

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 9(1), 2017, pp 47-51
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
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Remington, R. & Zickefoose, S. (2009). How Forbidden Love Drove a 12-Year-Old to Murder Her Family: Runaway Devil. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

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Robert Remington and Sherri Zickefoose's book, "Runaway Devil," is a crime fiction narrative that depicts the events surrounding an infamous case in Medicine Hat, Alberta. On April 23, 2006, twelve-year-old "JR" and her twenty-three-year-old boyfriend, Jeremy Steinke, murdered her father, mother, and little brother in the families' cozy, suburban home. These Calgary journalists turned authors, attempt to answer the question that haunts many of us when hearing this story: Why did they do it? The authors are able to incorporate varying perspectives on this case, including legal, psychological, and sociological explanations in order to provide an answer. Furthermore, Remington and Zickefoose provide detailed accounts of the couples unsettling relationship, their involvement with the Goth subculture, and their infatuation with violent music and movies. As the story is pieced together, the authors differentiate between the potential motives for why the youngest girl in Canada's history chose to commit familicide, recognizing three key approaches to the case: (1) Goth culture encouraged the couple; (2) JR was the master mind behind it all, luring Jeremy to play a part in her plan; and (3) Jeremy corrupted an impressionable and young JR. The book is expertly organized into chapters that provide a careful and detailed examination of all the events leading up to, during, and after the murders, giving the reader as much information as possible to evaluate each approach.

Remington and Zickefoose describe Goth culture as a misunderstood element in society. Many demonize the Goth lifestyle for its shock value appearances and ability to bring together

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bands of misfits who don't fit into the socially constructed 'normal society' - however, by utilizing police statistics, the authors show that "despite its threatening façade, Goth culture tends to be non-violent, pacifist, and tolerant" (p. 46). Learning about young JR, her upbringing is atypical of most Goth participants; coming from a stable home with two loving parents who believed in family vacations and Sunday dinners, it was surprising to most why JR was so enamored with the Goth subculture. Through detailed interviews the authors attempt to uncover JR's fascination with the Goth world. JR was described by her Grade 6 classmates as, "... the girl in the crowd who seemed to skip the awkward stage and instantly become a young [beautiful] woman" (p. 21). Coupling her fast paced maturity, the, "highly intelligent 'A' student, was [also] attracted to the cerebral side of the Goth subculture" (p. 23). Thus an innocent pre-teen began her transformation into the 'Runaway Devil', which is the online Goth persona she created on multiple social media accounts.

The authors also delve into Jeremy Steinke's upbringing to better understand how the self-proclaimed 'werewolf' turned murderer became involved with the Goth culture. Interviews with Jeremy's mother and childhood friends painted the picture of a more typical home life of the type of person attracted to the Goth lifestyle. Living in a trailer with his alcoholic mother, Jeremy had to endure three abusive step-fathers and constant bullying in school. A jobless, high school drop out with multiple failed relationships with women, Jeremy saw the Goth culture as a perfect outlet for his angst and was keen to join it. "In the Goth world, societal misfits often seek, and sometimes find, respect and understanding," (p. 45) which is something Jeremy was desperate to find. Jeremy was, "quickly embraced by the by the crowd of younger Medicine Hat Mall Goths, who looked up to him" (p. 45). Running in the same crowd, it was just a matter of time before JR and Jeremy met, instantly attracted to one another. While the Goth culture plays a

prominent role in their relationship, the authors conclude that the grisly murders cannot be completely attributed to it. Simply put, “being Goth” doesn’t account for the aggression the young couple consistently felt, leading the authors to look towards other channels for explanations.

After thoroughly presenting the incriminating social media communications between JR and Jeremy throughout their relationship, the authors wondered who the main instigator was that had planned to murder JR’s family. The book develops a carefully constructed timeline to explain the events leading to the Richardson family’s tragic demise. The authors compare how JR had initially been the one to suggest ideas involving murdering her family in an email to Jeremy saying, “So I have this plan. It begins with me killing them and ends with me living with you” (p. 81). However, Jeremy had posted a violent poem on Nexopia shortly after this email, including lines like, “I will kill, I will spill blood for you tonight, it will be a blood shedding fight” (p. 88). Had JR been the mastermind behind the crime, luring a socially ostracized and eager-to-please Jeremy to assist her in murdering her family or, had Jeremy corrupted JR the innocent little girl, convincing her that murder was the answer to all of her problems? The legal proceedings examined after the murders provide the greatest insight into this question.

Upon initial interrogation, the investigating officers provide the authors with a detailed account of the events that unfolded. JR had shown an emotionless, cold, and relatively tight-lipped front when confronted with the facts of the murder, while Jeremy had become a basket case, almost instantly providing incriminating details of the previous night’s activities. In an attempt to gain valuable evidence, the investigating officers had asked JR and Jeremy to write apology letters to their victims as well as letters to each other. In addition to the legal perspective, Remington and Zickefoose incorporate psychological explanations involving these

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letters to showcase the hidden meanings within the prison ‘love letters.’ Both participants lacked remorse, and continued to place their love on a pedestal above all else - Jeremy had even asked JR for her hand in marriage to which she replied with an enthusiastic, “Ahaha you make me so happy! Yes! Yes! I will I would love to” (p. 174). The authors provide valuable insight and merits to both approaches of who was really responsible for the plan, ultimately concluding that both JR and Jeremy had been convicted of three counts of first-degree murder (with varied levels of punishment).

Remington and Zickefoose conclude by offering their interpretation of the events reviewed throughout the book – tying everything to JR’s increasing feelings for Jeremy and her desire to be with him, ultimately impeded by her parents’ rules, that sparked the killings. The book is teeming with multiple references, illustrative examples, personal anecdotes and photographs detailing the interplay between sociological and psychological forces that shaped the murder of the Richardson family. The authors made great strides when researching JR’s family for any hint of explanation, uncovering many interesting details unbeknownst to the public in the process. For example, JR’s parents were recovering drug addicts but had, “identified their substance abuse early ... and had vowed to change their lives forever” (p. 13). They had appeared to be alert and good parents who were smart enough to monitor what websites and online groups JR used, her interest in Goth subculture, and musical/movie tastes. While most of these activities must have been a source of worry for concerned parents, the actions of JR had seemed nonetheless well within the limits of normal adolescent evolution. It may be that there is no concrete answer as to why JR felt she could dispose of those who had only ever loved and cared for her, and with JR and Jeremy still keeping secrets, it may be a question never answered.

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Remington and Zickefoose's intended readership is mostly for mature audiences with the ability to understand strong language and scenarios; this could include lawyers, psychologists, sociologists, and the general public. These events are unsettling but viewed with a critical eye, much can be learned from them- among the main learnings is prevention to such crimes, and increased awareness of bullying and stereotyping. The overarching result of this book is a narrative bringing about various explanations involving the exploitation of many people versus an all-encompassing attempt to uncover the real reason for this tragedy. Ultimately, the authors are at best able to humanize the unsettling crime of two deeply disturbed people, allowing a person to aptly decide their own explanation.