The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/08/books/review/sandy-hook-elizabeth-williamson.html

NONFICTION

The Long Shadow of Sandy Hook

In a persuasive and heartbreaking new book, Elizabeth Williamson argues that the 2012 shooting in Newtown, Conn., ushered in a new era of American conspiracy theories.

By Robert Kolker
March 8, 2022

SANDY HOOK: An American Tragedy and the Battle for Truth, by Elizabeth Williamson

So we're living in a world where, according to several polls, the majority of Republican voters believe Joe Biden stole the 2020 election, and some 41 million Americans are said to believe in QAnon. The rest of us, meanwhile, are struggling to explain when, precisely, our politics became so detached from reality. Some look to the propagandistic Clinton-hating conspiracies of the 1990s as the moment things started to change. Others blame the 9/11 truthers, or the original autism-related anti-vaccine panic. In her persuasive and heartbreaking new book, Elizabeth Williamson points to the horrific mass shooting in Newtown, Conn., on Dec. 14, 2012, when 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School were killed, and then a host of internet trolls set out to convince the world it didn't happen.

For Williamson — a former New York Times editorial board member who, as a reporter in the paper's Washington bureau, covered much of the litigation in the aftermath of the shooting — Sandy Hook became the site of "a battle over truth itself" when several clearly disturbed conspiracy theorists, corralled together by the Infowars web and radio host Alex Jones, claimed the families of Newtown were crisis actors, and that the children who died never even existed. But this, she writes, was just the start: Williamson promises to connect the dots from 2012 to 2021, from that horrible December morning in Newtown to that despicable January afternoon in Washington when Donald Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol, leading to seven lost lives and what at times feels like a mortal blow against democracy.

This is an ambitious claim. There are, after all, some major differences between Sandy Hook and Stop the Steal. Far more people believe Trump's fantasies than ever believed the Sandy Hook deniers (though Williamson cites a 2016 Fairleigh Dickinson University poll finding that 22 percent of Americans believed that Sandy Hook was "definitely" or "possibly" faked, which is pretty scary). But Williamson argues, in a narrative fueled by moral indignation, that Sandy Hook set our society into the land of "alternative facts" four years before Kellyanne Conway coined that phrase. The same tactics that allowed Jones's lies to spread, she explains, were used with dreadful effectiveness by Donald Trump.

Before connecting those dots, she starts with a retelling of the tragedy itself, moving tastefully but briskly, giving grieving families their due while not descending into trauma porn. The stories she tells are heart-rending: parents hugging children goodbye in the morning, then facing hours of uncertainty, then a lifetime of unspeakable loss. She pays little attention to the shooter, Adam Lanza. She also skips past the gun-regulation arguments that seized the news cycle, and barely mentions the families' lawsuit against Remington, which came years later. The real business of this book is the conspiracy theories — starting with Jones, who, that very afternoon, told his listeners, "My gut is, with the timing and everything that happened, this is staged," before likening Sandy Hook to Hitler's Reichstag bombing. "Why do governments stage these things?" he cried. "To get our guns!"

Williamson introduces Jones with some name-calling, dismissing him as "a barrel-chested, vain man" and "a race baiter who protests that he is not racist." Her sense of Jones's interior life is not always coherent. She describes his "belief that a totalitarian world government, the American federal government and powerful 'globalist' business interests … aimed to subjugate freedom-loving people like him," only to seemingly contradict herself a few paragraphs later by saying Jones "is not an ideologue; he is a salesman and a diagnosed narcissist." But if Jones's true nature remains elusive, Williamson is far better at parsing the man's business strategy — which, of course, doubles as his political strategy. Williamson explains that by telling his listeners to do their own research, Jones was driving web traffic and creating trending topics that raised his own show's rating, and presumably the price of his ad time. And she knows that Jones did not act alone: Tirelessly, she

follows and debunks several other conspiracy theorists, who “swore at family members on the street, looked into their windows and vandalized their homes and the impromptu memorials to the 26 victims. They sent them emails demanding, ‘Repent for your sins.’ One parent was barraged with phone calls and emails saying: ‘Your daughter is not dead. Your daughter is alive.’”

These mini-profiles form the most eye-opening aspect of Williamson’s account, in which one form of madness — the Sandy Hook shooter’s — is eclipsed by a group madness, a shared delusion too ridiculous ever to have anticipated and too dreadful for most of us ever to contemplate. Not every Sandy Hook denier is alike. While some seem cynical, with a political or financial agenda, others are acting out of a pathology. “Her feral lack of empathy astonished me,” Williamson writes about one woman, Kelley Watt, who then reveals a host of trauma that she must be papering over with her new life’s calling. But Jones and Infowars, Williamson writes, offered these lone wolves a chance to form a community that, in the tradition of Richard Hofstadter’s “paranoid style in American politics,” united against a common enemy. The Sandy Hook families, in this new tribe’s view, weren’t victims, she writes: “They were threats.” All the easier to dehumanize and torment.

As you see Jones offer each of them a megaphone, and they all start to interact and help one another, you get the sense there was nothing those poor Sandy Hook families could have done. They were unlucky enough to offer material to a no-holds-barred propagandist at a moment when social media had yet to demonstrate the full extent of its formidable power. One tragedy begets a second, thanks to two different, diseased malefactors — first Lanza, then Jones.

Williamson communes with the heroes in this conflict: the families who came out of hiding, raised the alarm on social media and forced Jones’s deplatforming. Lenny Pozner, whose 6-year-old son, Noah, was killed, shrewdly compares Jones’s tactics to those of professional wrestling. (Much of his act is staged, for maximum ratings, but at some point there’s no incentive ever to break character.) Pozner and a second parent, Neil Heslin, father of the 6-year-old victim Jesse Lewis, finally haul some of the deniers into court. When Jones is deposed, he crumbles, proclaiming that he only lied about Sandy Hook because of “the trauma of the media and corporations lying so much.” It’s a ludicrous defense, and even he seems to know it. “There’s something kind of pathetic about him in person,” Williamson writes. “How tiresome Jones was, and how dangerous. A charismatic, irresponsible man-child with an entourage of paid enablers and an audience of millions.”

It wasn’t over, though. Once he was dropped by Facebook and YouTube in 2018, Jones stepped up his conspiracy mongering, accusing Democrats and the “deep state” of plotting to seize power from Trump. Trump needed only to pick up the playbook. Williamson connects the dots like so: Sandy Hook made Jones a star in 2012; Trump embraced Jones, appearing on his show and overtly using conspiracy theories as jet fuel in the 2016 race; and finally Trump (no stranger to the pro wrestling ethos) adopted Jones’s tactics when he lost re-election in 2020. Jones even says he helped raise money for the rally that preceded the insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021.

Did Jones ever really buy into the act? Williamson largely writes him off as a hollow man. But she credits Jones with recognizing something crucial about our new world — something we’re still grappling with now. “We’re in the middle of a war over who controls information, who’s the arbiter of truth,” Pozner’s lawyer, Mark Bankston, tells her. “And if you destroy the arbiters of truth, anybody can be an arbiter of truth.”

Robert Kolker is the author, most recently, of “Hidden Valley Road,” one of the Book Review’s 10 Best Books of 2020.

SANDY HOOK: An American Tragedy and the Battle for Truth, by Elizabeth Williamson | Dutton | 496 pp. | $28
