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Review of *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder* By Beth Loffreda

John Gilgun
St. Joseph, Missouri

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Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder. By Beth Loffreda. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. A note on sources, acknowledgments. xv + 189 pp. \$22.95.

The book is about illusion and reality. It attempts, through interviews and rational analysis, to describe "Laramie in the October of Matt's death—the rush of protests and memorials, the arraignments of the killers, the arrival of the media, and the stunning transformation of Matthew into martyr, fueled by a surreal mixture of heartfelt identification, opportunistic politicking, and factual error."

It is also an attempt to describe the state of Wyoming, which exists in the national mind (when it exists at all) as a cowboy state. Check the Wyoming license plate with its cowboy on a bucking bronco. But the reality is that Wyoming is a "rural, poor and conservative state." Its natural resources, especially its low-sulphur-burning coal, are exploited by corporations for their own gain. Its citizens refer to it as "a Third World country." It experiences itself "as a colony controlled by outside financial interests." It is a state dependent on tourist money but resentful of tourists, a place where men work in mines and ranchers and farmers hate miners. It is a state "run by people who have a great deal invested in making sure nothing changes. And that includes civil rights."

(This according to Stephanie, born and raised in Wyoming, a member of the University of Wyoming's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association.) It is a place which found itself in October 1998 at the center of America's "politics of sexuality—perhaps the most divisive issue in America's 'culture wars'" and marginally equipped to handle the exposure.

What did I learn from this book? That Matthew Shepard was not crucified on that buck fence. He was found slumped at the bottom of it. Forget the scarecrow image. The fence itself was not out on the windswept Plains but on the edge of town near a housing development. "The college dorms [rise] in the middle of your view." Matt was not burned by his killers though he was tortured. I learned also that what at the time seemed to be the most horrifying detail was true. On "Matt's brutally disfigured face . . . the only spots not covered in blood were the tracks cleansed by his tears." I learned that "Matt had undergone regular HIV testing after being gang-raped during a trip to Morocco. The results of the tests had always been negative." I cannot remember now where I first read that Matthew Shepard had AIDS. But he did not have AIDS.

What's the truth? Whom can I trust?

Toward the end of her book, Beth Loffreda uses interview material with Rob Debee, a sergeant in the Sheriff's office, the "person in Laramie who perhaps can see those things most clearly." I believed what Rob Debee said. It took me several days to get around to asking myself, "Why trust this 'proudly professional, toughly built, Wyoming cop.'" In my experience it's not been members of the police force who give unbiased accounts of incidents involving gay men. Yet I did trust him. Beth Loffreda gives us his report of everything that happened that night, and, to me, it is convincing.

Rob Debee:

"There's no doubt in my mind that this was a planned thing because [Matt] was gay. Matt was what I would consider to be identifiable as gay in his outward appearance and obviously he was a good target for these guys.

They wouldn't consider him a threat—he's not going to be able to do anything to them."

"McKinney's claim in his confession and the trial that Matt had grabbed his genitals was . . . a flat lie."

"I think essentially what happened is Matt probably made a statement, 'Don't do this to me. I've got your license plate. . . .' Even if you trust McKinney's own statement where he says, 'I asked him to read the license plate and he did, so I hit him more'—that's premeditation."

I trust Debree because he's a professional, because he seems to have no agenda beyond getting at the truth, and because he's been trained to get at that truth. His report is as close to what really happened as anything we are likely to get. As Beth Loffreda wrote in an e-mail message to me, "I think that section on Rob was the heart of the book for me. I wanted to circle back to what happened to Matt, but late in the book, after I'd stripped away whatever metaphor and mythmaking I could to see what was there beneath it, Rob really seemed to me to be the best way to do that [because of what he knew and how he talked both]."

Put away the myths. Accept the truth.

JOHN GILGUN
St. Joseph, Missouri