

HOAX: Secrets that Truman Capote took to the grave

An investigation for the Sunday Times Magazine by Peter and Leni Gillman. Published 21 June 1992

Joe Fox was astounded. On his desk, this late autumn day in 1979, was a manuscript bearing the name of Truman Capote. Two months before, Capote had promised Fox a "surprise", but Fox had been unimpressed: as Capote's long-suffering editor at the New York publishing company, Random House, he had grown weary of his endless promises. Now Capote had delivered a manuscript to rank with his masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*.

Published 13 years before, Capote's true-life account of the murder of a ranching family in Kansas had brought him literary acclaim, with status and royalties to march. Yet Capote had written nothing to match it since. He had supposedly been working on a novel, *Answered Prayers*, but for more than a decade Fox had watched deadlines come and go with nothing from Capote but a series of excuses.

The gossip-mongers of the literary world were proclaiming that Capote was burnt out, his sources of inspiration dissipated by alcohol and cocaine. Now Capote had confounded them all by delivering a sequel to *In Cold Blood*. He called it *Hand-Carved Coffins*, adding the potent subtitle: "A non-fiction account of an American crime".

Fox started reading with mixed feelings, since it was not the long-awaited novel; but soon found it utterly absorbing. Like *In Cold Blood* its subject-matter was murder in the American Midwest. In 1970 a group of farmers had wanted to divert a river to irrigate their land but were opposed by a powerful rancher named Robert Quinn, through whose property the river flowed. A committee of townsfolk voted against the rancher by 8-1.

Over the next five years the committee members were murdered in a series of elaborate and gruesome executions. The first two victims were a lawyer and his wife. Climbing into their car one morning, they were attacked by nine huge rattlesnakes which had been placed inside overnight. The snakes had been injected with amphetamines to make them more aggressive and the victims' heads had swollen and

turned green, Capote wrote, "like Halloween pumpkins". Victims three and four, a farming couple, were killed in an equally calculating manner. They were living in the basement of their ranch-house while the upper part was being rebuilt. The killer had sealed the entrance with concrete blocks and then set the basement alight, creating an inferno from which there was no escape.

Although the remaining committee members were now on their guard, the executions continued remorselessly. The fifth member, a rancher who drove an open-topped Jeep, was decapitated by a wire stretched at head-height across the road. The sixth, the town coroner, was poisoned; the seventh, a widowed teacher, drowned in a puzzling swimming accident. The eighth, the local postmaster, fled to Hawaii, while the ninth, who alone had voted for the rancher, was spared.

In a further macabre touch, most victims had been sent a miniature wooden coffin containing a photograph of themselves. What made Capote's account all the more compelling was that the murders remained unsolved. Capote had become closely involved in the investigation, headed by a detective named Jake Pepper. Both regarded the wealthy rancher, Quinn, as the principal suspect but after spending almost nine years on the case Pepper failed to secure any solid evidence against him, eventually retiring in 1979.

Capote met Quinn on several occasions and once played him at chess. He too had to leave the matter unresolved, ending *Hand-Carved Coffins* by describing an enigmatic meeting with Quinn beside the river which had sparked the original dispute.

By the time he had finished reading, Fox had concluded that *Hand-Carved Coffins* was a *tour de force*. It also served as the perfect riposte to Capote's critics, demonstrating that his years in the literary wilderness had been spent working on a new masterpiece. Random House packaged it with a selection of Capote's short stories and journalism and published it under the title *Music for Chameleons* in August 1980.

The reviews were ecstatic. The *Washington Post* found *Hand-Carved Coffins* "quite simply stunning", and John Fowles considered it "as grippingly readable as *In Cold Blood*". The *Tennessean* felt that Capote had "elevated reportage to lyricism"; the *San Francisco Chronicle* judged him to be "at the peak of his creative and reportorial powers".

The book soared into *The New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list and stayed there for 16 weeks. The movie rights were sold for \$350,000. In Britain *The Sunday Times* serialised the entire manuscript over three weeks.

Hand-Carved Coffins was the last work of substance Capote produced, for he died of a mysterious illness - now suspected to have been Aids - in 1984. He took with him a number of secrets, if not to his grave, then to the urn of his ashes which stood on the mantelshelf of his lover, Jack Dunphy. For Capote never revealed where the murders described in *Hand-Carved Coffins* had taken place. In contrast to *In Cold Blood*, with its wealth of names and details, he had not named the town or state, and "Quinn" and "Pepper" were pseudonyms.

Capote explained that this was for legal reasons - since the case remained unsolved there was a danger that the alleged murderer could sue - but even to his intimates he would give nothing away. "I kept trying to pin him down," Joe Fox recalls, "but he never would tell me the name of the state." Capote revealed slightly more to the Hollywood producer Lester Persky who had bought the movie rights, telling him that the state was Nebraska, which borders Kansas to the north. Capote said much the same to his biographer, Gerald Clarke, though he would never go further. But he would always assure his questioners that *Hand-Carved Coffins* was true. He told one interviewer that he had described "exactly what happened" - adding that it was "one of my best pieces of reportage".

Ten years after *Hand-Carved Coffins* was published, Capote's secrets have remained intact. So where was "the forlorn little Western town" with its "wintry, windblown outskirts" where the murders took place? Who was the rancher, Robert Quinn, and had he ever stood trial? What had happened to the investigator, Jack Pepper? And had the case ever been resolved?

The answers, and much more, are to be found in the heart of the American Midwest, on plains as wintry and windblown as Capote described; answers which require the reputation of a 20th-century literary giant to be reassessed.

If anyone knew where the murders in *Hand-Carved Coffins* took place, I felt, it had to be Al Dewey. Dewey was the detective who emerged as the hero of *In Cold Blood*, a cool, laconic figure, dedicated to his pursuit of the killers of the Clutter family on their ranch in south-west Kansas. Capote had stayed in touch with Dewey and his wife Marie after *In Cold Blood* was published, inviting them to his apartment in New York and to his retreat at Palm Springs, California.

Dewey had been based in Garden City, five miles from the town of Holcomb, where the Clutter family was murdered. I began by telephoning the *Garden City Telegram*,

to learn that Dewey had died in 1987. But his wife Marie was still living in Garden City and so I called her, explaining that I was hoping to write about *Hand-Carved Coffins*. Remembering where Capote had said the murders occurred, I asked if her husband had ever told Capote about such a case in Nebraska.

No, Mrs Dewey said. "My husband didn't work in Nebraska."

It took a moment for my next question to dawn.

"Did your husband tell Capote about any cases like that in Kansas?"

"Yes," she replied. "That's like a case that was never solved down in Ensign."

The map of Kansas showed Ensign to be a tiny crossroads community close to the old frontier town of Dodge and, intriguingly, only 35 miles from Garden City. When I searched the files of the *Garden City Telegram* I eventually found a report on the case in the issue of July 2, 1974.

There was a photograph of a burned-out ranch-house with the headline: "Slain Ensign Farmer Had Enemies." The report told how the bodies of a 42-year-old rancher, Richard Anton, and his wife Ann, had been found in the gutted debris of their home. A series of bizarre events had preceded the killings, including the discovery of a rattlesnake on the back seat of a car. The leading investigator was Al Dewey.

The similarities with the case in *Hand-Carved Coffins* were already marked. Like Jake Pepper in *Hand-Carved Coffins*, Dewey had investigated a case which involved a grudge, a rattlesnake, and a ranch-house burned to the ground with its occupants entombed inside. Even more enticingly, it had taken place not in Nebraska, as Capote claimed, but little more than an hour's drive from the scene of *In Cold Blood*.

Ensign, as I found when I drove there on Highway 56 from Garden City, can justifiably be described - in Capote's words - as little and forlorn. A lowering grain elevator stands beside the highway and the gleaming tracks of the Santa Fe railroad. There is a farming equipment store, a taxidermist's shop, a tiny restaurant named Our Cafe and little else. According to the *Garden City Telegram*, the Anions had five children. The West Kansas directory showed that one son, Dave Anton, still lived at Ensign but there had been no answer when I telephoned. The *Telegram* had also mentioned a farmer named Frank Robinson, "a business associate and neighbour" of the Antons. When I telephoned his wife answered, listened patiently for a moment, then told me:

"We're sceptical of people around here."

"People?"

"Strangers."

Mrs Robinson finally agreed that I could visit them and told me how to reach their ranch: follow the tarmac road south out of Ensign for seven miles, then head west on the dirt road for another two. It was Mr Robinson, a stooped figure in his sixties, who greeted me and told me that Dave Anton still lived on his parents' ranch half a mile to the west.

When we arrived at the Anton ranch in Mr Robinson's pick-up I saw that in place of the usual ranch-house was a trailer parked at an angle to a cluster of sheds and an elegant Dutch-style barn. Dave Anton, a stocky figure in his early forties, wearing dark glasses and a black broad-brimmed hat, shook hands firmly.

He explained that he was driving cattle the next day but we could meet in the evening - unless I cared to take part in the cattle drive. I spent the next afternoon on the back of an amiable horse named Ted, endeavouring to keep up with a herd of cows as they moved to new pasturage. As we warmed up in the trailer, Dave Anton told me his parents' story.

Richard Anton, Dave's father, was born on the farm in 1925. As a young man he experienced the rigours of the dust-bowl winters and the banking collapses of the Depression years. When he married in 1944 his wife Ann joined him on the ranch. Richard's father told him he would never make a rancher and should seek his living in the city.

Richard and Ann Anton moved to Kansas City, where their children - four sons and a daughter - were born. Richard plunged into a business career, not only to feed his growing family but also to meet his father's challenge. "His father didn't think he could do it," Dave said. "He had to prove himself, and he did." Richard Anton first built a chain of soft-drink and hot-dog stands, then ran a company which installed coin-operated radios in hotels. By 1962 he had proved his point. His father ceded with good grace, retiring with his wife to Arizona, leaving Richard and Ann and their growing family to take over the ranch.

Dave Anton was 11 when the family moved back to Ensign and has warm memories of cloudless summers spent riding horses and playing in hay-lofts: "all the things that children do". Yet life on the farm remained austere. There was one bedroom for the parents and a long unpartitioned room in the basement for the children. The Antons mostly worked the farm themselves, driving their cattle and sowing their grain, with the children rallying round at harvest time. Richard Anton learned how to preserve his

soil against the pernicious prairie winds and was regarded as one of the best farmers in the county.

By now Richard Anton was keen to expand. In a series of adroit deals he bought several parcels of land and rented others. Life for the Antons became more comfortable and Richard planned to rebuild the family home. In place of their modest homestead would rise a stone ranch-house, with a fireplace built of Arkansas granite and a shingle roof. With manifest pride, Anton showed his neighbours a model of the new home.

Not all the farmers of Gray County shared Anton's enthusiasm. He had become known as an "aggressive" farmer, because of the zeal with which he acquired his land. "There was a lot of rumours and a lot of talk," Dave said. "When you get someone who's aggressive and expanding, the guys that are sitting still are going to bad-mouth him."

One of the farmers with reason to feel upset was Hilton Wade. From a poor farming family and known as a prickly and argumentative character, he and his wife were renting a farm from the Antons. That winter Richard Anton gave them notice to quit as he needed the farm for his son, Dave, who had just got engaged.

Although Wade found a new farm to rent some four miles to the west, he had a further grievance. An uncle living nearby owned land which Wade hoped to rent. But the uncle approached Richard Anton instead and rented the land to him.

No link has ever been established between those transactions and what now befell the Anton family. But on February 1, 1974, the Antons' garage caught fire. Next Dave Anton found that every nut, bar one, on a wheel of his father's pickup had been removed. Then the pickup's steering mechanism was tampered with and their combine harvester damaged.

The most alarming incident came on April 6. Richard Anton was driving home from Dodge when some instinct made him turn and look behind. Coiled up on the back seat, its head poised, was a rattlesnake. What made the discovery all the more sinister was that the rattle had been sheared off with a spade and its customary alarm signal silenced.

Anton abandoned his car and called Sheriff Marvin Kramer at the country town of Cimarron. Kramer dispatched a deputy who took out the snake and shot it. Asked whom he thought had put it in his car, Anton replied firmly: "Hilton Wade."

It was at this juncture, Dave said, that the family began to review all that had occurred. "We sat down and tried to figure out why and who. We had to go back and start putting all of these things together." His mother "was scared to realise that someone was actually doing these things. It was a real awakening."

Richard appeared more composed. "He wasn't one to back down on things," Dave said. But he did reveal his worries to his neighbour Frank Robinson. "Richard told me he didn't know what was going on and he was scared," Robinson says. "I told him it would all blow over. I was wrong."

On June 1 Dave Anton's wedding went ahead and he and his wife Edwina duly moved into the farmhouse vacated by Hilton Wade. Meanwhile, rebuilding of the family ranch-house was well under way. Richard and Ann Anton, with their youngest son, John, lived in the basement while construction continued above. Harvest time came in late June, with most of the family lending a hand. On Saturday, June 30, work ended early so that the family could get up for church the next morning. Shortly before midnight Dave and Edwina were roused by neighbours. They raced to the ranch-house to find it ablaze. Dave's brother John was away, but Dave saw immediately that his parents' pick-up stood in its customary place. "I knew they'd been at home," he says. "And I knew they were dead."

Al Dewey arrived at the Anton ranch around 1 am. He was joined by several other officers from the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, as well as Sheriff Kramer and the Gray County prosecutor, a young lawyer named Jay Don Reynolds.

Sheriff Kramer died in 1988, a year after Dewey. Reynolds is now a judge in Dodge City. A bearded figure of around 50, he invited me to his home near Dodge to discuss the case. The investigation, he recalled, had taken place in a fevered atmosphere stemming from memories of the *In Cold Blood* murders. Throughout the county, doors that had previously been left ajar were shut and bolted, and the police were flooded with calls whenever an unknown vehicle was sighted.

"I felt a very heavy sense of responsibility," Judge Reynolds said. "I felt a lot of anxiety and a lot of pressure to make sure that we didn't screw up."

It was not until Sunday afternoon that the remains of the ranch-house had cooled enough for Dewey and his colleagues to enter the basement. They found Richard's body at the foot of the stairs, Ann's under a table. Both had been shot before the fire

started. Forensic experts concluded that it had burned so fiercely because the killer had soaked the basement with petrol.

There was one immediate suspect: Hilton Wade. Sheriff Kramer told Dewey about the rattlesnake incident, and the investigators soon learned, according to Reynolds, that Wade "had a reputation for being around fires". Barns and abandoned homesteads had been mysteriously set ablaze and it often proved "that Hilton Wade had a tangential connection with the people, because of some real or imagined controversy".

Wade had first been questioned early on the Sunday morning. Found dozing in a hammock outside his farmhouse, he said he had been home all night, and his wife supported his account. He was questioned time and again over the ensuing weeks, but could not be budged. Nor was there any forensic evidence, for any footprints or tyre marks had been obliterated by the fire brigade and neighbours who had gathered at the scene. Dewey's team spent a week sifting through the ashes from the basement, lo no avail. Finally they gave Wade a lie-detector test; he passed.

Other theories were considered and rejected. Could it have been a Mafia hit that stemmed from the Antons' days in the music business in Kansas City? Or was it a repeat of the Clutter murders 15 years before? But any theories led to a dead end.

Al Dewey retired early in 1975, the murders still unsolved. The sheriff's department paid him a retainer to stay on the case and Dewey thought his quest was over when an army veteran barricaded himself in his home in Cimarron and confessed to the killing. But he later withdrew his confession and was ruled insane.

The fact remained that Hilton Wade was by far the best suspect. The further fact remained that the investigators had no case against him. "We had suspicions and a theoretical motive but there was no evidential connection," Judge Reynolds said. "We couldn't put him on the scene; there were no forensics, nothing. I didn't feel I should just blindly lash out and charge someone without any kind of evidence and I didn't have any evidence and so I didn't charge him."

It took me just a week in Kansas to prove that Capote's claims for *Hand-Carved Coffins* were false. It had not taken place in Nebraska; nor was it true and accurate in every respect. Quite the contrary. The Anton case, it was clear, had merely served as the starting point for a blend of fact and fiction, reportage and fantasy.

As for the factual elements, the backdrop was the same: the ranching country of the American Midwest. And there had been a feud, although in real life it concerned land,

not water. Capote had used the burning of the Anton ranch-house for two of his murders, down to the detail that its occupants had been staying in the basement while the main part was being rebuilt, and he had built on the rattlesnake incident for two more. The parallels between Al Dewey and Jake Pepper were also obvious. Both were in late middle-age, both - in Capote's phrase - were "in top condition", looking younger than their age. Both spoke in a concise manner that reflected their readiness to confront the realities of violent death. Both had a suspect whom they could not convict and both had pursued the case to their retirement and beyond.

There the similarities ended. There was no decapitation, poisoning, or mysterious drowning; no rancher named Quinn or anything else, and no hand-carved coffins. Far from being "a non-fiction account of an American crime", as Capote claimed, it stood exposed as a literary hoax.

Before leaving Kansas I tried to find the sources of other elements of the story. Poisoning and drowning were commonplace enough and scarcely required much imagination on Capote's part. The decapitation was far more fanciful - but a journalist on the *Garden City Telegram* believes she knows its origin. Dolores Hope knew Al Dewey well and had hoped to write a book with him about his most successful inquiries. She sent a synopsis to a New York agent, but nothing came of it. She also came to know Capote during his visits to Garden.

So far as Hope is aware, none of the 200 homicides Dewey handled during his career involved a decapitation of this kind. But she *does* recall that her husband, a Second World War veteran, used to talk of the German army erecting similar booby traps in forests, and believes that Capote learned this from him,

As for the hand-carved coffins, Hope is certain that they too came from Dewey's case-book. He once told her about another investigation in which a murderer had sent his intended victim a coffin: "It was a very crude box - nothing hand-carved or elegant," she says. In Capote's story, the crude box had become "a beautifully carved object, made from light balsa wood", which also contained a photograph of the prospective victim.

Hope is prepared to take a forgiving attitude towards Capote's fabrications. She was already aware of Capote's tendency to bend the truth, for he did so even in *In Cold Blood*, concocting the final scene, where Al Dewey meets a friend of the victims' family in Holcomb cemetery, to provide an upbeat ending. Hope believes that Capote had become unable to distinguish fact from fiction - even his own fiction. "In his own

mind it would be that way," she says. "Some people said he was a liar but I think he convinced himself that the things he thought to be true *were* true."

Those less willing to forgive included Al Dewey. He talked to Hope soon after reading *Hand-Carved Coffins* and had clearly not known that Capote intended to use the Anton case. He was visibly angry, Hope recalls, that Capote had combined aspects of several cases Dewey had told him about and then maintained that the composite account was true. "He was quite upset," she says. "I can hear Dewey even now say, 'Why didn't the little bastard say it was a story—why did he have to say it was true?'"

Dewey did not reveal to Hope the full cause of his anger. But Judge Reynolds knew. After telling me about the Anton case Reynolds had turned, unprompted, to Dewey's literary aspirations.

Reynolds related how Dewey had told him what a marvellous story the Anton case would make. "Frankly," Reynolds said, "I was under the impression that Al was going to attempt to write a book about it." He added: "I believe he contacted Capote about it... he told me that he had talked to Capote about this case."

So had Dewey suggested that Capote should write about the Anton case? Reynolds was very clear that Dewey had asked Capote for his advice - "there was going to be some conferring on it" - but wanted to write the book himself.

The implication was unavoidable. Capote had stolen his friend's idea. Dewey's widow Marie said her husband felt "used" by Capote. Expressed in the blunt manner Dewey himself favoured, he had ripped Dewey off.

What had driven Capote to steal a friend's idea and proclaim the resulting work of fiction to be true? The answers are proposed by his editor Joe Fox, one of those gravel-voiced stalwarts of the New York publishing world; and by his biographer Gerald Clarke, who began his research when Capote was still alive and received superb reviews when his book *Capote* was published in 1988.

Capote's travails had begun almost the day *In Cold Blood* was published. Despite the acclaim, Capote was aggrieved that he had not won the Pulitzer Prize. He was more aggrieved still when Norman Mailer was awarded the prize for his book about the Vietnam war protests. *The Armies of the Night*. Capote complained that Mailer had plagiarised the genre of the non-fiction novel which he, Capote, had pioneered. Mailer's book, he charged, was "a complete rip-off - there has never been a greater rip-off in the 20th century."

Gerald Clarke believes that the success of *In Cold Blood* had deepened the flaws in Capote's character caused by the early disappearance of his father and his fractured family life. "His need for admiration had become insatiable," Clarke concluded. "As he entered middle age the demons he thought he had exorcised long ago, the desperate fears of his lonely childhood, returned to whisper in his car."

Certainly Capote was beset with fears of loneliness now. His 20-year relationship with his lover Jack Dunphy was waning and he went in quest of new sexual partners. He was also drinking heavily and gulping down tranquillisers.

Outweighing all of this, in the anxieties it spurred, was Capote's unwritten novel, *Answered Prayers*. He predicted that it would be easy to write in comparison with *In Cold Blood* and boasted to Joe Fox that it would rank with Proust. He signed his first contract for the novel in 1966, promising to deliver it within two years.

But instead of a novel Fox received only excuses. New deadlines for *Answered Prayers* came and went and he was forced to repay a movie advance of \$200,000. Then came the disasters of 1975. In June *Esquire* published a short story, *Mojave*, which Capote claimed was intended as the first chapter of *Answered Prayers*. Fox was opposed to Capote writing his novel in this piecemeal manner but *Esquire* published a second purported chapter, *La Cote Basque*, in October. It proved to be a vicious satire of the glittering society life of which Capote had partaken so long. Few of Capote's friends were spared and one committed suicide. Society's retribution was swift and absolute: from being one of its most pampered guests, Capote became a virtual outcast. His drinking worsened and he started snorting cocaine.

By 1977 Capote had become the despair of Fox. He found Capote's drunkenness ever more irksome and had tired of pressing him over *Answered Prayers*. Capote had written two more chapters but the complete manuscript seemed as remote as ever. Capote announced in public more than once that it was finished, leaving Random House to field inquiries as to when it would be published. When taxed by Fox, Capote would assure him that the latest chapter was in the post. "It never arrived," Fox says.

Capote none the less made several attempts to reclaim himself. He consulted Alcoholics Anonymous and had spells in drying out clinics. In 1979, buoyed by a face-lift and hair transplant, he tried again. He told Gerald Clarke that he was working more efficiently than ever, adding: "I don't like to talk about it because it destroys the concentration, but bits of it will begin appearing very soon." It was in this period that he promised Joe Fox his surprise.

The surprise Capote was preparing, of course, was *Hand-Carved Coffins*. But in deciding to present it as his second non-fiction novel he faced enormous problems. Whereas *In Cold Blood* had required prodigious research, this time he had undertaken almost none at all, beyond his conversations with Al Dewey and a couple of calls to Sheriff Kramer.

Confirmation of this is to be found in the Capote archives in the New York public library. Whereas there is a large box of press clippings relating to the Clutter murders, the file for *Hand-Carved Coffins* contains nothing but the six exercise books in which he wrote the story in his curiously meticulous and child-like hand. Further evidence comes from Joe Fox: previously all of Capote's creative traumas had been lived out to the full, and his research for *In Cold Blood* had been virtually a public event. There were no such fanfares for *Hand-Carved Coffins*. "He had been talking about it for only two months," Fox says.

And so Capote constructed an alibi. It consists of his preface to *Music for Chameleons*. After a brief resume of the "highs and lows" of his career, Capote told how he had decided to review his entire creative life. This scrutiny, which brought four years of "torment", had led to alter his "entire comprehension of writing", bringing a new "understanding of the difference between what is true and what is *really* true". Capote's conclusion, in short, was that he had been over-writing. Previously his style had been too dense: "I was taking three pages to arrive at effects I ought to be able to achieve in a single paragraph." Even *In Cold Blood* contained "too many areas where I was not delivering the total potential". Now he had decided to write in a "severe, minimal manner", producing "a framework into which I could assimilate everything I knew about writing". The outcome was *Hand-Carved Coffins*.

Capote's preface served several purposes. First, it provided an excuse for the long hiatus, in his career: instead of finishing *Answered Prayers* he had been subjecting his writing to agonising review. Second, although his novel had not yet materialised, his new work was as significant and innovative as he had promised *Answered prayers* would be.

Third, and most important of all, Capote had explained away the most obvious discrepancy between *In Cold Blood* and its sequel. The overwhelming reason *In Cold Blood* was so powerful lay in its meticulously researched detail, leaving no doubt that it was authentic. *Hand-Carved Coffins* patently lacked any of that. But Capote's preface would reassure the sceptical reader, justifying the lack of detail not as an

omission but as art. Joe Fox says now that he doubted the veracity of *Hand-Carved Coffins* as soon as he read it. He also admits that when he was editing it the easiest course was to assume that it was true. "We didn't have any hesitation about using the word 'non-fiction'," he says. "Publishers aren't judges and if the author says something is true we choose to believe him." (That, he adds, "is why publishers are constantly being sued.")

Capote went on saying that *Hand-Carved Coffins* was true until he died. He continued to maintain that he could not reveal the details in case the alleged murderer sued. He also assured his biographer, Gerald Clarke, that he had supplied the vital information to 20th Century Fox, then preparing to film *Hand-Carved Coffins*. "He told me he had to verify everything, give them all sorts of names, things like that," Clarke says. The Hollywood producer Lester Persky knows nothing of this. After buying the movie rights to *Hand-Carved Coffins*, he quizzed Capote over the factual basis of the story. Far from verifying "everything", Capote told Persky that no-one knew if Quinn, the alleged killer, was still alive. Fox later pulled out of the project, and Persky is now making the film himself. He still believes that the main elements of Capote's story are "all factual", although Capote may have added "his point of view".

By any conventional definition *Hand-Carved Coffins* can be called one of the great literary hoaxes. Yet there is another way of looking at it which goes back to Capote's row with Mailer over the non-fictional novel. Mailer condemned the technique as a "failure of the imagination", even though he was to adopt it himself. If Capote's claims that *Hand-Carved Coffins* was true are put aside, it can be seen not as a failure but as Capote's triumphant response to the traumas of life.

In reworking the Anton case, Capote played some striking tricks with his characters. While the investigator, Pepper, was clearly modelled on Dewey, the inspiration for the rancher, Quinn, is more complex. One obvious source is Herbert Clutter, the murdered rancher from *In Cold Blood*, presented by Capote as a respected figure with a close and affectionate family. These were qualities shared by Richard Anton. What is most notable is that Capote transposed these attributes from his real-life victims to his fictional murder suspect, Quinn.

Quinn is by far the most charismatic figure in Capote's story. He outwits Pepper and has an affectionate relationship with his daughter, and Capote gives him some of the best lines. It can be argued that the character had special potency for Capote, lacking as he did both a father and a coherent family life - a vacuum which, according to

Gerald Clarke, accounted for the debilitating and ultimately destructive anxieties of his life.

But Capote went further: his character became an avenging angel, bringing destruction on the insular, self-contained community of his story. The appeal of the vengeful and all-powerful figure must have been irresistible to Capote. It offered a metaphor for the revenge he would also wish to have wreaked, first among the social elite who had cast him out; and, more apocalyptically, among the demons which had plagued his life.

By now there was one question left: how did the true-life case end? The failure to solve the murders in *Hand-Carved Coffins* enabled Capote to maintain the ambiguity over his character, Quinn. But what of Ensign and reality?

To this day the Anton murders have remained unsolved, too. But seven years after Richard and Ann Anton had been buried in the local cemetery, a neat square of ground fenced off from the prairie a mile from the ruins of their home, an incident occurred which crystallised many of the suspicions held by the people of Gray County.

On Christmas Eve 1981, a car-dealer from Dodge named Jim Lewis, together with his wife and her mother, drove to Colorado, where they were to spend the holiday with relatives. They had barely arrived when they were telephoned to be told that their home was on fire. They drove back to Dodge to discover that it had been extensively damaged.

Lewis's mother-in-law was named Barbara Wade. She was estranged from her husband, the prime suspect for the Anton killing, Hilton Wade. Three days before Christmas Wade had called at his wife's home in Dodge. There had been a furious row and she had asked him to leave. In an apparent act of revenge, Wade poured sulphuric acid on her sofa. Two days later he went further. After Barbara and her family had left for Colorado, Wade let himself into their house, doused it with petrol, and set it alight.

Wade was arrested shortly after Christmas. In July 1982, after a five-day trial in Dodge, he was convicted of arson and related charges. The judge, who said he was "capable of violent and vengeful acts", gave him a sentence of seven to 23 years. Even so, the local community felt that justice had been done, not least because the incidence of unexplained fires fell sharply.

"When he was around, this country looked like a war zone," says Dave Anton. "We'd have fields burned out, abandoned houses burned down. Nobody could ever pin it [on him] but now that they've arrested him there haven't been any more of these fires."

Since 1982 Wade has seen the inside of a succession of Kansas jails, most recently the Hutchinson Correctional Institute near Wichita. With parole he could have been released several years ago, but in Kansas there is an impressively democratic method of deciding the issue. When prisoners become eligible, notices are published in local newspapers inviting opinions on their possible release.

In Wade's case the community has furnished its opinions in abundance. Those delivered by Curtis Campbell, the attorney who prosecuted Wade, may be taken as typical.

Wade "is a coyote who strikes at night, and preys on the unsuspecting. His motives are never justifiable. He falls into that classification of people that are irredeemable dangers to society." The local parole board has evidently taken heed of such views, for Wade remains in jail.

It is surprisingly easy to interview prisoners in the US. You telephone the jail concerned and ask if the prisoner would care to call you back.' Less than an hour after I had made my request of the Hutchinson Correctional Institute, Hilton Wade returned my call,

I explained that I was writing an article on the Ancon case because of its connections with Truman Capote.

"I guess I was the prime suspect," Wade told me. "The KBI gave me a lie detector and I passed it. But it seems like it was still coming round to me. I'm just sloughing it off. It's just one of those things. I'm not taking it to heart or losing my sleep — I've got my own life to live."

I asked when he expected to be released. He replied: "Maybe another six months," explaining quickly that he was not in prison over the Anton killings. "I'm not spending time on this case. They keep trying to connect the two — I don't know why the hell they should." Quickly, he added: "Well, sir, I've got to go to eat."

Dave and Edwina Anton and their 15-year-old daughter Leslie still live in a trailer because they were never able to rebuild the family home. The insurance company declined to pay the full value of the ranch-house as it was being rebuilt at the time.

What was more, Dave's parents had been killed at a disastrous juncture, in the middle of financial restructuring which left sizeable inheritance tax to pay.

Dave and Edwina admit that life since then has not been easy. Not all their farm projects have succeeded, and they have been compelled to sell off some land, so that the ranch, once 6000 acres, is now barely half that size. "It's been a real struggle," Dave says. "But you don't expect anything given to you. That's just the way it works."

Although Dave and Edwina accept that Wade remains the principal suspect, they have not joined the letter-writers to the Kansas parole board. "What justification would we have to write?" Edwina asks. "I have nothing against Hilton. We have a lot of respect for our judicial system, and motive and probable cause don't mean anything without evidence."

Dave agrees. "He's an oddball, sure enough," he says. "But is that anything? He's innocent until he's proven. He fits all the bills but nothing jives when it comes to it. You could be real vindictive and hateful and say, 'This guy's done it,' but that's not my position. It's just one of those things. You've got to grow with it and go on."

In the final scene of *Hand-Carved Coffins*, Capote described the river which had been the cause of the dispute. He wrote of its "slow soft churning roar", flowing as inexorably and dispassionately as destiny. As an image it suggests that Capote had become reconciled to the vicissitudes of his life. Whether by chance or by the prescience given to great artists, it also presaged the dignified acceptance of fate to be found on the Anton ranch today.

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