



2005 WINNER

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN BY LIONEL SHRIVER

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lionel Shriver's books include Orange Prize-winner *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, *So Much for That*, *The Post-Birthday World*, *A Perfectly Good Family* and *Ordinary Decent Criminals*.

She is widely published as a journalist, writing features, columns, op-eds, and book reviews for many publications. She is frequently interviewed on television, radio, and in print media. She lives in London and Brooklyn, NY.

PLOT SUMMARY

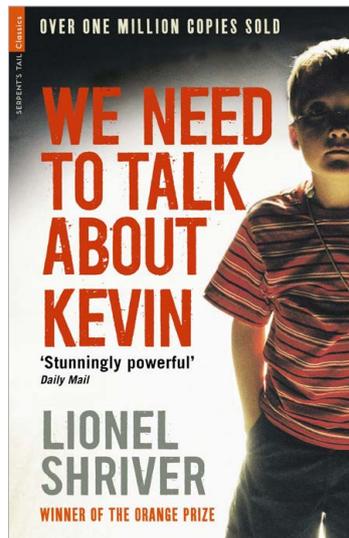
Eva never really wanted to be a mother: certainly not of the boy who murdered seven of his fellow high school students, a cafeteria worker and a teacher who tried to befriend him.

Now, two years later, it's time for her to come to terms with Kevin's horrific rampage in a series of startlingly direct correspondences with her estranged husband, Franklin. Uneasy with the sacrifices and social demotion of motherhood from the start, Eva fears that her dislike for her own son may be responsible for driving him off the rails.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

By writing *We Need to Talk About Kevin* from Eva's point-of-view, Shriver immediately makes us consider all the questions about being a 'bad mother' with reference to Kevin's actions, rather than, for instance, writing the story from Kevin's point of view, which would immediately lead to conversations about his own responsibility rather than hers. By carefully choosing her point of view character in this way, Shriver leads a conversation about continuing social attitudes to women, motherhood, sexual freedom and women's bodies rather than this being purely a book about a school shooting.

Shriver's use of Eva's one-sided communication with her estranged husband Franklin throughout the book means that we only get her version of events, and we sometimes have to wonder whether they are always 'the truth'. The letters themselves give an intimate feel to the reader of being inside Eva's private thoughts, meaning that we might feel more sympathy for her than we might otherwise.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Shriver makes much of Eva's reluctance to be a parent, and makes us wonder how much of her psychology around motherhood affects Kevin. As mothers, how much are we responsible for our children's actions? Is any amount of possibly not feeling wanted by your mother an acceptable reason for murder? Should mothers, in particular, take the blame when their children do bad things? What do you feel about the way our society judges 'bad mothers'? Do you think that Eva is a bad mother, perhaps considering the scene where she breaks Kevin's arm? Is she in fact an abusive parent?

Considering Eva's role as mother further, how does Eva's treatment of her second child, Celia, compare to the way she relates to Kevin? Is it because Celia is an 'easier' child, or because Eva is by now used to parenting? How does Shriver explore the difficult family dynamics between Franklin, Kevin, Celia and Eva especially with reference to the events leading up to Celia losing her eye? What, in the end, can we conclude about Eva as a mother and person?



QUESTIONS

Was Kevin born bad, or made that way?

Franklin always looks on the bright side of parenthood and tries to see all of Kevin's actions in as positive a light as possible. Is he a good or bad father for doing this?

Did you expect Kevin and Eva to be able to retrieve their relationship at the end of the book, or was it unexpected?

What does the novel have to say about high school shootings in America? Have we now become de-sensitised to these types of shooting, with their increased frequency in recent years?

NEXT STEPS

Write a letter from Franklin to Eva from any point in the book – it might respond directly to one of the letters Eva sends, or be a more general reply from Franklin. Where is he?

What will he say to Eva? Does he still love her? How does he feel?

You might also like to write a number of letters from Franklin either to Eva or to someone else: a friend, relative, or someone else like a doctor or professional contact. What is their relationship like? How does Franklin express himself with them? Is he different to the way Eva depicts him? You can choose to make him sympathetic for a reader (or really irritating, if you like!). You could add in details about Thursday that don't appear in Eva's account, or details about Franklin's life with Kevin and Eva, or even about Franklin's childhood.

“ NO OTHER WRITER HAS SHRIVER'S ACERBIC TURN OF PHRASE, NOR THE COURAGE TO EXAMINE SO FORENSICALLY THE AMBIVALENCE FELT BY SO MANY MOTHERS ”

JENNI MURRAY,
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2005

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

BIG BROTHER BY LIONEL SHRIVER

ROOM BY EMMA DONOGHUE

LULLABY BY LEILA SLIMANI