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Fact Checking “In Cold Blood”

I found the papers of the fact checker who worked on Capote’s nonfiction masterpiece. What did he miss?

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Almost from the start, skeptics challenged the accuracy of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*

Photo by John Lent/AP

In the light of history it’s clear that however great Truman Capote’s literary gifts, his promotional genius surpassed them. The key theme in the publicity campaign he masterfully engineered for “In Cold Blood”—published as [a four-part series](#) in *The New Yorker* in the fall of 1965, and subsequently as a [book](#)—was that, despite having the stylistic and thematic attributes of great literature, the account of four brutal murders in Kansas was completely true. At the top of *The New Yorker* series was an “Editor’s Note” reading, “All quotations in this article are taken either from official records or from conversations, transcribed verbatim, between the author and the principals.” The book’s subtitle was *A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*. In interviews, Capote kept talking about the brilliant genre he’d concocted, the “nonfiction novel,” and colorfully described the methods he’d devised to insure his work’s veracity. A *Times* reporter drank it all in and wrote:

“To record real life, [Capote] trained himself for two years in remembering conversations without taking notes. Friends would read to him and he would try to transcribe what he had heard, eventually reaching the point where he was 92 percent accurate.”

Almost from the start, skeptics challenged the accuracy of *In Cold Blood*. One early revelation (acknowledged by Capote before his death in 1984) was that the last scene in the book, a graveyard conversation between a detective and the murdered girl’s best friend, was pure invention. I myself made a small contribution to the counter-narrative. While doing research for my 2000 book, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, I found “In Cold Blood” galley proofs in the magazine’s archives. Next to a passage describing the actions of someone who was alone, and who was later killed in the “multiple murder,” *New Yorker* editor William Shawn had scrawled, in pencil, “How know?” There was in fact no way to know, but the passage stayed.

Over the years, many additional holes have been found in *In Cold Blood*. In the first of two notable recent revelations, a *Wall Street Journal* [article](#) suggested that the Kansas Bureau of Investigation waited five days before following up on what turned out to be the crucial lead in the case, rather than doing so immediately, as Capote wrote. This is not a trivial matter, because if the KBI had acted quicker, the killers—Perry Smith and Dick Hickock—may not have made it to Florida, where, according to a separate [investigation](#) by the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, they possibly committed four additional murders, of a husband and wife and their two young children

The mistakes in *In Cold Blood* are especially striking because the material originally appeared in *The New Yorker*, which, along with *Time* magazine, originated the practice of fact checking and has for many years been famous for the reliability of its content. I recently discovered that the *New Yorker* staffer assigned to check “In Cold Blood” was a man named Sandy Campbell, and that Campbell’s fact checking file for the story is in the special collections of the [library of the University of Delaware](#), where I work. I decided to give it a look. The file has not been mentioned in any book or article about Capote or *In Cold Blood* that I’ve found; as far as I can tell, no one has previously examined it in the context of the book’s veracity. Now that I’ve done so, I think I understand why the story passed muster at *The New Yorker*, stretchers and all.

But before I get to that, I have to tell you about Sandy Campbell, who is a story in himself. He was born into a wealthy New York family in 1922. After graduating from Princeton, he became a Broadway actor, with roles in *Life with Father*, the revival of *Spring Awakening*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. His lifelong romantic partner was Donald Windham, a novelist, and together they were part of a New York literary and social circle that included W.H. Auden, Glenway Wescott, Tennessee Williams, and Capote, who was close friends with both men.

Campbell died in 1988 and left his assets to Windham, who died in 2010, at the age of 89. The estate was of sufficient size to establish the [Windham-Campbell Literary Prizes](#), \$150,000 awards to nine writers of “outstanding achievement,” which were given for the first time early this month to, among others, the novelists James Salter and Tom McCarthy.

Campbell gave up his acting career in the '50s, and in 1963 was hired as a fact checker by the *New Yorker*, where Capote was already a valued contributor. Campbell was assigned to the "In Cold Blood" project at Capote's request, and in October 1964 traveled with him to the Kansas town where the murders had taken place. There, in the words of Capote's [biographer](#), Gerald Clarke, Campbell "verified such things as dates and distances." Campbell wrote in his diary (which he shared with Anne Taylor Fleming, author of a 1978 *New York Times Magazine* profile of Capote): "Truman calls [KBI investigator Alvin Dewey] Pappy, and Alvin calls Truman Coach. ... It is certainly extraordinary how he fits here in this small Kansas town with these simple Kansas people."

Campbell fit in as well. This was somewhat less surprising in his case, since unlike Capote, he was of conventional appearance, but, considering that he was a gay New York thespian-turned-litterateur, it was striking too. In any case, in the Campbell file at Delaware are many chatty letters from Kansans, including several from Alvin Dewey's wife, Marie. In one she confides, "The boys are making it fine in school. Dewey is surely looking forward to college next fall and has been invited to rush week at K.U. by his cousin." She closes: "The Rogues', my favorite program, is coming on now, so I'll say good-night. Love, Marie."

Other letters in the file hew more closely to the business at hand and suggest that fact checking, as Campbell and *The New Yorker* conceived it at that time, was mainly a matter of checking facts that pertained to dates, distances, spelling of proper names, and the like. A letter from Harold Nye, assistant director of the KBI, gives answers to six questions Campbell had posed, including this one, relating to an investigative trip he had taken to Nevada: "The two officers from Las Vegas, as mentioned in your letter, were Ocie Pigford and Frank McCauley." Allen Hoffard, public information officer of the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, writes to Campbell: "In response to your query, it is correct at the moment to state that the U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kan., is the largest Federal penitentiary of inmate population, with a current count [of] approximately 2,250 men." But there is nothing in the file to suggest that Campbell tried to verify the dialogue or action with which the article was packed.

Also in the file are the galley proofs from which Campbell worked. Again, his work seems to be all about the dates and distances: Campbell underlines in pencil every proper name and checkable fact, for example: "The pheasant season in Kansas, a famed November event ..." He also shows a sharp eye for internal inconsistencies. He circles a place in the galley where someone is referred to as a "cleaning woman." The same woman, he notes, is called "housekeeper" at another point, thousands of words away.

But verifying the "nonfiction novel" aspects of the article does not seem to have been part of Campbell's brief. They are, in any case, not underlined. To use a *New Yorker* term of art that was widely reported more than a quarter-century later, when Janet Malcolm was sued for libel by a disgruntled psychoanalyst, those things seem to have been "on author." To a large extent, *The New Yorker* of 1965 was the same magazine of the '40s and '50s, where no one raised an eyebrow when luminaries such as A.J. Liebling and Joseph Mitchell trafficked in composite characters—Colonel Stingo and Mr. Flood, respectively.

Rather than composites, “*In Cold Blood*” was filled with scenes, dialogue, and interior monologues. Many of them involved Hickock and Smith, who had not yet been executed at the time Campbell commenced his checking. Today’s fact checkers would talk to them; Campbell did not. Other scenes were literally impossible to check. For example, early on, there is an exchange between Nancy and Kenyon Clutter, a brother and sister who would be murdered later that day:

“ ‘Good grief, Kenyon. I *hear* you!’

As usual, the devil was in Kenyon. His shouts kept coming up the stairs.

‘Nancy! Telephone!’

Barefoot, pajama-clad, Nancy scampered down the stairs.”

Campbell made no marks next to the passage.

It is theoretically possible that another checker may have worked on the piece, and focused on these elements of the story. But based on my communication with the current *New Yorker* checking department, my knowledge of the magazine’s history, and the absence of a mention of any other checker in the Campbell file, I would say this is highly unlikely.

In any event, by the standards of 1965, *In Cold Blood* checked out impressively well, at least according to Campbell. Anne Taylor Fleming interviewed him in 1978 and reported him saying that “he had never seen such an accurate account and that whatever the fiction veneer, ‘*In Cold Blood*’ was a scrupulous non-fiction report.”

At only one point in the galleys did Campbell indicate an interest in matters that went beyond facts in the narrow sense of the word. But even in this instance, he acted less like a fact checker than a story editor who’d spotted a piece of foreshadowing that hadn’t been followed through on. In one early scene, Nancy Clutter says to Kenyon that she keeps smelling cigarette smoke in their house. She mentions this again, in a phone conversation with her best friend. Capote never returns to the question of the strange odor. On the first page of the first set of galleys, Campbell wrote, “Is there ever an explanation of Nancy smelling cigarette smoke?” Like William Shawn’s “How know?”, his question never got an answer.