

Columbine books offer tributes, insight

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What more can be said about Columbine?

Apparently, volumes. Or to be more exact, 1,300 pages.

At least nine Columbine-related books - filling all those hundreds of pages - have been published or are on the way to store shelves this month. They offer tributes to slain students, tips to prevent future school attacks and insights into the hard lessons learned from the April 20 school shootings.

They also carry an average price tag of \$16.99, with titles ranging from "Columbine, We Will Remember" to "Columbine Courage" to "Voices of Columbine." These days, Columbine sells. "Human beings are very logical creatures ... and when something like Columbine happens, people go in search of answers," says one of those nine authors, Kelly Zinna. "They keep looking until they find that bit of information that makes them say, 'Now I get it, now I understand.'" "I think that's part of the flurry of books." Zinna, a Denver-based police psychologist who "debriefed" SWAT team members at the Jefferson County school, has a book out called "After Columbine, A Schoolplace Violence Prevention Manual ... Written by an Expert Who Was There" (Spectra).

She started the 120-page primer in 1998 "when the world still associated the word 'columbine' with a flower." Five months after the shootings, she changed the title and added a Columbine chapter detailing "the things we learned from that situation." It retails for \$30.

Designed for principals, teachers and parents, Zinna's book offers "in-themoment direction and practical suggestions" so school officials can prepare for trouble and scramble to block schoolyard violence.

She recommends that schools adopt a "zero-tolerance policy" against threats - not "knee-jerk" expulsions of students who vow to kill, but some form of swift, consistent action. And she urges administrators to set up "threat management teams" to handle any promises of violence, to dole out discipline and to make sure the offending child gets good counseling. "After Columbine" aims to smooth out festering problems right now, not wait for longterm improvements in parenting or an upgrade of the mental-health safety net, Zinna says.

"Each (Columbine book) I've come across has something to offer ... But they have more to do with changing the school culture. That's a great goal, but it's going to take some time. "And what do we do in the meantime, until we get this culture where everybody is nice to each other and everybody has great empathy?" Zinna says. "In the meantime, what do we do with somebody making a threat, who appears to be a violence risk?" Still, most of the Columbine books steer away from psychological heavy lifting and instead honor the memories of slain students.

"She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall" (Plough, \$17), written by Cassie's mother, Misty Bernall, is based on the last word many believe the student spoke when asked by her killer if she believed in God. It focuses on her troubled teen years and the Christian transformation that preceded her death.

Another Columbine student who reputedly answered "yes" to that same chilling question was Rachel Scott. A devout Christian, Scott's sketch of two crying eyes - drawn 30 minutes

before her death - helped inspire her parents' new book, "Rachel's Tears" (Thomas Nelson, \$12.99). Featuring excerpts from Rachel's private journals and interviews with her mother and father, the book delves into the 17-year-old's struggles with her deep beliefs, including how her faith cost her friends.

"I think Rachel's story will grow, like Anne Frank's diary did," says her father, Darrell Scott. "A lot of people express the desire to read all of her journals. They're pleasantly surprised at the depth and insight that she had ... "Her journals really provide closure for my heart," he added. "Every prayer in her diaries has been answered - primarily, the one where she prayed to God to use her to reach other young people." The book will be released on Thursday, the one-year anniversary of the massacre. Meanwhile, "She Said Yes" already has logged five weeks on The New York Times best-seller list. And another Columbine offering, "Nobody Left To Hate, Teaching Compassion After Columbine" (W.H. Freeman, \$19.95), is out this month and quickly moving up in the Amazon.com sales rankings. Written by nationally known psychologist Elliot Aronson - and pushed by a New York City publicist - the book is expected to sell well.

But are any of the Columbine authors worried about the impression that they are turning a profit on a tragedy?

Some admit they have thought about the ethics of it all.

"That was one of the things I struggled with," says John Nicoletti, whose book "Violence Goes to School: Lessons Learned From Columbine" was published last June, (Nicoletti-Flater Associates, \$24). He started writing it a year before the school shootings. Last spring, he added the Columbine references.

"If somebody's got a book totally on Columbine, that may kind of give the appearance of cashing in on it ... It's a fine line," says Nicoletti, who runs the Denver consulting firm Nicoletti & Flater, which specializes in helping employers assess workplace violence. Nicoletti studied Columbine and earlier school attacks in Springfield, Ore., and Jonesboro, Ark., and discovered that classroom shootings tend to mirror episodes of workplace violence. The killers are typically "avengers trying to get back for a perceived injustice" and usually "tell you before they do it," he found.

Among the lessons learned, Nicoletti says, are that all threats made by students - even the empty ones - have to be looked at and dissected. What's more, he cautions parents and teachers, "Don't worry alone." If they catch wind of a threat, they must funnel that information into a "vortex" - his term for an all-encompassing "threat and violence assessment team." Nicoletti, a psychologist, spent years counseling Denver-area police officers who had been involved in fatal shootings. His colleague, former police shrink Zinna, says that for the Columbine writers to have any credence with readers, they must bring deep resumes to the table - unless they're simply profiling one of the victims.

"The consumer always has to be aware," Zinna says. "They have to investigate the credentials of the author: Is this somebody who has been working in the field of violence prediction for a while (or) just somebody capitalizing on this tragedy?"