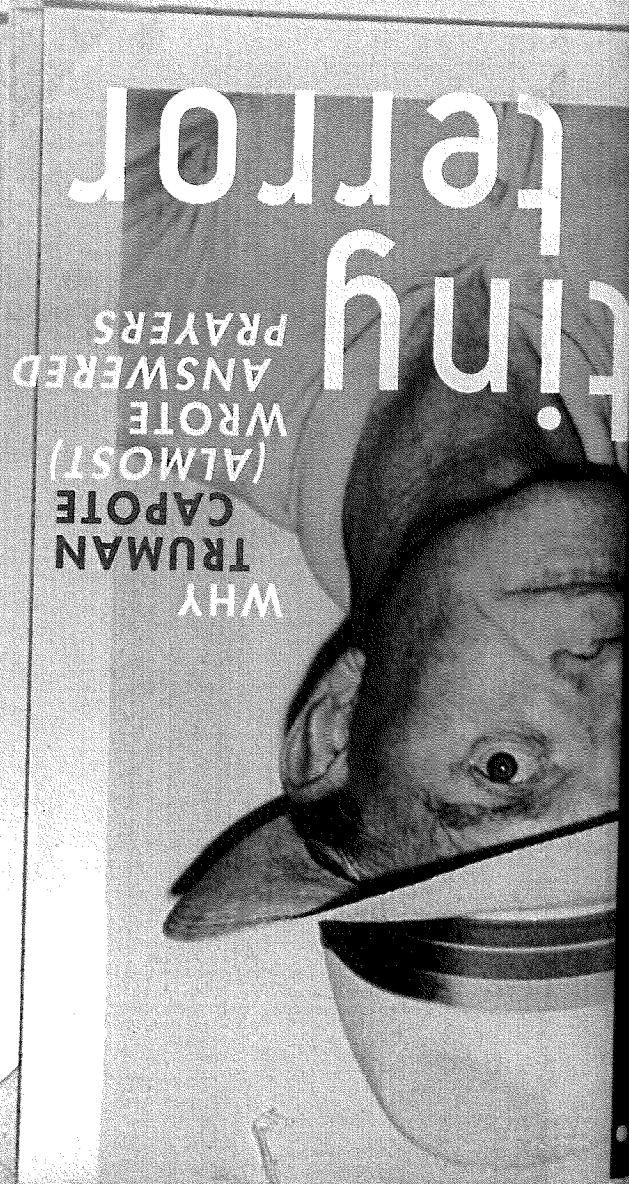


WILLIAM TODD SCHULTZ



Why
TRUMAN
CAPOTE
(ALMOST)
WROTE
ANSWERED
PRAYERS
ting
terror



CONSISTENTLY INCONSISTENT CONSISTENCY

“Consistently inconsistent” is what Truman Capote liked to call himself. And maybe he was: we all are, actually. There is much less unity in personality than we like to believe—not *none*, but *less*.¹ But Capote was flagrantly consistent about at least one matter: when describing his early life, he always told the same two stories. It may be that neither is true, it may be that each is partly true; it makes no difference. False memories tell us just as much about a person as true memories do, sometimes more.

Here’s the first story:

It was a certain period of my life. I was only about two years old, but I was very aware of being locked in this hotel room. My mother was a very young girl. We were living in this hotel in New Orleans. She had no one to leave me with. She had no money and she had nothing to do with my father. She would leave me locked in this hotel room when she went out in the

¹ Psychologists call this “domain specificity.” Coping strategies that work in one setting may not work in others; goals that drive behavior during one period of life may fade during others. Different feelings, thoughts, and behaviors get elicited by different demands and situations.

evening with her beaux and I would become hysterical because I couldn't get out of this room. . . . I can't remember anything about that whole period except things like that. Because very soon after that I was separated from her?

Elsewhere Capote was more attuned to the emotional devastation the episode entailed. He told Gerald Clarke, "Eventually I would become so exhausted that I would just throw myself on the bed or on the floor until they came back. Every day was a nightmare, because I was afraid they would leave me when it turned dark. I had an intense fear of being abandoned, and I remember practically all my childhood as being lived in a state of constant tension and fear."

Capote made frequent use of this particular scenario. It was the sort of story he dusted off with special devotion. The writer John Knowles, Capote's neighbor, and famous in his own right for the classic novel *A Separate Peace*, says:

Truman often talked about himself. Oh, my God, yes. . . . Just after I first met him, Truman began telling me his life story. This terrible, tragic story. The central tragedy (as he saw it) in his life is a scene: Truman is two years-old. He wakes up in an utterly strange room, empty. He yells, but he's locked in there. He's petrified, doesn't know where he is—which is in some dumpsy hotel in the deep South—and his parents have gone out to get drunk and dance; they have locked this tiny little boy in this room. That was his image of terror, and I think it was his way of

2. See detailed notes on sources at the end of this book.

symbolizing the insecurity of his youth—this image of that kind of abandonment.

There are a few things to notice about this memory right away. In the first version, it's his mother who was locking him in—and, according to Clarke, "instructing the staff not to let him out even if he screamed"—whereas in the other two it was his mother *and* father. So the facts varied slightly, as they often will when we recall early events from our lives. There's also the question of accuracy. Capote was just two years old. He said he was "very aware" of being locked in the room, but that's unlikely. More likely is the possibility that Capote reconstructed the scene from the vantage point of adulthood, maybe after being told about it by his mother, or someone else in the know. But the singularity of the scene—"I can't remember anything about that whole period except things like that"—its saliency, lends it special power. It colonized Capote's experience and drew other memories—or fantasies or dreams—into its orbit. Here, for instance, is a memory Capote called his "very earliest":

I was probably three years old, perhaps a little younger, and I was on a visit to the St. Louis Zoo, accompanied by a large black woman my mother had hired to take me there. Suddenly there was pandemonium. Children, women, grown-up men were shouting and hurrying in every direction. Two lions had escaped from their cages. Two bloodthirsty beasts were on the prowl in the park. My nurse panicked. She simply turned and ran, leaving me alone on the path. That's all I remember about it.

Here again, it's hard to know, maybe impossible, if the scene really happened. But it doesn't matter, if it's *psychologically* true.

Clarke, for what it's worth, calls the zoo memory "undoubtedly a dream rather than an actual event," though he does see it as "symbolic of [Capote's] early years." The zoo memory and the memory of the hotel room read like two versions of the same basic experience. In both, Capote is around the same age. In both, his mother is implicated—she either rejects and abandons him or hires someone who flees when he's traumatized. Whatever the case, he is left alone to deal with overwhelming fear. For Capote, the hotel incident was nightmarish; with the zoo, the metaphor was "pandemonium." Either way, there was a loss of emotional control, the sense that the world was dangerous, that adults who ought to be available and responsive in the face of danger simply could not be counted on for comfort. They disappointed him terribly. They didn't come through. Capote was on his own to do what he could with the hand dealt him.

This last element is more of a stretch, but I do think it's especially striking. In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Capote's first novel, which he described as an "attempt to exorcise demons," he created a black female character he named, of all things, "Zoo." She owns a charm that keeps "anything terrible from happening." Capote's child alter-ego in the book, Joel Knox, tells Zoo, "I love you because you've got to love me because you've got to." But Zoo is crazy, "always talking about snow, always seeing things" and just like the black caretaker did in the zoo memory, Zoo (the character) leaves Joel just as he begins to place his trust in her. She runs to Washington, D.C., and though she promises to send for Joel once she gets established there, she never does.

What does it all mean? It means that Capote was haunted by a particular script. He's small and defenseless, in some strange and lonely place, and those whom he expresses love to, or those whom he relies on, people he justifiably trusts, leave him and let him down.

As Capote himself explained, "My underlying motivation was a quest for some sense of serenity, some particular kind of affection." But as a young boy, he had neither. In fact, "bloodthirsty beasts were on the prowl," feelings he could not control or escape.

This next memory is more lighthearted—practically farcical—but just as representative. Whereas the first two concern psychological conflicts in Capote's *life*, the third concerns his motives for *writing*. I want to describe several different versions as a way of highlighting how discrepant they are.

The following comes from a *Paris Review* interview with Pati Hill conducted in 1957. Hill asked Capote when he first started writing.

When I was a child of about ten or eleven and lived near Mobile . . . I joined the Sunshine Club that was organized by the Mobile Press Register. There was a children's page with contests for writing . . . The prize for the short-story writing contest was either a pony or a dog, I've forgotten which, but I wanted it badly. I had been noticing the activities of some neighbors who were up to no good, so I wrote a kind of *roman à clef* called "Old Mr. Busybody" and entered it in the contest. The first installment appeared one Sunday, under my real name. . . . Only somebody suddenly realized I was serving up a local scandal as fiction, and the second installment never appeared. Naturally, I didn't win a thing.

Here, now, is Capote to Lawrence Grobel; Grobel's interviews were conducted between 1982 and 1984, when Capote died.

Mrs. Lee [the writer Harper Lee's mother] was quite an eccentric character. Mr. Lee was wonderful, but Mrs. Lee—who was

a brilliant woman—was an endless gossip. So I wrote something called “Mrs. Busybody” about Mrs. Lee and sent it to the *Mobile Register*. I won second prize and they printed the whole thing and it was just ghastly. . . . They were very upset in Alabama. . . . I didn’t know it was going to be published! I just sent it in. . . . And then one Sunday, there it was. Then people started to whisper about me. . . . I found they were very upset about it. I was a little hesitant about showing anything after that. I remember I said, “Oh, I don’t know why I did that, I’ve given up writing.” But I was writing more fiercely than ever.

Once more the facts shift, or reverse themselves entirely. Was it Mr. or Mrs. Busybody? Who knows? Did the piece ever appear in print; did Capote win a prize; did the neighbors really whisper? It’s anybody’s guess. Eugene Walter, a writer and Mobile resident, had this to say:

His aunt realized that he had written about a next-door neighbor and called off publication. Truman had used an eccentric reclusé for Mr. Busybody. . . . Truman pretended all his life that “Old Mr. Busybody” had been published. . . . That his first publication was on the Sunshine Page. . . . But it was never published. Nobody knows what happened to “Old Mr. Busybody,” because his aunt grabbed it in a hurry. . . . There are people working on their doctorates, or whatever, searching the files of the *Mobile Press-Register* to this day.

There you have it. The story never saw the light of day. Capote made it all up—or most of it, at least. He wrote the piece, it seems, but it ruffled no feathers, thanks to his aunt.

What is enormously revealing about the tale as a whole, however, is the light it sheds on Capote’s urge to write. The key detail is not the story’s subject—Mr. or Mrs. Busybody—or the subject’s inspiration. What is truly significant is the reaction Capote imagined. The work “upset people.” The response was “ghastly.” A scandal ensued. Neighbors talked. A little, modest *roman à clef* provoked major turmoil, but it strengthened Capote’s resolve. He began to write more fiercely than ever. He said he had “given up,” yet he did the opposite.

“Busybody” is a forerunner of Capote’s situation with *Answered Prayers*, this book’s chief focus. His very first story mirrors his last. *Answered Prayers* also was a *roman à clef*. It told the truth in fictional form. Temporarily it caused Capote to doubt his motives. Just like “Busybody,” *Answered Prayers* essentially rattled, only on a grander scale. He scorched the rich and famous, printed details told to him in confidence by socialites and jet-setters who thought they were his friends, who thought he could be trusted, who never suspected he might betray them. And the reaction was the same: utter scandal. Etswhile friends did more than whisper. They blacklisted him; shut him out of their lives forever.

Sometimes, when we engage in the act of remembering, we alter details in accordance with contemporary concerns; we inject a lot of the “present” into the “past.” That is what Capote did here. “Busybody” became a foil for *Answered Prayers*. In talking about the former, Capote really signified the latter. He made the two experiences fit together. What confirms this is the fact that the connection was not lost on him. He said to Lawrence Grobel, “[Busybody] was sort of like when I began publishing those chapters of *Answered Prayers* and everybody was so upset.” The element of timing is also relevant. Capote dated the beginning of *Answered Prayers* variously, but the two years he mentioned more than others were 1956 and

1958. The *Paris Review* interview in which he described "Busybody" appeared in 1957. So, when talking about the story, the book was very much on his mind. He saw "Busybody" through the prism of *Answered Prayers*.

Finally, even before any excerpts from *Answered Prayers* appeared in *Esquire*, Capote foresaw reactions similar to those he had imagined for "Busybody." He told *Rolling Stone* in 1973: "I'm sure [the book] will get some of the supreme all-time far-out attacks." Then later, "[It will] kill my last chances in the world of ever winning anything. Except, perhaps, twenty years in jail."

The solution to the mystery of "Busybody," then, is that it was a junior substitute for *Answered Prayers*; it was *Answered Prayers* writ small. The present was projected into the past. And maybe most importantly of all, "Busybody"/*Answered Prayers* highlights one particular motive at the root of Capote's creativity: power. Here was a displaced boy thought to be excessively feminine, abandoned by his parents, raised by spinsterish aunts, always considered odd and eccentric, going exactly nowhere, fast. What might he do to make a way for himself? To find meaning? To get noticed? He would write. Words would become his weapons. With words, Capote made himself mighty. As he put it in one of his last remarks about the fallout from *Answered Prayers*, "I can't understand why everybody's so upset. What do they think they had around them, a court jester? They had a writer."

It is remarkable how two "memories" in their microcosmic fashion, can say so much about who a person is and why he did the things he did. In their basic architecture they embed a massive amount of life-history information. The first in particular I am inclined to nominate as a "prototypical scene" in a sense I will explain later. But for now, other matters warrant more immediate

attention. It is essential, first, to investigate the facts of Capote's childhood, the events and happenings and relationships that resulted in the fixity of episodes like the "hotel room" and "Busybody." Those two memories colonized Capote's early experiences; next we need to explore exactly *how*.