Mother’s Reckoning (Klebold)

Summary

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Over the course of minutes, they would kill twelve students and a teacher and wound twenty-four others before taking their own lives.

For the last sixteen years, Sue Klebold, Dylan’s mother, has lived with the indescribable grief and shame of that day. How could her child, the promising young man she had loved and raised, be responsible for such horror?

And how, as his mother, had she not known something was wrong? Were there subtle signs she had missed? What, if anything, could she have done differently?

These are questions that Klebold has grappled with every day since the Columbine tragedy. In A Mother’s Reckoning, she chronicles with unflinching honesty her journey as a mother trying to come to terms with the incomprehensible.

In the hope that the insights and understanding she has gained may help other families recognize when a child is in distress, she tells her story in full, drawing upon her personal journals, the videos and writings that Dylan left behind, and on countless interviews with mental health experts.

Filled with hard-won wisdom and compassion, A Mother’s Reckoning is a powerful and haunting book that sheds light on one of the most pressing issues of our time. And with fresh wounds from the recent Newtown and Charleston shootings, never
has the need for understanding been more urgent.

*All author profits from the book will be donated to research and to charitable organizations focusing on mental health issue.* (From the publisher.)

**Author Bio**
- Birth—1948
- Raised—Columbus, Ohio, USA
- Education—Ohio State University
- Currently—Colorado

Sue Klebold is the mother of Dylan Klebold, one of the two shooters at Columbine High School in 1999 who killed 13 people before ending their own lives, a tragedy that saddened and galvanized the nation.

Susan came from a prominent family in Columbus, Ohio, the granddaughter of a philanthropist who build the local Jewish community center that bears his name. She and her husband Tom met at Ohio State University where both were art students. They married in 1971. Tom was eventually hired as a geophysicist for an oil company in Denver, Colorado, and Susan has worked as both a counselor at Arapahoe and Colorado Community Colleges. In 1990 the couple established Fountain Real Estate Management to oversee their rental properties.

Sue Klebold has spent the last 15 years excavating every detail of her family life, and trying to understand the crucial intersection between mental health problems and violence. Instead of becoming paralyzed by her grief and remorse, she has become a passionate and effective agent working tirelessly to advance mental health awareness and intervention. (*Adapted from the publisher and Denver Post* (http://extras.denverpost.com/news/shot0502c.htm) . Retrieved 2/21/2016.)

**Book Reviews**

[Sue Klebold] earns our pity, our empathy and, often, our admiration; and yet the book’s ultimate purpose is to serve as a cautionary tale, not an exoneration. Klebold seems to have written the book for yet another reason: to communicate with the families of the victims…. One has the eerie sense of bearing witness, in that moment, to the most intimate of communications. This is writing as action, bursting from a life so choked by circumstance that she could express that sentiment only from within the safety of a 300-page book.

*Susan Dominus - New York Times Book Review*

The author, whose son Dylan was one of two shooters who massacred 12 students and one teacher at Columbine High School in 1999, uses recollections, journals, and the profoundly disturbing writings and video recordings he left behind to reconstruct
events and ask hard questions: Why did Dylan go so very wrong? And what could she have done?

**Library Journal**

**Discussion Questions**

Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- How to Discuss a Book (helpful discussion tips)
- Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction and Nonfiction
- Read-Think-Talk (a guided reading chart)

Also, consider these LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion for *A Mother's Reckoning*...then take off on your own.

1. How does this book come across to you? What does Sue Klebold say her motivation was in writing *A Mother's Reckoning*? Does she fulfill her goal?

2. "A mother is supposed to know," Klebold has said. To what extent is she right? How much are parents supposed to know? How much can they be expected to know? If children are aware that their parents routinely search their rooms, won't they simply find better hiding places?

3. Talk about the trajectory of Dylan Klebold from Sue's "sunshine boy" to troubled, deadly killer. Was there any point when the Klebolds might have stepped in, where they might have—or should have—recognized something was amiss with Dylan, something seriously amiss?

4. How much sympathy do you accord to Sue and Tom Klebold? Has your attitude toward them changed after reading this book? Were any myths about the Klebolds dispelled, or misunderstandings clarified?

5. Should *A Mother's Reckoning* have been written? Should it have come out before this time? Or never at all?

6. Can you put yourself in Sue and Tom Klebold's place? Or is that simply too hard to contemplate?

7. School bullying has always been an troublesome element of childhood and adolescence. How has Columbine changed society's attitude toward bullying? What are the ways in which we're dealing with bullying? Are they effective?

8. What were the differences, according to Klebold, between her son Dylan and Eric Harris?
A Mother’s Reckoning,’ by Sue Klebold

By Susan Dominus

Feb. 15, 2016

Dylan Klebold pictured in the 1999 Columbine High School yearbook.

[On this week's Inside The New York Times Book Review podcast, Sue Klebold discusses “A Mother’s Reckoning.”]

Early on in her memoir, “A Mother’s Reckoning,” Sue Klebold recalls the most fateful day of her life, revealing, in some of the details, what seems to be a striking attunement to her 17-year-old son, Dylan. When he left for school that morning, he called out one word: “Bye.” She had detected, in that syllable, an edge she’d never heard before — “a sneer, almost, as if he’d been caught in the middle of a fight with someone.” The tone disturbed her enough that she turned to her husband, still in bed, and commented she was worried about Dylan. Something was amiss.

To say that she was right is an understatement. And yet, if there is one single, painful, recurring message in Klebold’s memoir, it is that she did not truly know her son — that they were in fact living in parallel universes, one of which was constructed with the elaborate
machinery of serious mental illness, or as Klebold prefers to characterize it, “brain illness.” Her son Dylan Klebold was one of the two teenage boys who committed suicide after their devastating attack on Columbine High School in 1999, killing 12 students and one teacher and wounding more than 20 others. When the horror of that day was over, and all the facts had emerged, Klebold had lost both the son she thought she had raised, as well as the person he had actually become.

Andrew Solomon, who wrote the introduction for “A Mother’s Reckoning,” included a profile of the Klebolds, written with great compassion, in his book “Far From the Tree.” But for years, the Klebolds shunned the press out of fear for how their comments would be construed, and even fear for their lives, following threats they received in the first months after Columbine. In their silence, Sue Klebold later realized, they seemed to be selfishly withholding insights that might be of use to others. A father of one of the children killed in the attacks wrote to her, with questions. Had they spent much time with Dylan at the dinner table? What would they do differently? “Might people say you were terrible, neglectful parents?” he wrote, in his demand for answers. “Sure,” he continued. “But obviously many say that already.”

A memoir by the mother of one of the Columbine killers could seem distasteful on its face: at best, a defensive account from an unreliable narrator; at worst, an inevitable endpoint to the media circus. But that father’s understandably cruel letter, which Klebold excerpts and runs without comment, sets the agenda for much of her book, which reads as if she had written it under oath, while trying to answer, honestly and completely, an urgent question: What could a parent have done to prevent this tragedy?

Klebold describes a home life that was, if not perfect, better than ordinary. Dylan grew up with happily married parents: a work-from-home dad who shared a snack and the sports pages with his teenage son every day after school, and a mom who worked with disabled college students, setting a moral example at the office before coming home at night to make the “gloppy, layered Mexican casseroles” her two sons loved. Klebold and her husband, Tom, were distressed when Dylan and his friend Eric Harris were arrested during their junior year for breaking into a van and stealing electronic equipment, a crime for which they could have served time. But Dylan had sailed through a counseling program offered as an alternative, even graduating from it early. When Klebold does complain about Dylan in her journals in the year leading up to the attack, it is often to note that he was “crabby” or failed to feed the cats. She loved her son, but was also worried about him enough to be periodically searching his room for drugs or stolen goods after that first serious incident with the police. (She found nothing.)
Dylan, who had plenty of friends — who went to the prom just days before the attack, who still laughed over old movies with his parents — had nonetheless fallen off an emotional cliff; his parents never even saw the ledge. They did not know that he drank, or thought obsessively of ending his life, or was madly in love with a girl whom he wrote about in creepy, mystical terms, ominously declaring: “It is time. It is time.” They did not know that he and his co-conspirator, Eric Harris — who was charismatic, persuasive and, according to the psychological research she cites, most likely psychopathic — had been stockpiling weapons. The crime of which Klebold convicts herself is ignorance, and for that, she feels bottomless guilt. She recalls being dumbfounded when someone asked her if she could ever forgive her son. “Forgive Dylan?” I said. ‘My work is to forgive myself.’ . . . I was the one who let him down, not the other way around.” She has a dream in which Dylan, still a baby, is found to have bloody cuts all over his torso that she had not seen; in another, other mothers have reserved a space for their babies to sleep, but she has not, and he cannot rest.

She does acknowledge that there were signs of impending danger, what the experts call “leakage,” as if Dylan’s misery were so overwhelming it was visibly oozing out of him. He had written for class an account of a man in black attacking some popular kids, a work so disturbing that his teacher brought it up with the Klebolds. They read it only after his death — Dylan never showed it to them, although they asked — but even if they had, in 1999, would anyone but the most paranoid of parents have suspected the worst? There was little precedent; the story of Columbine was not yet part of the American consciousness. She also missed classic signs of adolescent depression or even the impulse to suicide that sound maddeningly like the symptoms of adolescence itself: staring off into the middle distance, irritability, withdrawing from family. The Klebolds knew something was wrong with Dylan his senior year, she writes. “We simply — drastically and lethally — underestimated the depth and severity of his pain and everything he was capable of doing to make it stop.” Politely, methodically, she eviscerates in the reader the dearly held conviction that had he or she been in Sue Klebold’s place, all could have been prevented. “There are, of course, no guarantees a child will be O.K., even with professional help,” she states. “Eric’s parents did send him to a psychiatrist after the arrest, and he began taking medication.”

It is hard to shake the prosecutorial instinct while reading this book: Does Klebold reveal herself to be so measured, so reasonable, that she was perhaps averse to necessary confrontation? Did maternal pride cloud her judgment? These questions pop up, like bright, distracting buoys spotted from the illusion of high ground; if Klebold had failings (and what parent does not?), none of them would begin to explain the terrible turn of her son’s life.
Klebold’s powerful urge to defend herself all these years was surpassed only by her desire to disappear. She felt she was “cringing like a frightened animal” in the months and years after the tragedy, suffering panic attacks so debilitating she came to understand her son’s suicidal impulses. She lost 25 pounds, numbly stumbling through radiation for breast cancer but refusing chemotherapy because she was, all agreed, too broken to survive it. Eventually, Klebold found her way forward with a mission of suicide prevention, and she provides a precise education on the subject in “A Mother’s Reckoning.” She earns our pity, our empathy and, often, our admiration; and yet the book’s ultimate purpose is to serve as a cautionary tale, not an exoneration.

Klebold seems to have written the book for yet another reason: to communicate with the families of the victims. “I can only say here that if speaking with or meeting me would be helpful to any of the family members of Dylan and Eric’s victims, I will always be available to them,” she writes. One has the eerie sense of bearing witness, in that moment, to the most intimate of communications. This is writing as action, bursting from a life so choked by circumstance that she could express that sentiment only from within the safety of a 300-page book.

**A MOTHER’S RECKONING**
*Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy*
By Sue Klebold

Susan Dominus is a staff writer at The Times Magazine.

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