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Schliesmann, P. (2012). Honour on Trial: The Shafia Murders and the Culture of Honour Killings. Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside.

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Paul Schliesmann's book, "Honour on Trial: The Shafia Murders and the Culture of Honour Killings" is true crime told with journalistic integrity. When readers open the book, they're greeted with four black and white pictures of the presumed murdered women, which is unsettling, but respectful: a testament to these women being real people who senselessly lost their lives. Thoughtfulness runs parallel to everything Schliesmann writes and his humanity drives his fascination with the murders of Zainab, Sahar, and Geeti Shafia, and Rona Amir Mohammad even long after the trial is over. Schliesmann presents only the facts of the case in order to paint an accurate picture of four women caught up in something bigger than themselves: the intersection of culture, honour, and tradition. We already know the tragic ending, but we cannot ascertain what is going on in the minds of people who kill innocent family members; a truth that Schliesmann recognizes as he recreates an electrifying timeline of deception and control.

These four murders are a high profile case that contributed to an on-going debate over Canadian values, honour crimes, and protection of vulnerable immigrant groups. During his introduction, Schliesmann says, "with the murders, it became obvious that a new wave of immigration had brought with it challenges for young women wanting to fit into Canadian culture" (p. XI). Specifically, these challenges were the clash of western expressions of womanhood and traditional family expectations. One of the young daughters, Zainab Shafia,

struggled for her freedom while Zainab's younger brother, Hamed Shafia, is favoured and groomed for success by their father. Zainab had her "freedom severely restricted and monitored. She never learned to drive and never had a driver's license" (p. 58). The other sister, Sahar, two years junior of Zainab, shared a love of "western fashion" and "socializing" (p. 59). The family pact that no one would date before marriage inevitably led to conflict as Sahar and Zainab found allure in "flirting and falling in and out of love, like most teens their age" (p. 59). Geeti Shafia was the youngest of the sisters; at thirteen years old, she was no different than her older sisters trying to assimilate into her new Canadian home.

What some Canadians may have not realized during the 2009 trial, but Schliesmann successfully puts across more than once, is exactly how capable the Kingston police were at doing their jobs. The reader initially gains insight into Detective Geoff Dempster's competence when Schliesmann quotes Dempster's supervisor as saying "the detective's interviews in the first 24 hours [are] brilliant" (p. 25). Surely the tedious nature of interviewing via Persian translator would tire anyone, but Dempster persisted and early on, with the help of his peers, the police were able to recognize inconsistencies in the stories of the father Mohammad Shafia, the son Hamed Shafia, and the mother Tooba Mohammad Yahya (p. 25). Later, police bugged the family minivan to listen in on conversations, resulting in one of the most shocking revelations in the case and also the book. The reader learns what police heard, the father calling his daughters nasty expletives and "exhorting the devil to [defile] their graves" (p. 102). Schliesmann lays these most crucial and damning transcripts out in a way that does not overwhelm the reader, only affirming what we knew all along about the murderers' motives.

Through testimony from several people associated with the family, and the very words of the perpetrators themselves, we confirm the murders are motivated by honour. Honour killings

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are not specific to any one culture, and Schliesmann delicately considers every angle of the communication breakdown among authorities, protection agencies, and immigrant communities. The author drives home that the Shafia murders are not an isolated case by pointing to “an estimated dozen honour killings in Canada in the decade preceding the Shafia conviction, relatively few compared to the hundreds that occur each year around the world, including the United States” (p. 191). Schliesmann briefly describes five specific Canadian honour killings, and summarizes the book with reflective quotes from evidence, witnesses, and professionals affected by this case.

A notable piece of evidence, Hamed’s school assignment, provides eerie insight into the young boy’s mind, “... it doesn’t matter at all weather [sic] your [sic] close to the community following the specific traditions, or living millions of miles away. Tradition and customs of a person is like his identity and what makes him special even though, living in another country, surely it might feel embarrassing” (pp. 190-191). The reader understands Hamed has committed murder because of these customs, so the ardent words take on a new and insidious dimension. The intergenerational commitment to tradition is further demonstrated in the father’s wiretapped conversations, “Even if they hoist me up onto the gallows, nothing is more dear to me than my honour. [...] ... whoever play[s] with my honour, my [answer is] the same There is no value of life without honour” (p. 108).

During the court proceedings, I wondered why had there not been more done by the school psychologists and social workers. Schliesmann shares transcripts of professionals on the stand relaying multiple interactions with the three sisters, where the sisters are hysterical, afraid, and desperate to flee their home. Somehow resolution is found each time when the sisters retract their statements. Fortunately, there is a follow up and it is satisfying to finish the book with a

chapter dedicated to “lessons” (p. 200), an opportunity for a director with the centre responsible for child safety in Quebec to come forward and admit that “lack of awareness about honour killings, coupled with poor data-sharing between agencies” (p. 200) is partly to blame for the children slipping through the cracks. The book is only a glimpse at the symptom of unprepared supportive professionals who need education on contemporary issues surrounding immigration, particularly identifying oppressed females who are too afraid to come forward with allegations of abuse.

Despite the book’s title and Schliesmann’s dedication to exposing a patriarchal influence through testimony and evidence, I would have enjoyed a greater critical analysis of honour killings themselves. Early on in the text, Schliesmann provides the reader a simple footnote for a website that leads to an article on the Middle East Forum about honour killing (p. 88). Beyond the link, we only see the last short chapters reflecting on honour killing and interviews with people who offer their opinions. The book needs a greater, in-depth analysis to escalate the complexity, so readers can appreciate and consider the broad social and historical implications of the patriarchy’s relationship with honour and control over women’s bodies.

The quick pacing and straightforward writing will make for an easy read for most adults, and the style is especially captivating. Schliesmann’s style allows for a sense of mystery, no small feat considering many Canadian’s will have already heard of the case through mainstream media. Those drawn to this book will have interests in true crime, social psychology, religion, feminism, sociology, immigration, or law. The short chapters click along at a steady pace, often dropping bits of information that stun or startle the reader. Halfway through the book, there are crime scene photographs to visually aid in conceptualizing the case, while the successful weaving of evidence and transcripts into a tragic tale helps to make the book accessible for most

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readers. The occasional use of flash forwards at the end of chapters helps to digest future information in short chunks, so the reader has an easy time remembering the time-line and details of the case.