

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **In Cold Blood**

### **By Truman Capote**

#### **Introduction**

*In Cold Blood* reconstructs the murder in 1959 of a Kansas farmer, his wife and their two children. Truman Capote's comprehensive study of the killings and subsequent investigation explores the circumstances surrounding this crime and the effect it had on those involved.

At the center of Capote's study are the amoral young killers Perry Smith and Dick Hickok, who, vividly drawn by Capote, are shown to be reprehensible yet entirely and frighteningly human.

Increasing preoccupation with journalism formed the basis for *In Cold Blood*, a pioneering work of documentary novel or "nonfiction novel". The work started from an article in *The New York Times*. Capote interviewed with Harper Lee local people to recreate the lives of both the murderers and their victims. During the process he became emotionally attached to both killers. However, this did not prevent him from telling the story with utmost objectivity.

The research work and writing took six years to finish. Capote used neither a tape recorder nor note pad, but emptied his interviews and impressions in notebooks at the end of the day. He also recorded last days of the death-obsessed criminals.

Richard Brooks' screen adaptation of the book, with its black-and-white photography, avoided all sensationalism. The trial scene was re-enacted at the Finney County Court House in the Garden City, where the actual trial had taken place. Brooks also used the real jury who had convicted Perry Smith and Dick Hickok.

*(Penguin Books, Books and Writers)*

#### **About the Author**

American novelist, short story writer, and playwright Capote gained international fame with his "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood*, an account of a real life crime in which an entire family was murdered by two sociopaths. The Louisiana-Mississippi-Alabama area provided the setting for much of Capote's fiction.

Capote was born in New Orleans, as the son of a salesman and a 16-year-old beauty queen, Lillie Mae Faulk. His father, Archulus "Arch" Persons, worked as a clerk for a

steamboat company. Persons never stuck at any job for long, and was always leaving home in search for new opportunities. The unhappy marriage gradually disintegrated. When Capote was 5, his parents eventually divorced.

The young Truman was brought up in Monroeville, Alabama. He lived some years with his relatives, one of whom became the model for the loving, elderly spinster of the author's novels, stories, and plays. "Her face is remarkable - not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind," Capote wrote in *A Christmas Memory* of his distant relative Sook, Nanny Rumbley Faulk. Sook was 60-something, "small and sprightly, like a bantam hen..." Capote's mother, Lillie Mae, wrote letters and telephoned to her son, often crying that she had no money and no husband.

In his childhood Capote made friends with Harper Lee, who portrayed Capote as Dill in her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "Dill was a curiosity. He wore blue linen shorts that buttoned to his shirt, his hair was snow white and stuck to his head like duckfluff; he was a year my senior but I towered over him."

After Capote's mother married again, this time a well-to-do businessman, Capote moved to New York, and adopted his stepfather's surname. He attended the Trinity School and St. John's Academy in New York, and the public schools of Greenwich, Connecticut. At age of 17, Capote ended his formal schooling. He found work at the *New Yorker*, where he attracted attention with his eccentric style of dress. "... I recall him sweeping through the corridors of the magazine in a black opera cape, his long golden hair falling to his shoulders: an apparition that put one in mind of Oscar Wilde in Nevada, in his velvets and lilies." (Brendan Gill in *Here at The New Yorker*, 1975)

Capote's early stories were published in quality magazines and in 1946 he won the O. Henry award. His first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, depicted a boy, Joel Knox, growing up in the Deep South. Joel is "too pretty, too delicate and fair skinned". He seeks his father but falls into a relationship with a decadent transvestite. The book gained a wide success and created controversy because of its treatment of homosexuality. During this time Capote had already established his fame among the cultural circles as the thin voiced, promising young writer, who could brighten up parties with his sharp and clever remarks.

After years of living, and writing, in Europe, Capote wrote *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in 1958. Its central character, Holly Golightly, is a young woman, who comes to New York seeking for happiness. The narrator, an aspiring writer who has the same birthday as Capote (Sept. 30), follows Holly's life, filled with colorful characters. "What I've found does the most good is just to get into a taxi and go to Tiffany's. It calms me down right away, the quietness and the proud look of it; nothing very bad could happen to you there..."

*(Books and Writers)*

## Reviews

“Truman Capote offers us a vast book in just four sustained chapters, each of which is sub-divided as the narrative shifts between aspects of the different individuals' lives. Throughout, the style is much more complex than mere journalism, but the clarity with which it communicates is at times breathtaking. We hear from those directly involved, both victims and perpetrators, their families, the police, the judiciary, the neighbors, the lawyers, the passers-by, the acquaintances, the cellmates. The detail is forensic. -- *Blogcritics Magazine*

“The best documentary account of an American crime ever written. . . . The book chills the blood and exercises the intelligence . . . harrowing.” —*The New York Review of Books*

## Further Reading

*The Orchid Thief*, by Susan Orlean

*Angela's Ashes*, by Frank McCourt

*Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Faith* by Jon Krakauer

*Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream*, by H. G. Bissinger

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. How does Capote build suspense despite the fact that readers know the ultimate outcome from the beginning of *In Cold Blood*?
2. In what ways is *In Cold Blood* like a fiction novel? How does Capote report the facts and allow different voices to speak without using a journalistic style?
3. *In Cold Blood* starts with details about the Clutter family's last day alive. Did any of the details particularly stick out to you? Did Capote make you feel attached to the family by sharing these details?
4. Were there any other characters you empathized with because of small details Capote wrote about them? Bobby Rupp? Alvin Dewey?
5. Why do you think Capote split the narrative into three sections? Why do you think he did not describe how the murders happened until Dick and Perry were caught and gave their confessions?
6. How did Capote humanize the killers? Did they seem likable despite the brutality of their crime and unremorsefulness to the end?
7. Capote seems to paint Perry in a more sympathetic light than Dick. He seems sensitive and even kind at points; however, by the end you find out that Perry committed all four murders. Did that surprise you? Did you sympathize with Dick more than Perry at any point? Or did you not buy any of the kind characterizations?
8. Do you think Dick and Perry were sane? Did the psychiatric analysis of them and descriptions of other cold blooded killers surprise you? Scare you? Make you think differently about violent crime or the death penalty?
9. Rate *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote on a scale of one to five.

(About.com)