

# PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: TRUMAN CAPOTE

*a candid conversation with the outspoken, orchidaceous author of "in cold blood," "breakfast at tiffany's" and "other voices, other rooms"*

"WEALTHY FARMER, THREE OF FAMILY SLAIN: H. W. CLUTTER, WIFE AND TWO CHILDREN ARE FOUND SHOT IN KANSAS HOME." The UPI dispatch below this headline, buried in the back pages of the November 15, 1959, New York Times, was newsworthy outside Kansas only because H. W. Clutter was a former Eisenhower appointee to the Federal Farm Credit Board. But in New York City, the item had an electrifying effect on novelist Truman Capote. Within three days, he was in the small western Kansas farm town of Holcomb, interviewing friends and neighbors of the Clutter family and badgering local police for information about the crime, determined to probe deeply into the lives of both the Clutter family and their murderers.

At first the diminutive (5'3") Capote, with his exotic European clothes and high-pitched voice, was viewed askance by local residents, who often demanded to see his meager credentials—a letter of recommendation from the president of Kansas State University and a battered U. S. passport blackened with visas for over 30 nations. Nor was Capote, a darling of the jet set, initially at home on the plains of Kansas. "It was as strange to me," he said later, "as if I'd gone to Peking." But townspeople and police alike soon warmed to the effervescent elf; and for the next five and a half years,

he relentlessly investigated the lives of the Clutter family and the two men convicted of (and eventually executed for) their murder—Richard Hickock and Perry Smith, who became his close friends.

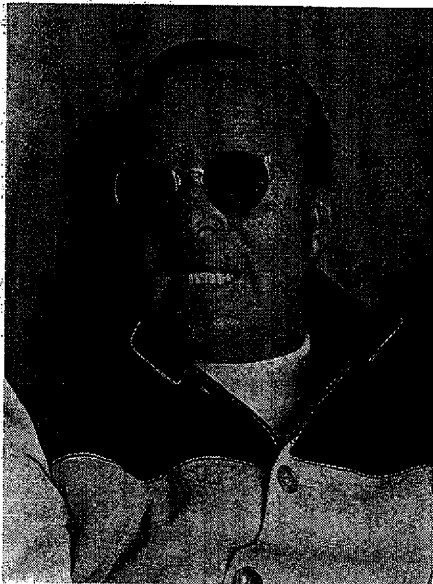
Capote's research was exhaustive—and exhausting. "I wrote 6000 pages of notes before I ever sat down to write the book," he says. Everyone even remotely connected with the case was interviewed in depth, and no aspects of the lives of the Clutters or of their killers escaped Capote's scrutiny. The result was "In Cold Blood," a 343-page "nonfiction novel"—Capote's own term—published by Random House in January 1966. An instantaneous critical and commercial success, the book soared within two weeks of publication to the top of the best-seller list, where it remained for over a year. In the process of selling 800,000 copies in hard cover and over 2,500,000 in paperback—in America alone—it became one of the biggest money-makers in publishing history. Translated into 25 foreign languages (including Hebrew, Catalan, Afrikaans and Icelandic), it has already earned Capote over \$3,000,000, including \$500,000 for movie rights. (See PLAYBOY's review of the film version in this month's "Playboy After Hours.")

The author was even more pleased by the book's rave reviews than by its re-

sounding commercial success. The icons of the literary establishment, who for years had merely tolerated Capote or, like Herbert Gold, dismissed him as "one of the chattering poets of decoration," now called him a towering figure in American letters. "Remarkable, tensely exciting, moving, superbly written," hailed The New York Times. "A masterpiece . . . a spellbinding work," echoed Life. "The best documentary account of an American crime ever written," declared The New York Review of Books. "One of the stupendous books of the decade," panegyrized London's Sunday Express. No book in recent years had been so widely and so lavishly praised.

Drowned out by the cheers were a few restive murmurs of dissent. Reviewing "In Cold Blood" for New Republic, critic Stanley Kauffmann wrote: "It is ridiculous in judgment and debasing of all of us to call this book literature. Are we so bankrupt, so avid for novelty that, merely because a famous writer produces an amplified magazine crime feature, the result is automatically elevated to serious literature?" Novelist Mary McCarthy derided the claim that Capote had invented the nonfiction novel and charged that his "greatest contribution to literary innovation was to publicize the author first, the book second."

Capote has always been a lightning



"After three years of work on 'In Cold Blood,' I almost abandoned it; I couldn't stand the morbidity. It was becoming a question of survival; but I forced myself to push the damned thing through."



"Are there any writers on the literary scene whom I consider truly great? Yes—Truman Capote. But there are others who, while not quite in this exalted orbit, are still commendable."



"Murderers almost always laugh when discussing their crime. They'll tell you how they cut someone's throat and it's as if they were watching a clown slip on a banana peel."

rod for controversy. Born Truman Streckfus Persons (he later changed his surname legally to that of his mother's second husband) in New Orleans on September 30, 1924, Capote was four when his mother divorced a traveling salesman and packed her unwanted son off to live with three elderly aunts in Monroeville, Alabama. In the following years, he shuttled among various relatives throughout the rural South, seldom seeing his mother and completely out of touch with his father. Perhaps as an antidote for parental rejection, he retreated into an inner world of fantasy and dreams. A precocious child, he began his writing career at the age of eight, and at twelve won first prize in a literary contest with a short story titled "Old Mr. Busybody."

Capote dropped out of school at 17 and, after a brief stint as protégé of a fortuneteller, he traveled to New York and got a clerical job at *The New Yorker*; originally hired by the accounting department, he confessed after one day that he could not add and was transferred to the art department. But his literary talents were soon recognized and he graduated from cataloging cartoons to writing items for "The Talk of the Town" department. He also found time to moonlight as a movie-script reader and to grind out free-lance anecdotes for a popular digest magazine. That same year, he wrote his first piece of published fiction, and at 19 won the O. Henry Prize for a short story called "Miriam," a schizophrenia-tinged tale about a mysterious child who enters the life of a middle-aged woman and slowly destroys her. All of Capote's early work dealt, as critic John K. Hutchens puts it, with a "macabre, isolated world of shadowy characters in flight from sundry terrors."

By 1948, a series of such stories had won him succès d'estime within the world of letters, but he was still unknown to the general public. Then his first novel, "Other Voices, Other Rooms," was published and Capote became an overnight celebrity. *The New York Herald Tribune* called the book "the most exciting first novel by a young American in many years," and critics began to compare its author with Norman Mailer, Irwin Shaw and Gore Vidal—the brightest literary lights of the early post-War period. Overshadowing the paeans, however, and perhaps as responsible for the book's success as its luminous prose, was the photograph of Capote on the dust jacket. Gazing limpidly out of a thousand bookshop windows at a public alternately beguiled, outraged and amused was a portrait of Capote reclining on a couch, fastidiously attired in a tattersall vest and black bow tie, blond bangs dangling over his forehead, full lips moist and pouting. Critic George Davis quickly dubbed him "the perverted Huck Finn of American Letters." Thus was

Capote stamped indelibly with the image of a decadent, orchidaceous aesthete.

As the years passed, his florid personal legend grew apace with his reputation as a writer. "Other Voices, Other Rooms" was followed with a string of equally successful, if less controversial, books. "A Tree of Night," an anthology of eight hauntingly evocative short stories, appeared in 1949 and was followed in 1950 by "Local Color," a collection of perceptive and civilized travel pieces that marked Capote's first literary departure from the shadowy borderland between dream and reality. "The Grass Harp," his second published novel (1951), once more reflected Capote's preoccupation with the world of childhood but evidenced a new feeling of human warmth and a life-affirming faith. In 1956, Capote unveiled yet another dimension of his evolving talents with the publication of "The Muses Are Heard," a biting witty documentary account of his trip through Russia with the touring company of "Porgy and Bess"—and the precursor of his preoccupation with journalism. In 1958 came "Breakfast at Tiffany's," his celebrated novella about Holly Golightly, the wistfully whimsical demimondaine subsequently immortalized on film by Audrey Hepburn. Capote adapted "House of Flowers," another story from this period, for the stage; it was a flop—but a revised version opened on Broadway early this year. In 1963, Capote's "Selected Writings" appeared—again, to mixed reviews. But the critics' objections didn't trouble Capote; he was then almost halfway through his most monumental work, "In Cold Blood."

In the years since then, Capote's stature as a world-acclaimed author has won him entree to the salons of international society, and he reciprocated on November 29, 1966, by throwing a gala—and widely reported—masked ball for his friends. Among the several hundred intimates who packed the Grand Ballroom of the Plaza Hotel were Rose Kennedy, Princess Lee Radziwill, Mrs. Stavros Niarchos, Lynda Bird Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford II, Princess d'Arenberg, Countess Gianni Agnelli, Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, Margaret Truman Daniels, Countess Rudi Crespi and Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach.

Capote, who has never been accused of modesty, forthwith accepted Elsa Maxwell's guttering torch with grace: "I'm an absolute social smash," he announced. Though he has been called a snob, members of his self-styled court are not selected on the basis of their standing in "Burke's Peerage" or with Dun and Bradstreet; beauty, wit and elegance are his criteria. Nor are Capote's courtiers, who range from royalty to Long Island potato farmers, drawn to him because of his reputation as a best-selling author. As

Suzy Knickerbocker, guru of the gossip columnists, puts it: "All his friends like and love him—not because he's a big literary lion, not because it's the thing to do, but because Truman is Truman. . . ."

To discover what makes Truman Truman and to fathom the complexities and contradictions of the man and the artist, PLAYBOY interviewed Capote at his New York residence, a five-room co-op on the 22nd floor of the luxurious new United Nations Plaza apartment building, a millionaire's mecca (Capote's next-door neighbors: Senator Robert F. Kennedy and Johnny Carson). Capote does the bulk of his writing at a two-house estate in Bridgehampton, Long Island; he also maintains a home in Palm Springs, California, and a mountainside villa in Verbier, Switzerland, but does most of his entertaining—and grants most of his infrequent interviews—in his New York apartment, surrounded by a collection of turn-of-the-century Tiffany lamps, animal bibelots, antique paperweights and yellowing photographs. Now 43, Capote is no longer the fey youth on the dust jacket of "Other Voices, Other Rooms": His blond hair is thinning, his jowls are fuller, and the years have traced fine lines about his eyes. But at our first interview session, as he uncorked a bottle of French champagne—his refrigerator holds little else—and settled himself, scruffily accoutered in T-shirt, windbreaker and sunglasses, on a window seat overlooking a view of the East River, the impish enfant terrible of 20 years ago seemed not so far away. "Have at me," Capote commanded in his lilting, near-contralto voice. PLAYBOY interviewer Eric Norden began by asking him about that other self.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think the public's initial image of you as a kind of literary Aubrey Beardsley helped or hindered your career?

**CAPOTE:** It certainly didn't do me any good in official academic circles, but then, I never cared about all those gray people with their drab quarterly reviews. On the other hand, a number of people who were concerned about my welfare and my emerging career did feel that this image harmed me, since many in the literary establishment were bound to resent my eccentricities and mannerisms and to feel that I received far too much publicity for a serious writer. But it's not true, as so many people seem to think, that I did a great deal to encourage this image in an effort to build an "atmosphere" around myself. From the beginning, I've never done anything but try to be myself and go my own way. I think there are certain people who have a natural charisma that generates public awareness and interest. You have it or you don't; and if you don't have it, there's nothing you can do to create it. For better or worse, I've had this charisma from

the start; and I can't say whether it's helped or hurt me. It all depends on whether you think fame is an asset or a hindrance in an artistic career. I feel rather indifferent about the whole thing, but then, I've been in public life over 20 years now, and you become neutral about publicity. I never pay attention to what people write about me anymore. It takes a lot to make my pulse skip a beat.

**PLAYBOY:** The image that grew up around Ernest Hemingway—big-game hunter, bullfight aficionado, belting whiskey and swearing like a stevedore—was just the opposite of your image, as you once described it in Paris to Art Buchwald: "fragile and aesthetic . . . although I'm not that at all." Do you think that in both cases the image may have tended to obscure the real man and his work?

**CAPOTE:** Yes, in both instances the myth is erroneous and almost comically misleading. I am secretly several of the things the hairy one pretended to be. But don't expect me to elaborate on that doubtless curious-sounding statement, for the operative word is *secretly*.

**PLAYBOY:** Despite—or perhaps because of—your famous dust-jacket photo on *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, you became an instantaneous literary celebrity. How did all that publicity affect your personal life and your writing?

**CAPOTE:** Mostly, it gave me confidence. Also, it improved my love life; a wide variety of attractive people became highly available.

**PLAYBOY:** Would you care to elaborate on that?

**CAPOTE:** No.

**PLAYBOY:** All right. You have said of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, "I feel a stranger to the book. . . . I'm terribly paranoid about the whole thing." Why?

**CAPOTE:** That was true once, but it isn't true now. The reason I felt alienated from it for so many years was that I didn't want to face the fact that the book was all about *me* and my problems. I hadn't reread it for many years—I'm always a little afraid of rereading my own work, for fear I'll discover that my harsher critics are correct—but a new edition is coming out this year, so I recently read it through in one sitting. And I realized that the book is a prose poem in which I have taken my own emotional problems and transformed them into psychological symbols. Every one of the characters represented some aspect of myself. Do you remember the young boy who goes to a crumbling mansion in search of his father and finds an old man who is crippled and can't speak and can communicate only by bouncing red tennis balls down the stairs? Well, I suddenly understood that, of course, this represented my search for my own father, whom I seldom saw, and the fact that the old man is crippled and mute was my way of transferring my own in-

ability to communicate with my father; I was not only the boy in the story but also the old man. So the central theme of the book was my search for my father—a father who, in the deepest sense, was nonexistent. This seems so clear and obvious today that it's hard to understand why I never grasped the fact at the time; it was a classic case of self-deception. I now realize that what I was attempting in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was to exorcise my own devils, the subterranean anxieties that dominated my feelings and imagination; and my ignorance of this was probably a protective shield between me and the subconscious well-spring of my material. And, of course, this explains why so much of my earlier work is written in a fantastic vein; I was attempting to escape from the realities of my own troubled life, which wasn't easy. My underlying motivation was a quest for some sense of serenity, some particular kind of affection that I needed and wanted and have finally found. As I reread the book, I realized that I've lost touch with that anguished youth of 20 years ago; only a dimming shadow of him remains inside me. I felt I was reading the work of a stranger. He impressed me—but he is no longer me.

**PLAYBOY:** Why did your childhood experiences have such a strong impact on your early writing?

**CAPOTE:** Well, I had a difficult childhood. I was born in New Orleans and my parents were divorced when I was four years old, with a great deal of bitterness on both sides. After that, I spent most of my time wandering between the households of relatives in Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi. My story *A Christmas Memory*, about a boy with elderly female relatives, is altogether drawn from life. As I grew older, I was packed off to different boarding schools all across the country, and I was lonely and very insecure. Who wouldn't be? I was an only child, very sensitive and intelligent, with no sense of being particularly wanted by *anybody*. I rarely saw my father; he remarried three or four times. My mother wasn't unkind to me; she simply had other interests. She remarried, too, and that's how I got the name Capote; it's not the name I was born with, but that of my mother's second husband, a Cuban gentleman. I wasn't neglected financially; there was always enough money to send me to good schools, and all that. It was just a total *emotional* neglect. I never felt I belonged anywhere. All my family thought there was something wrong with me. When I grew bored at school after the third grade and started getting straight Fs and bad-conduct marks, they began to think I was retarded. Then a WPA project—this was back in the Thirties—sent a team of researchers to our town one day to give intelligence tests to the school children, and I received the high-

est score they'd ever encountered. They were intrigued and paid my expenses to New York, where Columbia University gave me a whole battery of I. Q. and aptitude tests; and I returned home knowing I was extremely intelligent. That was the first time I ever felt proud of myself and I flaunted the test results to my relatives. They now knew I wasn't retarded, but they still considered me very peculiar. I always thought of myself as a kind of two-headed calf. Well, that's all I want to say about it. I've never been psychoanalyzed; I've never even consulted a psychiatrist. I now consider myself a mentally healthy person. I work out all my problems in my work.

**PLAYBOY:** How old were you when you first began to write?

**CAPOTE:** I was eight. I was a sickly kid. Or I *pretended* to be; I was always inventing a new illness so that I could stay home and read. I loved Poe and Dickens and Twain and I just couldn't get enough of them. The desire to write became an obsession, something I had no control over. I made myself a little office in one room with an old typewriter and each day I worked there for a certain number of hours; and before I reached my teens, I had developed a definite style. I began staying up all night, writing in a state of feverish excitement. And I read more and more: Oscar Wilde, De Maupassant, Henry James, Hawthorne, Flaubert, Jane Austen, Proust, Chekhov, Turgenev, Emily Brontë, Sarah Orne Jewett, E. M. Forster. They all contributed to my literary intelligence, each in a different way. This reading was of far more value to me than anything I ever learned in a classroom. My official education was a total waste of time and I dropped out of school at 17 and traveled to New York, where I got my first job, at *The New Yorker*. That job wasn't very glamorous, just clipping newspapers and filing cartoons, but I was delighted to have it, because I was determined never to set foot inside a college classroom. If I was a writer, fine; if I wasn't, no professor on earth was going to make me one. So ever since childhood, there has never been a moment when I wasn't concerned with writing.

**PLAYBOY:** What prompted you to make the creative leap from your dreamlike and poetic earlier work to the harsh realm of documentary writing such as *In Cold Blood*?

**CAPOTE:** I don't believe I was making any "leap" at all. I'd *always* been experimenting with journalism; my first attempt was a long *New Yorker* profile of Marlon Brando and I followed that with a book, *The Muses Are Heard*, which describes my tour of Russia as an observer of the *Porgy and Bess* company. In both cases, I was moving slowly toward *In Cold Blood*. But the truth of the matter is that there's no difference at all between the prose style of a story like

A Christmas Memory and, say, the opening chapter of *In Cold Blood*. If you examine *In Cold Blood* carefully, you'll realize that it's every bit as lyrical as my earlier work.

**PLAYBOY:** Critic Granville Hicks believes there is a greater gulf between your earlier work and your current documentary writing than you've just indicated. He claims that there are "two Capotes": the author of delicate, often exquisite, sometimes sentimental stories about children and the shrewd, alert, sophisticated reporter of events in the "real" world." Are there "two Capotes"? And, if so, will they continue to coexist?

**CAPOTE:** Dear old Granny Hicks. As far as the "two Capotes" goes, I occasionally read articles in these little literary quarterlies about the coexistence of two or three personalities and styles in the one writer—the "dark" Capote and the "bright" Capote, the "shadowy" one and the "sunny" one; I think it's all a lot of *merde*. Like any artist, such as a singer or a pianist, I change my tone and color range to suit my subject; and as a result, it *seems* as though there is some extraordinary difference of approach and style, when there is none whatever. Of course, the color tone of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is totally unsuited to books like *The Muses Are Heard* or *In Cold Blood*; but if anybody at all *soigné* in his knowledge of writing technique reads all three, he will see that the style doesn't change at all; there is merely a melodic adjustment of language to suit the shifting material. And why *shouldn't* a writer extend his subject matter? So the two Capotes Hicks refers to won't continue to coexist, because they *don't* exist.

**PLAYBOY:** Yet you have said of the time prior to your decision to write *In Cold Blood* that "I had to do something to myself, I had to re-create myself." What did you mean by that?

**CAPOTE:** Most American writers, as Scott Fitzgerald said, never have a second chance. I realized that if I were ever going to have that chance, it was necessary for me to make a radical change; I had to get outside of my own imagination and learn to exist in the imagination and lives of other people. I knew that it would help me enormously to expand my own range of interest and material and understanding, because I had become too obsessed with my particular internal images. That was the main reason I turned to journalism; and I must say, the shift of emphasis caused me to gain in creative range and gave me the confidence to deal with a wide spectrum of people I otherwise would never have written about. Take most of the characters in *The Muses Are Heard* or *In Cold Blood*; as an *imaginative* writer, I wouldn't have written one word about them, because they didn't come within my scope of interests. But by working journalistical-

ly, I was forced by the medium's own criteria to empathize with them and understand their motives and objectively describe their language and action and emotions; and as a result, I now have a vastly wider literary range. So I haven't shattered the mold; I've merely expanded it.

**PLAYBOY:** The publisher's blurb for *In Cold Blood* claims that the book "represents the culmination of Capote's longstanding desire to make a contribution toward the establishment of a serious new literary form: the nonfiction novel." Isn't the "nonfiction novel" a contradiction in terms—literarily as well as literally?

**CAPOTE:** Perhaps it's an awkward phrase, but I couldn't think of any better words to describe what I was attempting, which was to write a journalistic narrative that employed all the creative devices and techniques of fiction to tell a true story in a manner that would read precisely like a novel. So even though the phrase "nonfiction novel" is technically a *non sequitur*, it's the only description I could devise.

**PLAYBOY:** Some critics saw in the phraseology of that cover blurb an implied claim that you were the *inventor* of the nonfiction novel—and have pointed to many earlier experiments in the genre to prove that you weren't. Did you intend any such claim?

**CAPOTE:** Let me stress that the blurb you quoted reads: "make a contribution toward the *establishment* of a serious new literary form." Many people, of course, have experimented in this field before, and what I meant by saying I wished to contribute to the *establishment* of the nonfiction novel was that I wanted to present the technique in its most fully developed form. I have never claimed to have *invented* narrative journalism; I do claim to have undertaken the most comprehensive and far-reaching experiment to date in the medium of reportage. The dust-jacket copy on my book was thoughtfully written, but it was still misinterpreted. The real demarcation between my book and anything that has gone before is that it contains a technical innovation that gives it both the reality and the atmosphere of a novel; and that device is that *I* never once appear in the book. Never. Always before in this genre, the author has been faced with a technical problem of credibility: The reader wants to know *how* does the writer know this person said this to someone else, *how* does he know this background material? Now, previously the problem has always been solved by the narrator intruding himself into the scene: *I* discovered this, *I* saw that, *I* overheard this. The first-person pronoun permeates the whole composition and it thus becomes a piece of straight surface journalism. It only moves *horizontally* throughout. But what I wanted to do was bring to journalism the technique of fic-

tion, which moves both horizontally and vertically at the same time: horizontally on the narrative side and vertically by entering *inside* its characters. And that, of course, is what gives fiction its peculiar depth and impact. Now, in my effort to give journalism this vertical interior movement—and that was the whole purpose of my experiment—I had to remove the narrator entirely. I had to make the book flow uninterruptedly from beginning to end, just like a novel, and thus the narrator never enters the picture and there is no interpretation of people and events. I wanted the story to exist completely in its own right; except for the selection of detail, I am totally absent from the development of the book, and the people are re-created as they are in life. That's why I feel it's not comparable with anything else in the history of journalism.

**PLAYBOY:** You have said, "In 1955 I began to develop a theory that I could become a human tape recorder. I practiced over a period of two years and I ended with a high proportion of accuracy." *In Cold Blood* certainly demonstrates your talent as an interviewer and researcher; but in the process of becoming a recorder rather than an interpreter of events, isn't there a danger of sacrificing one dimension of your creativity and becoming a journalist rather than a novelist?

**CAPOTE:** The two disciplines, at their highest level, are not mutually exclusive; if I hadn't thought it possible that journalism and novelistic technique could be artistically wedded, I never would have set out on my experiment in the first place. As for my being a "human tape recorder," I've always had what amounts to the auditory version of a photographic memory, and all I did was perfect this gift. This is of great importance in the kind of reportage I do, because it is absolutely fatal to ever take a note or use a tape recorder when you interview somebody. Most people are quite unsophisticated about being interviewed, and if you erect any kind of mechanical barrier, it destroys the mood and inhibits people from talking freely. In the case of *In Cold Blood*, as I said a moment ago, it was vital for me to live *inside* the situation, to become part of the scene I was recording and not cut myself off from them in any way. And so I trained myself in this so-called human-tape-recorder technique. Anybody could learn to do it, but it's useful only to a specialist like me.

**PLAYBOY:** How do you react to those critics who deride the form of documentary crime writing employed in *In Cold Blood* as inferior to the novel?

**CAPOTE:** What can I say, except that I think they're ignorant? If they can't comprehend that journalism is really the most avant-garde form of writing existent today, then their heads are in the sand. These critics seem unable to

realize, or accept, that creative fiction writing has gone as far as it can experimentally. It reached its peak in the Twenties and hasn't budged since. Of course, we have writers like William Burroughs, whose brand of verbal surface trivia is amusing and occasionally fascinating, but there's no base for moving forward in that area—whereas journalism is actually the last great unexplored literary frontier. There is so much that can be done with journalism. It's the only really serious and creative field of literary experimentation we have today, and I feel rather sorry for those critics who are so ossified and so fearful of relinquishing their prejudices that they fail to recognize the fact. As Napoleon said of the Bourbons, they've learned nothing and forgotten nothing. In a way, I guess it's unfortunate that I selected a crime for my first big experiment in the genre, because that made it easier for them to mistakenly lump together the material and the technique and think of it as a true crime story. But a nonfiction novel can be about anything—from crime to butterfly collecting.

**PLAYBOY:** Of all the crimes, catastrophes, wars, political conspiracies and international crises you could have chosen as the theme for such an exhaustively researched work of nonfiction, why did you select the murder of an obscure Kansas farmer and his family?

**CAPOTE:** I didn't select this Kansas farmer and his family; in a very real sense, they selected me. I'd been experimenting for a long time with the theory of writing a nonfiction novel, and I'd had several dry runs that didn't work out. I was searching for a suitable subject and, like a bacteriologist, I kept putting slides under the microscope, scrutinizing them and finally rejecting them as unsuitable. It was like trying to solve a quadratic equation with the X—in this case, the subject matter—missing. And then one day I was reading *The New York Times* and buried in the back pages I found a little item about the murder of a family in Kansas and suddenly I thought: Why not a crime? Maybe if I applied my theory and the technical apparatus I'd devised to a crime, it would give me the necessary range of material to make the experiment succeed. I had no natural attraction to the subject matter; it just suddenly meshed into the equation. Anyway, I traveled to this small town in Kansas and started to investigate the crime and immediately faced innumerable difficulties. Remember, all the material was not just waiting out there for me, as some people seem to think; when I began, I was dealing with an unsolved murder and initially I got very little cooperation either from the Clutters' relatives and neighbors or from the local police. I didn't know from minute to minute what was going to happen with the case, so I simply drudged on, gathering material. In

fact, I didn't definitely decide that I was going to write the book until I had been working on it for more than a year. There were so many things that could have frustrated me; even after the two boys were arrested for the murder, what would have happened if, as was highly probable, they weren't interested in what I was doing and refused to cooperate with me? Of course, I did win their confidence and we became very close, but I had no assurance of that at the outset. And then, as the years dragged on and the legal delays and complications multiplied, I still didn't really know if I was going to be able to finish the book or even if there was any book there. After three years of work, I almost abandoned the whole project; I had become too emotionally involved and I couldn't stand the constant morbidity of the situation. It was becoming for me a question of personal survival. But I forced myself to keep going and pushed through the whole damned thing. It's a book that was written on the edge of my nerves. If I had ever known what I was going to have to endure over those six years—no matter what has happened since—I never would have started the book. It was too painful. Nothing is worth it.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you the same man you were when you began work on the book in the fall of 1959?

**CAPOTE:** Obviously I'm not. It wasn't the problem of writing it; I had to live it, day in and day out, for six years. I had to become a part of all those people's lives, some of whom weren't naturally sympathetic to me and with whom I had little in common. I had to surrender my entire life to this experience. Try to think what it means to totally immerse yourself in the lives of two men waiting to be hanged, to feel the passage of hours with them, to share every emotion. Short of actually living in a death cell myself, I couldn't have come closer to the experience. I lived a life totally alien to anything I had ever undergone before and I came to understand that death is the central factor of life. And the simple comprehension of this fact alters your entire perspective. Curiously enough, as a result of this constant awareness of imminent death, you develop a peculiar kind of humor—gallows humor, literally. My conversations with Smith and Hickock would have shocked and perhaps revolted anyone of the least sensitivity, because they were so stark, so brutal. But one is brutalized in that kind of situation, and overly sensitized at the same time. The experience served to heighten my feeling of the tragic view of life, which I've always held and which accounts for the side of me that appears extremely frivolous; that part of me is always standing in a darkened hallway, mocking tragedy and death. That's why I love champagne and stay at the Ritz.

**PLAYBOY:** Despite the efforts you made on

behalf of Hickock and Smith, all their appeals for commutation were rejected and on the night of April 14, 1965, you witnessed their deaths on the gallows. How did you feel that evening?

**CAPOTE:** It was the worst experience of my life. Period.

**PLAYBOY:** Did it affect your views on capital punishment?

**CAPOTE:** They had already been formed. I'm against it—but not for any of the usual reasons. I feel that capital punishment could very well be a deterrent if it were evenly enforced and used more generally. But today, because of all the legal machinery and the interminable slowness of appeal procedure, there is this incredible stupidity and cruelty of keeping men in death rows for years on end. At this very moment, 440 men are in death rows across the country, not knowing whether they will be executed tomorrow or next year, or spared by the whim of some governor. The average time a convicted murderer spends on death row is five years; but in Louisiana, two men wasted in death cells for almost 14 years waiting for new trials. There isn't a pretense of rehabilitation or even an attempt to find out what makes them tick; they're left to vegetate. Now, I'm no bleeding heart about murderers; most of them have no conscience at all and their sole regret is that they were caught. I know them and I'm realistic about them. But as capital punishment functions today, it is so erratic in its application and so creakingly accomplished that it really does constitute "cruel and unusual" punishment as proscribed by the Constitution. If the system was clear-cut and a person was sentenced and executed within a six-month period on an even, regularized basis, then it might become a singularly effective deterrent; I think professional murderers would really think twice. By professional murderer, of course, I mean not the killer for hire or the Syndicate assassin but the man who commits a crime with the intention of killing the man he is robbing, often in the belief that he will thus not be identified to the police by his victim. He considers murder a necessary by-product of his crime. Of course, this type of criminal is generally motivated by pathological drives, but he is rational; and if he knew that death would be his unavoidable punishment, I believe it would give him pause. Today, however, when some are executed and some spared almost by happenstance, as if the legal system were drawing straws, capital punishment has no value as punishment and really constitutes a kind of institutionalized sadism.

**PLAYBOY:** Why isn't the prospect of life imprisonment as effective a deterrent as death?

**CAPOTE:** It might be if a life sentence really meant life imprisonment. But in the ordinary American prison, a man sentenced to life on a first-degree homicide

charge is paroled and out on the street again within seven years. And almost no one is ever held longer than 12 years. That's why I'm against the way the parole system operates in homicide cases. There is an enormous number of recidivists among these parolees, and I believe that society has a right to protect itself against, say, a sexual psychopath who has no control over his compulsions. It might appear that there is no middle-ground choice between killing people and letting them out of prison prematurely; that's why so many people say, "Let's just extinguish this man so he won't go out and kill again." But there is a solution: I believe that all homicide cases, of whatever nature, from the psychopathic murderer to the obviously unpremeditated act of an enraged husband who kills his wife after catching her *flagrante delicto*, should be made a Federal crime, not a state crime, and every killer should be sent to a special maximum-security Federal prison. An immediate advantage here would be that all murder cases would go to trial outside the jurisdiction where the crime was committed; a man who commits murder in New York, for example, might be tried in California. And this would solve one of our major problems—that of pretrial publicity prejudicing the jurors. The key to this system would be that whenever a man is convicted of first-degree homicide, he would receive no precise sentence but an indeterminate sentence of from one day to life, and the actual length of his sentence would be determined not by a parole board but by an expert psychiatric staff attached to the Federal prison. The prison itself would be as much a hospital as a jail and, unlike most of our prisons, whose so-called psychiatric staffs are merely a joke, a true effort would be made to cure the inmates. Under this system, the board might determine that the man who killed his wife in a spasm of passion would be incarcerated for only three months, since his was not a repeatable crime, while a man like Perry Smith would probably have to stay there the rest of his life.

**PLAYBOY:** But is psychiatry sufficiently precise to make a valid judgment about whether or not a man is cured? Isn't it still possible under your plan that a cunning psychopath could con a board of psychiatrists into releasing him and then kill again?

**CAPOTE:** Oh, I don't pretend that my idea is foolproof. But it would certainly be a damn sight better than the situation you have today, with the inmates being handled by a lot of underpaid ex-Army sergeants and the parole boards staffed by a combination of political hacks and naïve do-gooders. I think it's a feasible idea and it would remove as much of the element of unfairness from the system as possible. The biggest stumbling block is that shifting homicide from state to Fed-

eral jurisdiction would require amending the Constitution. But sooner or later, it will have to happen.

**PLAYBOY:** You said that under your penal plan, Perry Smith would probably have been incarcerated for life because of his uncontrollable homicidal compulsions. Do you feel that rehabilitation would have been out of the question in his case?

**CAPOTE:** Not necessarily. He wanted very deeply to paint and write and he also had genuine talent as a musician. He had a natural ear and could play five or six instruments; the guitar, in particular, he played extremely well. But one of the things he used to tell me over and over again was what a tragedy it was that never in his life had anyone, neither his father nor the staffs of the various reform schools or correctional institutions, encouraged him in any single creative thing he wanted to do. He said he often tried to get someone interested in him in the hope that he could receive lessons in music or writing, but *nobody* ever paid the slightest bit of attention to him. As a result, Smith came to live in a kind of schizophrenic dream fantasy where he was a great musician or the creator of a brilliant piece of art. Obviously, if at any time in his life another human being had shown him some sustained affection or even interest, Smith could have revealed something of himself and his aspirations and thus been able to lessen his bitter feeling of being so utterly deprived and alone and jealous and ousted from the world. If this had ever happened, I believe that the drive precipitating his psychotic outbursts of violence might have been aborted. Of course, in the five years I knew him after the murders, Smith showed great improvement. He had nothing to do but sit in his cell on death row and wait and sweat; so when I sent him four or five books a week, he read them avidly and sent me opinions on them, very intelligent and perceptive opinions, and I put him on a systematic reading program. He grew particularly enamored of Thoreau and Santayana in his last years and really became, unlikely as it sounds, something of a Santayana expert.

**PLAYBOY:** Surely you don't intend to imply that the fact that Smith had artistic talent and an appreciation of Santayana would justify his release from prison.

**CAPOTE:** Not in itself, of course. But there is such a thing as *partial* rehabilitation. Emotionally and intellectually, Perry had improved considerably during his stay on death row, but his homicidal compulsions ran very deep and I'm not sure he could ever have fully overcome them in the outside world. But the whole point of the psychiatric board attached to the hospital under my plan is to ensure that Perry would undergo extensive examination during his years in prison. It would then be up to the board to decide whether or not he was cured. If Perry

had genuinely overcome his homicidal drives, I see no reason why he could not have been freed and allowed to play a productive role in society. It's really rather extraordinary that so many of the people I've interviewed on death rows across the country do change dramatically, primarily because for the first time in their lives they have the *time*, with no distractions whatever, to really think about their lives and probe inward to discover all kinds of things about themselves. So there's no doubt that people do have a capacity to rehabilitate themselves. For example, I visited a boy in Colorado State Prison named Michael John Bell, who has been on death row for almost five years now and has really evolved into an extraordinarily sensitive and perceptive guy. He's had six stays of execution and may be dead by the time this is in print, and it's a real shame. But this argument can be exaggerated; you mustn't forget that the people who are rehabilitated or who rehabilitate themselves are the exceptions and decidedly not the majority. And not all the rejuvenations take, either. Look at Paul Crump, who's one of the most celebrated examples of this sort of thing. He wrote a novel in prison, eventually had his sentence commuted; but he has gone downhill ever since his commutation and is now a problem character.

**PLAYBOY:** What about Caryl Chessman? Do you share the view of those who feel that it was a tragic waste to execute a man who had changed so dramatically since his conviction?

**CAPOTE:** I'm afraid there has been a lot of bleeding-heart nonsense printed about Chessman. He was a very, very dangerous psychotic who was anything but rehabilitated. He had a sympathetic personality that attracted people to his cause, a certain flair for writing that fooled a lot of people into thinking he was a saint and, God knows, he was articulate; but if Chessman had been let out of San Quentin, he would have returned to his old habits. The man had a *hopelessly* criminal mind. Of course, I'm not saying he should have been executed. Nobody should be executed for rape, even though the victims sometimes suffer aftereffects that are worse than being killed; one of Chessman's victims, remember, is still in a mental institution. I wouldn't have objected to commuting Chessman's sentence to life imprisonment, but I think we should dispense with all this romanticizing about him.

**PLAYBOY:** You have characterized Perry Smith as "psychotic." But was either Smith or Hickock clinically insane?

**CAPOTE:** No, at least not by the current legal definition of insanity. But you've got to make a distinction between Hickock and Smith. Perry Smith was a serious psychopath and to some degree paranoid, with the kind of mind that is able

to kill without passion and without remorse, just as you or I would swat a fly. I've known several Perry types, and human life means nothing to them; it's as if they have a talent for destruction, the kind of death-dealing ability hired killers have. These men have what I call the professional homicidal mind; they think nothing about murdering a man in the course of a robbery or a sexual assault. They can cut a man's throat from ear to ear and walk away and go to a movie and never think about what they've just done, because they place no value whatever on human life. It's almost as if somewhere along the line a surgeon had operated on them and removed some vital part of their brain, leaving them with this ability to kill. There is another type of killer whom I would describe as the *emotional* homicide. This is a man rather like Charles Whitman, the Texas tower murderer, or Robert Benjamin Smith, who walked into an Arizona beauty parlor, forced all the patrons to lie down on the floor and then shot them. This is murder on stage; they're doing it with a *desire* to be caught, because their own anonymity and inadequacy make them desperately require recognition. This type of killer is motivated by a desire to become *somebody*, because he thinks he's nothing; the act of murder becomes the sole release for his frustrations. One of the most interesting things about *Bonnie and Clyde*, which I consider an excellent film, is that it recognizes that the simple desire for notoriety is one of the strongest incitements to crime. Very few people have the vaguest idea of how strong a criminal motivation this is.

But Perry Smith's accomplice, Richard Hickock, doesn't fit either of these categories. Hickock wasn't capable of solo murder at all; he had the sly, quick mind of the petty thief, a kind of check-bouncing mentality. But you might say that in a sense he was a murderer, too, because he recognized the homicidal drive in Perry and he attached himself to it and encouraged it. Hickock was responsible for arranging the crime and the murdering was left to Perry. But Perry, once he was inside the Clutters' house, didn't really *want* to kill; he was reluctant about it, though the outcome was inevitable from the moment he saw Mr. Clutter. Do you remember what he said? "I didn't want to harm the man. I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Soft-spoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat." Insanity? Perhaps; but no court would recognize it as such.

**PLAYBOY:** You say that Smith and Hickock could not be judged insane by the current legal definition of insanity, which in most states is the M'Naghten Rule. Do you think the M'Naghten Rule should be scrapped or amended?

**CAPOTE:** It should certainly be amended. The M'Naghten Rule stipulates that the

only proof of insanity is a man's inability to distinguish between right and wrong at the time of the crime. It's completely black and white; you have to be literally foaming at the mouth to be classified insane under this rule; anything short of that and the courts have no choice but to adjudge you sane. It's absurdly simplistic, because a man can succumb to a terrible inner compulsion to kill, know it's wrong and yet be powerless to resist it. But under the M'Naghten Rule, he will be judged sane and hanged; while by any remotely civilized legal standard, he should be incarcerated in a mental institution. Our laws in this area are about as modern and enlightened as the rack and the bastinado.

**PLAYBOY:** You have said that Smith and Hickock would have gone on killing if they hadn't been apprehended. How can you be so sure?

**CAPOTE:** A pattern of homicide had become so ingrained in them that it was inevitable they would have killed again if they had remained free. Let me give you an example that for space reasons I had to omit from the book. After Smith and Hickock murdered the Clutters, they fled to Mexico and in Mexico City they became chummy with a Swiss man who owned a restaurant. He was a homosexual and Hickock arranged to be picked up by him and go to his apartment. Incidentally, there was no homosexual relationship between Hickock and Smith; Perry once had an affair with a man and had definite homosexual fixations, but he had nothing to do with Hickock; they were completely frank about such matters and would have told me like a shot. Anyway, once Hickock arrived at the apartment, Perry planned to show up and together they were going to murder and rob this man. The assignation fell through at the last moment, but they had every intention of murdering him. You'll find another instance in my book where the two of them are hitchhiking and they agree to murder anybody who picks them up. So this pattern of homicide had already set in; and if they had gotten away with the Clutter murder, they would have set forth on one of those cross-country murder sprees that have become so common. I must stress again that Smith and Hickock had absolutely no qualms about killing. The only thing that bothered them or, rather, disturbed Perry, was a recurrent superstitious dread that something terrible was going to happen, that they wouldn't get away with it. But conscience didn't enter into it at all; Perry Smith, as a matter of fact, told me he was somewhat upset that he *didn't* have any conscience. So the murder of the Clutter family would have been only the first of many.

**PLAYBOY:** The gulf between someone of your background and two such brutal criminals would seem impossible to bridge. But you've said, "Hickock and

Smith became very, very good friends of mine—perhaps the closest friends I've ever had in my life." How did you establish rapport with them?

**CAPOTE:** I treated them as *men*, not as murderers. To most people, a man loses his humanity the minute they learn he's a murderer; they could be talking with him one moment and then the next someone would whisper, "Do you know he killed five people?" and from that moment on, the man would become unreal to them, an uncomfortable abstraction. But I find it relatively easy to establish rapport with murderers; in the past few years, I've interviewed more than 30 of them in all parts of the country. Before I began *In Cold Blood*, I knew nothing about crime and wasn't interested in it; but once the book was under way, I began interviewing murderers—or homicidal minds, as I call them—in order to have a basis of comparison for Smith and Hickock; and I met many more recently while doing a television documentary on capital punishment. The second we begin talking, I find that they are ordinary men with extraordinary problems, set apart only by their ability to kill; in some it's a total lack of conscience, in others a passionate destructive drive. But I have found a certain pattern. One common denominator, for example, is their fetish for tattoos. I have seldom met a murderer who wasn't tattooed. Of course, the reason is rather clear; most murderers are extremely weak men who are sexually undecided and quite frequently impotent. Thus the tattoo, with all its obvious masculine symbolism. Another common denominator is that murderers almost always laugh when they're discussing their crimes. I've met few killers who didn't start laughing when I finally managed to force them to discuss the murder—which isn't easy. When Perry Smith started to tell me about the murder of the Clutter family, for example, he said, "I know this isn't funny, but I can't help laughing about it." Just a while ago, I interviewed a 21-year-old boy named Bassett in the San Quentin death house who is extremely intelligent. He's a slight, thin boy, with a delicate face and figure, a college student, and he writes poetry and short stories. He murdered his mother and father when he was 18; he'd been planning to do it since he was 10 years old. And when he started telling me about how he killed his parents, he began laughing and cracking little jokes, just as though he was telling me the most humorous story. They're mostly like that; they'll tell you how they cut someone's throat and it's as if they were watching a clown slip on a banana peel.

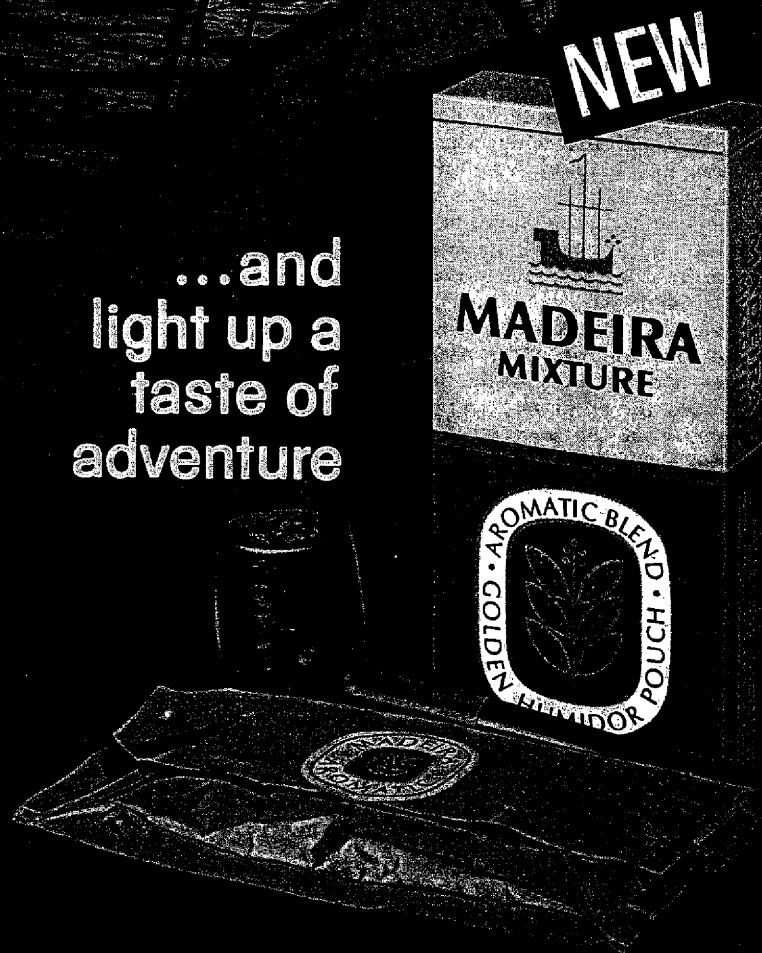
**PLAYBOY:** *In Cold Blood* scrupulously refrains from speculating about the motives of the two murderers. You thus avoid answering the crucial question, Why? Is

there no answer—or did you just fail to find one?

**CAPOTE:** There is an answer and it's implicit in the book. In the last section of Part Four, called "The Corner," I describe at some length a study by several psychiatrists at the Menninger Clinic entitled "Murder Without Apparent Motive," which deals with cases in which a man commits an act of exceptional violence, one out of all proportion to the situation, as Perry Smith did. These doctors analyzed many such cases and found that the backgrounds of all the murderers interviewed were remarkably similar: All of them had experienced a childhood marked by parental brutality, rejection, insecurity. One of the Menninger psychiatrists, Dr. Joseph Satten, concentrated extensively on Perry Smith, and his conclusion was that the person Perry was murdering that night in a Kansas farmhouse was not Mr. Clutter but his own father. I agree. It also became quite clear from many of the things Perry told me over the years that this was his *own* evaluation of what had happened. The only murder of psychological importance in this case is the first one, because once it was committed, the others were imperative, but not in themselves psychologically motivated; they were automatic and almost incidental. So the why is quite clear: Perry identified Mr. Clutter, an authority figure, with the father he loved-hated and he unleashed all his inner resentment in an act of violence. This was a pattern in Perry's life; each time he tried to kill someone, that person was an obvious authority figure, a father surrogate. For example, he told me many times about his attempt to murder a military policeman in Japan; he picked him up and then threw him off a bridge. In each instance, what triggered Perry's violence was his own love-hate relationship with his father. That was the motivation for the crime. In this respect, Smith was very much like Richard Speck, who murdered the eight nurses in Chicago. I haven't interviewed Speck, but I've studied his case and, once again, you have a man full of random, violent hatred that is psychologically triggered by subliminal compulsions. I believe Speck when he says that he didn't intend to kill the eight nurses; what happened was that he identified the last of the girls he tied up, the girl he raped, with his own wife, whom he detested. In Perry's case, it was a father surrogate whom he killed; in Speck's, a wife surrogate. And for Speck, as for Smith, it was only the *first* murder that counted; once he killed the girl he identified with his wife, the other murders were inevitable. I'm always surprised to read reviews of *In Cold Blood* that lament, "But Mr. Capote didn't tell us *why*." Well, short of getting a baseball bat and clubbing you over the head

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with it, I don't see how I could have made the point any more clearly.

**PLAYBOY:** Throughout *In Cold Blood*, you starkly and systematically emphasize the contrast between the wholesome, prototypically rural-American Clutter family and the brutal, disinvolved and desensitized drifters, Hickock and Smith. Some critics have wondered which you intended to imply more truly represents the *real* America of the Sixties—the Clutter family or their murderers.

**CAPOTE:** This contrast does exist, and even though I didn't start out on the book with any preconceived theme—at first I didn't know anything about the Clutter family, much less their killers—this gulf between victim and murderer became so intriguing that it was one of the major factors behind my decision to invest years of time and effort in the book. The contrast was so exaggerated that it became symbolic in a kind of textbook fashion. Here you have the Clutter family on one hand—such a perfect prototype of the good, solid, landed American gentry, as you point out—and on the other hand you have Hickock and Smith, particularly Smith, representing the dangerous psychotic element, empty of compassion or conscience. And these two extremes mated in the act of murder. The Clutter family and Hickock and Smith do represent the opposite poles in American society; if you ask me who best represents the *real* America, I have to say a very modified and much more soiled and complicated version of the Clutter family. But Perry Smith—and I single him out because he had a deeply psychotic criminal mind, whereas Hickock was just a smart-aleck, small-time crook—does represent a very real side of American life; he is typical of the conscienceless yet perversely sensitive violence that runs through such phenomena as the motorcycle gangs and the drifting herds of brutalized children wandering across the country. Of course, in Perry's case—and in the case of the thousands like him—the arbitrary act of violence springs from the poverty of his life, its deep insecurity and emptiness. That doesn't excuse what he did, of course, but it does help explain it. In a way, all this had to happen; there was a quality of inevitability about it. Given what Perry was, and what the Clutters represented, the only possible outcome of their convergence was death.

**PLAYBOY:** In addition to the type of depersonalized violence represented by Smith and Hickock, other forms of *anomie* permeate American society. In Forest Hills, New York, on March 26, 1964, Kitty Genovese was murdered while 38 witnesses stood by and did nothing to help for the half hour it took her assailant to kill her. Instances of this sort in our major cities have become as common as cases in which spectators gleefully shout "Jump!" to potential suicides on window ledges.

What do you think accounts for this widespread apathy to the sufferings of others?

**CAPOTE:** The two instances you cite are basically quite different. The Kitty Genovese case is a completely *urban* phenomenon; I don't think anything like it could ever happen anywhere in rural America. But in our big cities, people are afraid to become involved, because the city *itself* is frightening. The city dweller lives in his isolated unit, his apartment or furnished room, with bolts on the door; and his reaction to another person in trouble is, "I can't do anything, because I really don't know what's out there. I can't get involved." It's not surprising that they have no sense of community responsibility; they don't even know who their *neighbors* are. So why risk their own lives for a stranger? While nothing can excuse the people who watched Kitty Genovese murdered and didn't even call the police, it is understandable, in the context of the current urban brutality, why people are afraid to intervene in acts of violence. It's lamentable, but in some ways you can hardly blame them. If you understand the psychology involved, you can see why this kind of thing could never happen in a small town, where people have roots, where they are not afraid of their environment, where they know their neighbors and feel part of a recognized society. But the cities are anonymous, as Kitty Genovese discovered. The second point, about the spectators who shout "Jump!" to some poor suicide crouched on a window ledge, is just the opposite of the passivity and fear of involvement displayed in the Genovese case: This is the classic lynch-mob mentality. There is a sadistic component of the human mind that is seldom manifested in the individual but that is somehow liberated in the collective; you can have a crowd watching anything from a fire to a fist fight and it's amazing how quickly it can be sparked into a mob. When I was a child in Alabama, lynchings occasionally happened; and I've known hundreds of people perfectly capable of attending a lynching. It's amazing how easily an individual can become depersonalized and swept up into the lynch-mob mentality; people will tell you how they hate violence and how they could never imagine themselves involved in a lynching and then you'll see news photographs of a lynch mob and there they are, their faces glazed with joy and sadism. If the Kitty Genovese case is an urban phenomenon, the lynch-mob mentality is, I fear, a human phenomenon.

**PLAYBOY:** Ten thousand murders are committed in the U.S. each year—in New York City alone, about four times as many as in the whole of Great Britain. Our crime rate is one of the highest in the world and increases yearly. Four U.S. Presidents have been assassinated while in office and four oth-

ers have survived assassination attempts. Mass murders are becoming commonplace; extremist paramilitary groups arm to fight off their enemies; and race riots wrack more and more cities. Social critic Max Lerner contends that we are living in a "climate of violence—a climate of frustration, of emotional deprivation, of hate." He feels there is something peculiarly American about this high incidence of violence, perhaps rooted in our frontier psychology, which dictated that disputes be settled by guns. Do you agree?

**CAPOTE:** I'm constantly reading in the popular psychological press about this residue of frontier mentality accounting for the violence in our society, but I just don't agree. After all, for centuries, assassination has been almost a way of life, or death, in the Orient and the Arab world; and Russia has a pretty neat record of assassination, too. I just don't subscribe to the whole idea that America is more violent than other countries. What makes it *appear* that way statistically is that when you take America and put her next to France or Sweden or Liechtenstein, we have more of everything, from assassination to psoriasis. But the United States is an enormous part of a whole continent and comparisons like this are meaningless unless you first lump all the nations of Europe into one country and for good measure throw in a couple of Arab states; then you'd have a fair basis for statistical comparison, and I'm sure you would find the incidences of violence are quite similar.

**PLAYBOY:** Even if America is no worse than other countries in this respect, you have frequently expressed alarm over the rising tide of violent crime in our society. In November 1966, you appeared before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee and attacked recent Supreme Court rulings strengthening the rights of suspects in criminal cases, charging that if those rulings had been in effect at the time of Hickock and Smith's arrest, both men would have gone free to kill again. Why are you so opposed to these rulings?

**CAPOTE:** I'm not opposed to all the Court's rulings on the civil liberties of suspects in criminal cases. The Court has delivered two major decisions, *Miranda* and *Escobedo*. The *Escobedo* ruling states that if a suspect requests a lawyer, he must be supplied one, whatever his financial status. I have no objection at all to that decision. But the *Miranda* decision, which stipulates that a suspect must be advised that he has the right to remain silent and the right to the presence of an attorney before any questioning, is absurd and extremely detrimental to effective law enforcement. Just the other day, *reductio ad absurdum*, a nine-year-old boy was picked up for shoplifting in Missouri and he told the arresting officers that he wouldn't go to the police station and

(continued on page 160)

## PLAYBOY INTERVIEW (continued from page 62)

wouldn't answer any questions: "I know my rights! You get a lawyer here this minute!" That's a true story, believe it or not; and aside from its humorous aspects, it holds a sinister message: From now on, no prisoner is going to confess to any crime with a lawyer in the room, because no lawyer worth his salt will allow a prisoner to confess, even if he wants to. As a result, the number of convictions law-enforcement agencies will obtain is going to be considerably reduced; you don't have eyewitnesses at every crime, and frequently a confession is the only way a criminal's guilt will stand up in court. But as a result of the *Miranda* ruling, the police are hamstrung. I don't think this is fair either to the police or to the public at large.

**PLAYBOY:** Even if the *Miranda* decision does restrict police power to some extent, isn't it true that for years, suspects in criminal cases have been coerced into signing confessions by police strong-arm techniques? And isn't it more important to protect the civil liberties of the defendant than to ensure a 100-percent conviction rate?

**CAPOTE:** I'm well acquainted with this argument, but I think it applies to only an infinitesimal percentage of criminal cases. Of course, there are occasionally bad situations where the police use third-degree tactics, but I think that is being corrected by the police forces themselves, which are growing more enlightened every day. But I would still prefer the occasional situation where police exceed their authority to the situation we have today as a result of the *Miranda* ruling. The Supreme Court has handcuffed the police and thus bears a share of responsibility for the vast increase of crime in our society.

**PLAYBOY:** You don't agree, then, with the adage that it's better for a dozen guilty men to go free than for one innocent man to be unjustly convicted?

**CAPOTE:** It's a charming sentiment, but more apropos in the halcyon days of yore, when our cities had not yet been turned into jungles and a citizen could still stroll the streets in safety. I'm afraid that today, for the very self-protection of our society, it's better that one innocent man be punished than that a dozen guilty men go free. It's unfortunate, but that's the harsh reality we face.

**PLAYBOY:** You have consistently defended the police against their critics, but you've never addressed yourself to the problem of police brutality—and corruption—across the country. Why?

**CAPOTE:** I know it's become fashionable to depict the police as sadistic Cossacks riding down innocent citizens, but I've become well enough acquainted with law-enforcement agencies across the country to know that's just not the case.

Of course, a certain small percentage of policemen are irresponsible, just as a certain percentage of lawyers and doctors and insurance salesmen are irresponsible, but that doesn't justify the current unjust barrage of propaganda against a tribe of men who are hard-working, underpaid and daily risking their lives to protect us. I'm sure there are isolated instances of police brutality, but the rising crime rate and urban violence constitute a far, far more pressing problem.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you opposed to civilian review boards to supervise the police?

**CAPOTE:** Not on principle, but I do think that any such board is unworkable in practice and really little more than a piece of propaganda.

**PLAYBOY:** Crimes of sexual violence have been rising in recent years. Do you feel, as some proponents of censorship contend, that there is a discernible relationship between the reading of pornographic material and the commission of sex offenses?

**CAPOTE:** Pornography doesn't drive a man out into the streets to rape; if anything, it has the opposite effect. After all, the major purpose of pornography is to activate masturbation; thus, it serves to release sexual tensions, not to exacerbate them. The people who commit rape or other sexual assaults are suffering from a pathological condition, a kind of claustrophobic compulsion to burst out of their sexual frustrations by the commission of a violent act. They have been stimulated by interior drives that can find an outlet only in violence, and a salacious book would have as much effect on their behavior as a copy of *The Christian Science Monitor*. Pornography literally has no meaning for them; if it did, they would buy it and stay in their rooms, peacefully masturbating. But for those people who are less disturbed but still have sexual problems, pornography can be a quite healthy form of release and serve as a tranquilizer for the libido.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you believe it is possible to establish any objective legal guidelines for censorship?

**CAPOTE:** Of course not, for the very simple reason that nobody can even define what pornography is. It's all in the eye of the beholder, and what seems pornographic to one person may appear as benign as December snow to somebody else. I'm sure that there are people who consider the *Song of Songs* in the Bible pornographic. So if it's impossible to even establish a valid definition of something, how can you legislate against it? But even if you could define it, I'd be against censorship; I've never been able to understand the whole obsession with the "evils" of pornography. What possible harm can pornography do? I know some people argue that it falls into the hands of young people and corrupts them, but

that's nonsense; any child who reaches the age of 14 is already knowledgeable sexually, even if the only thing he's ever read is *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*.

**PLAYBOY:** Though the Supreme Court has considerably liberalized censorship laws in recent years, the Court departed from its tolerant stance in 1966 and upheld the obscenity conviction of publisher Ralph Ginzburg on the grounds that his advertising material—not the contents of his publications—was "titillating." What do you think of the *Ginzburg* ruling?

**CAPOTE:** The only obscene thing about it was the Court's own decision. But then, nothing this particular Supreme Court does surprises me. Not that I want anybody impeached—except, perhaps, Justice Douglas.

**PLAYBOY:** Why Douglas?

**CAPOTE:** I decline to answer, on the grounds that I prefer to be enigmatic.

**PLAYBOY:** Censorship, of course, is not the only area in which our sexual mores have evolved. In recent years, wife-swapping clubs and correspondence societies catering to offbeat erotic tastes have burgeoned across the country, and some consider this an unhealthy social phenomenon. Do you?

**CAPOTE:** It's always been going on beneath the surface, and now, with the loosening of censorship regulations, it just appears more obvious. What's new about orgies? The only original development is that people have now begun to select their sexual partners in the most convenient way—by putting an ad in the paper.

**PLAYBOY:** Those who place such ads sometimes get an unexpected response—from the U.S. Post Office. In recent years, the postal authorities have adopted a policy of opening first-class mail in search of pornography and turning over the offenders for prosecution. How do you feel about this policy?

**CAPOTE:** It's disgraceful. The Post Office's sole function, after all, is to ensure the delivery of mail—not to interfere with its contents. But they have arrogated this right to themselves and, as a result, have caused intense personal suffering for countless people. To give a case in point, a very good friend of mine was the late Professor Newton Arvin of Smith College, who was one of the foremost distinguished American literary critics of the century and has been cited as such by Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling and many others. One of Professor Arvin's hobbies was the collecting of pornography, which he frequently ordered through the mail—a perfectly harmless pursuit, as far as I'm concerned. But the defenders of public morality who run the Northampton, Massachusetts, Post Office began opening his first-class mail—in violation of the law—and then resealing it and sending it on to him. Finally, after a few months of this

surveillance, they went to his home with a search warrant, turned the premises upside down, impounded Professor Arvin's collection of pornography and arrested him. Though he could have been sent to jail for several years for the "crime" of possessing pornography, he pleaded guilty and was allowed to go free on probation. But the episode ruined his life and his career; Smith College tried to be decent, but they had to release him because of the publicity surrounding his arrest, and no other university would give him a position. So this charming, brilliant, civilized individual, one of America's four or five finest critics, died in shadow. And I'm afraid this kind of thing is going on every day. Only two things can correct it: the passage of legislation allowing a person to possess pornography if he so desires and the institution of measures preventing the Post Office from snooping into the mail of private citizens.

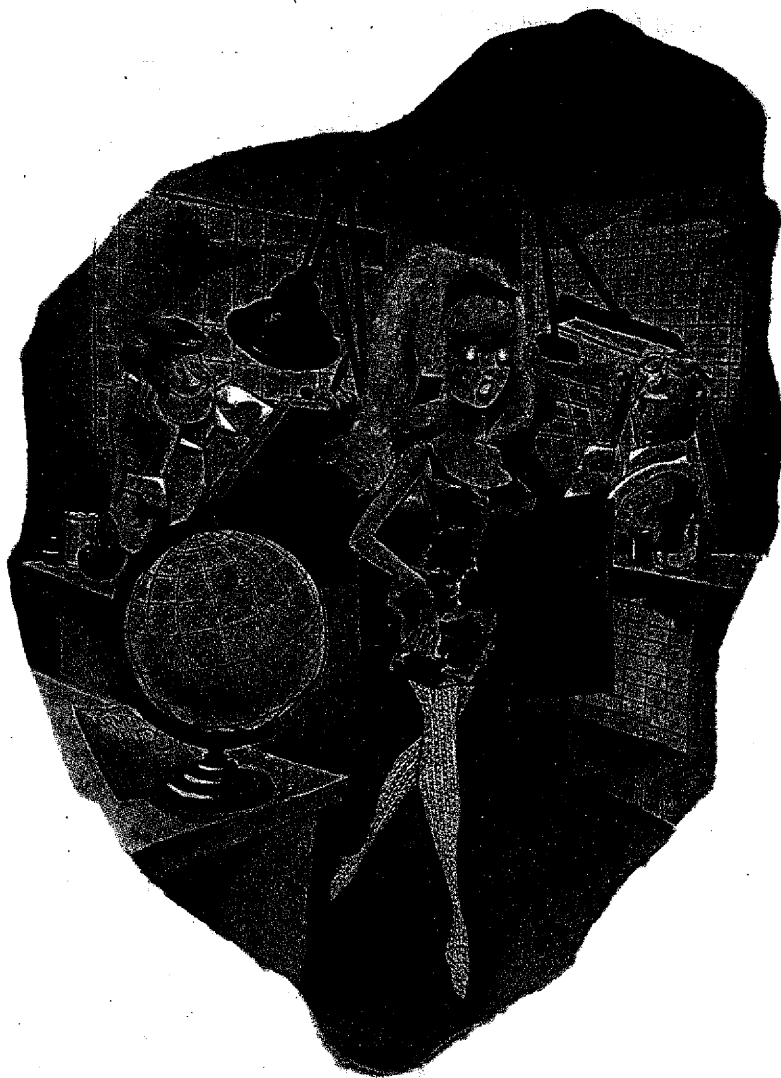
**PLAYBOY:** As you know, the Post Office isn't alone in invading the citizen's privacy. Vance Packard and other social critics, joined recently by Senator Edward Long, have warned that similar privacy invasions—by electronic eavesdropping, Internal Revenue Service investigations, Government "security" checks, intensive psychometric testing for job placement, etc.—are subtly ushering us into the age of Big Brother. Do you agree?

**CAPOTE:** I couldn't agree more. I think this systematic invasion of privacy is one of the most dangerous developments of the past 15 years, and I wish the public would become more exercised about it. There's no reason why we should meekly submit to this kind of creeping totalitarianism. But as it stands right now, Big Brother is having a field day.

**PLAYBOY:** The Post Office's attempts to sanitize the mail, as well as the *Ginzburg* decision, appear to constitute the rear-guard stand of traditionalism in its campaign against the so-called new morality, midwifed by the pill and the re-examination of sexual mores that began with the Kinsey Report. Do you consider this new morality a positive development?

**CAPOTE:** I certainly do. Anything that frees people of fear and makes them less inhibited is a damn good thing. Of course, I've read recently about various researchers who have polled college students across the country and discovered that today's girls aren't really any more lenient than girls 30 years ago, but I just don't believe it. There is a new morality; it was bound to happen, and I'm delighted it did.

**PLAYBOY:** One of the early fictional precursors of this trend was your own Holly Golightly, the heroine of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Would you elaborate on your comment that Holly was the prototype of today's liberated female and repre-



"Get lost!"

sentative of "a whole breed of girls who live off men but are not prostitutes. They're our version of the geisha girl."?

**CAPOTE:** Holly Golightly was not precisely a callgirl. She had no job, but accompanied expense-account men to the best restaurants and night clubs, with the understanding that her escort was obligated to give her some sort of gift, perhaps jewelry or a check. Holly was always running to the girl's room and asking her date, "May I have a little powder-room change?" And the man would give her \$50. Usually, her escort was a married man from out of town who was lonely, and she would flatter him and make a good impression on his associates, but there was no emotional involvement on either side; the girl expected nothing but a present and the man nothing but some good company and ego bolstering—although if she felt like it, she might take her escort home for the night. So these girls are the authentic American geishas, and they're much more prevalent now than in 1943 or 1944,

which was Holly's era. Every year, New York is flooded with these girls; and two or three, usually models, always become prominent and get their names in the gossip columns and are seen in all the prominent places with all the Beautiful People. And then they fade away and marry some accountant or dentist, and a new crop of girls arrives from Michigan or South Carolina and the process starts all over again. The main reason I wrote about Holly, outside of the fact that I liked her so much, was that she was such a symbol of all these girls who come to New York and spin in the sun for a moment like May flies and then disappear. I wanted to rescue one girl from that anonymity and preserve her for posterity.

**PLAYBOY:** Shortly after publication of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, a writer named Bonnie Golightly sued you for \$800,000, on the grounds that she was the real-life inspiration for your fictional heroine. At least four other New York girls about town countered with the claim that they were the prototype of Holly. Was the

characterization of Holly based on a real person?

**CAPOTE:** Yes, but not on any of the people you refer to. The real Holly Golightly was a girl exactly like the girl in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, with the single exception that in the book she comes from Texas, whereas the real Holly was a German refugee who arrived in New York at the beginning of the War, when she was 17 years old. Very few people were aware of this, however, because she spoke English without any trace of an accent. She had an apartment in the brownstone where I lived and we became great friends. Everything I wrote about her is literally true—not about her friendship with a gangster called Sally Tomato and all that, but everything about her personality and her approach to life, even the most apparently preposterous parts of the book. For instance, do you remember, in the beginning, where a man comes into a bar with photographs of an African wood carving of a girl's head he had found in the jungle and the girl could only be Holly? Well, my real-life Holly did disappear into Portuguese Africa and was never heard from again. But after the War, a man named John La Touche, a well-known song lyricist and writer, traveled to the Belgian Congo to make a documentary film; and in a jungle village he discovered this wooden head carving of Holly. It's all the evidence of her existence that remains.

**PLAYBOY:** Holly Golightly alludes to her onetime Lesbian roommate and obliquely expresses a sexual interest in other women. Was Holly a Lesbian?

**CAPOTE:** Let's leave Holly out of it. It's a well-known fact that most prostitutes are Lesbians—at least 80 percent of them, in any case. And so are a great many of the models and showgirls in New York; just off the top of my head, I can think of three top professional models who are Lesbians. Of course, there's a Lesbian component in every woman, but what intrigues me is the heterosexual male's fascination with Lesbians. I find it extraordinary that so many men I know consider Lesbian women exciting and attractive; among their most treasured erotic dreams is the idea of going to bed with two Lesbians. These men seem to find the role of voyeur in that kind of *ménage à trois* irresistible. It's a curious phenomenon. I don't know precisely what accounts for it, but it's certainly one of the most widespread male erotic fantasies I've encountered.

**PLAYBOY:** Isn't the liveliness of Manhattan's Holly Golightlys being threatened by the increasing influx of "amateur" bachelor girls who come to New York in search of fun and games as well as careers and husbands?

**CAPOTE:** Oh, yes. All these bars along Second and Third avenues, with names like The Little Jolly Brown Jug, are packed with airline stewardesses and

miniskirted secretaries waiting to be picked up by some guy. And when they ask for change for the powder room, they only expect a quarter.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think prostitution should be legalized?

**CAPOTE:** Why not? It goes on all the time anyway, and the laws we have on the books certainly do nothing to restrict it. There are more prostitutes in New York today than there have ever been; you can hardly walk down Broadway without being propositioned. If it were legalized, there would be hygienic centers where the girls could be inspected to check the spread of venereal disease, and perhaps prostitutes could be localized in certain designated areas of the city where they could be supervised by the authorities. What's more, the Government would have an additional source of tax revenue. But as it stands today, it's like Prohibition; people will go on drinking bad whiskey, so why not remove the restrictions and let them drink good whiskey? It's all so hypocritical. The last stand of puritanism is in our lawbooks; a considerable percentage of the population has freed itself of the old taboos, but laws always lag behind reality. So let's change the laws.

**PLAYBOY:** Your position on such questions as capital punishment, censorship and prostitution would seem to fall under the traditional liberal classification; but on other issues, such as the Supreme Court rulings on the rights of suspects in criminal cases, you adopt an essentially conservative stance. Where would you place yourself on the political spectrum—right, left or center?

**CAPOTE:** Nowhere. I have never considered myself right, left or center. On some issues, such as law enforcement, I do sound like a Birchite; and on others, more like Fidel Castro after two quarts of Appleton's rum. I never label myself; I decide how I feel about a specific political issue on its own merits, without evaluating everything from a rigid ideological position. As a result, my opinions don't always add up to a harmonious whole, but I've never known anybody altogether consistent who wasn't either a psychopath or a cretin—or both. To take a case in point, I have never been able to understand a group like the John Birch Society. I know three or four admitted Birchites and have discussed politics with them, and I find their position totally unrealistic; anybody who is so rigidly consistent about such a complex question as communism, say, is just a fanatic. I don't believe there can be any genuinely intelligent approach to a given issue unless one has a great mental flexibility, and the trouble with all these far-right and far-left mentalities is that they can encompass only one side of an argument and are congenitally incapable of holding two opinions in their heads at the same time. Of course, the middle-of-the-

roader isn't always correct, either, because sometimes an extreme left- or right-wing opinion happens to be correct; you have to pick and choose. Anybody who is consistently middle-of-the-road is just another type of extremist; you can't always straddle the fence.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you believe that a writer should be *l'homme engagé*, as Sartre put it, deeply committed to the social and political issues of his time? Or should he write only about what he subjectively perceives and not become involved in political controversy?

**CAPOTE:** I prefer not to become involved in politics. But there are certain writer-intellectuals—words that don't necessarily cohabit—whose sole distinction is their treatment of political and sociological subjects. Usually, these are men who can brilliantly perceive abstractions—and usually they are *not* artists. The essay is their natural medium, not poetry or narrative prose. Camus did manage to combine artistry with the *homme engagé* concept, with some success; also Malraux. But not Sartre. He's an interesting philosophical theoretician, but he is definitely *not* an artist. His novels are on a par with those of Simone de Beauvoir; together they constitute the dullest of intellectual vaudeville teams.

**PLAYBOY:** One of your few ventures into politics occurred in 1961, when you became a sponsor of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and signed a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* exhorting Washington to adopt a more conciliatory attitude toward the Castro regime. Do you regret your association with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee?

**CAPOTE:** Yes, I do. I'm sorry I signed that advertisement. But at the time, I honestly thought Castro was an admirable young insurgent who was being unjustly abused in the American press. So when I was asked to sign this Fair Play for Cuba advertisement, I agreed, although only on the condition that the committee assure me they were paying for the space themselves, without any assistance from the Castro government. They swore they were just a legitimate organization with no ties to Havana, so I lent them my name. But some time afterward, I discovered that the advertisement had been paid for by the Cuban government; the money was passed in cash to the Fair Play organizers by Raulito Roa, the son of Cuba's foreign minister. Naturally, I felt that the officers of the committee had been deceitful and unscrupulous, and I regret ever getting involved with them.

**PLAYBOY:** Apart from the duplicity of the advertisement's sponsors, do you now also disagree with the opinions expressed in the ad? Or do you still feel that the hostile American attitude toward Castro forced him into the arms of Russia?

**CAPOTE:** I suppose that may be true to

some extent, but I now believe that Castro was a Communist from the very beginning and was lying when he styled himself a democratic agrarian reformer. I'm just sorry I believed him; I even believed Che Guevara's disavowals. There's little doubt that sooner or later, whatever Washington's attitude, Castro would have declared his government Communist and at that point would have had no alternative but to turn to Russia and the Communist bloc for support. But it is possible that if both sides had shown more forbearance, we might never have gotten trapped into such a bitterly hostile relationship. After all, there are nationalistic variants of communism, and it's much better to coexist with a country like Yugoslavia than live in a state of antagonism, as we do today with Cuba.

**PLAYBOY:** Senator Fulbright contends that the Cold War has frozen us into an unrealistically rigid attitude toward world communism and has conditioned the public to view every Communist state as our mortal enemy, thus inhibiting the flexibility of our foreign policy and increasing the likelihood of war. Do you feel that's true?

**CAPOTE:** Yes, but I think that in recent years the United States Government has improved relations with Russia considerably and now *does* have a much more flexible attitude toward the Communist states. We are now peacefully coexisting with Russia to a degree that would have seemed impossible to most people ten years ago. And I think the central reason is China; both Washington and Moscow understand the threat posed by China, Russia even more than the United States. If we have mended our fences, it's primarily because both countries fear China more than each other. That's the main thing that keeps the thaw going.

**PLAYBOY:** Critics of American involvement in the war in Vietnam fear it will escalate into a confrontation with China that could precipitate World War Three. For this and other reasons, they urge an immediate cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of U.S. troops, unilaterally, if necessary. Do you agree?

**CAPOTE:** I can't give you a pat dove-hawk answer, because my preoccupations with the war are primarily emotional, not political. I think both sides, Hanoi and Washington, are terribly, tragically

wrong. And the mistakes of statesmen are always written in young men's blood.

**PLAYBOY:** Many artists and writers, including Robert Lowell and Arthur Miller, have boycotted White House cultural events to express their abhorrence of the war. Do you believe an artist should demonstrate his opposition to Government policy in such a manner?

**CAPOTE:** No. The issuance of an invitation is a private matter and its acceptance or rejection should also be private. Robert Lowell is a friend of mine and I have the greatest respect for him as a man and as an artist, but I think he was mistaken to publicly announce what by any standard of good manners should have been a privately conveyed regret. This has nothing to do with dissent, mind you, just good manners. But let me add that if Lowell really felt deeply that this was the best way to dramatize his opposition to the war, then that is his right, his freedom, his manhood—and to hell with etiquette. I just would have handled it differently.

**PLAYBOY:** Opponents of the Vietnam conflict, from Bertrand Russell to Senator Eugene McCarthy, are united in their condemnation of Lyndon Johnson and his conduct of the war. Do you share their estimation of the President?

**CAPOTE:** I think the attitude of the press and the intelligentsia toward him is unfair. He's the most maligned man since Lincoln. The President is confronting and dealing with situations on the basis of information to which the rest of us have no access; it's always easy to condemn a course of action when you're unaware of the hard facts on which it's based. Of course, it can be argued that our very lack of inside information is in itself an indictment of this man's Administration, but that is to totally ignore the tactics of our political opponents. President Johnson is a pragmatist who handles our interests without subtlety—but with a realism that requires a certain emotional control that I respect.

**PLAYBOY:** President Johnson's critics contend that he has deliberately misled the public, particularly in regard to the war in Vietnam, and has thus created a serious credibility gap. Do you agree?

**CAPOTE:** It's true that the Administration has made promises about Vietnam that haven't been fulfilled, but that doesn't mean there's any conscious deceit involved. For example, McNamara predicted that U.S. troops would be out of Vietnam by the end of 1965; but did it ever occur to you that at the time he made the statement he really thought those troops *would* be leaving? Just because things don't happen doesn't necessarily mean they weren't said in good faith the first time round; you can promise something and have every reason to believe it's true when you say it and place all your faith in it and then find that new developments change the



"Takes some of the incentive out of being a virgin, doesn't it?"

whole situation and dictate a new course of action. President Johnson may be mistaken in some of his policies, but I don't believe he has been deliberately lying.

**PLAYBOY:** To cite a specific instance, *Newsweek's* White House correspondent Charles Roberts and former Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hillsman have both reported that Johnson made the decision to escalate the war and bomb North Vietnam as early as December 1963 but withheld this information from the public until after the election so that he could counter Goldwater's hawkish campaign appeals with a promise to limit the war "and not go north." Isn't this an example of the so-called credibility gap?

**CAPOTE:** If it's true, yes.

**PLAYBOY:** Recent Presidential preference polls have shown both New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller and California Governor Ronald Reagan running close to President Johnson. What do you think of the two men as possible candidates?

**CAPOTE:** Well, Rockefeller is definitely back in contention for the 1968 Republican Presidential nomination. And I hope he gets it, too. He certainly deserves it. Without a doubt, he's the ablest man the Republicans could offer. As for Ronald Reagan, I met him recently for the first time and he's really a disarming fellow, not just the California aberration all the *cognoscenti* seem to think. He's a modest man with a genuine sense of self-deprecating humor and he talks easily, with a certain relaxed alertness, on quite a wide range of subjects. While he may not be my own choice politically, I can certainly understand why he appeals to the California voter. Don't underestimate him.

**PLAYBOY:** President Johnson's main rival within the Democratic Party is Senator Robert F. Kennedy, a personal friend of yours. How would you answer the charges of such political commentators as Victor Lasky and Ralph de Toledano that Senator Kennedy is ruthless and power hungry?

**CAPOTE:** Have you ever met a politician who wasn't? Actually, I think this particular Senator is quite considerate of other people's feelings and, on certain occasions, is even more loyal to those feelings than to the pursuit of his own ambition.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you believe Kennedy intends to run for the Presidency in either 1968 or 1972?

**CAPOTE:** 1972. But who really knows?

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think he'd make a good President?

**CAPOTE:** If Bob Kennedy were elected President, it would be rather like a career diplomat who starts out in the Foreign Service as a clerk and is finally appointed an ambassador; it's a post he's been trained for all his life, just as Bob Kennedy has been trained for the Presidency. Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean he'll ever get it, but he is certainly fully equipped for the job.



"He can't see you now—we're playing doctor."

**PLAYBOY:** R. F. K.'s critics warn that his past actions—including his work for Joe McCarthy and his hounding of Jimmy Hoffa—would make him a dangerously authoritarian President likely to run roughshod over the civil liberties of his opponents. Do you feel that this is a valid apprehension?

**CAPOTE:** No, because Bob Kennedy would certainly be no worse in this respect than any of the other likely contenders for the Presidency. If he were to become President, I think his sense of responsibility would rise to the altitude of his position. That's what happens to most people who are elected to high office; they become acutely aware of their own power and the responsibilities it entails and they learn how to gauge and apply it. I don't think Bob Kennedy is a ruthless or malicious person at all. He is human and, when he gets riled, he wants to go after his enemies; who doesn't?

**PLAYBOY:** One former associate of Kennedy's who is unlikely to agree with your evaluation of him is William Manchester. What did you think of his book *The Death of a President*?

**CAPOTE:** This has nothing to do with my friendship for the Kennedys, but the book is a literary and historic disaster.

**PLAYBOY:** Apart from the literary merits of Manchester's book, do you feel that Robert Kennedy behaved properly throughout the affair?

**CAPOTE:** I certainly do. What else could he have done? The Kennedy family commissioned the book; they requested certain conditions and Manchester signed a statement promising to respect those conditions—and then turned around and broke the agreement. Manchester could never have done the book without the assistance of the Kennedys and he was honor bound to abide by his word and

respect their feelings. Of course, I don't think Bob Kennedy would ever have gotten involved in the whole mess except for Mrs. Kennedy; he was, in effect, coming to her defense. But I think that he behaved as a good brother-in-law and as a man standing up for his own rights. I have never been able to understand the attitude of the press toward the controversy. Manchester made an agreement and then didn't live up to it. It's as simple as that.

**PLAYBOY:** Even if Manchester did fail to honor his agreement, do you think the Kennedys had any right to exact such conditions? Weren't they, in effect, demanding censorship of history?

**CAPOTE:** No, they weren't. Bob Kennedy had every right to insist on certain conditions, since the Kennedy family was supplying the relevant material to Manchester, speaking freely to him and ensuring that others spoke freely to him. The Kennedys gave the book to him, in return for his word that he would grant them a measure of editorial control. Manchester had the right to accept or reject those conditions at the outset; but he had no right, ethically or legally, to accept them when it was convenient and then reject them after he had gotten all he needed from the Kennedys. This all boils down to a simple question of contract. If a publisher negotiates a contract with me, he has every right to say, "Now, Truman, I want 60 percent of this material in the book and 40 percent of that." If I sign such a contract, I have to fulfill my obligations. If I don't fulfill them and my publisher insists that I stick to the terms of our contract, I certainly would have no right to holler that my muse was being violated.

**PLAYBOY:** But this book was an examination of the circumstances surrounding

the assassination of the President of the United States—and the facts of that tragedy belong to the public. Some feel that Manchester had a higher obligation to the truth than to his agreement with the Kennedy family. Do you disagree?

**CAPOTE:** Manchester had a higher obligation, all right—to the Book-of-the-Month Club, *Look* magazine and his accountants. But the most important point here is that the Kennedys were never thinking in such terms about Manchester's book; they didn't envision him doing a definitive, deathless study of the Kennedy assassination that would be pored over by scholars 300 years from now. They just didn't consider it a historical project; that task they left to Arthur Schlesinger, a highly competent historian who is compiling a comprehensive examination of the assassination for the Kennedy Library, to be released some years from now. The Kennedys asked Manchester to do a popular book on the subject because a slew of third-rate journalists had expressed their intentions to do the literary equivalent of those ghoulish J. F. K. memorabilia gimcracks that blossomed on the market after the assassination. To head off an onslaught of such commercial trash, the Kennedys contacted Manchester and provided him with information that was denied all other journalists. Bob Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy hoped that by cooperating with Manchester, they would prevent a lot of people from making money out of their brother and husband's death. Instead, they lost their privacy and made him rich.

**PLAYBOY:** Manchester generally confirmed the conclusions of the Warren Report, but its findings have been under heavy fire recently from best-selling author Mark Lane and New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, among others. What's your opinion of the Warren Report and the current controversy raging over it?

**CAPOTE:** The Warren Report is correct. Oswald, acting alone, killed the President. And that's it.

**PLAYBOY:** Nevertheless, a whole body of literature has sprung up challenging the Warren Commission's conclusions on the assassination. In addition to Lane, such authors as Edward Epstein, Sylvia Meagher, Leo Sauvage, Josiah Thompson and Harold Weisberg have examined in depth the Commission's own evidence and discovered many contradictions and discrepancies. Don't you think these critics have scored some valid points against the Warren Commission?

**CAPOTE:** Of course they've scored some points. Obviously, there are many mistakes in the Warren Report, generally minor technical errors and omissions. The Report isn't Holy Writ, after all. But I've read three or four of the most prominent books critical of the Commission, and I've also read the Warren Report, and by every rule of logic and

sanity I believe the Report is correct in all its essentials. I'm unable to understand why any intelligent and objective person cannot clearly see the basic correctness of the Warren Report. But I do understand very well all this nit-picking and speculation that's going on, because most of it is monetary; a bunch of vultures has discovered that pecking at the carrion of a dead President is an easy way to make a living.

**PLAYBOY:** If the authors of books critical of the Warren Commission are just "nit-picking," what about Garrison's claim to have discovered a well-organized assassination plot? Do you exclude the possibility that he's on to something?

**CAPOTE:** Mr. Garrison is on to something, all right—a good press agent. As far as I'm concerned, Garrison is a man on the make politically who's seized hold of this alleged conspiracy as a method of advancing his career. But I think he bit off more than he can chew and is now forced to ride the thing to the dirty end. I'll bet Garrison is sorry he ever started his so-called investigation.

**PLAYBOY:** Garrison answers the charge that he is politically motivated by arguing that an ambitious man would never crawl out on such a limb unless he had the facts to back him up. If Garrison doesn't have a case, why would he have started something that could only discredit him and scuttle his career?

**CAPOTE:** Well, if he really does have some cards up his sleeve, why doesn't he show them to us? I'm convinced his whole "case" is a lot of hot air. If Garrison really does have anything at all to back up his charges, it will be a great surprise to me. I think he's a faker.

**PLAYBOY:** Garrison contends that it's not his job to show his cards in public but to prove his case in a court of law. By not allowing his charges to stand or fall in court, aren't you prejudging the case?

**CAPOTE:** Of course I'm prejudging the case, for the simple reason that I don't believe he has any case. The man has behaved with outrageous irresponsibility, caused great emotional damage to a number of innocent people and, in general, conducted himself in a manner that makes Huey Long look like Orphan Annie. I'm not going to suspend my critical faculties just because the jury hasn't rendered a verdict. And if the jury did find Shaw guilty, I would still refuse to believe Garrison has a case. I was born in New Orleans and I know how the courts operate down there. I have about as much faith in New Orleans jurisprudence as I would in a moral-uptight campaign conducted by the local Mafia.

**PLAYBOY:** Has Robert Kennedy or any other member of the Kennedy family ever expressed to you their feelings about the assassination and the controversy over the Warren Report?

**CAPOTE:** They never discuss anything to

do with the assassination. The feeling of Senator Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy is that their brother and husband was murdered and nothing is ever going to change that. The one central fact that matters is that he's gone. Why it happened, how it happened and who did it doesn't concern them.

**PLAYBOY:** Then Robert Kennedy really knows no more about the assassination and the controversy surrounding it than the average man on the street?

**CAPOTE:** He doesn't pretend to.

**PLAYBOY:** The only figure on the right with political sex appeal comparable with that of Bobby Kennedy is William Buckley, who is reported to be considering a crack at the Republican nomination for the New York Senate seat currently held by Jacob Javits. How would you evaluate the "new conservatism" articulated by Buckley and his *National Review*?

**CAPOTE:** I prefer Buckley to his politics. I see *National Review* only occasionally, but I would say that the four best-edited commercial magazines extant are (1) *The New Yorker*, (2) *Time*, (3) *Vogue* and (4) *National Review*, in that order.

**PLAYBOY:** Thank you.

**CAPOTE:** This has nothing to do with the content; it's simply that each has an identifiable editorial approach that is like a signature. Buckley has the hardest row to hoe, but he is one smooth article—clever, logical, witty, almost excessively articulate, with a vocabulary as baroque as an 18th Century Austrian palace. If Buckley were a political candidate, he wouldn't get my vote, but he's certainly one of the live ones—and Forest Lawn has a real franchise on 90 percent of the rest.

**PLAYBOY:** Although both Buckley and Kennedy number many young political activists among their most ardent admirers, a growing percentage of the so-called under-25 generation that will soon dominate the country's population is refusing to buy its traditional values. Do you share their disenchantment?

**CAPOTE:** No, but I like today's younger generation. I think they have great verve and creativity and I particularly like their music, as exemplified by such groups as The Doors and the Jefferson Airplane. It's extraordinary and far better than most of the so-called serious music being produced either here or in Europe. Just the other day, I was passing one of those little stores where you buy pop posters and I saw this poster of me together with all the Beatles and a lot of other youngsters. I was delighted; I've never been more flattered.

**PLAYBOY:** What do you think of Timothy Leary and the psychedelic subculture that has sprung up across the country?

**CAPOTE:** I think Dr. Leary is a thoroughly delightful, harmless do-gooder—a true innocent. His heart is in the right place. But I don't think his theory of understanding oneself and expanding consciousness through psychedelic drugs is

at all valid. Out of my boundless curiosity, I've experimented with LSD myself once or twice, but I haven't derived much benefit from it. My own imagination is psychedelic enough.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you agree with Dr. Leary's contention that the American middle class is hag-ridden by ethical and spiritual hang-ups stemming from the pursuit of mediocrity?

**CAPOTE:** Well, of course, they're hag-ridden, but not by the *pursuit* of mediocrity; they *are* mediocre. You don't pursue the essence of your being.

**PLAYBOY:** Would you share the views of those social critics who argue that the mediocrity and materialism of the middle class account for the rising tide of drug-taking, juvenile delinquency and hippie dropouts?

**CAPOTE:** What society *isn't* totally concerned with materialism? It's not a question of economic systems, either, because Russia is the most materialistic country in the world; everybody, from the Politburo member on down to the street cleaner, is obsessed with consumer commodities and acquisitions. And what else is materialism? Does all this account for the younger generation's rejection of its parents' values? Well, it's a truism that youth revolts against the older generation in one form or another, but a youngster doesn't become a juvenile delinquent just because his parents are bourgeois. The reasons are more intimate. And many things account for the growing use of drugs. In my youth, drugs were just in the offing, a harbinger of the future, and now they're beginning to come into their own. It's inevitable that drugs will play a significant role in life. Alcohol is very *démodé*. Regarding middle-class responsibility for hippie dropouts, my one real criticism of the hippies is that they themselves are so middle-class in their values and so invincibly conformist; they conform about different things, but their insistence on adherence to their own rigid behavioral code, in everything from dress to language, is a form of middle-classism in itself. Of course, almost all of these kids do come from middle-to-upper-class homes, and there would probably never be a hippie if there weren't an Oak Road in Cleveland with a nice white frame house and a neatly pruned garden. Eighty percent of these kids will eventually settle down and there will be a rebellious wave of another kind. Each generation spawns its rebels, but eventually they wander back into the fold and are absorbed. Alas!

**PLAYBOY:** Some political activists of the New Left are critical of the hippies' turn on, tune in, drop out philosophy, on the grounds that it benefits the power structure by diverting potentially rebellious youths into a harmless Soma world. As Rap Brown put it recently,

"When the Federal troops march on Harlem, the hippies will be standing on the corner of 125th Street, handing them daffodils." Do you feel that in a sense the hippie subculture is subtly serving the interests of the establishment?

**CAPOTE:** I can well understand the argument of some radicals that they're contributing nothing whatsoever to a legitimate political rebellion, but that's not what they're all about. They're after something quite different. There's a so-called aesthetic movement, isn't it? Politicians belong in their own union hall, not with the Jefferson Airplane! As far as Rap Brown goes, I'm sure he would rather have people hurling hand grenades than passing out daffodils; he is so incredibly irresponsible in his tactics and utterances as to subvert one's confidence in his capacity for responsible action and thus render him worthless as a leader. It's a pity, too, because both he and Stokely Carmichael are very intelligent. But how can anybody, black or white, rationally back such extremists?

**PLAYBOY:** Are there any Negro leaders whom you respect?

**CAPOTE:** There is no leader on the Negro left of any real ability; in fact, there is no leader at all, just a handful of neurotic notoriety seekers who've appointed themselves spokesmen for a few shattered splinter groups and follow the television cameras across the country. There has been only one man of our generation who could have led a united and constructive radical Negro movement: Malcolm X. I always admired Malcolm and I think his assassination was a tragedy. He was an extremely intelligent man and, in the long run, I believe he was quite sensible in his outlook. He could have been a real leader and of great value.

**PLAYBOY:** Does your dislike of Brown and Carmichael extend to the philosophy of black power they articulate?

**CAPOTE:** There are only three kinds of real power in our society: economic power, political power and military power. When the phrase "black power" was originally coined, I understood it to

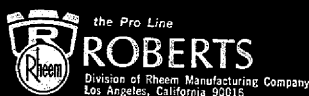


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mean that Negroes would press for the kind of economic power that would automatically generate political power and I considered that a constructive goal. Unfortunately, the very people who first launched the term have perverted it to mean *military* power—the power to kill and burn to achieve one's aims. So if black power means black armies racing through the streets, creating havoc, that certainly does nothing to advance the legitimate political and economic aspirations of the black community. Just the opposite, in fact.

**PLAYBOY:** Negro militants answer that objection by saying that racism is so endemic in our social structure and so institutionalized in our economy that they have been driven to violence as the only means of dramatizing their demands. Do you think there's any truth in this?

**CAPOTE:** Well, if they think a few Molotov cocktails are going to bring down the whole system and build something new, I'm afraid they're just indulging in wishful thinking. In any case, I have to deny their basic premise: I don't believe America is a hopelessly racist society, despite the awful abuses of the past. Racism is not a problem you find only in America. Look at India, where the caste system determines every person's role in society. The Brahmins at the top are pale-skinned; the untouchables at the bottom are black and it's gradation of color that determines the destiny of the intermediate castes. Take England, which now has an explosive racial situation stemming from the huge colored immigration from the Commonwealth; England has ghettos as bad as Harlem, and Negroes are discriminated against socially and economically. Even Africa has its own intertribal racism. And in those countries where race isn't a pressing problem, you have rigid class divisions, as in Russia. Of course, none of this in any way justifies our own situation, but I think it does demonstrate that racism and exploitation are not a peculiarly American phenomenon but a universal human phenomenon.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think that you, yourself, are entirely free of racism?

**CAPOTE:** Well, I think I am, but who really knows? Emotionally, I *feel* I am, because I have always had the closest personal relationship with Negroes. When I was a child, all the people I cared about, with two exceptions, were Negroes; and I felt an intense pain whenever they were slighted or abused. Of course, most of the white-Negro relationships I witnessed were relatively humane, but then I would walk down the street and see Negroes stepping into the gutter to let white people pass by and I just couldn't comprehend it. Throughout my life I have never had any feeling other than complete identification with colored people who were on any kind of wave length at all with me. It's some-

thing that I've stopped thinking about, really. I fully realize, of course, that this is not true of most white people, but I think the argument that *no* whites are free of racism is quite erroneous. But then, on another level, does it really matter if anybody is free of *any* negative feeling about *anything*? No matter how much you love somebody, you know, there's some part of him you don't like.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you impressed with the work of any of the new Negro writers?

**CAPOTE:** No. LeRoi Jones, who is a sort of avatar of this trend, is a total fraud, both artistically and politically. I was particularly amused to note that he was recently awarded a Guggenheim fellowship; well, a Guggenheim is something an artist applies for—*begs* for, actually—and if LeRoi Jones so violently hates the white race and all its works, why is he down on his knees pleading for several thousand of Guggenheim's filthy white capitalist dollars? You can't raise riots at the front door and then run around to the back door with an alms cup. He's just another hypocrite.

**PLAYBOY:** What about James Baldwin?

**CAPOTE:** He's another story entirely. When I first met him in Paris, he was a literary critic and essayist, and a first-rate one, although it was his fiction that saved him from starvation. But I think it is as an essayist that he will survive. You know, you've got to remember one thing whenever you discuss writers, white or black: Most people assume that because a man is a writer, he must, a priori, be intelligent. Not at all. It's possible to be greatly gifted and grievously stupid. For example, two of America's four leading playwrights are exceedingly dumb. But Jimmy Baldwin is one writer who is also a deeply intelligent man.

**PLAYBOY:** Who are the two "exceedingly dumb" playwrights you refer to?

**CAPOTE:** No comment. I want to have a few friends left after this interview!

**PLAYBOY:** Irrespective of their I.Q. ratings, whom do you consider the most able contemporary American playwrights?

**CAPOTE:** Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee.

**PLAYBOY:** Are there any authors on the current literary scene whom you consider truly great?

**CAPOTE:** Yes. Truman Capote. There are a number of others who, while not quite in this exalted orbit, are still commendable: Norman Mailer and Bill Styron and Katherine Anne Porter and my friends Glenway Wescott and Jack Dunphy and Donald Windham and Harper Lee, and writers like Jimmy Baldwin and Jane Bowles and the late Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers. I also think John Updike is a gifted fellow. Norman Mailer says he can't write, but in fact he can, and beautifully, although he doesn't write *about* anything; reading Updike is like trying to grab a piece of smoke.

**PLAYBOY:** For many years, American let-

ters seemed dominated by Southern writers, but, as you have said, "during the last ten years the large percentage of the more talented American writers are urban Jewish intellectuals." How do you feel about this shift in ethnic, geographic and literary emphasis?

**CAPOTE:** Well, it has brought about the rise of what I call the Jewish Mafia in American letters. This is a clique of New York-oriented writers and critics who control much of the literary scene through the influence of the quarterlies and intellectual magazines. All these publications are Jewish-dominated and this particular coterie employs them to make or break writers by advancing or withholding attention. I don't think there's any conscious, sinister conspiracy on their part—just a determination to see that members of their particular clique rise to the top. Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow and Philip Roth and Isaac Bashevis Singer and Norman Mailer are all fine writers, but they're not the *only* writers in the country, as the Jewish literary Mafia would have us believe. I could give you a list of excellent writers, such as John Knowles and Vance Bourjaily and James Purdy and Donald Windham and Reynolds Price and James Leo Herlihy and Calder Willingham and John Hawkes and William Goyen; the odds are you haven't heard of most of them, for the simple reason that the Jewish Mafia has systematically frozen them out of the literary scene. Now, mind you, I'm not against any particular group adhering to its own literary values and advancing its own favored authors; such cliques have always existed in American letters. I only object when any one particular group—and it could just as well be Southern, or Roman Catholic, or Marxist, or vegetarian—gets a strangle hold on American criticism and squeezes out anybody who doesn't conform to its own standards. It's fine to write about specifically Jewish problems, and it often makes valid and exciting literature—but the people who have other messages to convey, other styles and other backgrounds should also be given a chance. Today, because of the predominance of the Jewish Mafia, they're not being given that opportunity. This is something everyone in the literary world knows but never writes about.

**PLAYBOY:** Aren't you opening yourself up to a charge of anti-Semitism?

**CAPOTE:** No, because anti-Semitism has nothing to do with it. As I've already indicated, I would be just as opposed to a clique of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant authors and critics exercising exclusive control over American letters and excluding talented Jewish writers. I'm against ghettoization from *any* source. And let me point out that this Jewish Mafia is based more on a state of mind than on race; gentile writers such as Dwight

MacDonald who toe the line are made honorary members, while gifted Jewish writers are read out of the club for non-conformity. Irwin Shaw, for example, an excellent writer of Jewish origin, has been damaged by the Jewish Mafia, which has studiously ignored him, despite the fact that his early short stories are superior to any of the contemporary idols. Almost as many Jewish writers as gentiles have suffered at their hands. The ax falls, ecumenically, on the head of anybody, Jew or gentile, who doesn't share this group's parochial preoccupations. The regrettable aspect of all this is that there is so much room for diversity, plenty of space for everybody, if the Jewish Mafia could only accept that other people exist.

**PLAYBOY:** Mary McCarthy has said that American letters, Jewish and gentile alike, represent "the mirror on the whorehouse ceiling." Do you think that the current literary preoccupation with violence, sexual perversion, mental illness and death is a sign of decadence?

**CAPOTE:** Can you tell me of any age that hasn't been preoccupied with violence, sex and death? Was Shakespeare decadent? Society today is greatly more relaxed, especially sexually, and at least in that one area shows encouraging

progress. Progress, of course, is often misinterpreted as decadence.

**PLAYBOY:** This process of relaxation has been particularly pronounced in Hollywood, which in the past few years has dealt candidly with such hitherto taboo subjects as incest, homosexuality and nymphomania. But the old Production Code still prevailed in 1961, when your novelette *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was adapted for the screen, and its heroine was transmogrified from a pseudo prostitute to a flighty but inwardly untrammelled ingénue. Were you disturbed by this cinematic bowdlerizing?

**CAPOTE:** Of course. The book was really rather bitter, and Holly Golightly was *real*—a tough character, not an Audrey Hepburn type at all. The film became a mawkish valentine to New York City and Holly and, as a result, was thin and pretty, whereas it should have been rich and ugly. It bore as much resemblance to my work as the Rockettes do to Ulanova.

**PLAYBOY:** Is the film version of *In Cold Blood* more faithful to the original?

**CAPOTE:** Yes, it's as accurate a rendering of the book as I could have hoped, with the single exception that if it were done the way I would *really* have liked, it would have had to be at least nine hours long. As it stands, it runs about two



"He's a man of whom it may truly be said, 'He left the world a richer place.'"

hours; but those two hours are verbatim from the book and brilliantly done. I cooperated fully with Richard Brooks, who directed the film and did the screenplay, and we never had the slightest disagreement. The actors who play Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, by the way, turn in remarkable performances. Even the physical resemblance is uncanny; when I first saw the boy selected to play Smith, it was as if Perry had come back from the grave.

**PLAYBOY:** In addition to novel and short-story writing, you have also sidelined as a television playwright and adapted two of your works, *House of Flowers* and *The Grass Harp*, for the Broadway stage. Do your writing habits vary with each project or remain essentially uniform?

**CAPOTE:** They vary, but according to my personal habits rather than the medium in which I'm working. I used to write from midnight until five or six in the morning, but now I write only during the day. For the past ten years, my schedule has been to work eight months out of the year, separated into four-month periods, with a two-month interlude between each stretch. I still work during these "vacations," of course, but not with the same intensity. During my work bouts, I run a very tight ship; an artist, in my opinion, has to be as healthy and disciplined as a champion athlete. I go to bed at ten in the evening, get up at five, start work at six, stop at ten or eleven and attend to my correspondence—a heavy burden, yet I feel guilty not answering a letter, even though I can manage only one out of ten—have lunch at one, take a nap, then read or take a stroll, work again from five to seven, have several drinks, dinner, go to bed and start the cycle all over again.

**PLAYBOY:** How do you outline and organize your books?

**CAPOTE:** I've always had the illusion that a story or a novel springs into my mind *in toto*—plot, characters, scenes, dialog, everything—all in one long rush. Whether this is really true or not I don't know, but it certainly *seems* as if this is what happens. I suppose all good writing involves a tapping of the subconscious, and perhaps in my case, the process is a bit more instantaneous. But once I start to write a story or a novel, I have it very thoroughly outlined in my mind and often down on paper in considerable detail, too. I occasionally deviate from these outlines when I see a means of improving on them, but I generally follow them quite closely. Frequently, before I even write the opening words of a book, I will have written bits and pieces that fall one third of the way through, or halfway through, or at the very end; and as I write, I fit all these segments together into a kind of mosaic. The most important question in my mind is always: How does it end? I try to have the concluding two or three pages written before I start

the book, because that's what I'm driving toward from the very beginning and I always want to keep the book's central point clear. But the writing of a novel is such a complex and intimate process that you can't really recite it like a formula.

**PLAYBOY:** You're reported to be working on a new novel called *Answered Prayers*, with a theme revolving around a statement by Saint Theresa that "More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones." Does this indicate a return from the nonfiction novel to more traditional literary forms?

**CAPOTE:** Well, this book is rather a *roman à clef*, drawn from life yet suffused with fictional elements and partaking of both my reportorial abilities and imaginative gifts. However, this doesn't mean that I've abandoned the nonfiction novel in its purest form. In fact, I have one in the works right now. The subject matter is very ordinary and the color tone is gray-pastel; but if I can bring it off, I think I will have proved once and for all the point that journalism, regardless of its subject matter, is capable of reaching an artistic level equal to the most superior fiction. Not *better*, but equal.

**PLAYBOY:** When you're not working, you enjoy a highly publicized social life that crescendoed with that masked ball you held late in 1966 at New York's Plaza Hotel. But there were those who frowned on the opulence of the affair. Drew Pearson, for example, criticized the ball for being in poor taste when Americans were dying in Vietnam and racial violence was wracking the nation's ghettos. Pearson wrote, "If a fraction of the money spent on the fantastic New York party were spent on curing juvenile delinquency, there would have been no Perry Smith or Dick Hickock to commit one of the most cold-blooded murders in Midwest history." How would you reply to Pearson?

**CAPOTE:** The gentleman guilty of "poor taste" is Mr. Pearson. To supply the background, my party was given in honor of Mrs. Katharine Graham, a close friend of mine who publishes the *Washington Post*. I asked Mrs. Graham whom she wanted invited from Washington, and she supplied a list of 20 or so people, including Mr. Drew Pearson. So here you have a person attending a private dance because he is acquainted with the guest of honor and who then hurries to his typewriter and produces a column acutely critical of both his host and his fellow guests. If that's not dubious taste, I don't know what is. As to the substance of his criticism—what there is of it—is someone automatically blind to social injustice just because he chooses to have a private party for his friends? If so, we might as well declare a moratorium on all social events until the millennium. And remember, although this particular party was accorded an inordinate amount of attention, there are

parties given every day of the week that are many times more extravagant, and nobody bothers to comment on them. As far as I'm concerned, this was a private occasion and nobody's business but mine.

**PLAYBOY:** In the aftermath of your masked ball, one critic commented that your busy social life actually derives from your own essential loneliness. Many of the characters in your earlier fiction, which you have indicated was subconsciously autobiographical, have a great tenderness and capacity to love and an almost commensurate inability to express that love. Do you feel you may have the same problem?

**CAPOTE:** Oh, no! I've always been able to communicate my feelings to anybody I care about. I'm really a very warm person, although you might have trouble believing it from some of my answers to your questions. But for those who have my affection, I sing a different tune altogether. If I really like somebody, they *know* it.

**PLAYBOY:** Has your personal happiness matched your professional success?

**CAPOTE:** Well, I'll only say I'm not an unhappy person. I don't know *anybody* whom I could honestly say I considered happy. Anybody who is totally happy would have to be incredibly stupid. Only imbeciles and sweet idiots wandering around in the sunshine of a spring day are happy.

**PLAYBOY:** If you had the power to live your life over again, would you still select writing as your profession?

**CAPOTE:** Quite frankly, I think I could have done well at anything I set my mind to. I would have made a first-rate lawyer and I certainly could have done extremely well in business; if my concern had been to make money, I'd be one of the richest men in the world. The reason is that I have the ability to concentrate completely on one thing at a time and I also have discipline and a unique memory. It just so happened that from my childhood on, the thing that was always riding the top of my mind and dominating my inner self was art and creativity and writing. So I became an artist. But I believe that I could have accomplished anything I wanted to.

**PLAYBOY:** Somerset Maugham once called you "the hope of modern literature." Looking back on the past 20 years of your career, do you think you've realized your full creative potential?

**CAPOTE:** Of course not. I've always been too preoccupied with technique and the acquisition of a virtuoso apparatus; that's the principal reason the fields I've worked in have been so varied. And the result is that I've exposed far too few layers of my actual knowledge and perception. I'm 43, so perhaps, if luck allows and discipline holds, I will have time to arrive at higher altitudes, where the air is thin but the view exhilarating.