

A F T E R W O R D

On November 4, 2013, a month after *The Book of Matt* was first published, Tattered Cover, a renowned independent bookstore in Denver, hosted me for a reading and book signing. As I arrived that evening and descended a wide staircase to the store's spacious underground level — part of a renovated old theater — I could feel a nervous buzz in the room. The bookstore managers had received a call from an agitated activist pressuring them to cancel my appearance. Like other booksellers around the country who had received similar calls and emails, the managers declined the request.

Since Denver had played a crucial but little-understood role in Matthew Shepard's life, seeing so many rows of seats beginning to fill up heartened me.

Two weeks earlier when I'd arrived for a book event at Politics and Prose in Washington, DC, the store's owners, Bradley Graham and Lissa Muscatine, had ushered me into their office for a private meeting. They explained that they'd been getting a steady stream of messages from angry people intent on stopping my book tour. Graham and Muscatine said they never considered caving to the pressure. A short while later, each took to the podium at the back of their store and offered eloquent statements in defense of free speech. They also read a press release they'd received from the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, imploring bookstores not to cancel my events.

Another bookstore, located in the upscale enclave of West Hollywood, California, had been warned by an activist that the store would be "picketed like a Chick-fil-A"* if they proceeded with their plans to host a reading with me.

Before *The Book of Matt* had been read by more than a few hundred readers, let alone reviewed critically, rumors had circulated that the

*The fast-food chain was picketed following comments by its chief operating officer opposing the legalization of same-sex marriage.

book — and me, its author — were anti-gay and a tool of the right wing. *The Advocate*, America's leading LGBT magazine, published a piece on its website by columnist Neal Broverman titled "Why I'm Not Reading the 'Trutherism' About Matt Shepard." In branding my book with the dismissive "trutherism" label, Broverman was following the lead of an online organization called Media Matters. He borrowed other smears about me and my book from them as well:

"Jimenez is ostensibly getting the facts and showing it to the world as a service of the truth," Broverman wrote. "But to me, it feels lurid and cruel. Matt never agreed to be a public figure . . . I guess being beaten senseless and left to die is consent enough to allow writers to denigrate your reputation and victimize you again . . .

". . . Media Matters, an organization that challenges the spin of right-wing media, is not shy about calling Jimenez a journalistic ambulance-chaser," he continued. "The right wing is latching on to the Shepard 'trutherism' authored by Jimenez, creating headlines and stories and getting reactions from liberals, which they hint . . . may have been Jimenez's intention from the beginning.

"Maybe my refusal to read Jimenez's book and, admittedly, my anger toward it stem from my deep connection to Matt, who was eight months and one day older than me. We had the same slight build and baby face, and . . . many looked at me like I was either related to Matt or in danger of ending up how he did. I was a drug-using out kid at a public university who dealt with bad dudes and slept with the wrong men, including those who had girlfriends and considered themselves 'straight.' It's simply luck that I wasn't tied to a post and left to die."

Had Broverman bothered, at the minimum as a journalist, to read this book, he might have discovered that his conclusion about simple "luck" and the conclusions I draw are not far apart. More important, however, all of us in our diverse democracy are diminished by such well-intentioned attempts to reduce complex human experiences into tidy narratives so that they can be pressed into service on behalf of political agendas and social causes, or slotted into categories of right or left, conservative or progressive. Whether a journalist has a "baby face" like Matthew is irrelevant; it also doesn't give Broverman license to describe my reporting (in a book he didn't read) as "lurid" and

“cruel.” Media Matters makes no contribution to the advancement of desperately needed public discourse with their McCarthy-like slander of calling me an “ambulance-chaser.”

In a series of nine articles on *The Book of Matt*, none of which offers a shred of hard evidence to refute the book’s findings, Media Matters characterized me as a “hate-crime denier” who was trying to “de-gay” Matthew, and an “egomaniac.” When one of their reporters, Joe Strupp, contacted me for an interview, to which I heartily agreed, he, like Broverman, refused to discuss the book’s actual contents. I also gave Strupp the cell number of Shepard prosecutor Cal Rerucha, so he could verify key facts in the book. But he never followed through.

In the face of this political bullying, I couldn’t help but wonder how Matthew himself might have reacted to these attempts to silence me, under the guise of protecting his “reputation.” Many of his closest friends had told me truth was important to him, and, that knowing Matt as they did, they believed he would have wanted everything out of the closet, especially the actual circumstances that led to his own painful and tragic end.

Rumors about *The Book of Matt* and me notwithstanding, I was hosted for thirty-seven book events around the country, and at every one of them I had the privilege of engaging in meaningful conversations. Venues included the San Francisco and Philadelphia public libraries (the former event was sponsored by the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center), the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College, the Harvard Coop, New York University, the University of Minnesota, leading book festivals in Iowa, Wisconsin, Virginia, and Maryland, and dozens of independent bookstores.

The Book of Matt garnered positive commentary across the political spectrum, from *The Nation*, *In These Times*, and the *Lambda Literary Review* to *The American Conservative*, *New York Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*. It was also reviewed favorably in respected trade publications such as *Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *Publishers Weekly*.

Nevertheless, when I arrived at Tattered Cover on that November evening, Joyce Meskis, the bookstore owner, assured me she was

“ready” if any troublemakers showed up to interfere with the event. A longtime defender of First Amendment rights and former president of the American Booksellers Association, Meskis positioned herself in the back row of the audience, prepared to escort disruptive individuals to the door.

It wasn't hard to understand why folks in Denver might be especially resistant to the very idea of new revelations around Matthew's murder. The fact that Matthew was known in the city's thriving gay neighborhood of Capitol Hill made his suffering and death intensely personal and painful for many. A few days after Matthew was found at the fence, thousands attended a vigil on the steps of the Colorado state capitol. Some who were in attendance that day shared their shock at the turn of events that led to his murder when I interviewed them for this book. Fragments of this complicated history filled my thoughts as I waited for the program at Tattered Cover to begin. I was standing behind the last row in the audience — almost packed now — when a good-looking man with a strong, muscular build, leaning against a stack of bookshelves, caught my eye. He smiled hesitantly and came forward slowly to offer his hand. For a second I was caught off-guard, but I quickly realized that my partner, Miles, was stationed a few feet away. We'd already established a safety routine during the book tour, with him watching my back everywhere we went.

The man introduced himself as Mike Jones and said he'd heard an interview I'd done on Denver radio. Realizing the event was about to begin, he leaned in closer and confided in a few words that he'd known Matt while he was living in Denver. Jones also mentioned that he wouldn't be sticking around for the book-signing portion at the end, but “we can talk another time.”

While I was scribbling down his contact information, he added, “Back in those days the meth crowd in Denver was pretty small.”

Surprised, and my curiosity piqued, I didn't have time to ask him any questions, as the bookstore manager was at the podium beginning to introduce me. All I could do was shake Jones's hand and thank him for coming.

Mike Jones and I spoke on the phone a few times and exchanged emails, but we didn't meet again in person until a couple of months

later when I returned to Denver. I asked him to pick a quiet place where we could have a real conversation. Coincidentally he chose Racine's, a restaurant where I'd met another friend of Matthew years before.

During that interview on February 5, 2014, Jones spoke candidly about his past experiences as a gay male escort. He wasn't proud of the services he'd offered — selling himself to politicians, clergymen, professional athletes, married men, and a host of ordinary joes — but he said he'd worked hard to overcome the shame he still felt about his former life. He also talked about crystal meth and how popular it had been in Denver's gay community in those years. A number of his clients had enjoyed using it to enhance sex and sometimes asked him to procure it for their sessions together. But what stuck in his mind most was the meth-related devastation he'd witnessed.

According to Jones, he met Matthew the first time “at the home of one of Denver's biggest meth dealers.” They were both there for the same thing, he said, to pick up product. The dealer was later convicted and sent to prison. At the time his clientele was largely gay.

I asked Mike Jones why he'd decided to talk with me, just as I'd asked dozens of other sources over the years. He explained that he'd grown weary, even depressed, seeing so many people become victims of addiction and violence in their many forms. And like me, he, too, had witnessed the AIDS epidemic up close. Each of us still believed the battle cry of that era: SILENCE = DEATH.

Shortly before *The Book of Matt* was published in October 2013, a handful of media stories and interviews with me began to circulate. Just as some observers reacted negatively to the very idea of a book that would take a hard look at all of the circumstances surrounding Matthew's murder, there were others who came forward with a more nuanced perspective and, in some cases, new information.

One person who contacted me online was James Farris, whose name I'd never heard before. He claimed to have been “a close friend of Mathews [sic] prior to his death” and said that he'd worked as a “door guy” at the Tornado club in Fort Collins, Colorado — the bar Matthew had visited on the Friday night before he was attacked.

“Wish I had [gotten] the chance to speak with you prior [to] your publishing of this book,” Farris wrote. “Mathew spoke to me extensively about his true feelings . . . And yes mathew was having sex with Mckenny [sic] prior to his death for the exchange of drugs . . . Once I got to know him he totally opened up to me . . . What I witnessed through the whole thing was a joke [insofar as] what others were doing around me. I was the first person to ever be interviewed in the story and I was the first one to go visit mathew in the hospital before the [story broke]. As I was leaving [Poudre Valley] hospital a reporter asked if I knew mathew.”

When I checked James Farris’s background, I found he had indeed worked at the Tornado bar in October 1998. A native of rural Iowa, he had just turned thirty-three the week Matthew was attacked. His name had only appeared briefly in a couple of news stories.

Five months after the murder, Farris was quoted in a *Los Angeles Times* article that described Matthew in the same bland terms used over and over by the media: He was enthusiastic, always smiling, always laughing.

“. . . The Laramie kids will drive here in 2 feet of snow,” Farris said, “and if I-25 is closed, they take the back route.”

“[Matthew] organized car pools and rented limos to get to the club . . .” the newspaper reported.

Farris also told the *Times* that he’d noticed a change in customers at the bar: “You get cooped up and tired of hiding . . . You have to shake the gayness out of you. Here, everyone is welcome to be what they are. Men, women, gay and straight.”

But based on an article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* less than a week after Matthew was robbed and beaten, James Farris had reason to be cautious — and fearful — about discussing the attack on his friend. Farris said that, hours after being interviewed on a Denver television station, he’d received an anonymous call.

“They asked me if I wanted a date,” Farris told reporter Gwen Florio of the *Inquirer*. “And then they said, ‘You should go on a date with us so that we can tie you to a post and beat you like Matthew Shepard.’” Florio noted that Farris’s hands were “shaking violently as he spoke.”

While nothing in this book denies the brutal reality of anti-gay hate and violence, James Farris's voluntary comments to me fifteen years after the murder are another indicator of the crime's long-hidden drug underpinnings. ("Yes mathew was having sex with Mckenny [sic] prior to his death for the exchange of drugs . . . ") In truth, the LGBT community has been preyed upon, not only by homophobes, but also by ruthless drug traffickers pushing their goods, including crystal meth, on a vulnerable population.

As reported earlier in this book, it would not be until four years after Matthew's murder that "Mark K," a key member of the Denver drug circle, was convicted in Laramie on meth-related activities going back to 1997 — the same year the two men met. (See pages 139–141.) During his prosecution, Mark K alleged that police officers in both Laramie and Fort Collins had been involved in the meth trade. Unsurprisingly, documents pertaining to subsequent investigations into police malfeasance have been kept out of the public record.

But given the preponderance of reliable information and sources attesting to the role of meth in Matthew's murder, it seems disingenuous for any former or current police officials in Laramie — particularly in the Albany County Sheriff's Office — to continue denying that drugs were a factor.

James Farris and Mike Jones are only two of the new sources who have emerged recently. Other individuals whose names I hadn't known previously contacted me through my publisher and via Facebook; they also posted comments on Amazon.com, approached me at book events (as Jones had), or tracked me down by phone or email.

One reader who identified himself as Hoss Peterson posted the following on Amazon:

I grew up in Laramie . . . I know probably 50% of the people in this book personally. I have personal ties to the places and people here, so I was very hesitant to read this book. HOWEVER . . .

EVERY SINGLE PERSON I knew in Laramie said the same thing about the Matthew Shepard murder — that it

wasn't a hate crime because he was gay, it was a robbery over drugs. EVERY SINGLE PERSON.

I was worried that the writer would take the “easy way out” and not dig into the real story. I was happy to be disappointed. Mr. Jimenez spent the time to get the REAL story here. He talked to the people I knew and got the stories the locals knew were the right ones. For an outsider to get that kind of story, he had to have spent a LOT of time in Laramie, and he did . . .

The murder [was] a heinous crime, of that there is no doubt, it has just been blown into something way out of proportion to what it really was by an overzealous media.

Another person who wrote to me after *The Book of Matt* was published was Kathleen Johnson, the former owner of a Laramie antiques store called Granny's Attic. Johnson's daughter Courtney had been a close friend of Daphne Sulk, the fifteen-year-old girl whose frozen body was found in the wilderness outside Laramie in 1997. But Johnson had also known Aaron McKinney, Russell Henderson, and Matthew Shepard.

“The truth was that [Matthew's murder] was all about drugs, money, sex, and booze — all around a very dysfunctional family life on the part of Russell and Aaron,” Johnson wrote in a series of messages on Facebook. “Matthew I only knew as a client in my store. But the [Fireside] bar, which was part of the problem . . . has a story of its own and was ‘bad news’ even on a good day.

“Some of the participants in the saga happened to be gay,” she said. “The press, they did not dig very deep for the rest of the story.”

Johnson continued:

The entire saga . . . is wound around the series of bars in [Laramie]. At the time . . . [the town] had a population of 28,000 — 10,000 of [whom] were college students and 58 bars/restaurants — most of them serving alcohol, with the seedy drug trade always in the background. Summer sucked 10,000 students from the town, and it was

a long hot summer and a tough time for all as the funds the students spent . . . stopped flowing and the cash flow crashed for everyone. Money was short and supplemented by other means.

. . . Drinking and drugs were a huge problem in the college town, [which] included a large population of college drop outs who had never “moved on” . . . Mixed in [with] that were the locals with [a] wild west tone that included pickups routinely with a firearm in the window. It was just the way it was . . .

The town’s police and legal system were fiscally unable to get a handle on the drinking and drug problem . . .

And into this backdrop were the players in this story. It’s all true — I can vouch for page after page of details in [*The Book of Matt*]. The story should have been told years ago . . .

Life comes down to money — and if the other side of the story were to unfold, then the engine driving the first version of the Matt story would take a huge credibility and fiscal hit. The cause, bringing to light the bias against the gay community — a good one. The engine driving it, the crime of bigotry as it relates to Matt Shepard — not true.

. . . [Laramie] did not have the fiscal means to provide adequate mental, drug and alcohol counseling to its very diverse population. Had Matt, Aaron and Russell had access to fully funded treatment and counseling prior — this story ending would have been entirely different.

Over many years of research, I’d heard remarks similar to those of Kathleen Johnson and Hoss Peterson countless times. But Johnson also volunteered her personal recollections of limousine driver Doc O’Connor, whom she claimed to know well:

[Doc] was also my ex-husband’s best friend (both had antique stores) and Doc came to our wedding. Doc’s mother and I were close, and Doc always brought her to see me when she came to town . . .

Doc “rescued” young, and I mean young, men and let them “live” at his place in Bosler. They stayed a while, then moved on.

Doc was a closeted “gay” man through and through but he loved to have flings with bawdy bar flies as well — many got to stay with him at the old whore house he had converted in Bosler. The party place of choice, surprisingly, was the Eagles Lodge. [I] personally hated the place, but [my husband] Tom and Doc did all their networking there for their respective antique stores.

Johnson went on to explain how her ex-husband and Doc, whose real name is Thomas O’Connor, first met:

. . . Both “Tom’s” were from Denver. Tom (my husband) was a bar owner in one part of town and Tom (Doc) was in another part of town. Both managing topless bars. They met one night when Doc came to my husband’s bar to steal away some of his “girls” for his bar on the other side of town. Both reported to me that my husband escorted Doc out of the bar at the end of a gun . . . Somehow they became friends and “somehow” both ended up in Laramie.

. . . I had five children and was struggling. Why Doc was friends with me, I never understood. But, he financed furniture for me and I paid him off in full. He never solicited me in any way and was always the height of a gentleman around me. I used to stop in to visit with him when coming back from my fly fishing adventures in the high mountain lakes. Bosler was on the path home and it was always good for a great cup of coffee and a lively chat. I was always welcome in the dark depths of the Bosler store.

When it was a bar, before [Doc] was busted for pimping out his girls, it had all the overtones of a typical Wyoming Hog Ranch with the tiny rooms, bed, and a lamp. Hog ranches, in early Wyoming, [were] brothels of a special

kind. He kept all the rooms furnished just the way it was when he had the bar there . . .

Since I'd been to Bosler a number of times myself and had filmed an interview there with Doc for ABC News *20/20*, I knew Johnson's description was accurate. I also reported in this book what other sources had to say about Doc's wild parties; that his all-night guests had included Aaron McKinney and Matthew Shepard; and that Matthew had met with Doc at the Eagles lodge two days before he was robbed and beaten. Matthew wanted Doc's advice because he was terrified someone was going to hurt him.

During one of my visits to Bosler, I'd wandered on my own down a narrow corridor in the old whorehouse, stopping in each of the tiny rooms to imagine what the ghostly place must have been like when it was open for business. The frayed carpet was stained, there were old picture frames and broken glass strewn about, and a mattress lay on the floor in each room. Because I'd heard rumors that Doc had dabbled in drugs, I decided to satisfy my curiosity and lift one of the mattresses up to see if anything was concealed there — some money perhaps. Instead I found a pistol.

I quickly dropped the mattress and got out of there, and never said anything to Doc about the gun. But the fear arose again that I'd stepped into the same dangerous and surreal underworld Matthew had. For all I knew, Doc had been videotaping me with one of his hidden cameras.

Kathleen Johnson also related another side of the story, confirming facts already reported in this book:

Over the years I saw the young men and the bar flies that [Doc] "adopted" and "cared" for . . . Doc was also hooked on booze and drugs — big time. He used both to lure in his boy toys and he used both to keep them . . .

Doc giving a limousine ride for Matt to Denver — I can assure you [it] amounted to more than the use of the vehicle. Doc would have been involved in all aspects of the deal. Doc had the connections in Denver. Matt was young,

thin, blonde [sic], addicted to drugs — all the things Doc looked for in his hookups.

You nailed Doc O’Conner [sic]. He was dealing big time. He used the “kids” as the front for his operation. They “carried” the dope, he was the money man, the Limo was the disguise, and the police seemed incapable of getting on the inside of the “deal.” I was probably the only “straight” laced friend Tom had — have never figured that one out.

Doc is always in a position of plausible deniability. He can’t tell the story straight two times in a row. Subtle changes every time he tells it.

I was further intrigued by Johnson’s reminiscences concerning Russell Henderson, for whom she “always had a soft spot.”

“From what I personally saw, he was the follower and Aaron was the leader,” she said. “Aaron was an arrogant ass. Russell was polite and kind . . . I have always felt the punishment was harsh. Why he did not call when he got back to town [after they left Matthew tied to the fence] — he was very submissive and I can see him being scared to death of Aaron.”

But regarding her old friend Doc, Johnson still had questions:

. . . Tell me why [he] was able to deal drugs all those years and nary any issue with the local law. All they had to do is to pick off one of the “boy toys” after they battled with [Doc] and left his circle. I personally knew several of them as they worked for me at my husband’s place [because] they needed money to “move on,” or at my store when I opened my own. They were always willing to share their story with me . . . No, something has never added up there . . .

None of Kathleen Johnson’s allegations about Doc surprised me; most of them I’d heard before. What made me feel a tinge of personal embarrassment, though, were the positive and even warm feelings she expressed for him. I, too, had come to appreciate Doc, who’d allowed

me to glimpse corners of his life few others had been privy to — parts of the same terrain Aaron and Matthew had experienced firsthand, with fateful consequences.

“I was there in Laramie through all this and knew most of the people involved in this story,” Johnson wrote publicly on Facebook. “Some were friends, some acquaintances, others [were] in the circle of people I saw and talked to almost on a daily basis.

“ . . . Despite all his shortcomings . . . Doc had a heart of gold buried in there. He was very kind to [me] and my five children. He adored his mother, as I did . . . She passed in 2005 and I know that was devastating for Doc. He has a picture gallery on his website dedicated to her. His mother was English and an absolute hoot — a gracious sweet kind lady with an adorable sense of humor.”

I’d known for years about Doc’s dedication to his mother and how fiercely protective he was. Long before she died, he’d warned me there were items I couldn’t include in this book, as they’d be upsetting to her.

I couldn’t argue with Kathleen’s statement that Doc “can’t tell the story straight two times in a row,” but, like her, I also saw a man who is more than the sum of his “shortcomings.” Along with other characters in the Laramie tragedy, Doc often reminded me of Bruce Springsteen’s hopeful anthem, “Land of Hope and Dreams.” The song imagines *everyone* on board a mythic train, as thunder rolls down the track: saints and sinners, losers and winners, whores and gamblers, even “lost souls.”

In early February 2014, I returned to Laramie for a book event at the handsomely restored Gryphon Theatre downtown — formerly the Laramie High School auditorium — replete with its painted murals of the Old West. Laramie marked the end of my national tour, and for obvious reasons it was the one event I anticipated more than any other. For better and worse, I was bringing the story “home” to the community that not only had suffered the Shepard tragedy fifteen years earlier but will carry the stigma of Matthew’s murder forever.

The roads in town were icy, with bracing temperatures dropping to ten below zero. Slowly the auditorium began to fill up with a cross

section of locals. Although there were quite a few faces I recognized, the majority were strangers to me. Late that afternoon, Shepard prosecutor Cal Rerucha had phoned to say he'd be unable to make the hundred-mile drive from Rawlins, due to hazardous conditions on the interstate. That portion of the highway had already been closed several times during the day. But Cal said his wife Jan and son Luke would be there.

The event had been organized by a former Laramie junior high school principal, Glenn Johnson, and a former town mayor, Trudy McCracken, who had been in office at the time Matthew was killed. Johnson had been well acquainted with Aaron, Russell, and their eventual girlfriends, Kristen Price and Chasity Pasley, as students in his school. To moderate the evening, Johnson and McCracken had called on two former Wyoming journalists, Ray Hageman and Don Black. Hageman had covered the murder case on Wyoming radio, and Black was the former editor of the *Laramie Boomerang*.

A few hours before the event, I'd dropped by Lee's Mobile Home Park in West Laramie, hoping to pay an unannounced visit to Elaine Baker, a brave source who had helped me early on when others, mainly out of fear, were still holding their silence. I'd been to this mobile home park before; Aaron McKinney had once lived there, and so had a number of other players in the local meth scene.

I was dismayed to see all of Elaine's windows covered completely, with curtains or bedsheets. There was no car parked outside, so I wondered if she still lived there. But after I knocked on the storm door several times, Elaine appeared and opened the door slightly, shielding herself from the wind. She smiled weakly. I also noticed she was thinner and frailer than the last time I'd seen her. Immediately she invited me inside, where she was looking after her two-year-old grandchildren. The twins, a boy and a girl, were rolling around on the carpet, playing with her two dogs.

I'd brought along a signed copy of this book, which Elaine was pleased to see "at long last." Over the decade that I'd known Elaine, she had persistently encouraged me to tell the real story of what methamphetamine had done to Laramie — a story she knew intimately. Her son Christopher had grown up as a friend of Aaron McKinney,

and her daughter Lynell had briefly dated Russell Henderson. Elaine had also been a member of the Church of Latter Day Saints and had known Russell since he was a boy. And when Aaron, as a teenager, was beaten by his stepfather, she'd given him shelter at her home.

Elaine had known Matthew, too, from one of Doc's all-night parties with Aaron and a couple of other guests and was still haunted by the brutality of his murder. Having witnessed Aaron's gradual slide into hard-core meth addiction, she'd also been frightened by the personality changes she'd seen in him.

That last visit with Elaine on a cold February afternoon drove home once more that meth isn't an issue of the past; it's a scourge that lives on sixteen years after Matthew's murder — within her family, in Laramie, across Wyoming, in pockets all over the United States, and beyond. Christopher, her thirty-five-year-old son, has been in and out of prison on meth-related charges since he was eighteen. Now Jonathan, her youngest, is serving time on federal meth charges. Lives ruined — not once, but many times over.

As I toured the country talking about *The Book of Matt*, I'd been surprised nonetheless by the number of people with meth tales. Usually they approached me after an event had ended and the crowd was beginning to disperse. In September 2013 at Books, Inc., in San Francisco's Castro district, a camerawoman who had come to film my reading for broadcast on C-SPAN's *Book TV* confessed that she'd had no idea what the book was about when she accepted the assignment. But then her eyes filled with tears and she said that her brother, with whom she was very close, had been arrested on meth charges two weeks earlier. Until then, she'd known nothing about the drug. I was speechless when she took my hand in hers and thanked me for writing the book, and for talking about meth.

Standing nearby in the bookstore was Arthur Corbin, a veteran gay activist and organizer who had worked alongside Harvey Milk. I'd just met Arthur that day, and he, too, was fighting back tears. He reminisced about the hundreds he'd lost to AIDS — friends, neighbors, colleagues, roommates, co-workers — but also about the meth epidemic that had swept through San Francisco's gay community in its wake, shattering still more lives.

A few weeks later at a bookstore event in Los Angeles, an attractive, well-dressed straight male who'd grown up in Wyoming introduced himself as a former meth addict and said he was relieved that someone had finally written about the meth problem in his home state. Had he not weaned himself from the drug and gone through the agony of withdrawal, his career as an actor and screenwriter would have been over, he said.

In Tampa, Florida, a similar scenario played out. This time, the well-dressed man sitting in the back row at Inkwood bookstore was gay. As I was signing books, he approached the table and acknowledged, "If it weren't for the fact that I had a good job, I'd be dead now. Meth almost destroyed everything. Some of my friends haven't been so lucky, though."

One bookstore manager had even pulled me aside to tell me she was worried about her teenage son because she'd recently discovered he was "experimenting" with meth. Knowing how highly addictive the drug is, I advised her to seek professional counseling as soon as possible.

Many of those stories were with me as I sat on the worn couch in Elaine's living room, watching her grandchildren play on the floor, aware that their father, Jonathan, would be absent from their lives for the next several years. I wondered what kind of a father he'd be when he returned from prison, and how his kids would fill the hole his absence created.

Those questions — and others — were still with me when I walked onstage at the Gryphon Theatre that evening to talk about Matthew's murder, and some of its untold but still far-reaching consequences.

Catching Elaine Baker's sad eyes in the audience served to ground me, like a heavy-gauge wire. They reminded me that, painful and tragic as these stories are, they need to be told.

Also in the audience was Lucy Thompson, Russell Henderson's eighty-one-year-old grandmother, tucked in a wheelchair in the front row. Getting to the theater that night hadn't been easy, but she was determined to be there. With friends helping her navigate the slick pavement — and an unlucky fall along the way — she'd made it.

If anyone over the course of this story has taught me the meaning of falling down and then picking oneself up with dignity and grace, Lucy is that person.

Despite the freezing weather, she was far from alone in the theater. More than two hundred other locals filled the seats around her. I knew that many of them had come with questions about the book, but there was no way I could anticipate the feelings or memories that might bubble to the surface. I was also aware that many of those in front of me had *lived* the story, and that I was still an outsider looking in, which made their judgments and opinions matter more to me.

Glenn Johnson spoke first and expressed his hope that the wounds left by the tragedy of October 1998 would continue to heal. Next, former journalist Ray Hageman reminisced about his experiences covering the case. He'd been concerned at the time about the way the national media was covering the unfolding events in Laramie — cutting corners journalistically and relying on shopworn stereotypes of Wyoming and the American West to tell the story of Matthew's murder.

Hageman and former *Boomerang* editor Don Black asked me several pointed questions about *The Book of Matt*, including one I'd fielded numerous times during interviews: What about my use of anonymous sources? Some of my detractors had suggested it diminished the book's credibility. I responded to Hageman and Black much as I had to others: This was a dangerous story to report — and dangerous for sources on both sides of the law. Several would only agree to be interviewed if I left their real names out. The condition of anonymity is not uncommon in journalism, nor does it represent a breach in ethics. I did what I needed to do to get the facts of the story. I applied the same scrutiny and standards of corroboration to information I received from sources who asked that I protect their privacy. And while I may have shielded some sources from public disclosure, their identities are known to me and several colleagues, and I verified they are who they claim to be. Moreover, *The Book of Matt* contains a list of 112 *named sources*. The number of pseudonyms is minimal by comparison.

As the evening progressed, I read a few passages from the book and then answered additional questions posed by Hageman and Black. But the portion of the program that interested me most — and about

which I was still somewhat apprehensive — was the audience Q & A. Two microphones were set up in front of the stage, one in each aisle. The entire program was also being filmed by *Book TV* for national broadcast. My worst fear was that a difference of opinion among audience members (or with me) might devolve into an argument or, worse, a public shouting match. I was aware of how deeply divided Laramie had been over the Shepard case, and that some of those divisions persist.

And yet not one person who stood up to pose a question or offer a comment disputed the book's findings or its central thesis about Matthew's murder. Many thanked me for writing the book and for reporting what most local residents had long known: that the circumstances surrounding the murder were far more complicated than originally reported. But this Laramie audience also seemed to grasp something that has often eluded others: These complex truths make Matthew's murder more tragic, not less.

I was particularly surprised to see Matt Mickelson, the manager of the Fireside Lounge at the time of the attack, and members of his family in the audience. His father Jim Mickelson, who had owned the Fireside, stood up and complained that law enforcement officers had been informed of the drug component during their initial investigation at the bar. He was mystified as to why that part of the story had never been pursued.

It was hard for me to sleep that night following the Gryphon event. Not only had a long book tour come to an end, so had a long chapter in my life during which I had traveled to Laramie more times than I could remember. It was a place I'd grown to love, just as much as the people I'd gotten to know there. One of those people is Matthew Shepard, whose life and death convinced me that the truth matters.

As I tossed in my hotel bed, I kept thinking of two people I'd met that night for the first time — and only briefly. Both had left me with questions I couldn't possibly answer, but they were *my* questions, and I knew they would remain with me.

One was Charles Dolan, who introduced himself in the theater lobby after the event. As he shook my hand, I knew right away who

he was. On the night of October 7, 1998, the cyclist who'd found Matthew tied to a fence had run to Dolan's home for help. Dolan had called 911 and then gone to the fence with the cyclist to wait for help.

Dolan had experienced this tragedy with an immediacy that I hadn't; he'd looked into Matthew's badly beaten face. Fifteen years after the murder, what could a book (or I) possibly tell him that he hadn't seen with his own eyes? He was very quiet and we only exchanged a few words, but I still wondered, *Why did he come?*

The other person was the mother of a murder victim. Her son, a college student, had been killed in Laramie just a few years before, during an incident that left three young people dead, including her son's murderer. I had only read a couple of newspaper articles about it, but I didn't know how she managed to sit through the evening's program about my book. Although we exchanged just a few words of greeting, the sad look in her eyes was almost more than I could bear.

Why? her look seemed to ask. *Why was my son murdered?*

Soon I'd be leaving Laramie and *The Book of Matt* behind, but I knew I wouldn't shake that mother's expression from my mind — or what all mothers of the murdered rightly ache to know. *Why?*

The following morning, I woke up at five thirty and went to the window to check the weather. It was dark outside, but in the hazy light of the parking lot I could see that the previous night's snow had amounted to only a dusting.

Half an hour later, I was sipping hot tea in my rental car and driving west on the interstate, following the tiny reflector lights on the back of a tractor-trailer. Because the road conditions were slippery, nearly all the vehicles remained in the right lane, a long, slow-moving train.

There were two friends I needed to see before I could really consider the book tour "over." Cal Rerucha was now the Carbon County attorney, with an office in downtown Rawlins. With any luck he'd be free for lunch and I could fill him in on the previous night's event. But first I'd go to the state penitentiary to see Russell Henderson, now thirty-six.

While speaking at bookstores during the preceding months, I was often asked about Russell — what kind of a person he is; whether I

thought he got screwed; whether I'm an "advocate" for him; and if there's anything that can be done to help him. One reader of *The Book of Matt* (James Frazier) posted this message on Facebook:

[The book] raised in my mind all sorts of questions regarding truth, justice, mercy, hate, and love. My feelings about Matthew and the heinousness of the crime committed against him grew, but so did my sympathy for the other victims of a tragedy which, as the book makes clear, was not Matt's alone. As LGBT rights quicken and achieve enduring reality, I hope that we will become a community that welcomes this type of nuanced yet compassionate look at the events that have shaped us.

To me, James Frazier's hope — "that we will become a community that welcomes . . . [a] nuanced yet compassionate look at the events that have shaped us" — is one that I am convinced Matthew Shepard would have shared, and it's one that remains to be fulfilled. But there can be no compassion without forgiveness, no forgiveness without reconciliation, and no reconciliation without truth. As John Adams famously observed: "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." As a gay man who was profoundly shaken by Matthew's murder in 1998, it was not easy for me to resolve to follow the trail of evidence wherever it led without regard to the political ramifications of what I might discover. But I tried my best to do just that.

In his review of this book for *The Advocate* magazine, Aaron Hicklin, who is editor in chief of *Out* magazine, wrote: "There are obvious reasons why advocates of hate crime legislation must want to preserve one particular version of the Matthew Shepard story, but it was always just that — a version. Jimenez's version is another, more studiously reported account . . . Whether it was a hate crime, a drug crime, or a combination of the two, it's hard to shake the suspicion that self-hate and a misguided culture of masculinity, which taught McKinney to abhor in himself what Shepard had learned to embrace,

was as complicit as anything else in the murder of Matthew Shepard. That is, of course, a kind of hate crime — just not as straightforward as the one we’ve embraced all these years.”

I am gratified that the publication of *The Book of Matt* has started a conversation and has had the salutary effect of staking out some rhetorical space in which individuals are coming forward for the first time with their own testimonials. I am excited by the prospect that other responsible journalists might now pick up the trail where I left off, and that Matthew might be remembered not just as a symbol, but also as a complex person who lived, struggled, and died in a complex world.

Stephen Jimenez
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