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Columbine



Synopsis

EXPANDED WITH A NEW EPILOGUE "The tragedies keep coming. As we reel from the latest horror . . ." So begins a new epilogue, illustrating how Columbine became the template for nearly two decades of "spectacle murders." It is a false script, seized upon by a generation of new killers. In the wake of Newtown, Aurora, and Virginia Tech, the imperative to understand the crime that sparked this plague grows more urgent every year. What really happened April 20, 1999? The horror left an indelible stamp on the American psyche, but most of what we "know" is wrong. It wasn't about jocks, Goths, or the Trench Coat Mafia. Dave Cullen was one of the first reporters on scene, and spent ten years on this book-widely recognized as the definitive account. With a keen investigative eye and psychological acumen, he draws on mountains of evidence, insight from the world's leading forensic psychologists, and the killers' own words and drawings-several reproduced in a new appendix. Cullen paints raw portraits of two polar opposite killers. They contrast starkly with the flashes of resilience and redemption among the survivors.

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Customer Reviews

Ten years have passed since the tragic event that has become synonymous with school shootings. Columbine was once a word that simply denoted a high school, a football team or a state flower. But now the word is tainted. Despite the fact that we have moved on to newer tragedies with higher body-counts, the stain has not been scrubbed off of the word `Columbine'. But perhaps we need to do something other than wish it away. A better solution might be a deeper understanding of

Columbine and similar events. The What, How and Why. Most of our answers to these simple questions have been dead-wrong and it is time to replace myth with truth. But this is easier said than done. The Columbine shootings remain one of the most-thoroughly covered crimes in American history. However, despite the voluminous output of media coverage, what really happened that day, and the motivation behind the tragedy, is understood by very few people. The result of our curiosity led to more falsehoods than fact, making a clear picture of the events on and leading up to April 20th, 1999 difficult to discern. In many ways the vast outpouring of information makes this tragedy even harder to grasp; the chaff vastly outweighs the wheat. Which makes Dave Cullen's new book, *Columbine*, an accomplishment that catapults him to the top of the genre. Not since Capote's *In Cold Blood* do we find such a thoughtful, illuminating, riveting, and disturbing portrait of the criminal mind. *Columbine* doesn't just explode the myths of what happened that day and why. Instead the book carefully dissects our biases, revealing a populace eager to blame this tragedy on poor parenting, Satan, rock music, or goth kids because it is simpler and more convenient than hearing the truth. And the truth is that Eric Harris was a born psychopath and Dylan Klebold was clinically depressed, eager to please, and clawing for an escape hatch. Together they formed a rare and volatile combination known as a criminal dyad, a coupling of an egomaniacal control freak and a doting, depressed side-kick. Like Bonnie and Clyde and the D.C. snipers, the duo had a push-me pull-me effect that spun both kids out of control and down a dangerous path that now seems well-worn and obvious as we trace it back. Cullen's coverage of the tragedy is remarkably broad and deep for a book that doesn't even run 400 pages. The entire scope of the Columbine shootings are covered with almost no wasted space. The book is agonizingly well-researched and brilliantly end-noted. Cullen was one of the Colorado journalists covering the event as it was happening, and has been following the aftermath for the past ten years. He has become one of the most informed minds to wrestle with the shooting, and one of the few to draw the right conclusions. The layout and pacing in *Columbine* is also ingenious. Instead of pretending that this was a tidy moment in history that can be covered from beginning to end, Cullen pays homage to the frustrating way that details coalesced into a final picture. Jumping back and forth from Eric and Dylan's lives before the event to the tragic consequences that reverberated after, Cullen gradually paints a full portrait of the two men in much the way that they revealed themselves to investigators. There is no pretension here that this is a subject with an easy beginning, middle, and end. Any other method of relating this story would not do the popular confusion justice, nor would it result in such a vivid understanding of what these two boys were like, and what damage they wreaked on their community. Another impressive touch is the complete lack of images presented in the book. The center clump of photographs, a

mainstay of good non-fiction, is conspicuously absent. You will not find a single picture of the killers nor their victims. It took some time for me to appreciate this classy move by the author and publishers. There is no sensationalism here. This is an outstanding work of journalism that is not only the authoritative account of what happened at Columbine high school, it is also a glimpse of criminal psychosis that I believe will be held up as a classic in years to come. This isn't just a good book, it is an important book. It is not just about the past, and not just about this one event, it is about a sad fact of the human condition, and a call for forward-looking vigilance, not backwards-glaring vengeance. What most impressed me about Cullen's conclusions was his shucking off of the dangerous blank slate theory that causes so much societal grief. To this day most people blame poor parenting on the tragedy of Columbine. The sadness and horror that I feel when thinking about the treatment of Eric and Dylan's parents disgusts me. This injustice is fueled by the poor grasp that the vast majority of people have about human nature. It is a failing that causes harm in thousands of daily ways, and Cullen does his part in dispelling some of these myths. Some people are born with an inability to empathize with the feelings of others. And of these, some have an uncanny ability to blend in, conning the rest of us into thinking that they are normal. They are the stereotypical serial killers, described by friends and neighbors as the "nicest boy". And our failure to grasp the innate nature of these members of society makes us even more likely to be duped by them. One of the other fascinating threads in Columbine is the unreliability of eyewitness accounts and the way that early mistakes were not corrected with the passage of time, but rather hardened, becoming cemented in Columbine lore. The Trench Coat Mafia and a massive conspiracy involving many other participants led many people astray, including investigators. The idea that these were unpopular geeks who were picked on by bullies led to a national campaign against something that played no role in the tragedy. Eric and Dylan more often played the role of bully than they did bullied. And implications that music, movies, goth lifestyle, Hitler, or videogames inspired their actions are as false as Michael Moore's assertions that they bowled on the day of the shooting. Columbine replaces these falsehoods with an account of two kids that simply hated the world and its occupants. Everyone was beneath them. These were not kids cast out by society; they were misfits by choice. They fled the robots/zombies/sheep with eagerness and disdain. They celebrated the fact that they did not belong. Nobody pushed them away or ridiculed them, in fact they were just as popular in their own clique as any other kid, and just as invisible to most kids as we all were to people outside of our social circle. The kids who were not respected were Eric and Dylan's peers. The duo were able to look down on them from such a height of hubris as to be able to dehumanize them. Making them something outside of their scope of empathy. Easy enough to

dispatch. In this way, Marilyn Manson got it just as wrong as anyone else. When asked what he would have said to the kids in Moore's film *Bowling for Columbine*, Manson replied, "I wouldn't say a single word to them. I would listen to what they have to say, and that's what no one did." This notion that the boys were raging against a world that would not take them seriously is also debunked. The sad fact is that psychopaths are born with measurable differences in how their brains work. We can point to these peculiarities on a brain scan. And the differences are noted extremely early in a child's development. The idea that more compassion would prevent these tragedies is the claim that gasoline will extinguish a fire. These kids thrived on winning people over, which they did with ease. Possibly the most shocking myth stripped down in the book is that this was a school shooting by design. The event became the poster for gun restrictions, which may be a noble cause, but it misses the intentions that Eric and Dylan had that day. By all accounts, the attack was a dismal failure. The massive bombs that they rigged up did not go off as planned. They had a low body count estimate in the hundreds, but hoped for thousands. They wanted to start a worldwide revolution. And they hoped they could do this all without devastating their parents. In every possible way, these boys failed. They failed their society, their peers, their parents, and thank goodness, they failed themselves. These failures continue to cast ripples today. Cullen devotes a good chunk of his book to the horrible aftermath of these events. An investigation that became disgustingly political included cover-ups and foot-dragging. There were copycats, pranks and bomb-threats. Survivors went through physical and emotional re-hab. Some people tried to profit from the shooting. The school had to be rebuilt, along with the student body and the surrounding community. Some relationships were bonded for eternity, and some shattered. Depression and post-traumatic-stress were prevalent and devastating. Lawsuits were filed. The entire town seemed to be cursed, with normal bad luck ascribed to the ghost of Columbine. Cullen captures all of this with stunning detail and respectfulness. There is no stone that he does not peek under, describe, and then return with loving care. That he pulled this balancing act off for the entire book, detailing an event with so many scars and controversy, is absolutely stunning. The end result is a book that should be required reading for every teacher, guidance counselor, clinical psychologist and parent. *Columbine* unmasks universal and innate tendencies that a small portion of our population harbors. And what makes this minority dangerous is that they have no empathy for the rest of us, and a genius for hiding this flaw. The signs of their disease are usually there, but they are murky due to our faith in nurture conquering nature. *Columbine* is not just an account of an American tragedy, it is a guide for preventing future ones. We must begin by accepting that much of who we are is the dumb luck of genetics, but that this does not exculpate our actions. Sure, we can dream up more pleasant

realities for us to operate within, where free will plays a larger role, and loving someone enough will make everything all right, but fantasy is never a solution for improving our existence. It is just the comforting blanket we tragically suffocate ourselves with.

To rate five stars, a book should be memorable, thoroughly researched, and well-written. The reader should be absorbed into the book to the point that he/she and the author have a "shared experience" and the reader should be changed in some way by that experience. Dave Cullin succeeds on all counts. *Columbine* is a riveting narrative. He addresses many myths that the press created in the first moments after the tragedy and that most of us still believe. He also defends his premise -- that Eric Harris wasn't bullied, but a bully and a psychopath -- very well with ample substantiation. I recommend this book. Now, a caution: As of this writing there are 11 1-star and 12 2-star reviews of this book. Nearly all of these are written by reviewers who object not to the work itself, but to Mr. Cullin's premise. They are angered by the suggestion that the two boys weren't victims of bullying, or that their parents weren't to blame (although they made their mistakes as we all do), or that the school couldn't have anticipated the attack. These aren't legitimate reviews of the book. If an author presents a well-substantiated argument, he deserves credit for writing a good book, even if you don't agree with his conclusions. The dialogue throughout the reviews (both reviews and responsive comments) is badly compromised by writers with their own agendas -- including authors of competing books. Be aware that the reviewer and commenter, Randy Brown who identifies himself as "A Columbine Parent" (creating legitimacy) generally fails to mention that his son Brooks wrote a book on the matter as well. Mr. Brown's comments are as welcome as anyone's, but by failing to mention this conflict of interest, he is misleading readers. Mr. Brown's agenda is to promote the "stop school bullying" agenda, by insisting that Eric's attack was the result of school bullying. A noble cause, but confusing, considering Eric bullied Brooks for years, to the point that the Brown family called the police many times.

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