

12-25-2013

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Matthew Shepard* by Stephen Jimenez

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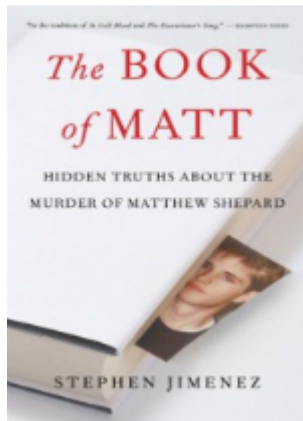
Wexelbaum, Rachel S., "*The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths about the Murder of Matthew Shepard* by Stephen Jimenez" (2013). *Library Faculty Publications*. Paper 31.

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‘The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths About the Murder of Matthew Shepard’ by Stephen Jimenez

Posted on 25. Dec, 2013 by Rachel Wexelbaum



The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths About the Murder of Matthew Shepard

by Stephen Jimenez

Steerforth Press

Hardcover, 9781586422141, 386 pp.

On October 7, 1998, Matthew Shepard was brutally murdered by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming. That is a fact which no one can question, dispute, or deny. The photo of Matt shown on television and newspapers around the country depicted a blond, clean-cut young man with a friendly smile—an all-American boy—whom the nation could love. His tragic death led to multiple initiatives to introduce anti-gay hate crime legislation, as well as increased awareness of homophobia in American society. Few people questioned the possibility that Matt—this nice all-American boy in the photo—could be anything other than a terribly random victim of a hate crime.

Over the years, a stream of journalists, playwrights, and others have visited Laramie, Wyoming to talk to people who knew Shepard. Some of those “East Coasters” went to Laramie with preconceived notions of what had taken place, and the place itself. Those biases often colored their interactions with Wyoming folk, and led the big city LGBT communities to believe that all people from that area were homophobic rednecks. Today, for anyone—especially a gay man—to question “the Matthew Shepard story” is tantamount to questioning Holocaust survivor testimony, or whether or not Jesus was the pure son of God. In *The Book of Matt*, award-winning journalist, writer, and producer Stephen Jimenez is the gay man who pokes at this sacred cow. In 2000, Jimenez went to Laramie to research the story of Matthew Shepard’s murder. His original intention was to write a screenplay re-enacting the story of homophobic violence that everyone—including Jimenez himself—believed as gospel. Instead, Jimenez discovered multiple

layers of secrets surrounding this case that had not originally been reported by the media. For thirteen years, Jimenez researched the Matthew Shepard case through personal interviews with more than one hundred sources, court documents, police reports, and visits to gay bars and drug trafficking sites in twenty states and Washington D.C., in order to write this book. The extensive interviews and dogged investigative research conducted by Jimenez make *The Book of Matt* a model for journalistic inquiry.

Stephen Jimenez is an award-winning journalist, writer, and producer. He has written and produced programs for ABC News 20/20, Dan Rather Reports, Nova, Fox, Court TV, and others. He has earned the Writers Guild of America Award, the Mongerson Award for Investigative Reporting, and an Emmy. He was also a 2012 Norman Mailer Nonfiction Fellow. Critics of *The Book of Matt* have made angry claims against Jimenez, from “sloppy research” to “pandering to the right wing” to making sweeping statements that murders of gay men are not hate crimes. Perhaps I would have believed this too, if prior to *The Book of Matt*’s publication I did not get to know a University of Wyoming of Laramie employee who is in charge of the Matthew Shepard Archives.

The Matthew Shepard Archives include all of the newspaper articles about Matthew Shepard’s murder and documents about Matthew Shepard while he was a student at the University of Wyoming. I remembered the archivist telling me that a significant percentage of the newspaper articles were false and sensationalized [which Jimenez illustrates in the first chapter of his book]. She had also told me that Matthew Shepard was openly gay as a student, that he was president of the student government, that he was a socially savvy, charismatic individual, and that he was no stranger to bars or gay activities. Jimenez walks the path of other award winning journalists such as Amira Hass, Christopher Hitchens, and the late Anna Politkaya. He dares to tell the truth about what we may not want to believe. This results in condemnation from some people and kudos from others. In *The Book of Matt*, Jimenez reveals that Matthew Shepard had a drug addiction that tied him to some of the more unsavory characters in Laramie...including his killers. One of the killers—Aaron McKinney—was also no stranger to gay sex. Jimenez was able to discover these things—and much more—because the court case documents and police reports had finally been unsealed. When interviewing his sources, Jimenez could reference these documents in his conversations.

People outside of Laramie may believe what they like about the Matthew Shepard case. One can read *The Book of Matt* as a masterful work of investigative journalism or intriguing crime fiction if they will not accept other perspectives on the case. What Jimenez makes very clear, however, is that the media is often the least trustworthy source of news you will ever find. Their mission is to keep stories simple and to sell papers. Would we have followed Shepard’s story so closely if we knew he offered McKinney and Henderson drugs for sex? Would his mother have been able to establish the Matthew Shepard Foundation to eliminate gay hate crimes? Jimenez is revealing today what we should have read fifteen years ago. In the meantime, the media continues to report on some anti-gay hate crimes while completely ignoring others, and thousands go completely unreported out of fear of retaliation. Perhaps the main takeaway from *The Book of Matt* is that

we should challenge ourselves to demand the truth from our media at all times, even if it costs us a tidy narrative.

Further Reading:

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