

IN REVIEW FEATURE

Author sheds fresh light on gun crisis in America

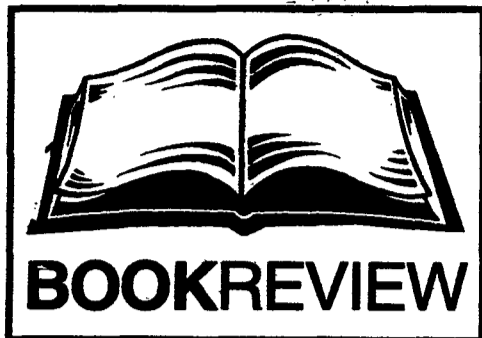
Lethal Passage: How the Travels of a Single Handgun Expose the Roots of America's Gun Crisis, by Erik Larson; Crown Publishers, Inc. (New York, 1994); 272 pp.; \$21.

Reviewed by Joe Wakelee-Lynch
Catholic News Service

Shooting sprees seem to erupt across America almost every month. Although they used to be rare, nowadays you can count on them. Whether they take place in schoolyards or subways cars, these mass murders hardly even surprise us anymore. Drive-by shootings, which once shocked the nation, don't even make the news anymore.

Erik Larson's *Lethal Passage: How the Travels of a Single Handgun Expose the Roots of America's Gun Crisis* could hardly appear at a more appropriate time. The easy availability of a gun — "the single most dangerous, socially costly, culturally destabilizing consumer product marketed in America" he calls it — has created a crisis, one that is almost out of our control. "When guns are easy to get, the wrong people get them easily," Larson writes.

Although many arguments about guns seem old, Larson sheds a fresh light. He



concentrates on how an immature 16-year-old boy, Nicholas Elliot, managed to acquire a semiautomatic pistol that he used to kill a Virginia schoolteacher in 1988. Larson tracks the gun through almost every stage of its existence: design, development, construction, marketing, sale and use. Along the way Larson describes a story of irresponsibility, starting with the adult friend who foolishly bought the gun for Elliot and including the salesperson who sold it. His mother had even bought bullets for him.

More incriminating, however, is Larson's detailed look at the gun industry itself — the thousands of gun-makers, sellers, and magazine writers and publishers who unceasingly tout the capabilities of guns and bullets that have no use for hunting or recreational shooting. Guns are products, and often those

in the business take no responsibility for what they produce and extol.

To Larson, Americans' fascination with guns has produced a gun culture that threatens all of us. In fact, the most frightening part of *Lethal Passage* is not Elliot's attack at his school, as senseless as it was. Rather, it is the story of how this boy was able to learn all he did about weapons and ammunition in order to modify his gun and cartridges. He fashioned a crude silencer, and he drilled and grooved bullets to make them more damaging. How is this possible? It's much easier than you may think.

The battle lines between those who desire tougher gun laws and those who oppose any such regulations are rigidly drawn. By now it seems futile to attempt to persuade anyone: who is left whose mind remains undecided?

More likely, however, is that the number of Americans who actively oppose gun laws has peaked. But between them and the Sarah and James Bradys of this country are countless millions who would like something done about easy access to guns but haven't yet stood up to demand it from their politicians.

That kind of mobilization is what groups such as the National Rifle Association are working to prevent. Larson's *Lethal Passage* leaves one wondering what it will take to get those people angry enough to do something.

Wakelee-Lynch is a free-lance reviewer living in Claremont, Calif.

Available at your bookstore or order prepaid from Crown Publishers, c/o Pensfield Press, 215 Brown Street, Iowa City, Iowa 52240. Add \$2 for shipping and handling.

'The Ref' based on one-joke premise that loses its steam

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following is a capsule review by the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.

'The Ref'

(Touchstone) Escaping from the cops on Christmas Eve, a jewel thief (Denis Leary) takes a battling married couple (Judy Davis and Kevin Spacey) hostage in their home, pretending to be their marriage counselor when relatives arrive for dinner. Ted Demme's comedy of barbs is at times wickedly funny, but its one-joke premise gradually runs out of steam before the fuzzy ending. Fleeting violence, a



Buena Vista Pictures
Kevin Spacey and Judy Davis portray Lloyd and Caroline Chasseur, a bickering married couple taken hostage by a jewel thief portrayed by Denis Leary in the new comedy *The Ref*.

dysfunctional family, some sexual innuendo and much rough language. The U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

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