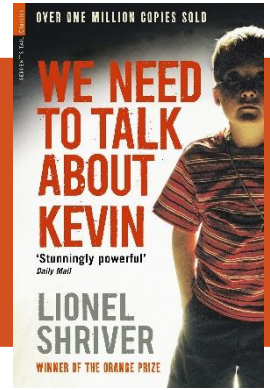




We need to talk about Kevin

Lionel Shriver



Author Background

Journalist and author Lionel Shriver was born Margaret Ann Shriver in 1957 in North Carolina, USA. She changed her name to Lionel at the age of 15 because she wanted to distance herself from the "girl with the pink ribbons in her hair, who married her high-school sweetheart and became an apple-cheeked housewife" she felt that was implied by the name Margaret Ann and the expectations of her deeply religious family.

She received a BA and MFA from Columbia University and, since then, has lived in Nairobi, Bangkok, Belfast and London.

Her first novel, *The Female of the Species*, was published when she was 29 (1986), and was followed by *Checker and the Derailleurs* (1987), *Ordinary Decent Criminals* (1990), *Game Control* (1994), *A Perfectly Good Family* (1996) and *Double Fault* (1997).

Although her earlier books received good reviews, sales did not follow, and she supported herself through journalism. Things changed with the publication of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) in which a teenager murders his classmates in a school shooting and a mother is forced to confront her son's monstrous acts and her role in them. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* was rejected outright by her agent, so Shriver had to shop it around on her own. Eight months later, having found a new agent and been rejected by at least 30 publishers, the novel was picked up by a small publishing company. It went on to receive significant public recognition and won the 2005 Orange Prize. Publishers Weekly said, "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."

Book Summary

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. The gripping international bestseller about motherhood gone awry is devastatingly haunting in its brutality and examines the nature versus nurture debate, also raising many questions about a mother's love for her children.

We Need to Talk about Kevin concerns a fictional school massacre and is written in an [epistolary style](#) from the perspective of the killer's mother, Eva Khatchadorian. Eva, in a series of letters to her estranged husband, examines whether her own shortcomings and her ambivalence about motherhood in general and Kevin in particular, may have shaped what he became.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ The book raises many questions about nature versus nurture. Do you think that Eva is responsible for creating a child that she sees as evil and a monster, or was he a monster all along? Can a child be born bad or evil?
- ❖ 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?
- ❖ If you were in Eva's place, would you have stayed living within the community? Would you have visited Kevin in jail? What do you think Eva's reasons were?
- ❖ Do you think that Eva is reliable when talking about her children and the events? How do you think Franklin's version of events may have differed? Or even Kevin's?
- ❖ Why did Kevin kill the children that he did? Why do you think he killed the one teacher that cared about him? Later in the novel, it is revealed Kevin has more complicated feelings about the people he killed, giving a hint to why he may have carefully planned and carried out these murders. Does he seem pathetic or more deserving of compassion as he may have had a motive?
- ❖ How did you react to the novel being written in the epistolary style (i.e. as a series of letters)? What are the limitations of this form? How does it help shape our view of the narrator?
- ❖ What do you think Lionel Shriver's purpose was in writing *We Need to Talk About Kevin*?
- ❖ Did you finish the book? Did you like the book?
- ❖ If you have had the chance to watch the 2011 film version, which do you think is more effective? The novel which prizes words to explain, describe and rationalise, or the sparse script of the film which relies instead on visual symbolism and sound effect to

References

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