Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 9(1), 2017, pp 127-131
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cjfy>

Remington, R. & Zickefoose, S. (2010). Runaway Devil: How Forbidden Love Drove a Twelve Year Old to Murder Her Family. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd.

Reviewed by: Breanna McDonnall, MacEwan University

Robert Remington and Sherri Zickefoose exposed one of Canada's most horrific multiple murder cases in their book, "Runaway Devil." The two journalists had followed the case as it unfolded, and they used actual facts from the case itself, along with direct testimonies from a number of people that were involved in J.R.'s and Jeremy's lives before, during, and after the murders. It not only makes for an interesting read for the average person, but the chilling details provide incredible insight into the ways that the different relationships are viewed by the two convicted killers. J.R.'s relationship with her family is explored, both from J.R.'s perspective and the people around the family, and there is a definite change in both J.R.'s and Jeremy's friends' view when it comes to the young lovers' relationship. The focus, however, is primarily on the direct relationship between J.R. and Jeremy: a physically mature twelve-year-old girl with a mentally immature twenty-three-year-old man. The facts that are laid out in the book prove that a person does not need to be an adult to manipulate a weaker-willed individual, and anybody is capable of murder regardless of whether they wielded the weapon(s) or not.

J.R.'s parents, Marc and Debra had overcome adversity in the form of a substance abuse recovery program before they were married and had children. By the time J.R. was born in 1993, both parents had been clean and decided to make an even better change in their lives, for the sake of their children (pp. 12-13). The family moved to Medicine Hat, and they were the epitome of a happy family. A perfect family, with a house with a nice backyard for the kids (p. 19). The

Book Reviews

extended family and surrounding neighbours all provided fond words about the family, furthering the idea that nothing quite so horrific could ever happen to them. By the time J.R. had turned twelve, she was heavily into the goth scene and although her parents were protective of their daughter, they still granted her a relatively large degree of freedom. Eventually, though, J.R. and her parents started having more arguments at home over her behaviour. She was spending time with boys or men that were too old for her, and her parents attempted to corral their daughter by limiting her phone privileges (p. 54). It is essential for parents to teach their children how to behave appropriately because “adolescents have a misplaced sense of maturity that may lead to risky behaviours such as ‘sexual experience, smoking, alcohol, and drug use.’” When J.R. spoke to her school counsellor about her hatred of being at home with her family, there were no signs of any sort of abuse happening behind closed doors (pp. 55-56). The young girl believed that she was more mature than she was, that she deserved more freedom and to be treated like an adult when she was simply a pre-teenage girl.

J.R.’s school friends were involved in the goth scene by the time they started grade seven, and they had found a place to belong within the goth community. Part of the gothic culture is the acceptance of anybody, no matter what age, if they can get along (p. 27). J.R. had found a place where she belonged, which was where these older boys and men that her parents disapproved of resided. After meeting Jeremy, and finding a kindred spirit within him, J.R.’s rebellion skyrocketed and she started to seriously consider and comment on the death of her family. But once she started to get grounded by her parents and her privileges taken away, some of her school friends started to clue in that something was wrong with the relationship with Jeremy. J.R.’s friends started explaining that J.R. and Jeremy’s age difference was just a little too much. J.R. was convinced that he was simply an older teenager, when her friends seemed to know that

Book Reviews

he was an adult. It was an inappropriate relationship. Several of her school friends attempted to dissuade J.R. from the relationship, which only seemed to steel her to the fact that they should, in fact, be together. One of her friends even flat out told her to “get rid of Jeremy.” Her friends were starting to sound like her parents, while Jeremy was the only one that supported her (pp. 71-72).

J.R.’s friends weren’t the only ones that believed the pair’s relationship to be inappropriate. Jeremy’s friends had similar views, as he was told that she was too young for him. They, of course, knew his true age, as well as the fact that she was not only a minor, but a significant one. He needed to be doing things that an adult should be doing, not “running around with young girls” (p. 72). With everybody telling the pair that they shouldn’t be together, it was very much a forbidden romance that seemed to be developing. Yes, it was clear that J.R. and Jeremy cared for each other very much, but the fact that they *shouldn’t* be seeing each other made their relationship that much stronger. It was dangerous and rebellious, and it was truly when J.R.’s mindset began to change in regards to her parents. The seemingly casual comments about killing her parents started to become a little more serious (p. 81).

J.R. and Jeremy’s relationship is easily the most dangerous thing in the book. While Jeremy is the adult of the two, it is J.R. that drives the murderous intentions and the plans of killing her family. Jeremy is already a disturbed individual, coming from a broken home and struggling with substance abuse, and even stated himself that he’d “had twisted thoughts in [his] head since [he] was 13” (p. 66). All he wanted was to be accepted by someone, since he couldn’t receive it at home and had always been an outcast in school. J.R. gave him that acceptance, and although she was only twelve, she was already a master manipulator. Between her constant pushing and Jeremy’s already dark thoughts about what he would like to do to her parents for

keeping them apart, the trail of emails and social media posts continued to get darker and more specific (pp. 78-82). It wouldn't be long before the pair's dream became a reality; they could be free from the influence of her parents, and they could just be with one another in love.

Jeremy's weakness continued to play a part as he asked for help in killing J.R.'s parents. It is interesting to note that his friends never took his requests seriously, or at least not seriously enough to do anything about it. They said 'no', for various reasons, leaving Jeremy to do the deed alone. Drinking vodka and Vampire wine, and getting high on pot, cocaine, and ecstasy before the murderous act, J.R. provided his entry into the house, leaving Jeremy to physically kill her parents, who fought tooth and nail not only to stay alive, but presumably to protect their children as well (pp. 97-101). J.R. attempted to strangle her brother, but it is never clear who used the knife to murder the innocent child. Neither person ever took credit, blaming the other for killing Jacob. However, it is highly probable that it was J.R. that performed the act, based on the testimonies of the couple while they were in prison. Jeremy broke rather easily, admitting to his part in the murders but also admitting that it was J.R. who had wanted it to be done. The only one he refused to admit to killing was Jacob (pp. 161-165). This further proves that he was a weak man, only wanting to be accepted by the girl he loved even if that included murdering her family. The fact that he didn't admit to killing Jacob when he rather openly offered up all the other information is what makes it seem like it was J.R. who had killed her little brother, all the while trying to portray Jeremy as the monster that had committed the murders. After all, she had tried to strangle him twice, beforehand (pp. 60, 101).

This case is a prime example that it does not matter how old you are, or what culture you come from – anybody is capable of murder. The authors aimed to let the public know the details of what happened before, during, and after the grisly murders of J.R.'s family, based on the

Book Reviews

evidence and testimonies that were given. It was well-documented, and well planned-out in terms of the layout of the book. Psychologists and sociologists alike can take a lot from this book, as it explores various psychological problems, especially in terms of child psychology, and the ways that the different relationships and reactions were considered surrounding the pair in question. It is an incredibly disturbing account of the triple homicide in Medicine Hat, but an important one, nonetheless. Just because a person may or may not wield a weapon, they are no less innocent of the crime committed if they have pushed the other to murder. Master manipulators are the most dangerous people of all, just like little J.R. at age twelve.