

Hoffman shines in powerful *Capote*

by **Seth Motel**
Editor in Chief

You know a movie is good when the only major complaint about it is its misleading title.

Capote is not a biography of legendary author Truman Capote, but rather a mixture of character study and the process of writing a book. And that's where the criticism ends.

Unlike 2004's *Ray*, *Capote* only follows the author for a few years in his life in which he's gathering research for his groundbreaking "nonfiction novel," *In Cold Blood*. The six years he spends researching and writing it wipes him out, as his investigation of the murder leads to an emotional conflict.

Capote is portrayed by Philip Seymour Hoffman (*Almost Famous*) in what may be the best performance of the year. The only un-Capote-like thing about Hoffman is his six-and-a-half inch height advantage over the real one. Outside of that facet, Hoffman is hauntingly spectacular.

He goes on a trek to Kansas to interview the suspected murderers in a particularly brutal slaying. He takes along lifelong friend and *To Kill a Mockingbird* scribe Harper Lee (Catherine Keener) to help him get inside the head of the supposed cold-blood killers.

What Truman expects to be a piece for *The New Yorker* becomes a project he works on for six years. The prisoners keep getting stays of execution, eliminating any possibility of him completing the book.

More of a dilemma for Truman is his friendship (some real-life critics argue that it was a love affair) with one of the prisoners (Clifton Collins, Jr. as Perry Smith). While Smith gives him so much insight into why he committed the murders, Truman becomes conflicted. Truman insists that the book will display the two murderers in a positive light, even coming up for a slick lie about the title. However, even if Smith buys his story, Truman won't buy his own.

He tumbles into a spell of catatonia and alcoholism. He is torn between wanting the men to finally be executed and saving the life of a friend. Ultimately, he decides that the book is more important, and manipulates Smith without bound.

As written earlier, Hoffman gives the performance of a lifetime. Just watch his eyes go back and forth while the studying the other characters. His voice is a great imitation of Capote's legendary high pitch.

But it's not just subtle details that make his acting job superb. His body language is startlingly believable, and his delivery is ingenious. What's so impressive about Hoffman, and Capote, as well, is his ability to both deliver the show-stopping stories at parties about dinner with John Huston and to talk so quietly and painstakingly as the make the viewer uncomfortable. As far as the Oscars are concerned, only *Brokeback Mountain*'s Heath Ledger has a legitimate shot at getting the gold.

Keener's Harper Lee is worth recognizing, especially given her versatility shown earlier in the year as Steve Carell's girlfriend in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* and Sean Penn's partner in *The Interpreter*. Also delivering a solid supporting role is Chris Cooper (*Adaptation.*) as investigator Alvin Dewey.

The film is exquisitely directed by Bennett Miller, whose only previous experience was the 1998 documentary *The Cruise*. His lighting in the prison scenes, especially, is a big reason why the Directors' Guild of America has nominated him for best director. Truman's scenes with murderer Smith are so gripping due in large part to the dim atmosphere Miller creates. Miller also does a tasteful job depicting the murders, preferring suspense rather than blood and gore.

Also a novice is first-time screenplay writer Dan Futterman, known best for his role as Robin Williams' and Nathan Lane's son in *The Birdcage*. His adaptation, which has won him four critics' choice awards, is brilliant. The viewer never gets the sense of the characters acting out the book; in fact, the dialogue is sound enough that there is no cognizance of there being a script at all.

It's unfair to walk into *Capote* expecting to see a biopic; however, it would be much more unfair to deny yourself the privilege of experiencing Hoffman and the movie itself.

