

## Afterword

Truman Capote wrote the fourteen stories in *The Early Stories of Truman Capote* as an adolescent and a young man. They are, as the title says, the early fiction of a writer who would go on to become one of the twentieth century's masters. By their very nature, they are not mature works but, rather, the efforts of a young writer developing his craft. "I began writing really sort of seriously when I was about eleven," Capote said. "I say seriously in the sense that like other kids go home and practice the violin or the piano or whatever, I used to go home from school every day, and I would write for about three hours. I was obsessed by it."

Many of the manuscripts—located in the Truman Capote archives at the New York Public Library—show Capote's edits and revisions. The cross-outs and marginal notes depict a precociously talented young writer

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dedicated to improving his skills. In these stories, we can see many flashes of Capote’s trademark prose—clear sentences, precise imagery, language that is both vigorous and light. With phrases such as “a fire, purring drowsily in a stone fireplace, reflected yellow pools in the eye of a cat” and “the water spurted out of the fountains in a crystal spray” we can hear an early version of the voice that would captivate us in stories like “A Tree of Night” and “A Diamond Guitar.” The manuscripts offer rare insight into how a writer born with outsized gifts still must apprentice himself. The stories provide ample evidence that Capote had found his own voice by a very early age and, at the same time, had to work hard to develop it.

The stories also show early manifestations of one of Capote’s most powerful talents: empathy. In much of his writing, Capote empathizes with the outsider and the other—the man or woman, the boy or girl, who resides at the fringe of society and its expectations. In these early stories, we see Capote drawn to figures who do not, or cannot, live at the center of their worlds: homeless men, lonely children, a girl of mixed race passing in an all-white school, an old woman near death, an African American woman from the South dislocated in New York City. Just as the manuscripts show a young writer

improving his sentences through work and revision, these stories also give us a glimpse of Capote developing his powers of empathy by imagining the lives of many different kinds of people. The profound empathy we find in Capote's masterworks was nurtured in part by this early fiction.

As with all early efforts, the results are imperfect. Hilton Als, in his foreword, notes the young Capote's limits when attempting to inhabit an African American character. Rather than relying on his own imagination, Capote sometimes turns to trope and stereotype. Occasionally, the female characters in these stories are more gothic than complex. Other characters are more archetype than flesh. Still, these stories, in their subject matter and themes, show Capote, at the earliest stages of his writing life, inspired more by the marginalized and the vulnerable than the powerful and the accomplished. One explanation for this, of course, is Capote's queerness, which marginalized him within the worlds he inhabited and made him vulnerable to scorn and abandonment, or worse. Like many gay writers before and after him, Capote used deflection to probe his own heart. Even so, most young writers begin by depicting on the page some version of themselves. In many of these

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stories we find the young Capote looking to others, rather than the mirror, as if he already understood empathy would become central to his art. This capacity, honed and mastered through years of writing, would guide Capote through a celebrated career that would ultimately lead him to Kansas in 1959. In his masterpiece *In Cold Blood*, Capote is doing much more than telling the story of a family gunned down in their farmhouse. He's using every talent he has access to, especially empathy, to understand and depict all sides of a vicious crime most could only deem senseless.

We cannot identify the exact dates when Capote wrote all these stories or when he revised them. Seven of the stories were first published between 1940 and 1942 in *The Green Witch*, the literary magazine of Greenwich High School, in Connecticut, where Capote was a student from 1939 through 1942: "Swamp Terror," "The Moth in the Flame," "Parting of the Way," "Lucy," "Hilda," "Miss Belle Rankin," and "Louise," which won second place in the school's literary contest. According to the winner, Capote was "furious" about not taking top prize. Dorothy Doyle Gavan recalled to a newspaper many years later, "[Truman] came right up to me in class and called me a foul word." Estimated to have been writ-

ten between 1945 and 1947, “Kindred Spirits” is likely the last story from Capote’s early years; its uptown setting and wearied characters suggest how much New York City and early adulthood were changing him as a writer.

The stories have been copyedited for spelling, consistency, and, occasionally, clarity, but Capote’s sometimes idiosyncratic punctuation has been preserved when his meaning is clear. The titles are Capote’s, with one exception: the manuscript for “This Is for Jamie” is called “This Is in Jamie.” The story itself implies that the “in” of Capote’s original title was an error.

Posthumous publishing requires a balance of caution and openness. Caution in order to preserve a writer’s legacy, and openness as a way to expand our understanding of a writer’s development as well as to share with readers what is usually accessible only to a few. *The Early Stories of Truman Capote* does not collect everything he wrote as a young writer. The Capote archives houses several other stories excluded because they seemed too immature (one was written when he was about eleven). The Truman Capote Literary Trust, Random House, and several others with deep knowledge of Capote and his work deliberated over which stories to include. Scholars and students may visit the Capote archives to review

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the original manuscripts published here as well as those left out.

When Truman Capote died in his sleep in Los Angeles in 1984, he left behind a literary legacy that has enthralled millions of readers. He also left behind an unpleasant public image: drunk, bitter, disloyal, and, perhaps most sadly, not writing. He wasn't working and hadn't been, not really, for many years. At the time of his death some felt that despite his literary legacy—one that includes *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*; *Breakfast at Tiffany's*; dozens of stories; and *In Cold Blood*—he had let his talents waste. These early stories offer a counterpoint to that final image: a young writer laboring over his typewriter to maximize his gifts. A Truman Capote not slurring on a television talk show but driven to nail the right word on the page. John McPhee once wrote, “It is a law of sport that everything that happens affects everything that happens thereafter.” This is also a law of the artist. These stories helped develop the Truman Capote who would go on to write the works that so many of us love. They show us genius before the full bloom.

—David Ebershoff, Random House