

COLUMBINE AND GEN WHY: 10 YEARS LATER

NEWSWEEK STAFF

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Just before noon on April 20, 1999, high-school students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered 12 kids and one teacher before killing themselves. We all remember, and undoubtedly always will remember, what happened at Columbine High School. But for those of us who were in high school on that day, the memories are especially wretched—and personal. I was 16, and I remember fixating on a series of somewhat arcane details: Many of the Columbine victims were gunned down in the library. Sometimes I spent lunch in the cafeteria, but just as often I studied in the library. In other words, your life—my life—could boil down to one snap decision: lunch in the cafeteria, you live; study in the library, you die. Of course, I was never in any danger myself. My high school sat 1,153 miles away, in Fresno, Calif. But nobody really felt safe after Columbine. There had been school shootings before, but this was the deadliest, the most horrifying, the one that wouldn't heal. A few weeks following the shootings, my sleepy suburban school received a mysterious threat: someone was planning a second Columbine in our halls. We didn't know the details—it's unclear if anybody knew them—except for the early-May attack date. Lots of students stayed home, despite assurances from the principal that we'd be completely safe. Many more gathered up their courage and came to school anyway. I remember walking to trigonometry class on a sunny morning, looking up at the blue sky and seeing a police officer stationed on the roof of our language-arts building. I felt as if I was in a prison.

Columbine was a grisly milestone for my generation. It was the violent day that made Gen Y feel like victims, the first time that '80s toddlers realized that their overprotective helicopter parents couldn't protect them from everything. We'd witnessed other catastrophic events, especially the Oklahoma City bombing. But they felt distant, like something that happened in an office building. Columbine hit us because it took place in a school, and because it felt like the first large-scale tragedy of the 21st century. We'd never seen—or, rather, heard—a massacre unfold in real time, via broadcasts of some students' cell-phone calls. Cable news

ran unprecedented saturation coverage. On that day, Fox News had its highest ratings ever up to that time, and MSNBC had its best numbers second only to Princess Diana's funeral. Harris had even documented his anger on the Internet and in videos, and when they leaked later, they became a glimpse into a teenager's angst, a precursor to blogging and YouTube. All of which meant we not only felt we were inside Columbine High School, we had to relive it all over and over again.

In the decade since Columbine, there have been countless efforts to make sense of that day: memoirs, books, movies, even a play opening in Los Angeles in April. The definitive account, however, will likely be Dave Cullen's "Columbine," a nonfiction book that has the pacing of an action movie and the complexity of a Shakespearean drama. "Columbine" opens four days before the shooting, at a school assembly where the principal, Frank DeAngelis, admonishes his students—ominously, it turns out—to be safe during prom weekend. Cullen has a gift, if that's the right word, for excruciating detail. At times the language is so vivid you can almost smell the gunpowder and the fear. On the day of the massacre, Harris opens fire at 11:19 a.m. on an outdoor staircase. Some students think it's a paintball game and rush toward him—one kid feels "a couple of pricks, like an IV needle being pulled out," before realizing he's been shot. Cullen shows us every bullet fired and every victim taken down. He writes of the gallons of blood that pool on the library carpet, "coagulating into a reddish brown gelatin, with irregular black speckles." Brain matter flies everywhere and later has to be "scraped off with putty knives." When Harris finally shoots himself in the head—"his arms curled forward, as if hugging an invisible pillow"—you unexpectedly shudder. He may have been a monster, but the image is so lonely you can't help but pity him.

The Columbine killers were a strange and deeply disturbed pair, right out of a Truman Capote book. We've heard plenty of the details about Klebold and Harris—their fixation with the Nazis, their lust for violence, the homemade tapes in which they laid out their grand scheme for us to watch later—but Cullen, despite all odds, manages to humanize them. Harris, 18, was the mastermind, the twisted megalomaniac who hoped his plot would be compared, as he wrote,

to "the LA riots, the Oklahoma bombing, WWII, Vietnam, Duke and Doom [two videogames] all mixed together ... I want to leave a lasting impression on the world." He was also an excellent con artist. Cullen tells a story about Harris's having been arrested for breaking into a van and the touching essay he wrote about how the incident had changed him. "You have really learned from this," the teacher wrote back to him. "I would trust you in a heartbeat." You could see the cracks, though, in some of his other writing. Harris once wrote a paper about how he was similar to Zeus—he believed they both got "angry easily and punish people in unusual ways." Klebold was also a lost soul, and he became the perfect accomplice. He fantasized about killing himself, and he was madly in love with a girl he was too shy to approach. Two months before the shootings, he turned in a creative-writing assignment to his teacher that was so violent she called his parents. "It's just a story," Klebold said, but you have to wonder if he wasn't trying to get caught.

As obvious as it sounds now, the guys wanted to kill as many people as they could—many more than the 13 who died. They planted bombs in duffel bags placed strategically in the cafeteria. If the explosives had gone off as planned, hundreds would have perished, but Harris and Klebold's diabolical aspirations far exceeded their technical prowess. The killers envisioned an even more spectacular, posthumous finale: their cars—wired with explosives—would explode into the news vans that assembled to cover the melee.

Cullen also debunks some of the biggest fallacies. The boys weren't targeting jocks, as the media reported in the immediate aftermath. Harris and Klebold were only vaguely associated with the "Trench Coat Mafia," a clique of outsiders, though they wore trench coats that day. They weren't goth kids, either. Nobody really claimed them as their own, though that's hardly exceptional. What makes their rampage so frightening is how much—on the surface—they were like any ordinary teenagers. Except they were much angrier, and crazy.

Perhaps the saddest thing about reading "Columbine" is how it leads you into a game of "what if?" The parents of one of Harris's friends had reported his psychotic Web site to the police, but they never launched a full investigation or exercised a search warrant. Harris and Klebold took a friend to buy two shotguns

and a rifle, but she never suspected anything. After the shootings, the sheriff's department held back the SWAT team from immediately entering. They assumed Harris and Klebold were still alive, holding hostages inside, and proceeded slowly from classroom to classroom. In that time, a wounded business teacher named Dave Sanders bled to death, while his students watched in horror and repeatedly dialed 911. It's not surprising that so many people were caught off guard—no other school shooting had ever come close to Columbine. It's now become part of the fabric of our lives, a one-word shorthand for mass tragedy.

Even worse, it's a tragedy that refuses to go away. Seung-Hui Cho, who in 2007 killed 32 people at Virginia Tech, was heavily influenced by Columbine. In a letter he wrote, he called Harris and Klebold "martyrs." A year ago I went to Oxnard, Calif., to cover a junior-high-school shooting in which a 14-year-old boy shot his 15-year-old classmate in the head. As I interviewed kids, school violence seemed like a matter-of-fact part of their lives. It was tragic, they said, but somehow not unexpected. The word came up time after time: Columbine. That's exactly what Harris and Klebold wanted—to be famous. They envisioned themselves as stars, in a pre-"American Idol" era. They even debated who would make the movie of their lives—Tarantino or Spielberg. What they got, what we all got, was that horrible scene of students running for their lives. For many of my peers, and for me, it's a scene that never fades to black.