No Easy Answers:
The Truth Behind Death at Columbine

By Brooks Brown with Rob Merritt
Reviewed by Terrance L. Peterson and John H. Hoover

For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that we approached Brown and Merritt's *No Easy Answers* with some preconceived notions due to our respective experiences. On September 24, 2004, we recognized the first anniversary of a fatal double shooting that took place at Rocori High School in Cold Spring, Minnesota, a community within 20 miles of our university. In his role as a counselor educator, Peterson worked extensively in the school with survivors dealing with post-event trauma. Hoover has spent the past decade studying students' perceptions of bullying. Several research teams have noted a connection between bullying and about two in three targeted school shootings (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003; Vossekul, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2000).

We found *No Easy Answers* compelling for obvious reasons. One element that stood out was Brown's very public grieving. Brown, self-identified as a friend of Dylan Klebold, honestly exposes the gamut of emotions he experienced in dealing with the shootings, including confusion, fear, and even outrage. The outrage stems from the fact that, in dealing with the event's aftermath, law enforcement officials in Littleton, Colorado attempted to link Brown with the shootings. The most interesting aspect of the book is following Brown's struggle in order to give meaning to the events and thereby provide him with an understanding of the tragedy. His co-author, Rob Merritt, credibly lets Brown's voice, with all its adolescent querulousness, take center stage. In the end, *No Easy Answers* is an important contribution to the literature on school shootings, in spite of the failure to clearly pin down the tragedy's cause.

Brown and Merritt dedicate the final two-thirds of their book to identifying mistakes made by law enforcement officials before, during, and after the shootings. Though much of this information has been chronicled elsewhere, we valued Brown's first-person account of the degree to which his being investigated as a conspirator complicated his ability to manage his anguish. In a sense, Brown transforms his pain into anger at Sheriff Stone and away from his friend Dylan. Brown expresses a great deal of fury at what he sees as adult prejudice and willful lack of knowledge about the subtleties of youth culture. These observations align with what Males (1996) portrayed as the negative stereotypes that color many adult views of adolescents.

If Brown's portrayal of adult disconnect from youth is accurate, then such a generational divide holds potential for real tragedy. For example, when Brooks Brown falls out with Eric Harris, the latter young man devotes a section of his web site to the publication of death threats against Brooks. When Brown and his family complained, law enforcement officials essentially ignored these concerns, perhaps assigning them to the category of "kids will be kids." This leaves the reader wondering what would have happened had authorities taken these threats (and others published on the site) more seriously.

We appreciated Brown and Merritt's efforts to make sense of the Columbine tragedy, although it was not possible to reach any definitive conclusions. Much of Brown's story revolves around Klebold, with Harris appearing as a darker, more enigmatic presence. Brown clearly attributes the shooting to the bullying that students such as...
Klebold and he received on a daily basis in Littleton's schools. Brown supplies many details of this bullying:

One guy, a wrestler who everyone knew to avoid, liked to make kids get down on the ground and push pennies along the floor with their noses. This would happen during school hours as kids were passing from one class to another. Teachers would see it and look the other way. “Boys will be boys,” they'd say and laugh. (p. 50)

For small, anxious, and shy students, the climate at Columbine described by Brown appeared to be nothing short of horrific. Brown clearly identified bullying as the cause for Klebold's violent turn, although he also cites Harris's influence as a key element.

Although Brown's experiences provide him an opportunity to expand our understanding of a school shooter's development, no clear explanations are offered as to why two boys, Klebold and Brown, both bully victims, both with loving and supportive parents, walked such divergent paths. Brown and Merritt offer Klebold's more intense relationship with Harris as part of the explanation, yet Brown also maintained such a relationship, moving from a target of Harris's death threats to friendship and status as the one student that Harris warned to leave the school on the day of the shooting. Perhaps Brown's most poignant words were his first; there are "no easy answers." As is true of many accounts of such events, we (along with Brown) are left to put these pieces together on our own.

Fairly or unfairly, some educators and school administrators emerge as heavies in Brown's account. To
his eyes, school officials either knew about the bullying or should have. Brown and Merritt describe a climate where the bigger, stronger, more assertive boys ran the school's back halls with an iron fist; bullying appeared rampant at the institution. On the other hand, several authors are seen as reaching out to students. "I didn't get along with most of my teachers, but it's amazing the power that a positive, caring teacher can have. My best experience with such a teacher was Sue Carruthers, Columbine's drama teacher" (p. 60).

The simple explanation, however, that bullying caused the shootings at Columbine High, or that they explain in full the Rocozi shootings, falls short. It is clear from the first author's experience with Rocozi survivors that meaning making, such as that evident in No Easy Answers, is essential in healing. Victims such as Brown are well served by this aspect of what essentially amounts to healthy grieving. Grieving becomes increasingly difficult with the passage of time. Initially, public support for expressions of grief are the norm; yet with time, grief becomes much less acceptable. The pain of many is thinly shrouded in a public face showing "we are okay" or "we don't want to be reminded" with "moving on" being expressed nearly as a mantra.

While Brooks Brown turned to the wider world beyond Littleton to expose and deal with his feelings, many without such resources are frequently given the message that they just need to move along. Put another way, the disapproval of significant others can separate those still reacting to a loss from the ongoing grieving process, a phenomenon known as disenfranchisement (Doka, 1989). While the antecedents of incidents such as those at Columbine and Rocozi remain unclear, equally unclear is how to effectively help everyone in the community heal.

Brown's chronicle of his process serves him and the reader well, and we may safely consider Answers an important source of information in our struggle to deconstruct school violence and its aftermath. It will likely require more detailed and certainly more detached explorations of such events to fully understand them.

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**REFERENCES**


