

BOOK REVIEW: WHY MEADOW DIED: THE PEOPLE AND POLICIES THAT CREATED THE PARKLAND SHOOTER AND ENDANGER AMERICA'S STUDENTS

By **Andrew Pollack and Max Eden**

Reviewed by **Rachel Kosaka, Nathan Kruis and Nicholas J. Rowland**

The authors of *Why Meadow Died*, Andrew Pollack -- father of murdered student Meadow Pollack -- and Max Eden -- former senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute -- without question, have no intention of entering into a discourse over topics pertaining to school shooters and their shootings. They are not going to blame victims or parents, or discuss gun control legislation, advocacy, and activism. Instead, they wage a controversial argument that school policy, and, thus, school boards, are ultimately responsible for contemporary school shootings. In Pollack and Eden's telling of it, the decisions of policymakers at Broward County collectively failed both Nikolas Cruz and the seventeen Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) students and teachers that were killed on February 14, 2018. The book is not published in a university press, and, as such, is not firmly academic in tone or posture. In the remainder of this book review we cover the book's main argument, comment on some stylistic concerns, and hint at broader, empirical implications of the authors' argument linking educational policies and school shootings at a national level.

While this book adopts a relatively unique approach to the identification of the antecedents of school shootings, the book has yet to receive, to the best of our knowledge, much if any scholarly review apart from Catlin's (2020) "A Mother and a Father and the Tragedy of School Shooting," a review that compares *Why Meadow Died* to Sue Klebold's book *A Mother's Reckoning* -- Klebold being the mother of Dylan Klebold, responsible for a school shooting at Columbine High School in 1999. "These books could not be more alike," Catlin (2020: p. 57) writes; they are both "very hard, induce tears, and are riveting upon examination." While these authors adopt markedly different viewpoints on preventative strategies, they both approach the subject matter from the parental viewpoint. Also, if the parental perspective in the wake of a school shooting was of interest to readers of Sue Klebold's *A Mother's Reckoning*, then we suspect that these readers will also find utility in *Why Meadow Died* -- just be forewarned that the latter provides more of the stance that tragedies "can be averted," but is squarely focused on the role the school may have played in making that tragedy possible (Klebold, 2016, p. xii). There are additional titles that may be of interest to this readership. For example, *Parkland* by Dave Cullen and *Glimmer of Hope* by The March for Our

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Lives Founders each provide a unique perspective on the Parkland/MSD school shooting. If readers found the journey of The March for Our Lives activists interesting, then Pollack and Eden's book likely will be too -- it also contains a detailed roadmap on "overcoming trauma and helplessness" and shining "a light on just how rigged our system is" (Kasky, 2018, p. 1). These are just a few of the books in the same broad conversation, close-by on the proverbial bookshelf, with *Why Meadow Died*.

Regarding analysis, Pollack and Eden are unabashed in their abundant repetitiveness of denouncing the lack of accountability culture and leniency policies developed by the Broward County School District. These policies, they intuit, also impact other schools across the US. While the school's policies were partially to blame for the shooting at MSD, blame to the shooter, Cruz, is minimized in the book. The authors explain that the predictable red flags at MSD were "missed by design" and that administrative convenience allowed the shooter to slip through the cracks (Pollack & Eden, 2019, pp. 45, 71, 152). The writers, somewhat counterintuitively, point to political correctness as the mitigating factor in decisions made by policymakers and school administrators in the school environment. Not surprisingly, the authors specifically set out to explain why Meadow died in this context. However, the argument may be applied to and tested within a broader analysis of historical policy change to determine whether the data exposes any correlative relationship between the adoption of leniency policies and school gun violence. Specifically relevant to a sociology readership, another aspect of the book, which the authors demonstrate but do not theoretically conceptualize, is the problem of "goal displacement" (Selznick, 1949): politicians' and school administrators' goal to bolster school safety for all students was subtly displaced by the need to make schools look "good" on paper and show adequate safety precautions in the form of numerical data -- most notably the school's enactment of a progressive disciplinary regime, known as the PROMISE program, intended to reduce the "school to prison pipeline" through behavioral leniency, by reducing suspensions, expulsions, and arrests. Unintended consequences, thus, emerged as dangerous students, such as Cruz, were intentionally kept within the same school system, which, the logic goes, ironically reduced the overall safety of the school.

Why Meadow Died contains little ambiguity in the authors' intention. Even though there are a number of other stories told in the book, namely, from an MSD teacher and a student journalist, the authors stick to their intended purpose and focus the lion's share of the book on school policy and administrative incompetence. While the book's constant repetitiveness may be maddening to the close reader, it is useful for the casual reader who may pick up the book for only a chapter or two.

The writers do not, at any point, shy away from emotionally-charged language choices. Anger and sarcasm are easily recognizable in the book; on balance, however, it is also worth noting that there is also a tone of empowerment and resilience in their text. The authors keep the reading level simple for the general public, and are neither condescending nor pedantic at any point. Eden, the education policy expert, did have a small, dense portion near the beginning of the book based on their policy expertise; however, the authors manage to align their book in its logical course without distraction. There are a few grammatical and formatting mistakes, such as backward quotations or missing the preposition "to;" still, overall, the errors do not detract from the book's message or meaning.

The authors of *Why Meadow Died* intend for their book to be a call to action for parents with children; a call to investigate whether their child's school may have adopted the same types of policies generated in the Broward County school district (Pollack & Eden, 2019, pp. xiv, xxiv, 149, 211, 274-275). School administrators, teachers, boards, and PTAs have been, implicitly, called to heed the potentially dangerous policies for the sake of preserving the future lives of their student body. While this book is clearly written for parents whose children may be directly impacted by Broward County school district-type policies, there can be some utility for this book within the college environment. *Why Meadow Died* is not conceptually oriented or founded on a specific theoretical perspective relevant to scholars in the social sciences; as such, this book would be challenging to incorporate into introductory or general education courses for the undergraduate level. In terms of undergraduates, this book may fit within special topics or advanced courses, such as a sociology of education or educational policy course.

The book, while modestly emotional, is informative. While *Why Meadow Died* may have been written for the sole purpose of explaining the Parkland shooting through a parental lens, the argument that school policy could be endangering students calls for a deeper look, critically and analytically, into education policy and its connection to violence within schools. In the end, while guns -- and gun accessibility -- are issues routinely raised in discussions of school shootings in the US, Pollack and Eden identify another non-human actor, in this case, education policy, as a co-contributor in school shootings.

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