

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT REVIEWS



■ Hoffman and Keener as Capote and Lee: a flawless pas de deux

EDITOR'S PICK FILM

Capote

■ Directed by Bennett Miller ■ Starring Philip Seymour Hoffman ■ Sony Pictures Classics

Truman Capote cut a florid figure late in life, offering up sharp-tongued bons mots on TV talk shows and generally spending more time in the gossip pages than at his work. People who know only the Capote who dismissed author Jack Kerouac with the memorable slam "That's not writing. That's typing" could be forgiven for thinking Capote was just a celebrity, not an artist who revolutionized journalism. The movie *Capote* should enlighten them.

Unquestionably one of the best movies of the year, *Capote* details the signal triumph of Capote's long career—the reporting and writing of *In Cold Blood*, a remarkable best seller about a multiple homicide in Middle America and the men who committed it. The book exploded conceptions of what was possible in nonfiction, and the openly gay Capote influenced writers and reporters for generations to come.

At the center of the film is Philip Seymour Hoffman as Capote. Hoffman has wowed us repeatedly in movies like *Boogie Nights* and on Broadway in such productions as *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, so we expect brilliance. We get it. Capote could easily be portrayed as a vain, silly figure—played for laughs, as gay men, especially "sissies," so often are. But Hoffman exhibits the keen intelligence and seductive empathy that helped this exotic creature win the trust of informants as disparate as high school girls, the head of the investigation, and, especially, killer Perry Smith (Clifton Collins Jr.), a miserable outcast with dreams of artistry.

By Hoffman's side is Catherine Keener as Capote's childhood friend, writer Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*). Keener is having a career year, thanks to her warm and sexy turn in the sweet comedy *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and now her superlative work here. Capote asks Lee—who's

played as a lesbian, albeit implicitly—to come with him to the Kansas town where the murders took place. There she almost literally opens doors for him, helps type up his notes, and serves as the anchor for his budding talent. Keener defines *supporting actor* here, and her work keeps Hoffman's risk-taking grounded in reality. It's hard to imagine Capote succeeding as well without Lee, and it's hard to imagine Hoffman succeeding as well without Keener.

So much of the film works beautifully: the production design; the sharp black-and-white photography; the subtle score; and the delicate dance between Capote and Smith, the killer Capote identifies with, wins over, and then lies to repeatedly in order to maintain the flow of information.

First-time feature film director Bennett Miller (who helmed the documentary hit *The Cruise*) triumphs completely here, as does first-time screenwriter Dan Futterman (Will's onetime boyfriend on *Will & Grace*). Here they've excelled at that most difficult genre of film: that which captures an artist at work. Watching it, we can see they're artists at work as well. —Michael Giltz