

REVIEW: *TOWER SNIPER: THE TERROR OF AMERICA'S FIRST ACTIVE SHOOTER ON CAMPUS*, by Monte and Nathaniel Akers and Dr. Robert Friedman
Submitted by Faye Walker, Ph.D.

We are becoming accustomed to mass shootings: Columbine, Aurora, Orlando, Sandy Hook, just to name a few. This creeping sense of "normality" is not a positive move in our so-called civilization. We could argue all day and all night about gun control, but that is another essay.

However, in 1966, only soldiers knew the pain and trauma of mass shootings. Until Charles Whitman went up the Tower at University of Texas campus in Austin and started targeting innocent people. He killed 16 on that day (plus one who died from his injuries several years later) and injured 32. It was the first mass shooting in the modern era of civilians. It took 96 minutes for several courageous members of the Austin Police Department to end the entire event.

TOWER SNIPER: THE TERROR OF AMERICA'S FIRST ACTIVE SHOOTER ON CAMPUS is the most recent book to be written about the event. But this book is different in its scope from those that have come before. One of the major aims is to expose some of the myths and misinformation that have tarried for fifty years after the Whitman event. Another is to take a new psychological look at Whitman's actions. It is a well-written, factual and speculative work divided, essentially, into three parts.

This division of the text allows a comprehensive view of the situation that occurred August 1, 1966 in Austin, Texas. The minute-by-minute description of the shooting is well-researched by the father-son team of Monte and Nathaniel Akers from primary sources such as radio tapes, archived material, and most importantly from personal interviews with some of the principals.

The authors have taken an admirable view of their responsibility to detail in itemizing the movements of Whitman and every victim and many survivors on and around August 1, 1966. Eighty some pages follow Whitman from his childhood through to the day he ascended the tower to kill people. Since many books, articles, movies, and memoirs have been written which cover this ground, the coverage may seem excessive.

However, in analyzing Whitman's and his victims' movements, the Akers team carefully teases out the strands of real fact from the babble of misunderstanding and chaos occurring on that sweltering afternoon, even making clear some aspects of the famed Connally Commission Report. Certainly, they clarify the role of one Austin policeman, Houston McCoy, who deserves the "credit" for killing Whitman, they put to rest the "rumor of the tumor" that supposedly influenced Whitman's actions, they analyze the trajectory of his shooting to put

down a belief that he targeted any one in particular (he was “democratic” in his shots: he just wanted to kill everyone he could), and they allow those brave individuals who aided others their opportunity to be heroic.

The psychoanalysis of the shooter, done by Dr. Robert Friedman, brings new theories to bear on the problem every article, book, memoir, and movie has asked: “Why did he (Whitman) do it?” Most of these sources have tried to answer that question by insisting on a brain tumor, blaming his autocratic father, suggesting excessive use of amphetamines, or some combination of all three. Dr. Friedman turns to modern psychoanalytic theory and our better understanding of the brain to come to his conclusions. After all this time, it is a refreshing insight although the reader may not be satisfied, once again, with the answer. That is our humanity coming through. When bad things happen, we want to know why, but the simple truth is that the answers are not simple, and we can never know the killer’s mind no matter how many clues he leaves behind.

The third part is woven throughout Dr. Friedman’s analysis so to call it a “division” may be something of a misnomer. However, Friedman brings his psychoanalysis to bear on the question of “Why has U.T. ignored and shuffled under the rug the long memory of the rampage to the detriment of survivors and others?” In a kind of hurt and puzzled tone, the author accuses, shames, and laments the fact that the university, until very recently, has tried not to memorialize the event. The university’s reasons are many: they didn’t want to glamorize Whitman, they may have been afraid of lawsuits, they wanted to emphasize the safety of their campus, among other things.

There is a sense in which U.T. could not have known in 1966 how to deal with their crisis. It was the first mass shooting on a school campus in the U.S. Psychology was not prepared to treat victims of a civilian shooting. Remember, institutions were completely unprepared for the (not yet named) PTSD that Vietnam soldiers were returning with and had never treated the shell-shocked, as they were called, of the previous wars. So when a casualty of war came to the homeland, no one really knew what to do.

That excuses U.T. for the first, say, ten years, but as psychological theories evolved and understanding of mental illnesses progressed, the university should have taken measures to aid those affected by the shooting. Dr. Friedman compares Virginia Tech’s handling of the 2007 mass shooting with U.T.’s mismanagement and credits Virginia Tech with understanding what survivors need.

Friedman and the Akers believe it is time for the university to “own” this event, for many reasons, among them, to help survivors and other victims understand and come to grips with this timeless tragedy.

[One warning to readers: the graphic photographs of the dead are startling and may be offensive to some. However, the photos of civilians lying dead, dying, or helpless on the sidewalks of U.T. are at least as upsetting.]

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Born on a Northeast farm, educated in the Midwest and South, teaching in the winters of Minnesota, Faye Walker seems to have chosen Houston in which to reside. Captured here for thirty years, she writes, edits, and copywrites from her home in central Houston. In between those jobs, she teaches at UH-Downtown, cares for her pets, and travels whenever possible. Scotland is her second home and both novels she’s written take place in historical Scotland. Walker gives talks at writing conferences and works on a third novel in her spare time.