

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 9(1), 2017, pp 123-126
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
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Remington, R., & Zickefoose, S. (2009). Runaway Devil: How Forbidden Love Drove a 12-Year-Old to Murder Her Family. New York: McClelland & Stewart Ltd.

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The biographical book, “Runaway Devil” by Calgary journalists Robert Remington and Sherri Zickefoose is the fascinating story of how J.R., a young, 12-year-old girl from Medicine Hat, became the country’s youngest person to be “convicted of multiple homicide and one of the youngest females anywhere to commit familicide, the annihilation of one’s entire family” (p. XI). The writing of this book is primarily fact-based with little subjective feelings from the authors towards the matter. This leaves the reader to draw their own conclusions and feelings towards the case while reading it. Throughout the book, the authors provide a detailed description of the events leading up to and after the massacre, the steps taken throughout the criminal investigation, and finally the trial of both J.R. and her boyfriend Jeremy Steinke. With the exception of the narrative beginning with the bodies of J.R.’s family members being found on April 23, 2006, it is written in the chronological order of the events that took place, making it an easy read.

A large part of the beginning focuses on the life of J.R.’s parents, Marc and Debra. An overview is provided of the struggles they faced in their younger days with substance abuse and how they overcame it. In general, society tends to root for people who are able to turn their lives around after leading a dangerous lifestyle. When the reader learns of this, they instantly feel connected to Marc and Debra and feel sympathy towards them; after working so hard to build the life they wanted, to be gruesomely murdered is truly unfortunate. This grasps the audience’s

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interest into understanding what happened to the “perfect suburban family” (p. 10) that “every weekend [did] family stuff” (p. 17) in the early hours of April 23, 2006. The memories provided from friends and acquaintances gives the reader a glimpse into who Marc, Debra, and their eight-year-old son, Jacob was on a more human level instead of reading about them as only victims. Remington and Zickefoose also attempt to give a detailed description of who J.R. was and how her personality drastically changed as she experienced difficulty while maturing quicker than her peers. Throughout this section of the book, they go into great detail about the numerous online personas J.R. created for herself across various popular websites, such as Nexopia, MySpace, and VampireFreaks. The explanation of what these accounts looked like, along with Jeremy’s profiles was a dry read and was not necessary as enough insight was given through a description of their actions and friends. For instance, the reader can understand Jeremy and J.R. were interested in heavy metal music by them frequently going to punk shows.

A detailed depiction is provided of J.R.’s initial transformation from being a grade five student who was known to be a “studious, quiet, [and] well-scrubbed honour student” (p. 21) to becoming entrenched in the “goth subculture” (p. 23), where she would later meet Jeremy Steinke. An in depth description of the goth culture is explained and, although Remington and Zickefoose do not explicitly say it is a negative group, it leaves the reader thinking a gothic lifestyle is for troubled individuals who may pose a threat to others by listening to heavy metal music and wearing “black hoodies, dark eyeliner, skin piercings and white face makeup” (p. 48).

The authors proceed to explain what occurred as Debra, Marc, and Jacob were murdered in their own home, which once again piques the interest of the reader. Unfortunately, due to the news, TV shows, and movies, people often become desensitized to stories such as this one. Especially reading it as a book (rather than an article or watching a news story), we as the

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readers might get caught up in it and start thinking of it as more of a fictional novel than a real life case. The intense account of the crime taking place evokes emotion within the reader largely due to the thorough description given previously of Marc, Debra, and Jacob. It reminds the audience that these three victims were real people and not merely fictional characters in a novel.

Remington and Zickefoose approach writing “Runaway Devil” in an appropriate manner that at times reminds the reader that not only was a single family affected that day, but so were the many people involved in solving the case and the young boy, Gareth Penner, who discovered the bodies. “Sarah [Gareth’s mother] would later come to realize that something in her little boy died that bright Sunday, too. Killed in Gareth was his innocence” (p. 4). This one statement illustrates how the crimes committed by two people who selfishly want to be together, can have a ripple effect throughout a community and have long lasting, devastating effects. The effects of J.R. and Jeremy’s actions were also evident when Sergeant Secondiak was testifying in court and struggled to describe finding J.R.’s brother’s lifeless body. “His voice quavered” (p. 200) and he “let out a huge sigh” upon completing his testimony.

The intended readers of “Runaway Devil” are adults, mainly due to the subject matter, who are interested in criminology and potentially people within the Criminal Justice System who can use this case for future reference. It can also be useful for students in a program related to criminology as it can assist them in their studies of understanding the proceedings of an actual case. As Remington and Zickefoose readily point out, television shows such as *CSI* do not depict crime scene investigations accurately.

Since the authors of the book, Robert Remington and Sherri Zickefoose, are a columnist and crime reporter respectively, it is expected that they refer to people by their last name only, as this is oftentimes the convention in articles. Throughout the book they regularly used this way of

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referring to individuals. Unless it was a youth, when a person was first introduced their first and last name was said and then they were referred to by only their last name moving forward. With the numerous amount of people involved, I would have preferred that first names were used instead of last because it is easier to remember who the person is by first name. For example, the school counsellor was Sandra Richard, but was often referred to as Richard. When reading the name Richard, one can normally assume you are talking about a male, but since it is a last name it does not follow the typical male or female assumptions. Knowing that J.R.'s school counsellor was female, it caused slight confusion and led to going back to ensure it was in fact the same counsellor being discussed.

Although, the authors never set out a clear explanation as to their beliefs into why this heinous act was committed, they lend possible answers by detailing parts of Jeremy's upbringing. By learning of his alcoholic mother and her abusive partners one can conclude that those factors have contributed to his current state of mind and what drives his own substance abuse problems. As it is appreciated that they do not include their own thoughts on the case, there are times when their opinion comes through on matters when it doesn't seem necessary. For instance, when describing the people who investigate crime scenes it is noted that "some [are] beautiful, [but] most [are] not" (p. 116) or when explaining how the police were informed of J.R. and Jeremy's whereabouts, it is said that "the gossipy, loose-lipped teens could not resist blabbing about what they knew" (p. 128). These statements are personal beliefs that do not seem to fit in with the primarily objective approach taken by the authors.