

January 16, 1966

## The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel

By GEORGE PLIMPTON

**“**In *Cold Blood*” is remarkable for its objectivity--nowhere, despite his involvement, does the author intrude. In the following interview, done a few weeks ago, Truman Capote presents his own views on the case, its principals, and in particular he discusses the new literary art form which he calls the nonfiction novel...

*Why did you select this particular subject matter of murder; had you previously been interested in crime?*

Not really, no. During the last years I've learned a good deal about crime, and the origins of the homicidal mentality. Still, it is a layman's knowledge and I don't pretend to anything deeper. The motivating factor in my choice of material--that is, choosing to write a true account of an actual murder case--was altogether literary. The decision was based on a theory I've harbored since I first began to write professionally, which is well over 20 years ago. It seemed to me that journalism, reportage, could be forced to yield a serious new art form: the "nonfiction novel," as I thought of it. Several admirable reporters--Rebecca West for one, and Joseph Mitchell and Lillian Ross--have shown the possibilities of narrative reportage; and Miss Ross, in her brilliant "Picture," achieved at least a nonfiction novella. Still, on the whole, journalism is the most underestimated, the least explored of literary mediums.

*Why should that be so?*

Because few first-class creative writers have ever bothered with journalism, except as a sideline, "hackwork," something to be done when the creative spirit is lacking, or as a means of making money quickly. Such writers say in effect: Why should we trouble with factual writing when we're able to invent our own stories, contrive our own characters and themes?--journalism is only literary photography, and unbecoming to the serious writer's artistic dignity.

Another deterrent--and not the smallest--is that the reporter, unlike the fantasist, has to deal with actual people who have real names. If they feel maligned, or just contrary, or greedy, they enrich lawyers (though rarely themselves) by instigating libel actions. This last is certainly a factor to consider, a most oppressive and repressive one. Because it's indeed difficult to portray, in any meaningful depth, another being, his appearance, speech, mentality, without to some degree, and often for quite trifling cause, offending him. The truth seems to be that no one likes to see himself described as he is, or cares to see exactly set down what he said and did. Well, even I even can understand that--because I don't like it myself when I am the sitter and not the portraitist; the frailty of egos!--and the more accurate the strokes, the greater the resentment.

When I first formed my theories concerning the nonfiction novel, many people with whom I discussed the matter were unsympathetic. They felt that what I proposed, a narrative form that employed all the techniques of fictional art but was nevertheless immaculately factual, was little more than a literary solution for fatigued novelists suffering from "failure of imagination." Personally, I felt that this attitude represented a "failure of imagination" on their part.

Of course a properly done piece of narrative reporting requires imagination!--and a good deal of special technical equipment that is usually beyond the resources--and I don't doubt the interests-- of most fictional writers: an ability to transcribe verbatim long conversations, and to do so without taking notes or using tape-recordings. Also, it is necessary to have a 20/20 eye for visual detail--in this sense, it is quite true that one must be a "literary photographer," though an exceedingly selective one. But, above all, the reporter must be able to empathize with personalities outside his usual imaginative range, mentalities unlike his own, kinds of people he would never have written about had he not been forced to by encountering them inside the journalistic situation. This last is what first attracted me to the notion of narrative reportage.

It seems to me that most contemporary novelists, especially the Americans and the French, are too subjective, mesmerized by private demons; they're enraptured by their navels, and confined by a view that ends with their own toes. If I were naming names, I'd name myself among others. At any rate, I did at one time feel an artistic need to escape my self-created world. I wanted to exchange it, creatively speaking, for the everyday objective world we all inhabit. Not that I'd never written nonfiction before--I kept journals, and had published a small truthful book of travel impressions: "Local Color." But I had never attempted an ambitious piece of reportage until 1956, when I wrote "The Muses Are Heard," an account of the first theatrical cultural exchange between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R.--that is, the "Porgy and Bess" tour of Russia. It was published in *The New Yorker*, the only magazine I know of that encourages the serious practitioners of this art form. Later, I contributed a few other reportorial finger-exercises to the same magazine. Finally, I felt equipped and ready to undertake a full-scale narrative--in other words, a "nonfiction novel."

*How does John Hersey's "Hiroshima" or Oscar Lewis's "Children of Sanchez" compare with "the nonfiction novel?"*

The Oscar Lewis book is a documentary, a job of editing from tapes, and however skillful and moving, it is not creative writing. "Hiroshima" is creative--in the sense that Hersey isn't taking something off a tape recorder and editing it--but it still hasn't got anything to do with what I'm talking about. "Hiroshima" is a strict classical journalistic piece. What is closer is what Lillian Ross did with "Picture." Or my own book, "The Muses Are Heard"--which uses the techniques of the comic short novel.

It was natural that I should progress from that experiment, and get myself in much deeper water. I read in the paper the other day that I had been quoted as saying that reporting is now more interesting than fiction. Now that's *not* what I said, and it's important to me to get this straight. What I think is that reporting can be made *as* interesting as fiction, and done *as* artistically--underlining those two "as" es. I don't mean to say that one is a superior form to the other. I feel that creative reportage has been neglected and has great relevance to 20th-century writing. And while it can be an artistic outlet for the creative writer, it has never been particularly explored.

*What is your opinion of the so-called New Journalism--as it is practiced particularly at The Herald Tribune?*

If you mean James Breslin and Tom Wolfe, and that crowd, they have nothing to do with creative journalism--in the sense that I use the term--because neither of them, nor any of that school of reporting, have the proper fictional technical equipment. It's useless for a writer whose talent is essentially journalistic to attempt creative reportage, because it simply won't work. A writer like Rebecca West--always a good reporter--has never really used the form of creative reportage because the form, by necessity, demands that the writer be completely in control of fictional techniques--which means that, to be a good creative reporter, you have to be a very good fiction writer.

*Would it be fair to say, then, since many reporters use nonfiction techniques--Meyer Levin in "Compulsion," Walter Lord in "A Night to Remember," and so forth--that the nonfiction novel can be defined by the degree of the fiction skills involved, and the extent of the author's absorption with his subject?*

"Compulsion" is a fictional novel suggested by fact, but no way bound to it. I never read the other book. The nonfiction novel should not be confused with the documentary novel--a popular and interesting but impure genre, which allows all the latitude of the fiction writer, but usually contains neither the persuasiveness of fact nor the poetic attitude fiction is capable of reaching. The author lets his imagination run riot over the facts! If I sound querulous or arrogant about this, it's not only that I have to protect my child, but that I truly don't believe anything like it exists in the history of journalism.

*What is the first step in producing a "nonfiction novel?"*

The difficulty was to choose a promising subject. If you intend to spend three or four or five years with a book, as I planned to do, then you want to be reasonably certain that the material not soon "date." The content of much journalism so swiftly does, which is another of the medium's deterrents. A number of ideas occurred, but one after the other, and for one reason or another, each was eventually discarded, often after I'd done considerable preliminary work. Then one morning in November, 1959, while flicking through The New York Times, I encountered on a deep-inside page, this headline: Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain.

The story was brief, just several paragraphs stating the facts: A Mr. Herbert W. Clutter, who had served on the Farm Credit Board during the Eisenhower Administration, his wife and two teen-aged children, had been brutally, entirely mysteriously, murdered on a lonely wheat and cattle ranch in a remote part of Kansas. There was nothing really exceptional about it; one reads items concerning multiple murders many times in the course of a year.

*Then why did you decide it was the subject you had been looking for?*

I didn't. Not immediately. But after reading the story it suddenly struck me that a crime, the study of one such, might provide the broad scope I needed to write the kind of book I wanted to write. Moreover, the human heart being what it is, murder was a theme not likely to darken and yellow with time.

I thought about it all that November day, and part of the next; and then I said to myself: Well, why not this crime? The Clutter case. Why not pack up and go to Kansas and see what happens? Of course it was rather frightening thought--to arrive alone in a small, strange town, a town in the grip of an unsolved mass murder. Still, the circumstances of the place being altogether unfamiliar, geographically and atmospherically, made it that much more tempting. Everything would seem freshly minted--the people, their accents and attitudes, the landscape, its contours, the weather. All this, it seemed to me, could only sharpen my eye and quicken my ear.

In the end, I did not go alone. I went with a lifelong friend, Harper Lee. She is a gifted woman, courageous, and with a warmth that instantly kindles most people, however suspicious or dour. She had recently completed a first novel ("To Kill a Mockingbird"), and, feeling at loose ends, she said she would accompany me in the role of assistant researchist.

We traveled by train to St. Louis, changed trains and went to Manhattan, Kan., where we got off to consult Dr. James McClain, president of Mr. Clutter's alma mater, Kansas State University. Dr. McClain, a gracious man, seemed a little nonplussed by our interest in the case; but he gave us letters of introduction to several people in western Kansas. We rented a car and drove some 400 miles to Garden City. It was twilight when we arrived. I remember the car-radio was playing, and we heard: "Police authorities, continuing their investigation of the tragic Clutter slayings, have requested that anyone with pertinent information please contact the Sheriff's office. . . ."

If I had realized then what the future held, I never would have stopped in Garden City. I would have driven straight on. Like a bat out of hell.

*What was Harper Lee's contribution to your work?*

She kept me company when I was based out there. I suppose she was with me about two months altogether. She went on a number of interviews; she typed her own notes, and I had these and could refer to them. She was extremely helpful in the beginning, when we weren't making much headway with the towns people, by making friends with the wives of the people I wanted to meet. She became friendly with all the churchgoers. A Kansas paper said the other day that everyone out there was so wonderfully cooperative because I was a famous writer. The fact of the matter is that not one single person in the town had ever heard of me.

*How long did it take for the town to thaw out enough so that you were accepted and you could get to your interviewing?*

About a month. I think they finally just realized that we were there to stay--they'd have to make the best of it. Under the circumstances, they were suspicious. After all, there was an unsolved murder case, and the people in the town were tired of the thing, and frightened. But then after it all quieted down--after Perry and Dick were arrested--that was when we did most of the original interviews. Some of them went on for three years--though not on the same subject, of course. I suppose if I used just 20 percent of all the material I put together over those years of interviewing, I'd still have a book two thousand pages long!

*How much research did you do other than through interviews with the principals in the case?*

Oh, a great deal. I did months of comparative research on murder, murderers, the criminal mentality, and I interviewed quite a number of murderers--solely to give me a perspective on these two boys. And then crime. I didn't know anything about crime or criminals when I began to do the book. I certainly do now! I'd say 80 percent of the research I did I have never used. But it gave me such a grounding that I never had any hesitation in my consideration of the subject.

*What was the most singular interview you conducted?*

I suppose the most startled interviewee was Mr. Bell, the meat-packing executive from Omaha. He was the man who picked up Perry and Dick when they were hitchhiking

across Nebraska. They planned to murder him and then make off with his car. Quite unaware of all this, Bell was saved, as you'll remember, just as Perry was going to smash in his head from the seat behind, because he slowed down to pick up another hitchhiker, a Negro. The boys told me this story, and they had this man's business card. I decided to interview him. I wrote him a letter, but got no answer. Then I wrote a letter to the personnel manager of the meat-packing company in Omaha, asking if they had a Mr. Bell in their employ. I told them I wanted to talk to him about a pair of hitchhikers he'd picked up four months previously. The manager wrote back and said they *did* have a Mr. Bell on their staff, but it was surely the *wrong* Mr. Bell, since it was against company policy for employees to take hitchhikers in their cars. So I telephoned Mr. Bell and when he got on the phone he was very brusque; he said I didn't know what I was talking about.

The only thing to do was to go to Omaha personally. I went up there and walked in on Mr. Bell and put two photographs down on his desk. I asked him if he recognized the two men. He said, why? So I told him that the two were the hitchhikers he said he had never given a ride to, that they had planned to kill him and then bury him in the prairie--and how close they'd come to it. Well, he turned every conceivable kind of color. You can imagine. He recognized them all right. He was quite cooperative about telling me about the trip, but he asked me not to use his real name. There are only three people in the book whose names I've changed--his, the convict Perry admired so much (Willie-Jay he's called in the book), and also I changed Perry Smith's sister's name.

*How long after you went to Kansas did you sense the form of the book? Were there many false starts?*

I worked for a year on the notes before I ever wrote one line. And when I wrote the first word, I had done the entire book in outline, down to the finest detail. Except for the last part, the final dispensation of the case--that was an evolving case--that was an evolving matter. It began, of course, with interviews--with all the different characters of the book. Let me give you two examples of how I worked from these interviews. In the first part of the book--the part that's called "The Last to See Them Alive"--there's a long narration, word for word, given by the school teacher who went with the sheriff to the Clutter house and found the four bodies. Well, I simply set that into the book as a straight complete interview--though it was, in fact, done several times: each time there'd be some little thing which I'd add or change. But I hardly interfered at all. A slight editing job. The school teacher tells the whole story himself--exactly what happened from the moment they got to the house, and what they found there.

On the other hand, in that same first part, there's a scene between the postmistress and her mother when the mother reports that the ambulances have gone to the Clutter house. That's a straight dramatic scene--with quotes, dialogue, action, everything. But it evolved out of interviews just like the one with the school teacher. Except in this case I took what they had told me and transposed it into straight narrative terms. Of course, elsewhere in the book, very often it's direct observation, events I saw myself--the trial, the executions.

*You never used a tape-recorder?*

Twelve years ago I began to train myself, for the purpose of this sort of book, to transcribe conversation without using a tape-recorder. I did it by having a friend read passages from a book, and then later I'd write them down to see how close I could come to the original. I had a natural facility for it, but after doing these exercises for a year and a half, for a couple of hours a day, I could get within 95 percent of absolute accuracy, which is as close as you need. I felt it was essential. Even note-taking

artificializes the atmosphere of an interview, or a scene-in-progress; it interferes with the communication between author and subject--the latter is usually self-conscious or an untrusting wariness is induced. Certainly, a tape-recorder does so. Not long ago, a French literary critic turned up with a tape-recorder. I don't like them, as I say, but I agreed to its use. In the middle of the interview it broke down. The French literary critic was desperately unhappy. He didn't know what to do. I said, "Well, let's just go on as if nothing had happened." He said, "It's not the same. I'm not accustomed to listen to what you're saying."

*You've kept yourself out of the book entirely. Why was that--considering your own involvement in the case?*

My feeling is that for the nonfiction-novel form to be entirely successful, the author should not appear in the work. Ideally. Once the narrator does appear, he has to appear throughout, all the way down the line, and the I-I-I intrudes when it really shouldn't. I think the single most difficult thing in my book, technically, was to write it without ever appearing myself, and yet, at the same time, create total credibility.

*Being removed from the book, that is to say, keeping yourself out of it, do you find it difficult to present your own point of view? For example, your own view as to why Perry Smith committed the murders.*

Of course it's by the selection of what you choose to tell. I believe Perry did what he did for the reasons he himself states--that his life was a constant accumulation of disillusionments and reverses and he suddenly found himself (in the Clutter house that night) in a psychological cul-de-sac. The Clutters were such a perfect set of symbols for every frustration in his life. As Perry himself said, "I didn't have anything against them, and they never did anything wrong to me--the way other people have all my life. Maybe they're just the ones who had to pay for it." Now in that particular section where Perry talks about the reason for the murders, I could have included other views. Perry's happens to be the one I believe is the right one, and it's the one that Dr. Satten at the Menninger Clinic arrived at quite independently, never having done any interviews with Perry.

I could have added a lot of other opinions. But that would have confused the issue, and indeed the book. I had to make up my mind and move toward that one view, always. You can say that the reportage is incomplete. But then it has to be. It's a question of selection, you wouldn't get anywhere if it wasn't for that. I've often thought of the book as being like something reduced to a seed. Instead of presenting the reader with a full plant, with all the foliage, a seed is planted in the soil of his mind. I've often thought of the book in that sense. I make my own comment by what I choose to tell and how I choose to tell it. It is true that an author is more in control of fictional characters because he do anything he wants with them as long as they stay credible. But in the nonfiction novel one can also manipulate: If I put something in which I don't agree about I can always set it in a context of qualification without having to step into the story myself to set the reader straight.

*When did you first see the murderers--Perry and Dick?*

The first time I ever saw them was the day they were returned to Garden City. I had been waiting in the crowd in the square for nearly five hours, frozen to death. That was the first time. I tried to interview them the next day--both completely unsuccessful interviews. I saw Perry first, but he was so cornered and suspicious--and quite rightly so--and paranoid that he couldn't have been less communicative. It was always easier with Dick. He was like someone you meet on a train, immensely garrulous, who starts

up a conversation and is only too obliged to tell you *everything*. Perry much easier after the third or fourth month, but it wasn't until the last five years of his life that he was totally and absolutely honest with me, and came to trust me. I came to have great rapport with him right up through his last day. For the first year and a half, though, he would come just so close, and then no closer. He'd retreat into the forest and leave me standing outside. I'd hear him laugh in the dark. Then gradually he would come back. In the end, he could not have been more complete and candid.

*How did the two accept being used as subjects for a book?*

They had no idea what I was going to do. Well, of course, at the end they did. Perry was always asking me: Why are you writing this book? What is it supposed to mean? I don't understand why you're doing it. Tell me in one sentence why you want to do it. So I would say that it didn't have anything to do with changing the readers' opinion about anything, nor did I have any moral reasons worthy of calling them such--it was just that I had a strictly aesthetic theory about creating a book which could result in a work of art.

"That's really the truth, Perry," I'd tell him, and Perry would say, "A work of art, a work of art," and then he'd laugh and say, "What an irony, what an irony." I'd ask what he meant, and he'd tell me that all he ever wanted to do in his life was to produce a work of art. "That's all I ever wanted in my whole life," he said. "And now, what was happened? An incredible situation where I kill four people, and *you're* going to produce a work of art." Well, I'd have to agree with him. It was a pretty ironic situation.

*Did you ever show sections of the book to witnesses as you went along?*

I have done it, but I don't believe in it. It's a mistake because it's almost impossible to write about anybody objectively and have that person really like it. People simply do not like to see themselves put down on paper. They're like somebody who goes to see his portrait in a gallery. He doesn't like it unless it's overwhelmingly flattering--I mean the ordinary person, not someone with genuine creative perception. Showing the thing in progress usually frightens the person and there's nothing to be gained by it. I showed various sections to five people in the book, and without exception each of them found something that he desperately wanted to change. Of the whole bunch, I changed my text for one of them because, although it was a silly thing, the person genuinely believed his entire life was going to be ruined if I *didn't* make the change.

*Did Dick and Perry see sections of the book?*

They saw some sections of it. Perry wanted terribly much to see the book. I had to let him see it because it just would have been too unkind not to. Each only saw the manuscript in little pieces. Everything mailed to the prison went through the censor. I wasn't about to have my manuscript floating around between those censors--not with those Xerox machines going clickety-clack. So when I went to the prison to visit I would bring parts, some little thing for Perry to read. Perry's greatest objection was the title. He didn't like it because he said the crime wasn't committed in cold blood. I told him the title had a double meaning. What was the other meaning? he wanted to know. Well, that wasn't something I was going to tell him. Dick's reaction to the book was to start switching and changing his story. . . saying what I had written wasn't exactly true. He wasn't trying to flatter himself; he tried to change it to serve his purposes legally, to support the various appeals he was sending through the courts. He wanted the book to read as if it was a legal brief for presentation in his behalf before the Supreme Court. But you see I had a perfect control-agent--I could always tell when Dick or Perry wasn't telling the truth. During the first few months or so of interviewing them, they weren't

allowed to speak to each other. So I would keep crossing their stories, and what correlated, what checked out identically, was the truth.

*How did the two compare in their recounting of the events?*

Dick had an absolutely fantastic memory--one of the greatest memories I have ever come across. The reason I know it's great is that I lived the entire trip the boys went on from the time of the murders up to the moment of their arrest in Las Vegas thousands of miles, what the boys called "the long ride." I went everywhere the boys had gone, all the hotel rooms, every single place in the book. Mexico, Acapulco, all of it. In the hotel in Miami Beach I stayed for three days until the manager realized why I was there and asked me to leave, which I was only too glad to do. Well, Dick could give me the names and addresses of any hotel or place along the route where they'd spent maybe just half a night. He told me when I got to Miami to take a taxi to such-and- such a place and get out on the boardwalk and it would be southwest of there, number 232, and opposite I'd find two umbrellas in the sand which advertised "Tan with Coppertone." That was how exact he was. He was the one who remembered the little card in the Mexico City hotel room in the corner of the mirror that reads "Your day ends at 2 p.m." He was extraordinary. Perry, on the other hand, was very bad at details of that sort, though he was good at remembering conversations and moods. He was concerned altogether in the overtones of things. He was much better at describing a general sort of mood or atmosphere than Dick who, though very sensitive, was impervious to that sort of thing.

*What turned them back to the Clutter house after they'd almost decided to give up on the job?*

Oh, Dick was always quite frank about that. I mean after it was all over. When they set out for the house that night, Dick was determined, before he ever went that if the girl, Nancy, was there he was going to rape her. It wouldn't have been an act of the moment--he had been thinking about it for weeks. He told me that was one of the main reasons he was so determined to go back after they thought, you know, for a moment, they wouldn't go. Because he'd been thinking about raping this girl for weeks and weeks. He had no idea what she looked like--after all. Floyd Wells, the man in prison who told them about the Clutters hadn't seen the girl in 10 years: it had to do with the fact that she was 15 or 16. He liked young girls much younger than Nancy Clutter actually.

*What do you think would have happened if Perry had altered and not begun the killings. Do you think Dick would have done it?*

No. There is such a thing as the ability to kill. Perry's particular psychosis had produced this ability. Dick was merely ambitious--he could *plan* the murder, but not commit it.

*What was the boys' reaction to the killing?*

They both finally decided that they had thoroughly enjoyed it. Once they started going, it became an immense emotional release. And they thought it was funny. With the criminal mind-- and both boys had criminal minds, believe me--what seems most extreme to us is very often, if it's the most expedient thing to do, the *easiest* thing for a criminal to do. Perry and Dick both used to say (a memorable phrase) that it was much easier to kill somebody than it was to cash a bad check. Passing a bad check requires a great deal of artistry and style, whereas just going in and killing somebody requires only that you pull a trigger.

There are some instances of this that aren't in the book. At one point, in Mexico, Perry and Dick had a terrific falling-out, and Perry said he was going to kill Dick. He said that



he'd already killed five people--he was lying, adding one more than he should have (that was the Negro he kept telling Dick he'd killed years before in Las Vegas) and that one more murder wouldn't matter. It was simple enough. Perry's cliché about it was that if you've killed one person you can kill anybody. He'd look at Dick, as they drove along together, and he'd say to himself, Well, I really ought to kill him, it's a question of expediency.

They had two other murders planned that aren't mentioned in the book. Neither of them came off. One "victim" was a man who ran a restaurant in Mexico City--a Swiss. They had become friendly with him eating in his restaurant and when they were out of money they evolved this whole plan about robbing and murdering him. They went to his apartment in Mexico City and waited for him all night long. He never showed up. The other "victim" was a man they never even knew--like the Clutters. He was a banker in a small Kansas town. Dick kept telling Perry that sure, they might have failed with the Clutter score, but this Kansas banker job was absolutely for certain. They were going to kidnap him and ask for ransom, though the plan was, as you might imagine, to murder him right away.

When they went back to Kansas completely broke, that was the main plot they had in mind. What saved the banker was the ride the two boys took with Mr. Bell, yet another "victim" who was spared, as you remember, when he slowed down the car to pick up the Negro hitchhiker. Mr. Bell offered Dick a job in his meat-packing company. Dick took him up on it and spent two days there on the pickle line--putting pickles in ham sandwiches. I think it was before he and Perry went back on the road again.

*Do you think Perry and Dick were surprised by what they were doing when they began the killings?*

Perry never meant to kill the Clutters at all. He had a brain explosion. I don't think Dick was surprised, although later on he pretended he was. He knew, even if Perry didn't, that Perry would do it, and he was right. It showed an awfully shrewd instinct on Dick's part. Perry was bothered by it to a certain extent because he'd actually done it. He was always trying to find out in his own mind why he did it. He was amazed he'd done it. Dick, on the other hand, *wasn't* amazed, *didn't* want to talk about it, and simply wanted to forget the whole thing: he wanted to get on with life.

*Was there any sexual relationship, or such tendencies, between them?*

No. None at all. Dick was aggressively heterosexual and had great success. Women liked him. As for Perry, his love for Willie-Jay in the State Prison was profound--and it was reciprocated, but never consummated physically, though there was the opportunity. The relationship between Perry and Dick was quite another matter. What is misleading, perhaps, is that in comparing himself with Dick, Perry used to say how totally "virile" Dick was. But he was referring, I think, to the practical and pragmatic sides of Dick--admiring them because as a dreamer he had none of that toughness himself at all.

Perry's sexual interests were practically nil. When Dick went to the whorehouses, Perry sat in the cafes, waiting. There was only one occasion--that was their first night in Mexico when the two of them went to a bordello run by an "old queen," according to Dick. Ten dollars was the price--which they weren't *about* to pay, and they said so. Well, the old queen looked at them and said perhaps he could arrange something for less: he disappeared and came out with this female midget about 3 feet 2 inches tall. Dick was disgusted, but Perry was madly excited. That was the only instance. Perry was such a little moralist after all.

*How long do you think the two would have stayed together had they not been picked up in Las Vegas? Was the odd bond that kept them together beginning to fray? One senses in the rashness of their acts and plans a subconscious urge to be captured.*

Dick planned to ditch Perry in Las Vegas, and I think he would have done so. No, I certainly don't think this particular pair wanted to be caught--though this is a common criminal phenomenon.

*How do you yourself equate the sort of petty punk that Detective Alvin Dewey feels Dick is with the extraordinary violence in him--to "see hair all over the walls"?*

Dick's was definitely a small-scale criminal mind. These violent phrases were simply a form of bragging meant to impress Perry, who *was* impressed, for he liked to think of Dick as being "tough." Perry was too sensitive to be "tough." Sensitive. But himself able to kill.

*Is it one of the artistic limitations of the nonfiction novel that the writer is placed at the whim of chance? Suppose, in the case of "In Cold Blood," clemency had been granted? Or the two boys had been less interesting? Wouldn't the artistry of the book have suffered? Isn't luck involved?*

It is true that I was in the peculiar situation of being involved in a slowly developing situation. I never knew until the events were well along whether a book was going to be possible. There was always the choice, after all, of whether to stop or go on. The book could have ended with the trial, with just a coda at the end explaining what had finally happened. If the principals had been uninteresting or completely uncooperative, I could have stopped and looked elsewhere, perhaps not very far. A nonfiction novel would have been written about any of the other prisoners in Death Row--York and Latham, or especially Lee Andrews. Andrews was the most *subtly* crazy person you can imagine--I mean there was just one thing wrong with him. He was the most rational, calm, bright young boy you'd ever want to meet. I mean *really* bright--which is what made him a truly awesome kind of person. Because his one flaw was, it didn't bother him *at all* to kill. Which is quite a trait. The people who crossed his path, well, to his way of thinking, the best thing to do with them was just to put them in their graves.

*What other than murder might be a subject suitable for the nonfiction novel?*

The other day someone suggested that the break-up of a marriage would be an interesting topic for a nonfiction novel. I disagreed. First of all, you'd have to find two people who would be willing--who'd sign a release. Second, their respective views on the subject-matter would be incoherent. And third, any couple who'd subject themselves to the scrutiny demanded would quite likely be a pair of kooks. But it's amazing how many events *would* work with the theory of the nonfiction novel in mind?the Watts riots, for example. They would provide a subject that satisfied the first essential of the nonfiction novel--that there is a timeless quality about the cause and events. That's important. If it's going to date, it can't be a work of art. The requisite would also be that you would have had to live through the riots, at least part of them, as a witness, so that a depth of perception could be acquired. That event, just three days. It would take years to do. You'd start with the family that instigated the riots without even meaning to.

*With the nonfiction novel I suppose the temptation to fictionalize events, or a line of dialogue, for example, must at times be overwhelming. With "In Cold Blood" was there any invention of this sort to speak of--I was thinking specifically of the dog you described trotting along the road at the end of the section on Perry and Dick, and then later you introduce the next section on the two with Dick swerving to hit the dog. Was*

*there actually a dog at that exact point in the narrative, or were you using this habit of Dick's as a fiction device to bridge the two sections?*

No. There was a dog, and it was precisely as described. One doesn't spend almost six years on a book, the point of which is factual accuracy, and then give way to minor distortions. People are so suspicious. They ask, "How can you reconstruct the conversation of a dead girl, Nancy Clutter, without fictionalizing?" If they read the book carefully, they can see readily enough how it's done. It's a silly question. Each time Nancy appears in the narrative, there are witnesses to what she is saying and doing-- phone calls, conversations, being overheard. When she walks the horse up from the river in the twilight, the hired man is a witness and talked to her then. The last time we see her, in her bedroom, Perry and Dick themselves were the witnesses, and told me what she had said. What is reported of her, even in the narrative form, is as accurate as many hours of questioning, over and over again, can make it. All of it is reconstructed from the evidence of witnesses which is implicit in the title of the first section of the book "The Last to See Them Alive."

*How conscious were you of film techniques in planning the book?*

Consciously, not at all. Subconsciously, who knows?

*After their conviction, you spent years corresponding and visiting with the prisoners. What was the relationship between the two of them?*

When they were taken to Death Row, they were right next door to each other. But they didn't talk much. Perry was intensely secretive and wouldn't ever talk because he didn't want the other prisoners--York, Latham, and particularly Andrews, whom he despised to hear anything that he had to say. He would write Dick notes on "kites" as he called them. He would reach out his hand and zip the "kite" into Dick's cell. Dick didn't much enjoy receiving these communications because they were always one form or another of recrimination--nothing to do with the Clutter crime, but just general dissatisfaction with things there in prison and . . . the people, very often Dick himself. Perry'd send Dick a note: "If I hear you tell another of those filthy jokes again I'll kill you when we go to the shower!" He was quite a little moralist, Perry, as I've said.

It was over a moral question that he and I had a tremendous falling-out once. It lasted for about two months. I used to send them things to read--both books and magazines. Dick only wanted girlie magazines--either those or magazines that had to do with cars and motors. I sent them both whatever they wanted. Well, Perry said to me one time: "How could a person like you go on contributing to the degeneracy of Dick's mind by sending him all this degenerate filthy literature?" Weren't they all sick enough without this further contribution towards their total moral decay? He'd got very grand talking in terms that way. I tried to explain to him that I was neither his judge nor Dick's--and if this was what Dick wanted to read, that was his business. Perry felt that was entirely wrong--that people had to fulfill an obligation towards moral leadership. Very grand. Well, I agree with him up to a point, but in the case of Dick's reading matter it was absurd, of course, and so we got into such a really serious argument about it that afterwards, for two months, he wouldn't speak or even write to me.

*How often did the two correspond with you?*

Except for those occasional fallings-out, they'd write twice a week. I wrote them both twice a week all those years. One letter to the both of them didn't work. I had to write them both, and I had to be careful not to be repetitious, because they were very jealous of each other. Or rather, Perry was terribly jealous of Dick, and if Dick got one more

letter than he did, that would create a great crisis. I wrote them about what I was doing, and where I was living, describing everything in the most careful detail. Perry was interested in my dog, and I would always write about him, and send along pictures. I often wrote them about their legal problems.

*Do you think if the social positions of the two boys had been different that their personalities would have been markedly different?*

Of course, there wasn't anything peculiar about Dick's social position. He was a very ordinary boy who simply couldn't sustain any kind of normal relationship with anybody. If he had been given \$10,000, perhaps he might have settled into some small business. But I don't think so. He had a very natural criminal instinct towards everything. He was oriented towards stealing from the beginning. On the other hand, I think Perry could have been an entirely different person. I really do. His life had been so incredibly abysmal that I don't see what chance he had as a little child except to steal and run wild.

Of course, you could say that his brother, with exactly the same background, went ahead and became the head of his class. What does it matter that he later killed himself. No, it's there--it's the fact that the brother *did* kill himself, in spite of his success, that shows how really awry the background of the Smiths' lives were. Terrifying. Perry had extraordinary qualities, but they just weren't channeled properly to put it mildly. He was a really a talented boy in a limited way--he had genuine sensitivity--and, as I've said, when he talked about himself as an artist, he wasn't really joking at all.

*You once said that emotionality made you lose writing control--that you had to exhaust emotion before you could get to work. Was there a problem with "In Cold Blood," considering your involvement with the case and its principals?*

Yes, it was a problem. Nevertheless, I felt in control throughout. However, I had great difficulty writing the last six or seven pages. This even took a physical form: hand paralysis. I finally used a typewriter--very awkward as I always write in longhand.

*Your feeling about capital punishment is implicit in the title of the book. How do you feel the lot of Perry and Dick should have been resolved?*

I feel that capital crimes should all be handled by Federal Courts, and that those convicted should be imprisoned in a special Federal prison where, conceivably, a life-sentence could mean, as it does not in state courts, just that.

*Did you see the prisoners on their final day? Perry wrote you a 100-page letter that you received after the execution. Did he mention that he had written it?*

Yes, I was with them the last hour before execution. No, Perry did not mention the letter. He only kissed me on the cheek, and said, "Adios, amigo."

*What was the letter about?*

It was a rambling letter, often intensely personal, often setting forth his various philosophies. He had been reading Santayana. Somewhere he had read "The Last Puritan," and had been very impressed by it. What I really think impressed him about me was that I had once visited Santayana at the Convent of the Blue Nuns in Rome. He always wanted me to go into great detail about that visit, Santayana had looked like, and the nuns, and all the physical details. Also, he had been reading Thoreau. Narratives didn't interest him at all. So in his letter he would write: "As Santayana says"--and then there'd be five pages of Santayana *did* say. Or he'd write: "I agree with Thoreau about

this. Do you?"--then he'd write that he didn't *care* what I thought, and he'd add five or ten pages of what he agreed with Thoreau about.

*The case must have left you with an extraordinary collection of memorabilia.*

My files would almost fill a whole small room, right up to the ceiling. All my research. Hundreds of letters. Newspaper clippings. Court records--the court records almost fill two trunks. There were so many Federal hearings on the case. One Federal hearing was twice as long as the original court trial. A huge assemblage of stuff. I have some of the personal belongings--all of Perry's because he left me everything he owned; it was miserably little, his books, written in and annotated; the letters he received while in prison. . .not very many. . .his paintings and drawings. Rather a heartbreaking assemblage that arrived about a month after the execution. I simply couldn't bear to look at it for a long time. I finally sorted everything. Then, also, after the execution, that 100-age letter from Perry got to me. The last line of the letter--it's Thoreau, I think, a paraphrase, goes "And suddenly I realize life is the father and death is the mother." The last line. Extraordinary.

*What will you do with this collection?*

I think I may burn it all. You think I'm kidding? I'm not. The book is what is important. It exists in its own right. The rest of the material is extraneous, and it's personal. What's more, I don't really want people poking around in the material of six years of work and research. The book is the end result of all that, and it's exactly what I wanted to do from it.

*Detective Dewey told me that he felt the case and your stays in Garden City had changed you--even your style of dress. . .that you were more "conservative" now, and had given up detachable collars. . .*

Of course the case changed me! How could anyone live through such an experience without it profoundly affecting him? I've always been almost overly aware of the precipice we all walk along, the ridge and the abyss on either side; the last six years have increased this awareness to an almost all-pervading point. As for the rest--Mr. Dewey, a man for whom I have the utmost affection and respect, is perhaps confusing comparative youth (I was 35 when we first met) with the normal aging process. Six years ago I had four more teeth and considerably more hair than is now the case, and furthermore, I lost 20 pounds. I dress to accommodate the physical situation. By the way, I have never worn a detachable collar.

*What are you going to work on now?*

Well, having talked at such length about the nonfiction novel, I must admit I'm going to write a *novel*, a straight novel, one I've had in mind for about 15 years. But I will attempt the nonfiction form again--when the time comes and the subject appears and I recognize the possibilities. I have one very good idea for another one, but I'm going to let it simmer on the back of my head for awhile. It's quite a step--to undertake the nonfiction novel. Because the amount of work is enormous. The relationship between the author and all the people he must deal with if he does the job properly--well, it's a full 24-hour-a-day job. Even when I wasn't working on the book, I was somehow involved with all the characters in it with their personal lives, writing six or seven letters a day, taken up with their problems, a complete involvement. It's extraordinarily difficult and consuming, but for a writer who tries, doing it all the way down the line, the result can be a unique and exciting form of writing.

*What has been the response of readers of "In Cold Blood" to date?*

I've been staggered by the letters I've received, their quality of sensibility, their articulateness, the compassion of their authors. The letters are not fan letters. They're from people deeply concerned about what it is I've written about. About 70 percent of the letters think of the book as a reflection on American life, this collision between the desperate, ruthless, wandering, savage part of American life, and the other, which is insular and safe, more or less. It has struck them because there is something so awfully inevitable about what is going to happen: the people in the book are completely beyond their own control. For example, Perry wasn't an evil person. If he'd had any chance in life, things would have been different. But every illusion he'd ever had, well, they all evaporated, so that on that night he was so full of self-hatred and self-pity that I think he would have killed somebody--perhaps not that night, or the next, or the next. You can't go through life without ever getting anything you want, ever.

*At the very end of the book you give Alvin Dewey a scene in the country cemetery, a chance meeting with Sue Kidwell, which seems to synthesize the whole experience for him. Is there such a moment in your own case?*

I'm still very much haunted by the whole thing. I have finished the book, but in a sense I haven't finished it: it keeps churning around in my head. It particularizes itself now and then, but not in the sense that it brings about a total conclusion. It's like the echo of E.M. Forster's Malabar Caves, the echo that's meaningless and yet it's there: one keeps hearing it all the time.

*Mr. Plimpton is editor of The Paris Review, which has made a specialty of the long, tape-recorded literary review.*

[Return to the Books Home Page](#)

---

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

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

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

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

In the novel Dear Mr. Henshaw, the story is written in a diary/letter format, documenting the thoughts and feelings of the main character, Leigh Botts. While my students read the diary entries, I had them record things that Leigh wrote about in his diary that showed development in any of these 4 areas. Teach students to use appropriate tone of voice to convey the feelings behind the characters and events in the script. It's so much fun! Pair Fiction and Nonfiction where possible: Finding a nonfiction text that pairs well with your novel works especially well with realistic and historical fiction novels. For example, when my students were reading about how Judd, a main character in the book Shiloh, was mistreating his dog, I had them read a nonfiction article about animal rights.

Fiction stories are based on imagination, some may contain real facts, situations, or items or be completely unique to the writer. Non-fiction is based on reality, can be auto biographies, biographys, dissertations, scientific findings, dictionaries, encyclopedias, cookbooks, the list is endless. 508 views. Related QuestionsMore Answers Below. What is the difference between a novel and non-fiction? What is the difference between a novel, fiction and non-fiction?Â But first, let's start with the broadest categories: Fiction is the opposite of nonfiction. Fiction comes from a range of medieval words meaning something created or something pretended. Fiction is not real. It didn't happen. Someone created it or invented it using their imagination.