

Jolly, Joanna. (2019). Red River Girl: The Life and Death of Tina Fontaine. Toronto: Viking Press.

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“Red River Girl: The Life and Death of Tina Fontaine” encompasses a myriad of interrelating issues, including systemic racism, loss of identity, and the vulnerability and isolation felt through marginalization. As this book unfolds, we see how these issues catalyze a generational continuance of downward spiralling of Indigenous women and girls unable to break free from the adversity created by societal ignorance and racism embedded into the very institutions designed to support them. Author, Joanna Jolly, uses her book as a vessel to bring international enlightenment to the suffering of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. The assertion of multiculturalism, an ideal that epitomizes what it means to be Canadian, is put into question as it seemingly runs contrary to the nation’s historical and continual treatment of its Indigenous citizens.

“Red River Girl: The Life and Death of Tina Fontaine” is a story centred on Tina Fontaine, a fifteen-year-old girl murdered in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. As a documentary maker and journalist, research methodology is no new feat for Jolly, clearly demonstrated by the detailed portrayal of Tina’s life, the murder investigation, and the court proceedings. This book is craftily pieced together using a mosaic of face-to-face interviews, police notes, transcripts of recordings, and trial testimonies. Jolly states that she “tried to build up as accurate a picture as possible” (p. 5). The book was created to tell the story of Tina Fontaine while also echoing the narratives of numerous other missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

A noteworthy theme portrayed throughout the book is the conflict between perception and reality. With an analysis of the overarching issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls in Canada, this issue displays this contradiction in and of itself. Canada, a country internationally recognized for its ideals of multiculturalism and equality, is often perceived as infallible when it comes to prejudice. As Jolly states in the prologue, “it was a shock to hear that it had a problem with racism and violence against Indigenous women” (p. 3). Jolly takes readers on a journey of enlightenment that she herself experienced while researching for the book, shining a light on the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples of Canada. Dismantling the fallacy “that the violence against women was confined within the Indigenous community” (p. 23), Jolly brings awareness to an issue that often goes unseen behind Canadian niceties.

The book also brings to light the defamation of the Indigenous identity describing a “misogynistic impression of what ‘Native women’ were like” (p. 25)—identifying a societal propensity to perceive Indigenous citizens inherently at fault for their adversity with a disregard for the extrinsic dynamics involved. Jolly includes a statement made by Nahanni Fontaine, an Indigenous activist and distant relative of Tina. Her words exemplify the issue of discrepancy between perception and reality of Indigenous hardship: “It was true that Indigenous women were more likely to live vulnerable lives dominated by drugs, alcohol, and sex work, but Fontaine saw nothing inevitable about it. To her, the real issues were abuse, poverty, and a lack of opportunities. But most of all, she felt women were suffering because of an intrinsic racism” (p. 25).

This intrinsic racism is another running theme seen throughout Jolly’s book. Displays of discrimination embedded in institutions such as the police force, judicial system, media, and social

programs are demonstrated at various points as the story unfolds. Jolly includes some historical insights into the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples by the police. Incorporated in the book are inserts of commissioner investigations: “A police culture defined by racism, sexism, and indifference, operating in a community where callous treatment of Indigenous people was the norm” and that “this discriminatory conduct was probably so inbred that the officers did not notice that their conduct displayed prejudice and discrimination” (p.20). The book also highlights the empathetic and dedicated officers such as O’Donovan. “Hearing a detective speak with such passion about an Indigenous victim was unusual...with compassion and empathy as if she were a true victim—as if she mattered. For once, somebody seemed to care” (pp. 18-19). Jolly also demonstrates the idea that the media can encourage this prejudice by blaming the victim, exemplified by the following line from her book: “Newspaper reports speculated that she had been killed because she was caught up with gangs and the sex trade” (p. 21).

The marginalization of Indigenous citizens is another insight the book presents. This idea is effectively illustrated by the line describing Winnipeg’s North End: “all poor, mostly sick, all Indigenous...Most Winnipeggers sped by quickly in their cars...the North End felt cut off from the rest of the city” (p. 76). Jolly illustrates a state of vulnerability for Indigenous women as they face high domestic abuse rates inside the reservations; however, they are ostracized and preyed upon if they leave them (p. 24). Many indigenous women and girls face the impossible situation of staying and being abused or leaving and abusing their bodies to live. This dilemma is portrayed abundantly throughout her book. Jolly describes that “most worked to fund an addiction...90 percent of those selling sex were Indigenous” (p. 78), and “they were doing it to survive, and for them, it was a dangerous business” (p. 80).

“Red River Girl: The Life and Death of Tina Fontaine” is also a book about identity. It poses insights into what it means to be Indigenous in Canada, the limitations simply because of this identity, and the perpetuation of trauma through generations of those who feel they have lost their identity altogether. Jolly details Tina’s life as one that started with hope and optimism. She begins to spiral into an identity crisis when she loses her father and attempts to regain her sense of self by reconnecting with her biological mother. Tina soon ends up on the streets of Winnipeg’s North End, and not long after, her body is discovered at the edge of the Red River. During the telling of these events, Jolly includes that Tina had cut her hair, which her family described as a symbol of her identity, and her guardian Thelma “wondered if, when alone in Winnipeg, Tina had stopped feeling special” (p. 48). The loss of identity is a familiar anecdote for many Indigenous peoples. As Jolly recites, their identities were fractured by a cultural genocide executed by the Canadian government through the residential school system, as they were “subjected to decades of policies aimed to assimilate the “Indian” into a European and Christian way of life” (p. 32).

Jolly’s primary intention with this book is to bring international awareness to the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in Canada. I found the book to be professionally written and logically structured. The chronological layout with the insertion of social issues made sense for the author’s purpose of telling Tina’s story and bringing awareness to the overall themes. The jumps of focus between Tina and O’Donovan were executed craftily and allowed for a greater depth of perspective. A possible shortcoming could be the substantial portion dedicated to police investigations, interviews, and primarily “Project Styx,” perhaps digressing from the focus of bringing awareness to the central issue. Others may argue that Jolly’s abundant

inclusion of police material effectively established the police force's limitations when investigating these crimes. I found that Jolly used a neutral approach to telling this story in that she stated the facts from multiple perspectives allowing the reader to form their own opinion on the matter. However, if the author's purpose when writing the book was awareness and to inspire action, some may argue that the unbiased nature did not deliver the persuasion that it could have. I found Jolly's intentions with this book to be genuine and appreciated her non-hostile approach of letting the facts speak for themselves.

"Red River Girl: The Life and Death of Tina Fontaine" would be intended for an array of readers, including various fields in the social sciences, Canadian law enforcement (particularly, in diversity training), multiple layers of government, the Indigenous citizens of Canada, non-Indigenous citizens, and various international readers. The book is a Canadian story, however, the themes are universal. In this regard, the social aspects displayed could be applied cross-culturally and be a beneficial read for anyone seeking social insight or self-reflection.