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We Need To Talk About Kevin



Synopsis

That neither nature nor nurture bears exclusive responsibility for a child's character is self-evident. But generalizations about genes are likely to provide cold comfort if it's your own child who just opened fire on his fellow algebra students and whose class photograph—with its unseemly grin—is shown on the evening news coast-to-coast. If the question of who's to blame for teenage atrocity intrigues news-watching voyeurs, it tortures our narrator, Eva Khatchadourian. Two years before the opening of the novel, her son, Kevin, murdered seven of his fellow high school students, a cafeteria worker, and the much-beloved teacher who had tried to befriend him. Because his sixteenth birthday arrived two days after the killings, he received a lenient sentence and is currently in a prison for young offenders in upstate New York. In relating the story of Kevin's upbringing, Eva addresses her estranged husband, Frank, through a series of startlingly direct letters. Fearing that her own shortcomings may have shaped what her son became, she confesses to a deep, long-standing ambivalence about both motherhood in general—and Kevin in particular. How much is her fault? *We Need To Talk About Kevin* offers no at explanations for why so many white, well-to-do adolescents—whether in Pearl, Paducah, Springfield, or Littleton—have gone nihilistically off the rails while growing up in the most prosperous country in history. Instead, Lionel Shriver tells a compelling, absorbing, and resonant story with an explosive, haunting ending. She considers motherhood, marriage, family, career—while framing these horrifying tableaux of teenage carnage as metaphors for the larger tragedy of a country where everything works, nobody starves, and anything can be bought but a sense of purpose.

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Customer Reviews

"We Need To Talk About Kevin" is a disquieting, provocative, and brilliantly written novel about a mother, desperately attempting to understand why her son, 15-year-old Kevin, brutally, with premeditation, murdered seven of his fellow classmates, a cafeteria worker and his English teacher in a Columbine-style school massacre. There have been nationwide discussions on the cause of events like these - especially during the 1990s when it seemed like school shootings ran rampant throughout the US. In Pearl, Paducah, Springfield, Littleton, seemingly normal kids, kids who had almost everything a child could want, became terribly derailed. Some argue that the proliferation of and easy access to guns is the cause; others that the excess of violence in movies, TV programs and video games induce violent behavior in children and adolescents. The one question almost everyone seems to have in common is, "What were these murderous kids' parents like?" "Didn't they recognize symptoms of violence in their own children?" Eva Khatchadourian, Kevin's bereft mother, narrates this novel through a series of compelling letters to her estranged husband, Franklin. She examines her son's life, from conception to his terrible act of violence, trying to understand the why of it. What becomes clear early on is that Eva tortures herself with blame. She is guilt-ridden that her shortcomings as a parent might have caused Kevin's evil act, his violent behavior, his very nature. She must have failed, she must have been deficient as a mother, for her boy to commit such a chilling crime. She also considers that neither nature nor nurture are solely responsible for shaping a child's character.

Kevin is one of a recent series of "Columbine" books--those that try and plumb the characters of young boys who plan high school massacres. Some are just bad (Vernon God Little), others are great (Project X). Kevin falls in the middle. Its major strength is the compelling nature of the premise--just what is it that caused young Kevin (in prison at the time of the novel's present) to kill several of his classmates and some school staff? It's the sort of question we all know there is no real answer for, and yet we feel the need to ask it anyway. Both the question and the need to ask it

are examined through the course of the narration--structured as a series of letters from Eva, Kevin's mother, to her estranged husband and Kevin's father, Franklin. While the structure allows for a lot of introspection and detail, it also feels a bit gimmicky in places. On the one hand, it seems self-evidently clumsy when she spends so much time telling Franklin things he already knows, having lived through those same scenes. On the other hand, that self-evident clumsiness eventually too obviously hints at what is supposed to be, as Publisher Weekly puts it, "a huge and crushing shock." Without giving much away, I'll say it didn't seem all that shocking by the time it happened and somewhat worsened the contrived feel of the structure. The other negative aspect of Shriver's choice of structure is that it locks us into a single voice, that of the mother, and over the book's 300+ pages, that voice starts to wear on the reader. Actually, it began to wear on this reader pretty early and Eva's voice was one of the major stumbling blocks to continuing the book.

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