

Sob-Sister Gothic

IN COLD BLOOD By Truman Capote
Random House. 343 pp \$5.95

Sol Yurick

Writers will have much to thank Truman Capote for. Leading celebrities of the "subjective" life, such as Selby, Pynchon and Heller have been shown the way. Legions of poets will scan newspapers instead of lines, seeking the coordinates of truth!

Actually, taken by itself (aside from a still uncured tendency to rodomontade), *In Cold Blood* is not a bad book. It is better than the usual police reportage, fast moving, melodramatic, suspenseful in the way of its genre, even a little artful. But it is impossible to dissociate *In Cold Blood* from the claims its author and publisher are making for it: that it is a new art form and, as such, represents a higher objectivity. Capote's establishment of the new art form reminds one of those special 3-pound weight classes which are staked out in boxing from time to time to fatten the take: junior lightweight, senior bantamweight. Capote's first defense of his new title is successful: we are told Oscar Lewis has written a documentary, ". . . an *impure form* . . ." (italics added), poor Lillian Ross only managed to write a novella, Daniel Defoe's *Journal of The Plague Year* certainly wasn't poetic enough, Meyer Levin wrote a novel "suggested" by fact; and as for those thirty or more a year case studies in the annals of aberrant crime, forget it, the Dreisers, the Farrells, the Algrens—they are not in it at all. The *minnesinger* of engineer reality wins in a stylish walk.

And it turns out that what we are really witnessing is a kind of morality play: the conversion of Truman Capote who, turning away from the sinful, the decadent, the tumid prose pathologic, comes into the clear and healthful air of the world of objectivity and, at the same time, throws open new markets of opportunity by the example of his redemption. He also manages to save the moribund novel which has priced itself out of the market with too much exotic experimentation.

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As for the higher objectivity—we are to be persuaded that it is reportage shotgun-wed to poetics. How beguiled we are by the thought of the lived or witnessed experience, what paeans our dust jackets sing to that author who has lived the rich, full life as ritually exemplified by homage to the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*. But the critics are demonstrating a deplorable lack of homework in the history of literature and psychology when they respond enthusiastically to this book—we should expect as much from fans of the *Reader's Digest*. The dramatic distillation of this vast assemblage of data (trunks full, we are assured) follows the paths of mythic selection dictated by the style-book of *New Yorker* fact pieces. And Capote's choice of detail is more influenced by *The Folk-Motif Index*, or amateur readings in Jung's moonshine of the racial unconscious than by any disinterested resolution of social forces. If you accuse Capote of distortion, he can plead the novelist's license, if you point out that Perry Smith's dreams of a poisonous diamond tree defended by a snake is lifted out of mythology and worse: parlor Freud—or that the godlike giant parrot is cribbed from Flaubert's *A Simple Heart*—his defense will be reportage: *the man said it*.

Capote's first section, "The last to see them alive," shows how, that dramatic night, the Clutters' destiny intersected with the destiny of the killers, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock. It is done in the best tradition of newspaper sob-sisterism wedded to Southern Gothic prose. Each section ends on a doom-note hooker as he switches back and forth from the innocent family going about its business to the approaching killers. "Then, touching the brim of his cap, he headed for home and the day's work, unaware that it would be his last." "A bookmark lay between its pages, a stiff piece of watered silk upon which an admonition had been embroidered: 'Take ye heed, watch and pray for you know not when the time is.'" "I can't imagine you afraid. No matter what would happen, you'd talk your way out of it." Why go on? Objective? It is "little-did-they-think" writing, fat with portent. Possibly the

enthusiastic response is due to years of conditioning by newspaper reportage. At last! a recognizable form, you don't have to work to recognize reality—it's like you see in the newspapers all the time. And like the newspaper approach, the poverty of Capote's 'new' art form is appalling: the shallowness stupefying. This is a man who gives us the stunning psychological metaphor, "the criminal mind . . ." As they say on the radio: "Make this simple test." Read any newspaper or magazine account of Capote's *In Cold Blood*, then read the book—you will not learn one new thing, you will even have been given all the worth-while lines. A work of art should, presumably, continue to shape our easy acceptance of the world, make us see in new ways, create new metaphors with which to view the world: new art should go beyond engineer reality.

This higher objectivity consists of such factual sentences as ". . . the left eye being truly serpentine, with a venomous, sickly-blue squint that although it was involuntarily acquired, seemed nevertheless to warn of bitter sediment at the bottom of his nature." How wonderful that any accident should adapt itself to the eternal verity of a thing, how right for the world is that "nevertheless" ". . . from first footfall to final silence, flawlessly devised," a fine formation of a florid phrase! One compares it with Lillian Ross's masterly understatement, or with Hubert Selby's restrained catalogue of horrors, the very impersonality of which raises any "truly serpentine eye" from a prosaic given to a poetic fact.

How Capote excels at the list! He enumerates, piling up detail, taking care to shed the aura of doom on artifact so that each item acquires enormous pathos and drips sentimentality. This kind of emotion amplification serves to make one weep over crumpled tissues, pie baking becomes a footnote to the short life of man, what a weak vessel is he, tears are baked in with the cherries. To be sure, after the first section, Capote's prose lavenders more lightly, itinerary, document, presumable interview are more in evidence, but he reprises at the end with an underplayed crescendo of tear-jerking effects, giving us a sheriff's elegy in a country graveyard where the Clutters are buried. Naturalism decays into case history. Case

history's half-life becomes decadence, a concern with the emotional charging of literary ornaments, not substance. The sought-after effect is the vicarious charge, the tear. This is where we came in—it is still that unreconstructed devil, Capote, not too far off from his earliest ventures. We are still in the presence of Huysmans, not Huntley-Brinkley. The implications for American Fiction are bad because it argues, more and more, a turning away from the recognizably fictional modes not because they are presumably less true but less marketable, less emotion provoking. Capote is in the forefront fleeing the subjective life. But is he?

"*In Cold Blood* is remarkable for its objectivity—nowhere, despite his involvement, does the author intrude," Mr. Plimpton informs us in *The New York Times*. Nonsense. One of the most studied omissions of the history is the role Capote played in the life of the killers. He tells us with pride that he disdains mechanical recording instruments because they cause a distortion of the interview—that he has trained himself to have 95 per cent memory retention. I won't doubt his word at all. I will suspend belief and accept that the killers said what Capote remembers they said. But how much of their words were, nevertheless, Capote's art and none of their

own? Any interviewer has an effect on the interviewed, there is always a subconscious effort to please the questioner, to give him what he wants. Guidance comes in the form of subliminal hints, facial gestures, hard movements denoting approval or disapproval, the very diction of questioning conditions and cues. The interrogatory moral-seeking words of one reporter are useful as response to the next breathless inside-story seeker. Here is Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in action, observation alters the observed. Hitherto illiterate prisoners respond in categories of humility, piety, absurdity, and begin to sound like Dostoevskian heroes on the verge of an epiphany. Prisoners learn their literary style on the edge of the gallops.

And where there has been, admittedly, as in Capote's case, excessive involvement, preoccupation, breathless obsession—a whole vicarious involvement is hinted at—what room and time there was for a leisurely programing of the prisoners in the use of ironic moral overtones, reportorial portentousness—remember, Capote was in touch with them, personally and by mail, for years—he was present at their execution. Capote didn't have to be afraid of tape recorders after all, the prisoners buried the evidence of what they were and forgot about it. Why does Capote

leave himself out of it? He is one of the prime actors. Lillian Ross wasn't afraid to include herself in *Picture* and made a much better book for it. And who's not to say that the polishing of a crude phrase—merely editorship, of course—might not lead to a statement like "And it wasn't because of anything the Clutters did. They never hurt me. Like other people. Like people have all my life. Maybe it's just that the Clutters were the ones who had to pay for it." How neat. Could Joe Mankiewicz have said it better?

Even the title irritates. Not only is it in the best tradition of sensational headline mongering but it represents the standard incantation used by prosecuting attorneys in asking for the extreme penalty. But the description of the killing indicates that it was done not "in cold blood" but in the grip of obsession, almost sexual passion, bringing a release that was almost as intense as any orgasm or mystical experience. "In cold blood" argues logic, reason, planning, cause-effect thinking, personal responsibility, above and beyond any social conditioning, in the committing of a crime the phrase is the Establishment invocation of sanity. And Capote's use of the title argues his tacit approval of the system.

It is the middle class which is responsive to and outraged by that violent dislocation, by that apparent unmotivation of certain acts which it is stylish to call irrationality or absurdity in literature. The very words argue the exception that tests a pervasive condition, an everyday state of being. And, after all, it is the middle class which has created a social medium whose very nature is shored up by an ideology that stresses personal volition, cause-effect, reason, logic, historicism. Anything that appears to violate this order is shattering, outrageous, deserving of the death penalty, the very presentation, the very special pleading, of *In Cold Blood* implies the *unusualness* of the murderer's act and so becomes diversion, entertainment in case history, and tries to persuade us that what are in fact common patterns of behavior are aberrations. But the poor, for instance, live in a world of violent and "criminal" dislocations, casual unmotivated brutality which no police force tries seriously to stop, so long as it doesn't spill over, it is a world whose inhabitants are not too strongly programed in the ethics of cause-effect, and kill without much feeling, who do not find such behavior absurd, but expected. How few Capotes put their

Bill Watson's Report from Canada

- (1) Safe in their giant glass house
ruffled by gusting wind, frogs
hide under the mud rug and bulge
the little waves of their eyes
to mean "Winter, spare me; I am
just a little life on my knees;
even my eggs are almost water."
And boys throw stones that
go magic into that glass.
- (2) Geese come by. They strain
the downwing sweep, then slide
south fifty yards each time, pump
history past their checked eyes,
and belong wherever they've arrived.
- (3) The bear come down. They swing
the dream of their heads. Every airedale
drop in our dog's blood sings to her
throat, and she becomes that queen
who said "Whom" and "We are not amused."
- (4) Till we grow up we think we're Americans,
that comfort will come. But we do our own
seeing. They're different. We hear them,
their confident tears, in music boxes.
I had not known so many are that way.
I'm Canadian.

William Stafford

obsessed talents to dramatizing such worlds Selby convinces us, for instance, that the world of taken-for-granted violence and brutality interpenetrates our world And since they are of these related worlds, we cannot rest with the Perry Smiths and the Richard Hickocks as they are, before we kill them we make sure they negate themselves by turning into literate, psychopathic heroes We make sure that it is understood that the relationship of the killers to the

Clutters is considered aberrant by treating it as a one-of-a-kind case history Possibly it would have made more sense if Perry Smith's statement read "And it was everything the Clutters did They always hurt me Like other people Like people have all my life It's the Clutters who are the ones who should pay for it" They did and not for the cheap, shallow, sentimental reasons Capote gives us

The higher objectivity? We are still waiting for it.

Proust and the Tartar Relation

PROUST *The Later Years* By George D Painter Little, Brown & Co 424 pp \$7.50

Mina Curtiss

George D Painter's two-volume biography of Marcel Proust is an extraordinary work The six-year gap between the publication of the two volumes, due largely to the noncooperation of Proust's heirs, necessitates a rereading of the first volume, *The Early Years*, in order to judge the success of the work as a whole Its virtues are many and unusual Not only has Mr Painter discovered useful material in little-known memoirs neglected by other Proustians but he has, by the meticulous thoroughness of his study of already used sources, succeeded in creating a unique portrait in montage of Proust's day-to-day existence

The basis of Mr Painter's biographical theory is the conviction that this account of the traceable details of the daily life of the author and of everyone with whom he came in contact reveals the creative process by which *A la recherche du temps perdu* came into being Certainly his handling of the ingredients in this richest of dishes makes absorbing fare But the biographer is, after all, not the chef whose indefinable personal magic is the essential clue to a masterpiece If science could isolate the inner processes whereby the recorded acts and thoughts of a genius are transformed into the specific masterpiece that no other artist could have written, Mr Painter would have succeeded For no one has surpassed him as historian of the keys to the characters in Proust's novel But be-

cause Proust himself was a moralist and because Mr Painter has patterned the structure of his biography on his conception of Proust's method as a novelist, there is a recurring, if perhaps subliminal, moralistic tone that gives false emphasis to many of his conclusions Mr Painter is not the only distinguished English scholar attracted to the life of an admittedly "abnormal" French writer who seems impelled to stand in judgment on the subject of his choice, ignoring the fact that the artist, a *monstre sacré*, is under compulsion to follow the bent of his genius through processes perhaps incomprehensible to the noncreative mind

In her life of Baudelaire the brilliant Oxford don, Emd Starkie, writes

In England, Baudelaire would have gone either to Oxford or Cambridge where under proctorial or tutorial supervision, he would probably have made a name for himself in artistic and literary clubs, and thus might have satisfied his need for eccentric self-expression Unfortunately the university system in France does not fulfill the same function that it does in England [There] Baudelaire was the center of a noisy band of young men [who] lounged about the Latin Quarter drinking in the sordid underground bars.

The smoking of opium was then newest and most daring vice Little did Baudelaire realize at that time that, twenty years later, he would be bewailing his inability to break himself of the addiction

Not that Mr Painter would ever claim that exposure to an English university might have inoculated Proust against the form taken by his "need for eccentric self-expression" Nevertheless, his labeling as a "vice" what Proust called the "curse" of homosexuality reveals a preconceived moral attitude incompatible with the open-

mindedness essential to a biographer He seems to feel that a heterosexual youth would somehow have mitigated Proust's "sin" So in spite of the existence of an unpublished letter (Mr. Painter, mistakenly, I think, restricts himself to published sources), written when Proust was 16, describing in lyrical terms a homosexual experience, his biographer, writing about him in his mid-20s, says "he had often been in love with women, he could still regard himself as fundamentally normal Now, once and for all, he must admit to himself that he was a homosexual . . . He was a criminal . . . Worst of all, he must now devote his life to an interminable effort to conceal his real nature from his mother If he succeeded would he not crucify her daily with his deceit? If he failed would he not quite literally kill her?" (Again there is an unpublished letter that implies beyond doubt that Madame Proust was well aware of her son's tendencies and even tried to warn him against showing them)

Mr Painter's Freudian interpretation of these love-hate feelings is not new However, as he presents the relationship, it is Marcel who, in spite of being a *monstre sacré* to his mother, bears the brunt of blame for their torturing love Yet their correspondence certainly suggests that the mother, in her own sacred way, was also a monster Mr Painter's failure to admit Madame Proust's share in the emotionally burdened relationship suggests that his knowledge of French society is based on scholarship rather than experience Otherwise he would be aware of the domineering power of the mother prevalent in most French bourgeois families even today Indeed, calling to mind the mother troubles of the writers who at various times were important to Proust—Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, not to mention Ruskin—one wonders whether certain illuminating analogies, which would reduce the significance of Proust's guilt, have not been ignored Mr Painter, however, uses his great gift as critic and explicator only at the rare intervals when he is not preoccupied with fitting keys into what is not, after all, a locked microcosm, but a world as rich in poetic description and metaphor, in analysis of the arts and of the phenomena of time and of memory, as in the development of personal relations He is less interested in exploring the psychological parallels between Proust's peers in the macrocosm of art and of time than in tracing the chronology

Mina Curtiss is the author of *Bizet and His World* (Knopf) translator and editor of *My Friend Degas* by Daniel Halévy (Wesleyan University Press), and of *Letters of Marcel Proust*, to be republished this year by Vintage.

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