C.