

Book review

A Mother's Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of the Columbine Tragedy

Edited by Sue Klebold

WH Allen

London

2017

ISBN 978-0753556818 (Paperback)

Keywords Columbine

Review DOI

10.1108/JFP-11-2019-057

The Columbine High School shooting was meticulously planned and received unprecedented media coverage in 1999. It became a potent convergence point for a multitude of societal issues: gun control, school bullying culture, alternative youth sub-culture and the influence of alternative rock music and video games, to name but a few. Twenty years on, its legacy persists as a frame of reference readily applied to similar spree attacks and it has led to multiple copycat school shootings. Ostensibly, this is a memoir of living in its wake. However, given the author is Dylan Klebold's mother, its perspective is singularly unwonted. Seventeen-year-old Dylan was one of two shooters to eventually turn weapons on themselves after killing twelve fellow students and a teacher. They also seriously injured and irrevocably traumatised countless others.

Sue Klebold's professional background is in the disabilities sector. Her Colorado household is described as neither staunchly pro-gun, nor an environment where extremist views were ever tolerated. She places this in counterpoint to later experiences of media and public vilification and exaggeration of aspects of their home life such as perceived wealth and parenting styles. In the aftermath, this memoir is her account of their family's experiences in trying to come to terms with the maelstrom of devastation, grief, heartbreak, confusion, blame and hate-campaigns that ensued. They endured death threats, bankruptcy, tens of lawsuits and eventually, divorce. In a lucid, measured and deeply reflective style, she painstakingly retells the time leading up to and the years after the event. She does so with striking candour. The familiar domestic rhythms and struggles to emerge will surely resonate with

readers as those of a typical loving family endeavouring to do their best. The *New York Times* Book Review said it read, "[...] as if written under oath".

Through her own study and research on mental health, she has come to frame what happened as murder-suicide and believed her son to have been depressed and suicidal in the months before and at the time. The tragedy is considered with the utmost respect for the victims and their families. She does so offering tentative analyses with thoughtful curiosity and humility. It represents a 17-year process of reaching for answers. She does not intend this as exonerative, nor does it read as such. With her memoir, Sue Klebold is also reaching out to the victims' families. At the core of what happened, she also lost her child. She feels she and her husband missed crucial – yet subtle – signs in the preceding months and has made it her life's mission to ensure others do not. *The Times* described it as, "[...] required reading for the parents of adolescents" and she discusses her own learning and insights from relevant mental health experts at various points. In recent years, she has since worked extensively with charities around stigma and suicide prevention in the USA with any profits from this book being passed on.

As the narrator and mother of one of the perpetrators, a fine balance was inevitability going to be toed – and actuated in readers' minds – as to self-portrayal and culpability. The thrust of blame is for the most part leveled at Eric Harris, Dylan's co-accomplice, with the hypothesis that her son's purported depressive state, hopelessness and suicidal ideation rendered him more vulnerable to influence from Eric's reportedly sadistic and misanthropic outlook. Beyond the speculations, there remain nevertheless the inescapable hard truths of her son's premeditation and final acts and perhaps readers may feel aspects of their consideration to be unsatisfactory. Perhaps also, it may be that the appetite in us for this serves to render more remote still similar imagined possibilities in our own communities.

Throughout the book, the spectre of the unknowability of others torments and beleaguers her efforts; as do the complexities of her own singularly cloistered victimhood and grief. This underscores the dense turmoil through which she described wading in search of answers, or at least clues as to what went so wrong. Experiences of support from neighbours, loved ones, victims' relatives and strangers afford the reader an insight into the human capacity for immense compassion in the face of unspeakable tragedy and suffering.

This powerful memoir has much to offer any psychiatrist or indeed anyone working with families in the context of severe trauma.

Owen P. O'Sullivan

Dr Owen P. O'Sullivan, Specialty Registrar in Forensic Psychiatry, North London Forensic Service, Chase Farm Hospital, Enfield, UK and Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust, St Ann's Hospital, London, UK.

Dr Owen P. O'Sullivan can be contacted at:
Owen.O'Sullivan@nhs.net