

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Jo Scott-Coe: Before the Violence, and After

Scott Butki · Wednesday, May 1st, 2019

I went to Poly High School in Riverside, CA with Jo Scott-Coe, the focus of this interview and article. We were both friends and had mutual friends. She went on to teach at that high school and wrote a book showing some of the behind the scenes things us students missed. I interviewed her for that book, *Teacher at Point Blank: Confronting Sexuality, Violence, and Secrets in a Suburban School*, here: <https://blogcritics.org/an-interview-with-jo-scott-coe1/>

In that book you can sense that she is looking for justice, pointing out places where it was not happening and asking why. We drifted apart, Jo and I, but both were off looking for justice in our own way, she in her writings and me as first a journalist, then as someone helping and advocating for folks with mental health issues. And we both strongly cared about marginalized communities and those hurt and affected by violence.

Jo writes creative nonfiction that often includes a heavy research component. She works as an associate professor of English composition, literature, and creative writing at Riverside City College in southern California.

A few years ago, I started noticing her name all across my radar on Facebook. While she was still in Riverside, I'd by then moved to Austin. It was getting near the 50th anniversary of Charles Whitman's notorious shooting from the tower of the University of Texas. I read many articles trying to find new angles and other interesting ways to write about the original event and the meaning of the anniversary.



Jo Scott-Coe

It was Jo, though, thousands of miles away, who had the best piece near that anniversary: Interviewing the family of Whitman's wife, Kathy, and talking about the domestic violence in Whitman's life. Jo's piece, *Listening To Kathy*, was amazing and I shared with many who were moved by it. You can read it here: <https://catapult.co/stories/lis>

When I talked to Jo later, she mentioned she had discovered Kathy's story while working on a new book, *MASS: A Sniper, a Father, and a Priest*, about the relationship between Charles Whitman and a Roman Catholic priest. I was interested and we talked about another interview, but I admit I didn't rush to it. I was also curious how she, as a Catholic, would navigate all the ethical minefields involved in such work.

MASS was published in April last year. Then came a cascade of new revelations in the summer and fall, about cases of sexual abuse by Catholic priests in the U.S. dating back five decades or more. And the priest whose story Jo had documented in her book? His name was included on the list, finally released in January by the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, of priests "credibly accused" of abusing children.

That development got us moving, and this interview is the result of it. I have been impressed by Jo's passion for the truth, the lengths she goes to get closer to understanding topics, and her eloquence. I expect you too will notice this.

Scott Butki: What sparked you to write this book?

Jo Scott-Coe: In my first book, *Teacher at Point Blank*, published nearly ten years ago now, I was trying to understand, on a very intimate and personal level, how everyday factors—visible yet ignored—were a barrier to our understanding flashpoints of violence in school settings, especially locations where we think it could "never" happen. I couldn't get away from the question: What *don't* we talk about when we talk about school shootings? So when I started working on a new book in 2011, I began thinking more broadly: What *don't* we talk about when we talk about violence in any public space? What happens before "it" happens? What continues afterwards?

Another issue really bothered me. People who survive a violent event know that after the initial burst of sensational interest in the media, memory fades. People forget. There are also hundreds if not thousands of stories that do not "merit" coverage in a very loud and kinetic media environment, now more than ever. As a mass audience, we add the latest mass shooting to an incomprehensible heap of horrors stowed in a collective emotional basement somewhere. Bursts of attention can blind us to how our own ways of watching and responding become habits, even rituals, for dismissing pieces of the story that cannot get told. I realized that the UT story was an important one to study precisely because its narrative had established a very consistent pattern of storytelling that would not be easy to break.

Butki: How did you learn about this connection between this priest and tower shooter Charles Whitman? Was this something you learned doing research and/or from relatives?

Scott-Coe: One of the first sources I stumbled upon as I began my research was an interview of the priest conducted by the FBI two weeks after Whitman's rampage. The interview summary got my attention because it had been conducted at Elmendorf AFB in Alaska—not in Texas, where the murders took place, nor in Florida, where Whitman had grown up and where he had first met Father Leduc. Once I realized that Leduc had been dead since 1981, I also discovered that his statement had been redacted until the 1990s, and that despite some minor mentions in the secondary record (where his name was regularly misspelled), there appeared to have been no follow-up to understand who he was and how he fit into Whitman's story. That was inherently intriguing. So I had to build and synthesize Leduc's story entirely from scratch. No one was

encouraging me to do it.

Butki: How did you go about researching this?

Scott-Coe: I started, as any researcher should, with the established secondary record, to get a grip on what had already been talked about. But then I spent a lot of time with the primary materials from the Austin Public Library for original sources related to the shooting history. I also had to learn how to locate and navigate Catholic records—in seminaries, chancery archives, and directories. I read a lot of Catholic literature of the mid-20th century, and studied Catholic history and theology, especially about the sacred and cultural role of the priest. I spent hours with magazines from the time and in newspaper databases and court and county records, as well as military records and reports about how “problem priests” had been discovered and/or hidden. I made a lot of site visits, and I had to stage these at times of the year when I didn’t have classes to teach. It was stressful at times!

One thing I discuss in the book that readers may not understand: when seeking information about the Catholic Church, there is no Freedom of Information Act protection for researchers who contact dioceses, so I had to consult with individuals who have spent several lifetimes knowing what questions to ask when you hit a brick wall—as well as how to interpret gaps in information or “signals” in the visible record. This was a whole other level of study for me. I interviewed many individuals—including priests and former priests—whether about Leduc or Whitman personally, or about the shooting, or about the culture of the time. Richard Sipe, who died last year, was an incredible ally. Many people know him now as the “hippie priest” who consults the *Boston Globe* journalist team by phone in the movie *Spotlight*.



Butki: You talk in the book about rituals of the faith that Whitman repeated? Does this have to do with this thing where some would go to a tower with a pretend machine gun and/or other things? As part of your answer please explain the rituals.

Scott-Coe: What struck me very early in my research was the overlap between two images published in *LIFE* magazine on 12 Aug. 1966: the first, showing Whitman as a Catholic boy scout standing in front of the altar railing at his home parish in Florida, and the second, now-famous photo of the balustrade of the UT Tower the day of the shooting. I saw an imagistic resonance, a symmetry between the altar in the church and an altar in the sky.

The Know Your Mass comic created for kids, especially altar boys of the 1950s, literally traces the mass as a series of steps up towards the moment when the priest re-creates Christ’s sacrifice and consecrates the bread and wine into what Catholics believe becomes Christ’s body and blood—there’s even an escalator in the comic’s diagrams that shows how only the “faithful” and special people are lifted up to that final moment. Even if you weren’t Catholic or didn’t know anything about these images, you probably have some knowledge that it’s a convention in many faith traditions to go to the high, high place for a talk with the divine or for a transformation. The thing is, we tend to assume that transformation will always be holy or good or healthy, but it can also be the opposite. You can raise yourself up to curse the gods, to curse your fellow humans, to repeat the “sacrifice” by shedding other people’s blood instead of offering yourself for service.

When I visited the campus for the 50th memorial of the shooting—remember, this is now five

years into the whole process, after meeting Kathy Leissner's family and spending so much time immersed in her letters, understanding her story alongside the shadowy story of the priest who married her to the man who would murder her—I was physically overcome. I mean it made me *physically ill* the night before the memorial when I took a walk alone, how much UT mall space evokes the layout of a traditional Catholic church on a grand scale: the oak trees lining the mall create a nave leading up toward the “transept” with flags on “side altars” in front of the tower building steps; the main building itself looks like a “sanctuary” with its tabernacle clock high in the sky and the basin of the fountain, like a giant baptismal, far below the oaks at the entrance. I went to mass alone that evening in the Newman center, and I just lost it.

Body memory is a significant part of ritual, and while Whitman had by most accounts ceased to practice his faith in any traditional way, he had been trained from the age of 9 how to assist any priest in what his generation called “The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.” He was immersed in the tradition through twelve years of Catholic school.

When it came to the “high point” of Whitman's horrific massacre, records available tell us that he had set his mind on killing at least two days before the shootings. The hours leading up to the shooting were like a reverse-Gethsemane, where he justified his own violence and betrayal of loved ones. He wrote multiple epistles and read over his diary entries from two years earlier. He had a final visit with two friends and took his wife to a movie and dinner. He murdered his wife and mother with a new Bowie knife he had purchased for that purpose. He washed the blood of these two women from his hands. He stayed up all night and prepared a heavy trunk with water and sweet rolls and other supplies, including more weapons. He put on different vestments. He carried the heavy trunk up to the tower. Instead of incense, gun smoke. Instead of Holy Communion down the altar railing, unholy bullets served through the balustrade rainspouts. Instead of resurrection or an offering of himself, death for so many others—and suicide by cop as his own final destiny.

Because of TV and radio, the rampage played out in 1966 as a mass media story—it was the first public shooting to have that kind of impact on an international audience. The “mass” is now part of the viral ritual we experience when, sadly, these horrible events play out in different places, with different actors and targets, but the same bumper music, the same “thoughts and prayers.” We can go back to Marshall McLuhan for insight about how the replicated image of an event begins to create a message about the event that can take on a life of its own unless we stop it. McLuhan was a Catholic, and his understanding of ritual gave him a fresh eye for seeing media patterns in a Protestant and increasingly secular country.

One more thing: Thinking of Whitman's history as a kid in confession, as a child in a home where violence in the family was an open secret, then as a young man in many spaces where habits of *omerta* with priests and other adult men became both protection and poison, I interpret the selection of the Tower “stage” for the shooting as telegraphing the most vivid, loud, and awful opposite of secrecy possible. *Here I am, Lord. It is I, Father. Here's Johnny!* It was a fusion of violence and messaging for a pre-Twitter world.

And through the almost “divine” power of mass communication, there were two men at the two farthest ends of the North American continent whose attention Whitman would finally command in the most awful way, two men who got away with terrible acts in private and were never held accountable in their lifetimes: Whitman's abusive biological dad, in southern Florida; and his spiritual “father,” Rev. Leduc, who had taken a post in Alaska just 7 days before the shooting. A priest we now know was “credibly accused” of sexual abusing children.

Butki: Did you go into researching this thinking there was something inappropriate about the relationship between the priest and the sniper? If so, what? Was it a suspicion that maybe there was something in their relationship that might shed light on Whitman's actions? Or that he should have said something about the domestic violence?

Scott-Coe: I noticed in the FBI statement how blasé Rev. Leduc was about the abuse he refers to within Whitman's home. He also does not react one iota to the murders his mentee committed. Leduc spends more time on his concern that Whitman wanted to be an Eagle Scout at too early an age. I mean, really? You're an ally, a friend, a confidant to a guy you've mattered to since he was 9 years old, a young man whose wedding you officiated, a guy who has just murdered or wounded nearly fifty people after killing two family members—two women you have met—and your main concern is how rushed he had been to become an Eagle Scout when he was 12?

Leduc also repeated how he didn't want anyone other than investigators to know that he was providing a statement. That was odd, considering that Leduc revealed zero confidential information. It made me wonder: Who was Leduc so worried about drawing scrutiny from, whether for his connection to Whitman or simply being interviewed by the FBI? I think it's a reasonable inference that any bishop who had approved Leduc's transfer into the military would not have been thrilled—especially if he had already identified Leduc as a problem.

For nearly a full year of my process, I separated out Leduc from Whitman's timeline entirely to establish a sense of who the priest was and where he had come from on his own terms. As I discovered, there was trouble in Leduc's story whether Whitman appeared there or not. The seminary timeline suggests that Leduc probably shouldn't have been ordained in the first place. Weaving their stories together revealed uncomfortable finds. Whitman had been fixated on Leduc at significant moments in his life. The connection didn't have to be suspicious to merit more understanding from an historical perspective.

Given the circumstances, Whitman—and/or either of his two younger brothers—could have been molested in Florida by Leduc even before he was ordained. But we must also allow the possibility that Leduc didn't physically molest Whitman at all. Would their connection still matter? Absolutely. Consider how the shooting would have only provided additional rationale for any allegations against Leduc to be handled as quietly as possible. Consider the double victimization for those whose stories were buried offstage. Leduc himself was hidden in plain sight, blurred out by a shooting that was already too horrific to fathom.

What we know for sure is that Whitman, by the age of 9 years old, met Leduc, who was roughly 12 years older, and bonded significantly with him during scouting activities and hunting trips. He served at Leduc's first mass in the summer of 1955. By the time he came to Texas in 1961, around the age of 20, Whitman began fraternizing and drinking with Leduc, a priest and regional Houston area scoutmaster who has now been identified as “credibly accused” of child abuse.

What did Whitman find attractive or empowering in this connection? It's the worst possible formula for pastoral “care” or good advice one can imagine. What kind of wisdom would Leduc give a college boy about sex, about women, about marriage, about being a man? It would not have been healthy input. Whitman wanted Leduc to be the priest to marry him to “his most precious possession,” Kathy Leissner, in a matter of weeks. Those wedding pictures make my heart hurt. Leduc's smile over the young couple does not feel like a benevolent presence.

Butki: What was your reaction to the recent news that the priest was on the credibly accused list? Did the relatives, presuming you're still in touch, have reactions to this news?

Scott-Coe: It knocked the wind out of me, to be honest. It was also vindicating, in the sense that I had been working alone for a long time and concentrating attention on a priest nobody seemed willing to take an interest in. But obscurity lingers all the time, and not just with abuse cases. There was a murder case in Texas that was finally adjudicated against a priest after 57 years. A Latina named Irene Garza was murdered in 1960 and her family had to live with that grief and damage for nearly six decades, until we found out in open court—in 2017—that Catholic authorities in 1960 helped “disappear” the murderer because they thought the story would stir up anti-Catholic prejudice and derail the Kennedy election.

So here I was, stumbling through to understand a story about a priest who was at the outset, at the very least, the “troubled” friend of a young Catholic man who committed matricide, wife-murder, and mass killing on television. I understood at the outset that if Leduc was a serious problem, he was not going to be easy to find.

So now Leduc has been named, along with 41 other priests, many who are dead, from the Houston area. I did not expect him to be identified even if he needed to be. I had been prepared to live with the discovery that he had been a murky figure and was pretty resigned that having the book available might enable someone to come forward if they had felt isolated in their dark knowledge and wanted to speak up. The release of Leduc’s name gives me some limited hope. Someone somewhere in that diocese said “enough” for this guy. I have been asked by several experts if I think that the diocese of Galveston-Houston saw my book and considered it a factor in releasing Leduc’s name, and I don’t know about that. There is still so much hidden. The Houston archdiocese did not, for any priest on their list, identify the total counts or number of reports or any nature about the allegations, other than that they were credible and involved children.

But we may be able to get more official information about Houston if legal authorities use their muscle. Last November, there was a raid on the diocesan offices in connection to a pending case against another priest. Many archival materials were confiscated, including historical files, tapes, computers, etc. I would certainly like to see Leduc’s record. His active priesthood was roughly 15 years—a relatively short time, even for a predator when you compare to other cases—which suggests that whatever officials saw in him must have been damaging. I think a lot about whether there are survivors of Leduc still living, and whether they received any modicum of justice from the church. I wonder if there are other victims who never came forward.

Yes, I have made contact recently with family members about this new information—both on the Leissner and the (distant) Whitman sides—but I am not seeking a quick reaction from anyone. There’s already so much suffering in this story. This is just another layer of pain. It takes time to process.

Butki: What are you doing with this news? I understand you’ve reached out to the media. How is that going?

Scott-Coe: I have been writing essays. I had an article picked up by Southern California newspapers and I was interviewed on a major Los Angeles radio show. The news cycle ebbs and flows and can be fickle. That said, I’m in touch with a few reporters. It’s an important story, so we’ll see what continues to unfold. I am not going away any time soon. A few weeks ago, I offered

the keynote at a memorial for the 20th anniversary of the Columbine shooting.

Butki: Now some will read this book, or this interview, and wonder if you're suggesting that you're taking away some of the responsibility or culpability of Whitman so let's respond to that head-on. Are you suggesting that?

Scott-Coe: I'm so glad you asked that. No one pulled the trigger but Whitman. If you look at survivors of domestic abuse in the home—whether children or intimate partners—or survivors of sexual abuse and assault of any kind, most do NOT go on to perpetrate violent crimes. It is also true that if you look at those who are convicted and sentenced for violent crimes, a significant proportion have (among other factors) a history of abuse in their backgrounds, whether it's violence, neglect, or sexual assault/molestation. Understanding a social context does not need to provide an excuse.

We have to be more sophisticated in the way we talk about the worst kinds of violence. We tend to silo these events or acts, to oversimplify a single trigger or “cause,” so that we can set the event aside and distance ourselves. We compartmentalize to survive. But there are muddy layers and intersections of reality in any given life that teach some individuals how to rationalize their worst and most drastic choices. The ugly truth is that many of these choices and some of this damage is perpetrated in private, behind closed doors, on a much more massive scale and yet offstage, comfortably hidden from view. We need to start caring more about violence in those spaces. It has a way of spilling out somehow into the public sphere, whether a gun goes off or not.

Butki: You have extensive notes for this book. Did you make a point of taking more notes, perhaps to prepare yourself for criticism, or did this just happen?

Scott-Coe: Right! *MASS* has more than 100 pages of notes and sources, and I'm proud of them. Originally, those notes were integrated into the text of the book, if you can believe that. As the book took shape, I felt it would be too cumbersome for a general reader who wanted to follow the key strokes, so I figured out how to separate what was essential from what was ancillary or background. I worked with my publisher to include the annotations in a format for anyone who needed or wanted to understand additional connections, history, rabbit holes, etc. I see the annotations themselves as a separate narrative thread of their own. The source listing, of course, is crucial for indicating how I was engaging an established narrative, providing citations for authors that helped me build my understanding.

Butki: You mention at least once in the book that you noticed things a non-Catholic might notice. Was it hard for you, as a Catholic, to write about this faith, its rituals, its past, etc? Put another way did that help or hinder?

Scott-Coe: Hm. I said that I noticed things a non-Catholic might NOT notice. I had a very traditional Catholic upbringing and education, but now consider myself on the “stray” fringe of the flock. I'm interested but generally suspicious. It was definitely easier for me, with my background, to know how to approach a spectrum of folks, some still deeply religious and others whose faith experience ran aground of very ugly realities. I understood what threads to pull. I'm not saying it worked perfectly, but I had an easier time than I if I were starting from a purely secular position.

Butki: What are you working on next?

Scott-Coe: This is a strange transition for me, after *MASS*, because the abuse questions on a

broader level are not resolved. There is so much work yet to do. I'm starting to write essays about Catholic women, trauma, and survival—and how alliances outside and across traditions are vital to social change. How do we prevent erasure and, more than that, make sure that we are heard?

I am also concentrating on finding the best and most respectful, impactful way to preserve the archive of Kathy Leissner's correspondence, whether in a library, or critical edited collection, or both, or something else. It haunts me that in a world where Whitman's models were a violent father and an abusive priest, the voice of his wife, Kathy—a decent, socially intelligent, vibrant, loving person—could simply not be heard. We can hear her now. Kathy's voice, the voices of so many mothers and wives and sisters, can change the story. It's time for the priests and the patriarchs to listen to us, take us seriously, and do something different.

Top image: The pages from LIFE Magazine.

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