

Reputation Rehab

“Capote Reconsidered” by Brooke Allen, in *The New Criterion* (Nov. 2004),
900 Broadway, Ste. 602, New York, N.Y. 10003.

The trouble with being a bad boy is that people don't remember you were once very, very good. In author Truman Capote's last years, his cringingly public displays of drunkenness and drug use caused old friends to wring their hands over his squandered talent. By his death in 1984, the shambles of his personal life had dwarfed his literary reputation. But it's time to resurrect him in memory as a literary giant, argues Allen, author of *Artistic License: Three Centuries of Good Writing and Bad Behavior* (2004).

Capote's rise was all the more dramatic for his humble roots. He was born in 1924 to a small-town con man and an itchy-footed girl from Monroeville, Alabama. They soon parted, and Capote spent much of his childhood feeling abandoned by both his absent father and his wayward mother, who left him for a long spell in the care of Alabama relatives.

He cut his literary teeth as a short-story writer for *Mademoiselle* and *Harper's Bazaar*, which were then homes for innovative fiction (*The New Yorker*, where he was a copy boy, refused to publish his stories because they were “romantic in a way this magazine is not”). His charm—issuing, seemingly, from a “puppyish desire for love”—quickly became legendary, adding to his persona.

With the publication of his novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in 1948, he was hailed as “dangerously gifted,” though his prose was nearly upstaged by the jacket photo, in which he lolled like a “male Lolita.” For the next decade, he used his gifts well for the most part, publishing *The Grass Harp* in 1951 and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in 1958. After noticing a news item in November 1959 about the murders of a Kansas farm family, Capote spent the next six years researching *In Cold Blood*, perhaps the first nonfiction novel of the nascent “new journalism” movement.

With the book's publication in 1966, to a rapt national audience, his star seemingly could shine no brighter.

But the clouds were already gathering—some apparently summoned by the destabilizing experience of writing the book itself, which had immersed him in the grisly crime and drawn him to identify with one of the killers. “His crackup was as public and spectacular as any in recent history,” says Allen. He drank “heroic” amounts of alcohol and kept pill pushers in business. Largely deserting his longtime emotional



Truman Capote's 1970s “crackup was as public and spectacular as any in recent history,” says critic Brooke Allen.

anchor, Jack Dunphy, Capote took up with a series of “inappropriate” lovers. In 1975, nine years after throwing his black-and-white ball, dubbed the party of the century, at the Plaza Hotel in New York, he committed social hari-kari: *Esquire* published excerpts from his work in progress, *Answered Prayers*, in which he skewered—in thinly disguised fiction—his rich and

Periodicals

beautiful society pals.

In reading the early Capote, however, the grotesque that he later became is nowhere in evidence, says Allen, whose praise is occasioned by the publication of new editions of *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* and *The Complete Stories of Truman Capote*. “It is a stunning experience to reread this fiction—mostly written when he was in his early twenties—and to realize

how very golden this golden boy was,” she effuses. “The image of the unhappy middle-aged clown dissolves. . . . Norman Mailer’s judgment that Capote was the most perfect writer of their generation—‘he writes the best sentences word for word, rhythm upon rhythm’—seems true and just.” Capote deserves enduring fame, says Allen, of the kind that will “outlive the mere notoriety of his final years.”

Designing Utopia

“Why Don’t the Rest of Us Like the Buildings the Architects Like?” by Robert Campbell, in *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Architecture has become a troubled profession. For every Sydney Opera House or Museo Guggenheim Bilbao—buildings that become instant icons and transform a cityscape—there are hundreds of buildings such as Peabody Terrace. The latter, designed by Sert, Jackson & Associates to house Harvard University graduate students along Boston’s Charles River, consists of functional modernist towers “enlivened, at street level, by the bright color accents of the shops and cafés.” As Campbell, an architect and *Boston Globe* design critic, explains, the architects were trying to devise a strategy to make their project blend with the surrounding neighborhood. He admits to admiring the work but acknowledges that its “architectural language remains, for most people, unfamiliar and offensive.” Indeed, even though the design won the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects, “everybody else did, and does, hate it.”

In Campbell’s view, this conflict between architects’ visions and their buildings’ reception by the general public is an indication that “the connection between memory and invention has been severed in our culture.” Architects and laypeople who pay attention to design, Campbell says, mainly fall into two camps, “trads” and “rads.” The trads—traditionalists—want all buildings to “look like the buildings of the past they have learned and been conditioned to love.” The rads—radicals—want to “use computers to make groovy new shapes that will broadcast

our daring, our boldness, our march into the future.” Despite their seeming difference, both rads and trads “seek to substitute a utopia of another time for the time we actually live in. The trads find utopia in the past; the rads find it in the future.” Instead of grappling with “the complex reality of a present time and place,” both camps “inevitably create architecture that is thin, bloodless, weak, and boring.”

Campbell himself defines architecture as “the art of making places,” but argues that “you appreciate a work of architecture in only one way, by inhabiting it.” His definition would likely anger university professors of architecture, who “dream up totally unreadable theories” whose only purpose seems to be to “send smoke signals to [their] peers in other places.” Campbell likewise faults architecture critics like himself, who have encouraged the notion that a building can be appreciated as a separate thing, outside its own spatial context. This invites treating buildings as commodities, which then allows people to think of a “Frank Gehry” the way they do a Picasso or a Rembrandt. Campbell’s definition would probably not find favor even with most architects, who tend to “build for their peer group, and the hell with the rest of the world.” Rather than design with “an eye to the media world, not the physical world,” says Campbell, architects need to find a way to anchor their creations in the here and now, or risk having them become merely a succession of totems “in the worldwide stream of images.”