

TRUMAN CAPOTE

Enfant Terrible



ROBERT EMMET LONG

Truman Capote—
Enfant Terrible

This page intentionally left blank

Truman Capote— Enfant Terrible

ROBERT EMMET LONG



continuum

NEW YORK • LONDON

2008

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

Copyright © 2008 by Robert Emmet Long

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publishers.

Printed in the United States of America on 50% postconsumer waste recycled paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Long, Robert Emmet.

Truman Capote, enfant terrible / Robert Emmet Long.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8264-2763-2 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8264-2763-4 (alk. paper) 1. Capote, Truman, 1924-1984. 2. Novelists, American--20th century--Biography. I. Title.

PS3505.A59Z685 2008

813'.54--dc22

[B]

2008004957

For Carolyn, with love

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

	Preface and Acknowledgments	ix
Chapter 1.	The Early Years: Engaging Two Worlds	1
Chapter 2.	Early Stories: “Miriam,” “A Tree of Night,” “The Headless Hawk,” “Shut a Final Door,” “Master Misery,” and “Children on Their Birthdays”	13
Chapter 3.	<i>Summer Crossing</i>	33
Chapter 4.	<i>Other Voices, Other Rooms</i>	40
Chapter 5.	Early 1950s Reportage, Theater, and Films: <i>Local Color</i> , <i>The Grass Harp</i> , “House of Flowers,” and <i>Beat the Devil</i>	49
Chapter 6.	The Mid- to Late 1950s: <i>The Muses Are Heard</i> , “The Duke in His Domain,” <i>Observations</i> , <i>Breakfast at Tiffany’s</i> , and <i>The Innocents</i>	65
Chapter 7.	<i>In Cold Blood</i>	81
Chapter 8.	Late Capote: <i>Music for Chameleons</i> , <i>Answered Prayers</i> , and Other Writings	94
Chapter 9.	Capote in Retrospect	115
	Bibliography	121
	Index	125

This page intentionally left blank

Preface and Acknowledgments

I first became aware of Truman Capote when I was a high school senior in an upstate New York town, and happened upon a paperback edition of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. I was amazed by the contents of the book, and by the bizarre jacket photograph of the author. A year or so later I almost met Capote. I was then a student at Columbia College, and noticing that he would be giving a reading at the YMHA, I went to see and hear him. The moment he began reading in that strangest of voices, the audience—or some of it—broke out into disbelieving laughter. Capote paid no attention and continued to read, and within a few minutes the laughter subsided and was replaced by a kind of awed silence and absorption in what was being read. At the end Capote received a huge ovation.

Inspired by the reading, and with the confidence of my eighteen years that Capote would be happy to see me, I finessed my way backstage to offer my congratulations. He was standing alone behind the curtain, and when he saw me he looked startled; his eyes grew wide with terror. Then the strangest thing happened: as if some magic wand had been waved, in a split second he disappeared! At a later time (but also in New York) I was with a friend—a Southerner, as it happened—in a Greenwich Village bar. At some point the friend said to me, “Oh, there’s Truman Capote.” But when I looked to the doorway where he had been standing, he once again had vanished. Like a phantom.

On another, later occasion, I was at a party in New York honoring the filmmakers Ismail Merchant and James Ivory; among the guests, and next to me in a buffet line, was Gerald Clarke, then writing his biography of Capote. We talked a bit about the book and the progress he was making with it; and I prepared to hear all manner of things behind the scenes when he was lured away by his female companion,

and my approach to Capote through his authorized biographer proved yet another phantom experience.

Yet it was after I moved back upstate that I had my closest near encounter with Capote. A new family moved into a Victorian house across the park from where I lived, and before long we became friends. As it happened, my newfound friend, Mary Aswell Doll, was the daughter of Mary Louise Aswell, a prominent editor in New York who had a generation earlier helped discover Capote and befriended him. It was at her summer house on Cape Cod that he had finished writing *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Over dinners and barbecues, incidents involving Capote were recalled (one about his taking her to a school dance, and of his being no taller than she was). I was getting very close, if not close enough.

More time has passed since then, and even though I never did have my meeting with Capote, I have at last, in preparing this book, come face-to-face with him.

I am indebted to the New York Public Library's Humanities and Social Science Library, where on five different occasions I made use of the Truman Capote Papers for my research, and to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center—for its elaborate clipping files and its Theatre on Film and Tape Archive. I am grateful, too, to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., which vies with the New York Public Library for possessing the largest Capote collection in America. In addition, I am grateful to Alan U. Schwartz, Capote's lawyer and friend, with whom I spoke on numerous occasions. Gerald Clarke's splendid and indispensable *Capote: A Biography* provided a treasury of information and insight; and George Plimpton's *Truman Capote*, a collection of memories from early childhood on by those who knew Capote, was a pleasure to read and savor. It goes without saying that I read all of Capote's work and the principal literature about him. My thanks to all.

Chapter One

The Early Years: Engaging Two Worlds

Of the Southern writers who came to public attention in the middle of the twentieth century, Truman Capote was the most unlike the others, the most resistant to being typed as a “local writer.” A polished and detached observer, he was ultimately placeless; like his character Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, he was always “traveling,” unwilling or unable to put down roots. He was born in a New Orleans hospital in 1924, and spent the early part of his childhood in Monroeville, Alabama, a town with fewer than a thousand inhabitants that was not near any big city. In one respect, at least, this setting served him well, for in works like *The Grass Harp* and “A Christmas Memory” he was able to create his own fictional world based in the South.

His surname was not originally Capote, but Persons—his mother, Lillie Mae Faulk, having married Archulus Persons in 1923 when she was barely more than sixteen and he twenty-six. Five feet tall with dark blond hair, she was a local beauty who lacked maturity and had married “Arch” Persons for the money she thought he had. He belonged to a respected Alabama family that had produced lawyers and judges, but Arch was an empty suit—a man who dressed smartly and talked big, but in the end spent time in prison. Lillie Mae learned on her honeymoon that he did not have anything like the means she imagined. The marriage was an on-again, off-again affair. Lillie Mae lived for a time with her Faulk relatives in Monroeville, but the marriage officially lasted for six years, during which time the couple were reunited intermittently. During one of these reunions, Lillie Mae became pregnant. Capote was born in a New Orleans hospital, his infancy spent in a New Orleans hotel suite where he was conspicuously neglected by his mother.

Virtually a child herself, Lillie Mae hadn't the least idea of how to bring up her infant son. She had no trouble attracting men, with whom she spent much of her time, while her child remained locked in their suite, sometimes in a dark closet. Fearing that he had been abandoned, Truman would begin screaming at the top of his lungs. Lillie Mae instructed the hotel management to ignore his wild screams, which they did, and he would continue screaming for hours. He was abandoned, literally, when Lillie Mae left him with her relatives while she went to New York to pursue a dream of mingling in café society. The Faulks, who lived in a substantial white frame house on South Alabama Avenue in Monroeville, consisted of three unmarried women and their reclusive, unmarried brother Bud. Jennie Faulk was the prosperous, dominant one; her sister Callie kept the books at Jennie's dry goods store; and a distant relative, Nanny Rumbley Faulk, or "Sook," as she was known, was a woman of a shy and childlike nature who had no well-defined function in the family, which Capote would later describe as "Southern Gothic."

Sook, memorialized by Capote in "A Christmas Memory," adored Truman and loved nothing better than playing games with him in the attic of the big house. They liked to find oddments in trunks and create make-believe costumes. According to Capote's Aunt, Capote "was almost unnatural in its intensity." In her loneliness she desperately clung to the small boy. Perhaps she sensed in Truman a kindred spirit. They were both forgotten people, Sook by her sisters and brother, Truman by his parents. Both were outsiders—Sook because her childlike mind kept her apart from the adult world; and Truman because his pretty looks, delicate build, and girlish tenderness offended other people's notions of how a "real boy" ought to look and act. Sook loved to sort through the collection of old clothes to dress Truman up; "putting a bonnet on his head, slipping faded white arm-length gloves on his hands, wrapping a feathered boa around his neck," Sook would exclaim, "'[D]on't you look like an elegant lady ready for the ball!'"

In his loneliness, Truman did have a close friend apart from Sook—Nelle Harper Lee, who later, writing under the name Harper Lee, would become the author of the best-selling novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). They were, in fact, about the same age and lived next door to each other in Monroeville. Their friendship began at once and lasted a lifetime. Lee's biographer, Charles Shields, observes that "from the start they recognized in each other 'an apartness,' as Capote

later expressed it, and they both loved reading. When Lee's lawyer father gave them an old Underwood typewriter, they began writing original stories together. She was also his protector. In their childhood Truman was beaten up, and she rescued him from the other boys. By the time she was seven years, she was a fearsome stomach puncher, foot-stamper, and hair-puller. . . . Once some boys tried to challenge her . . . each ended up face down . . . crying 'Uncle!'"

In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Capote would model the tomboy Idabel after Lee, and in turn Lee drew on Capote for her character Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the 1950s Lee would join Capote on trips to Kansas, where she helped to secure the cooperation of the townspeople for Capote's nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*.

The lonely childhoods of Truman and Nelle were connected by their estrangement from their mothers. Nelle's mother had a bipolar condition causing mood swings that disqualified her from serving as a model for her daughter, who thus adopted a masculine identity. Truman's troubled relationship with his mother also had consequences, for she left him with a lifelong sense of abandonment; she did not show him the love she should have, and she was repelled by his effeminacy. Even from the beginning, he fought back, refusing to be other than who he was; there was deadly warfare between them.

Capote was not the only notable creative writer of recent times who became locked in years of conflict with his mother. One sees this, for example, in the playwright Edward Albee and his well-to-do stepmother, who in the end disinherited him. That relationship is reflected in the formidable mother figure in Albee's *Three Tall Women* (1994), and it is spelled out in full in Mel Gussow's revealing biography of Albee, *A Singular Journey* (1999). But not even Albee's strenuous experience can eclipse the lastingly destructive relationship of Lillie Mae Persons and her son Truman. In his Monroeville years Truman had already been convinced that he would be a writer, and he spent many hours recording his impressions and his ideas for fiction. This juvenile writing was locked away in a trunk on the upper floor of the Faulk house, and he would allow no one to see its contents. But his mother, perhaps under the influence of alcohol, set fire to the trunk; it was as if she were destroying everything for which he stood. Years later he would say that his mother was "the single worst person in my life."

Jack Dunphy, Capote's longtime companion, has written in *Dear Genius: A Memoir of My Life with Truman Capote*, that even late his life,

Capote would talk to his mother in his sleep, demanding [to know] why she had not taken him with her, why she had left him behind to haunt the post office for news of her to enliven his life in the small town of Monroeville. It was the commencement of her life-long determination to dominate a spirit she no more understood than she did the turnings of the moon. . . . She was forever trying to make him over, make a man of him. That she did not really want him, and never had, was only to surface with her later on, when drink bared her secret most soul, not only to herself but to Truman as well. . . . He confessed how he had almost pushed her out the window of the Park Avenue apartment once when she was drunk. He never said that he hated her but he did all the same. He despised and feared her somewhat as well.

Dunphy goes on to describe essential differences between mother and son:

She would have liked to sit on him and smother him and subdue him utterly, as some animals, motivated by jealousy and competitiveness, do to their young. Truman was an exotic, and she had no connection with him, really, except in the mere biological sense. He did not love her, but he wanted her to love him. I don't think that [she] was ever in love in her life. She struck me as being all for herself, whereas Truman possessed the gift of selflessness. He was not like other sons. He was better. He was this instrument, this finely tuned thing made of nerves that helped him catch the nuances of things and recover them.

After shuffling him around for six years, Lillie Mae left Truman with the relatives in Monroeville for good in 1930. In 1931 she moved to New York City, where she eventually found restaurant work. It was here that she re-encountered Joseph Capote, a Cuban immigrant she had originally met in New Orleans in 1925. Before long they were married. She shed her countrified name of Lillie Mae and became Nina; and Truman, now adopted by her husband, became Truman Capote. In the 1930s Nina and Joe Capote lived it up; they traveled abroad and vacationed at the best American resorts. They had a house in Brooklyn at first, then moved to an attractive apartment on