

Blood relations: how to live with a killer in the family

Marina Benjamin probes the stories of the Columbine killers and the Unabomber through *A Mother's Reckoning* by Sue Klebold and *Every Last Tie* by David Kaczynski.

Marina Benjamin

30 Mar 2016



(Photo By Getty)

Life changed in an instant for Sue Klebold one morning in April 1999, when her son Dylan, then just 17 years old, walked into Columbine High School in Colorado along with his fellow pupil Eric Harris, armed with pipe bombs and guns, and proceeded over 50 agonising minutes to kill 12 pupils and a teacher before taking his own life. Hearing about the massacre, Klebold wanted to throttle her son, but he'd beaten her to it. She longed to die herself, and felt suffocated by shame and guilt. Blundering numbly through the weeks and months that followed, she was unable to grieve for Dylan because what he had done was so huge and unforgivable that it drowned out everything else.

Even now, she writes, "I would give my life to reverse what happened that day . . . Nothing I will ever be able to do or say can possibly atone for the massacre." What she does do, however, is mine her family's history, searching for answers about how her "sunshine boy", her "shiny penny" – polite, smart, funny, the son who loved building computers and fixing up cars with his dad – came to commit such a heinous act. Her book is an exercise in self-healing, an attempt to silence the sour mantra replaying constantly inside her head: how could I not have seen the signs? Or intuited Dylan's despair? "How could I not have known what my son was planning?"

They say that time heals, but Klebold was merely pitched from one hellhole into another. The triple whammy of guilt, grief and shame spawned debilitating panic attacks and digestive ailments; the "firestorm of hate" that raged at her and her husband,

Tom, for years after the shootings, forced them to live as virtual fugitives. When a child goes on the rampage, the rest of the world holds the parents accountable. Yet the heartfelt lesson of *A Mother's Reckoning* lies in seeing just how much parents blame themselves. Klebold's pages are racked with wincing self-flagellation.

As well as being a work of penance, this book is a form of restitution: a way for Klebold to offer some small portion of comfort to the disconsolate Columbine parents – and not only them, because, between its lines, she finally and movingly allows herself to grieve for the loss of her son, telling the world (in lieu of telling him) how much he was loved and cherished.

Although it is brave of her to venture into print, what impelled her was a desire to set records aright. The press portrayed her and Tom as “useless . . . bumbling and blindly oblivious”, or as having “knowingly shielded a hateful racist, turning a blind eye to the arsenal he was assembling under our roof, thereby exposing an entire community to danger”. Contrite or defensive, they couldn't win.

By opening a window on to her family life and allowing fresh air to blow in, Klebold shows that Dylan committed atrocities not because of his upbringing but in spite of it. She and Tom were hands-on, emotionally literate parents – even if they couldn't read the crucial signs that their son had been derailed; even if they were unaware that he suffered from what Klebold insists, awkwardly, on calling “brain illness”. The point remains: what Dylan did, any teenager could do, and, love them as they might, their parents may be none the wiser, either to the cause or to the cure. “Love is not enough,” Klebold writes. It is a blood-curdling message.

The myth is that only “evil” children commit horrific acts of violence. It is an assumption that Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* unhelpfully enlarged, against a backdrop in which Columbine was followed by shootings at Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook. But while Klebold knows that there is no getting around Dylan having murdered people, she wants us to note nonetheless that he died by suicide. On this seemingly small distinction between “murder” and “murder-suicide”, the entire book hangs.

It makes sense of how “a good kid” of Dylan's kind signed up to Eric Harris's baleful plan, not as a boy who had been “brainwashed” but as a co-conspirator. Various psychiatrists whom Klebold consults illuminate the toxic compact that existed between the boys: Eric was a homicidal psychopath and Dylan a suicidal depressive. Eric wanted to kill, Dylan to die. Without the other being complicit, neither boy was capable on his own of acting.

Categorising Dylan's death as a suicide is also a call to arms, a prompt to mental-health campaigners and educators everywhere to become more aware (and more vocal) about suicide prevention – as Klebold has done in recent years.

That journey from grieving parent to activist began four years after the massacre, when materials confiscated as “evidence” from the family home were returned – among them, confessional journals that she never knew existed and into which her son had poured his suicidal yearnings. Love-lorn, lonely, desperate and hateful, Dylan raged

wildly. Here was fresh torture. If only she had known! If only she had possessed, then, the knowledge and tools she has acquired since, she might have decoded the subliminal signs that subtly betrayed his profound alienation.

Very few suicides commit murder while fulfilling their death wish. But with the case of Andreas Lubitz (who took down Germanwings Flight 9525, killing 150 people last spring) in such fresh memory, any temptation to dismiss the practical utility of Klebold's soul-searching should be resisted.

Klebold cannot forgive herself. That is understandable. Yet *A Mother's Reckoning* asks the reader to let her off the hook. Is this fair? I am a great believer that good confessional writing should create unease in readers; that it should challenge and discomfit them. But asking for their dispensation oversteps the bounds of art and bleeds into therapy: as Mary Karr writes in her brilliant recent book, *The Art of Memoir*, in therapy the therapist is the mummy and the patient is the child. In writing, however, and especially in memoir, the writer must be the mummy: she is responsible for the reader, not the other way round.

One egregious omission from this book is the absence of any argument for gun control. Klebold clearly buried her head in screeds of psychiatric literature concerning suicide, and she wears her learning well; yet compelling research – which demonstrates over and over that unless a depressed and murderous child has access to a gun, he or she unequivocally cannot kill so many other people – seems to have passed her by.

Klebold might in any case do well to read David Kaczynski's memoir, which plainly demonstrates that even if you can decode the worrying signs, most likely you will explain them away. And if you don't, if you turn your murderous kin over to the law, as he did in 1995, confessing to the FBI his suspicion that his elder brother, Ted, was the Unabomber (he was), even then you cannot forgive yourself.

The Unabomber was a domestic terrorist whose true identity eluded investigators for almost two decades – over which time he killed or maimed 26 people using mail bombs. His targets, some of whom were well-known US industrialists, were chosen because, to the Unabomber's sick mind, technology was demonic. In a rant known as "The Unabomber Manifesto", he called for the rejection of technology and the reclamation of basic civic freedom.

Ted Kaczynski was deeply unhinged. But although he had slipped the bonds of society to live in the wilderness as a recluse – his glittering (if short-lived) career as a maths professor at Berkeley long behind him – part of him still craved attention, even notoriety. As with Anders Breivik, Kaczynski's campaign of terror was, to him, not just a rational pursuit, the product of a coherent ideology, but an art, with his manifesto serving as the theory and the bombing as the audience-seeking practice.

Like Klebold, David Kaczynski has become a mental-health activist, with a focus less on preventing people from unravelling than on campaigning against the death penalty. Thanks to his efforts, his schizophrenic, serial-killer brother is still alive. David continues to think of Ted lovingly, despite getting letters like "emotional bombs" in which he screeched: "I get just choked with frustration at my inability to get our

stinking family off my back, and ‘stinking family’ emphatically includes you.” David is “committed to putting a human face” on his “mentally ill brother”.

Every Last Tie doesn’t trailblaze, or hector, or self-flagellate. It is delicate in tone and elegiac in spirit. Kaczynski gives us rounded portraits of his parents: the loving mother for whom Ted was a troubled genius, unable to form lasting connections with others; the deeply moral father, who took his own life in 1990 while dying of cancer, whether to unburden the family, or himself, or in anger at the world, David will never know.

Kaczynski was vilified by the press, too, as a snitch, the guy who gave up his brother for the reward money. The FBI had guaranteed anonymity but somehow his role was leaked. Remarkably, he is not bitter; his integrity intact, he wonders what brothers are to each other: mirrors, split selves? They come from the same womb, after all. Your family, he writes, “has a certain flavour and smell unlike any other” – an ethos, perhaps even a mythology. “A brother shows you who you are – and who you are not.”

Though *Every Last Tie* is flawed – it gives no account of the Unabomber’s crimes or manifesto, and it’s unevenly written – its pages do not drip with self-recrimination. It is less showy and less gripping than Klebold’s book but it has more soul. Of the two, I have a hunch that Kaczynski’s is the one I will remember.

A Mother’s Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of the Columbine Tragedy by Sue Klebold is published by W H Allen (336pp, £16.99). *Every Last Tie: the Story of the Unabomber and His Family* by David Kaczynski is published by Duke University Press (176pp, £14.99)

Marina Benjamin’s *The Middlepause: On Turning 50* will be published by Scribe in June

The Ted K Archive

Marina Benjamin

Blood relations: how to live with a killer in the family

Marina Benjamin probes the stories of the Columbine killers and the Unabomber through A Mother's Reckoning by Sue Klebold and Every Last Tie by David

Kaczynski.

30 Mar 2016

This article appears in the 30 Mar 2016 issue of the New Statesman, The terror trail.
<newstatesman.com/culture/2016/04/blood-relations-how-live-killer-family>

www.thetedkarchive.com