

A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussion groups or library programs.

Meet journalist and political cartoonist John “Derf” Backderf and learn about his works.

Select from a range of discussion questions to deepen the experience of reading *Kent State*.

Discover websites and primary sources to explore topics and themes in depth, and check out other nonfiction, memoir, and journalism comics written for adult audiences.

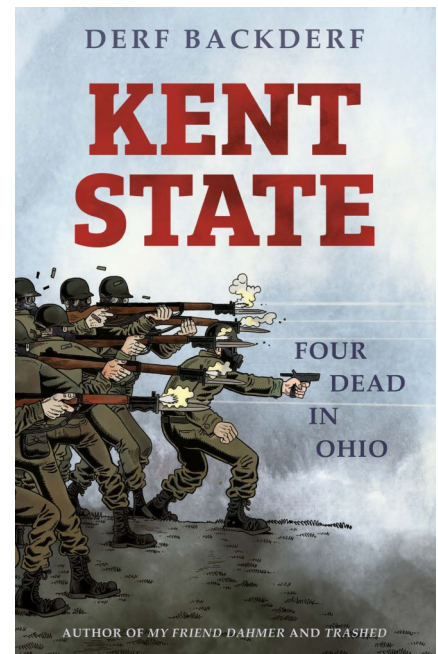
Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio

By Derf Backderf



About the Book

On May 4, 1970, the Ohio National Guard gunned down unarmed college students protesting the Vietnam War at Kent State University. In a deadly barrage of 67 shots, four students—Jeffrey Miller, Allison Krause, William Schroeder, and Sandra Scheuer—were killed and nine others were shot and wounded. It was the day America turned guns on its own children—a shocking event burned into our national memory. A few days prior, 10-year-old Derf Backderf saw those same Guardsmen patrolling his nearby hometown, sent in by the governor to crush a trucker strike. Using the journalism skills he employed on *My Friend Dahmer* and *Trashed*, Backderf conducted extensive interviews and exhaustive research to explore the lives of these four young people and the events of those four days in May when the country seemed on the brink of tearing apart. ***Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio***, published in time for the 50th anniversary of the tragedy, is a moving and troubling story about the bitter price of dissent—as relevant today as it was in 1970.



From *KENT STATE: Four Dead in Ohio* by Derf Backderf.
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Book Details

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Available as an ebook through the Ohio Digital Library: ohiodigitallibrary.com

Book Awards

2022 Selection for Great Reads from Great Places by the Ohio Center for the Book
2021 Eisner Award for Best Reality-Based Work
2021 Mike Wieringo Comic Book Industry Award for Best Non-fiction Comic Work
2021 ALA/YALSA Alex Award Winner
Named “Best Book of 2020” by *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, *National Public Radio*,
Publishers Weekly, and *Library Journal*.



Author photo courtesy Abrams; used with permission. Biography compiled by Don Boozer, Ohio Center for the Book.

“12:24 P.M.
**SIXTY-SEVEN
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A FUSILLADE THAT
LASTS A MERE
13 SECONDS.

**THIRTEEN
BLOODY
SECONDS.”**

About the Author

John “Derf” Backderf grew up in Richfield, Ohio, near Akron. He attended Ohio State University on a journalism scholarship and served as political cartoonist for the student newspaper. The bestselling, award-winning creator of **Punk Rock & Trailer Parks**, **My Friend Dahmer**, and **Trashed** is also the recipient of the prestigious Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award for political cartooning for his weekly comic strip, “The City,” which appeared in over 100 newspapers for almost twenty-five years. Backderf lives in Cleveland, according to his website, “for reasons he can no longer remember.”

Author Resources

Derf Backderf’s official website

www.derfcity.com

A Chat with Derf Backderf

wexarts.org/read-watch-listen/chat-derf-backderf

Video interview conducted by David Filipi, Director, Film/Video, Wexner Center for the Arts at The Ohio State University.

Remembering Kent State with Derf Backderf

www.wexarts.org/read-watch-listen/remembering-kent-state-derf-backderf

Backderf recounts some of the research that went into the creation of **Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio** in a blog post for the Wexner Center for the Arts.

Kent State: In Conversation with Derf Backderf

www.facebook.com/watch/?v=141023258003820

Video interview conducted by Don Boozer, Manager, Ohio Center for the Book at the Cleveland Public Library.

“We Seem To Just Be Steamrolling Toward Tragedy”: An Interview with Derf Backderf

www.fcj.com/we-seem-to-just-be-steamrolling-toward-tragedy-an-interview-with-derf-backderf/

Conducted by Irene Velentzas for *The Comics Journal*.

For publicity and speaking engagement inquiries:

Contact Derf Backderf at derfcity@en.com and copy Kristen Milford, Senior Marketing Manager at Abrams, kmilford@abramsbooks.com.

Talk About It

Topics to share when discussing **Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio**.

- Why do you think Backderf decided to begin the book with his own experience of seeing the National Guard troops? How does this foreshadow the events of May 4?
- Discuss the ways in which Backderf brings in the perspectives of the students, local townspeople, National Guard troops, and others to provide a fuller picture of the events. Does this make you more or less sympathetic to those involved on a particular side? Does it evoke other emotions?

Talk About It (continued)

- It was important to Derf that the story be told from the viewpoint of “The Four”: Jeffrey Miller, Allison Krause, William Schroeder, and Sandra Scheuer, who are often hardly remembered beyond their school photos. This makes the reader think about the national tragedy from a very intimate and personal perspective. Discuss your reaction to the author's decision to use the personal narrative of “The Four” while also providing the exhaustively-researched reportage of the historical context surrounding May 4, 1970. How does getting to know the students as individuals affect your reaction to the events?
- How is miscommunication or misinformation amplified within each group involved? How does this escalate events, ending in the shootings themselves?
- Discuss the unique storytelling opportunities made possible through the use of the medium of comics. For example, Backderf in interviews has specifically mentioned that no photographs exist of the shootings as they happened. His depictions (pp. 221-232, all meticulously researched) are a powerful pictorial witness to the shootings themselves.
- Several times, Backderf stretches sound effects, shouts, or screams across multiple panels: music playing (pp. 21-22); tolling of the bell (p. 178); “Guard off campus!!” (p. 186;); Mary Ann Vecchio's scream (pp. 235-237). Discuss the effect these have in unifying a scene or setting the tone for the story being told within those specific panels.
- Why do you think Backderf chose to include the copious notes at the end of the book? Discuss why you think Backderf chose to place the epilogue of the conversation between President Nixon and his Chief-of-Staff H.R. Haldeman after the notes.
- Did **Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio** provide additional details of the events on Kent State's campus of which you were unaware? Some readers have specifically mentioned they were unaware, prior to reading the book, of the use of bayonets (p. 142-147) by the National Guard troops.

Go Further

The following resources will allow you to further explore the historical context surrounding the events of May 4, 1970, on the campus of Kent State University, as well as the social context in which they happened.

FBI Records: The Vault – Kent State Shooting

vault.fbi.gov/kent-state-shooting

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has digitized hundreds of pages of documents relating to the Kent State Shooting and made them available online.

Kent State University: May 4 Archives

www.kent.edu/may-4-1970

Kent State University's online home of commemoration and research of the tragic events of May 4, 1970. Clicking the Archives link leads to the May 4 Collection, which includes invaluable oral history interviews (used extensively by Backderf in his research) from witnesses to the historical events.

Mapping May 4

mappingmay4.kent.edu

This website, hosted by Kent State University, provides a visual representation of the events surrounding the shootings overlaid on an area map. Clicking on specific locations links the viewer to oral histories and other stories associated with those spots.

Nonfiction “Graphic Novels” for Adults

The catch-all term “graphic novel” might obscure the use of comics as an evocative medium for telling nonfiction stories. **Kent State** uses comics to provide an engaging narrative history of the events leading up to May 4, 1970. Backderf’s 26 pages of notes document specific sources for nearly every page of the book, making it a must-read for anyone trying to understand the cultural context of that tragedy.

Comics can convey information in a way that cannot be duplicated in any other medium; and nonfiction, memoir, and journalism comics provide creators with a unique way to tell their stories. While the Pulitzer Prize-winning **Maus** by Art Spiegelman has become deservedly well-known, we also suggest the following nonfiction comics to expand your exploration of this genre.

Putin’s Russia: The Rise of a Dictator (2022) by Darryl Cunningham

Cunningham’s biography of the Russian leader provides historical and cultural context on how Putin came to power and how he has consolidated public support and attempted to eradicate dissent. A timely and compelling read.

The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media (Updated ed., 2021) by Brooke Gladstone and Josh Neufeld

NPR’s Brooke Gladstone and comics artist Josh Neufeld provide a valuable examination of the workings of the media with a new afterword looking at the rise of social media and our responsibility in a time of division and disinformation.

They Called Us Enemy (2019) by George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker

Takei recounts the story of his childhood imprisoned in American concentration camps during World War II. A 2021 & 2022 Choose to Read Ohio selection.

March by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell

Told over three volumes published 2013 to 2016, **March** is the late US Congressman John Lewis’s autobiographical account of his lifelong fight for civil and human rights from his childhood in rural Alabama to his work with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea (2018) by Guy Delisle (Helge Dascher, translator)

While working for a French animation company, Delisle became one of the few Westerners allowed access to North Korea. The book conveys both the humor and tragedy of life under dictatorial whims and government censorship.

Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992–1995 (2002) by Joe Sacco

Joe Sacco literally coined the term “comics journalism,” setting a high bar for hard-hitting reporting coupled with graphic storytelling. **Safe Area Gorazde** is Sacco’s award-winning work incorporating oral history interviews with his own personal reflections.

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (1994) by Scott McCloud

Told through the medium that it examines, this now-classic text provides insights into the unique storytelling possibilities of comics and the special relationship that comics work has with its reader.

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors, illustrators, and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits:
library.ohio.gov/ctro.

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