

LETHAL PASSAGE

"Brilliantly conceived...
should be required reading."

— *Newsday*



ERIK
LARSON

THE STORY OF A GUN

Acclaim for
**ERIK LARSON'S
LETHAL PASSAGE**

“Larson creates one of the most readable anti-gun treatises in years.”

—*Washington Post Book World*

“Shocking ... compelling ... *Lethal Passage* is a perfect blend of reporting and storytelling.”

—*Detroit Free Press*

“Larson touches on all aspects of the gun issue in this country.... There is a feeling in America that perhaps enough lives finally have been terminated or forever changed by the pull of a trigger. That something real must be done. Erik Larson gives great voice to that feeling.”

—*San Diego Union-Tribune*

“By tracing the path of a firearm that is worthless for hunting or target practice, we see how our nation’s laws have fallen out of sync with modern life.... Erik Larson shows us just what fearful legacy our national self-image is leaving our young.”

—*Dallas Morning News*

ERIK LARSON
LETHAL PASSAGE

Erik Larson writes for the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. His articles and essays have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. He is also the author of *The Naked Consumer*. He lives with his wife and their two children in Baltimore, Maryland.

LETHAL PASSAGE

THE STORY
OF A GUN

ERIK LARSON



VINTAGE BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

NEW YORK

First Vintage Books Edition, January 1995

Copyright © 1994, 1995 by Erik Larson

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto. First published in hardcover in slightly different form by Crown Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, in 1994.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

The Library of Congress has catalogued the Crown edition as follows:

Larson, Erik.

Lethal passage: how the travels of a single handgun expose the roots of America's gun crisis / by Erik Larson.—1st ed.

p. cm.

1. Gun control—United States. 2. Firearms—Social aspects—United States. 3. Murder—Virginia—Virginia Beach—Case studies. 4. Elliot, Nicholas Walden Herman. 5. Murderers—Virginia—Virginia Beach—Biography. I. Title.

HV7436.L37 1994

364.1'523'9875551—dc20 93-34560

eISBN: 978-0-307-80331-3

v3.1

*For all children who have
faced a gun*

Contents

Cover
About the Author
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Epigraph

CHAPTER ONE	INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER TWO	NICHOLAS
CHAPTER THREE	THE LETHAL LANDSCAPE
CHAPTER FOUR	NICHOLAS
CHAPTER FIVE	THE GUN
CHAPTER SIX	NICHOLAS
CHAPTER SEVEN	THE PURCHASE
CHAPTER EIGHT	THE DEALER
CHAPTER NINE	NICHOLAS
CHAPTER TEN	THE ENFORCERS
CHAPTER ELEVEN	NICHOLAS
CHAPTER TWELVE	THE CULTURE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	NICHOLAS
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	THE NEW TYRANNY
	CODA
	AFTERWORD TO THE VINTAGE EDITION
	SOURCE NOTES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*The essential American soul is hard, isolate,
stoic, and a killer.*

—*D. H. LAWRENCE*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

ON A BITTER, COLD DECEMBER MORNING, a sixteen-year-old boy walked into the Atlantic Shores Christian School in Virginia Beach, Virginia, with a semiautomatic handgun and several hundred rounds of ammunition tucked into his backpack. His name was Nicholas Elliot. By midmorning, a forty-one-year-old teacher had been shot dead, and another teacher, struck by two nine-millimeter bullets fired at point-blank range, was extraordinarily lucky to be alive. Two other teachers narrowly escaped Nicholas's bullets. One found herself running a zigzag pattern through the schoolyard as Nicholas fired round after round at her back. The other, a man who tackled Nicholas and saved the lives of a roomful of crying and praying teenagers, felt a bullet breeze past his head.

In a nation accustomed to murder in large multiples, the shootings received little out-of-state coverage. A single homicide barely rates mention beside the events at Stockton and San Ysidro, two names that ring of casual mass violence the way the names of great battlefields ring of valor. But the story of how that gun wound up in Nicholas's backpack, how the gun came to exist at all, constitutes a cultural detective story that tells a great deal about the roots of America's gun crisis. Nicholas in effect carried with him the good wishes of an industry and a culture whose institutions and mores have helped make the things he did that morning so commonplace in America.

Nicholas carried a gun—the Cobray M-11/9—that by any reasonable standard should never have become a mass-consumer product. He acquired the gun from a federally licensed dealer using a means that puts thousands of guns into the hands of illegal users each