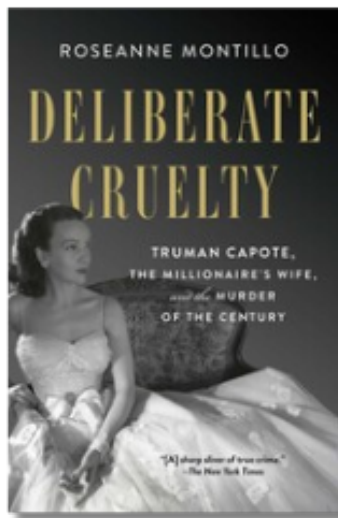


Deliberate Cruelty: Truman Capote, the Millionaire's Wife and the Murder of the Century by Roseanne Montillo



Summary

This glittering, “wild romp of a story, boldly and beautifully told” (Neal Thompson, author of *The First Kennedys*) explores the darkly intertwined fates of infamous socialite Ann Woodward and literary icon Truman Capote, sweeping us to the upper echelons of Manhattan’s high society—where falls from grace are all the more shocking.

When Ann Woodward shot her husband, banking heir Billy Woodward, in the middle of the night in 1955, her life changed forever. Though she claimed she thought he was a prowler, few believed the woman who had risen from charismatic showgirl to popular socialite. Everyone had something to say about the scorching scandal afflicting one of the most rich and famous families of New York City, but no one was more obsessed with the tale than Truman Capote.

Acclaimed for his bestselling nonfiction book *In Cold Blood*, Capote was looking for new material and followed the scandal from beginning to end. Like Ann, he too had ascended from nobody to toast of the town, but he always felt like an outsider, even among the exclusive coterie of high society women who adored him. He decided the story of Ann’s turbulent marriage would be the basis of his masterpiece—a novel about the dysfunction and sordid secrets revealed to him by his high society “swans”—never thinking that it would eventually lead to Ann’s suicide and his own scandalous downfall.

“A 20th-century morality tale of enduring fascination” (Laura Thompson, author of *The Heiresses*), *Deliberate Cruelty* is a haunting cross between true crime and literary history that is perfect for fans of *Furious Hours*, *Empty Mansions*, and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.

Courtesy of the publisher



About the Author

Roseanne Montillo is an accomplished research librarian who earned her MFA from Emerson College and has taught creative writing at Emerson and the Tufts Extension School. In addition to *Deliberate Cruelty*, she has published four previous works of narrative nonfiction to critical acclaim—*Fire on the Track*, *The Wilderness of Ruin*, *Atomic Women*, and *The Lady and Her Monsters*.

Courtesy of the publisher

Discussion Questions

1. Were you familiar with the Woodward murder case before reading this book? Were you familiar with Truman Capote? Have you read any of his work?
2. Compare Ann Woodward and Truman Capote's upbringing and relationship with their parents.
3. Talk about the beginning of "gossip columns" as described in the book. How might these events have played out if today's social media had been available?
4. Discuss the role of class/social standing/climbing the social ladder/keeping up appearances in this book.
5. What is your theory about what really happened the night of the murder?
6. How do you feel about Ann Woodward--do you feel sorry for her? Do you dislike her? Why or why not?
7. What did Truman Capote's "Swans" have in common? Why do you think they were so open with Capote? Why did they ultimately feel so betrayed?
8. What was Capote's motive for publishing "La Cote Basque"? Do you think he was surprised by the reaction to it?
9. What do you think happened regarding Capote's "Answered Prayers" manuscript? Was it ever completed? If so, what happened to it?
10. One of the characters in the book stated that "morality is for the middle class." What do you think she meant?
11. What is the significance of this book's title?

Reviews

In this engrossing account, research librarian Montillo (*Atomic Women: The Untold Stories of the Scientists Who Helped Create the Nuclear Bomb*) recreates a tragic cause célèbre. On November 15, 1955, Billy Woodward was shot to death in his Long Island home by his wife, Ann, who later insisted that she had mistaken him for a burglar. Her story, which had more than a few holes in it, was persuasive enough that a Nassau grand jury declined to charge her with murder. Montillo punctiliously reconstructs Ann's painful life, including her failed attempt at becoming a movie star like her role model, Joan Crawford, and her troubled marriage to a philanderer, who may have been bisexual and whom she had wed after having a sexual relationship with his father. In addition, the author details the life of author Truman Capote, who planned to write an epic novel, *Answered Prayers*, "that would rival Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*," inspired by Ann's killing of her spouse. That never happened, but Capote's publication of a purported excerpt from it led Ann to die by suicide in 1975. True crime fans particularly interested in bloodshed among the upper classes will enjoy this dark look at two intertwined and unhappy lives.

--Publishers Weekly

Capote took interest in Ann Woodward in 1955 after she shot and killed her husband, Billy Woodward, claiming she thought he was a burglar. When he accosted her in a restaurant a year later, the socialite angrily dismissed him as "a little f**." The author suggests that this insult may have been one of the infamously spiteful writer's motivations for writing "*La Côte Basque, 1965*," his infamous 1975 short story. The author's fascination with Woodward and Capote is evident in her elegantly novelistic retelling of their lives and the strange connections and parallels that linked them.

The beautiful Woodward had escaped a bleak Kansas life to become a New York showgirl. Capote left Alabama and flourished in New York City, where his brilliance as a writer was quickly recognized. After their initial encounter, Woodward would become an increasingly marginalized figure among the wealthy socialites who had never fully accepted her, while literary bad-boy Capote went on to become the "chronicler of the New York social world that...shunned" her. His 1975 story, based on the lives of Woodward and the high-society women friends he called his "swans," was so devastating that Woodward committed suicide by overdosing on Seconal, the drug that also killed Capote's mother. In turn, Capote was rejected by his swans for his betrayal of their confidences and sank into the drug and alcohol abuse that eventually led to his death.

This engaging, well-researched book will appeal to true-crime aficionados, Capote fans, and anyone interested in a darkly intriguing story well told.

A compelling mix of true crime and literary biography.

--Kirkus Reviews