

The cult of Columbine

The Age/April 27, 2004

The Columbine massacre has spawned a disturbing cult, with websites painting the killers as champions of alienated teens. Johann Hari reports.

On the morning that Columbine High School was ripped apart by bullets and bombs, shot and planted by its own students, two cults were born. One is the cult of Cassie Bernall. She is as quintessentially American as the heartland wants her to be: blonde and beautiful and a Bible-carrying believer. On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris (although some say it was Dylan Klebold) is said to have blasted his way into the Columbine library, pressed a gun to Cassie's head, smirked, and said, "Still believe in God now?" In a firm voice, she allegedly said yes. He shot her.

Within days, Christian shrines were appearing across the country to "the martyr Cassie". Her parents wrote a bestselling book, *She Said Yes*, that explicitly compared her to the early Christian saints who died for their faith. There are now more than 7000 websites dedicated to her, and several churches take her name. One of America's most famous Baptist preachers lauded her as "the greatest Christian of the 20th century".

Yet Columbine spawned another cult, just as powerful for its own followers. This cult flourishes in another America, among the excluded, bullied, murderous and lost.

It is the fable of Eric and Dylan as heroic avengers. Thousands of teenagers have adopted the killers as exemplars, for reasons best summarised by Mellissa Andersen, a 17-year-old girl from Iowa who runs an Eric and Dylan "fan site". "The reason I believe Eric and Dylan were really cool to do what they did is because they stood up for themselves. Every single day they were teased, and I can relate to that.

"They were constantly messed with, and even though they repeatedly told people about it, they knew nothing would be done unless they took matters into their own hands. After 20 April, all of the popular kids in schools around America left the unpopular kids alone because they were afraid of another shooting at their school by someone they had teased."

As anti-heroes, the "trench coat mafia" - the name high-school jocks gave to Eric and Dylan's gang - have the same appeal as *A Clockwork Orange's* Alex DeLarge, with the added potency of being real. Yahoo discussion lists with titles like "I love Eric and Dylan" have, between them, thousands of members. Websites with names such as "In Remembrance of Eric and Dylan" - and even one encouraging teens to wear "sympathy ribbons" if "you want to remember their achievement" - have received hundreds of thousands of hits.

You will be hearing more about Cassie, Eric and Dylan, tied together forever in blood and memory. Gus Van Sant's loosely fictionalised account of the massacre, *Elephant*, is now screening in Melbourne.

They seem now to belong to that blurred period after the Cold War and before September 11, when the main threats to American security came from within. Neo-Nazi Timothy McVeigh planted the Oklahoma bomb, crazed teens committed seven highschool massacres in just two years following Columbine, and paranoia spread. Reading the news reports from that period today, it's striking how many of the same questions were to recur after the attacks on Manhattan: how could this happen here? Why do they hate us?

Half a decade on, the cults have taken over any discussion of Columbine. The causes of the tragedy are lost in this mist. Nor is there much hope that the roots of the disaster will be dug up this year.

Van Sant's movie is hypnotic, with long, slow, unjudgemental camera work and naturalistic acting that magnify the pointless horror of the killings. Yet it is also a totally shallow film. It offers an account of a highschool massacre without giving any explanation for it. Its Eric and Dylan characters are loosely sketched: we get a sense that they are smart, playing Beethoven and watching long documentaries, but they are never seen interacting with their schoolmates or families. The killers are morally blank, the

victims are morally blank; you leave the cinema just as puzzled about everyone's motives as when you walked in.

Yet there was a brief window, in the days following the murders, when the answers were there to be glimpsed - and those answers help us to understand Eric and Dylan's morbid afterlife. The image of Columbine High as a perfect school, populated by saints and attacked by demons, unravelled as unfiltered accounts of Eric and Dylan's life at Columbine emerged in the immediate media swarm that descended on the school.

Brooks Brown, a friend of theirs, explained: "The truth is that our school was not the happy place everyone's playing it off to be. A lot of people walk through that school with just a feeling of fear ... You feel nothing else. You worry if someone's going to come up and beat the hell out of you all the time." Another of their friends explained: "They were hated, so they hated back. They hated back.

" Eric and Dylan were widely suspected to be gay, something that Van Sant makes explicit in his film. Evan Todd, a popular football player and school hero, said: "Columbine is a clean, good place except for those rejects. Most kids didn't want them there. They were into witchcraft. They were into voodoo dolls. Sure, we teased them. But what do you expect if you come to school with weird hairdos? It's not just jocks; the whole school was disgusted with them. They're a bunch of homos, grabbing each other's private parts. If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease 'em. So the whole school would call them homos, and when they did something sick, we'd tell them, 'You're sick and that's wrong'."

Voices like this soon disappeared from the media coverage, in part out of respect for the victims' families. There seems to have been an anxiety that some people would conclude that the victims (picked, it seems, at random) somehow deserved to be murdered. No amount of physical or verbal abuse, it scarcely needs pointing out, can justify a program of mass murder. Yet, given a choice between the conformist fundamentalism of Cassie and the bullied rage of Eric and Dylan, it is horribly easy to understand why too many people have been swayed to sympathy.

Several recent novels, such as Douglas Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!*, have depicted high school massacres with a degree of understanding. In the Booker Prize-winning novel *Vernon God Little*, DBC Pierre creates a character not dissimilar to Eric, called Jesus, who is represented as a hideously abused, semi-Messianic figure who may find redemption in his murders.

Eric and Dylan need to be understood, these writers imply, not as evil beasts but as part of a wider culture of endemic low-level violence, persecution and aggressively policed conformity. "The US high school system is unusually vicious," explains Alice James, a 23-year-old IT consultant who was educated in the US, Britain and France.

"Of course, all teenagers are cliquy and can be cruel. But there are two differences in the US system, I guess. The first is that it is unusually hierarchical. In British schools, you get different groups who all sneer at each other, but there's no obvious ranking system. The kids into hip-hop might hate the kids who are into pop, but neither of them is universally regarded to be better or higher up the social tree. In American schools, it's like the bloody Indian caste system. Jocks simply rule the school, and everyone knows it. They are indisputably at the top, and 'freaks', which means anybody a little bit different and I guess that included Eric and Dylan, are indisputably at the bottom.

"The second big difference," she continues, "is that the hierarchy the teenagers create for themselves is reinforced by parents and the school authorities, by giving out awards to the prom queen and the football squad. While most British or French parents see their teenagers' social affairs as trivial or even slightly comic, American parents take it incredibly seriously. It's given a kind of official imprimatur, because they build their kids up to be cheerleaders or jocks and they're openly disappointed if they don't make it. For 'freaks', it's not just like they've failed in the eyes of their schoolmates - it's like they've failed for life."

The savage nature of US high schools - and the reason for Eric and Dylan's bloody rebellion - has been best explained to British audiences by a sub-genre of US movies that could be dubbed "teen ironic". This began in 1988 with *Heathers*, where Winona Ryder and Christian Slater play outcasts who befriend the stigmatised fat girl, he murders the vacuous blondes, and brings the movie to an end by blowing up the school.

Teen ironic movies follow a pattern: we are shown the total anomie of anybody who is judged to be a "loser" in the US school system, and then the scenario is (usually violently) reversed. In Romy and Michele's High School Reunion, Mira Sorvino and Lisa Kudrow return to their high school to find that the good-looking people who always shunned them are still obsessed with who is "A-list". They pretend to have invented Post-it notes and made millions in order to trump them. "I can't believe it! You must be the most successful person in our graduating class!" one of the erstwhile cheerleaders howls. Kudrow replies: "Uh-huh. And you're not. Bye."

The theme continues in films from Drop Dead Gorgeous to But I'm a Cheerleader . These movies are the revenge of the smart, shunned nerds who grew up to become screenwriters in Los Angeles, leaving the "A-list" behind to become mechanics and cookie moms in Nowheresville, Arizona. Eric and Dylan didn't allow themselves that chance, and it is not an option for most of the members of their unofficial cult.

Instead, for Eric and Dylan, the feeling of being trapped seems to have curdled into a weird, incoherent mix of hatreds. At times their private writings rage against racism, yet they also became infatuated with Hitler, and even launched their attack on his birthday. The first line of Eric's diary is an apt summary: "I hate the f----- world." Yet their rantings always returned to their social anxieties. Several survivors of the massacre have related that Eric and Dylan repeatedly said, "Oh, you f----- nerd. Tonight's a good night to die."

Judith Alpert, a professor of applied psychology at New York University, explains: "By calling their victims 'nerds', a label that seems to have been applied to themselves, the boys were putting their victims into the roles they had been given by their peers. They were assuming power over them. Ironically, their frightening strength is more likely to be remembered than their feelings of loneliness, isolation and weakness."

This is all forgotten in the simple, mirror-image cults of Saint Cassie or Saint Dylan, each valiantly standing against the imagined evildoers on the opposing side. Rory Schmidt, a 17-year-old who posts on Eric and Dylan message boards, explains the danger of this simplistic thinking. "Unless the way high schools work in America is totally changed ... unless there is a revolution in our hallways and libraries and dining halls, there are going to be more and more of us," he writes. "Eric said he was only the beginning, the first revolutionary. He was right."