

Books

The New York Times  
ON THE WEB

Home

Site Index

Site Search

Forums

Archives

Marketplace

ROYAL  
TREATMENT

Check out what  
to see, eat and  
do in London!

The New York Times  
Travel  
[nytimes.com/travel](http://nytimes.com/travel)

January 16, 1966

## One Night on a Kansas Farm

By CONRAD KNICKERBOCKER

**T**he plains of western Kansas are even lonelier than the sea. Men, farm houses and windmills become specks against the vast sky. At night, the wind seems to have come from hundreds of miles distant. Diesel-engine horns echo immensity. During the day, one drives flat out through shimmering mirages. Highways all roll straight to the point of infinity on a far horizon. Tires click; tumbleweed rustles; Coca-Cola signs endlessly creak.

---

**IN COLD BLOOD**  
A True Account of a  
Multiple Murder and  
Its Consequences  
By Truman Capote.

---

On the Indian summer night of Nov. 14, 1959, two criminals visited this haunting geography. With a knife and a 12-gauge shotgun, they robbed and murdered a man and his wife and their son and daughter. The deed filled the scene. It echoed through the lives of all who lived nearby, rushing toward some appalling, mysterious point of psychic infinity. It made haggard men out of the guardians of order. Eventually through a fluke almost as gratuitous as the killing itself, they captured the murderers. On an April night last year, as rain beat on the roof, the two were hanged in a chilly warehouse in the corner of the yard of the Kansas State Penitentiary at Lansing.

To the Midwestern newspaper reader, the crime and its aftermath while awful enough, were not especially astonishing. Spectacular violence seems appropriate to the empty stage of the plains, as though by such cosmic acts mankind must occasionally signal its presence. Charlie Starkweather, accompanied by his teen-age lover, killed 10 people. George Ronald York and James Douglas Latham murdered seven. Lowell Lee Andrews, the mild, fat student with dreams of becoming a Chicago gunman, dispatched his father, mother and older sister with 21 bullets. Last May, Duane Pope, a clean-cut young football player, shot four people (three of them fatally) who were lying face down on the floor of a rural bank in Nebraska. Multiple murder is one of the traditional expressions of youthful hostility.

To Truman Capote, the killings in western Kansas seemed less commonplace. Already he had explored beyond the lush settings and moonlit characters that had made him famous. The very forms of novel and short story seemed to him

increasingly inadequate to the weird dynamics of the age. "Breakfast at Tiffany's" was a bon-bon, but in "The Muses Are Heard," with its improbable cast of Negro performers and Russian and American culturati, he demonstrated that reality, if heard out patiently, could orchestrate its own full range. He did not intend to be merely the novelist-as-journalist writing diversionary occasional pieces. He had already done all that in "Local Color." In the completer role of novelist-as-journalist-as-artist, he was after a new kind of statement. He wanted the facts to declare a reality that transcended reality.

He went west, to Kansas City, to Garden City and Holcomb, Kan., the hamlet where the murders took place. With the obsessiveness of a man demonstrating a profound new hypothesis, he spent more than five years unraveling and following to its end every thread in the killing of Herbert W. Clutter and his family. "In Cold Blood," the resulting chronicle, is a masterpiece--agonizing, terrible, possessed, proof that the times, so surfeited with disasters, are still capable of tragedy.

The tragedy was existential. The murder was seemingly without motive. The killers, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock, almost parodied the literary anti-hero. Social dropouts filled with nausea, disillusioned romantics, they were the perfect loners. Their relationship, if not physical, was spiritually homosexual, similar to the exacted *Freundschaft*, bound in blood, of SS brothers. Smith, the archetypal underground exile, had the usual existential loathing of the body; he hated his crushed legs. Chewing aspirin and drinking root beer, he daydreamed in his crushed heart of a Mexican beach paradise with treasure under the sea. At night, sometimes afflicted with enuresis, he dreamed of a giant yellow bird that would lift him to salvation. Sometimes his captors saw in him the violence and power of a maimed jungle animal. Hickock, on the other hand, was nothing; merely the kid next door gone totally wrong. He was only charming while unloading hot checks on clothing salesmen. One of his weaknesses was little girls, and to the end he loudly asserted he was "a normal."

The Clutters made especially poignant victims. It was not that they wanted killing, but their lives, like so many of their countrymen's, rigid, solidly reliant on the grace of affluence, denied the possibility of evil and thus were crucially diminished. Mr. Clutter tolerated no drinkers among those who worked on his farm. He ate apples in the morning and bought everything by check. The wax on the floors of his \$40,000 house exuded a lemon scent. His daughter, Nancy, lovely and virginal, baked pies and attended 4-H Club meetings. Once, her father caught her kissing a boy, but she could never marry him because he was a Catholic. His son Kenyon made good things with his hands in the basement workshop. Mrs. Clutter, the pious Bonnie, afflicted with deathly cold shivers and fits of anxiety amid the sunny bounties of a Kansas farm, was the only discordant element in this American dream. Finally they knew terror, and the knowledge in Mr. Capote's words becomes heartbreaking.

The crime confronted the townsfolk of Holcomb with their own isolation. Neighborliness evaporated. The natural order seemed suspended. Chaos poised to rush in. They distrusted and came to suspect not terrible strangers, but themselves. At the trial, struck mostly silent, they gaped. A squadron of psychiatrists, about the best we can produce in the way of a tragic chorus,

emphasized the banality and dehydration of the current articulations of motive. "Paranoid orientation," they said. "Schizophrenic reaction. Severe character disorder."

Perry Smith, on the other hand had mastered the true modern vocabulary. He spoke with the nightmare logic of all the socially and emotionally dispersed: "I thought he was a very nice gentleman. . . .I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat."


There are two Truman Capotes. One is the artful charmer, prone to the gossamer and the exquisite, of "The Grass Harp" and Holly Golightly. The other, darker and stronger, is the discovery of death. He began the latter exploration as a very young man in his first novel "Other Voices, Other Rooms" and in such stories as "Master Misery," "The Headless Hawk" and "A Tree of Night." He has traveled far from the misty, moss-hung Southern-Gothic landscapes of his youth. He now brooks with the austerity of a Greek or an Elizabethan.

As he says in his interview, with George Plimpton, he wrote "In Cold Blood" without mechanical aids--tape recorder or shorthand book. He memorized the event and its dialogues so thoroughly, and so totally committed a large piece of his life to it that he was able to write it as a novel. Yet it is difficult to imagine such a work appearing at a time other than the electronic age. The sound of the book creates the illusion of tape. Its taut cross-cutting is cinematic. Tape and film, documentaries, instant news, have sensitized us to the glare of surfaces and close-ups. He gratifies our electronically induced appetite for massive quantities of detail, but at the same time, like an ironic magician, he shows that appearances are nothing.

"In Cold Blood" also mocks many of the advances (on paper) of anti-realism. It presents the metaphysics of anti-realism through a total evocation of reality. Not the least of the book's merits is that it manages a major moral judgment without the author's appearance once on stage. At a time when the external happening has become largely meaningless and our reaction to it brutalized, when we shout "Jump" to the man on the ledge. Mr. Capote has restored dignity to the event. His book is also a grieving testament of faith in what used to be called the soul.

*Mr. Knickerbocker is a critic and writer who knows the Kansas plains.*

[Return to the Books Home Page](#)

<b>ROYAL TREATMENT</b>		<b>Check out what to see, eat and do in London!</b>	<b>The New York Times Travel</b> <a href="http://nytimes.com/travel">nytimes.com/travel</a>
----------------------------	---	---	--

[Home](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Site Search](#) | [Forums](#) | [Archives](#) | [Marketplace](#)

[Quick News](#) | [Page One Plus](#) | [International](#) | [National/N.Y.](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) |  
[Science](#) | [Sports](#) | [Weather](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Op-Ed](#) | [Arts](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Books](#) | [Diversions](#) |  
[Job Market](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Travel](#)

[Help/Feedback](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Services](#) | [New York Today](#)

[Copyright 1997 The New York Times Company](#)