



We Need to Talk About Kevin

Lionel Shriver

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That neither nature nor nurture bears exclusive responsibility for a child's character is self-evident. But generalizations about genes are likely to provide cold comfort if it's your own child who just opened fire on his fellow algebra students and whose class photograph—with its unseemly grin—is shown on the evening news coast-to-coast.

If the question of who's to blame for teenage atrocity intrigues news-watching voyeurs, it tortures our narrator, Eva Khatchadourian. Two years before the opening of the novel, her son, Kevin, murdered seven of his fellow high school students, a cafeteria worker, and the much-beloved teacher who had tried to befriend him. Because his sixteenth birthday arrived two days after the killings, he received a lenient sentence and is currently in a prison for young offenders in upstate New York.

In relating the story of Kevin's upbringing, Eva addresses her estranged husband, Frank, through a series of startlingly direct letters. Fearing that her own shortcomings may have shaped what her son became, she confesses to a deep, long-standing ambivalence about both motherhood in general—and Kevin in particular. How much is her fault?

We Need To Talk About Kevin offers no at explanations for why so many white, well-to-do adolescents—whether in Pearl, Paducah, Springfield, or Littleton—have gone nihilistically off the rails while growing up in the most prosperous country in history. Instead, Lionel Shriver tells a compelling, absorbing, and resonant story with an explosive, haunting ending. She considers motherhood, marriage, family, career—while framing these horrifying tableaux of teenage carnage as metaphors for the larger tragedy of a country where everything works, nobody starves, and anything can be bought but a sense of purpose.

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