

We Need to Talk About Kevin by Lionel Shriver

About the book...

In a series of compelling and introspective letters to her estranged husband, Franklin, Eva Khatchadourian dissects her married life and her mothering of her son Kevin and daughter Celia in the aftermath of Kevin's Columbine-like school slaying of seven classmates, a cafeteria worker, and a teacher.

Worried that her son's murderousness might have resulted from her deficits as a mother, Eva probes the most intimate and shocking aspects of her inner life, her marriage and her resentment of motherhood. This literary page-turner tackles the sensitive proposition that mothers can be unmoved by -- and even dislike -- their own children. Eva struggles with her lack of ready emotion when Kevin is first placed in her arms and with the subsequently hellish years of parenting a boy who both refuses to speak until the age of 3 and be potty

trained until the age of 6, and who seems to enjoy nothing but the taunting of his mother. Having dramatically scaled back on her satisfying and profitable career, Eva becomes a stay-at-home mom who discovers that her son, while seemingly slow, is whip-smart and vindictive -- and cunning enough to play for his father with disastrous results. **We Need To Talk About Kevin** is a searing and complex look at the reasons couples decide to have children, the parent-child relationship, marriage, and the limits of love and loyalty.

About the author...

Lionel Shriver is a novelist whose previous books include Orange Prize-winner *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, *The Post-Birthday World*, *A Perfectly Good Family*, *Game Control*, *Double Fault*, *The Female of the Species*, *Checker and the Derailleurs*, and *Ordinary Decent Criminals*. She is widely published as a journalist, writing features, columns, op-eds, and book reviews for the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, *Marie Claire*, and many other

publications. She is frequently interviewed on television, radio, and in print media. She lives in London and Brooklyn, NY.

Reviews

Booklist

In a series of brutally introspective missives to her husband, Franklin, from whom she is separated, Eva tries to come to grips with the fact that their 17-year-old son, Kevin, has killed seven students and two adults with his crossbow. Guiltily she recalls how, as a successful writer, she was terrified of having a child. Was it for revenge, then, that from the moment of his birth Kevin was the archetypal difficult child, screaming for hours, refusing to nurse, driving away countless nannies, and intuitively learning to “divide and conquer” his parents? When their daughter, loving and patient Celia, is born, Eva feels vindicated; but as the gap between her view of Kevin as a “Machiavellian miscreant” and Franklin’s efforts to explain away their son’s aberrant behavior grows wider, they find

themselves facing divorce. In crisply crafted sentences that cut to the bone of her feelings about motherhood, career, family, and what it is about American culture that produces child killers, Shriver yanks the reader back and forth between blame and empathy, retribution and forgiveness. Never letting up on the tension, Shriver ensures that, like Eva, the reader grapples with unhealed wounds.

Kirkus Review

The bad seed/nurture vs. nature theme updated as a teenaged sniper's mother tries to understand the *why* behind her son's criminality, in a series of letters to her not so mysteriously absent husband.

Two years earlier, when he was not quite 16, Kevin Khatchadourian went on a murderous rampage and now lives in a juvenile facility, where his mother Eva visits him regularly if joylessly. Although she has won a civil suit brought by a grieving mother who held her parenting responsible for Kevin's acts, Eva does not doubt her accountability any more than she doubts Kevin's guilt. Is she a bad

mother? Is he a devil child? The implied answer to both is yes. Eva and her husband Franklin were happily married until she became pregnant in her late 30s. The successful publisher of bohemian travel guides who loves her work, Eva is more ambivalent than Franklin about the prospect of parenthood. When Kevin is born, her lack of instantaneous maternal love is exacerbated by Kevin's rejection of her breast. The baby shows—or she sees—plenty of early signs that he is “different.” He refuses to talk until he's three or toilet train until he's six—a matter of choice, not ability. Babysitters quit; other children fear him. Franklin, a bland, all-American type about whom Eva talks lovingly but condescendingly, notices nothing wrong. He defends Kevin against all accusations. When Eva's daughter Celia is born, the contrast between the children is startling. Celia is sweet-natured, passive, and a bit dim, and Eva is amazed how naturally she and the girl bond. Meanwhile, Kevin grows into a creepily vicious adolescent whose only hobby is archery. The impending disaster is no surprise despite Shriver's coyly dropped hints. Eva's acid social commentary and slightly arch voice only

add to the general unpleasantness—which isn't to say Shriver lacks skill, since unpleasantness appears to be her aim.

Not for the faint-hearted or those contemplating parenthood.

Publishers Weekly

A number of fictional attempts have been made to portray what might lead a teenager to kill a number of schoolmates or teachers, Columbine style, but Shriver's is the most triumphantly accomplished by far. A gifted journalist as well as the author of seven novels, she brings to her story a keen understanding of the intricacies of marital and parental relationships as well as a narrative pace that is both compelling and thoughtful. Eva Khatchadourian is a smart, skeptical New Yorker whose impulsive marriage to Franklin, a much more conventional person, bears fruit, to her surprise and confessed disquiet, in baby Kevin. From the start Eva is ambivalent about him, never sure if she really wanted a child, and he is balefully hostile toward her; only good-old-boy Franklin, hoping for the

best, manages to overlook his son's faults as he grows older, a largely silent, cynical, often malevolent child. The later birth of a sister who is his opposite in every way, deeply affectionate and fragile, does nothing to help, and Eva always suspects his role in an accident that befalls little Celia. The narrative, which leads with quickening and horrifying inevitability to the moment when Kevin massacres seven of his schoolmates and a teacher at his upstate New York high school, is told as a series of letters from Eva to an apparently estranged Franklin, after Kevin has been put in a prison for juvenile offenders. This seems a gimmicky way to tell the story, but is in fact surprisingly effective in its picture of an affectionate couple who are poles apart, and enables Shriver to pull off a huge and crushing shock far into her tale. It's a harrowing, psychologically astute, sometimes even darkly humorous novel, with a clear-eyed, hard-won ending and a tough-minded sense of the difficult, often painful human enterprise.

Discussion Questions

1. Non-maternal, ambivalent mothers are one of the last taboos -- and Eva is a

prime example. Were her motives for having a baby entirely selfish? And if so, how much can that have factored into the outcome of an abnormally difficult baby and apathetic child? In contrast to Kevin, Celia was loving, needy and sweet -- and her mother's favorite, if not her father's. By the very end of the novel, has Eva's love for Kevin, or at least her primitive loyalty to him, finally become unconditional? How does this fit in with the feminist ideal of motherhood?

2. Is Eva's view of Kevin colored by her ambivalence about motherhood in general, or perhaps by hindsight knowledge of his eventual violence? Is Eva responsible for creating a child she sees as a monster, or was he a monster all along?

3. Eva's tone changes throughout the course of her letter-writing. She is in turns angry, frustrated and mystified. Could you describe Eva as a loving mother -- in deed if not in thought? Was Kevin overly indulged by a parenting style that let him potty train and learn at his own pace?

4. Did the inclusion of a child into Eva and Franklin's stable, loving relationship cause the rift between them? Did the fact of a child threaten their marriage? How was Kevin perceived as a threat by Eva from conception? What expectations did Eva have of motherhood and how did she meet the reality of it? Was Franklin unsupportive of Eva?

5. The irony of Eva having read Robin Hood to an ailing, needy Kevin at a time of almost shocking mother-son bonding is played out in the way Kevin massacred his fellow students and the teacher who took an interest in him. Since it is Eva who connects Kevin's fevered state with her recollection of his unusual interest in anything whatsoever, is it possible that Kevin's methods were meant to figuratively slay his mother?

6. After Eva throws Kevin across the room, she takes him to the hospital. She confesses later on to Franklin, "However much I deserved rebuke, I still preferred the slow burn of private self-excoriation to the hot lash of public reproof." Are

Eva's letters to Franklin her form of self-excoriation, though she is suffering public reproof as the mother of a mass murderer?

7. Does Eva feel responsible for Kevin's series of nasty deeds and childhood "pranks?" Does she think she could have prevented any of it? Does she come to realize why Kevin would harm other children or does she give up trying to understand? How can we sympathize with a mother and father who saw all the warning signs but failed to stop the violence?

8. Given that the story is told from Eva's perspective only, can she be trusted as reliable? How do you think Franklin's version of events would have differed? Might Eva choose to portray Kevin in childhood as more wicked than he really was, if only to make her seem less culpable for his crimes as a teenager?

9. What were Eva's reasons for having a second child? Did Franklin forgive her for the deception? Was she repentant? How closely were her expectations met and

was she gratified? How did Franklin's attitude toward Kevin and Celia differ?

10. Toward the end of the novel, it is revealed that Kevin has more complicated feelings about his mother and some of the 9 people he murdered. This gives us a hint as to why he might have carefully planned and carried out Thursday. Does he seem pathetic or more deserving of compassion because he may have had a motive, after all?

11. At the conclusion of the novel, did you find Eva sympathetic in a way you may not have initially? Do you think Eva has sympathy and forgiveness for herself? Is she able to accept Kevin, and to see his personality as, however uncomfortably, akin to her own?

Readalikes

Eye Contact by Cammie McGovern

In the woods of a small town, Adam, a nine-year-old autistic boy, is discovered hiding near to the body of his classmate. They both wandered off from the school

playground several hours earlier, and now the police are relying on Adam as the only witness to an appalling crime. But he can't tell the police what he saw—or what he heard. Barely verbal on the best of days, Adam has retreated into a silent world that Cara, his mother, knows only too well.

Nineteen Minutes by Jodi Picoult

Sterling is a small, ordinary New Hampshire town where nothing ever happens -- until the day its complacency is shattered by a shocking act of violence. In the aftermath, the town's residents must not only seek justice in order to begin healing but also come to terms with the role they played in the tragedy. For them, the lines between truth and fiction, right and wrong, insider and outsider have been obscured forever. Josie Cormier, the teenage daughter of the judge sitting on the case, could be the state's best witness, but she can't remember what happened in front of her own eyes. And as the trial progresses, fault lines between the high school and the adult community begin to show,

destroying the closest of friendships and families.