

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES



Slim Aaron's iconic "Poolside Gossip" photograph, February 22, 2018. ZOE MEYERS/THE DESERT SUN

Truman Capote's party scene in Palm Springs

Tracy Conrad
Special to The Desert Sun

An amusing paragraph appeared in Time Magazine in March 1969.

"He is 'terribly subject' to those New York winter chills, and he has already tried the Sahara and the Caribbean. Miami was a thought, 'because it's so infinitely sordid and untempting.' So now author Truman Capote is settled in Palm Springs, Calif., working away on his first book since *In Cold Blood*. 'It's to be called *Answered Prayers*,' said Truman, striking that languid reclining pose that he made famous on the jacket of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* 21 years ago.

His new book will have lots of characters and 'some of them will be recognizable.' That is, if he can find time away from his millions of friends. 'Mrs. Winston Guest was here for a week. Senator Javits. Kay Graham. Christopher Isherwood from Los Angeles. I like my friends because they are beautiful, bright and amusing. And I think I'm the same.'

Capote was the darling of literary circles and café society after *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was published in 1958 and made into a now iconic film in 1961. His intense true crime tome, *In Cold Blood*, cemented his celebrity in 1967. At the height of his fame, he rented, then purchased the house at 853 E. Paseo El Mirador in Palm Springs in 1968.

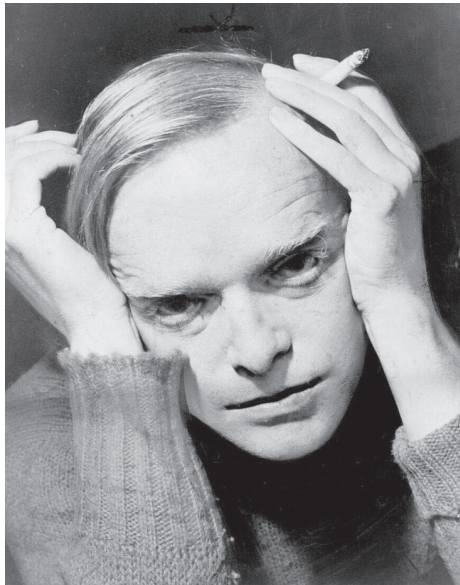
He was drying out in the desert and attempting to work on his would-be magnum opus, *Answered Prayers*.

His neighborhood was sparkling and new, parts recently subdivided. The Movie Colony and the El Mirador neighborhoods were the spot for Hollywood glitterati. Erroll Flynn, Ralph Bellamy, Charlie Farrell, Jane Wyman, Tony Curtis, Janet Leigh, Lawrence Welk and Howard Hughes were all sometime neighbors.

Capote occupied the house from 1968 to 1984 and regularly hosted large parties attended by some of the biggest socialites of the day, including Slim Keith, Babe Paley and Walter and Leonore Annenberg. (that is, before his 1975 publication of *La Cote Basque* 1965 that ruined everything for him.)

Capote relished the sybaritic lifestyle, so his decamping from New York to sunny Palm Springs in the late 1960s seemed natural.

The particularly lavish and good life was to be found in the desert and was captured magnificently in the photographs of Slim Aarons who visited Palm Springs in 1970. Aarons' book entitled *A Wonderful Time: An Intimate Portrait of the Good Life* could have easily served



Truman Capote COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

as Capote's bible. It featured many of Capote's closest friends in their luxurious surroundings.

Also included was the photograph "Poolside Gossip," now the very notion of desert modernism that has defined Palm Springs ever since. Pictured at the Richard Neutra-designed Kaufman House are impossibly glamorous Helen Dzo Dzo and Nelda Linsk.

Linsk owned the Kaufmann house at the time. On his arrival to the desert, Aarons asked her to assemble a group of friends for the impromptu photoshoot. She dutifully called her friends, who happened to be extremely attractive and included Dzo Dzo, Lita Baron, and designer Arthur Elrod.

Aarons came over about an hour later with a tripod and his camera. Linsk recalled, "There were no assistants, no makeup artists, no hairstylist, nothing

We just put on the clothes we had in our closets. Very casual. In fact, if I'd known then what I know today, I might have dressed up a little more." The whole thing took about an hour.

During that 1970 visit, Aarons also took several photos of Capote, showing him in utter repose at his home in a fanciful outfit, seated on his pink and orange lounge in the garden with his dog. Aarons snapped Capote in the wide and empty streets of his neighborhood riding his red bicycle with a simple red and white basket, wearing red pants, sandals, a blue tunic and a knitted cap.

And Aarons also caught an image of a cowboy-attired Capote being kissed on the cheek by a very beautiful Viola Lowey, married to famous industrial designer Raymond Lowey, dressed in fringed vest wearing a beaded headband. (Peek at the Aarons images by

searching the Getty Archive.)

Linsk attended many a fabulous cocktail party at the Capote home. She and Capote were also present at Elrod's party in 1973 honoring designer Bill Blass. The soiree described in the newspaper was "held in Elrod's super-scenic, supersonic, simply super, somewhat smaller than the Rose Bowl and somewhat larger than a breadbox, abode" up on the hill of Southridge.

It was a spectacular party in a town known for its glistening nightlife. "Alice Faye sang for her supper ... Barbara Marx (later Sinatra) was a phantom guest in her sand-colored halston. (She nibbled a few shrimps and pool! She disappeared before dinner.) Literary giant Truman Capote at 5'3" dwarfed everyone ... A blob of brain receiving one awed fan after another. Nelda Linsk in something lavender, long and lovely glamorized the *maitre d'* profession as she escorted the rich, the powerful and the pretty to their tables."

The newspaper noted that "Blass unbiasedly bills Mrs. Lowell Guinness and Mrs. William S. Paley as the two best dressed women in the world. 'Neither of them wears my clothes,' he smiled sportingly. If magnanimity awards had been handed out during the evening, Blass would have had first prize all sewn up."

Apparently others were less generous, and in the effete world of such parties, the snipes were worth reporting. "But all was not roses and regal resolve, with some guests rallying to take a few swipes and swings at various targets. Truman Capote dismissed the work of John Steinbeck: 'He was a hack writer.' Just the sort of unvarnished opinion fashioned into a roman a clef that would get Capote thrown out of café society but had been thought impishly impertinent prior.

At that glamorous and more simple time, Capote had escaped the New York winters and was the toast of the toasty desert town. Linsk explains the charm that made Capote so popular. "He had the best stories. Just good, good stories to tell. He had all those girlfriends in New York he called swans who would all confide in him, so he knew everything. They loved him. And he loved them, and so he had the best stories to tell. Gals would tell him things they wouldn't normally tell a guy, except Truman."

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The *Thanks for the Memories* column appears Sundays in *The Desert Sun*. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.