

In cold blood: the must-read for the students in school

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Qualifying In Cold Blood's Place in Public Schools

When a novel inspires, perplexes, and teaches a lesson to its readers, it is a rare gem. After researching and analyzing Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, there is no doubt in my mind that it should remain in public schools. *In Cold Blood* retells the story of six murders, four of which are gruesome and revolting, while the other two are of the murderers themselves (after being sentenced to the death penalty). Ever since Capote's novel first found its way to school bookshelves, it has ignited a controversy that is alive to this day. Though this may be a dark and difficult read, it is a story that deserves to be told because of its outstanding writing, strong emotions, and powerful lessons about life and the human psyche.

Capote's unique writing style immediately catches the essence of the story to follow. Because *In Cold Blood* follows the lives of the Clutter family and their murderers, each chapter juxtaposes the last one in an unusual yet effective rhetorical strategy. One of the main reasons that this book should stay in public schools is because of its elaborate writing style. Teachers often attempt to teach their students to write with elements that Capote himself utilizes, such as imagery, color, rhetorical strategies, and creativity. An example of this style may be seen when Capote writes: "It was ideal apple-eating weather; the whitest sunlight descended from the purest sky, and an easterly wind rustled, without ripping loose, the last of the leaves on that the Chinese elms" (10). This type of writing is very rich with imagery, which invites readers to see the sunlight and feel the rustling wind. The fact that this rare, beautiful imagery is the backbone of an incredible story makes it

even more powerful. School youth need be exposed to this type of writing in preparation for adulthood, so that they may become more advanced in writing.

Another reason that *In Cold Blood* deserves to stay on the bookshelves is that Capote portrays the mind of the lesser respected character: the murderer. Ann Algeo writes in her scholarly article that Perry Smith is “ the total symbol for the exile, the alienated human being, the grotesque, the outsider, the quester after love, the sometimes sapient, sometimes innocent, sometimes evil child” (Algeo). The murderers in this novel and in real life don’t deserve to be forgiven for what they did – but at least they will be better understood. For example, the following quote shows Perry’s vulnerability and how much he looks to Dick for guidance: “ Of course, Dick was very literal-minded, very – he had no understanding of music, poetry – and yet when you got right down to it, Dick’s literalness, his pragmatic approach to every subject, was the primary reason Perry had been attracted to him, for it made Dick seem, compared to himself, so authentically tough, invulnerable, ‘ totally masculine’” (Capote 10). Perhaps if they were understood during childhood as “ the alienated human being,” they may not have been so inclined to murder an entire family (Algeo). Perry’s isolation all his life, as Algeo points out, may have led him to seek a toxic friendship with Dick. Everybody deserves to be understood, and without stories like *In Cold Blood*, students would grow up not knowing why there is evil in the world.

Additionally, *In Cold Blood* encourages students to consider and debate difficult, hot-button issues, like the death penalty. Megan O’Neil writes in her

editorial “ In Cold Blood Too Bloody for Students?” that the book should stay in the class room “ because it introduces students to the American judicial system and the death penalty, among other contemporary topics.” Perry and Dick are facing the death penalty, a controversial form of capital punishment in the year 1959, which continues to be controversial even today. O’Neil also observed that “ it is also superbly written and allows students to form their own opinions.” The book is also unbiased. Interestingly, upon doing a search in the novel, I noticed that Capote never actually uses the phrase “ death penalty” - it is only ever used in the context of a quote said by someone else. He remains unbiased by including opinions from others but never his own. As a result, readers can learn from the quotes and information provided and synthesize their own opinion. As O’Neil points out, whether the students were influenced by the story or not, at least they were taught a few lessons about powerful writing, rhetorical strategies, the court system, and the death penalty. This goes to show that there are many angles to take as to why students should be given permission to read this book.

Although Capote’s writing is mesmerizing and his book is powerful, there is controversy regarding the accuracy of the genre of In Cold Blood, which has been called a “ nonfiction novel” for its dramatization of a journalistic style (Hickman). Trenton Hickman writes in his scholarly article, “ The Last to See Them Alive: Panopticism, the Supervisory Gaze, and Catharsis in Capote’s In Cold Blood” that Capote’s thought-provoking writing “ could well be argued as his most significant contribution to the development of the so-called nonfiction novel”. This provokes a separate argument that stems from the

credibility of Capote's recollection of events. In other words, critics wonder if Capote is filling in the story with incorrect memories or figments of his own imagination. While the murders and trial that took place in the novel actually did happen in real life, there is uncertainty surrounding the details in Capote's writing, which makes it less of a true story. Nevertheless, this is not a valid argument as to why it should not be allowed in schools because the benefits of reading Capote's unique, journalistic writing style outweigh the controversy surrounding the book

Perhaps the main counterargument is that public schools should not allow kids to read about murder, sex, and profanity, all of which can be seen in *In Cold Blood*. James Moore and his wife Minnie of Savannah, Georgia, fought to have this book banned because "the endorsement of putting trash in the minds of children by a school system is horrifying to think of and it is dangerous to the social stability of this great country" (*Anatomy of a Book Controversy*). After all, according to their logic, wouldn't this type of reading influence students, especially adolescents whose brains are developing? This is an understandable counterargument, but what is missing is the fact that students do not have to read this book because alternative assignments are available (although surely not as powerful or effective in teaching a life lesson).

From the moment a child can understand language, they begin to understand the cruelty of life. In elementary school, kids are already learning about war and poverty. By middle school, 11-year-olds are taught about the extermination of over 6 million Jewish people during the Holocaust; they are

taught about slave trade and how other races and classes were seen as inferior; and they are taught about the Trail of Tears, 9/11, the bombing of Japan, the Crusades, and countless other indecencies of life. After a long day of learning about some of the darkest times in history, they go home to watch the news. The daily news covers stories of rape, murder, child abuse, poverty, starvation, and more. Yet nobody in their right mind would think of banning the news. Nobody would rewrite a textbook to teach only the good. Nobody would ask for an alternative assignment when learning about World War II. Somehow, though, parents are proclaiming that it is not okay for a student to read a book with incredible writing that captures the essence of a powerful true story because of gruesome details surrounding a murder that vastly affected the lives of real people. This is the same argument that has been used over and over again for several other banned books, but children are perfectly capable of handling heavy themes in literature because they are not naive to real world issues.

The use of racially charged curse words has long been debated as a reason to censor literature, such as in the classic novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*'s controversial use of the n-word, a commonly used word in that time period. In *Cold Blood*, just like Huck Finn, also makes use of the n-word. Although it is understandable why parents might be concerned about the use of such racial slurs, it is important to the integrity of the book to include the original language because it maintains historical accuracy. One conversation by Dick and Perry proceeds as follows, using racially charged language and insults profusely: "' But a nigger,' said Perry. ' That's different.'

The comment, the reluctance with which it was pronounced, made Dick ask, 'Or did you? Kill him like you said?' (Capote 109)" It was a significant question, for his original interest in Perry, his assessment of Perry's character and potentialities, was founded on the story Perry had once told him of how he had beaten a "colored man" to death. This shows the much lower value he would place on the life of a black person, and also makes use of another outdated term, "colored." However, the use of the words "colored" and "nigger" make sense in the context because they reflect how Dick and Perry would actually speak in the 1950's, a time when segregation was legal and the Civil Rights movement was right around the corner, so tensions were high. Censoring these words would not reflect the true nature of this time period.

Capote's novel is one that sparks every feeling and emotion known to man. Julia Fierro, who read the book for the first time as a high schooler, writes in her editorial that "the ultimate test of a book is how it makes me feel. The more complex my emotional reaction, the more meaningful the book." She goes on to describe her love-hate relationship with Perry Smith, as well as the fear she had for him mingled with hope. This book is not a happy-go-lucky, feel-good book that should be taken lightly; it is a gruesome and realistic portrayal of love and death, exposing the flaws of the human psyche. But, any novel that elicits a reaction within the reader that inspires them to read and write more, whether gruesome, sexual, and profane or not, deserves a position on the library bookshelf. In Cold Blood provides a chance to inspire a younger generation of readers, as well as reveal to them the

hard truths of life. Fierro sadly declares that “ I spent most of that year with my nose in a book, looking over my shoulder (both figuratively and literally), waiting for some adult in our nearly all-white, all middle-upper-class community to tear the book out of my hands.” At the end of the day, no school student who finds themselves engaged and connecting with characters on a piece of paper should fear reading. It is a rare moment for them to grow and learn about what it means to be human.