



# In cold blood

a true account of a multiple murder and its consequences

**By Truman Capote**

First published in 1966

**Genre & subjects**

Murder Investigations

True crime stories

## Synopsis

On November 15, 1959, in the small town of Holcomb, Kansas, a wealthy farmer, his wife and their two young children were found brutally murdered. Blood all over the walls, the telephone lines cut, and only a few dollars stolen. Heading up the investigation is Agent Al Dewey, but all he has are two footprints, four bodies, and a whole lot of questions.

Truman Capote's detailed reconstruction of the events and consequences of that fateful night, *In Cold Blood* is a chilling, gripping mix of journalistic skill and imaginative power.

## Author biography

Truman Capote was born in New Orleans in 1925 and was raised in various parts of the south, his family spending winters in New Orleans and summers in Alabama and New Georgia. By the age of fourteen he had already started writing short stories, some of which were published. He left school when he was fifteen and subsequently worked for the *New Yorker* which provided his first - and last - regular job.

Following his spell with the *New Yorker*, Capote spent two years on a Louisiana farm where he wrote *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948). He lived, at one time or another, in Greece, Italy, Africa and the West Indies, and travelled in Russia and the Orient.

Truman Capote died in August 1984.

## Discussion starters

- Start with the victims. What kind of family is the Clutter household? In what way does Capote create sympathy for them? Do you feel they represented the American Dream?
- How does Capote, as a writer, handle the actual murder of the Clutter family. Or is it too gruesome, too heartbreaking to discuss?
- Discuss the killers, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock. What kind of men were they? What were their motives in committing murder? Talk about their backgrounds and psychological make-ups? Think, for instance, about Perry Smith's chilling

comment: "I thought he was a very nice gentleman.... I thought so right up to the moment I cut this throat."

- In many ways, *In Cold Blood* is about the murderers. Do you feel they deserve such attention? Do you think that Capote pulls off the near impossible—does he build sympathy, in your mind, for the killers? Does he endow them—Perry Smith, in particular—with any kind of humanity? Or does he depict them as savage animals, devoid of human redemption?
- What was the impact of the murders on the Holcomb community? How did it alter the residents' perceptions of the natural order of things, of life?
- With this book, Truman has been credited with developing a new genre of writing: "literary non-fiction." What might that term mean, and how does *In Cold Blood* differ from straight crime reporting? Why did Capote create the kind of story he did, and what is its impact on the reader of this new approach?
- Suggestion: Watch the 2005 film, *Capote*, with Philip Seymour Hoffman in the role of Truman Capote. Does the film affect your view of Capote and his motives in writing his book?

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