 *In Cold Blood*

Truman Capote, [*In Cold Blood*](http://www.amazon.com/In-Cold-Blood-Truman-Capote/dp/0679745580)*: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (New York: Random House, 1966).

Summary:

“Clutter, his wife, and their two teen-age children were found murdered in their farm near Garden City early last Sunday morning. Each had been bound, gagged, and shot through the head with a .12-gauge shotgun.” So read a news broadcast in November 1959, after a quadruple homicide in a small Kansan town. Truman Capote, famed author of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, and childhood friend of Harper Lee—author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*—invented the true crime genre with his book *In Cold Blood*, Capote’s condensed work from his 8,000 pages of research, *which* might best be described as a combination of a novel and investigative journalism, or, as Capote himself called it, a “nonfiction novel.” The town of Holcomb is understandably uneasy after the murders, and everyone suspects everyone. Paralleled with the story of the town and the police investigation is the tale of the two murderers, Dick and Perry, and their attempt to allude the police and, eventually, the death penalty. The book was published in 1966, less than a year after Dick and Perry were hanged.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Structure. The book has a creative, intentional structure. First, the stories of the Clutters and the Dick/Perry are told separately. Second, these stories converge on the night of the murders. Third, the stories separate again during the investigation, while Dick and Perry are on the run. Finally, there is a collision again for the arrest and execution.
* Ordinary. Holcomb and the Clutters are described as extremely ordinary. A KBI agent says, “Of all the people in the world, the Clutters were the least likely to be murdered.”
* Dreams/visions/ghosts. The novel has multiple instances of dreams and visions and even a slightly ghostly ending.
* Description. Capote is a master if description: gunshots are “somber explosions,” Nancy Clutter’s eyes are “like ale held to the light,” Bonnie Clutter experiences “inexplicable despondency,” Dick’s tattoos are an “inky gallery,” and the Holcomb area of the Bible-belt is a “gospel-haunted strip.”

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Capote “zoom in” to Holcomb and the Clutters at the very beginning of the novel? Why?
2. Why does Capote make the town of Holcomb its own character, with mood shifts and collective reactions to the murders?
3. Do you feel sorry for Dick and Perry? Are they beyond saving?
4. Dick calls Perry a “natural killer.” Why? Do you agree?
5. What is this novel saying about the American Dream?
6. Can you discern Capote’s opinion of the death penalty? If so, how?
7. Why does Capote include this epigraph, which is from a poem by François Villon called “Ballad of the Hanged Man”?

*Brothers, men who live after us,*

*Let not your hearts be hardened against us,*

*Because, if you have pity for us poor men,*

*God will have more mercy toward you.*