

## The Truman Capote Connection

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*In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote was published in hardback by Random House in 1966 after it was serialized in *The New Yorker* the previous year. The best seller, focusing on the murder of the Clutter family in [Holcomb, Kansas](#), continues to inspire books and movies. Two of the more successful by-products are *Capote: A Biography* (1988 with paperback editions in 2001 and 2005) by George Clark, and the film, [Capote](#) (2005), that was nominated for five academy awards, including best actor in a leading role won by [Philip Seymour Hoffman](#).

In spite of this notoriety, few are aware of Capote's connection with K-State and Manhattan during and after the writing of *In Cold Blood*. This relationship began soon after the death of the Clutter family in 1959 when Capote decided to do a piece for *The New Yorker* magazine on the gruesome event. Recognizing that it would be difficult for him to arrive in the small community to interview residents about the murders without assistance from others to pave the way, he went to his publisher, Bennett Cerf, for advice. As it turned out, Cerf, the co-founder of Random House, had recently visited K-State to give a lecture and meet with English classes. He considered James McCain, the president, a friend as a result of the time they had spent together in Manhattan. When Cerf called McCain to ask if he knew the Clutter family and if one of their writers could visit him on the way to the murder site, McCain responded, "The Clutters were my close personal friends, I know everybody in Garden City" (the seat of Finney County, not far from Holcomb). When Cerf informed McCain who the author was he responded, "Truman Capote? Coming to Kansas?" McCain told Cerf if Capote would spend an evening with the English department he would "...give him letters to half the people in Garden City." Cerf accepted the invitation for Capote!

Capote arrived in Manhattan on November 19, 1959 only four days after the murder! He was accompanied by his longtime friend, Harper Lee ("Nelle"), the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (slated for publication the next year) to help with the endeavor. President McCain arranged for a luncheon in the K-State Union that included mostly people from the School of Agriculture who had known Herbert Clutter. Earle Davis, chair of the English Department, also attended. Cerf recounted how McCain told him that when he met Capote he was wearing a pink velvet coat. After Capote announced, "I bet I'm the first man who has ever come to Manhattan, Kansas wearing a Dior jacket," McCain replied, "I'll go you one better, Mr. Capote. You're probably the first man or woman who ever came to Manhattan wearing a Dior jacket."

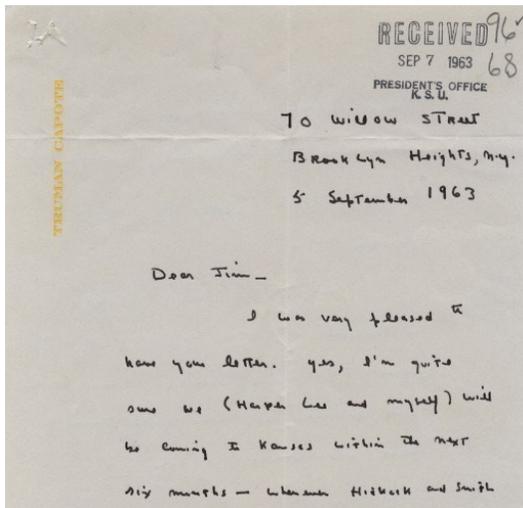
According to Davis, Capote and Lee stayed at the [Wareham Hotel](#) where he went to pick up Capote for an evening in the Union Ball Room with members of the English Department. When Davis arrived at the hotel, Capote invited him to his room for a drink and pulled a whiskey bottle out of one of two trunks he brought with him in case he couldn't buy liquor in Kansas, as he had been told. Arriving at the Union wearing a florid scarf, pink shirt, bright orange red jacket, and button-shoes with turned-up toes, Davis' apprehension about Capote's drinking, clothes, and mannerisms

soon dissipated as he used stories about literary figures in New York, and other topics, to charm the group. According to the account that McCain gave Cerf of Capote's visit, when Capote and Lee left the next morning for Garden City, "the entire [English] faculty got up to see them off. Mrs. McCain and I got up too."

In an article he wrote for the Manhattan Mercury in 1984, "Memories of Capote," Davis doesn't mention other visits to Manhattan by Capote in 1959 or later (Capote died in 1984). He states that after Capote left town that morning in 1959, "he never stopped by on his way back." Local lore has it that Capote spent a summer with Davis in his house at 1711 Fairchild Ave. working on his book, but that cannot be substantiated. It would appear that Davis would have mentioned this residency in his "memories" piece (and it is difficult to imagine Capote staying in Kansas for an extended period!). Davis' son, Charles, does not recall his parents ever mentioning that Capote stayed in the family home, although he does remember hearing that Capote did stay in the Wareham Hotel but it is unclear if this was during his visit in 1959 or at a later time. One reason the book was not completed and published prior to 1966 was the fact the two murderers were not executed until April 15, 1965 after spending five years on death row in Lansing, Kansas. Written in a literary form Capote called "the non-fiction novel," bringing the crime to a close was an essential part of the book.

In addition to visiting Kansas shortly after the Clutter family was murdered, Capote had other occasions to visit the state during the writing of the book and for the filming of a movie that opened in 1967. Bill Brown, editor of the [Garden City Telegram](#) at the time the book was written, and later a professor of journalism at K-State, recalled that Capote was in Garden City "off and on for six years." This included a return shortly after *In Cold Blood* was published to attend a reception in his

honor at the public library, but not before giving a reading to 3,500 students at the University of Kansas! He was followed by representatives of NBC news who were filming a story, "Capote Returns to Kansas." It is not known if he stopped in Manhattan.

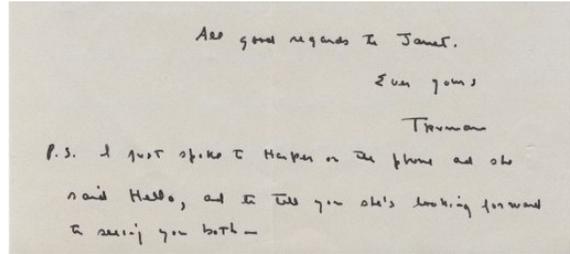


Opening of Capote Letter

To date, evidence does not exist to prove that Capote made other visits to Manhattan, but it is likely that he did. According to letters between Capote and McCain in the University Archives, the two remained in contact for several years. The correspondence reveals the desire by both parties for Capote to come to Manhattan. In one letter, Capote explains that he had to leave [Garden City] sooner than expected and could not come to Manhattan, and in another he states that he will be coming to the state "within the next six months" and

that he would be "happy to meet anyone you wish" but he wasn't "equipped to address a dinner," perhaps a reference to his experience at K-State in 1959! Capote's letters also show his kindness

towards Mrs. McCain, one ending with “All good wishes to Janet.” It is clear that Capote valued their friendship good wishes to Janet.” It is clear that Capote valued their friendship and the assistance that McCain gave him while writing *In Cold Blood*. Among the few individuals that he singled out in the book’s acknowledgments, “Dr. James McCain, President of Kansas State University,” is listed first.



All good regards to Janet.  
Ever yours  
Truman  
P.S. I just spoke to Harker on the phone and she  
said Harker, and to tell you she's looking forward  
to seeing you both -

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Sources: *James A. McCain Papers, University Archives*; *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* by Truman Capote; *Capote: A Biography* by George Clarke; *At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf*; “*Journalism Professor Remembers Meeting Capote*,” *Kansas State Collegian*, August 29, 1984; “*Memories of Capote*” by Earle Davis, *Manhattan Mercury*, September 2, 1984.

### Closing Words of Capote Letter