



## Columbine: A True Crime Story

*Jeff Kass*

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Literary Nonfiction. United States Studies. With a foreword by Douglas Brinkley and cover illustration by Ralph Steadman. Ten years after Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed twelve classmates and a teacher, Columbine remains the world's most iconic school shooting. COLUMBINE: A TRUE CRIME STORY, A VICTIM, THE KILLERS AND THE NATION'S SEARCH FOR ANSWERS is the first book of investigative journalism to tell the complete story of that day, the far-reaching consequences, and the common denominators among school shooters across the country. Jeff Kass was one of the first reporters on scene and has continued to cover the story as a staff writer for Denver's Rocky Mountain News.

## **Columbine: A True Crime Story Details**

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Author : Jeff Kass

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## From Reader Review Columbine: A True Crime Story for online ebook

### Nikki says

While I think this is a better over all book than Dave Cullen's Columbine, there were parts that just seemed like they were filler. He goes into details of minor people and it's just unnecessary. He doesn't talk nearly enough about the victims, however, it felt much more than what Cullen did.

I think people like Cullen's book better simply because Cullen chooses to make people believe we have an excellent portrait of the killers. We can even label them. Kass doesn't take that tact, which doesn't make people feel good. When you can label someone as a psychopath and someone else as a depressive, it makes people believe you can identify someone by traits, that we'll be able to prevent people from doing similar things as long as we observe them carefully and treat them accordingly.

Kass doesn't give readers false hope that these two kids were anything more than average kids who did something inexplicable. I think that's a better way to go about it than to pretend to break down their personalities after death and say "We know who they were."

Because we don't.

We never will. Even with the basement tapes and journals, we don't know if those were fabricated by the killers to project something or if it was truly who and what they were. To say we have the answers when it's clear that we do not, is wrong.

I am glad to be finished with this book and to be moving on from Columbine.

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### Jill Crosby says

Fairly decent---did little to uncover any new information on the tragedy; the author spent most of his time complaining about how no one would "talk to him/" Not the Jefferson County Sheriff's Dept., not the families of the shooters, not the families of the victims (with the exception, of course, of the media-hound & racial trump-card throwing Michael Shoels, father of victim Isaiah.) No one would talk to this guy---a reporter for the "Rocky Mountain Times."

He's all about burial of information, deceit, and doing some open flirting with the idea of "cover-up." The tidbits he did manage to discover about the sad little lives lived out by the shooters just prior to the event were worthwhile and provided some insight into the tragedy; I was disappointed that more time wasn't devoted to delving into the meaning of these activities--maybe consulting with psychologists/sociologists/anthropologists--- instead of railing against government bureaucracies, whose sole purpose for existence seems to be hiding documents. I was interested especially in the journal pages and essays produced by the two shooters--surface examination reveals them for what they are and were (violent drawings and rantings produced by deeply angry individuals), but little light was shed on the deeper meanings or messages contained in those scribblings. It was as if Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" had been paraded in front of a group of art students, while the instructor says, "See? Here's the 'Mona Lisa.' Yup. That's it all right." At the books' close, I wasn't certain if the "True Crime" in the title of the book represented the actual tragedy, or the mess made by the authorities of doing the requisite "damage control" after the fact.

Book's weaknesses: Undertone of complaining, lack of significant insight or revelation of the tragedy/crime

Book's Strengths: Spot-on reporting skills clearly demonstrated documented events leading up to the shooting; inclusion of drawings and essays to give some testimony about how the shooters were thinking; in-depth reporting the reactions of the shooter's families---a piece left out of MANY school shooting narratives.

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### **Madelyn Louis says**

Columbine by Jeff Kass is a news novel that incorporates all aspects of the tragic school shooting that occurred at Columbine High School on April 20th, 1999. It includes all the information from the entire investigation starting with a detailed description of how Eric and Dylan, the killers, showed up to school that day and murdered 12 of their classmates and 1 teacher. It also incorporates so many people involved with the tragedy like Eric and Dylan's families, friends, other classmates, and families of the victims. Along with evidence, it has an analysis of both murderers throughout the book.

What I liked about this book was how detailed and personal it was. Although some of it is disturbing, it's very emotional and I got to see many different perspectives of how people are affected by a school shooting. I also liked how much information the author included because it provides the reader with many points of view.

The only thing I didn't like about this book was sometimes there was too much extra information that didn't really seem necessary to include. But that only happened a few times so there was not much else that I disliked about this book.

This book was definitely difficult to comprehend solely because of the fact that it is true. It's intriguing to go deeper into a tragedy such as this in order to understand why it might have happened and this book is definitely not a typical read.

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### **Shaun says**

Like Cullen's more popular book on the same subject, Kass' books excels on some levels and fails on others.

#### **In the positive column:**

-Kass provides many more examples of the killers' personal diaries, writings, and other relevant documents. There is nothing like hearing from the killers in their own words.

-Kass focuses more on the killers and their motivations. I felt as if I had a clearer picture of who Dylan Klebold was...though Harris remained more elusive...perhaps because his family has been so tight-lipped since the shooting.

-Kass spends more time on the killers' families and the scrutiny they faced after the fact, and it's quite an interesting discussion. How much blame should the parents assume? At the very least, shouldn't they have known something was not right? Kass also spends a little more time on exposing all the warning signs that were either missed and/or discounted.

-Kass discusses how the lack of transparency on the part of investigators and the parents of the killers has impeded the process of analyzing what went wrong. He seems to think, and I would agree, that it is impossible to truly understand what happened at Columbine if everyone self-edits...in part because they are concerned about the backlash...primarily being sued or found culpable both legally and morally speaking.

For example, I understand that Dylan and Eric's parents are also victims and want to get on with their lives, but I think it is their responsibility (whether fair or not) to be as upfront and as honest as possible, if only so we can try to understand how this happened. Of course, this is tough for many reasons, especially when many hold the parents accountable on some level...which is sad.

It sounds as if their lawyers advised them to keep quiet. That is also another interesting aspect of this case that gets more attention in this book--the number of lawsuits and settlements and the role that these legal proceedings played in the aftermath. It seems as if everyone was looking to blame and then even sue everyone else whether for financial gain or simply to win access to information.

### **In the negative column:**

-Kass spends quite a bit of time giving us Susan Klebold's family tree...most of which seems to be irrelevant and boring filler.

-Kass occasionally inserts his own bias into the discussion, presenting it almost as fact rather than his opinion.

-Eric Harris, arguably the one who played a more assertive role in both the planning and execution of the shooting, seemed to fade into the background...again, maybe because the Harris' have been less open and willing to talk. It also appears, unlike Dylan, who was liked by many, Harris was more of a loner who people didn't generally warm up to.

-While competently written, this book could have used a more thorough editor. It wasn't horrible, but it could have been better.

### **Conclusion:**

Honestly, after reading the two accounts, I can't say one is "better" than the other. They are both worthy in their own right. If, like me, you are interested in the killers and their motivations, I think Kass' book definitely provides more detail and is even more honest. On the other hand, Cullen's book does a better job of exploring the after-effects on the community as a whole. It's also more "reader friendly."

One key important difference between the two accounts the role bullying and or rejection from peers played. Cullen seems to say it was minimal and more a myth that these boys were retaliating for bad deeds done to them. Yet after reading Dylan and Eric's own words, I think Cullen may be undervaluing/underestimating the significance of these social pressures.

Personally, if you are really curious about Columbine, I would recommend reading both. There is some overlap obviously, but (surprisingly) I think each book covers the tragedy in different yet complimentary ways. I definitely feel as if I have a fuller picture after reading this book than I did after simply reading Cullen's book.

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### **Dan Phillips says**

This was a poorly written, horribly dull book - especially compared with Dave Cullen's *Columbine*. The most interesting parts were the fuller excerpts from Eric and Dylan's journals and school essays. Elsewhere, Jeff Kass spends a telling amount of time explaining why no-one wants to talk to him. So here we have a book about trying to write a book about *Columbine*...and failing.

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### **Edward Kearns says**

This book was the most poorly edited tome I have ever laid eyes on. The book was poorly written, poorly organized and lacked a cohesive narrative.

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### **Rebecca McNutt says**

Chilling and unsettling yet as important now as ever, *Columbine* is a disturbing true crime book but worth reading all the same.

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### **Crystal says**

Cullen's look at *Columbine* is much more resonant and poignant. Kass' approach feels sensationalized and biased. He injects himself so much within the text that I frequently felt as though he were patting himself on the back for all he accomplished in digging up dirt on the families of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. He only mentions one of the victims' families in detail - that of Isaiah Shoeles - which appear to be as out for their 15 minutes of fame as they are for memorializing their son.

It's ok for what it is, but if I were to recommend a book on *Columbine*, it wouldn't be this one.

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### **Tânia says**

Jeff Kass was one of the first reporters on the scene on April 20th, 1999 to cover the news of the *Columbine* High School shootings and spent the following years doing research for this book. The result is a comprehensive, if somewhat biased account of the day of the shootings and its aftermath.

For the most part, it's a fairly good addition to other *Columbine* related books but it lost direction every time the author strayed from the main point to irrelevant facts like Colorado background history or the Klebold's family tree (pretty intrusive move on his part, in my opinion). It could do with good edition work and grammar rectification.

He spends too much time analyzing the killers, and not enough on the victims, so this reads more like a

psychological autopsy. There are many more examples of their writings, drawings, videotape's transcripts, and full school essays so revealing one has to wonder how it is possible people missed the warning signs. I'm sure no one could've predicted a school shooting, but looking at this they could have at least recognized something was wrong.

One also has to wonder: wasn't there one single moment of doubt in their one year in the making attack plan?

Jeff Kass's take on the whole investigation is different but interesting to read. It can also be very disturbing and the "Day One" chapter is particularly graphic because it recounts the shootings much like a police report.

That said, I'm glad this is over.

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### **Jessica says**

Badly written (example: "One of Dylan's favorite presents to Devon was \$10."), some of the same excerpts included multiple times, padded with irrelevant information about extended family, and plenty of instances of Kass trying and failing to get the information he wants because he has made himself rather unpopular to many people associated with this tragedy and its aftermath.

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### **Gracie says**

Columbine, A True Crime Story is the definitive book on the mass shooting that took place at Columbine High School on April 19, 1999 in Littleton, CO

Jeff Kass was one of the first reporters on the scene. However when the media circus packed up their tents and moved on to the next town, Jeff Kass continued to dig. He wanted to find out not only the what, where, and how; but the why?

In researching this book Jeff Kass dug through Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris's personal journals and daytimers. He traveled to the birthplace and talked to the families of their parents. He talked with their friends and enemies. This extensive research has lead to a very thorough portrait of who Erik and Dylan were.

There is another book recently released on this same subject, but my issue with this book is its lack of references. In Columbine by Dave Cullen he states that Eric Harris "got more tail than the football players". However in Eric's own diary days before the tragedy he complains about how girls will not give him the time of day.

Jeff Kass presents a thorough well researched, well written book on the subject. Does he give us all the answers? No, because in a senseless tragedy, there are no perfect explanations. But perhaps we can start a dialogue and learn to look for warning signs.

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### **Mary Lynn says**

This book (to me) is what it means to be a writer in that it made me understand the two killers, their motive and their background a lot more. Kass's book was an uncomfortable read that stuck with me. It is a gritty and real account of a tragedy that explores the human nature aspect of why these events happen. It also shows the frustration of journalism in getting the run around because of a cover up and negligence by the police who had the ability to do something before people were murdered and shot for no reason.

I also, like how Kass doesn't over-criminalize the killers because of their illnesses like the other book by Dave Cullen (although an easier more entertaining read) did. This is the first book I've read that almost gets it right. I have so much respect for this guy not losing focus and having the attention span to figure it out. People like him, could prevent this from happening in the future with the knowledge they now know by actually researching and having a real sense of compassion to stop it. Couldn't say enough good things about this book. Not entertaining but certainly truthful!

If you want to know more about the victims, I'd suggest reading Alan Pendergast's coverage in *Westward*.

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### **Andrea says**

I wasn't as impressed with this book as I was with the other Columbine book recently published.

The author seems to suppose things without concrete proof. I understand it's hard to prove thing with the killers dead, but then, don't "suppose" you know what they were thinking either.

The layout was kind of jumpy and all over the place, although that may have been the author's intention. There were also a few grammatical errors (that were NOT in the intentionally left in area).

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### **Gaby says**

I've long been interested in Columbine, partly because it happened while I myself was in high school and partly because when the media talked about these messed up killers, it was scary how they didn't seem so very different to my friends and me. That's why I picked this book.

I thought Part One was very strong. It describes the events preceding Columbine and the day of the shooting thoroughly and systematically. It was very well researched and narrated. There were some parts which could've been cut out- background on Colorado and on the Klebolds- but mostly as a reader I trusted the author knew where he was going with this. Part Two, which deals with the emotional and legal aftermath of the event, was like an altogether different book. It felt rushed due to scattered grammar mistakes that were absent in the first part, and worse, objectivity was completely lost to the point I felt like re-reading Part One more critically. For instance, the excessive background into the Klebolds now feels like it was the author's

petty revenge on a family that wouldn't talk to him. Like he fought so hard to get minor details about the family, he made damn sure he'd publish them, even though ultimately they added nothing. The theme throughout Part Two is that the killers' families and the police didn't want to talk to the author, and it gets annoying even if the author disguises his bruised ego with a "the truth must be known!" way. He also overly focuses on one victim's family (a controversial one at that) simply because (I'm guessing) they were willing to talk to him, when an overview of all victims' families would have been better (such as the very good "13 Families: Life After Columbine" documentary).

It has its flaws, but I would still recommend this book to anyone interested in Columbine, as it contains valuable and easy-to-digest information.

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### **Gina says**

I kind of read this book by accident. I thought this was the one I wanted when I should have gotten David Cullen's Columbine. Oh well. I will read that one later after I've let this one settle in for a while.

When I taught at a college in Colorado, I had to spend 4 hours in intensive active shooter training. Columbine, 10+ years earlier, is the reason. And just when I think it is maybe being overly cautious, a co-worker's daughter is shot in the Aurora theater shooting. She lived. So while I can't claim any personal connection, I find myself like a lot of people drawn to answers as to why these shootings occur. You won't find any answers to that here and even Kass argues those answers may not exist. He takes a journalistic approach, fact after fact, to the police documents, documents that were only released 3 to 5 years after the shooting. I learned a good bit I didn't know about the shooters, their families, and the police response. However, Kass fills this book with so much non-essential information, pages and pages of facts from his research that have nothing to do with the case itself, it is hard to wade through all of it to what is relevant. Instead of summarizing information, Kass spends numerous pages filled with disjointed quotes from people or documents. I can appreciate what the author is trying to do and the angle he wants to present the information, but he does it poorly through bad writing and editing.

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