

[Dartmouth College](#)

[Accuracy, Empathy, and Accountability:](#)
[A Review of Dave Cullen’s *Columbine*](#)

[Olivia Cao](#)

[Professor Clara Lewis](#)

[True Crime](#)

[April 24, 2025](#)

Formatted: Spanish (Traditional Sort)

Formatted: Centered, Automatically adjust right indent when grid is defined, Space After: 8 pt, Line spacing: 1.5 lines, Adjust space between Latin and Asian text, Adjust space between Asian text and numbers

Deleted: WRIT SEM:

Formatted: Spanish (Traditional Sort)

Deleted: 24

Formatted: Spanish (Traditional Sort)

Formatted

Formatted

On April 20, 1999, two high school seniors fatally shot 12 of their peers and one teacher and injured 24 more before killing themselves. In the years following, Columbine High School would become the poster child for the American mass shooting epidemic. Dave Cullen's *Columbine* draws on ten years of Cullen's own research – including witness, family, and expert testimonials as well as the shooters' own journals – to analyze the events and aftermath of the Columbine Massacre. The five-part book alternates between two storylines: the perpetrators' progression into premeditated murder and the subsequent reverberations through the local community. Cullen's systematic deconstruction of Columbine mythology and discussion of law enforcement controversy, however, broadens the scope of this narrative, transforming *Columbine* into an eye-opening yet empathetic portrait of Columbine, the impact of sensationalized media, and the long-lasting implications of tragedy.

In keeping with this aim to expand beyond the shooting itself, *Columbine* is woven with clear-cut refutations of media-peddled myths. Cullen's dedication to fact is clear and continuous. From the get-go, he acknowledges the misinformation surrounding the shooting – and places the onus on the public and the media for its proliferation: “The fundamental experience for most of America was almost witnessing mass murder...It would be years before the detective team would explain why. The public couldn't wait that long. The media was not about to. They speculated” (66-67). Throughout *Columbine*, Cullen continues this attack against misinformation with irrefutable precision: “The Columbine crisis was never a hostage standoff...SWAT teams searched the building for over three hours, but the killers were lying dead the entire time. They had committed suicide in the library at 12:08, forty-nine minutes after beginning the attack” (83). In this distinct continuity, Cullen ensures his narrative transcends tragedy. Even as he gives voice to the events of Columbine, its victims, and its perpetrators, he makes his book more than a story

Deleted: Dave Cullen's *Columbine: A Review* ... [1]

Commented [OMC1]: Brevity of piece calls for direct intro. Concision and impact are key.

Deleted: the name ...olumbine High School would become synonymous with ...he poster child for the American school...mass shooting epidemic; other school shooters followed in their footsteps, myths — everything from the Trench Coat Mafia to a connection with Marilyn Manson — swirled in their wake. Dave Cullen, NYT journalist who covered Columbine _____, compiled 10 years' worth of research into one comprehensive narrative: *Columbine*. Cullen's five-part book follows two parallel storylines: Eric and Dylan's respective progression into _____ and the aftermath _____ as reflected in the families' lives, the victims' futures, and the local community. Yet, even as these narratives run relatively chronologically on their own, each part of the book flashes between timelines, sometimes alternating the origin of Eric and Dylan's ideas with the immediate aftermath, while others parallel the shooting itself with a look into the lives of the victims' and shooters' families. Cullen ... [2]

Commented [OMC2]: Contextualize event, emphasize significance (particularly because understanding of Columbine explains the necessity for deconstructing mythology, reason for Cullen's book, etc.)

Deleted: shooters' respective journals,...en years of Cullen's own research – including witness, family, and expert testimonials, and other resources...as well as the shooters' own journals – to analyze not only ...he events of the shooting, but also ...nd aftermath of the Columbine Massacre. The five-part book alternates between two storylines: the perpetrators' progression into premeditated murder and the subsequent reverberations through the local and national community. He discusses the controversies controversies within local ...ommunity. Cullen's syste... [3]

Formatted ... [4]

Deleted: from potentially passive observation to ...nto an eye-opening yet continually ...mpathetic investigation into ...ortrait of Columbine, the impact of sensationalized media, and the long-lasting implications of _____ ... [5]

Commented [OMC3]: Verbalize broader point that the book targets. Why read this book? Why is it important?

Deleted: _____, Cullen...hooting itself, *Columbine* is careful to interweave his narrative...oven with clear-cut and declarative ...efutations of media-driven myths...eddled myths. Cullen's dedication to fact is clear and continuous. From the get-go, he frames...cknowledges the story in... [6]

Commented [OMC4]: Notably, quotation both pinpoints specific facts and identifies (and refutes!) the myth in question -- all in one sentence. Strong example for analysis of Cullen's rhetoric and argument.

Deleted: — and holding the media accountable — “The details were accurate, the conclusions wrong. Most of the media followed. It was accepted as fact” — is continuous and irrefutable...83). In both these ways...his distinct continuity, Cullen matches structure...nsures his narra... [7]

of brutality; he makes it a lesson. Cullen consistently addresses our own misinformed state, the myths perpetuated by the media, and the dangers of sacrificing accuracy at the altar of sensationalism. Through these explicit confrontations with fact, Cullen foregrounds *Columbine's* central aims: to provide truth and warn against misinformation.

What Cullen also does incredibly well in his reconstruction of *Columbine* is effectively balancing perspective. It would have been easy to restrict the spotlight to the perpetrators; instead, Cullen extends the same courtesy to the victims and survivors, dedicating whole chapters to their lives and families. Most notable is Cullen's continuous reflection on the story of Patrick Ireland, the infamous "Boy in the Window." Cullen emphasizes Patrick's continual struggle but eventual success in recovering from significant brain injury, following him as he "tr[ie]d to talk again...slow, labored attempts would produce a single guttural syllable, then a sudden burst of sound" (189). With these details, Cullen's narrative memorializes Patrick's journey, refusing to sideline the survivor's suffering. At the same time, Cullen also recognizes Patrick as an individual. Even after describing the events of the shooting itself, Cullen's description of Patrick's life is one affected by the massacre but is ultimately not defined by the singular tragedy: "Patrick had retired the wheelchair and the crutch in high school. The foot brace remained. His right leg lagged behind a little: noticeable, but not debilitating. Running was out of the question, but water skis were not" (321). Cullen ensures Patrick is portrayed as more than victim; he honors Patrick's own refusal to let "the shootings...set the tone for the rest of my life" (358). Much the same way that reading Christie Warden's letters in class heightened sympathy for Christie herself, Cullen's recognition of the survivors as individuals forges a deeper connection with the reader. He offers us not only the "expected" story of titillating brutality, but one of profound empathy.

Deleted: reminded of

Deleted: power

Deleted: the media in influencing witness testimony, the sacrifice of

Deleted: , and the _____.

Deleted: this _____ and _____ confrontation

Deleted: truth

Deleted: makes his own aim painfully obvious

Deleted: expose the _____.

Deleted: the

Deleted: this _____ is a balance of

Deleted: In theory, it

Deleted: play into true crime sensationalism. Cullen could have focused solely on the psychology of the shooters, the gruesome details of the shooting itself

Deleted: favors nuance. He shines the conventional spotlight on Eric and Dylan, yes, but he also offers

Deleted: service

Deleted: Columbine

Deleted: exploring

Deleted: their

Deleted: From Coach Dave Sanders to student

Deleted: infamously "The

Deleted: ," Cullen _____. He highlights Coach Sanders's future plans: "He was planning more changes: No basketball this summer. Less coaching, more time with his own girls and his grandkids." He

Deleted: Patrick Ireland's

Deleted: crafting a life in the wake of brutal

Deleted: : " _____." In

Deleted: small

Deleted: voice brings these people to life. Regardless of whether they are alive or dead, he

Deleted: their and their families' challenges and triumphs. In much the same way as our class investigation into _____ accomplished, Cullen's refusal to continually indulge in societal fascination with

Deleted: killers alone, to offer the same courtesy in

Deleted: personalization and remembrance of those who suffered

Commented [OMC5]: Reference to material from murder case reviewed in class

Deleted: between _____ and _____. We are offered

Deleted: that some might have been expecting, but a profoundly empathetic narrative that encourages understanding of each perspective

This same balance is reflected in Cullen's storytelling. Whether shooter, victim or survivor, Cullen narrates the same way he cites research with characteristic dedication to evidence. He describes Eric Harris, one of the perpetrators, as someone who "broke the rules, tagged himself with the nickname Reb, but did his homework and earned himself a slew of A's" (6). Cullen describes one of the Columbine victims, Coach William Sanders, with similar bluntness: "He drove an aging Ford Escort, dressed in drab polyester slacks and plain button-down shirts" (23). In both these instances, Cullen maintains his refreshing clarity. His sentences are straightforward. His descriptions are almost purely reliant on observation. Any experiences and evaluations of personality mentioned in *Columbine* are supported by quotations, and when Cullen writing in the shooters' voices, he almost always references passages from their journals, a subtle corroboration of Cullen's storytelling.

Cullen could have taken the easy route. Instead, just as "A Loaded Gun" investigates Amy Bishop's family life and the background of her brother's shooting, Cullen goes beyond the impetus for *Columbine*. He explores the role of media misrepresentation in the dissemination of misinformation, the long road to recovery for victims, and the responsibility of the law and other systems of authority in recognizing and acting on warning signs. With this expansion of focus, as well as Cullen's balance of perspective, and dedication to fact, *Columbine* presents a strong model for writing effective yet empathetic true crime.

Commented [OMC6]: Structure builds on previous point - balance both in the form of Cullen's descriptive treatment of the individuals in the book but also in terms of factual truth

Deleted: concept of ...alance is even more prevalent...eflected in Cullen's method of ... [8]

Deleted: In the cases of both the shooters and the victims/survivors, ...hether shooter, victim or survivor, Cullen narrates the same way he presents facts: bluntly, objectively, and with refusal ... [9]

Commented [OMC7]: Stricture ties into first point. Cullen's explicit use of fact and straightforward narration style. Also reinforces thesis statement claim as to the central goal of book: dismantling of myth/endorsement of truth and fact

Deleted: shy away from the facts....vidence. He describes Eric as "blast[ing] hard-core German industrial rock from his Honda. He enjoy[ing] firing off bottle rockets and road-tripping to Wyoming to replenish the stash. He ...arris, one the perpetrators, as someone who "broke the rules, tagged himself with the nickname Reb, but did his homework and earned himself a slew of A's." He... (6). Cullen describes one of the Columbine victims, Coach William Sanders similarly, writing,... with similar bluntness: "He drove an aging Ford Escort, dressed in drab polyester slacks and plain button-down shirts." Notably, in ... (23). In both these instances, Cullen's ...ullen maintains his refreshing clarity. His sentences are short, ...traightforward, his... His descriptions reliant...re almost purely reliant on observation. Any experiences and evaluations of personality and experiences ...entioned in *Columbine* are supported with...y quotations from family... and friends and, ...hen Cul ... [10]

Commented [OMC8]: Notably this is an important contrast to the media sensationalism surrounding the Columbine Massacre. Cullen refusal to succumb t ... [11]

Commented [OMC9]: Reinforce Cullen's more investigative approach to reporting, counter to more reactive styles of conventional reporting

Deleted: _____,

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Commented [OMC10]: Reference to class materials

Deleted: _____...mpetus for *Columbine*. He explores the painful lack of legislative impact *Columbine* had, the ...ole the ...ole of media misrepresentation in the ... [12]

Commented [OMC11]: Return to significance of book; why read this book as opposed to another? What about this book makes it worth reading?

Deleted: ...as well as Cullen's careful balancing act...alance of perspective, and the alignment of _____ and function...edication to fact, *Columbine* _____...reser ... [13]

Commented [OMC12]: Broaden scope of review. Not just what we can learn from this book on a thematic lex ... [14]

Formatted

Page 2: [1] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [1] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [1] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [1] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [1] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [1] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [1] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [1] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [2] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [2] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [2] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [2] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [3] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [3] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 2: [3] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [3] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [3] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [3] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [3] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [4] Formatted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
-----------------------	---------------	---------------------

Font: Italic

Page 2: [4] Formatted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
-----------------------	---------------	---------------------

Font: Italic

Page 2: [5] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [5] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [5] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [5] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [6] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [6] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [6] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [6] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [6] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [6] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [6] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [6] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [6] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [7] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
---------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 2: [7] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 2: [7] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 2: [7] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 4: [8] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 4: [8] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 4: [8] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 4: [9] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 4: [9] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 4: [10] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 4: [10] Deleted

Olivia M. Cao

12/14/25 2:19:00 PM



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------



Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [10] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [11] Commented [OMC8]	Olivia M. Cao	12/19/25 4:21:00 PM
-------------------------------	---------------	---------------------

Notably this is an important contrast to the media sensationalism surrounding the Columbine Massacre. Cullen refusal to succumb to the common pitfalls of reporting on true crime, more humane treatment of a tragedy as devastating as Columbine. Concrete use of evidence also grounds emotional, easy-to-manipulate narrative.

Page 4: [12] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [12] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [12] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [12] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [12] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [13] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [13] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [13] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [13] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [13] Deleted	Olivia M. Cao	12/14/25 2:19:00 PM
----------------------	---------------	---------------------

▼

Page 4: [14] Commented [OMC12]	Olivia M. Cao	12/19/25 5:29:00 PM
--------------------------------	---------------	---------------------

Broaden scope of review. Not just what we can learn from this book on a thematic level but also what we can learn as writers (especially in the delicate field of true crime)