

BOOK REVIEWS

Truman Capote lived most of the last decade of his life as an item on Page Six of the *New York Post*. His terrible misadventures excited much scorn and satisfaction, but to his credit Capote authorized his biographer, Gerald Clarke, to operate with candor, and Clarke has told the sad story of Capote's finish with an unsensational thoroughness befitting the sturdy treatment he gives his beginning (also sad) and middle (productive). Objections will be raised that there is more of the celebrity than the artist in this book, but given the subject, how could it be otherwise? Capote did not, after all, just set out to be a writer; he set out to be an Author.

He was really Truman Streckfus Persons, born in Alabama in 1924 to Lillie Mae Faulk and Arch Persons. Mama drank and had affairs (one with Jack Dempsey) and Daddy was "a born salesman" who dealt mostly in snake oil. One of his promotions was "the Great Pasha, otherwise known as Sam Goldberg from the Bronx. . . . With the help of what was advertised as a secret Egyptian drug, he could retard his heartbeat to such an abnormally slow rate that . . . he could remain alive in an airtight coffin for up to five hours." Arch and Lillie Mae abandoned Truman, leaving him to live with three aging maiden cousins and an unmarried uncle. Old Sook, who would show up in *The Grass Harp* and *A Christmas Memory*, was so shy she seemed simple-minded to some; she read only Grimm's fairy tales and the Bible; made herbal medicines for dropsy; sent Christmas fruitcakes to the Roosevelts; and was addicted to morphine. (Of such things is Southern Lit born.)

Lillie Mae eventually reached New York City, where she married Joseph Capote, a Cuban working successfully on Wall Street. (He would later do a little time in Sing Sing.) Truman was grudgingly called north by his mother, and he spent most of his adolescence in Manhattan and Greenwich, enraging the drunken Lillie Mae with his bravely undisguised effeminacy. Clarke takes an orthodox Freudian view of Truman's tormenting Lillie Mae (who had rechristened herself Nina), and finds it "impossible to dispute his bleak and chilling judgment of his

CAPOTE: A BIOGRAPHY Gerald Clarke/Simon and Schuster/\$22.95

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own mother: 'she was the single worst person in my life.' She would kill herself with Seconal in the early fifties.

Clarke quotes E. B. White's description of *The New Yorker* during World War II: "a worse madhouse than ever now . . . on account of the departure of everybody for the wars, leaving only the senile, the psycho-neurotic, the maimed, the halt, and the goofy to get out the magazine. There is hardly a hormone left in the place . . ." Still, copyboy Truman Capote managed to stand out, sashaying through the corridors, his blond bangs bouncing, ordering in his meals from 21: " 'For God's sake! What's that?' [Harold] Ross himself demanded when he peered out of his office and saw him drifting down the hall." He even managed to lose his job (not an easy task there, then or ever) for offending the dignity of that monstrous false god of American poetry, Robert Frost.

It didn't matter. He would soon launch himself with spooky, gorgeously written short stories in *Harpers' Bazaar* and *Mademoiselle*, creating anticipation for his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Its jacket photo—TC in a calculated, Gothic kiddie-porn pose—remains nearly as famous as the book itself, though, as Clarke notes, *Other Voices* contains "the themes that dominate all of Truman's writing: the loneliness that afflicts all but the stupid or insensitive; the sa-

credness of love, whatever its form; the disappointment that invariably follows high expectation; and the perversion of innocence."

His serious lovers lacked his taste for limelight: Newton Arvin, a fastidious English professor at Smith ("Newton was my Harvard") and, enduringly, Jack Dunphy—angry, reclusive, butch, dignified, and it would seem from this book, something of a horror. At least as important to Capote were his relationships with those Clarke calls the "swans"—rich women like Babe Paley, Slim Keith, Gloria Guinness, and Lee Radziwill—to whom he became confidant, jester, tastemaker, and toy. Some, like Mrs. Paley, were truly exquisite; others, like Princess Lee, were nullities.

Throughout the fifties Capote succeeded with delicate fictions, travel sketches, and personality pieces. (Unwisely stagestruck, he had respectable failures with *The Grass Harp* and *House of Flowers*.) Without really knowing it, he was moving toward his big book, learning to make one eye, the reporter's, work with the second, a novelist's, through a single pair of spectacles. His report on the trip of an American musical company doing *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union (*The Muses Are Heard*, 1956) and an extended interview with deep thinker Marlon Brando read today like warm-ups for *In Cold Blood* (1966), the "non-fiction novel" that told the story of how Perry Smith and Dick Hickock killed the Herbert Clutter family of Holcomb, Kansas, in 1959 and how,

five and a half years later, society exacted its retribution.

About that book one wants to use the old advertising slogan "Often Imitated, Never Equalled," because it surely applies. Whether the nonfiction novel was invented by Capote or two hundred and fifty years earlier by Defoe, the point remains that of all the New Journalism produced in the past quarter century *In Cold Blood* achieved a unique level of artistry. So exhausted was Capote from his emotional immersion in the case (he bought the killers' gravestones) that when it was over, and the book was a commercial and critical phenomenon, he was finished. He didn't know it, of course, and the long social bender he embarked on would be interrupted with small achievements here and there, but his talent was prematurely aged, and he would spend what should have been his prime mostly dithering himself to death.

Along with great sums of money and a new apartment in the U.N. Plaza came a level of celebrity he could scarcely have imagined. His Black and White masked ball at the Plaza Hotel in 1966 was the Party of the Century. All the achievers and parasites of our time begged for invitations. It was so glittering that professional killjoys like Pete Hamill had to print scoldings about such things being allowed to occur while there was a war going on; it was also so successful that even Dunphy had a good time. Still, Capote was silly enough to believe that he had accomplished something by it, and in the years of his crazy fame he was prompted to take on such empty projects as turning Lee Radziwill into an actress—an effort whose redundancy eluded him. He became a fixture of the talk-show couch. Suburban millions would gasp, and even take offense, when he first lisped hello to Johnny, but before the next commercial they would decide, rather like the residents of Finney County, Kansas, that the little fellow was so clever he must be all right. Having become famous to the extent only television will permit, he had gotten his wish to astonish. But it was granted with a Midas catch: exposed so widely and frequently, he soon became familiar, almost ordinary, a literary Charo on an upholstered Love Boat.

He was supposed to be in pursuit of an even bigger book than *In Cold Blood*, a novel. Not an elegant little dolls' house like *Breakfast at Tiffany's*



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(Clarke reveals that Holly Golightly was called Connie Gustafson in an early draft); he was going to make a Taj Mahal. The American Proust was what he wanted to be, declaring the ambition repeatedly:

"A large novel, my magnum opus" was how he described it to Bennett Cerf. "A book about which I must be very silent, so as not to alarm my 'sitters,' and which I think will really arouse you when I outline it (only you must never mention it to a soul). The novel is called 'Answered Prayers'; and, if all goes well, I think it will answer mine."

All went nowhere. For one thing, far from being silent, he did almost nothing but talk about it; and, for another, he remained far more interested in the sitters themselves than any portrait he might produce. (This alone makes him something more like Proust's opposite than successor.) Finally, he forgot the very saying from which he derived the title ("more tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered prayers"). The little of the book that was published in *Esquire* in the mid-seventies can without much exaggeration be said to have killed him.

The swans recognized themselves dopedily dishing their marital secrets—secrets Capote had hardly refracted into anything like art—in the chapter called "La Côte Basque, 1965." Babe would no longer speak to him and Slim Keith ("Lady Ina Coolbirth") turned into an active enemy. It was, says Clarke, a disaster "complete and absolute," over which Capote cried without comprehension. His "boundless and insatiable" need to be loved now had to be filled by a B-team of swans, like Johnny Carson's second ex-wife.

He had nothing else to fall back on. One thing Clarke's book shows is that Capote's mind was engaged only by people, not such a bad thing for a novelist, but rather terrible for a person. Brilliant but shallow, he pursued no culture ("For him Venice was Harry's Bar," said Donald Windham), and he wound up with no intellectual resources for a rainy day. Of his contemporaries—Mailer, Vidal, and Baldwin, that bundle of talent all born around 1925—he has the least claim to the title man of letters. He wrote almost nothing that could be called criticism, because he was one of those people with tastes instead of beliefs.

He made one abortive revival. *Musical for Chameleons* (1980) is a disciplined collection of lean stories and sketches, an intriguing sort of notebook from an artist trying to fight his way back. But even it is flawed by "Handcarved Coffins," something that falsely claims to be "A Nonfiction Account of an American Crime," but is

more like a parody of *In Cold Blood*, just as Capote's 1970s (sleazing through Studio 54) were a bad-joke version of the real high life he lived in the sixties.

By 1970 his relationship with Dunphy was no longer sexual, and the two of them lived far from each other for months of the year. Capote did not fall into the manic promiscuity of his sometime friend Tennessee Williams; instead, he developed destroying obsessions for two completely unglamorous men: "Danny," an air conditioner repairman separated from his wife; and John O'Shea, a violent alcoholic, married "low-level bank vice president." Clarke is very good on the irony of these last romances. Danny, he says,

represented all those carefree, freckle-faced Alabama country boys Truman had wished he could have been, mocking him, even if they uttered not a word, with the nonchalant assurance of the absolutely average. In every way Danny stood for the common man: that was his allure. If he had been handsome, had boasted a fine physique, or had been out of the ordinary in any other way, Truman would not have given him a second glance.

He still showed up on talk shows, only drunk, not witty. He was a positive vacuum cleaner for cocaine, and his body, moving from binge to spa, ballooned and deflated like a rubber syringe. "An exact count of his [hospital] stays is hard to come by," Clarke says. During "the first few years of the eighties he was hospitalized in half a dozen states and Switzerland too. But the tally from Southampton Hospital, his favorite, gives an indication of the quickening pace of his decline: he registered there four times in 1981, seven times in 1982, and sixteen times in 1983." He died from either suicide or an accidental overdose—the question is pedantic—in 1984.

This is a well-researched book. There are patches of flat writing and overwriting (the two are really the same thing), but Clarke's prose is generally solid and in a few places memorable: "It was a strange household he entered in Monroeville, unique to the South, peculiar to the time: three quarrelsome sisters in late middle age, their reclusive older brother, and an atmosphere heavy with small secrets and ancient resentments." There are some nice set pieces on 1940s New York and the fashion magazines that gave Capote's fiction its start. I wish Clarke wouldn't first-name everyone (Cerf is "Bennett" and Vidal is "Gore"), but I suppose this is meant to give the reader some sense of how "Truman" operated in the world. For many years that operation was calamitous, and Capote is lucky to have found someone—rather in the way Oscar Wilde eventually found Richard Ellmann—who has been able to make far more sense of his life than he himself did. □

SENATORIAL PRIVILEGE:
THE CHAPPAQUIDDICK COVER-UP
Leo Damore/Regnery Gateway/\$19.95

Franz M. Oppenheimer

What? Another book about Chappaquiddick and Teddy Kennedy? Who wants to hear any more about that? I was asked that question repeatedly when seen with this book, 40,000 copies of which were sold before publication. The answer is that we all ought to hear more about it. Senator Edward Kennedy remains a leading member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and on June 11 he was formally endorsed by the Massachusetts State Democratic Convention as the Democratic party's candidate for yet another term as senator. True, what we already know should alone make that endorsement a scandal. But thanks to the luck and patient detecting of Leo Damore we now know more, and enough to remove the lingering mysteries of that sordid episode.

From Robert Sherrill's masterly *The Last Kennedy*, we knew by 1976 that sometime between 11:30 p.m. and 12:45 a.m. during the night of Friday, July 18, 1969, Senator Kennedy drove his car off a narrow bridge in Chappaquiddick, and that his car, and in it Mary Jo Kopechne, were discovered submerged in Poncha Pond about 8 a.m. the following morning by two fishermen, who reported their discovery by telephone to the police at 8:20 a.m. Senator Kennedy reported the accident to the police about two hours after the fishermen had reported it. He had complained to the night manager at his motel at 2:25 a.m. about noises from a neighboring party; and at about 7:30 a.m. he chatted with some yachting friends on the motel's porch. He was immaculately dressed in "yachting clothes," freshly shaven, nonchalant, and "normal in every way."

Senator Kennedy gave three different and inconsistent accounts of his role in the tragedy: a written account drafted with the help of his friend and lawyer Paul Markham at the police station after reporting the accident, an account that omitted, among many other facts, any mention of the party with Mary Jo Kopechne and five other former members of Robert Kennedy's staff; a television address, given a week later on the same day he pleaded guilty (and there-

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by avoided cross-examination) to the charge of leaving the scene of an accident without reporting it "after knowingly causing injury to Mary Jo Kopechne"; and secret testimony at an inquest held the following January. The TV speech was the product of a conclave of Kennedy celebrities who were barricaded with their leader incommunicado inside the Kennedy compound at Hyannis Port for a full week after the accident. The chief draftsman was Theodore Sorensen; among the other handmaidens were Richard Goodwin, Arthur Schlesinger, Burke Marshall, and Robert McNamara. The public reaction to the evasions, irrelevancies, and probable falsehoods of the speech was, in Sherrill's words, "a disaster." The *New York Times* commented: "Senator Kennedy was really asking for an outpouring of support on the basis of a partially irrelevant and totally unsatisfactory *ex parte* account." As for Kennedy's third and last story, given at an inquest belatedly held on January 5-8, 1970, the judge found it "probable" that "Kennedy and Kopechne did not intend to return to Edgartown at that time; that Kennedy did not intend to drive to the ferry slip and his turn onto Dyke Road was intentional." The judge also found "inconsistencies and contradictions" of testimony too numerous for him to list and "probable cause to believe that Edward M. Kennedy operated his motor vehicle negligently . . . and that such operation appears to have contributed to the death of Mary Jo Kopechne."

Apart from obvious internal contradictions, the untruths of Kennedy's accounts were most convincingly established by a man of unblemished reputation, Christopher Look, a deputy sheriff of Dukes County who testified at the inquest. Look had spotted Kennedy's car at 12:45 a.m. stopped on the road; he left his car and went toward Kennedy's to see whether help was needed, only to see it speed away on the dirt road toward the fatal bridge. Since Kennedy and all other Kennedy witnesses had testified at the inquest that Kennedy and Miss Kopechne had left the party together at about 11:15 p.m., and Kennedy maintained that he had done so in order to drive Miss Kopechne to the ferry, which was only two