

queer classics: truman capote's "other voices, other rooms"

By ERNIE MCLEOD

I remember Truman Capote from his 1970s television appearances: a bloated old queen gossiping with Johnny Carson or Dick Cavett. I suppose I vaguely understood that he was a writer. But actual accomplishment seemed beside the point, as it did with other talk show caricatures like Liberace or Zsa Zsa Gabor. To my youthful eyes, Capote – with his famously high, fey voice – was a wholly alarming figure.

Because this boob-tube image of Capote was indelibly stamped on my mind, I'd always dismissed him as an artist. "Real" writers didn't chew the fat with Johnny and hang out at Studio 54, right?

My narrow-minded perception of Capote was finally upended recently when I read *The Scarlet Professor*, Barry Werth's sad, excellent biography of the literary critic Newton Arvin, whose life was ruined by a bogus 1960 pornography bust. In the mid-1940s, just before Capote precociously achieved notoriety with his first novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, he and the older (and closeted) Arvin had a passionate two-year affair. As personalities, the two men couldn't have been more different, but the love between them was genuine, and the young Capote that emerges on Werth's pages is flamboyant, but also notably tender and kind. *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was dedicated to Arvin, and Capote remained a supportive friend long after their affair was over.

How to bridge the gap between the compassionate wunderkind portrayed in *The Scarlet Professor* and the bitchy, dissipated queen on 70s TV? And how to fit Capote's limited but varied oeuvre – which includes *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *In Cold Blood* – into the overall celebrity portrait?

Truman Capote was born in 1924 in New Orleans, an only child whose parents divorced when he was four. His childhood was spent wandering among his eccentric Southern relatives, a lonely and unusual existence that became the seed for his first fictions. He never went to college, but after moving north to attend boarding school, at seventeen he landed a lowly job at *The New Yorker*. In the next few years he began publishing short stories to acclaim, and by the time he was twenty-three, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* had debuted, quickly establishing him as a writer and personality to watch.

It might be easier to understand Capote's astonishing ascent if *Other Voices, Other Rooms* weren't such a dense, curious little novel. Part of the attention was purely literary: people who mattered recognized him as the real thing. And though the novel was odd, its oddness seemed

directly influenced by and not out of place alongside the work of other "Southern" writers, particularly that of the equally precocious Carson McCullers. The fact the novel thematically addressed both race and homosexuality – albeit in a highly stylized fashion – also got people talking, though the lion's share of the controversy was reserved for the author's book-jacket photograph. It looks fairly innocuous today, but at the time Capote's sultry yet childlike pose inspired a raft of scandalous publicity, which didn't hurt sales, even as he was dubbed "the perverted Huck Finn of American Letters."

Other Voices, Other Rooms tells the story of 13-year-old Joel Harrison Knox, who, after his mother dies, goes in search of his long-lost father in a godforsaken place called the Landing. Once Joel arrives at his destination, he

forming emotional problems into psychological symbols.

I most appreciated the novel as an early glimpse into Capote's artistry; it touched me more on a craft level than on an emotional one. Capote believed that style more than content should provide a "mirror of an artist's sensibility." He considered himself a "fanatic on rhythm and language," and his carefulness with words is but one of the aspects of his talent that got overshadowed by his celebrity.

Capote's celebrity reached its zenith with the 1966 publication of *In Cold Blood*, the "nonfiction novel" most consider his masterpiece. The book's subject matter – the real-life murder of a family in Kansas – seemed an odd choice for Capote. He said he wrote it "to get outside of my own imagination," adding that the jour-

morphoses in the aftermath of *In Cold Blood*, beginning with the infamous Black and White Ball he threw at the Plaza Hotel in New York not long after the book's publication. The party's guest list appeared in *The New York Times* – who wasn't on the list was the only thing discussed more than who was.

Capote was scratched off many invitation lists when excerpts from his much bally-hooed but never completed Proustian roman à clef were published in *Esquire* in the mid-1970s. *Answered Prayers* was supposed to have been his crowning literary achievement. Instead, the fragments that appeared were labeled vicious, and the resulting scandal diminished both his social and artistic standing, though evidence of increasing substance abuse kept his name alive in the gossip pages

Quotable Voices:

"Any love is natural and beautiful that lies within a person's nature; only hypocrites would hold a man responsible for what he loves, emotional illiterates and those of righteous envy, who, in their agitated concern, mistake so frequently the arrow pointing to heaven for the one that leads to hell!"



quickly learns that nothing there is as he wanted or expected it to be. His father is an invalid whose ability to communicate consists mainly of dropping a red tennis ball to the floor, and the only other male adult in the house is sickly cousin Randolph, who wears a seersucker kimono and a lady's ring and who holds Joel's hand in a way that Joel finds "obscurely disagreeable." Randolph's voice, accentless with "an emotional undercurrent," also disturbs Joel, as do the strange stories Randolph begins to spin about his impossible love for a scrappy little Mexican boxer named Pepe Alvarez.

Joel develops relationships with a variety of characters he initially finds anxiety-provoking, including a flame-headed tomboy named Idabel Thompkins. By novel's end, Joel begins to accept and understand many of the things he once found unfathomable, including his own longings. But don't expect an unambiguous coming-of-age/coming-out novel; Capote retrospectively described *Other Voices, Other Rooms* as "an unconscious, altogether intuitive attempt" to "exorcise demons," a prose poem trans-

nalistic parameters of the project forced him to empathize with and understand people who wouldn't naturally have fallen within his "scope of interests."

Capote devoted six years to *In Cold Blood*, and its artistic and commercial success cast his career in a whole new light. Final product momentarily aside, what's perhaps most amazing from a queer perspective is that he was brave enough to throw his flaming homo self into a world not predisposed to look kindly upon his kind. (Harper Lee, who initially accompanied Capote to Kansas, said his arrival was "like someone coming off the moon – those people had never seen anyone like Truman.") That he carried the whole thing off with undeniable aplomb silenced those who'd dismissed Capote as an "orchidaceous aesthete."

Or, as Capote himself put it in a *Playboy* interview in which his fragile image was contrasted with Ernest Hemingway's macho one: "I am secretly several of the things the hairy one pretended to be."

Capote's image and reputation went through more meta-

until his death in 1984.

What never made news was Capote's thirty-five year relationship with the novelist Jack Dunphy. Given that Capote's sexuality was always an open book, it's ironic (but not surprising) that the media paid scant attention to the central relationship of his adult life.

It's likely that Truman Capote's work will outlast his role – for better or worse – as a cultural icon. Certainly his writings should be appreciated on their own terms, but to take Capote out of his sometimes gaudy context is to miss something essential about the person even Norman Mailer had to concede was one "bally little guy." ▼

Further Reading:
Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career by George Plimpton.



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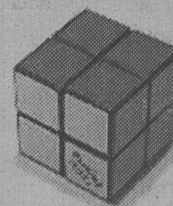
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