

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and the Origins of True Crime

By Harold Schechter

1.

An early Wikipedia entry on “true crime” identified the 1965 publication of *In Cold Blood* as the origin of the genre, a wildly inaccurate assertion that has since been corrected. In point of fact, true crime literature extends back several centuries B. C.-- Before Capote, that is.

At least as far back as the early Renaissance, tragic tales of murder, lust, and betrayal were made into songs and transmitted orally for the benefit of illiterate peasants. Many of these ballads were later transcribed by folklore scholars. Of the eight examples of English ballads reprinted in the standard college textbook, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, one describes a father brutally slain by his daughter's new husband, who is fatally wounded in the struggle (“The Daughter's Tragedy”); one deals with a young man poisoned by his lover (“Lord Randall”); one involves a woman who is hanged for the murder of her illegitimate child (“Mary Hamilton”); one relates the conversation among a trio of carrion birds as they contemplate the bloody remains of a murdered knight (“The Three Ravens”); and one concerns necrophilia (“The Unquiet Grave”).

By Shakespeare's time, traveling peddlers had figured out a way to profit from the public's love of sensationalism by selling printed versions of popular ballads. Some of these were the Elizabethan equivalent of supermarket tabloids, providing news of strange and shocking events, many of dubious authenticity. “A Marvelous Occurrence, Being the True Relation of the Raining of Wheat in Yorkshire” and “The True Report of a Monstrous Pig which was Farrowed at Hamstead” are typical titles from the late sixteenth century. Freakish births, supernatural visitations, weird and wondrous phenomena of every description were the common subjects of these crude publications.

Far and away the most popular topics, however, were gruesome crimes. Whenever a particularly ghastly murder or hideous rape occurred, it was translated into doggerel and printed on a page-long sheet known as a broadside, or expanded into a pamphlet-length

prose narrative. Often adorned with grisly woodcuts of the murders in question, these seminal works of true crime literature dished up, for the reader's delectation, graphic descriptions of every manner of human butchery. One such surviving broadside ballad from 1648 tells of the "Marvelous Murther Committed Upon George Drawnefeld of Brampton in Derbyshire." Adorned with a woodcut picture showing the victim being slain in his bed, the ballad details the savage actions of the killers, who "broke his neck in sunder," crushed his head with "deadly blowes," then "stopt his nose and eares, his mouth and throat" with balls of dough to keep the blood from splattering all over the room. An eighteenth-century ballad called "The Cruel Gamekeeper" graphically describes the butchery of a pregnant young woman, whose fetus is cut from her womb by her barbarous lover:

"I will not marry yet," said he,
For while I'm single, I am free."
From his pocket a knife he drew
And pieced her tender body through.

Her ripped her up and there was by,
A baby in her womb did cry;
He then did hide among the thorns,
The baby crawling in her arms.

Devoid of literary merit or thematic intent, these early true crime accounts were created with one overriding purpose: to sell as many copies as possible by appealing to the public's innate love of narrative sensationalism. Occasionally, however, a gifted author would produce a piece of true crime writing distinguished by genuine literary qualities. As early as 1551, the German poet, playwright, and Lutheran minister, Burkard Waldis, published a widely read pamphlet, "A true and most horrifying account of how a woman tyrannically murdered her four children," that skillfully manipulates plot construction, point of view, dialogue, and other devices to build suspense, generate both horror and pathos, and ultimately reinforce a religious message about repentance and salvation. Indeed, Waldis and a small number of his more accomplished contemporaries were already employing the dramatic techniques that would come to characterize the crime writings of Truman Capote and his fellow "New Journalists" four centuries later.

Thus, at the very inception of the true-crime genre, we find the situation that still obtains today: a vast lode of schlock yielding the occasional gem by a writer able to transmute what is essentially a sub-literary form into potent, artfully wrought nonfiction.

2.

The first true crime book in English, dating back to 1635, was John Reynolds' *The Triumphe of God's Revenge Against the Crying and Execrable Sinn of Murther*. An early bestseller that went through multiple editions, it consisted of several dozen accounts of purportedly real-life atrocities, dished up under the pious pretext of demonstrating that such villainies cannot escape "God's miraculous detection and severe punishment." The sensationalism of Reynolds' ostensibly high-minded anthology can be gleaned from the synopses offered in its table of contents:

Vasti first murdereth his son George, and next poisoneth his wife Hester, and being afterwards almost killed by a mad Bull in the field, he revealeth his two murthers, for the which he is first hanged and then burnt.

Alphonso poisoneth his own mother Sophia, and after shoots and kills Cassino with a short musket from a window. He is beheaded for these two murthers, then burnt, and his ashes thrown in the river.

Maurice, like a bloody villain and damnable son, throws his mother, Christina, into a well and drowns her; the same hand and arm of his, wherewith he did it, rots away from his body; and being deprived of his wits in prison, he then confesseth this foul and inhumane Murther, for the which he is hanged.

Even more popular was *The Newgate Calendar*--or, to use its full title, *The Newgate Calendar, or Malefactors' Bloody Register containing General and Circumstantial Narratives of the lives and transactions, various exploits and Dying Speeches of the Most Notorious Criminals of both sexes who suffered Death Punishment in Gt. Britain and Ireland for High Treason, Petty Treason, Murder, Piracy, Felony, Thieving, Highway Robberies, Forgery, Rape, Bigamy, Burglaries, Riots and various other horrid crimes and misdemeanors*. Issued in a steady stream of new and updated editions from the 1700s through the mid-nineteenth century, this collection of sordid true

crime accounts was one of the most widely read books of its era--“the book, along with the Bible, Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, and Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, most likely to be found in any English home between 1750 and 1850,” as one scholar has noted.

Each entry in *The Newgate Calendar* recounted the crimes, inevitable arrest, and justified execution of a particular perpetrator, whose case was summed up in a highly descriptive title: “Tom Austin, Highwayman, guilty of unparalleled butchery. He murdered his aunt, wife, and seven children. Executed in August, 1694.” Or “John Stanley. An insolent puppy who presumed on his swordsmanship. Executed at Tyburn, 23rd of December, 1723, for murdering his mistress.” Or “John Price, Commonly called Jack Ketch. A rogue and liar, who was not believed when he spoke the truth. He held the office of common hangman, and was himself hanged in Bunhill Fields in May, 1718, for murdering a woman.”

Like sensationalistic crime literature before and since, these shocking tales were overlaid with a thick coating of preachiness, ultimately affirming universal morals wherein good behavior is rewarded and transgressions are punished. The frontispiece illustration for one eighteenth-century edition shows an anxious mother handing her little son a copy of *The Newgate Calendar* while pointing through the window at a body dangling from a nearby gibbet--an image meant to convey the message that, by taking to heart the lessons in the book, the boy might avoid a similarly gruesome fate.

The earliest form of true-crime writing in our own country was the Puritan execution sermon. Like *The Triumph of God’s Revenge* and *The Newgate Calendar*, it combined moral edification with morbid titillation, supplying stern lessons about the dreadful fate awaiting the wicked while catering to the reader’s appetite for lurid entertainment: to what William James called “our aboriginal capacity for murderous excitement.” Typically delivered right before a hanging, the execution sermon was, in both structure and intent, indistinguishable from any other Puritan discourse, the crime itself being merely an “awfull occasion” for the preaching of Calvinist doctrine. Following its initial recitation (either at church or on the scaffold itself), the sermon would be printed and sold as a pamphlet and later collected with other such orations into books, a number of which became early American bestsellers. The most famous of these is *Pillars of Salt: An History of some Criminals Executed in this Land for Capital*

Crimes. With some of their Dying Speeches; Collected and Published for the Warning of such as Live in Destructive Courses of Ungodliness (1699)--one of the more than four hundred publications by the indefatigable Cotton Mather. Throughout the eighteenth century, popular writers like Parson Mason Locke Weems (best-known as the fabricator of the George Washington cherry-tree myth) continued to churn out sermonizing true-crime literature, blood-soaked sensationalism in the guise of religious instruction.

As the years progressed, American true-crime writing--reflecting the cultural shifts in the country at large--became increasingly secular and commercialized, so that by the 1830s, the marketplace was flooded with grisly accounts of real-life horrors. A favorite subject (then, as now) was sex-murder, often described in such slavering, quasi-pornographic detail that, according to one contemporary critic, young men could learn more about female anatomy from these tawdry publications than from medical textbooks. Cheap crime pamphlets, trial reports, and the sensationalistic stories in the proto-tabloid "penny press" were the main sources of true-crime titillation in Jackson-era America, along with books like James Faxon's *The Record of Crimes in the United States* (1833), an early true crime anthology containing (as the subtitle put it) sketches of "the most notorious malefactors who have been guilty of capital offenses and who have been detected and convicted."

Among the most ardent fans of this bestselling volume--whose subjects include "wife stabbers, husband poisoners, child murderers ...and rapists"--was Nathaniel Hawthorne. A self-confessed lover of "all sorts of good and good-for-nothing books," Hawthorne was such a voracious consumer of cheap crime literature that his own son, Julian, described his father's interest as a kind of addiction--a "pathetic craving." One of the last memories Julian had of his father was of the ailing man "sedulously leafing through an enormous volume of trial reports."

Herman Melville, Hawthorne's devotee and would-be soul-mate, was likewise fascinated with contemporary accounts of shocking real-life murders, particularly the atrocities of the Harpe brothers, a pair of early American serial murderers who terrorized frontier communities between 1798 and 1804 and whose bloody exploits are invoked in the opening scene of *The Confidence-Man*. The sensational 1841 ax-murder of New York City printer Samuel Adams by John C. Colt (brother of the legendary gun-maker)

also made a lasting impression on Melville, who was still obsessing about the case twelve years later when he composed “Bartleby the Scrivener.”

Neither Hawthorne nor Melville, however, produced anything that could be described as a masterpiece of American crime writing. That accomplishment was left to Edgar Allan Poe in “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” the second of his tales of ratiocination starring his prototypical sleuth, C. Auguste Dupin. Poe habitually scoured the newspapers for sensational incidents that he could exploit in his work. Like Melville, he was gripped by the Colt-Adams affair and used its most ghoulish feature--the victim’s salted corpse smuggled aboard a clipper in a packing crate--as the basis for his story, “The Oblong Box.” The shocking 1840 murder of a prominent New Jersey banker named Abraham Suydam by a creditor named Peter Robinson--who buried the victim beneath the newly laid floorboards of his basement--served as an inspiration for Poe’s masterpiece of horror, “The Tale-Tale Heart.” Some scholars believe that his very first Dupin story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” was at least partly inspired by a bizarre real-life incident reported in 1834, “involving an orangutan trained to climb buildings and rob apartments.”

In all these tales, however, Poe gives free rein to his fantasy, using the real-life incidents as mere springboards. The case is very different in “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” a work so barely fictionalized that Poe himself, in a letter to an acquaintance, described its detective-story form as a mere “pretense” for “a very rigorous analysis of the real tragedy,” the sensational 1841 slaying of the beautiful cigar-store salesgirl, Mary Rogers. Indeed, when the story was reprinted in the 1845 edition of his *Tales*, Poe added footnotes identifying the real-life counterparts of its Parisian details (pointing out, for example, that the Rue Pavée Saint Andreé stood for Nassau Street and that a news report supposedly cited from the weekly *Le Soleil* actually came from *The Saturday Evening Post*). The purpose of the story, he proclaimed, was nothing less than “the investigation of the truth.” To be sure, Poe indulges in freewheeling forensic speculations, leading to a “solution” that has long been discredited. Nevertheless, the story is built entirely on the documented evidence. Nothing significant beyond its Gallicized setting is made up. Reading Poe’s tale, it’s hard not to feel that, had the “New Journalism” been invented a century earlier, the author wouldn’t have bothered with the “pretense” of fiction at all.

Thirty years after the appearance of Poe's story, in May, 1875, the *Atlantic Monthly* published Celia Thaxter's "A Memorable Murder," the most notable piece of American true crime writing of the post-Civil War era. Two years earlier, on the night of March 5, 1873, a grisly double killing had taken place on Smuttynose Island off the New Hampshire coast. Thaxter--daughter of a lighthouse keeper on neighboring White Island and a celebrated regionalist poet--had known both victims, Norwegian sisters-in-law butchered by an ax-wielding burglar while their husbands were away on a fishing trip. After hurrying to the scene to offer comfort to the survivors, Thaxter detailed the murder in a letter to a friend, later elaborating the story into her *Atlantic Monthly* piece. Widely acknowledged by scholars of the genre as an early classic of American true crime writing, Thaxter's essay is almost the inverse of Poe's famous tale of deductive logic: an explicitly nonfiction work that relies heavily on the conventions of sentimental storytelling to tug at the reader's heartstrings ("Ah me, what pathos is in that longing look of women's eyes for far off sails!"). In her application of fictional techniques to the narrative re-creation of a shocking, contemporary crime, Thaxter is a clear, if largely unacknowledged, precursor of Truman Capote.

3.

Edgar Allan Poe and Celia Thaxter are far from the only serious American authors who have been attracted to sensational real-life murders as a subject. A partial list of important works of fiction that have sprung from such crimes includes *Wieland*, the pioneering Gothic novel by Charles Brockden Brown, published in 1798 and based on the case of a religious fanatic named James Yates, who had slaughtered his wife and four children two years earlier in upstate New York; Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899), which echoes the case of Patrick Collins, an unemployed San Francisco ironworker who stabbed his wife to death in 1893 for refusing him money); John O'Hara's *BUtterfield 8* (1934) inspired by the death of party girl, Starr Faithfull, whose corpse washed up on a Long Island beach in 1931); James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1943), based on the sensational 1927 case of Queens housewife Ruth Snyder and her milquetoast lover, Judd Gray, who conspired to bump off her husband; and Thomas Berger's *Killing Time*

(1967), inspired by a grisly triple-murder committed on Easter Sunday, 1937 by Robert Irwin, known in the tabloids as “The Mad Sculptor.” One of the most celebrated of such novels is Theodore Dreiser’s 1925 masterpiece, *An American Tragedy*, which used the highly publicized, 1906 murder of pregnant factory girl, Grace Brown--drowned in an Adirondack lake by her boyfriend, Chester Gillette--to explore the author’s preoccupying subjects of sex, money, and social class.

All of the above novels, however--Dreiser’s included--take extensive liberties with historical truth, freely adapting the facts to the writer’s thematic concerns. The case is markedly different with Meyer Levin’s 1956 bestseller, *Compulsion*. As a student and budding journalist at the University of Chicago in 1924, Levin had been a schoolmate of the infamous “thrill killers,” Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb. Long obsessed with the crime, he initially considered collaborating with Leopold on the latter’s autobiography before embarking on his own project, a heavily researched recreation of the case drawing on contemporary newspaper accounts, trial transcripts, and the climactic courtroom speech delivered by the legendary defense attorney, Clarence Darrow. Though adhering closely to the facts, Levin, in a preface to the book, acknowledged that he had ascribed “thoughts and emotions . . . to the personages in the case” and altered certain details. Some changes were made for artistic reasons (streamlining the story, for example, by combining Leopold’s two brothers into a single character). Legal considerations played a part in others, most notably Levin’s decision to use different names for the characters (the two principles are rechristened Judd Steiner and Artie Strauss). Searching for a definition of the hybrid form he had employed--a highly factual true-crime narrative that allows room for the author’s imaginative “interpolations”--he came up with the term “documentary novel.” The book was a phenomenon, selling a million copies in paperback and incurring a lawsuit from an outraged Nathan Leopold, who complained that, thanks to the “consummate artistry” with which Levin combined fact and fiction, “no general reader can possibly know what is true and what contrived.”

For all its critical and commercial success--including its translation into an acclaimed 1959 movie--*Compulsion* did nothing to dispel the disreputable air that clung to true crime writing, which, by and large, continued to be churned out by hacks and peddled in pulp detective magazines and lurid paperbacks with titles like *The Bizarre and*

the Bloody and *The Lust Killers*. Then came *In Cold Blood*, which elevated the book-length true crime narrative to the rarefied heights of serious literature, paving the way for important works like Joe McGinnis's *Fatal Vision*, James Elroy's *My Dark Places*, and, most prominently, Norman Mailer's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Executioner Song*. Capote, never a shrinking violet, was not shy about claiming credit for the very existence of such major true crime bestsellers, proclaiming in the preface to his 1980 collection, *Music for Chameleons*, that other writers had "made a lot of money and won lots prizes" by following the model of *In Cold Blood*.

If Capote's book represented a milestone in the evolution of American true crime writing, it also inspired a heated controversy that persists to this day and that continues to bedevil the entire field of what has come to be known as creative nonfiction. Not content with having produced a literary masterpiece, Capote felt compelled to boast that he had invented a completely new and unprecedented genre, "the nonfiction novel"--"a narrative form that employed all the techniques of fictional art but was nevertheless immaculately factual," as he defined it in an interview with George Plimpton. When Plimpton mentioned several apparent precursors, including *Compulsion*, Capote was dismissive, insisting that every word of his own book was absolutely true, whereas Levin's novel was "a fictional novel suggested by fact but in no way bound to it." Researchers, however--beginning with a writer for *Esquire* magazine named Phillip K. Tompkins, dispatched to Kansas soon after the publication of *In Cold Blood* to check on its veracity--have established that Capote not only indulged in a great deal of novelistic embellishment but invented details out of whole cloth, including the intensely poignant (but completely fabricated) concluding scene.

Even those who would now categorize Capote's book as a blend of fact and fiction--"faction," as it is now sometimes called--acknowledge its greatness. Setting out to write a *New Yorker* article about the effects of a horrific murder on a small Midwestern community, Capote stumbled upon a story that he transmuted into a stunning work of art, a page-turning thriller that embodies profound sociological, psychological, and existential themes: the dark underbelly of the American dream, the toxic bonding of two unstable personalities who incite each other to evil (what psychologists call a "*folie à deux*"), the

inexorable workings of a retributive justice, the terrifying precariousness of existence, and the ultimate futility of our efforts to shield ourselves from tragedy.