



Truman Capote, 1924-1984: Created the First Nonfiction Novel With 'In Cold Blood'

BOB DOUGHTY: And I'm Bob Doughty with PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English. Today we tell about Truman Capote, one of America's most famous modern writers. He invented a new kind of book called the nonfiction novel. This literary form combined factual reporting with the imaginary possibilities of storytelling. Capote's writing ability and his wild personality captured the interest of people all over the world.

FAITH LAPIDUS: Truman Capote became famous for living a wild and exciting life. He traveled a great deal and divided his time between homes in New York City and Switzerland. But he started out from more common roots.

Truman was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in nineteen twenty-four. His name was Truman Streckfus Persons. When he was a very young child, Truman's mother sent him to live with her family in Monroeville, Alabama. He lived with his aunts and cousins for several years.

Truman rarely saw his parents. But he did become friends with the little girl who lived next door to his family. Her name was Harper Lee. She would later grow up to be a famous writer. Her book "To Kill a Mockingbird," would earn her a Pulitzer Prize. One of the characters in the book is based on Truman as a child.

BOB DOUGHTY: Truman was a very lonely child. He later said that he felt very different from everyone around him. He said he felt he was much more intelligent and sensitive than others and feared that no one understood him. This helps explain why Truman began writing. Putting his thoughts on paper helped him feel less lonely. As a child he would write for about three hours a day after school.

FAITH LAPIDUS: When Truman was about ten years old he joined his mother in New York City. She had remarried a Cuban-American businessman named Joseph Capote. Mr. Capote soon became the legal parent of Truman. He renamed his stepson Truman Garcia Capote.

Truman did not do well in school. He was very smart but did not like classes. He stopped attending high school when he was seventeen years old. Instead, he started working for the New Yorker magazine. And, he kept on writing.

BOB DOUGHTY: Truman Capote once said: "I had to be successful and I had to be successful early." He said that some people spent half of their lives not knowing what they were going to do. But Capote knew he wanted to be a writer and he wanted to be rich and famous. He succeeded.

FAITH LAPIDUS: In nineteen forty-five Truman Capote sold his first short story to a major magazine. This story, "Miriam", won a literary prize called the O. Henry Award. A publishing company soon gave him money to start working on a book.

Capote was only twenty-three years old when he finished his first novel, "Other Voices, Other Rooms." It tells the story of a southern boy who goes to live with his father after his mother dies. The story is an exploration of identity. The boy learns to understand and accept that he loves men.

BOB DOUGHTY: "Other Voices, Other Rooms" was a great success. Critics praised its clarity and honesty. But the story was also disputed. It openly deals with homosexual issues of men loving men. Truman Capote had relationships with men and was not afraid of expressing this fact to the world.

The photograph on the book cover also caused a dispute. The picture of Capote is intense and sexually suggestive. Capote loved shocking the public. He liked to get all kinds of publicity.

Truman Capote soon became well known in the literary world. He loved rich people from important families. Capote was as famous for his personality as he was for his writing. He attended the best parties and restaurants. His small body, boyish looks, and unusual little voice became famous.

FAITH LAPIDUS: Capote wrote many more short stories and essays. In nineteen fifty-eight, he published a book called "Breakfast at Tiffany's." It has become one of the most well known stories in American culture. The main character is Holly Golightly. She is a free-spirited young woman living in New York City.

Holly is very beautiful and has many lovers. She runs from party to party wearing little black dresses and dark sunglasses. But she has a mysterious past that she tries to escape. At the end of the story Holly leaves New York forever. She disappears from the lives of the men who knew her. But they can never forget her colorful personality.

BOB DOUGHTY: "Breakfast at Tiffany's" was soon made into a movie. The film stars Audrey Hepburn. She captures Holly Golightly's spirit perfectly. Here is a scene from the movie. Holly and her friend Paul are visiting Tiffany's, a very costly jewelry store.

HOLLY GOLIGHTLY: "Isn't it wonderful? You see what I mean how nothing bad could ever happen to you in a place like this? It isn't that I give a hoot about jewelry except diamonds of course -- like that! [looking at a diamond necklace] What do you think?"

PAUL: "Well ..."

HOLLY GOLIGHTLY: "Of course, personally I think it would be tacky to wear diamonds before I am forty."

PAUL: "Well, you're right. but in the mean time you should have something."

HOLLY GOLIGHTLY: "I'll wait."

PAUL: "No, I'm going to buy you a present. You bought me one -- a typewriter ribbon and it brought me luck."

HOLLY GOLIGHTLY: "All right, but Tiffany's can be pretty expensive."

PAUL: "I've got my check and ...ten dollars."

HOLLY GOLIGHTLY: "Oh, I wouldn't let you cash your check. But a present for ten dollars or under, that I'll accept. Of course, I don't exactly know what we're going to find at Tiffany's for ten dollars."

FAITH LAPIDUS: In the late nineteen fifties Truman Capote started developing a method of writing that would revolutionize journalism. He wanted to combine the facts of reporting with the stylistic richness of storytelling. He became interested in a short New York Times report published in November of nineteen fifty-nine.

The report described the murder of a family in the small town of Holcomb, Kansas. A husband, wife and two children had been shot in their home in the middle of the night.

BOB DOUGHTY: Truman Capote immediately traveled to Kansas to learn more about the killings. His childhood friend Harper Lee went with him. Together they spoke with everyone involved in the investigation. They met with police officers and people living in the town. Capote even became friends with the two killers. The writer met with them many times in jail after they were arrested.

Capote spent the next few years researching what would become his next literary project. His book would give a detailed description of the murders. It would explore the effects of the killing on the town. And it would even tell the story from the point of view of the killers.

FAITH LAPIDUS: But Capote became involved in a moral conflict. He could not complete his book until he knew its ending. So, he had to wait until the end of the trial to see if both killers were found guilty and put to death. As a writer he wanted to finish the story. But as a friend, it was difficult for him to watch the two men die. Capote was torn between his duty towards human life and his duty to his work.

BOB DOUGHTY: Capote worked for six years to produce his book "In Cold Blood." It was finally published in nineteen sixty-six. It immediately became an international best seller. Truman Capote had invented a whole new kind of writing. He called it the non-fiction novel. He was at the top of his profession.

Here is a recording of Truman Capote from a two thousand five documentary about him. Listen to Capote's small southern voice as he talks about style.

TRUMAN CAPOTE: "I think one has style or one doesn't, but style is one's self. It's something that you don't, you cannot...learn. It's something that has to come from within you. And bit by bit, be arrived at and it's simply there like the color of your eyes."

FAITH LAPIDUS: Truman Capote decided to celebrate his new success. In nineteen sixty-six he gave what people called the "party of the century." He invited five hundred friends for a night of eating, drinking and dancing at the Plaza Hotel in New York. Guests included famous writers, actors and important people from the media. They were told to wear either black or white formal clothing. Capote's "Black and White Ball" was one of the most famous events in the history of New York society.

BOB DOUGHTY: But Truman Capote's popularity soon decreased. His drinking and drug use seriously affected his health. His writing also suffered. He published stories that insulted his rich and powerful friends. Many people no longer wanted to have anything to do with him. Capote died in nineteen eighty-four. He was fifty-nine.

FAITH LAPIDUS: Truman Capote's writing is still celebrated today for its clarity and style. In two thousand five the film "Capote" renewed interest in his work and personality. This little man from Alabama left an important mark on American literary culture.

BOB DOUGHTY: This program was written and produced by Dana Demange. I'm Bob Doughty.

FAITH LAPIDUS: And I'm Faith Lapidus. Join us again next week for PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English.