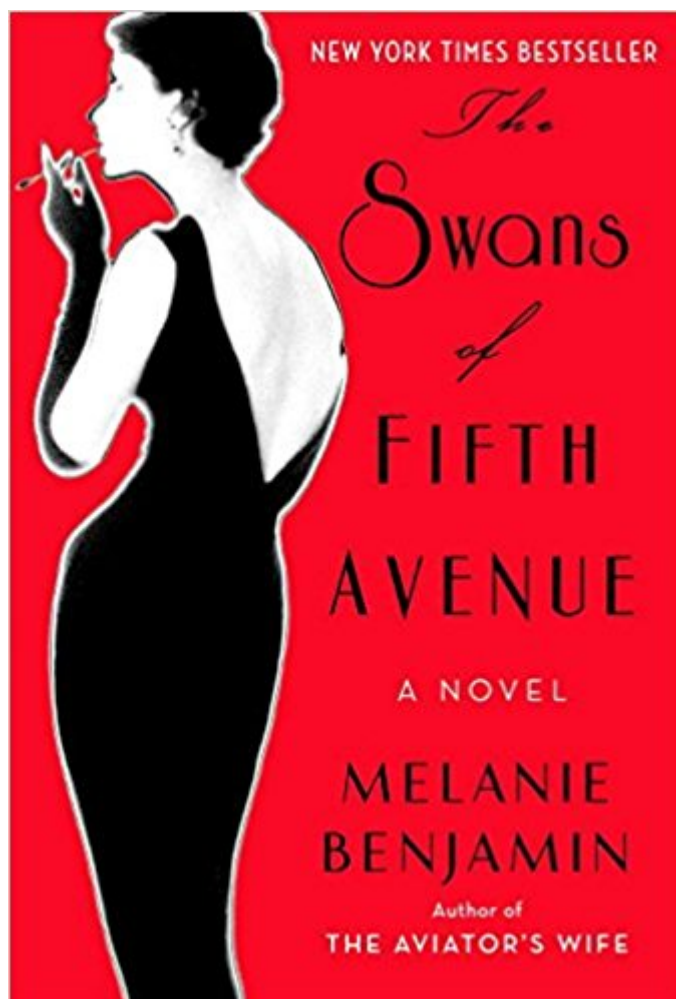


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# The Swans Of Fifth Avenue: A Novel



## Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • The author of *The Aviator*'s Wife returns with a triumphant new novel about New York's "Swans" of the 1950s and the scandalous, headline-making, and enthralling friendship between literary legend Truman Capote and peerless socialite Babe Paley. People's Book of the Week • USA Today's #1 • New and Noteworthy • Book • Entertainment Weekly's Must List • LibraryReads Top Ten Pick Of all the glamorous stars of New York high society, none blazes brighter than Babe Paley. Her flawless face regularly graces the pages of *Vogue*, and she is celebrated and adored for her ineffable style and exquisite taste, especially among her friends—the alluring socialite Swans Slim Keith, C. Z. Guest, Gloria Guinness, and Pamela Churchill. By all appearances, Babe has it all: money, beauty, glamour, jewels, influential friends, a prestigious husband, and gorgeous homes. But beneath this elegantly composed exterior dwells a passionate woman—a woman desperately longing for true love and connection. Enter Truman Capote. This diminutive golden-haired genius with a larger-than-life personality explodes onto the scene, setting Babe and her circle of Swans aflutter. Through Babe, Truman gains an unlikely entrée into the enviable lives of Manhattan's elite, along with unparalleled access to the scandal and gossip of Babe's powerful circle. Sure of the loyalty of the man she calls "True Heart," Babe never imagines the destruction Truman will leave in his wake. But once a storyteller, always a storyteller—even when the stories aren't his to tell. Truman's fame is at its peak when such notable celebrities as Frank and Mia Sinatra, Lauren Bacall, and Rose Kennedy converge on his glittering Black and White Ball. But all too soon, he ignites a literary scandal whose repercussions echo through the years. The Swans of Fifth Avenue will seduce and startle readers as it opens the door onto one of America's most sumptuous eras. Praise for *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* • "Exceptional storytelling . . . teeming with scandal, gossip and excitement." • "Harper's Bazaar • This moving fictionalization brings the whole cast of characters back to vivid life. Gossipy and fun, it's also a nuanced look at the beauty and cruelty of a rarefied, bygone world." • "People • The era and the sordid details come back to life in this jewel of a novel." • "O: The Oprah Magazine • A catty, juicy read that's like a three-martini lunch." • "USA Today • [Captures] the mesmerizing sparkle and scandal of New York high society in the 1950s." • "Chicago Tribune • Tantalizing . . . Readers will fall into a world of glitz, glamour and the exciting life of the rich and famous. The details and conversations are so rich, you may forget you're reading a novel." • "Associated Press • Highly entertaining." • "The Washington Post • Take Gossip Girl and move it to the 50s." • "theSkimm • The strange and fascinating relationship between Capote and his "swans" is wonderfully reimagined in this

engrossing novel • "Sara Gruen, New York Times bestselling author of *Water for Elephants*  
• Your next must-read book-club selection. • "Jamie Ford, New York Times bestselling author  
of *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When Truman Capote published *La Cote Basque* 1965 (in 1975), it was much to the embarrassment and shame of a top tier group of NY Society women, formerly referred to by Truman Capote as his "Swans." The Swans were comprised of Barbara Paley, Slim Keith, C.Z. Guest, Maria Agnelli and Gloria Guinness (and several others). For a few decades – the 1950s to the 1970s – these were the "IT" girls. You didn't mess with them. That is, unless you were Truman Capote on booze and drugs. There is a *Vanity Fair* article entitled, *Bye Society*, by Gerald Clarke, from 1988 that one can read online – just google it – that is very informative as this story goes. For many years, Truman Capote ingratiated himself into the lives of these women, who loved and adored him and who trusted him with all of their many secrets and private circumstances. His later downward spiral following years of obsessive focus on *In Cold Blood*, a time that included enough alcohol and drugs to choke a horse, resulted in his somewhat unethical betrayal of the Swans right there on the pages of *Esquire*, for all the world to see. Truman was especially close to Barbara "Babe" Paley, the glamorous wife of CBS executive, Bill Paley, and much of this novel has to do with this central relationship. In a way, Truman and Babe were soulmate friends who sincerely adored and understood each other's frailties. Truman was welcomed into Babe's life as well as the other ladies' lives, complete with a constant flow of invitations to their magnificent houses and

yachts and gifts of extravagant luxuries. Even as a relatively young and unknown writer, he was accepted into influential circles, meeting people and celebrities he wouldn't have otherwise. As his fame grew and his talent recognized, he changed. And not for the better. With an overindulgence of drugs and drink, he became unable to focus on another book the magnitude of *In Cold Blood*. Instead, he penned *La Cote Basque* 1965 (in 1975) and betrayed his beloved Babe and the rest of the Swans. The results were quite shattering for most of the group. As the *Vanity Fair* article states, he committed Social Suicide. Big time. This novel is based on facts but does fill in some of the blanks with literary fiction, which includes a sufficient amount of juicy, catty, backstabbing dialogue. We learn a lot about Truman's personal life, his mother issues, his longing for fame and notoriety and his downward spiral into that Social Suicide. The funny thing is that when you think about this type of thing in today's media environment, the fallout would be minimal. Back then it was devastating. I read this back to back with a small book of Truman Capote's early stories that is just being released. It was a nice companion, thinking about Truman's relationships and lifestyle. Well written and researched. Recommend.

Truman Capote...we've all seen the movies. We all (if we really love books) have read 'Breakfast at Tiffany's', 'In Cold Blood' and Capote's other books. Including the bits and pieces he produced for what he considered his masterpiece, 'Answered Prayers'. That book, really an unfinished collection of essays, was (I believe) his poorest work and the one that ended his career and his time in high society New York. This book is a fictionalized description of his life as the beautiful boy of society, through his sad death from alcohol, drugs, and other excesses. The 'swans' in the title are the beautiful society women he befriended, and whose husbands thought it was fine. He was, after all, clearly not a threat to them in a meaningful manner, right? He was gay. Their wives would not cheat with him. They forgot, these powerful men, that their wives had access to something a lot more important than sex: secrets. And that Truman was a writer. He soaked up these secrets, this small, apparently harmless man, and then he spewed them out in public to the embarrassment of all. I read this book in one long session, literally could not stop reading. The author has a wonderful way of capturing these characters. While of course the actual dialog is not real, the outline of the story is real. It happened. Scandal, suicides, all of it happened, and at the center was this enigmatic little man and his poison pen. It's a great book. If you are interested in Capote, or of reading of 'high society' in the 1960s, this is a wonderful read.

From the 1950s into the 1970s, New York society was dominated by a group of beautiful women,

the frenemies of their time. The inner circle included Barbara "Babe" Paley, Slim Keith, Pamela Hayward, Gloria Guinness, Maria Agnelli and C. Z. Guest. Truman Capote latched onto these ladies, whom he dubbed his "Swans," and they adopted him as an adored and indulged pet. He was allowed into their boudoirs for gossip sessions and heard all their secrets. His flamboyantly effeminate behavior reassured husbands and he even became friends with Babe's husband, Bill Paley, the famously hard-charging founder and chairman of CBS. As has been well-documented, after he published *In Cold Blood*, Capote began to degenerate into drink, drugs, and dissolute company, and could be a vicious gossip. In 1975, Capote betrayed his Swans and other socialites in their outer circle by telling their secrets in the *Esquire* magazine short story "La Cote Basque 1965." The results were devastating for many.

The novel tells the story of Capote's life in New York, starting as a star-struck, slim young man, devoted to his Swans, especially to Babe Paley. Babe, of whom it is said that the only thing keeping her from perfection was that she was perfect, saw in Capote what she'd always longed for: a true and loving friend and confidante. The guilty pleasure part of the book is its depictions of the Swans' fashions and lifestyles, which include fabulously-decorated yachts, houses and apartments, long lunches at Manhattan's most elegant restaurants (where the calories come from champagne and the food just gets pushed around the plate), hobnobbing with celebrities from all walks of life, servants for every need. The gossipy dialog is very much a part of the guilty pleasure. Still a pleasure, but a less guilty one, is the book's examination of the relationship between Capote and Babe Paley, two emotionally fragile characters who seemed to fill the deep need each had to be recognized and loved for his/herself. Author Melanie Benjamin's depiction of Capote's decline and descent into self-destructive behavior and betrayal feels very real. Her characterization of Babe Paley is touching.

The more serious side of the book is Benjamin's treatment of the fact that the Swans have achieved the pinnacle of society through marriage to wealthy men. Beneath the Swans' glamorous and assured surface, there are questions about the purpose of their lives, and the risks to their marriages and status as they age. There is a scene at the beginning of the book when Truman sees Babe greeting husband Bill Paley when he comes home from work. This beautiful, engaging woman becomes completely attuned to his needs, reapplying her makeup, dressing up, fixing his cocktail, serving him hors d'oeuvres, tantalizing him with a description of the wonderful dinner he'll be served, massaging his feet. I know this is fiction, but this scene mesmerized me and made me see how, in that era, a beautiful woman's best way to achieve the comforts of wealth was to essentially enslave herself to a rich man. And when a trophy wife knows that she could lose it all at her husband's whim, she had to keep polishing that trophy non-stop. Sometimes, Benjamin makes the mistake of telling this point

rather than showing it. Otherwise, this adds poignancy and helps make the Swans more sympathetic characters. If you'd like to read "La Cote Basque 1965," you can find it as a chapter in Capote's unfinished novel, *Answered Prayers*.

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