

## Capote

Truman Capote, the distinctive and idiosyncratic American writer, died more than 20 years ago (in 1984), and public memories of him--aside from the literati--are of a sardonic, impish, roly-poly figure delivering malicious wit on TV talk shows or in the Neil Simon movie farce *Murder by Death*. This was the period of Capote's rather tawdry last 15 years, so markedly different from his prodigal youth and his mature literary luster. *Capote*, the new film, offers us this writer at one peak of his prowess and renown, a peak he was never to approach again. The film captures beautifully both the specific nature of a singular character and the general potency of literary ambition.

*Capote* is a labor of love for three long-time buddies, actor Philip Seymour Hoffman (who has the role of his life as the writer), screenwriter Dan Futterman (also an actor), and director Bennett Miller, who makes his first feature film a most assured and auspicious debut. The film focuses on Capote's desire to write a narrative about the vicious killing of the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas, in November 1959, a narrative that would become the first "non-fiction novel," "In Cold Blood." Originally meant as a magazine story, Capote's project expands as he and his fellow-writer assistant Harper Lee (Catherine Keener) scout Holcomb and its townspeople. Once the likely killers--Perry Smith (Clifton Collins, Jr.) and Richard Hickock (Mark Pellegrino)--are apprehended, Capote has his true protagonists.

To help round out his tale, Capote befriends the killers, especially the troubled Smith, visits them regularly in prison, and aches to get the first-person story of the Clutter murders. He writes that he "can hardly breathe" contemplating the potential impact of his novel. Even after gaining Smith's ultimate description of the bloody deed, however, the writer now needs an ending: the deaths of the perpetrators. Capote, ever the novelist, must make real events conform to his sense of drama and completeness.

It is notoriously difficult, perhaps impossible, to put on film the real work of literary creation; how can you make that inner struggle palpable on film? *Capote* doesn't attempt that; what the film does so effectively instead—principally through Futterman's graceful script--is depict the force and drive of literary ambition, the emotional investment a writer can make in forging his story. The film shows both Capote's ready manipulation of his subjects--e.g., lying to and cajoling Perry Smith--and his unfeigned identification with those same subjects--comparing Perry's grim upbringing with his own.

This is, of course, Hoffman's film (aside from the fact that he was crucial in getting it made in the first place). He is in almost every sequence, events are seen through his eyes and match his grim time frame--it took six years for "In Cold Blood" to appear. Hoffman, at 38, is exactly the author's age when he was mid-way through his novelistic enterprise. The hairdo, the head-cock, the body language and, especially, that outlandish, wispy voice--a cross between a purr and a whine--are dead-on, but his performance is beyond mere impersonation (as good as that is). The Capote figure in the film states that "people always think that they had me pegged," and the actor, indeed, proceeds to surprise you with the twists and turns of Capote's psyche. You forget about the expert mimicry quickly as Hoffman seems to be channeling the author himself. He is as fascinating as Truman Capote probably believed he himself was.

Kudos are due, also, to a number of other performers in the film: Collins' spooky, needy Smith, Keener's level-headed Harper Lee, Chris Cooper's perfectly phlegmatic

police investigator, but the acting triumph is Philip Seymour Hoffman's, and it is total. Watch for his name at award time.

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