

Paul Auster (b. 1947) is an American writer and film director. His books have been translated into more than forty languages.

Paul Auster

## Bloodbath Nation

One of my good friends is a man named Frank Huyler, a writer who has published poems, novels, and works of nonfiction but is also an emergency room doctor at the University of New Mexico Hospital in Albuquerque, where he has been on the staff for more than twenty years. [...] Early on in my investigations into the grim particulars of American gun violence, Frank and I talked for a couple of hours on the phone as I pumped him with questions about the various measures taken when a gunshot victim turns up in the ER<sup>1</sup>, something that happens a little over a hundred times a year by his estimate, which of course does not reflect the total number of shootings treated at the hospital, since he is not on call every day of the year.

[...]

When I asked Frank if he had ever treated a victim or victims of a mass shooting, he said that it had happened to him only once, about ten or twelve years earlier. A man had walked into his ex-wife's office one afternoon bent on killing her, but before he managed to track her down he warmed up by shooting randomly at various workers sitting at their desks. Three people died and several others were wounded. One by one, emergency patients arrived at the hospital, and among the people Frank was called upon to examine was a woman in her late thirties. He didn't tell me how many times she had been shot, but I understood that her condition was precarious, and as she lay on her back looking up at Frank, she said to him in what he called a "calm, clinical voice" – without the slightest trace of fear in it – *I'm going to die*. Then, in the same passionless voice, she gave him her husband's cellphone number, and not long after that, before she could be wheeled into the operating room for surgery, she was dead.

Mass shootings account for just a small fraction of American gun deaths, but they nevertheless occur with stunning frequency, roughly one per day over the course of any given year. Four is the number generally given to define mass, although for some that means four people dead and for others it means four people shot, whether killed or wounded. As with nearly all the one-on-one gun killings across the country, only a small number of mass shootings are reported in the national press. Americans have become so inured to the daily slaughter around them that they can't be bothered to pay attention anymore, even as the numbers continue to mount year after year after year. But then, suddenly, a mass shooting occurs somewhere that stands out from the rest, a bloodbath of such magnitude and horror that the whole of American society is momentarily stopped in its tracks as cameras swoop in to capture images of ravaged, weeping people and reporters dig into the details of the crime and publish stories about the killer and his motives and op-ed writers and television commentators spew forth their opinions to the public. For a brief moment, everyone seems to come together in this lonely, fractured country, but two blinks later the pro-gun and anti-gun camps are squaring off against each other again, and in spite of the outraged cries for

---

<sup>1</sup> emergency room

reform and action and change, nothing ever changes, and within a week or two the distracted public turns its attention elsewhere.

These grisly spectacles have occurred often enough in the past two decades to qualify as a new form of American ritual: bloodshed and grief transformed into a series of ghoulish entertainments that time and again plant us in front of our television sets as we absorb the grim-faced accounts of the newest nightmare and bemoan what has happened to our beloved America. Meanwhile, the networks boost their ratings and increase their profits by reversing the old huckster's jingle, "more bang for your buck," into "more bucks from the bang." It is enough to turn the most hopeful idealist into a full-bore cynic.

Most of these mass murders are committed by solitary young men, occasionally by older men in their early middle age, rarely, very rarely (almost never) by women, and as with the furious ex-husband in Albuquerque, they are generally hatched in a dark inner sanctum of personal grievance, where they go on festering for months, even years, and then metastasize into a universal hatred that pushes the shooter into killing anyone even remotely connected to his primary target. That is what distinguishes mass grievance murders from their one-on-one counterparts – the gunman's willingness to turn his weapon on strangers and mow them down for no other reason than the satisfaction of killing them – which is what most people find so difficult to understand, whether we are pro-gun or anti-gun or somewhere between the two. Why on earth would a man want to kill people he doesn't know, especially people who have never done him any harm and most likely would help him off the ground if they saw him fall or reach into their pocket and give him a dollar if he told them he was hungry? Horrible and shocking as all one-on-one grievance murders are, they do not plunge us into the same depth of confusion, for we all understand anger and even rage, and we can all imagine ourselves being driven over the edge of reason into temporary madness and then going after a person we believe has wronged us, as my grandmother did when she shot and killed my grandfather in the kitchen of her house in Kenosha<sup>2</sup>. Unforgivable, yes, but not incomprehensible.

Also not incomprehensible is the contract killer who earns his living by murdering strangers or the young kid from a rough urban neighborhood who knows his life will be under constant threat if he doesn't join a local gang and therefore goes out into the streets one afternoon and fires a bullet into an anonymous passerby to prove he has the guts to be embraced by the clan. No one in his or her right mind would applaud these instances of murder, but at least we understand them. What we don't understand is the arbitrariness of random killing, and each time another mass shooting claims national attention, all of us begin to feel more vulnerable, for if that old person or that young person or that small child can be shot and killed for no reason, why couldn't it happen to my child or to me? Fear takes hold of us, and fear is a poison that corrupts our ability to think, and when we can no longer think, our decisions are given over to the forces of blind, blundering emotion.

Another thing that distinguishes mass murders from other kinds of murder is the high degree of planning that goes into mounting one of these attacks. Weeks and often months of preparation are required before the killer is ready to pounce. Spur-of-the-moment impulse is off the table; the furious, hot-headed eruptions that precede most fatal bar fights and road-rage killings do not factor into the plotting of mass murders, and contrary to what one might expect, most of these killers go about their business calmly and methodically, with no shouts or denunciations or outward displays of feeling, as if they had entered a zone beyond what we would call normal conscious life, a place where the world is already dead to them and they are dead to themselves. The point is to turn yourself into a killing machine. To that end, these killers choose their weapons carefully, often arming themselves with an assortment of long guns and handguns,

---

<sup>2</sup> town in the state of Wisconsin

and in some cases they arrive at the scene fully girded in body armor. In almost all cases, the weapons and ammunition and armor have been bought through perfectly legal means.

75 Family grievances, spousal grievances, sexual grievances, workplace grievances, institutional grievances, political grievances, racial and ethnic grievances (hate crimes), and, as the epidemic of mass shootings continues to spread, the ambition on the part of many of the youngest killers to surpass the death tolls achieved by their predecessors, to break the record and thereby win fame and everlasting outlaw glory as the greatest mass killer in American history. Social media sites swarm with the braggadocio of these would-  
80 be destroyers as they prepare themselves to carry out their versions of the armed massacre in a school, a college, or a church, and to read through their communications is to understand that the annihilation of strangers has been turned into both a competitive sport and a sinister new variant of contemporary performance art. It is America's latest gift to the world, a psychopathic footnote to such previous wonders as the incandescent lightbulb, the telephone, basketball, jazz, and the vaccine against polio. Our friends  
85 from distant continents look on in perplexity and horror, no less appalled than we are when we read about the genital mutilation of adolescent girls or the practice of stoning women to death when their husbands have accused them of infidelity.

What strikes me as remarkable is that any reasonably attentive American over the age of twenty-five will have no trouble recalling details from a long list of mass shootings that have occurred over the past ten  
90 years, the unhinged attacks on elementary schools, high schools, and colleges, for example, such as the 2012 killing of twenty small children and six teachers and staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, or the seven dead and fourteen wounded in the 2014 gun-knife-car rampage within meters of the UC Santa Barbara campus in Isla Vista, California, or the fifteen-year-old freshman who five months later killed four of his closest friends and then himself in the cafeteria at Marysville-Pilchuck  
95 High School in Marysville, Washington, or the nine wounded and ten killed in 2015 at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, or the 2018 bloodbath at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, that left seventeen wounded and seventeen dead, and, in the first and last of these cases, the added blows delivered to the suffering families of the victims when an army of conspiracy-mongers from the far right jumped out of the shadows and began spreading false stories that the widely covered and thoroughly documented Sandy Hook and Parkland massacres were in fact nothing more than hoaxes  
100 perpetrated by so-called crisis actors. Within hours of the shootings, one form of American madness had given way to another, and as with the Holocaust deniers<sup>3</sup> before them, no amount of contravening evidence has budged the hoaxers from their cruel, cynical assertions.

In all, there have been two hundred and twenty-eight episodes of gun violence in schools and colleges  
105 across the country in the past ten years. Thirty of them have been large enough to qualify as mass shootings, and among the examples I have just given it is striking to look at the personal histories and motives of the shooters and discover how many traits they had in common. To begin with, all of them were young – fifteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-two, twenty-six – and all of them had shown clear signs of mental and emotional disturbance by late childhood or early adolescence. The oldest four were obsessed  
110 with guns, were mostly friendless and hostile to others at school, and bore smoldering grudges against the people they felt were responsible for their walled-off, impoverished lives. The single word that runs through all their stories is loneliness, unbearable, mind-crushing loneliness, which is the same loneliness that drives millions of other Americans to seek comfort in various forms of obliteration – too many drugs, too much alcohol, and obsessive fugues<sup>4</sup> into the labyrinthine pathways of the Internet. Lives of slow self-

---

<sup>3</sup> *Holocaust deniers*: conspiracy theorists who deny the reality of the murder of 6 million Jews by Nazi Germany

<sup>4</sup> an escape from reality

115 destruction that year after year result in tens of thousands of “deaths of despair,” a new term for a new kind of American misery, and at the far end of the misery spectrum stand the killers, the ones who opt to destroy themselves by destroying others, for the truth is that every person who sets out to kill large numbers of random, unknown people is also plotting his own suicide.

[...]

(2023)