Lionel Shriver is a novelist whose books include Orange Prize winner *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, *So Much for That*, *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*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *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.

Praise for *We Need to Talk About Kevin*
winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction 2005

"An elegant psychological and philosophical investigation of culpability with a brilliant denoument…although (Eva's) reliability as a narrator becomes increasingly questionable as she oscillates between anger, self-pity and regret, her search for answers becomes just as compulsive for the reader" *Observer*

"Explores but gives no simplistic solutions to the horrors of copycat killings, the choices before women combining careers with rearing children, or whether evil can be innate" *Times Literary Supplement*

"One of the most striking works of fiction to be published this year. It is *Desperate Housewives* as written by Euripides…A powerful, gripping and original meditation on evil" *New Statesman*

"A chilling, yet compulsive book that'll keep you hooked until the very end" *Irish News*

"[A] powerful, painful novel…The ending Shriver chooses will shock many readers in these politically correct times that take for granted the innocence of children and the corrupting culpability of adults.There are true, terrible things said here about family life that most of us would leave unspoken" *Saga Magazine*

"[Shriver's] detailed depiction of a marriage and a family torn apart by silence is disarmingly direct…Shriver's novel is a timely one…maybe we all need to talk about Kevin…Nature or nurture? Shriver leaves it to the reader to decide in this powerful cautionary tale" *Belfast Telegraph*

"Pitch-perfect, devastating and utterly convincing" Geoff Dyer

"An awesomely smart, stylish and pitiless achievement. Franz Kafka wrote that a book should be the ice-pick that breaks open the frozen seas inside us, because the books that make us happy we could write ourselves. Shriver has wielded Kafka's axe with devastating force" Boyd Tonkin, *Independent*

"My beach novel of choice…tense account of a mother who gives birth to a child she unapologetically dislikes from the start" Judy Rumbold, *Guardian*

"A great read with horrifying twists and turns" *Marie Claire*

"A chilling yet compulsive book that'll keep you hooked until the very end" *Yorkshire Post*

"A deeply shocking but mesmerising novel" *Herald*

"The most excruciating, thought-provoking book I've read in years" *Sunday Telegraph*

"This book asks the question many women are afraid to ask: does maternal instinct really exist…A good read for all women who have struggled with the loss of self that often comes with motherhood" *Big Issue*

"A true literary achievement…Read it. Pass it on. We need to talk about this book" *Irish Sunday Independent*

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

LIONEL SHRIVER

INTRODUCTION BY
KATE MOSSE

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Introduction

Every now again, one of those books comes along that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand on end when you read it. A novel that's bigger than the story contained within its pages, bigger than the context within which it is published, not limited by or to the fashions of the day. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is one of those novels.

At first glance, it's an unlikely book to have achieved such acclaim and so quickly. It was published in 2003 and won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2005. The story of a teenage boy who, Columbine-style, goes on a rampage, slaughtering classmates, teachers, others. But poke beneath the surface and immediately it's clear that "Kevin" is not about that one singular act – or, rather, not only about that Thursday – but actually an immensely complex and subtly layered novel about storytelling and lies, about blame and free will, about the choices we make. Most of all, it's about love and the failure of love, about the black lines we paint around our own silhouettes.

The story is told as a series of letters from Eva Khatchadourian, Kevin's mother, to his father, Franklin. The tone is chatty, intimate, a dialogue between a woman and her, we assume, estranged husband. Eva is independent, interesting, someone we might like to know. Franklin seems duller, more measured, limited by his desire for a domestic life with picket fence and clapboard dog. Already, without realising, we are taking sides.

This is one of the many ways that Shriver is so skilful, so

tricksy. She sucks us in. Even as we're learning the story of Eve and Franklin's relationship, as we meet their son, Kevin, then their daughter, Celia, we believe we are on top of things. We think we're being asked to decide who's to blame, that there is a moment when all the death and destruction could have been averted. Is it Eva's fault or Franklin's? Was it inevitable? Nature versus nurture, too little maternal love or too much, the old familiar questions. We get it.

And yet, and yet.

Little by little we start to realise that Eva – our friend, our co-conspirator – is not necessarily to be trusted. Worse, she's that creature beloved of novelists, the unreliable narrator. Plausible, charming, but not always truthful. We don't want to lose faith in her, as the letters continue, grudgingly we're forced to accept that Eva might have her own reasons for painting her son blacker than he is. Too late, we realise the internal questions within the novel, the nature of the relationships laid semi-bare, are being echoed by our external reactions to what we're reading. And too late do we realise we have become as voyeuristic as the characters who dance between the covers. When Shriver delivers the final *coup de grâce*, cutting the novel out from under our feet, it's almost a relief.

Few novels are considered classics. Fewer still attain that status within their lifetimes. This, though, is one of them. A novel so compelling, so original, as to warrant being read again and over again.

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

For Terri
One worst-case scenario we've both escaped.

A child needs your love most when he deserves it least.

—Erma Bombeck

November 8, 2000

Dear Franklin,

I'm unsure why one trifling incident this afternoon has moved me to write to you. But since we've been separated, I may most miss coming home to deliver the narrative curiosities of my day, the way a cat might lay mice at your feet: the small, humble offerings that couples proffer after foraging in separate backyards. Were you still installed in my kitchen, slathering crunchy peanut butter on Branola though it was almost time for dinner, I'd no sooner have put down the bags, one leaking a clear viscous drool, than this little story would come tumbling out, even before I chided that we're having pasta tonight so would you please not eat that whole sandwich.

In the early days, of course, my tales were exotic imports, from Lisbon, from Katmandu. But no one wants to hear stories from abroad, really, and I could detect from your telltale politeness that you privately preferred anecdotal trinkets from closer to home: an eccentric encounter with a toll collector on the George Washington Bridge, say. Marvels from the mundane helped to ratify your view that all my foreign travel was a kind of cheating. My souvenirs—a packet of slightly stale Belgian waffles, the British expression for "piffle" *(codswallop!)*—were artificially imbued with magic by mere dint of distance. Like those baubles the Japanese exchange—in a box in a bag, in a box in a bag—the sheen on my offerings from far afield was

all packaging. What a more considerable achievement, to root around in the untransubstantiated rubbish of plain old New York state and scrounge a moment of piquancy from a trip to the Nyack Grand Union.

Which is just where my story takes place. I seem finally to be learning what you were always trying to teach me, that my own country is as exotic and even as perilous as Algeria. I was in the dairy aisle and didn't need much; I wouldn't. I never eat pasta these days, without you to dispatch most of the bowl. I do miss your gusto.

It's still difficult for me to venture into public. You would think, in a country that so famously has "no sense of history," as Europeans claim, that I might cash in on America's famous amnesia. No such luck. No one in this "community" shows any signs of forgetting, after a year and eight months—to the day. So I have to steel myself when provisions run low. Oh, for the clerks at the 7-Eleven on Hopewell Street my novelty has worn off, and I can pick up a quart of milk without glares. But our regular Grand Union remains a gauntlet.

I always feel furtive there. To compensate, I force my back straight, my shoulders square. I see now what they mean by "holding your head high," and I am sometimes surprised by how much interior transformation a ramrod posture can afford. When I stand physically proud, I feel a small measure less mortified.

Debating medium eggs or large, I glanced toward the yogurts. A few feet away, a fellow shopper's frazzled black hair went white at the roots for a good inch, while its curl held only at the ends: an old permanent grown out. Her lavender top and matching skirt may have once been stylish, but now the blouse bound under the arms and the peplum served to emphasize heavy hips. The outfit needed pressing, and the padded shoulders bore the faint stripe of fading from a wire hanger. Something from the nether regions of the closet, I concluded, what you reach for when everything else is filthy or on the floor. As the woman's head tilted toward the processed cheese, I caught the crease of a double chin.

Don't try to guess; you'd never recognize her from that portrait. She was once so neurotically svelte, sharply cornered, and glossy as if commercially gift wrapped. Though it may be more romantic to picture the bereaved as gaunt, I imagine you can grieve as efficiently with chocolates as with tap water. Besides, there are women who keep themselves sleek and smartly turned out less to please a spouse than to keep up with a daughter, and, thanks to us, she lacks that incentive these days.

It was Mary Woolford. I'm not proud of this, but I couldn't face her. I reeled. My hands went clammy as I fumbled with the carton, checking that the eggs were whole. I rearranged my features into those of a shopper who had just remembered something in the next aisle over and managed to place the eggs on the child-seat without turning. Scuttling off on this pretense of mission, I left the cart behind, because the wheels squeaked. I caught my breath in soup.

I should have been prepared, and often am—girded, guarded, often to no purpose as it turns out. But I can't clank out the door in full armor to run every silly errand, and besides, how can Mary harm me now? She has tried her damnedest; she's taken me to court. Still, I could not tame my heartbeat, nor return to dairy right away, even once I realized that I'd left that embroidered bag from Egypt, with my wallet, in the cart.

Which is the only reason I didn't abandon the Grand Union altogether. I eventually had to skulk back to my bag, and so I meditated on Campbell's asparagus and cheese, thinking aimlessly how Warhol would be appalled by the redesign.

By the time I crept back the coast was clear, and I swept up my cart, abruptly the busy professional woman who must make quick work of domestic chores. A familiar role, you would think. Yet it's been so long since I thought of myself that way that I felt sure the folks ahead of me at checkout must have pegged my impatience not as the imperiousness of the second-earner for whom time is money, but as the moist, urgent panic of a fugitive.

When I unloaded my motley groceries, the egg carton felt sticky, which moved the salesclerk to flip it open. Ah. Mary Woolford had spotted me after all.

"All twelve!" the girl exclaimed. "I'll have them get you another carton."

I stopped her. "No, no," I said. "I'm in a hurry. I'll take them as they are."

"But they're totally—"

"I'll take them as they are!" There's no better way to get people to cooperate in this country than by seeming a little unhinged. After dabbing pointedly at the price code with a Kleenex, she scanned the eggs, then wiped her hands on the tissue with a rolled eye.

"Khatchadourian," the girl pronounced when I handed her my debit card. She spoke loudly, as if to those waiting in line. It was late afternoon, the right shift for an after-school job; plausibly about seventeen, this girl could have been one of Kevin's classmates. Sure, there are half a dozen high schools in this area, and her family might have just moved here from California. But from the look in her eye I didn't think so. She fixed me with a hard stare. "That's an unusual name."

I'm not sure what got into me, but I'm so tired of this. It's not that I have no shame. Rather, I'm exhausted with shame, slippery all over with its sticky albumen taint. It is not an emotion that leads anywhere. "I'm the only Khatchadourian in New York state," I flouted, and snatched my card back. She threw my eggs in a bag, where they drooled a little more.

So now I'm home—what passes for it. Of course you've never been here, so allow me to describe it for you.

You'd be taken aback. Not least because I've opted to remain in Gladstone, after kicking up such a fuss about moving to the suburbs in the first place. But I felt I should stay within driving distance of Kevin. Besides, much as I crave anonymity, it's not that I want my neighbors to forget who I am; I want to, and that is not

an opportunity any town affords. This is the one place in the world where the ramifications of my life are fully felt, and it's far less important to me to be liked these days than to be understood.

I'd enough of a pittance left over after paying off the lawyers to buy a little place of my own, but the tentativeness of renting suited. Likewise my living in this Tinkertoy duplex seemed a fitting marriage of temperaments. Oh, you'd be horrified; its flimsy pressboard cabinetry defies your father's motto, "Materials are everything." But it is this very quality of barely hanging on that I cherish.

Everything here is precarious. The steep stairway to the second floor has no banister, spicing my ascent to bed with vertigo after three glasses of wine. The floors creak and the window frames leak, and there is an air about the place of fragility and underconfidence, as if at any moment the entire structure might simply blink out like a bad idea. Swinging on rusty coat hangers from a live wire across the ceiling, the tiny halogen bulbs downstairs have a tendency to flicker, and their tremulous light contributes to the on-again, off-again sensation that permeates my new life. Likewise the innards of my sole telephone socket are disgorged; my uncertain connection to the outside world dangles by two poorly soldered wires, and it often cuts off. Though the landlord has promised me a proper stove, I really don't mind the hot plate—whose "on" light doesn't work. The inside handle of the front door often comes off in my hand. So far I've been able to work it back on again, but the stump of the lock shaft teases me with intimations of my mother: unable to leave the house.

I recognize, too, my duplex's broad tendency to stretch its resources to the very limit. The heating is feeble, rising off the radiators in a stale, shallow breath, and though it is only early November, I have already cranked their regulators on full. When I shower, I use all hot water and no cold; it's just warm enough that I don't shiver, but awareness that there is no reserve permeates my ablutions with disquiet. The refrigerator dial is set at its highest point, and the milk keeps only three days.

As for the decor, it evokes a quality of mockery that feels apt. The downstairs is painted in a slapdash, abrasively bright yellow, the brush-strokes careless and aerated with streaks of underlying white, as if scrawled with crayon. Upstairs in my bedroom, the walls are sponged amateurishly in aqua, like primary-school daubs. This tremulous little house—it doesn't feel quite *real*, Franklin. And neither do I.

Yet I do hope that you're not feeling sorry for me; it's not my intention that you do. I might have found more palatial accommodation, if that's what I wanted. I like it here, in a way. It's unserious, toy. I live in a dollhouse. Even the furniture is out of scale. The dining table strikes chest-high, which makes me feel underage, and the little bedside table on which I have perched this laptop is much too low for typing—about the right height for serving coconut cookies and pineapple juice to kindergartners.

Maybe this askew, juvenile atmosphere helps to explain why yesterday, in a presidential election, I didn't vote. I simply forgot. Everything around me seems to take place so far away. And now rather than pose a firm counterpoint to my dislocation, the country seems to have joined me in the realm of the surreal. The votes are tallied. But as in some Kafka tale, no one seems to know who won.

And I have this dozen eggs—what's left of them. I've emptied the remains into a bowl and fished out the shards of shell. If you were here I might whip us up a nice frittata, with diced potato, cilantro, that one teaspoon of sugar that's the secret. Alone, I'll slop them in a skillet, scramble, and sullenly pick. But I will eat them all the same. There was something about Mary's gesture that I found, in an inchoate sort of way, rather elegant.

Food revulsed me at first. Visiting my mother in Racine, I turned green before her stuffed dolma, though she'd spent all day blanching grape leaves and rolling the lamb and rice filling into neat parcels; I reminded her they could be frozen. In Manhattan, when I scurried past the 57th Street deli on the way to Harvey's

law office, the peppery smell of pastrami fat would flip my stomach. But the nausea passed, and I missed it. When after four or five months I began to get hungry—ravenous, in fact—the appetite struck me as unseemly. So I continued to act the part of a woman who'd lost interest in food.

But after about a year, I faced the fact that the theater was wasted. If I grew cadaverous, no one cared. What did I expect, that you would wrap my rib cage with those enormous hands in which horses must be measured, lifting me overhead with the stern reproach that is every Western woman's sly delight, "You're too thin"?

So now I eat a croissant with my coffee every morning, picking up every flake with a moistened forefinger. Methodically chopping cabbage occupies a portion of these long evenings. I have even declined, once or twice, those few invitations out that still jangle my phone, usually friends from abroad who e-mail from time to time, but whom I haven't seen for years. Especially if they don't know, and I can always tell; innocents sound too roisterous, whereas initiates begin with a deferential stutter and a hushed, churchy tone. Obviously I don't want to recite the story. Nor do I covet the mute commiseration of friends who *don't know what to say* and so leave me to spill my guts by way of making conversation. But what really drives me to make my apologies about how "busy" I am is that I am terrified we will both order a salad and the bill will arrive and it will only be 8:30 or 9:00 at night and I will go home to my tiny duplex and have nothing to chop.

It's funny, after so long on the road for A Wing and a Prayer—a different restaurant every night, where waiters speak Spanish or Thai, whose menus list seviche or dog—that I should have grown so fixated on this fierce routine. Horribly, I remind myself of my mother. But I cannot break with this narrow sequence (square of cheese or six to seven olives; breast of chicken, chop, or omelet; hot vegetable; single vanilla sandwich cookie; no more wine than will finish exactly half the bottle) as if I am walking a balance

beam, and with one step off I will topple. I have had to disallow snow peas altogether because their preparation is insufficiently arduous.

Anyway, even with the two of us estranged, I knew you would worry about whether I was eating. You always did. Thanks to Mary Woolford's feeble revenge this evening, I am amply fed. Not all of our neighbors' antics have proved so anodyne.

Those gallons of crimson paint splashed all over the front porch, for example, when I was still living in our nouveau riche ranch house (that's what it was, Franklin, whether or not you like the sound of it—a *ranch house*) on Palisades Parade. Over the windows, the front door. They came in the night, and by the time I woke the next morning the paint had almost dried. I thought at the time, only a month or so after—whatever am I going to call that Thursday?—that I couldn't be horrified anymore, or wounded. I suppose that's a common conceit, that you've already been so damaged that damage itself, in its totality, makes you safe.

As I turned the corner from the kitchen into the living room that morning, I recognized this notion that I was impervious for codswallop. I gasped. The sun was streaming in the windows, or at least through the panes not streaked with paint. It also shone through in spots where the paint was thinnest, casting the off-white walls of that room in the lurid red glow of a garish Chinese restaurant.

I'd always made it a policy, one you admired, to face what I feared, though this policy was conceived in days when my fears ran to losing my way in a foreign city—child's play. What I would give now to return to the days when I'd no idea what lay in wait (*child's play* itself, for example). Still, old habits die hard, so rather than flee back to our bed and draw up the covers, I resolved to survey the damage. But the front door stuck, glued shut with thick crimson enamel. Unlike latex, enamel isn't water soluble. And enamel is expensive, Franklin. Someone made a serious

investment. Of course, our old neighborhood has any number of deficiencies, but one of them has never been money.

So I went out the side door and around to the front in my robe. Taking in our neighbors' artwork, I could feel my face set in the same "impassive mask" the *New York Times* described from the trial. The *Post,* less kindly, depicted my expression throughout as "defiant," and our local *Journal News* went even further: "From Eva Khatchadourian's stony implacability, her son might have done nothing more egregious than dip a pigtail in an inkwell." (I grant that I stiffened in court, squinting and sucking my cheeks against my molars; I remember grasping at one of your tough-guy mottoes, "Don't let 'em see you sweat." But Franklin, "defiant"? I was trying not to cry.)

The effect was quite magnificent, if you had a taste for the sensational, which by that point I certainly didn't. The house looked as if its throat were slit. Splashed in wild, gushing Rorschachs, the hue had been chosen so meticulously—deep, rich, and luscious, with a hint of purplish blue—that it might have been specially mixed. I thought dully that had the culprits requested this color rather than pulled it off the shelf, the police might be able to track them down.

I wasn't about to walk into a police station again unless I had to.

My kimono was thin, the one you gave me for our first anniversary back in 1980. Meant for summer, it was the only wrap I had from you, and I wouldn't reach for anything else. I've thrown so much away, but nothing you gave me or left behind. I admit that these talismans are excruciating. That is why I keep them. Those bullying therapeutic types would claim that my cluttered closets aren't "healthy." I beg to differ. In contrast to the cringing, dirty pain of Kevin, of the paint, the criminal and civil trials, this pain is *wholesome*. Much belittled in the sixties, wholesomeness is a property I have come to appreciate as surprisingly scarce.

The point is, clutching that soft blue cotton and assessing the somewhat slapdash paint job that our neighbors had seen fit to

sponsor free of charge, I was cold. It was May, but crisp, with a whipping wind. Before I found out for myself, I might have imagined that in the aftermath of personal apocalypse, the little bothers of life would effectively vanish. But it's not true. You still feel chills, you still despair when a package is lost in the mail, and you still feel irked to discover you were shortchanged at Starbucks. It might seem, in the circumstances, a little embarrassing for me to continue to need a sweater or a muff, or to object to being cheated of a dollar and fifty cents. But since that *Thursday* my whole life has been smothered in such a blanket of embarrassment that I have chosen to find these passing pinpricks solace instead, emblems of a surviving propriety. Being inadequately dressed for the season, or chafing that in a Wal-Mart the size of a cattle market I cannot locate a single box of kitchen matches, I glory in the emotionally commonplace.

Picking my way to the side door again, I puzzled over how a band of marauders could have assaulted this structure so thoroughly while I slept unawares inside. I blamed the heavy dose of tranquilizers I was taking every night (please don't say anything, Franklin, I know you don't approve), until I realized that I was picturing the scene all wrong. It was a month later, not a day. There were no jeers and howls, no ski masks and sawn-off shotguns. They came in stealth. The only sounds were broken twigs, a muffled thump as the first full can slapped our lustrous mahogany door, the lulling oceanic lap of paint against glass, a tiny rat-a-tat-tat as spatters splattered, no louder than fat rain. Our house had not been spurted with the Day-Glo spray of spontaneous outrage but slathered with a hatred that had reduced until it was thick and savorous, like a fine French sauce.

You'd have insisted we hire someone else to clean it off. You were always keen on this splendid American penchant for specialization, whereby there was an expert for every want, and you sometimes thumbed the Yellow Pages just for fun. "Paint Removers: Crimson enamel." But so much was made in the papers about how rich we were, how Kevin had been spoiled. I

didn't want to give Gladstone the satisfaction of sneering, look, she can just hire one more minion to clean up the mess, like that expensive lawyer. No, I made them watch me day after day, scraping by hand, renting a sandblaster for the bricks. One evening I glimpsed my reflection after a day's toil—clothing smeared, fingernails creased, hair flecked—and shrieked. I'd looked like this once before.

A few crevices around the door may still gleam with a ruby tint; deep in the crags of those faux-antique bricks may yet glisten a few drops of spite that I was unable to reach with the ladder. I wouldn't know. I sold that house. After the civil trial, I had to.

I had expected to have trouble unloading the property. Surely superstitious buyers would shy away when they found out who owned the place. But that just goes to show once again how poorly I understood my own country. You once accused me of lavishing all my curiosity on "Third World shitholes," while what was arguably the most extraordinary empire in the history of mankind was staring me in the face. You were right, Franklin. There's no place like home.

As soon as the property was listed, the bids tumbled in. Not because the bidders didn't know; because they did. Our house sold for well more than it was worth—over $3 million. In my naïveté, I hadn't grasped that the property's very notoriety was its selling point. While poking about our pantry, apparently couples on the climb were picturing gleefully in their minds' eyes the crowning moment of their housewarming dinner party.

[Ting-ting!] Listen up, folks. I'm gonna propose a toast, but first, you're not gonna believe who we bought this spread from. Ready? Eva Khatchadourian…*Familiar? You bet. Where'd we move to, anyway? Gladstone!…Yeah,* that *Khatchadourian, Pete, among all the Khatchadourians you know? Christ, guy, little slow.*

…That's right, "Kevin." Wild, huh? My kid Lawrence has his room. Tried one on the other night, too. Said he had to stay up with me to watch Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer *because his room was "haunted"*

by "Kevin Ketchup." Had to disappoint the kid. Sorry, I said, Kevin Ketchup can't no way be haunting your bedroom when the worthless little bastard's all too alive and well in some kiddie prison upstate. Up to me, man, that scumbag would've got the chair…No, it wasn't quite as bad as Columbine. What was it, ten, honey? Nine, right, seven kids, two adults. The teacher he whacked was like, this brat's big champion or something, too. And I don't know about blaming videos, rock music. We grew up with rock music, didn't we? None of us went on some killing frenzy at our high school. Or take Lawrence. That little guy loves blood-and-guts TV, and no matter how graphic he doesn't flinch. But his rabbit got run over? He cried for a week. They know the difference.

We're raising him to know what's right. Maybe it seems unfair, but you really gotta wonder about the parents.

Eva

Afterword by Lionel Shriver

I can roughly divide my novels into two stacks. They either address what I want, or what I fear. Perhaps to my spiritual detriment, the latter pile is the taller, and from my crowd of phobias – of failure, other people – one rose head and shoulders above the rest about three years ago.

I was petrified of having children.

I first foreswore motherhood when I was eight years old. The rueful, she'll-soon-change-her-tune smirk that this proclamation elicited from my elders only solidified my resolve.

As for what prompted my precocious aversion, I can only speculate. Having borne my two brothers and me did seem to have further entrenched my own mother's second-in-command status in our family. As for my ambitious, restive father, he was forever relishing aloud that glorious day when he could finally have "adult conversations" with his children. While he may have meant us to take this impatience as a compliment, I couldn't help but reflect that it would have been more efficient by half should he have conducted his conversations with adults, period. Moreover, he made little effort to disguise the fact that until that day arrived we were an annoyance. But rather than feel wounded, I think I sympathized. We *were* annoying. We were loud and sneaky and broke things. At eight, maybe I was simply horrified by the prospect of being saddled with myself.

As a teenager, I began to hedge my bets. My future incarnation might prove subject to all manner of preposterous urges, even if I already suspected by fifteen that a pigheaded commitment to doing what I'd always said I'd do if only because I'd always said it was with me for life. So I started to append casually to my I-don't-want-babies line, "Oh, at most I can see being one of those women who has a kid at forty-five." The caveat seemed safe, since when you're fifteen the age of forty-five is a distant abstraction. Forty-five = never.

Well, surprise, surprise. I'm fifty-three.

It was the encroaching proximity of this adolescent due-date of sorts – coinciding with the imminent closure of the reproductive window – that moved me to address this matter at forty-two. I was in a stable relationship of six years' standing. If my own earnings were in freelance flux, my partner had a steady job; we could afford parenthood, financially. And my partner was nightmarishly accommodating on this issue; whether we had a family fell into the same category as the material for our living-room curtains. As I picked a washable rayon for the drapes, I could select the fabric of our domestic life, too.

So what, exactly, was I afraid of? Big, fat fears are often bundles of smaller ones, and any woman contemplating what never used to be a choice could rattle off the downsides of motherhood: hassle and expenditure (and not only of money). An acceptance that comes reluctantly to boomers of being a grown-up for keeps. The relegation of one's own ambitions so far to the back burner that they fall off the stove. A precipitous social demotion that I inferred from the chuckle of those smug adults who discounted my renunciations at eight: *You say you want to be a writer, but you're a girl, and all you really want to be is a mommy.*

And then there's the risk that the project does not go strictly according to plan, and little Tiffany or Jason has *problems*. Since just about any stranger could come knocking nine months

later, coitus without contraception is, as Eva observes, "like leaving your front door unlocked". *Unsafe sex*, indeed.

Yet my greatest fear was of the ambivalence itself. I hadn't wanted to be a mother since I was eight. What if I bit the reproductive bullet, and this queasiness failed to abate? What if, even, it got worse? Imagine bearing a child and then realizing, with this helpless, irrevocable little person squalling in its crib, that you'd made a mistake. Who really, in that instance, would pay the price?

Meanwhile, a series of barely pubescent boys had started shooting their classmates. Like most Americans, I was appalled. The perpetrators were all white, substantially middle-class, and couldn't endure a little ribbing from peers or rejection from girlfriends without taking their tawdry, quotidian pain out on other people with a disproportionate vehemence that boggled the mind. Apparently I was obliged to add to my list of motherhood's shortcomings, along with diapers and lost sleep: *son might turn out to be a killer.*

Out of this intersection of private and public angst I wrote *Kevin*, crafted in great trepidation. It seemed presumptuous to write about motherhood when I'd never had children myself. To my relief, no reader has yet to approach me in indignation that I didn't know what I was talking about. Because I didn't. Still, I had friends and siblings with children, I was once on the short side myself, and apparently – when it comes to my terrors – my imagination is vivid.

Though any writer is pleased by admiring reviews, I've been more fascinated by the responses to *Kevin* from so-called "ordinary" readers. Not only are many of these amateur reviews well written and reflective, but they divide almost straight down the middle into what seem to be reviews of two different books.

One camp assesses a story about a well-intentioned mother who, whatever her perfectly human deficits in this role, is saddled with a "bad seed", a child evil from birth whose

ultimate criminality only she seems to perceive but is helpless to prevent. Even in retrospect, nothing this poor benighted mother might have done differently would have headed off her son's becoming one of those infamous high school murderers at fifteen.

The second camp of readers appears to have read another novel entirely: about a mother whose coldness is itself criminal, and who bears full responsibility for her son's rampage as a teenager. Having allowed an uneasiness with the whole parental enterprise to poison her relationship with the boy even as an innocent baby, this mother is an object lesson. Parents get the children they deserve.

I have found this division gratifying. Mission accomplished. The novel does implicitly ask "Has Kevin been mangled by his mother's coldness, or is he innately horrid?" Yet I hope that this question is no more resolved in the book than crude oppositions like "nature versus nurture" are ever reconciled in real life.

Is Kevin inherently evil, or is Eva – who admits about motherhood, "I was terrible at it" – finally to blame for how he turned out? I don't know. You tell me.

Many of you *have* told me. Which brings us to a point of genuine humility, even for a writer so notoriously uppity.

Fictional creations are fragile. On bad days, authors can't suspend their own disbelief. The characters seem plainly fabrications. The story feels made-up. But fiction is a two-way street. Readers bring imaginations to the table, and contribute additional substance to a book. Hearing back from my audience – through readings, e-mail, letters, and Web site reviews – has made this novel *more real to me*. Intelligent, astute, and creative feedback has turned these characters into larger, fuller, and more complicated people than they were in my head when I tried to bring them to life. A novel is able to tap into its readers' brain power, much as a big project like climate-change calculation can enlist the computing power

of individual laptops around the world. Readers' collective belief in this book, the personal experiences they've brought to bear on the text, and their vigorous arguments over, say, "Is Franklin a fool, or a merely a nice man who desperately wants a happy family?" have immeasurably enriched my own novel for me, and I am profoundly grateful.

But I have a confession. I faced my fears, and they bested me. Throughout the composition of that worst-case scenario, I continued to use contraception. I will never be "one of those women" who has a child in her forties.

Nevertheless, there is something nihilistic about refusing to reproduce, selfish in the worst way. Granted, the latterday Western emphasis on personal satisfaction has a logic to it; to find meaning in life through children is effectively to foist the existential dilemma on to the next generation, which will presumably foist it on to the next, ad infinitum, and no one ever has to justify why we're here. Yet to remain deliberately childless expresses a lack of faith, as my protagonist puts it so ineloquently, "in the whole human *thing*". Take individual fulfilment at the expense of parenthood to the limit, and one generation has a cracking good time, after which the entire human race, *poof*, disappears.

For a long time I felt vaguely superior to parents, whom I regarded as having been suckered. And certainly the list of reasons to give progeny a miss is as long as your arm: tedium, exhaustion, *son might turn out to be a killer.* I couldn't do it; I am too much of a coward. But despite the money, the risk, and the bother, most folks – with recourse to reliable birth control – still have children. Nowadays, I'm anything but scornful.

I'm impressed.

Voted number 2 in the Penguin/ Orange Reading Group Prize 2007

Reading group questions that have arisen from publication of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*.

Was Kevin just born wicked, or is his cold heart the inevitable consequence of an unaffectionate mother? Does the novel answer this question? And do you think the answer to this classic "nature versus nurture" debate—whether character is formed by one's environment or is innate—has to be one or the other?

Do you completely trust Eva's version of events? More than once, she admits that she was mistaken about something she assumed that Kevin did. Is she perhaps exaggerating her son's malignancy to make herself seem less blameworthy, or was she just the only party in this story who foresaw what he was capable of well in advance of *Thursday*?

Do you think that Kevin was guilty of damaging his little sister's eye? If so, what evidence do you find for this assumption? Would it stand up in court?

Franklin always looks on the bright side of parenthood, and interprets whatever Kevin gets up to in the most favorable light possible. Do you find this eagerness to give his own child a break sympathetic? Or is Franklin a fool?

We're often most repelled by people who share our own flaws. Eva confesses that she never really liked her son. But what are some of the traits that Kevin and his mother have in common?
Why *do* people have children, when kids are expensive and exhausting, and the risks of something going wrong are so high?

While you were reading the novel, did you ever wonder what Franklin was doing, and why he never seemed to write back to Eva?

Eva was sued in civil court for being a negligent parent. Many school shooting incidents have resulted in similar suits. If you were the judge in that case, what ruling would you have handed down? Are there any other parties in this story who seem to you conspicuously remiss?

Does the novel truly explain why high school killings have become a social phenomenon in the United States? And did you want an explanation?

Is Eva a bad mother? Is she too hard on herself, or is she not hard enough?

What do you believe ultimately motivated Kevin to stage *Thursday*?

Other books by Lionel Shriver

So Much for That
The Post-Birthday World
A Perfectly Good Family
Game Control
Double Fault
The Female of the Species
Checker and the Derailleurs
Ordinary Decent Criminals

Double Fault

A cautionary tale of passion and rivalry, *Double Fault* (published by Serpent's Tail) is also a love story set in the high-pressure world of professional tennis. With the unerring scrutiny that is her trademark, Shriver examines a modern marriage.

"A brilliant tale of doomed love" *Observer*

"Shriver has a terrible gift for laying bare for us the emotions that lie just beneath the skin. I doubt that there is any thoughtful woman who does not recognize herself somewhere in Shriver's writing" *Financial Times*

"A terrific approach shot with which she sets things up for the deadly putaway volley that is *Kevin*" *Independent*

"Shriver's exploration of [Willy's] character is so fearless that, although readers may not sympathise with her, they'll understand why she's driven to destroy what she loves" *Metro*

Serpent's Tail

"Serpent's Tail is a consistently brave, exciting and almost deliriously diverse publisher. I salute you!" Will Self

"Nobody else has the same commitment to the young, the new, the untested and the unclassifiable" Jonathan Coe

"Serpent's Tail is one of the most unique and important voices in British publishing" Mark Billingham

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"You're a good deed in a naughty world" Deborah Moggach

"Thanks, Serpent's Tail, for years of challenging reading" Hari Kunzru