

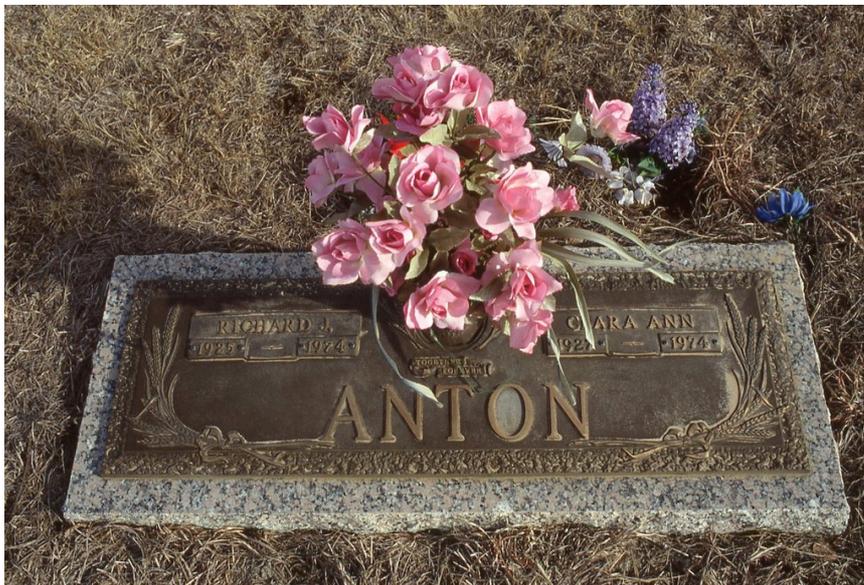
The truth about Truman Capote

Peter Gillman

The Sunday Times 17 February 2013

I first heard doubts about the veracity of *In Cold Blood* twenty years ago. The person who expressed them was none other than Marie Dewey, widow of Sheriff Al Dewey, Capote's hero in his tale of how two drifters who murdered a Kansas ranching family in 1959 were brought to justice and hanged.

I called Mrs Dewey in Garden City, Kansas to ask about another of Capote's supposedly factual stories, *Hand-carved Coffins*, also said to feature Dewey. Mrs Dewey declined to be interviewed, saying only that her husband had felt "used" by Capote. She added the telling aside: "Of course, not everything Capote put into *In Cold Blood* is true."



Grave of Richard and Ann Anton - basis for Capote's Handcarved Coffins

Mrs Dewey would not to elaborate and I did not pursue the matter, as my brief was to explore the background to *Hand-Carved Coffins*, which Capote had written in 1979, thirteen years after *In Cold Blood*. It too was a tale of mid-west mayhem: a cattle rancher had pursued a vendetta against a committee of townsfolk who had denied him water rights.

All but one of its members had met a gruesome end. One couple had been bitten by rattlesnakes that had been secreted in their car. A second couple were barricaded in their half-built ranch house and burned alive. Another member, who drove an open Jeep, was decapitated by a wire stretched across a road. The title referred to miniature balsa-wood coffins, containing the victims' photographs, which had been sent to each before they were killed.

Capote had given these characters fictional names and obscured the location, on the grounds that the rancher had never been brought to justice and could sue for

defamation. My quest was to establish (a) where this had taken place and (b) how it ended.

What I found appeared to undermine the reputation of a writer celebrated for the great non-fiction novel of the twentieth century, one that combined meticulous research with the techniques of fiction. Since then, increasing doubts have been cast on Capote's methodology, culminating in this week's revelations about the extent to which he modified the truth to shape the narrative of *In Cold Blood*. My discoveries prefigured all of this, as well as revealing the most unsavoury aspects of his fragmenting personality.

Capote did drop one clue to the supposed location of Hand-carved Coffins. Under pressure from the producer who bought the movie rights, he claimed that it was based on a case Dewey had worked in Nebraska. Armed with that assertion, I called Mrs Dewey again. She still would not be interviewed, but when I asked her if her husband had ever told Capote about such a case in Nebraska, she replied:

"My husband didn't work in Nebraska."

The penny dropped. "Did your husband tell Capote about any cases like that in Kansas?"

Oh yes, she said, it's like a case that was never solved down in Ensign.

In short order I was inspecting back copies of the local newspaper in Dodge City, fifteen miles from the tiny cross-roads community of Ensign. A gruesome murder in July 1974 was reported under the headline: "Slain Ensign Farmer Had Enemies". It told how the bodies of Richard Anton and his wife Ann had been found in the debris of their burned-out – and half-constructed – ranch house. Previously a rattlesnake had been found on the back seat of their car. A day or later I met the Antons' son Dave and his wife Edwina, who confirmed the story, adding further details such as that the rattlesnake's rattle had been sheared off so that its alarm signal was silenced.



Dave Anton – confirms details of his parents' murder

Dewey had indeed handled the case. Capote's chief investigator, "Jake Pepper", had striking resemblances with Dewey: both men were "in top condition" and both were obsessional in their determination to catch the killer.

From that point, fact and Capote's story diverged. The suspect in the Anton case was not a vengeful rancher but Hilton Wade, a farmhand whom Anton senior had evicted and who was notorious for setting fires. Wade denied killing the Antons and passed a lie-detector test. Any forensic evidence – tyre marks, footprints – had been obliterated by firefighters and although Dewey and his team spent a week sifting the ashes they found nothing.

Capote had imported further details from Dewey's casebook, including the origin of the hand-carved coffins. In another case, a murderer had sent his intended victim a crude coffin and Capote had converted this into the balsa-wood miniatures of his title.

By now my own story seemed clear. Capote had elaborated on the Anton case to construct his story, blending fact and fiction under the cloak of anonymity. He was following the precedent of *In Cold Blood* but to a far more dramatic extent. Had he not presented the story as true, there may not have been a problem. But he compounded his deceit with claims to have found a new way of writing, renouncing the compelling use of detail that distinguished *In Cold Blood*.

Previously, he declared, he had taken "three pages to arrive at effects I ought to be able to achieve in a single paragraph". Now he was writing in a "severe minimal manner" - the outcome "of everything I knew about writing". The book spent sixteen weeks in the *New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list, the movie rights went for \$300,000 and the *Sunday Times* serialised the entire manuscript.

If my research had ended there, it would have established how far Capote was cavalier about the truth. But there was more. From a local journalist, Dolores Hope, I heard of Dewey's anger over *Hand-carved Coffins*. That was surprising, given how Capote had lionised the Deweys when *In Cold Blood* was published thirteen years before. He had invited them to stay with him in New York and California - and, as revealed this week, insisted that Mrs Dewey was paid a handsome consultancy fee by the producers of the *In Cold Blood* movie. Yet Dewey complained to Hope: "Why didn't the little bastard say it was a story? Why did he have to say it was true?"

Even this did not seem enough to explain why Dewey had felt "used" by Capote or his wife's sense of hurt. Hope also told me that she and Dewey had hoped to collaborate on a book about Dewey's best cases. She had sent a synopsis to a New York agent, but nothing came of it. I learned more when I met Judge Jay Don Reynolds, the county prosecutor at the time of the Anton case. Reynolds knew about Dewey's literary aspirations, but added one telling detail. After Hope had failed to find an agent, Dewey had asked Capote to help with his book, although making clear he wanted to write it himself. Dewey had told Capote about the Anton case – but far from assisting Dewey, Capote had purloined the case and used it for his own purposes.

Seen in the crudest light, Capote was revealed as a literary thief and plagiarist. By this stage of his career, however, nothing disreputable about Capote seemed

surprising. In 1975 he had written an excoriating satire – *La Cote Basque* – on the New York glitterati who had regarded him as one of their own. He was the despair of his publisher, having signed a contract in 1966 to deliver the next great American novel, *Answered Prayers*, but producing only a couple of chapters.

In 1979, as if to compensate, he promised his publishers a "surprise" – which proved to be *Hand-Carved Coffins*. He dressed up his failure to deliver the novel with his grandiose statements about re-inventing the non-fiction form which also served to justify the lack of detail in *Hand-Carved Coffins*.

The forgiving view is that Capote was a master writer who was following an honourable tradition of merging fact and fiction for the sake of his narrative constructs. *Hand-carved Coffins* also had a powerful sub-text which met his personal aims. Throughout his life he had been plagued with demons that originated in a tortured childhood. He had constructed a tale of revenge, with an all-powerful figure who brings death and destruction to his enemies.

My article, first published in the *Sunday Times Magazine* in 1992, gave an important insight into Capote's working methods and psychology, confirmed by this week's revelations. I wrote then that my article should provoke a reassessment of Capote but that appears to have taken longer than I had expected.