

## Another Look at Truman Capote and *In Cold Blood*

*Untold Stories, Unheard Voices: Truman Capote and In Cold Blood.*  
by Jan Whitt. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2019. Hardcover, 335 pp.,  
USD\$35.

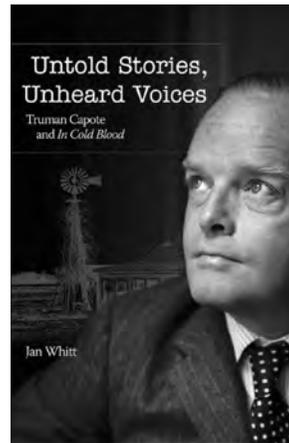
Reviewed by Matthew Ricketson, Deakin University, Australia

Truman Capote remains an important, even iconic, figure in literary journalism studies whose reputation rests primarily on *In Cold Blood*, published first as a four-part series in the *New Yorker*, in 1965, and as a book by Random House in January 1966. The book became an instant bestseller, swiftly garnering for Capote the then—and even now—astounding sum of US\$2 million for paperback, foreign, and movie rights. Confusingly labelled by its author a “nonfiction novel,” *In Cold Blood* won an Edgar award for best factual crime book, but, unlike any of the award’s previous seventeen winners, it legitimized a sub-genre—true crime, as it is now called. Since 1966, *In Cold Blood* has been released in 250 editions, translated into thirty languages, and remains easily available today in the Penguin Modern Classics edition.

Capote, along with Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Tom Wolfe, is one of the most prominent writers identified with the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s. Collectively, their works have spurred much critical attention, both at the time, and in a second wave, as the term literary journalism began to come into critical usage in the 1980s.

So, a classic work, a pioneer, a bestseller, and an influence on later generations of writers: *In Cold Blood* is all of these. It is also a contested, controversial work, and, importantly, has been since its release. Soon after publication, Kenneth Tynan, the English theatre and literary critic, attacked Capote’s ethics and said the book’s title could well have referred to the author’s choice of doing less than he could to help save the two convicted murders, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, from the gallows. Phillip K. Tompkins, writing in *Esquire* in June 1966, attacked Capote’s oft-stated claims to factual fidelity. Tompkins returned to Holcomb, Kansas, the location of the murders of the Clutter family that had sparked Capote’s interest in 1959, and documented errors of fact and interpretation. Some were small but a worryingly large number weren’t.

In the decades since, various scholars, biographers, and journalists have uncovered more problems with Capote’s work. Some scholars have delved into Capote’s papers



held at the New York Public Library to show, among other things, the extraordinary access to case materials that Detective Alvin Dewey gave Capote or how much unattributed work Harper Lee contributed to *In Cold Blood*. Gerald Clarke, Capote's first and most comprehensive biographer, has revealed that the final scene of *In Cold Blood* is entirely invented and, in 2013, a journalist from the *Wall Street Journal* dug into a cache of old documents held by the Kansas Bureau of Investigation to show Capote distorting facts to suit his narrative purpose.

This does not for a moment mean students and scholars should strike *In Cold Blood* from their list—it remains a compelling reading experience—but they should read it with their eyes open to the many questions that have been raised, and proven, about it. One of the curious features of critical scholarship about Capote and *In Cold Blood* is how often critics, in the face of strong evidence, have excused Capote's practices on the ground that he was an accomplished writer with literary ambitions. Granted, the term nonfiction novel opens the door to misreadings (one critic, Sven Birkerts, tartly observed that it was an oxymoronic phrase and a moronic idea), but *In Cold Blood* was ineluctably an account of an actual rather than a fictional multiple murder and its consequences (Birkerts, "Docu-fiction," In *An Artificial Wilderness: Essays on Twentieth Century Literature*, 265–70. New York: William Morrow, 1987). To avoid facing this reality, or to wave away questions about Capote's journalistic and literary practices, undermines the years of careful work done by scholars and practitioners to define the elements and boundaries of literary journalism.

Do we need another book about Capote when there is so much literary journalism being done in the United States and many other countries that merits attention? Probably not unless it offers either a fresh reading of the book or fresh information about its creation or its consequences. *Untold Stories, Unheard Voices* does not offer the former but does provide the latter. Some of this draws mainly on the work of other scholars, such as a 2012 doctoral dissertation by T. Madison Peschock that demonstrates the extent to which Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and childhood friend of Capote, contributed to the research of *In Cold Blood* and how Capote failed to acknowledge her work. As promised in the book's title, the voices of other players in the orbit of the Clutter murders have been included by Whitt. They include a memoir about the Clutter family by the niece of Herbert and Bonnie Clutter (278–84), a memoir about Perry Smith by Donald Cullivan, a former army acquaintance (288–302), and a memoir by Dick Hickock, ghost-written by local journalist, Starling Mack Nations (184–203).

These morsels of new information are moderately interesting, adding a modicum to our understanding of *In Cold Blood*. It would have been good had the author more actively engaged with how these additional accounts intersect with earlier ones. To take one example, Capote writes in *In Cold Blood* that Hickock intended raping the fifteen-year-old Nancy Clutter but was stopped by Smith. The Reverend James Post, chaplain at the prison where Smith and Hickock had been on death row, told Capote's oral biographer, George Plimpton, that Hickock was not the "sex fiend" that Capote portrayed and, indeed, there is no mention of Hickock having sex with underage girls in the mini-biography Capote compiled of Hickock that is among his papers in the

New York Public Library. However, there is evidence in his ghost-written memoir (192) that Hickock intended to rape Nancy Clutter. Nations's account, then, appears to be the source for Capote. Needless to say, this information goes unacknowledged in *In Cold Blood*. Capote regarded Nations as a rival and did all that he could to undermine Nations's attempts to produce a book about the Clutter murders, which Whitt documents in *Untold Stories, Unheard Voices*.

No one, including Nations's son, Michael, who found the ghost-written memoir, regarded Nations as an artist: "He wrote like a sledgehammer," Michael is quoted as saying (Whitt, 181). It is another piece of evidence, though, if any were needed, of Capote's unethical behavior. Whitt is aware of what Capote did to Nations but could have worked harder to bring out the implications of some of the material in her newly unearthed accounts.

*Untold Stories, Unheard Voices* would have benefited from a good editor. It is repetitious; the structure of the book is outlined early on in some detail, then repeated on pages 174–76. Why? Early in the book, Whitt writes that *In Cold Blood* "has outlasted negative criticism and will endure as a fusion of fiction and nonfiction and as a stylistic masterpiece." This phrase, or something like it, is repeated throughout the book with the regularity of a journalist adding an autofill background par to a developing news story. Whitt appears to have been so impressed by a lengthy quotation on page 269 from Madelaine Blais, a literary journalist and professor of journalism, that she repeats it on page 315.

The book contains basic errors that should have been picked up. The pulp true crime magazine, *Male*, is described as "extant" on page 183 but "defunct" on the following page. On page 30 Capote is quoted discussing the news item in the *New York Times* that piqued his interest in the Clutter case. "Eisenhower Appointee Murdered" is the headline he cites, but this is wrong; the correct headline, "Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain" is actually cited earlier, on page 16. Ironically, in a paragraph on page 21 discussing Phillip K. Tompkins's criticisms of inaccuracies in *In Cold Blood*, a well-known quote of Capote's—"One doesn't spend almost six years on a book, the point of which is factual accuracy, and then give way to minor distortions"—is wrongly attributed to Tompkins.

The book's index is a bare two and a half pages, and its organization is unhelpful. Various authors, such as Albert Camus, Thomas Mann, and William Shakespeare, are listed, even if they have been mentioned only once, and are peripheral to the book's argument. Conversely, few if any of the literary critics and biographers, upon whose work Whitt regularly draws, are listed in the index.

This lack of attention to detail in a scholarly book casts a pall over the interesting material the author has amassed. For literary journalism scholars and for students, then, *Untold Stories, Unheard Voices* is a work to be consulted and added to rather than relied on.