

Book Reviews

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Remington, R., & Zickefoose, S. (2009). Runaway Devil: How Forbidden Love Drove a 12-Year-Old to Murder Her Family. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

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The true crime novel “Runaway Devil: How Forbidden Love Drove a 12-Year-Old to Murder Her Family” by author’s Robert Remington and Sherri Zickefoose is a nonfiction portrayal about Canada’s youngest familicide offender. The book tells the true story of one of Canada’s most iconic crimes; how 12-year-old JR and her 23 year-old boyfriend, Jeremy Steinke, murdered JR’s mother, father, and 8 year-old brother. On April 23, 2006, Debra, Marc, and little Jacob were murdered in their home. JR – the daughter of Debra and Marc and the older sister to Jacob – stabbed her family to death with the assistance of her family-disapproved boyfriend.

Remington has a personal connection to the story as a one of his long-time acquaintances was a personal friend of the victims. This relationship allowed Remington to obtain addition background information about the family from a private source. Zickefoose is a crime reporter who was able to conduct exclusive interviews with key figures during the time of the murder investigations. Both authors use their experience and knowledge of journalistic reporting to express untold details of an event that affected not only a whole community but an entire country. Key methodologies such as these aid in creating an entertaining depiction of the story. Remington and Zickefoose also take a unique approach by crafting this true story as if it were a fictional crime novel.

Writing a true crime book comes at no ease, especially when the focal offender is a 12-year-old girl that is protected under terms of Canadian legislation and the “Youth Criminal Justice Act.” As mentioned in the Author’s Notes, “anything that may identify a young offender ... cannot be publicized” (p. *XI*). This forces the authors to refer to the 12-year-old offender by only her initials and restrains the authors from using family surnames that may aid in identifying young JR. Due to the “Youth Criminal Justice Act” in Canada, Remington and Zickefoose face extensive obstacles when writing the true crime story. The authors are limited by the legally protected grounds of all youth involved, such as JR’s neighbours and friends, as well as the privacy rights of those providing evidence and information. While respecting the limitations imposed on them, Remington and Zickefoose are able to exceptionally craft this true crime story.

The story of young JR and her overaged boyfriend, Jeremy, is arguably one of Canada’s most shocking triple homicide crimes. The murders took place inside JR’s seemingly happy Medicine Hat home. Medicine Hat is a small prairie town in southern Alberta, Canada. Friends and family of the victims, as well as people from the neighbourhood, describe the family as “picture perfect” (p. 14) and “a loving family ... [who] treated each other ... with love and respect” (p. 16). The ideal image that the family conveyed made the brutal events that occurred in April 2006 much harder to digest. It is likely that Remington and Zickefoose wrote this book with the primary intention to provide closure to those indirectly affected by the criminal acts. Residents of Medicine Hat, and other small town communities, were struck with the fear of being stabbed to death in their own homes; a fear they would have never even considered before this bloodletting event. The authors may have wanted to provide answers to those who followed the story in the media but still had questions: questions regarding the motivations of each offender and what factors could drive a straight-A school student to murder her entire family.

“Runaway Devil” is a means of telling the untold aspects of the crimes and a way to reduce the fear of those who believe they are at risk of being attacked. The secondary motivation may serve as a source of reference and information for students and professionals. Fields such as psychology, sociology, criminal investigations, and policing may be the particular focus for this audience. As Remington and Zickefoose filter through the motivations that led to JR and Jeremy planning a triple homicide, the authors examine multiple academically researched methods to explain such reasons. They illustrate theories and step-by-step processes that help in providing a clear understanding of why such unexpected events occur and how these crimes are solved.

The book is creatively composed in such a way that the true crime story is read as if it is a fictional crime novel. The construction of the book creates an entertainingly suspenseful, yet still informative, tone that forces readers to become emotionally invested in the story while acquiring a new knowledge of Canadian crime history. One specific technique used by the authors is the way they strategically interchange the names of JR and Jeremy with the use of the couple’s online identities. Throughout the book, whenever the authors are referring to the individuals in a positive light, with no relation to the crimes they committed, they use their real names of JR and Jeremy. However, when the authors are referring to the offenders in a negative context, they use their online personas of Runaway Devil and Souleater. This technique attempts to distance the relationship between the identity of the real-world JR and the identity of her online persona Runaway Devil. In a report about JR’s progress after spending time in therapy-based incarceration, the authors note that “JR posed no risk to the public and indicated that Runaway Devil was overcoming her lack of remorse and inability to grasp the consequences of her horrific act” (p. 266). When referring to the positive behavioural progress, and the absence of any imposed danger, the authors use the identity of JR. Conversely, when referring to the girl who

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still does not feel bad for murdering three of her family members and who still does not understand the depths of her actions, the authors refer to the identity of Runaway Devil. This technique successfully distances the innocence of 12-year-old JR from the misconstrued maturity of her online persona Runaway Devil. The use of this creative writing technique helps to engage the reader in ways that are similar to fictional novels where the storyline and characters are merely made-up.

While the book is strongly delivered in an enjoyable way, the composition needed to include further explanations and references in some instances. While the authors provide exceptional background information, scenic details, and informative explanations, the plot is sometimes confusing to follow. Throughout the book, timelines and perspectives are interchanged causing confusion about the order of events. In order to minimize this confusion, the authors needed to provide some clarity by referring to other points in time that correlated with the newly mentioned events. Each time the story jumped in the timeline it needed to contain a brief explanation as to how the new information was related to, or in some cases different from, earlier events. For instance, at the beginning of the book the crimes are outlined as police investigators examine the crime scene. Later in the book, however, testimonies are heard from both JR and Jeremy. These testimonies not only differ from each other, as each offender tries to plead their own innocence, the testimonies also differ from the original outline of events. In order to clarify the differences, the authors could have referred to the inconsistencies and explained them. Upon examination, it later becomes evident that the original outline is only a general depiction of the crimes and is used for referencing. Eventually, both JR and Jeremy provide their own descriptions of the offences in more detail but each have motivation to cover up the severity of their own personal involvement. Briefly noting these differences and

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describing why they appear would have aided in keeping the timeline clear and the story consistent. Although some confusion is expected since “neither JR nor Jeremy Steinke ever took responsibility for the death of Jacob” (p. 251), additional clarification, where possible, would have improved the intelligibility of the story.

It is of no surprise that “Runaway Devil: How Forbidden Love Drove a 12-Year-Old to Murder Her Family” was a finalist for the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Nonfiction Crime Book. This award is presented annually by the Crime Writers of Canada to the winning book as voted by twenty accredited volunteer judges. Meeting such high standards and gaining recognition from highly esteemed writing associations places this book respectably within its broader discipline. This distinguished book is an entertaining read and is placed alongside many similar award winning books of its kind. Remington and Zickefoose wrote this book to be both entertaining and culturally informative. I very much enjoyed reading this book and would recommend it to those who enjoy both true crime stories and fictional crime novels. Reading “Runaway Devil” has intrigued me to continue reading books of similar genres such as fictional and nonfictional crime, mystery crime, and Canadian culture crime.