

In a time before the open and watchful eye of technology, in an unknown part of the Midwest, in a town of a few hundred people, in the stillness of a cool and windless night, in four different rooms of a well-known farmhouse. In four blasts of a borrowed shotgun. In the Clutter family's house. Every life there was taken. In cold blood.

If you've read Truman Capote's most famous "non-fiction novel" of that very famous title, you have read what many consider to be a classic of American literature and the finest true-crime book ever written. It's a book that's not simply well written, it's a series of stories exceedingly well told. This is my second in a two-part blog where I look at 6 things Capote did that translate well to storytelling in the courtroom and teaching storytelling in the classroom. In the January blog I did a decent job at not spoiling key details in the story. This month's installment, however, contains one fairly large spoiler in the final segment.

The Thrill of a Chase

In a good-sized chunk of the book you follow, in parallel stories, those who are chasing down the two killers of the Clutter family and the two killers themselves. In the last blog I discussed the narrative power of parallel storytelling. I write this month, however, about the narrative impact of the chase. One thing Capote does well is catalog the mistakes the killers are making as they change locations, bouncing around to hide themselves while also grifting enough to feed their stomachs and their habits. Seeing the mistakes, the reader gets an immediate sense that a payoff is coming—the forming, foreboding clouds of justice that would appear right before the cloudburst of their capture. We wait eagerly for it. But it doesn't come. Not immediately, anyway. It's difficult to know the reality of how close the cops got to the killers with each mistake or each fumbled breadcrumb of evidence. What we do know is that Capote makes each escape feel like a matter of inches. The close calls create tension. However, there is also a greater onset of anxiety when the killers slip again and again through the snapping jaws of justice. With that, the reader feels an internal tension as we start to doubt what we already know—that these two *will* actually be caught. The creation of tension is the creation of narrative momentum.

A good storyteller knows and plays with the listener's expectations. This has to be done with a purpose, however. Subverting a listener's expectation merely for shock value can cause cynicism and a sense in the listener or reader that the storyteller is manipulating them. The subversion of expectation also can't be so jarring that it dislodges the listener from the world of the story. A reader or listener should not be jolted back into the real world where they will now start to think about whether the subversion makes any sense or whether a particular character is authentic anymore. Here, I think of Luke Skywalker, without a moment of reflection, tossing his long-lost lightsaber over his shoulder at the beginning of *The Last Jedi*. I may only be speaking for myself on this point, but that moment dislodged me from the fantasy right at the start. So, instead of taking in the subsequent scenes of the movie, I was running around my own head trying to think through what I'd just seen. The storytellers had jarred me right out of their story.

A Range of Feeling

I can remember the first time that I finished watching *There Will Be Blood*. I felt wrung out and hung up damp. Such is the rollercoaster of emotions one experiences about Daniel Day Lewis's oil-tycoon character. You're sliding slowly with him into his depravity and suddenly you experience a glimmer of

hope, softening toward him. But it's short lived and your disgust with him turns to resentment. Good characters in a story possess a character arc, certainly. They have to change with time. But I believe that the best characters in a story cause us to feel a range of emotions *at* and *with* them. And why shouldn't it be that way? That is our human experience. We love our loved ones dearly, but there are days when we might not be sure we even really like them.

Capote does this masterfully with one of the killers. He introduces you to his coldness, his greed, and his ugly habits. Then, he pulls back a curtain to introduce light among the darkness of the character. He writes of the killer's childhood and you see the innocence of the man's youth. You soften—as we naturally do in the presence of the vulnerability and naiveté of a child. To overdo this in the narrative, however, would be manipulative. So, he doesn't. Capote brings you back into the present and you confront again the man you know to be a killer. Later, you learn of the man's desperation in life. You learn how lonely he was and you soften, again, at the thought of a cold soul with no external source of personal warmth. Capote does it in doses and it's all so carefully positioned against the static evil of the *other* killer in this plot. We are never meant to soften toward *that guy*. So, not only do we feel the tension of the shifts in how we warm and cool on one character, we feel the tension between a character we encounter as a real person and his partner-in-crime who never feels perfectly human or humane to us.

The Trapdoor

The best stories I have ever encountered were the ones with a big twist. In a good story, we go with the narrative enough to relax, only to realize how artfully we have been led to the moment where we're upended. I think of Willis's character in *The Sixth Sense* or the end of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. We can't always have these moment of dropping a trapdoor from under the listener if the facts of our stories don't allow it. However, a good storyteller can see the opportunities for this moment where one might not be obvious. Before I go on, I pause for the biggest spoiler warning of the blog. In the book, Capote lets us know two men were in the Clutters' house that night committing this terrible crime. We know they jointly planned and prepared for that encounter. As you make your way through the book, it becomes clear to you that the mastermind of the whole plot is the *real* killer of the Clutter family. We become convinced that no other person in the story could possibly be evil enough to execute four innocent souls. Then, the ground shakes and we feel ourselves reeling sideways at the step-by-step recollections of the *other* criminal in the house that night. What does he tell us about his confederate; that brooding and callous mastermind of the entire plot? The man who first said that terrible, horrible word ["kill"] out loud—bringing into life death itself? *That* man never fired a shot.

I think Capote could have written a different narrative here—knowing the end at the beginning. I imagine the facts were plentiful enough for Capote to never set the reader up for this twist and to save the surprises for some other plot line or character. The important part is that knowing who the readers would suspect, he spotted the opportunity to invite us to sit comfortably over that trapdoor.

Not every tool of storytelling is available to a lawyer in a case for the most likely reason that not every fact will permit the use of every tool. If you asked, therefore, what the biggest takeaway might be from this little two-part blog series, I think I would say it has to be "intentionality." When storytelling isn't intentional, it too easily collapses into a chronology of recited facts. However, that kind of cold, taught timeline leads to the end of the rope where story goes to die.